

Religion as a ‘form of life’

Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that we cannot understand language without understanding the ways in which language is used and how it interacts with how we live and what we do (*Philosophical Investigations*). Wittgenstein was greatly influenced by Kierkegaard in his understanding of religious belief. He sought to understand religious language and belief by relating them to religious activity. He agreed with Ayer that religious language is not empirical, but rejected Ayer’s conclusion that it was therefore not meaningful.

LANGUAGE GAMES

Wittgenstein attempted to illuminate the nature of language by comparing language to games. In particular, like games, language is an activity guided by rules – in games, rules governing what one can do, in language, rules governing meaning; and second, meaning is learned from the rules governing the use of the word/sentence, like ‘pieces’ in a game, e.g. chess, are understood by how they can be used.

Meaning, then, is often a matter of how words are used. Appreciating this requires a distinction between surface grammar and depth grammar: words or sentences in one context describing objects or an event may be similar on the surface to ones that in another context that do nothing of the sort, e.g. ‘the bus passes the bus stop’, ‘the peace of the Lord passes understanding’. To understand a particular ‘piece’ of language, one must look at how the language is used, as meaning is not given by the form of words alone.

When looking at how words are used, we need to look at the ‘language game’ – that bit of language and the rules it follows – which gives the words their meaning. (Wittgenstein lists as examples of language games asking, thanking, cursing, praying, greeting, and so on.)

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The idea of ‘language games’ emphasises the foundation of language in activity. Wittgenstein says that a language game is the speaking part of a ‘form of life’. A form of life is far broader than any specific language game, it is the foundation out of which language games grow, the collection of cultural practices which embed language games. (The very foundation is biology, and Wittgenstein often emphasises how our natural reactions form the basis for language games. Think of talking about pain or colour or even responses to music.) As part of forms of life, language games do not need any justification. They are rooted in natural human reactions and activities. If then, religious faith and language are a particular language game, part of a human form of life, their claims need no justification. We only need to understand what is distinctive about them.

So religious language must be understood as part of a religious life. Religious life and language contains the many different language games of praise and worship, prayer, miracles and so on; but religious language can also be understood as forming a game in

its own right, governed by particular rules. Wittgenstein argued that religious language has a depth grammar quite distinct from its surface grammar. Its surface grammar can look empirical, as though, like science, religious language is talking about things and events. This is misleading.

A central part of Wittgenstein's analysis is that 'God exists' is not a statement of fact. It is not about a thing, an object that exists as part of the world like natural objects do. It is not a claim about an entity at all. If it is not an empirical statement, then believing it is not an empirical belief: 'a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.' (*Culture and Value*, 64) He argued that if we look at how the statement is used, what it expresses for people who believe it, we see that it is not used as a description, it is used to express a form of commitment.

This can be illustrated by talk of the Last Judgement. This is not a hypothesis about a possible future event; if it was, it would be utterly bizarre (what's the evidence? how is such a belief formed?). The Last Judgement is a 'picture', an understanding of life by which the believer is guided through life. Another example is provided by D Z Phillips, who defended and developed Wittgenstein's theory ('Religious beliefs and language games'). He argues that if someone thinks that prayer is a means to obtaining something, they have misunderstood the nature of religion, and their belief has become superstition.

On this view, religious language expresses an emotional attitude and understanding of life and a commitment to living life according to that understanding. It is not a description of the way the world is. Phillips argued that this means that God is not 'logically prior' to religion, some thing to which religion is a human response. Talk of God only makes sense within religious practices. To understand religious language is to understand the place of certain statements in the life of the believer and religious community. And the nature of religious faith and morality shows that these statements are not factual.

DISCUSSION

An important implication of Wittgenstein's theory is that we can't criticise or support religious beliefs by using evidence. No language game can be criticized by standards of rationality that are external to that game. Religion cannot be criticised on the grounds that it is not true or highly improbable; for this presupposes that it makes factual claims, and it does not. So, for example, both the argument from design and the problem of evil are irrelevant as attempts to prove or disprove the existence of God. Faith, then, is not founded on reason. It is a distinctive and natural part of being human.

This, we might object, cuts religious belief off from reason too severely. However, Phillips points out that the theory doesn't mean there are no grounds for accepting or rejecting religious belief. Religion is part of a form of human life: 'Religion has something to say about... birth, death, joy, misery, despair, hope, fortune, and misfortune.' If religious faith makes no sense in the light of such experiences, we will rightly reject it. The problem of evil could be relevant here. Not any set of attitudes and commitments makes sense.

What this means is that religion can't be isolated from other cultural and linguistic practices that criticise it. Religion is not a completely autonomous form of life, for it is always situated in and among many other human practices. But this does not mean that such connections to life justify or refute religious beliefs.

But we can object that this interpretation of religious belief as not factual conflicts with how many believers think of God and their faith. Wittgenstein's account looks like a reinterpretation of religious belief, not an analysis of it. In defending religious faith against criticism from 'external' standards, his theory makes a claim about what religious language means which seems equally external to (and critical of) religious faith.

It also makes what you believe much less important, as religious faith is about how we live. Yet many religious believers who act in similar ways and hold similar values argue there is something distinctive and important about the different beliefs they hold. Furthermore, within the history of any religion, there have been heated arguments about how to interpret a particular doctrine (e.g. in Christianity, the Incarnation), when it is very difficult to see how the different interpretations could make any impact on different ways of living. All this suggests that religious language is intended to be true, i.e. fact-stating, and not just expressive.

We can argue that Wittgenstein was right to point to the expressive use of religious language. But he was wrong to think that because religious beliefs express attitudes, they cannot also be empirical. There is no reason to think that they cannot be both. After all, religious believers do think they are saying something factual when they say 'God exists'. It has this use.