

The Fideism of the Wittgensteinians

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Among the various English philosophical currents that have dealt with religion, “Wittgensteinian fideists” have, more than anyone else, stressed the relativity of beliefs and their relation to the forms of life in which they originate.

The term “Wittgensteinian fideism” belongs to Kai Nielsen, who attributed a fideist position to pupils or followers of Wittgenstein, philosophers such as Winch, Hughes, Malcolm, Cavell, Phillips, and later to Wittgenstein himself.¹ What these thinkers have in common is the idea that theological discourse is *sui generis* and therefore cannot be understood and judged in terms other than its own; the truth and meaning of a religious world view should not be understood on the basis of the object that it wishes to represent but only on the basis of the tradition or the community within which the view has emerged and in which it has its function.

In the present article, we shall examine the positions of Norman Malcolm and D. Z. Phillips, the most representative of this line of thought, as well as Kay Nielsen’s critique of their positions and the position of Yong Huang.

1. Religious beliefs as language games

Norman Malcolm maintains that Wittgenstein’s ideas on language games as found in *On Certainty*, particularly those that insist on their own groundlessness,² are especially valid for the

¹ See K. Nielsen, “Wittgensteinian fideist,” *Philosophy*, 42 (1967), p. 191-209.

² “Du muß bedenken, daß das Sprachspiel sozusagen etwas Unvorhersehbares ist. Ich meine: Es ist nicht begründet. Nicht vernünftig (oder unvernünftig). Es steht da - wie unser Leben.” “You must bear in mind that the language game is,

language through which religious beliefs are expressed. By religious belief, Malcolm does not mean the doctrinal aspects of a belief in God, but the attitude of religious people in general, including, for example, that of the Buddhists, who claim they do not believe in God. For Malcolm, philosophy of religion is interesting because it is the field where on the one hand there is a strong preoccupation with providing demonstrations and a pre-eminent desire to offer a rational foundation to a form of life, and on the other hand there is an evident failure of any such effort.

Religion is the form of life “implanted, grafted unto action” like science, and the first needs no more be justified than the second. If many academic philosophers prefer science to religion it is only because they do not participate in this form of life and do not understand its character, a problem compounded by their tendency to assume that their role as scholars requires a strictly objective and detached attitude.

Malcolm, along with all other fideists, shows a marked aversion for any effort to elaborate a theology which, starting from the observation of the natural world, would arrive through reasoning to the definition of the characteristics of God or, on the basis of the same criteria, would strive to evaluate religious doctrines. For him, it is impossible to theorize a single epistemological approach to different subject matters, rather one must each time use the approach appropriate to the investigated object, thus acknowledging the limitations and ultimate failure of any effort to study the religious phenomenon through reductionist approaches and with methods borrowed from other disciplines. The typical reductionist mistake would be that of seeking to play the game of religion according to the rules of science, psychoanalysis and philosophy. There are various language games, various *Sprachspiele*, and while we can ask for guarantees within a given game, it is a mistake to ask for guarantees on games in

so to speak, something unforeseeable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. Not reasonable (or unreasonable). It stands there – like our life” ÜG 559.

themselves, indeed the very notion that we must justify our language games is one of the first pathologies of language.³

Hypotheses and verifications occur within a given system, a system which has its limits; the desire to examine, to find justifications, can only go so far. This is not a sign of a human weakness, indeed not accepting certain limitations would mean not having learned the language game. We do not choose to live on earth, nor do we choose to learn our native language; in the same way, we grow up within a framework of beliefs and world views that, in practice, we never question. Religious belief is a language game, a form of life that establishes its own *internal* criteria of meaning and of rationality.

“It may, however, be said to be ‘groundless’, not in the sense of a groundless opinion, but in the sense that we accept it, we live it. We can say, ‘This is what we do. This is how we are’.”⁴

The same holds true for Chemistry where the attitude towards the law of induction is a “religious” belief, an unfounded assumption.⁵

The religious person sees his beliefs as absolutely certain not because their truth has been properly established but because they form the basis of that which can be said, thought or done within a religious life.⁶ This attitude, which many modern philosophers would decry as dogmatic and superstitious, is common to all

³ See R. D. GEIVETT e B. SWEETMAN, eds. *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, p.98.

⁴ N. MALCOLM, *Thought and Knowledge*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1977, p. 208.

⁵ ÜG 499-500. See MALCOLM, *Thought and Knowledge* pp. 203-204.

⁶ See D. MARTIN, *On Certainty and Religious Belief*, “Religious Studies”, 20 (1984), p. 602.

human activities, even while more prominent in religious or even purely ritual ones.

Malcolm also uses the “tu quoque” argument, that is, he shows that the arguments of the critics of beliefs are also ultimately unfounded, insofar as they are based on a framework of unfounded principles.⁷ And if one were to ask Malcolm to demonstrate these statements, Malcolm would reply that he does not know what to demonstrate could possibly mean in this context.

Malcolm maintains that events such as miracles, supernatural events, resurrections and the like have a religious import insofar as they are seen from a religious perspective, within a *Weltbild*, a conception of the world that cannot be understood by somebody who does not at least partially share that view. Only within a religious atmosphere can evidence have meaning, there must be at least some degree of common experience. The atheist who argues against the existence of God cannot understand the issue and therefore express himself properly; those who are strangers to the game of religious language are unable to understand it.

2. Autonomy and incommensurability

Phillips agrees with Malcolm, arguing for the autonomy of religious expressions, which can only be judged as warranted through implicit standards, that is, standards that are *internal* to religious life.⁸ In Phillips’s opinion, a great limit of those who criticize believers is the fact that they do not examine the concepts in the contexts from which they draw their significance.⁹

⁷ See M. J. FERREIRA, *A Common Defense of Theistic Belief: Some Critical Considerations*, “International Journal for Philosophy of Religion”, 14 (1993), pp.129-141.

⁸ See D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, New York, Schocken Books, 1970, cap. IX.

⁹ See D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith, Skepticism, and Religious Understanding* in R. D. GEIVETT and B. SWEETMAN (edit.) *Contemporary Perspectives on*

They lack an essential existential component since there is no understanding of religion without passion and participation; if philosophers were to understand this they would abandon their skepticism.¹⁰

One cannot ask religious language to satisfy criteria of signification that are foreign to it because there is no paradigm of rationality from which all discursive modes can be derived. Indeed, a necessary premise of the philosophy of religion is acknowledging the existence of differing criteria of rationality. The significance of religious expressions is in the function they have for believers. Unlike scientific language:

“Religious language is not an interpretation of how things are, but determines how things are for the believer”¹¹

Scientific language has an explicative function, whereas religious language has a regulating one: it guides the community of believers. Each language restructures its discursive world: religious death is different from the one familiar to doctors.

Referring to one of Wittgenstein’s famous examples, Phillips argues that if the idea of the Last Judgment has no role in one’s life, he or she cannot participate in the language game of those who believe in the Last Judgment; it is therefore incorrect to say that the non-believer contradicts the believer, rather they live

Religious Epistemology, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, p. 83.

¹⁰ See D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith, Skepticism, and Religious Understanding* in R. D. GEIVETT and B. SWEETMAN (edit.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, p. 91.

¹¹ D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, Schocken Books, New York 1970, p. 132. This sentence reminds another one from the *Tractatus* “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.” T. 6.44.

within two different forms of life and give different meaning to the same expressions.¹²

When the believer speaks using words that belong to common language he attributes different meanings to them. An example is the expression “God exists,” in which the verb *to exist* is used in a very different sense from when the verb is applied to everyday objects. Religious language has its *own* concepts of truth and reality.¹³ The relativity of language forms is the manifestation of the diversity of forms of life.

3. Nielsen’s critique

It is not difficult to show the limits of the approach of Wittgensteinian fideists to the question of religion. Nielsen, besides raising doubts on the accuracy with which Wittgenstein’s followers have interpreted his positions--an issue we shall not address here--also attacks their arguments in general. Against the Wittgensteinian fideists, he points out that if religious discourse, as they say, belongs solely to the believer it is to be viewed as a private discourse, something that can only be understood by the person who uses it. Any effort to establish a dialogue, to make comparisons, to produce judgments is therefore bound to fail. Fideism is the perspective of believers who are tired of arguing.¹⁴

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that philosophy does not interfere with language, it can only describe it:

¹² D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, Schocken Books, New York 1970, p. 114-115.

¹³ See D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith, Skepticism, and Religious Understanding*, in R. D. GEIVETT e B. SWEETMAN (edit.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, p. 83.

¹⁴ See F. KERR, *La teologia dopo Wittgenstein*, Queriniana, Brescia 1992, p. 52.

“Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give any information either. It leaves everything as it is.”¹⁵

Wittgensteinian philosophers, according to Nielsen, cannot legitimately criticize religious discourse or maintain that it is incoherent or unintelligible, but only show its function within our form of life. If there is no discipline establishing the criteria of rationality, the philosopher can at the most outline as accurately as possible the grammar of the various disciplines, accepting an infinity of ontologies.

But for Nielsen this is an extremely conservative position, as well as unproductive if not downright useless, insofar as it is purely descriptive, or, more precisely, it passes itself off as descriptive, hiding its own ethics of belief. And it is unproductive because it does not allow one to distinguish error from religious truth.

Nielsen also argues that a single conceptual structure can include both science and religion and that in this case, concepts of truth, evidence, and knowledge allow us to criticize and discard specific forms of life, as is the case of witchcraft, for example.¹⁶

4. Huang’s proposal

¹⁵ “Die Philosophie darf den tatsächlichen Gebrauch der Sprache in keiner Weise antasten, sie kann ihn am Ende also nur beschreiben. Denn sie kann ihn auch nicht begründunden. Sie läßt alles, wie es ist.” PU 124.

¹⁶ See K. NIELSEN, *Does Religious Skepticism Rest on a Mistake?*, in R. D. GEIVETT e B. SWEETMAN (edit.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, p. 123.

Huang while taking into consideration Nielsen's arguments often ends up rejecting them and adopting a position closer to that of Malcolm and Phillips, while advancing his own reading of Wittgenstein's ideas on religious matters.¹⁷ He maintains that different languages may imply different logics but this does not mean the same person cannot know more than one and know when and how to use them; the fact that they are different does not exclude the possibility of their pertaining to different aspects of the same form of life.

Huang, in any case, supports the notion that religious beliefs are as firm as the laws of math, science or common sense in regards to their function though not to their nature. Behind all our arguments are beliefs that we do not question, not because we know them to be certain but because they are the unquestioned background against which our language game can take place.

Huang agrees with Phillips that, unlike scientific language, religious language determines what things are for believers; but, he adds, religious beliefs, besides regulating life, are also an interpretation of the world, though different from the scientific one. As the world influences our religious convictions, so do our religious convictions influence our understanding of the world. He acknowledges not only the expressive and regulative aspects of beliefs but also the cognitive ones.¹⁸

According to Huang's interpretation, Wittgenstein's position was that beliefs form a system where nothing can be understood except in relation to the other parts and the whole.

“When first we begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions ... It is not single axioms that strike me as

¹⁷ See Y. HUANG, *Foundation of Religious Beliefs after Foundationalism: Wittgenstein between Nielsen and Phillips*, “Religious Studies”, 31 (1995), pp. 251-267.

¹⁸ See D. Z. PHILLIPS, *Faith after Foundationalism*, Routledge, London 1988, p. 307-308.

obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support.¹⁹

We may question or justify any proposition on the basis of the others but not the system as a whole. Though it is impossible to justify our system this does not mean, however, that we can support any system of beliefs, so long as it has certain minimum prerequisites such as, for example, non-contradiction (naïve coherentism). What then could serve as a test, as a verification in these situations? The justification of beliefs is found in the unwarranted behavior that is at the basis of the language game.

“But the end is not a ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting”²⁰ ... “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting* which lies at the bottom of the language-game”.²¹

Practice is guided by rules and its enactment shows reveals it is erroneously applies and consequently the truth or falsity of beliefs.²² To maintain that practice is an unfounded activity does not mean it cannot be legitimate, but simply that it is not based on

¹⁹ “Wenn wir anfangen, etwas zu *glauben*, so nicht einen einzelnen Satz, sondern ein ganzes System von Sätzen. ... Nicht einzelne Axiome leuchten mir, sondern ein System, worin sich Folgen und Prämissen *gegenseitig* stützen” ÜG 141-142.

²⁰ “Aber das Ende ist nicht die unbegründete Voraussetzung, sondern die unbegründete Handlungsweise.” ÜG 110.

²¹ “Die Begründung aber, die Rechtfertigung der Evidenz kommt zu einem Ende; - das Ende aber ist nicht, daß uns gewisse Sätze unmittelbar als wahr einleuchten, also eine Art *Sehen* unsrerseits, sondern unser *Handeln*, welches am Grunde des Sprachspiels liegt.” ÜG 204.

²² See ÜG 29.

propositions.²³ Rather one must look to the practical consequences of systems of beliefs.

One might ask if this is not an unusual form of foundationalism: the foundationalism of practice in which one searches for non-epistemic, non-cognitive but rather an active foundation? Huang's answer is no, for practice is founded in turn on beliefs. Their common foundation is their mutual founding; as our practice is at the basis of our beliefs, so do our beliefs lie at the basis of our practice. A community expressing itself through a collective practice is what guarantees a system of beliefs and makes it possible, and language is the instrument of a community's way of life.

“We are quite sure of it does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education.”²⁴

Thus, in contrast with Nielsen, Huang maintains that religion cannot be a private thing but must necessarily pertain to a community.

But is Wittgenstein speaking of a single human community or of several ones? How can conflicts between communities be solved if no communication is possible?

5. Final Considerations

²³ See “Wenn das Wahre das Begründete ist, dann ist der Grund nicht *wahr*, noch falsch.” “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false.” ÜG 205.

²⁴ “Wir sind dessen ganz sicher, heißt nicht nur, daß jeder Einzelne dessen gewiß ist, sondern, daß wir zu einer Gemeinschaft gehören, die durch die Wissenschaft und Erziehung verbunden ist” ÜG 298.

Wittgensteinian fideism has some merits but also great limits, partly deriving from the ideas of Wittgenstein himself, which, however, we shall not discuss in the present context. The price paid by fideists to ensure the autonomy of religious language is the loss of commensurability, which is the basis of all discourse, of all communication. While on the one hand it is possible to appreciate the anti-reductionist impulse, thanks to which discourses other than those belonging to the verificationist or foundationalist canons can be endorsed, on the other hand the perspective of Wittgensteinian fideists is characterized by several ambiguities, as for example when they speak of being “in” or “out” of the language game, without being able to clarify the way these terms are used. The fideists’ mistake, in my opinion, is that of relying on the notions of language games and forms of life, which are open concepts without clear limits, in order to draw boundaries, to differentiate, something that Wittgenstein never does. Since there are no criteria that allow one to establish the boundaries of language games, it is meaningless to speak of in and out, of *internal* criteria; these expressions seemed to be ultimately used by fideists in an instrumental and improper way.

The same holds for forms of life, a concept that can be extended or shrunk according to the whim of the speaker; not having any distinctive value, anything can be included in or excluded from it. It is said that religious language must be judged according to *internal* criteria, but this could mean that the criteria for Christian language are different from that of the Hindu religion, but also that the language of Catholicism is different from that of Protestantism, or that of twentieth-century Catholicism is different from that of fifteenth century Catholicism, and so on. Which, in a way, is certainly true, but, if taken literally would mean that each community and indeed, each believer, has his own language, his own personal grammar. This particularizing process may be a useful methodological precaution against neo-positivist tendencies to hyper-assimilate and generalize languages, tendencies common to all forms of foundationalism, but cannot be certainly treated as an epistemological maxim, insofar as it does not allow us to tell where boundaries can be legitimately drawn. If

identity is a product of differences, the concepts of language game and form of life do not allow us to ascertain identities because they do not allow us to differentiate, to say what is in and what is out: is religious language a single language game or does it include more than one? is prayer a language game different from thanking or praising the Lord?

The notion that a language game can occur independently of all others has no basis in Wittgenstein's work, who on the contrary speaks of language games as interconnected activities, which often come into conflict. Conflicts are overcome also through people's ability to reason (something that fideists would be reluctant to admit, because of their hostility to any theological systematization). We can decide to abandon or embrace a faith after having evaluated it; if this were not the case we would be faced with the paradox of a convert who did not know what he was considering believing in until he actually believed in it. If the criteria were really internal they would be unintelligible for those on the outside and therefore no conversion would be possible, if not for motivations lying outside the rational sphere.²⁵

The appeal to the community does not work for the same reasons, namely that it is impossible to establish the limits of any given community. Each believer is part of many communities: Roman Catholics, for example, belong to their parish, diocese, country, ethnic community, historic period, social group, etc. What is in and what is out? What is the boundary of a community? Can these boundaries be expanded at will to the point of including all human beings, including those who lived in the past? But if we do this the concept necessarily loses its utility, it becomes the container of everything and its intensity diminishes in inverse proportion to its extension.

It is important to acknowledge the various uses of language, the role of context and behavior; one can appreciate the invitation to focus on where beliefs originate and develop; attention to religious practice means attention to symbolic and mythical

²⁵ See J. KELLENBERG, *The Language-Game view of Religion and Religious Certainty*, "Canadian Journal of Philosophy", 2 (1972), pp. 261-263.

aspects, to rites, liturgy, celebration, against those pseudo-intellectual conceptions that reduce religiosity to a body of doctrines. But all this cannot serve to deny the importance of the rational and cognitive aspects that lead us to favor one doctrine over the other.

It is true that in the same way that we do not decide to be born on earth or learn our native language, we cannot help growing up within a framework of beliefs and world views, but it is not true that people lack the ability to question received beliefs. Understanding the genesis of our behaviors does not mean necessarily justifying them, at least as long as one retains the ability to choose, to decide, and until will and choice continue to play a role in our beliefs.

The valuable aspect of the fideists' arguments is that they highlight the way certain religious practices and expressions will never be fully understood until one does not take into consideration their expressive and behavioral aspects, but this is far from saying that religious language is solely expressive. Indeed one can lose one's faith through one's ability to think rationally, for example because of the impossibility of providing a logical answer to the problem of evil.²⁶

Furthermore, the dichotomy of regulative versus explicative religion is a false one: something can serve as a guide in our lives because it has an explicative value, as Huang rightly notes.²⁷ Any religious form presupposes at least the idea of man, of his capabilities, of the world he lives in, etc., which it expresses in a doctrine. Moreover, in every religion there is an orthodoxy, a canon, a tradition as well as a corresponding heresy, and Malcolm

²⁶ See K. NIELSEN, *Does Religious Skepticism Rest on a Mistake?* in R. D. GEIVETT and B. SWEETMAN (edit.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, p. 119.

²⁷ See Y. HUANG, *Foundation of Religious Beliefs after Foundationalism: Wittgenstein between Nielsen and Phillips*, "Religious Studies", 31 (1995), p. 259.

himself admits that beliefs must necessarily be expressed in some specific theologically elaborated form.²⁸

The fideists' strategy seems designed to avoid confrontation by eliminating the common ground between languages that allows different forms of life to engage into dialogue. In their effort to oppose a dangerous tendency to an homologation of expressive styles, fideists go to the other extreme, the attitude according to which everything goes, everything is meaningful.

The limits of Wittgensteinian fideism, which is ultimately a form of religious relativism, is that it cannot hope to be universally valid. It applies only, if at all, to that specific form of life which is the religiosity of Wittgensteinians.

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²⁸ See N. MALCOLM, *The Groundlessness of Belief*, in R. D. GEIVETT and B. SWEETMAN (edit.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1992, pp. 188-189.

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