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The God of Religion, the God of Metaphysics and Wittgenstein’s “Language-Games”

In the present paper an attempt is made to view both the God of religion and the God of metaphysics under the aspect of what Ludwig Wittgenstein presented as the theory of “language-games” or “forms of life.” He himself initiated the application of this theory to religion, and more recent debates on religious belief have tended to utilize this approach. I am thinking, in particular, of D. Z. Phillip’s *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London, 1970), W. D. Hudson’s *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief* (London, 1975), the papers edited by John Hick under the title *Faith and the Philosophers* (New York, 1964), and more books edited by him and others. According to Wittgenstein’s theory, there are distinct systems of speech, each with its own ground-rules, self-contained and structured in a way that nothing can be properly understood without reference to the whole. The term “forms of life” originally denotes basic linguistic activities, but its meaning has been extended to cover also attitudes, feelings, needs and events. A variety of specific areas of cultural activities come under this category. The speaking of the language appropriate to each domain is a vital part of each form of life. Every language-game is a given, an ultimate, and it is defined by the a priori assumptions valid within the system concerned. It has its inner autonomy. It is simply that which is said and believed.

As for the ontological truth of the beliefs and assertions of those engaged in a particular form of life, that is another matter. From a phenomenological viewpoint, the question need not be asked, and the Wittgensteinian method is somewhat reminiscent of Husserl’s phenomenology. Its stress on the autonomy of language-games bears also a certain resemblance to Josaiah Royce’s notion of “internal meaning” and to Ernst Cassirer’s “symbolic forms.” Yet Wittgenstein’s forms of life are far more radically autonomous than the parallels cited. They are pure language-games, with no grounding in anything transcendental or absolute. I shall return to this point in the last section of this paper. At present, all I want to suggest is the extreme usefulness of Wittgenstein’s theory for an understanding of the specific character of religion. Why

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1 He did so especially in his “Lectures on Religious Belief,” which were given in 1938.
not, then, applying it also to metaphysics? For it seems to me that metaphysics is no less of a language-game or form of life than religion. True, the metaphysical enterprise does not exhibit the wide range of social and cultural activities found in religion, the inspirational source of sacred music, devotional poetry, church architecture, etc. Yet we do speak of metaphysical poets, man’s metaphysical needs, and we may well discover that certain art forms of an abstract sort arise from a profound concern with metaphysical truth. It might, therefore, be legitimate and profitable to treat not only of religion, but also of metaphysics from the perspective of specific forms of life. In this way, it may be hoped, the meaning attached to the term “God” in each of the two spheres will reveal itself most clearly.

I

1. The primary act of the religious language-game is the expression of faith. As the analysts have shown, faith is not opinion, for opinion can be contradicted whereas it makes no sense to contradict somebody else’s faith. Not sharing the faith is one thing, contradicting it is another. It was a mistake typical of the Enlightenment to confuse faith with opinion. The motive was obvious. In an effort to discredit the zealous faith of combative sects, Hobbes designated religious faith as mere opinion. Even a moderate leader of eighteenth century Enlightenment, like Moses Mendelssohn, fought shy of the term faith and spoke instead of “principles” (Grundsätze). The difference between faith and opinion has been described in terms of the distinction between “belief-in” and “belief-that.” In other words, the propositional character of assertions made on behalf of opinion has been contrasted with the decidedly non-propositional nature of religious speech expressing faith in God. In Justin Martyr’s words, there is a difference between knowing things and knowing God.

This does not necessarily mean that the content of faith is reduced to the status of emotive expression or non-cognitive value judgment. Rudolf Otto’s celebrated description of the Holy as an object evoking love and fear might seem to support the equation of faith with a state of emotion, and Max Scheler’s identification of God with the Holy as the highest value might be considered to imply that faith was a non-cognitive

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5 Leviathan, ch. XXIX.