Wittgenstein on Language and Religion

- I -

Religious themes have always been a concern for philosophy. Thus it is understandable that, given the great variety of philosophical schools, the views concerning religion actually outlined and developed by philosophers throughout the history of their discipline should be fantastically different. Indeed religion has been examined, *inter alia*, from the point of view of its cognitive claims, from the standpoint of class struggle and from the perspective of ethics and moral life. Each great conception of religion is historically justified in the sense that it corresponds to the kind of debate typical of this or that particular period. Naturally, this applies as well to whom can be seen as the most influential thinker of the XX th century, *viz.*, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Now, however vague its reference may be, surely vigorous, alive twentieth century philosophy is what is known as 'analytical philosophy', that is, the school which envisages all philosophical problems (epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, etc.) from the perspective of the philosophy of language. Wittgenstein himself, together with Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, was responsible for this change in our general philosophical outlook. It is therefore to be expected that his contributions in the philosophy of religion should depend upon his more general views on language. Wittgenstein had new and important insights into the nature of religious belief, behaviour, attitudes and so on, but one way or another they derive from what he had to say about language and, more specifically, about religious language. On the other hand, it is well known that Wittgenstein developed two quite different approaches to language and so it could be inferred that he built two different conceptions of religion. I want to hold, however, that beneath the obvious and drastic differences that hold between the views on language and religion contained in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and those which emanate from the *Philosophical Investigations* there is a single trend of thought, one and the same set of basic insights. Part of my task here is to make them explicit.

- II -

I think it would not be a mistake to assert that the main point of Wittgenstein's continuous thinking on religion is that religious language has no factual content. On his perspective, religious language is not meant to describe a special sector of reality. So one feature that can be traced in both the young and the later Wittgenstein' thought is what could be called his 'anti-transcendentism'. But if to speak about heaven is not to speak about a particular place, to refer to God is not to refer to a particular being and so on, the question which immediately arises is: what

is the specific content of religious expressions and what do we have a religious language for?

Let us quickly consider the *Tractatus* first. Indeed it is a challenge to approach the subject without repeating what has already been said countless times. Nonetheless and trying not to be repetitious, I want to hold first of all that the book contains, among other things, the best possible expression of the solipsistic view of the world. In other words, it is a work written in the first person. There is no need or place in the book for "the other" or, more in general, for social issues. It is the subject who speaks (and the author almost says it explicitly)[1], but curiously enough what he gives us is the rationale of **our** logic, world, knowledge, mathematics, science, ethics and religion. But how is the transition from the subject to the rest of us carried out? Obviously, such an ambitious project had to have some implicit premise, some unavowed thought which would guarantee that what he takes to be the right picture of the world is something that could be accepted by any other person as well, *i.e.*, by all of us. In my opinion, the most basic implicit belief in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the Schopenhauerian idea that we all search, want, pursue, think and so on, the same; to put it in a somewhat misleading way: we do belong to a natural kind, *i.e.*, the human one. That's is perhaps why he says that "I am the microcosmos".[2] It is on this basis, on this tacit premise alone that the whole, self-contained, imposing system is built.

Now what do the subject has to say about the world as a whole? One important Fregean idea should be emphasized here, namely, that reference (whatever it might be) can only be got at through language. Frege would probably have said "through sense", but Wittgenstein did not follow Frege on that point. Since for him the meaning of names are the objects they denote, Wittgenstein is closer to Russell than to Frege on this particular issue. On the other hand, it is clear that the formal, factual ontology and the abstract philosophy of language put forward in the *Tractatus* are the two sides of the same coin. Language and reality are just logically, but not conceptually, independent of each other. It would be a sheer mistake to try to make Wittgenstein a sort of linguistic idealist. Language does not create reality: it merely reflects it. But our idea of a world is mediated by language. Now what language shows is that the world is all the facts there are, all the facts that obtain. Every time we say something, what we do is to state a fact, to picture it. To say something is not just to point to something. To say something is to state something that can be true or false. In order to say something that can be true or false we have to employ sentences which literally are, from a logical point of view, pictures of facts. A sentence is a sequence of sounds or signs which become alive when they are

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[1] Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 5.631 (b).

[2] L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 5.63.

endowed with a sense. The Picture Theory embodies Wittgenstein's explanation of how a dead series of signs can become a useful sentence. What a useful sentence expresses is a proposition. A proposition is nothing but a sentence actually used by someone, "a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world"[3]; in other words, we have a proposition when a picture (*i.e.*, a well formed sentence) is actually thought out by someone (regardless of its being used *sotto voce* or aloud). A thought, on the other hand, is a mental entity which is a logical picture of a fact. So thoughts and propositions may not coincide, for mental and linguistic pictures may differ. At any rate, it is clear that in the *Tractatus* there is no place for Platonic entities, Fregean *Gedanken* and so on. Rather, a proposition is produced by a speaker when he says something or at least when he thinks it out. Anyway, the point which should be stressed here is that the only thing a speaker *qua* speaker can do is to speak about reality, that is, to state or depict facts.

Once the logic of our world has been given to us, Wittgenstein observes that there are certain things that logically cannot be said. Admittedly, here lies the major paradox of the *Tractatus* for: isn't it Wittgenstein himself which explicitly states what, according to his own stand, cannot be put into words? I am convinced that there is no chance whatever, within the framework of the *Tractatus*, to overcome this difficulty. Maliciously, Russell himself was the first to point it out in his controversial but quite useful "Introduction". However, I shall not press the point here, among other things because I also think that the later Wittgenstein, in what is a completely different framework and with a completely different conceptual apparatus, did manage to avoid the problem. We shall come to that later on, but now let us rather try to make Wittgenstein's point. After all, what he wanted us to understand is neither new nor as absurd as it could seem at first sight. At any rate, the only philosophical antecedent I know of concerning the issue of the limits of language is to be found in Frege. For logical reasons which I shall not go into now but which are well known, Frege was committed to the unacceptable view that the concept of a plane is not a concept, the concept of a dog is not a concept, etc. Wittgenstein, it can be argued, reasons in the same vein. What he would be willing to ask would be something like this: what kind of explanation does after all someone offer of, say, the logical structure of language, if in order to elaborate his explanation he must have recourse to language itself and, therefore, to the very logical structure he aimed at explaining? Put it in this way, Wittgenstein's position does not seem absurd at all. What has to be grasped is that for Wittgenstein it makes no sense to speak of language as if we were away, cut off from it, standing on a different platform. No speaker can refer to language as a whole. There is no such possibility.

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[3] L. Wittgenstein, *ibid*, 3.12.

It follows that (and here language forces to utter nonsenses) "there are" "things" we cannot speak about. It is clear, I think, from what I have said that, strictly speaking, there are no such things. Since our language is necessarily about reality and when we speak of reality we speak of objects making up facts, it is unavoidable for us to express ourselves **as if** we were speaking of things in this case too. Factuality and meaningfulness coincide, so that it makes no sense to try either to catch facts in a non linguistic way or to say something which would not amount to the stating of facts. Nevertheless, there is such thing as religious language. Since religious language does not satisfy the conditions imposed by the Picture Theory, there is sense in which it is not meaningful language. Logically, religious language is not meaningful for there are not such things as religious facts. There is none the less another sense in which it is not only meaningful, but crucial. What has to be specified is its role in our life.

The fact (if it be a fact) that the world is independent of my mind does not imply that it is not **for** me. Let us recall that what Wittgenstein presents us with is the world viewed from the perspective of the subject (not to say 'the self', for there is no such thing). So the world is and has to be **my** world. 'Being my world' means that I judge it, in the sense that, for better or worse, I evaluate it, I adopt an attitude towards it. Facts do not change depending upon my evaluation, but my life does. Now if we want to speak about my position in the world and with respect to it, about what has value in itself and about the meaning that the totality of facts has for me, I shall have to use language in a non factual way, for what I shall try to state in words are not more facts, but rather the presuppositions of facts, their possibility of being for me. So we have to leave, strictly speaking, meaningful language. It is here that we can appreciate the importance of religious language and the first thing to be said about religion, taking "God" as its main object, is that "God does not reveal itself **in** the world".[4] That is, when we speak of God we do not speak about a special entity, having special powers, living in a special place and so on. We speak, although in a non literal way, about our place *vis à vis* the world, that is, about the meaning of the world or, what amounts to the same thing, about the meaning of our life, for "World and life are one and the same".[5] The point of religious language is thus to use words in order to point to what can only **show itself.**

It should be taken into account that for Wittgenstein 'religious language' did not mean concrete prayers or the language of the ritual in general. Religious language was conceived by him mainly as that part of natural language in which the word 'God' and related words are used. Now the logical study of language did show that the world, regardless of its actual configuration, is **for** me, *i.e.*, it is the world I

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[4] L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 6.432.
[5] L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, 5.621.

have experience of. This shows that there are two elements involved here: the objective world and its being for me. It is when we want to speak of this second "element" that we are prone to speak of God. To speak of God, therefore, is not to speak of something lying beyond the realm of factuality. That is a distorted interpretation of religious language, the outcome of an all too easy assimilation to factual language. Obviously, there must be something deeply wrong and misleading in the attempt. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, it rather is a way of expressing something about the whole complex system of relations which holds between me and the world and which is nothing but my life. Since in this case we are no longer dealing with facts, language is useless to express what we nonetheless are inclined to state. What is it that we want to say but cannot put into words? The meaning of life. It is then that the word 'God' is the right word to use.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is cautious and rather spearing in words. His elucidations have only a somewhat critical flavour. It would seem as if at the time he was more interested in rejecting all sorts of vacuous, trivial discourse about God than in giving long, detailed explanations about the usefulness of religious language. By rejecting theism in general he was already on the right track, but it should also be acknowledged that, however brilliant and profound, what he holds will unavoidably leave everybody unsatisfied, philosophically hungry, for even if we accepted his general stand we would nevertheless feel that what he had said was not and could not be the end of the story. As a matter of fact, given his general outlook, his views about language and its limits, he could hardly have said something more. Fortunately, Wittgenstein's thinking was in constant evolution and thus, soon after his official return to philosophy, in 1929, he had already produced a wholly original and completely new conception of language which had decisive implications for our understanding of religion. About this new view, I shall limit myself to state the following points:

a) language is basically conceived now from the point of view of its practicality, not from the point of views of its formal or logical features.
b) The new view is not a contribution to any kind of science of language. It was designed to show the uselessness of philosophical discourse by making explicit its conflicts with the rules of use.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why and how the whole approach to religious issues had to change dramatically. The point now was not to make us understand what could not be stated in words. The kind of question which was now sensible to raise was rather: what is the purpose of religious language? Why should we speak of God at all?

Let us start by recalling the core of Wittgenstein's new conception of language. His proposal consists in viewing language as composed by an indeterminate number of "language-games". To each language-game there corresponds a "form of life", which is nothing but an institutionalized, socialized practice. Actually, no speaker participates in all language-games, since no individual can take part in all forms of life. A simple way to present Wittgenstein's conception is to compare society to a kind of market to which everybody has to go and in which what is offered and has to be acquired are forms of life. In order to take part in any form of life whatsoever, a person must also be familiar with the corresponding language, that is, he must also take part in the corresponding language-game. Paraphrasing Kant, we could say that language-games without forms of life are empty and forms of life without language-games are unintelligible. For instance, nobody can take part in the form of like of classical music unless he knows the language-game of music (keys, notes, etc.). The some holds *mutatis mutandis* for the language-games of computers, differential equations, base-ball, etc., and of course of religion. Accordingly, instead of speaking of religion in general, we shall rather speak of religious language-games and religious forms of life. Now what does Wittgenstein have to say about them?

Let us state clearly what our goal is: we aim at grasping and understanding the peculiar mode of meaning of religious expressions. However, in accordance with what we have said, this is tantamount to asking how religious words and expressions are employed and this requires us to describe the practices which give rise to them and which in turn are reinforced and polished by them.

Let me have recourse to an example I gave in another paper [6]. Let us imagine the following situation: two friends, *A* and *B*, have, from their childhood onwards, spent most of their lives together. They have attended the same schools, they have travelled together and so on. However, their personal situations are different. *A* is a handsome, rich and good hearted person. He has protected and helped on multiple occasions his friend who, unknown to everybody, is mortally jealous of him. Let us further imagine that *A* faces a wonderful future: he is to get married to a lovely and rich lady, he has secured for himself a socially comfortable position, etc. Now suddenly *B* is presented with an opportunity to get rid of *A*: some convincing documents related to an awful crime are produced and *A* is judged and, much to everybody's surprise, sent to jail where, trying no longer to understand what happened, he commits suicide. *B* then takes over *A*'s position in life. He gets everybody's condolences, marries his former friend's wife (the woman he always loved in secret) and starts a new and successful life. He lives happily till at some

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[6] A. Tomasini, "Conceptos Religiosos y Vida Religiosa" en *Lenguaje y Anti-Metafísica.Cavilaciones Wittgensteinianas* (México: Plaza y Valdés, 2005).

stage, many years later, when he at last perceives the horizon which marks the end of his life, he (to put it some way) "gets worried": he now realizes the magnitude of his crime, a crime factually impossible to uncover. Anyway, he feels as if he had to account for what happened. Now let us suppose that this man really repents, that is, not only in words but in deeds: he abandons his well established marriage, his children, he repudiates his social situation, etc., and starts living in a completely different way. Let us assume that such a fellow does want to be forgiven (this is already a *façon de parler*, since nobody accuses him of anything), to feel free in a world in which as a matter of fact nobody could even touch him. He knows that he cannot erase the past: his friend is dead and buried and there are no facts to be changed. But he wants, he needs to change reality in some way and to repair somehow what he did. Now what could a man in such a situation say to give expression to his new attitude (assuming that he is sincere, *i.e.*, that he joins words to actions), to his remorse, to his new behaviour and feelings? It is clear, I think, that psychological language would be quite useless here. What goes on in his brain is completely irrelevant for the whole business. It is not the language about "mental states" that would be useful here. Rather would not expressions like 'Oh Lord, forgive me!', 'Lord, do not let me die like this, do not send me to the flames!', 'Oh my God, forgive this sinner, your son', 'Oh my God, please accept me again. I am ready to do anything whatsoever', be the right expressions to be employed, the only possible ones?

Examples like this one can easily be either found or imagined. The question is: what do they teach us? This is what we have to investigate now.

We said above that not everybody takes part in all forms of life open to him by society. So let us ask: what would a person lose, who has not incorporated religious language-games and who does not take part in any religious form of life? What would he be lacking? From a Wittgensteinian perspective, there are two lines of response, one relating to his capabilities of expression and one concerning praxis. Let us consider the former first. Obviously, such a man would be lacking a powerful linguistic tool. But what does this imply? What we want to determine is: what in fact would he be deprived of? Now Wittgenstein insisted that the characteristic feature of religious language was the use of an **image**. The example above makes this clear. When the fellow in question asks to be forgiven, when he prays, is he talking to someone, to another normal speaker? Is he engaged in normal conversation? Clearly not. He is using the image of a (let us call it this way) "super-person", a "super-being", to express his emotion, it is by reference to it that he expresses his state of mind. But (as was to be expected) that "being" does not respond at all. To pray is to use language **as if** what one was doing were talking to someone special, someone who would understand us better than anybody else, and who would forgive us. In

praying, therefore, an image is involved. When the fellow in question begs not to be thrown to the flames, he is once more having recourse to an image, the image of something terrible happening to him, of being burnt alive, although as a matter of fact nothing threatens him.[7] So the image is crucial and essential to religious ways of speaking, but what is its point? The answer is simple: it helps to colour one's experiences and, more importantly, it leads one in a certain direction; it contributes to give meaning to one's life. Moreover, the image plays a pragmatic role, for it induces us to **act** in a certain way. Accordingly, the most absurd thing to do would be to interpret religious expressions as a special kind of factual or purely descriptive language. That renders religious language and life utterly unintelligible.

It could be asked: what is so important about an image, which after all is nothing but a linguistic device? As we said, this linguistic mechanism is what enables speakers to give colour to their lives. Once again we find ourselves with the thought that religion has something to do with the meaning of life and this in turn does explain why people should rather die than abandon their religious beliefs, that is, their religious symbols. We cannot simply accept what gives meaning to our lives to be destroyed and not to react with force. The image may be so important to us that it is understandable that people should hold to it even if the price is to risk their lives for its sake, something we would never do for a simple belief about facts, a scientific belief for instance. Clearly, on the other hand, the assimilation of an image is not the outcome of a calculation or an experiment, the conclusion of a rational process. In this sense, religious belief is beyond rationality and irrationality. The realm of religious belief is the realm of faith.

Just as the language of colours helps us to develop our spectrum of sensations of colours,[8] so religious language helps us to widen our possibilities of feeling and acting. Religious language-games are not merely sets of propositions. Like hammers and knives, they are tools and thus they acquire their real meaning when they are employed properly and they are so employed when they make the speaker feel and behave in certain ways. Mental life and overt behaviour become religious only when they pass through the filter of religious language and what is entailed by it. For instance, religious emotions and thoughts must be involved. Now what are typical religious feelings and emotions? Things like remorse, beatitude, internal peace, acceptance, a sort of joy, the sense of having sinned, trust, forgiveness and so on. Religious life takes shape in behaviour guided by the images we have been inculcated to apply. For instance, if we adopt the image of a god made man and

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[7] I recognize that, if the meaning of 'hell' is a place, I was never able to understand literally what it is to be in it. For instance, I just have no idea whatever of what it is for a soul to be burnt.

[8] Just ask: how many colours are we entitled to admit that someone who uses, say, eight names for colours, does perceive?)

crucified in order to save us for our sins, then we shall be in a position to behave in accordance with that image in multiple situations. For instance, we could give some of our money away, because we would want to be like Him; we might react calmly when we are offended, because we would have accepted His teaching, and so on. At any rate, let us keep in mind that Wittgenstein indicates that there are always **criteria** to judge the sincerity of someone's speech and actions. So it is relatively easy to detect a religious fraud, a purely verbal commitment and to distinguish it from a genuine one. We could perhaps express the thought by saying that it is impossible to fool God.

- III -

In what sense is Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion different from the usual kind of philosophical debate about religion and what does it contribute with to our progress toward a better understanding of religion in general? Since Wittgenstein's clarifications, *i.e.*, his descriptions of the grammar of religious expressions, make it clear from the very beginning that in having recourse to religious language we are not alluding to anything lying beyond the realm of facts, something not to be located within the four dimensional space-time structure, his discussions have nothing to do with proofs or disproofs about the existence of anything: non-natural beings and places, unintelligible events and so on. His main goal always was to exhibit the rationality of religious language, its peculiar *modus operandi*, and the assessment of its place and importance in human life. Thus Wittgenstein can perfectly well elude all sort of conflict between religion and both common sense and science. So if we are able to follow him and look at things the way he indicates, we are no longer forced to choose between "rationality" and religion. Once we understand that religion and science are, so to speak, on different planes, the long lasted conflict between science and religion just disappears. From this new perspective religion is a dimension of life that thanks to Wittgenstein, in the age of technology, can be recovered for the individual. We no longer have to face the "facts or superstition" dilemma, for Wittgenstein did show that it is nothing but a pseudo-problem. We can confidently initiate our children in the use of certain special linguistic tools, opening for them new horizons of feeling and action, and at the same time to introduce them in the world of knowledge. There is no contradiction or tension involved.

In a wonderful tale, *What men live by*, Leon Tolstoy says: children can live without parents, but they can't live without God. If by 'God' he meant, as he probably did, the whole dimension of human affection, the complex set of feelings, emotions and practices which give colour and meaning to human life, then it could be argued that Tolstoy's *dictum* embodies Wittgenstein's position better than any other one and also that he was right. The latter's profound understanding of the

functioning of language made him aware of the reigning mess concerning religion and his original insights about the nature of philosophical puzzles enabled him to become the most successful defender in our times of genuine religious life.