

Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Religious Atheist

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ABSTRACT

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the greatest philosophers of the last century puts forward his view of meaning as use in his later philosophy. While he was lecturing at Cambridge he discussed religious beliefs in the context of the use of words. This paper will attempt to bring forward Wittgenstein's views regarding religious belief primarily as it appears in the Lectures he gave in Cambridge. He showed that religious language and non-religious language do not contradict each other but are on an entirely different plane. What is important is the use of the terms. And Wittgenstein says that religious belief cannot be equated with scientific belief. The latter demand evidence whereas the former does not. The former on the other hand uses words like "faith", "dogma" etc. And he cites examples like the belief in the Last Judgement or in the existence of God to show his case. Thus on this ground we can argue that every kind of religious belief including those of the atheist's, each has something to say and none can be shoved aside for lack of proof, evidence or arguments. This is because religious language does not demand proof and are not related to anything empirical in the world. It is the use of the terms in religious language which sets them apart from scientific beliefs.

Key Words : Religious, Belief, Believer, Nonbeliever, Use of Words

INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein was born on 2 April, 1889 in Vienna, Austria. He has become somewhat of a cult figure in contemporary philosophy. All his works were published posthumously except for the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*^[1], which was his Ph.D. dissertation and *Some Remarks on Logical Form*^[2], an article he wrote upon his return to Cambridge in 1929. This was his early philosophy where he was primarily concerned with viewing the world aright. This gradually gave way to the later Wittgenstein who upheld meaning as use in language. Wittgenstein's treatment of religious belief in the Lectures in 1938 at Cambridge provides a paradigm case of his late method of philosophising. But one should keep in mind that Wittgenstein never thought that his views would be published someday, atleast not in the manner they have been published. Wittgenstein's insights into the nature of religious belief are derived from what he said about language and more specifically about religious language.

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Religious Belief in the Lectures:

Wittgenstein spoke of religion and ethics, although he never developed any formal philosophy of religion. His student and later friend MO'C Drury recalls the now famous remark of Wittgenstein's that though he was not a religious man yet he could not help considering every problem from a religious standpoint. Wittgenstein's lectures at Cambridge in the 1930's on religious belief drives his point home. He points out that religious beliefs are very intense and strong, although they lack evidence and proof. Their uniqueness lies in the near unshakeable commitment towards them. Wittgenstein looks at the same examples of language used to express religious beliefs in order to learn how that language is used and what, if anything, it is about. Wittgenstein cites the case of a person who believes in the Last Judgement in such a manner that it is the regulating principle of his life^[3]. He argues that when people say things about their religious beliefs, we should be open to the realisation that they are not doing the same thing as scientists do when they take about their hypotheses. Belief in the Last Judgement is not the same kind of thing as belief in rain tomorrow. If I say that I feel sure it would be rain tomorrow because I had a dream, it would be a bit absurd because we do not base weather forecasts on the evidence of dreams. But it is altogether absurd to assume that religious beliefs are like weather forecasts. Moreover if anyone, for example, bases belief in the Last Judgement on dreams, then it is equally absurd to say that he is making the same kind of blunder as the weather forecaster cited above. Thus Wittgenstein writes: "Whether a thing is a blunder or not –it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another"^[4]. It is necessary to know the rules of a game in order to know whether a move is permissible within it or not and the same thing can be said of the use of words in language.

If religious belief is based on evidence in the same manner that science is based on evidence, then according to Wittgenstein it "would destroy the whole business"^[5]. Religion would be reduced to superstition. He refers to Father O'Hara who in a symposium on *Science and Religion*^[6] makes religion a question of science. Wittgenstein says he would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable^[7]. According to Wittgenstein religious beliefs are beliefs of a logically distinct kind. No matter how strong a religious belief is, it cannot be proved by reasoning or any other grounds for belief. There may be others who may not even believe in a Judgement Day in the way a religious person does. And the non-believer's explanation would obviously be rejected by the believer. But the important point is that the two beliefs do not contradict each other. Entirely dissimilar and disparate ways of thinking are possible without one contradicting the other. For example, Wittgenstein says that if anyone were to ask him whether he considered illness to be a punishment, he would probably reply that he has no thoughts of punishment.

Wittgenstein gives us other examples. Religious believers might say that a man is not really dead, even though by ordinary criteria he is. Or in other words religious believers might think of him as really alive. *i.e.* they may speak of him as a disembodied spirit although he is what we all call dead. According to Wittgenstein the important point is 'to connect with these words'^[8]. The word 'dead' has a technique of usage' considered as a 'public instrument'^[9]. Generally we use the word 'dead' to mean that the person referred to has ceased to exist. Religious believers, on their part have to clarify what they want to say when

they say that the dead have not ceased to exist but are ‘disembodied spirits’. They need to, tell what to do with these words, what consequences they will draw, what they oppose this to^[10].

Wittgenstein introduces the notion of ‘using a picture’. He considers the case ‘God’s eye sees everything’ and enquired whether eyebrows are going to be talked of in connection with the Eye of God^[11]. Here Wittgenstein points out that one has to discover the technique of using the picture. For instance, believers evidently draw the conclusion that if God’s eye sees everything, then he is aware of everything which goes on not only in the world but also in our hearts. But believers do not draw the conclusion that since God has an eye, he must also have eyebrows. There are no theological dogmas or controversies regarding the shape or shagginess of the divine eyebrows. That is never the case how believers use the picture ‘God’s Eye’. We can only learn what conclusions believers draw only if we understand their ‘technique of usage’. And Wittgenstein points out that those of us who have had a religious upbringing have acquired this technique of usage and we know that pictures of God are not used like pictures of aunts^[12]. The ‘connections’ that make religious beliefs distinct from scientific beliefs are in fact a matter of use.

According to Wittgenstein, controversies relating to religious beliefs are inconclusive. Religious controversies are not all on the same level. If, for example, the occurrence of a Judgement Day were supported by scientific evidence then it would no longer be called a religious belief. In the face of scientific evidence, religious belief is likely to be smashed to smithereens.

Believers and Non-Believers:

According to Wittgenstein the difference between believers and non-believers is not simply a matter of believers affirming certain propositions and the unbelievers denying them or vice versa. But actually believers and unbelievers think of things in different rather than opposite ways. Where one person says he is sure of the matter and another says may be or may be not, then both are on a different plane. Wittgenstein likens believer and unbeliever to two people playing different games. If one person says that handling the ball is a foul and another says that handling the ball is not a foul, then are they contradicting each other? They will be doing so only if they are playing the same game, referring to the same rules but not otherwise^[13]. The words which are generally used in religion are “dogma”, “faith”, etc. We do not talk of high probability or of knowing in case of religious beliefs. And most importantly the phrase “I believe so and so will happen” is used in religion in a different way.

Wittgenstein considers the word “God” as one of the earliest learnt. He points out that belief in the existence of a God plays a completely different role from that of the existence of a person or of an object which we have heard of. The former uses the word “believe” in an extraordinary manner. We do not use the word ‘believe’ in this way in other cases. Believing in God, no matter what it may be, is not like believing in anything that we can test or find or experiment. And we cannot even determine whether the evidence, if it is at all provided, is satisfactory or not of a sentence like “God exists”, just because some people say they believe in the evidence. Actually, according to Wittgenstein, religious and non-religious languages are incommensurable. The same terms can have different meanings in religious

and non-religious language. Therefore X is P and X is not P do not contradict each other because they are taken to be merely expressing different attitudes. In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein says “The way you use the word God does not show who you mean but rather what you mean”. And in the same work he remarks that religious belief is just a passionate commitment to a way of living^[14].

Conclusion :

Therefore we see that according to Wittgenstein religious language has no factual content. On his perspective religious language is not meant to describe a special sector of reality. Moreover this line of thinking can help realise that in this world there is room for every kind of religious belief including the atheist’s belief. It is the use of words that sets one’s beliefs apart from others and the difference lies in the use of words alone. We need not argue about “My God” and “Your God” because both, in their own ways are expressing different attitudes without contradicting each other. Therefore, Wittgenstein has a point when says that though religious beliefs are not reasonable, yet it is not unreasonable to have them. I conclude with a quotation from *Culture and Value*: “Religion as madness is a madness springing from irreligiousness”^[15].

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