CHAPTER 8

Wittgenstein’s Paganism

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Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.

Dwight Eisenhower, Address at the Freedoms Foundation, New York City, 12/22/52

Religion was a subject of great philosophical and personal significance for Wittgenstein, yet his relation to it is difficult to pin down. The ambiguity of the place of religion in Wittgenstein’s thought and his ambivalent attitude towards it comes out nowhere more succinctly than in Maurice O’Connor Drury’s oft discussed recounting of Wittgenstein’s telling him that “I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.”¹ This paper concerns how Wittgenstein’s well-known respect for and tolerance of religious tradition and his reticence, even revulsion, at rendering judgments of religious systems, is related to issues of objectivity and relativism and to his understanding of the significance of philosophy.

In three recent papers Cora Diamond has attacked arguments by Ilham Dilman and Peter Winch that make purportedly Wittgensteinian impossibility arguments that try to limit logically what can and cannot be said about alien systems of thought and practice.² She shows how, in quite similar ways, these

philosophers argue that one must be moving within the grammar or on the inside of a particular conceptual or cultural system or domain of discourse in order to criticize it. Diamond criticizes Dilman and Winch for, in effect, trying to (use the later Wittgenstein to) lay down what she calls “supergrammatical” laws for what can and can’t be done with language, in particular with reference to criticisms of social systems of thought and practice in which one is not a participant. A “supergrammatical law” as Diamond is using this term would be in effect be a law that delimits the domain of what is logically thinkable. Such laying down of supergrammatical laws would have the result that criticizing certain elements of social and intellectual systems of thought and practice from the “outside” deprives these elements of the very identity they have only within the “inside” of a particular social context. Because such criticism would violate the purported boundaries of intelligible speech, someone who engaged in it could be met with the relativist response “you can’t say that.” Diamond argues that this kind of argument is not necessarily to be found in the later Wittgenstein’s work and moreover that it is wrong. She writes:

[I]t is possible to have a grammar of social and intellectual things, such that what counts as the same in relation to such things depends upon the ways in which the people whose social and intellectual things are in question understand what is the same as what, what they are willing to identify as the same as such-and-such. It then counts as depriving an intellectual or social thing of its character as an intellectual or social thing if you impose in your thinking about it criteria of identity that would be rejected by those whose intellectual or social thing it is. But it is instead possible to have a grammar of social and intellectual things, in which such things have as it were two sides, the understandings of those things within the culture whose social and intellectual things they are, and understandings by people who think about those intellectual and social things, using terms which are not limited to those available to, or acceptable by, the people whose intellectual and social things they are. This side of those things may in various ways involve ideas and criteria of identity that would be rejected by those whose intellectual and social things the things in question are, as Jews might reject the claim that their hope of a Messiah can be identified with the Christian hope that is taken to be fulfilled by Jesus. My argument here is: if you say that the second sort of approach deprives the intellectual and social things in question of their character as intellectual and social things, all that this comes to is that it is ruled out by the first grammar of intellectual and social things. It is not ruled out by the second. What counts as depriving an intellectual or