Wittgenstein on the Grammar of Religious Beliefs

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Abstract

Ludwig Wittgenstein's renewed approach to language and religious belief has significantly influenced the traditional Judeo-Christian approach to religious belief that is highly metaphysical with its doctrinal and dogmatic character. Penetrated into the depth grammar, Wittgenstein claimed that religious language does not give an explanation of supernatural entities as does natural science, which explains natural entities and facts. The meaning of religious language is divorced from its doctrinal footings and finds its meaning in ordinary life situations. This paper is an attempt to expose Wittgenstein's non-metaphysical approach to religious discourses, emphasizing the priority of practice over doctrine by delving into the depth grammar of religious beliefs to find a space for meaningful talk about religion and religious beliefs in the form of life where they are used in religious celebrations and ritual practices. Wittgenstein has made an attempt to bring religious beliefs and discourse to their original home, centered on the life of the community of believers.

1. Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein has influenced the discipline of philosophy as well as its subsidiary fields including the philosophy of religion.

He has produced two different philosophies yet equally brilliant and mainly centered on the philosophy of language with a non-metaphysical approach. Wittgenstein claimed "what *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical use to everyday use" (1967, p. 116).

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This is an attempt to expose Wittgenstein's non-metaphysical approach to religious discourses emphasizing the priority of practice over doctrine. Wittgenstein has made an attempt to bring religious beliefs and discourse to their original home, centered on the life of the community of believers. Wittgenstein's renewed approach to language and religious beliefs significantly influenced the traditional Judeo-Christian approach to religious beliefs which is highly metaphysical with its doctrinal and dogmatic character. After Wittgenstein, there was a change in the approach and application of religious belief, a change from theory to practice. The meaning of religious language is divorced from its doctrinal footings and finds its meaning in ordinary life situations, where one uses them in religious celebrations and ritual practices.

2. Meaning, Grammar and Theology

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his linguistic analysis, focuses on the theories of meaning at both phases of his philosophy. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, which represents his early thought, brings forth the picture theory of meaning where the structure of language reveals the structure of reality, and language is founded on the bedrock of reality. However, in his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, we observe a decisive change in his philosophical reflection on language and meaning based on his new philosophical methodology of the language-game.For Wittgenstein, philosophical investigations are investigations into the grammar of language.

The concept of grammar is one of the key notions in Wittgenstein's later thought. As far as language is concerned, grammar is generally associated with the structure (syntax) of language. However, Wittgenstein uses grammar as associated with meaning (semantics) in his later thought. The concept of language and grammar is best understood in relation to the use of language in a particular context (Baker, 1974, p. 60). The concepts of grammar, meaning and use are intimately connected. Grammar describes the use of words, and the use of words brings forth meaning (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 60). This is opposed to the *logico-syntatic* use of words of *Tractatus*, in which Wittgenstein describes use as an activity of speaking with words in the context of extra-linguistic activities.

The *Logico-syntatic* use of words is a narrow use of words representing the way a word could or could not combine with other words in the sentence.

However, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, the use of words in a broader understanding concerns the use of words in a particular context which pertains to the use of language in the context of various human activities (1967, p. 23). Corresponding to the two dimensions of use, Wittgenstein (1967) has distinguished two kinds of grammar, i.e. surface grammar and depth grammar (p. 664). Surface grammar "consists of obvious syntactic features of the sentence and the words of which it is composed" (Hacker, 2000, p. 434). The syntactic form of an expression corresponds to its surface grammar, and depth grammar corresponds to the way an expression is used. Depth grammar emphasizes a wider domain of language use, mainly an integration of speech with other human activities. A context-sensitive or occasion-sensitive aspect of language use is taken into consideration in depth grammar (Travis, 2008, p. 100). Occasion-sensitive grammar would specify occasion specific rules for the purpose of a particular occasion of utterance, a correct use of an expression. Syntactic grammar remains the same in two different utterances; however, the occasion-sensitive grammar can vary. The sentence can have multiplicity of occasion-sensitive grammars depending on the occasion in which it is used. Even though the surface grammar remains the same, occasion-variant grammar may vary due to a change of context.

Grammar is *essential* for Wittgenstein in describing language; a description of grammar is a description of essence. Wittgenstein (1967) claimed that "Essence is expressed by grammar" (p. 371). Wittgenstein(1960) claims human beings have an inherent "craving for generality" (p. 20). Wittgenstein maintained an anti-essentialist position during the later stage of his philosophy. He mentions different language games, but nowhere has said what the essence of a language-game is. There is nothing common to all but only similarities which he portrays as family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 66). He makes it clear that the essence of language, that is its function and structure, is not hidden from us (p. 92). It is there in our linguistic practices and activities. The essence is linked to everyday thoughts and linguistic practices.

Wittgenstein's claim that "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as Grammar)" (1967, p. 373) is to be seen in an interpretative manner, in the background of the stated claim that grammar expresses essence. Looking at the use of words within its surroundings is the best way to find what something is.

When we look at the nature of something, we have to pay attention to the usage of words in the human form of life. The application of this grammar model to theology is seen in this parenthetical remark. Theological discourses, like god-talk, are brought down to their 'original home' which consists of religious practices, rituals and human existential situations. The grammar of theology is the grammar of practice for Wittgenstein.

3. Theological Objects

A grammatical investigation reveals what kind of object something is. Considering theology as grammar, as a parenthetical remark, points to the broader understanding of language and especially theological language, where we consider what lies around language. Wittgenstein's remark, "How words are understood is not told by words alone (theology)"(1970, p.144) is to be read in this context. The kinds of objects that are used in religion and religious beliefs are to be understood in their grammatical situation. Grammatical remarks like "What is God?" or "How does God communicate," are to be looked at by how they are used (p. 717). "The various uses of 'God' (the various grammars or grammar of the word) will indicate what people (or a people) mean by it. The description of the uses of 'God' also involves making connections, finding links, and, above all, looking at what people do*, how they act in their surroundings and the circumstance in which the world is used (Engelmann, 2013, p.264). Concepts like God, love and sacrifice used in theology are to be understood in the context of their use in celebrations, festivals and conventions (Bell, 1975, p. 310). These concepts are used in a particular way by the believer and gain meaning. These words gain meaning not because of any object referring to them outside language but because of words related to the people who use them individually or collectively. The grammar of language is autonomous in the sense that it is independent of any reality outside language. Wittgenstein (1979) claimed that "a grammatical rule does not stand in a relation to reality such that we can give rule and reality and then see whether they agree or not"(p. 86). The grammar of language is not molded after the structure of a language independent reality (Medina, 2002, p. 52).

Objects used in theology, like God, are of a *kind* which the grammar of theological expressions describe (Bell, p. 311). Grammar which expresses the kind of objects in all religious utterances is not uniform. Grammar of religious utterance is complex, various, and mixed.

The analogy of the language game and form of life are used for the purpose of showing the complexity of language and its close relationship with people and their lives (Ashford, 2007, p. 360). For Wittgenstein, a given expression is not always used in the same way, but rather in various ways. A word has meaning someone has given to it. There are words with several clearly defined meanings. Wittgenstein's remarks that "If we look at the actual use of a word, what we see is something constantly fluctuating..... If for our purposes we wish to regulate the use of a word by definite rules, then alongside its fluctuating use we set up a different use by codifying one of its characteristic aspects" (1974, p.77). Thus, for Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word depends on the grammatical variety of utterances in which it is used. The grammatical variety of a meaning of the word brings forth the indeterminacy and fluid character of the grammar of language (Citron, 2012, p. 30).

Wittgenstein's remarks on the varieties of the grammar of religion state that the word 'God' has been used in multiple ways.

There is no uniform grammar for the word 'God.' "I have always wanted to say something about the grammar of ethical expression, or e.g. of 'God.' Now: use of such a word as 'God'. It has been used in many different ways: e.g. sometimes for something very like a human being - a physical body" (Wittgenstein, 1979). The use of the word 'God' does not have a uniform grammar. Varieties of grammatical usage make religious utterance complex. These grammatical usages are not only various but also mixed and indeterminate. They do not identify a simple set of rules that govern a particular utterance or find out the grammatical category to which they belong. Wittgenstein uses simple examples with fixed grammars as objects of comparison to be compared with more complex realities. The expression, theology as grammar, has a broad meaning understood in the context of the grammatical analysis of language and the new understanding of meaning as use.

4. Religious Beliefs and Justification

The kind of objects used in religious beliefs need not to be justified by the referent or by any rational or historical evidence.

For Wittgenstein, religious beliefs are not based on any scientific or historical evidence: "We don't talk about hypothesis, or about high probability or about knowing" (1966, p. 57) Religious beliefs are not factual beliefs; however, religious beliefs involve certain factual beliefs: beliefs about the occurrence of certain historical events. Wittgenstein comments that Christianity does not rest on a historical basis. Belief concerning it is not treated like historical or empirical propositions. Wittgenstein's response to the acceptance of historical facts in any religion is not sufficient for religious belief. Wittgenstein (1984) claimed:

"Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather; believe through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. Here you have a narrative: don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it" (p. 82).

The fundamental attitude that a Christian adopts about a Biblical narrative is one of passion, and that is different from a historical narrative that is tentative. Any new evidence may falsify or change the adopted historical narrative. This type of falsification is out of range with Biblical narratives. The believer believes through thick and thin. According to Brain R. Clack, Wittgenstein's more mature view on religion is not in any way connected with speculative beliefs and historical events (1999, p. 53). For Wittgenstein, historical narratives or stories are occasions for believing. Someone could adhere to the Christian belief while accepting the historical occurrence mentioning the Gospel as false. The belief in the Last Judgment Day possibly involves some factual components involving some sort of empirical belief about the occurrence of a future event. However, Wittgenstein would hold the view that a belief in the Last Judgment is not about the nature of reality or the occurrence of past or future events. Rather, it is a belief in the Last Judgment as an expression of a commitment to seeing the world in a particular way and leading one's life accordingly (Child, 2011, p. 225).

The total character of religious belief is not the result of good evidence. It is groundless in the sense that we cannot go further than this common form of life to find out some external evidence. This system of beliefs does not rest upon any evidence, but is there like our lives (Bell, p. 310). For Wittgenstein, "the end is not ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting" (1972, p. 110).

Philosophers of religion were in search of proofs for the existence of God. Wittgenstein emphatically rejects such considerations. For him, that God exists or not is not the problem, but what is important is what is meant by the word 'God.' Wittgenstein remarked "God's essence is supposed to guarantee his existence – what this really means is that what is here at issue is not the existence of something"(1984, p. 84). The believers believe not on the basis of the proof for the existence of God. If their faith is based on proofs, then it is not true religious faith. Wittgenstein (1984) remarked:

"A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their 'belief' an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never come to believe as a result of such proofs" (p. 85).

It is the believers who try to give an intellectual foundation for religious belief. They try to give a foundation to what they believe in justification. Religious belief itself is not an outcome of any intellectual enterprise. Religious discourse is neither to be explained nor to be justified. Explanation is a matter for theories. Religious discourse neither justifies nor explains religious practices. To adopt religious talk is to express one's commitment to a certain way of life (Harre, 2001, p. 231).

5. Pragmatic Point of View

Religious talk, in so far as it is considered as a religious act, can be accommodated in the philosophical understanding of Wittgenstein. What is important for him is not the words but the role of the words in the life of the believer. It is practice that gives the word its meaning. Wittgenstein, in his understanding of meaning as use, is also consistent in its application to religious belief. Religious language is part of religious activity; therefore, as religious behavior it gains meaning. Certain readings from *Culture and Value* which are not sufficiently elaborated invite us to see religion as a way of life, a way of acting rather than a theoretical account of the world. "I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or *the direction of the your life*)" (1984, p. 53).

Though Christianity is mounted with doctrines and sometimes well established ones, penetrated into its heart, it is a way of life rather than an offering of theoretical explanations. Penetrated into the depth grammar, religious language does not give an explanation of supernatural entities as natural science describes and explains natural entities and facts. Religious assertions are not fact statements (Clack, p. 55). The significance of religious expression is not its referent but its function in a person's life.

Wittgenstein, after reading James George Frazer's *Golden Bough* which accounts for myth, magic and religion, wrote a series of comments on it. Frazer had a conceptual and instrumental view of religion along with magic and myth, whereas Wittgenstein exposes a more symbolic and expressive nature of religion. These symbols, which are expressive, are without scientific explanations. For Wittgenstein, error and progress are not features of magic and religion but of science. "The distinction between magic and science can be expressed by saying in science there is progress, but in magic there isn't. Magic has no tendency within itself to develop" (1993 p. 141). Science and technology are based on instrumental practice; intellect and reasoning tend towards progress and development. Religion, magic and myth are not of this kind. One prays, not because the prayer is based on a proven theory, nor does one abandon an old prayer due to lack of explanation. For Wittgenstein, religion, magic and myth are beyond intellectual reasoning and conceptual explanation that call for development and progress.

Myth, magic and religion are expressive and symbolic; they emerge from cultural rituals, metaphors and symbolic narratives. As symbolic and expressive, they are more akin to ritualistic practices, and these symbolic and expressive practices cater to the human spirit. The conceptual features that make these practices spiritual are the promotion of an attitude of wonder at the mysterious nature of life, the manner in which they express symbolic actions. These features make myth, magic and religion, transforming them into inspiring a spiritual attitude towards life (Lurie, 2012, p. 161).

6. Religious Beliefs and Rituals

Wittgenstein (1979b) places prime importance on action rather than doctrine concerning the spiritual nature of religious practices:

"I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions, in which there is thus no talking. Obviously, the essence of religion cannot have anything to do with the fact that there is talking, or rather: when people talk, then this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory. Thus, it also does not matter at all if the words used are true or false or nonsense" (p. 117).

There are other occasions where Wittgenstein strongly argues that ritualistic practices and deeds gain priority in religious beliefs. For Wittgenstein, the origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language - I want to say - is a refinement, 'in the beginning was the deed' (1984, p. 31). Here, Wittgenstein is imagining a pure ritualistic type of religion not supported by doctrinal propositions. Doctrinal principles are often theological worldviews that support the rituals practiced. Wittgenstein imagines a religion without such theological and metaphysical support to the rituals. The language used in rituals is not part of doctrinal principles; however, it is symbolic and expressive which is to be distinguished from the language used to ascertain theological claim. Therefore, there is no reason to find foundations for religious practices on any doctrinal or theological propositions since they are expressions and promotions of a personal spiritual attitude towards life. Wittgenstein is not totally getting rid of the theological principles from religious practices; however, he makes a clear distinction between the language used in religious practices and the language used in doctrinal principles to assert those rituals. Religious practices are ritualistic and symbolic. The expressive use of symbols is an important characteristic of religious practices as distinct from the instrumental use of signs (Lurie, 2012, p. 168). Wittgenstein's point here is that rituals are not based on any proven theory; however, one can well understand a ritual in terms of a theory (Clack, 1999, p. 134).

The key to understanding Wittgenstein's account of rituals lies in his idea that they are rooted in instincts. The natural disposition of human beings to react in an expressive way and to create and observe rituals that can symbolically express the existential concern of human beings serves as the foundation of religious symbols. When I am furious about something, describes Wittgenstein, I sometimes beat the ground or a tree with my walking stick. But I certainly do not believe that the ground is to blame or that my beating can help anything. "I am venting my anger." And all the rites are of this kind. Such actions may be called Instinct-actions... (1993, p. 137).

Wittgenstein stresses the spontaneity of ritual action as the natural behavior of a ceremonial animal. Religious rituals come out of the natural inclination to express our concerns, not out of reasoning about cause and effect. They are created in relation to the primitive natural expression of human existential concerns. It is the cultural community that creates the rituals.

Human beings have a natural disposition to create and observe rituals that can express their everyday concerns, as for instance, anger, friendship, etc. A right ritual can evoke for a participant a spiritually edifying way of birth, death, sex, love, and other occasions that are deeply important to humans. The meaning of rituals depends on the apt use of it in Wittgenstein's broader context of the later philosophy (Hoyt, 2007, p. 180).

Wittgenstein (1980) makes a clear distinction between opinion and attitude: "What is the difference between an attitude and an opinion? I would like to say: the attitude comes *before* the opinion" (p. 38). Opinions come out of reasoning and reflection and are open to discussion and debate. However, attitudes pertain to life and concern living experiences. "Attitudes are related to ways of seeing and experiencing various aspects of things, to desires, feelings, concerns, likes and dislikes. They are ways in which we grasp the meaning of things that make up our lives in a very personal, basic, immediate, and non-inferential fashion" (Lurie, 2012, p. 176). Wittgenstein (1980), asked "Isn't belief in God an attitude? (p.38). Faith in God, that pivotal part of religion and religious belief, can be meaningfully understood as an attitude. This attitude of belief in God is supported later by rational thinking and theological formulations. There is no instrumental purpose behind the act of burning an effigy or kissing the photograph of a beloved one. They simply satisfy an urge or instinct. In that sense, they are non-cognitive. These analogies that Wittgenstein uses parallel the formation of pain behavior as he explains how human beings learn the meaning of the word pain (1967, p. 244). Similarly, the language of religion - the articulation of religious beliefs is an extension of certain primitive reactions that are to say a natural expression of wonder or fear. The kissing of a photograph of a loved one is an expression of love, and burning an effigy is an expression of hatred. These acts are not purpose-driven and do not to have any effect on the person in the case (Burley, 2012, p. 22).

7. Conclusion

Wittgenstein's new approach to the philosophy of language has considerably influenced his philosophy of religion. This non-metaphysical approach has brought religious discourse back to the life of the community of believers. Theology after Wittgenstein (Kerr, 1997, p.140) has become the grammar of practice surpassing the priority of doctrines. This pragmatic approach is explained by the analysis of his parenthetical remark, theology as grammar, based on his new approach to the theory of meaning in his later philosophy.

The religious celebrations and ritualistic practices of the believers find meaning without scientific and historic evidences. A meaningful talk about religion and religious beliefs are made possible in pragmatic contexts without scientific and doctrinal justifications.

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