

Wittgenstein on religious language and belief¹

What are we doing when we are talking about God? Are we stating truths, facts, how things are? Or is religious language meaningful in some other way, e.g. expressing an attitude or commitment toward the world, rather than trying to describe it? Is talk about God meaningful at all? In this handout, we discuss Ludwig Wittgenstein's approach to understanding meaning and his resulting view of religious language.

LANGUAGE GAMES

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, 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. He 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, the rules govern what one can do; in language, rules govern meaning. 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 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.)

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.) But the biology is always taken up in a particular culture, and what is 'natural' is often only natural within a

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2014) *Philosophy for AS* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 264-7

particular way of living as a human being. 'Human nature' involves both biology and culture.

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Wittgenstein's understanding of language games means that religious language must be understood as part of a religious life. Religious language contains the many different language games of praise and worship, prayer, miracles and so on; but it can also be understood as forming a game in its own right, governed by particular rules - those displayed in the analysis of its depth grammar.

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.

While philosophers agree on this much, they disagree on exactly what Wittgenstein wanted to claim about religious language. Many have argued that Wittgenstein is a non-cognitivist. Religious claims, such as 'God exists' or 'God created the world' or 'There will be a Last Judgment' do not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. Instead, they express emotions or attitudes toward the world and human life, a way of understanding or relating to the world, or a kind of commitment to live one's life a certain way. Why think this is what Wittgenstein believed?

A central part of Wittgenstein's analysis is that 'God exists' 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. It is unclear, then, that it can be true or false. Of course, if it is not an empirical statement, then believing it is not an empirical belief. He says, in *Culture and Value*, that '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'. This suggests that if we look at how statements of religious belief are used, what they express for religious believers, we see that religious language is used not as a description, but 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. Religious language expresses an emotional attitude and understanding of life and a commitment to living life according to that understanding.

Another example: Wittgenstein says that 'The historical accounts in the Gospels [about Jesus' life, death and resurrection] might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this ...'. It seems, then, that the meaning of religious belief and language is not given by trying to assert certain claims as true.

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 belief shows that these statements are not factual.

OBJECTIONS

In the handout 'Religious language: cognitive or non-cognitive?', we look at two objections to non-cognitivist theories of religious language. If Wittgenstein's theory is non-cognitivist, then it faces the same objections.

First, if religious language is not trying to assert truth claims, then we cannot criticise *or support* religious belief by appealing to evidence or arguments. In fact, even within religious belief, it is unclear how one belief is connected to another. For instance, can religious beliefs be logically inconsistent with one another if they are not true or false?

We can develop this objection further by pointing out that non-cognitivism makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to understand religious doubt. When someone begins to wonder whether God exists or not, according to non-cognitivism, what exactly do they call into question? Is this the same as withdrawing a commitment to live life a certain way? Perhaps it is the thought that a religious way of understanding the world no longer makes sense. But what exactly does that mean?

The second objection we raised is that non-cognitivism, including Wittgenstein's theory as described above, fails to make sense of how many believers think of God and their faith. If we should look at religious practice to understand the meaning of religious language, then when we look, we see ways of thinking and talking that support cognitivism. Religious believers argue, provide evidence, doubt, think that religious and scientific claims can conflict, and so on.

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

A number of philosophers have recently argued that Wittgenstein was not a non-cognitivist. He does not deny that religious language makes claims that are meant to be true. However, he emphasises that this is not *all* that religious language does. Instead, as we see when we look at religious practice, religious language and belief has a rich emotional and practical dimension as well. It expresses emotions, attitudes and commitments, and cannot be understood in purely cognitive terms. For example, in talking about a 'system of reference', Wittgenstein does not deny that a system of reference involves beliefs that can be true or false; he simply claims that religious belief must involve a *passionate commitment* to a system of reference. (A similar view is held by Basil Mitchell, and discussed in the handout 'The 'University' debate'.)

If this is the correct interpretation of Wittgenstein, then his theory of religious language avoids the objections raised against non-cognitivism above. It also means that we can - as philosophy of religion often does - discuss arguments for and against the existence of God and the truth of religious belief. However, it may be that we need to approach such questions with care and attention to the *kind* of evidence that may be appropriate in discussing a topic that is quite unlike empirical questions.