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WHAT HAS PHILOSOPHY TO SAY TO RELIGION?

Peter Winch
(edited by D.Z. Phillips)

Does philosophy determine what is sense or nonsense, or does that distinction get its sense from the practices in which it appears? Does religion compete with philosophy in giving an account of reality? *Prometheus Bound* illuminates one conception of the relation of the divine to the human condition, one of compassion rather than power. The same distinction can be found in conflicting conceptions of justice. The conflict cannot be resolved by an appeal to human nature, but one can reject the general claim that justice must be based on a balance of power. The religious perspective may be said to be informed by "a place outside the world", but the sense of this notion is religious, and does not involve the illusion of a metaphysical place beyond all our practices. Philosophy may remove misunderstandings about these practices, but it cannot demonstrate or refute their validity.

Editorial Note: The present paper is a combination of two papers by Peter Winch. 'What has philosophy to say to religion?' was read at Montana State University on May 18th 1989. 'The love of the gods' was a brief paper, in response to a colleague's presentation, read at the University of Illinois at Urbana - Champaign on March 7th 1988. I have edited the response to make it self-contained. It is the second section of the present paper. The papers are part of the Peter Winch Archive at University of Wales Swansea.

The influence of Wittgenstein, throughout Winch's discussions, led me to include them in this special issue on religion and Wittgenstein's legacy. The divisions in the paper and their titles are mine. Any insertions by me are indicated in square brackets. Combining the papers affords a discussion of (a) the relation of philosophy to other forms of human thinking; (b) the elucidation of a relation of the divine to the world very different from that which dominates contemporary philosophy of religion; (c) the relation of philosophy to these different conceptions of the divine.

I

Philosophy and Forms of Human Thinking

"A philosopher easily gets into the position of an incompetent manager who, instead of getting on with his own work and just keeping an eye on his employees to make sure that they do their work properly, takes over



their work until one day he finds himself overloaded with other people's work, while his employees look *on and criticize* him".¹

That is a quotation from a notebook of Wittgenstein's written in 1931. It hits off nicely the characteristically ambivalent relationship between philosophy and other forms of human thinking, while at the same time raising the question of how we are to determine what precisely *is* the philosopher's "own work".

It is well known, notorious perhaps, that philosophers regard it as an important part of their task to assess the intellectual significance of other forms of human thinking: moral, aesthetic, political, scientific thinking, for example: and religious. The way they carry out this task will reveal the view they take of the distinction between sense and nonsense: whether they think the criteria for this distinction as independently discoverable by philosophical reasoning: or whether they think of such criteria as fashioned in the different practices of the modes of thinking they are investigating. The danger of the first approach is that noticed in the quotation from Wittgenstein: the danger of trying to do other people's work rather than one's own. The danger of the second approach is that of an "anything goes" attitude: a type of relativism which places everything on the same level. Distinguishing the worthwhile from the meretricious is a responsibility philosophy surely cannot relinquish without violating its own nature.

However, perhaps it is misleading to put the issue, as I have been doing, as though it concerned the observance of boundary lines between one "discipline" and another. Disputes about this are no doubt important in the context of academic politics, but hardly matter if what we are interested in is basic intellectual integrity and clarity. What does it matter, it may be asked, to what discipline a given inquiry and its outcome belong, provided the inquiry is honestly and intelligently conducted and its conclusion well established? - I have a great deal of sympathy with this attitude.

However, there *is* still a serious point that I have not yet properly expressed. So I will try again.

In my view the most valuable contribution to our intellectual culture of the philosophical tradition (cultivated most explicitly in logic and epistemology) is sensitivity to, and techniques of clarifying, differences between different uses of language and the kind of argument and criticism appropriate to each. This interest is one important reason why philosophers have concerned themselves with investigating the logical and conceptual character of the diverse forms which inquiry, thinking, argument and inference take in different areas of human concern. It is also probably the most important reason why philosophical inquiry is so persistently and narcissistically turned on its own nature and significance.²

There is another central, and perhaps more primitive, stream in our philosophical tradition: I mean the ("metaphysical") attempt to give a general account of the nature of existence and, in particular, of mankind's place within it. I think it is probably true to say, indeed, that the cultivation of the kind of logical sensitivity to different modes of utterance that I was talking about a moment ago, has been developed most fully and fruitfully by way of reaction to the perceived intellectual excesses to which metaphysics, in this sense, is constantly tempted.³

This brings me at last to religion. I spoke of the metaphysical attempt to formulate "a general account of the nature of existence and, in particular, of mankind's place within it". But could not this phrase equally well characterize what we seem to find, say, in the first two Chapters of *Genesis*, to say nothing of other sacred texts, both Christian and non-Christian. Are philosophy and religion, then, competitors in the same line of business? It is certainly a common perception that this is so. Undergraduates frequently come to philosophy seeking enlightenment on such subjects as "the nature of reality" and "the meaning of life", and there is no doubt that often, initially at least, they do hope to find in philosophy what, for one reason or another, they have failed to find in religion.

Certainly there is a great deal of error and confusion in such expectations. But the confusion is a perfectly natural one and the conceptual features that give rise to it are far from easy to set in a clear light. I do not of course expect to achieve that in the course of one short [paper]: but it is the subject I shall try to discuss.

So far I have been speaking in very general terms and I want now to become more specific. I am going to consider an idea put forward by Simone Weil about the relation of the world to God, namely, that we should think of the world, not as created by an exercise of God's infinite power, but rather as existing precisely because God *refrains* from exercising His power to its full extent, since the full exercise of His power would make no room for the possibility of anything existing *but* God.

The idea is not original to her; though the way she develops it is. [In the next section I shall simply elucidate the idea, in my own way, by reference to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and then, in the following section, turn to Simone Weil's development of the idea.] The reason why I find this a particularly interesting example in relation to my theme is this: The "God" Simone Weil speaks of here is undoubtedly the God of Christianity, the God of worship and prayer, rather than the "God of the philosophers" (as found in Descartes's *Meditations* or in Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics*, for example). That is to say, it is undoubtedly a *religious* conception that she is developing. But it is also closely connected with her treatment of logical and epistemological issues in certain earlier works.⁴ Indeed, it sometimes looks as though general logico - conceptual considerations are advanced as part of the argument for her view. This makes her thinking about this a particular difficult case for someone who, like myself, let me reveal, thinks that religious meditation and philosophical argument cannot properly be assessed according to the same standards. [But this serves to raise the issue of the relation of philosophy to religion: "Are they competitors in the same line of business?"]

II

On the Love of the Gods

Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is about the love of gods for human beings and about the implications of this love. The nature of 'the divine view of things', is very much an issue in the play. The play, whether or not this was an issue for Aeschylus himself, raises not merely a question about

what view the gods take of human beings and of the world; but a question which I incline to regard as deeper: what kind of thing are we saying when we talk about a view of the world taken by the gods? We are speaking in an entirely different mode here from that involved in speaking of, say, the different views of the world taken by Colonel Joll and the Magistrate in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

The comparison would attach insufficient importance to the fact that Prometheus and Zeus are gods. Zeus differs from the rulers of Coetzee's Empire not in the extent of his power, but in the nature of that power. This would not make it wrong to compare Coetzee's and Aeschylus' works; nor even to think it wrong to see their themes as linked: to see *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a book about the relation of humankind to the gods. But it is important to the treatment of the theme that the gods do not figure at all as protagonists in the action of the novel, but are the main focus of attention in the play. There are important conceptual ("grammatical") differences between speaking of human beings inflicting suffering on each other (the Empire on the barbarians, Joll on the magistrate), and speaking of a god's inflicting suffering on a human being (Zeus on Io); and further conceptual differences in speaking of one god inflicting suffering on another (Zeus on Prometheus).

The last point especially is bound up with complications about the identity of divine figures. There are countless stories about one god defying the explicit command of another god while in fact doing the other god's secret will. One of the best known examples is to be found in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in which Brünnhilde, Wotan's daughter (and hence an emanation of his love) disobeys her father's command by protecting Siegmund (another off-spring of Wotan) and is punished for it by Wotan (in a scene, incidentally, which seems to me musically one of the purest expressions of love in the cycle, perhaps in all Wagner's work); punished for it, even though it is quite clear that Wotan actually wants Siegmund to be protected. Wotan, however, the chief of the gods, is unable to protect Siegmund because of the implications of his divinity: a general concern for humanity (of which he is brutally reminded by the goddess Fricka) in such matters as the keeping of contracts.

There are distinct echoes of a similar theme in Christian theology: in the role of God the Father in imposing the Passion and Crucifixion on his son ("my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased"). If "imposing the crucifixion on his son" sounds too strong, remember Christ's plea to have the cup taken from him and the Father's response, or lack of it.

What these stories bring out, of course, is the idea of a conflict, an essential conflict, in the nature of the divine: a conflict involved in the very idea of humanity as the object of divine love. I think, then, that it is best to regard *Prometheus Bound*, not as a story about the relations between various individuals, named respectively Zeus, Prometheus (who happen to be Gods) and Io (who happens to be a mortal woman), but as concerning, on the one hand, the relation between different aspects of divinity, (represented by Zeus and Prometheus) and, on the other hand, the relation between divinity in its different aspects (Zeus and Prometheus) and humanity (Io).

Putting the matter like this shows how such complexities in the notion

of identity, as applied to a god, are intimately connected with deep conceptual issues about how we are to read stories about the gods: about what, to use a different idiom, is their logical and conceptual status.

I shall take it for granted that the sense of stories about the gods makes no room for the notion of a possible verification of them analogous, e.g. to the ways in which stories about what goes on behind the scenes in the White House might "in principle" be verified.⁵ I shall also take it for granted that these stories are not merely told for their entertainment value (though that is of course, sometimes, a significant element), but are intended to convey important insights about the nature of human life, about "the human condition".

These two assumptions taken together suggest (to put the claim at its weakest) that we must seek the religious value of such stories about gods which want to make the notion of love central to our understanding of life and of the world. Central, I mean, not just in the values we apply in our understanding of different possibilities in the attitudes human beings may have to one another, but in our understanding of the nature of creation at large and, in particular, in our understanding of the place of human beings in creation, or vis-a-vis the rest of creation. These issues are far from being mutually independent, as is brought out in the beautiful passage from St. John's Epistle (I, 4:20): "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?". The passage also, incidentally, brings out the close conceptual connection between God's love for mankind and mankind's love for God. Another way of putting this would be to say that stories about the gods belong to an attempt to represent the world as a place human beings are, or at least can be, at home in, feel they belong to. The very fact that such a question can be raised already shows something about the character of human beings and of their place in the world. What gives these stories their point is that there is much about the world which makes it very difficult for us to regard it as a place we can be at home in, given the undoubted miseries of many different sorts that life involves.

Prometheus Bound, I take it, attempts to represent these miseries as a natural, perhaps necessary, concomitant of that in human life which also shows it to be a product of divine love. An amazing task to undertake, you may well think: one, nevertheless, that it has in common with many other such stories. And this can be nothing less than everything that we regard as characteristic of human existence, the practice of cultivating the environment, husbandry, the taming of animals, the building of homes, the arts, the various forms of inquiry, the ability to plan for future contingencies, the complex modalities of love in human relationships, and so on: In short, all those gifts that Prometheus bestowed on humankind and the absence of which Hobbes' *Leviathan* represents as what makes natural human existence "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". I will try in a moment to address - very briefly and sketchily - the nature of the connection between these gifts and the concomitant suffering, both human and divine, which mark it off from the sort of historicizing theodicy where the suffering of the present is to be made 'meaningful' by the rosy revolutionary dawn that will some day come.

In putting the matter in the way I have, I deliberately want to discour-

age the question "why". Prometheus loved humanity. The very asking of the question displays, in my view, a misunderstanding of Prometheus' divine status. By the same token it misunderstands the possible relation to divine love of what is valuable in human life. These values are a manifestation of, not a reason for, divine love. One could not avoid circularity in taking the latter course: since one would need to refer to those very features which are a divine gift, as the reason why the gift was bestowed. Prometheus did not see a potential in human beings the gods missed. He bestowed this potential on humanity. Io has no special features which explain Prometheus' love. The lack of a 'reason' helps to characterize the love. Io, however, is as it were, essentially an exemplary recipient of divine love. The confrontation with Io is part (perhaps the central part) of Prometheus' torment, keeping before him the implications of what he has done. She is his 'thematic twin', but not in the sense of being a fellow victim of torture; she is, rather, a fellow victim of divine love; their juxtaposition displays the different consequence of such love for a god and for a human being. Io shows what sacrifice by the gods amounts to and what it means for humanity. (I think we have to read Zeus' love of Io and Prometheus' love of humanity as different aspects of the relation of humanity to divine love.)

Let me go back to my promise to say more about the connection between divine love for humanity and divine and human suffering. The first point to notice is this, beautifully expressed by Wittgenstein: "The human gaze has a power of conferring value on things; but it makes them cost more too".⁶ The life that goes with the cultivation of the land, the search for understanding, the existence of stable family and other social relationships, is a life with tremendous potentialities but equally, and by the same token, a life inevitably involving agonizing disappointments and suffering of all sorts.

The fact that this is so 'by the same token' perhaps gives a hint why the gifts of the gods (in the persons of both Prometheus and Zeus) entail suffering for them (in the person of Io). And let us not forget the Chorus who are not exactly bubbling over with joy either. All these manifestations of human civilization involve the application of standards and of ideals of perfection which cannot, in human life, ever be realized. Their realization can only be a divine realization. What is more, the understanding of this fact emerges from, and only from, that very life in which perfect realization of the good is unattainable. But when the gods give these things to human beings they ensure that their own perfection is no longer fully realized in the world. That is why their gift is a gift of love and why it involves suffering in the very nature of being, in the nature, that is, of the gods themselves. It is the helpless suffering of knowing one has sacrificed the possibility of complete perfection. Human suffering, on the other hand, is the sort inflicted by the gadfly: the restless search for a perfection that is unattainable.

I by no means want to underestimate in any way the role of physical pain and suffering in all this; but the importance of the emphasis on torture is the added dimension of suffering involved when the pain is deliberately inflicted by one human being on another. Coetzee, it seems to me, brings this out beautifully. The terrible hardships of the environment described

on the Magistrate's expedition from the barbarian frontier are almost a relief from the cruelties of Joll. This added dimension, moreover, is made possible, precisely by the kind of life together that Prometheus' gifts make possible. I wonder if this is part of the meaning of Io's semi-transfiguration into a beast, a cow, in her attempt to flee Zeus' love. She sees the suffering that love involves and tries to escape it by rejecting its gifts. Only, of course, once the nature of the gift has been comprehended, it is too late, for such comprehension comes only with those gifts. The eventual salvation which Prometheus prophesies for her is an acceptance of the gifts: Zeus' impregnation "without fear", an acceptance that is to say, of the gifts along with their cost. Whereas, on the contrary, any historicist hope that all may one day be made well (the cost eliminated), when the revolution comes perhaps, is just a continuation of the original refusal to accept the gods' gifts, their costs being an inextricable part of the package; it takes one farther from the possibility of salvation and reconciliation with Zeus.

The historicist hope plays down the importance of the individual in favor of humanity 'collectively'. It will be felt by some that Io's healing will change almost nothing, and that this is why she is so deeply ambivalent about the prospect of Zeus' touch "that brings no fear". I would say, on the contrary, that it is just because that touch will change everything that she is so ambivalent about it. When I say 'it will change everything', I have in mind something like what I believe Wittgenstein meant when he wrote:

If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts, not the things that can be expressed in language.

In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.

The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy
(*Tractatus* 6:43).

Fear of this change is precisely one of the main elements in Io's relation to the gods. The historicist may reply that whereas everything is changed, it is only for her, the implication being that it would be of no great significance. One may react in the same way to the actions of the Magistrate in Coetzee's novel, if one concentrates on the collectivity. His commitment to decency may seem admirable, it may be argued, but he can do nothing for the wider cause of decency.

I find such reactions astonishing. The point of acting decently is not to do something 'for decency', it is simply - to act decently. Of course if one can do anything to create a situation in which people are more likely to act decently, so much the better. But if one cannot do that - and usually one will not be able to - that does not remove the point of one's own decency. Indeed, to see this, really to see it and to live by it, is, so it seems to me, a large part of accepting Zeus' impregnation without fear; and I even see something of this in the Magistrate, who seems to me anything but an image of moral futility. My moral disagreement with an emphasis on the collectivity in the reading of *Prometheus Bound* is inseparable from philosophical and theological disagreement.⁷ [Such disagreement is explored

further in the next section in relation to the work of Simone Weil].

III *Justice, Power and Epistemology*

Simone Weil distinguishes between two forms of justice: a higher and a lower. The lower form is that which applies exclusively to bargaining situations between parties roughly equal in power. She does not mention Hume, but this is clearly the conception of justice that he had in mind. Distinct from this is a conception of justice as what she calls "a supernatural virtue". Her account of this starts off from a passage in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* which greatly impressed her. It concerns the embassy of the Athenians to the island of Melos, the purpose of which was to bully the Melians into joining the Athenian alliance against Sparta (of which Melos was a former colony). The Athenians rest their case on (to speak anachronistically) the Humen concept of justice.⁸

And we ask you on your side not to imagine that you will influence us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us any harm. Instead we recommend that you should try to get what is possible for you to get, taking into account what we both really do think: since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.

A bit later:

So far as the favor of the gods is concerned, we think we have as much right to that as you have. Our aims and our actions are perfectly consistent with the beliefs men hold about the gods and the principles which govern their conduct. Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist forever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way. And therefore, as far as the gods are concerned, we see no reason why we should fear to be at a disadvantage.

When the Melians refused the Athenians' demands they were attacked and defeated: all adult males were slaughtered, women and children enslaved.

Simone Weil makes the important comment⁹ that in spite of (or perhaps because of) the candour with which the Athenians state their case, their manner of presentation shows that they did not in fact believe their view of

things to be the only possible one: "we see in Thucydides how clearly the Athenians, when they perpetrated cruel abuses of power, were aware that they were doing so".

Just as the Athenians linked their claims to a certain conception of the Gods, so does Simone Weil believe that the existence of this unacknowledged other possibility shows something about the relation of the world to God.

The Athenian idea that "it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can", is expressed by Simone Weil herself in another way,¹⁰ where she refers to our constant unthinking practice of using other people in the service of our own interests and "do not waste our time and power of attention in examining whether they have consented to this". She comments: "This is necessary. If it were otherwise things would not get done, and if things did not get done, we would perish". That is as much as to say that the necessity of exercising power in the way described by the Athenians is rooted in the nature of human life.

If this thought is connected with certain very important epistemological discussions in her earlier work we can see that it cuts very deep. In those discussions she had argued against a traditional empiricist account of the human formation of concepts by any sort of process of abstraction from or construction out of a given manifold of sensation: and for an account which makes human practice primitive and sees concepts as essentially embedded in practice. Practice in its turn has to be seen as an expression of the nature of the acting individual, which it aims to preserve and enhance. Hence the perception of the world by human beings is itself, and necessarily, an aspect of practical activity, the exercise of power, in which the perceivers' interests are expressed. A world of objects with stable properties in determinate, discernable causal relations, a world in which an agent's goals can be rationally pursued and obstacles to the attainment of those goals methodically investigated.

This is the deeper source of the temptation to which the Athenians succumb in thinking that the very fabric of the world is structured on the principle that "one must rule wherever one can".¹¹ Simone Weil sees the same line of thinking manifested in the emphasis in what has been perhaps the dominant Judaeo-Christian theological tradition on God's power and of His creation as an expression of that power. It is a line of thinking which can take one, as it took the Athenians, to the position that a sufficiently worthy project can justify an exercise of power without limit, to the position indeed that there is no intelligible alternative to this.¹²

In her later writings one of Simone Weil's principal concerns was to refute this position and show that something else *is* thinkable. Her great, and well-known, essay on *The Iliad* is an example. She also points to the example of Christ and, in particular, to St. John's words about him:

"Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man: And being formed in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every other name".

She comments: "These words could have been an answer to the Athenian murderers of Melos", and links this "answer" with the following remark: "The act of Creation is not an act of power. It is an abdication. Through this act a kingdom was established other than the kingdom of God. The reality of this world is constituted by the mechanism of matter and the autonomy of rational creatures. It is a kingdom from which God has withdrawn".

The production of examples (like that of *The Iliad* and St John's *Epistle*) cannot, I take it, show that the Athenians were *wrong* in the way they behaved on Melos. What it can do is to challenge their claim that their way of thinking about such matters is the only possible one and is shared by all mankind. Such a mode of argument (challenge by counter-example) is of course well known in philosophy, where I believe it fulfils a legitimate and important function. But obviously this is not all that is going on. The existence of this new possibility is linked on the one hand with a religious conception of the world in relation to God: on the other hand with a philosophical analysis of the genesis of our concept of a natural order of the world.

Simone Weil's reference to "the mechanism of matter and the autonomy of rational creatures" clearly makes this latter connection. She offers in various places arguments to show that our understanding of the nature of things develops in our methodical attempts to overcome obstacles to our projects. It is natural to conclude as a corollary that only by pressing our powers of action to their limits shall we be able to form an adequate conception of the necessities of nature. It is interesting that in our own time opposition to such a view has been mounted from *within* the scientific community itself. This is clearest, perhaps, in the contemporary emphasis on respect for ecological equilibrium not merely as a politico-moral ideal but as a condition for proper *understanding* of the natural environment and of the place of human beings within it.¹³ But similar considerations are at work too in many of the debates about the limits to the role of experimentation on human beings and animals.

Be that as it may, it is certainly Simone Weil's mature view that respect for such limits on the exercise of power is a condition for proper understanding of the natural order. She argues, for instance, that the idea of an equilibrium in nature is possible only for one who is willing to inhibit his natural tendency to appropriate, use and consume. (Her discussions of the beauty of the natural order are extremely important in this respect). And again she argues that an understanding of the rational autonomy of human beings is possible only in a context in which that autonomy is *respected*: i.e. in which other human beings are recognized as imposing limits on acceptable pursuit of our projects.

This, if it can be sustained *is* an answer to the Athenians' claim (like that of Plato's Thrasymachus) that they, and they alone, in their conversations with the Melians, are thinking and acting "in accordance with nature". For in fact, they are not merely *opposing* the conception of justice appealed to by the Melians, they are characterizing it as an *illusion*. It is an attempt by the weak to defend themselves against the strong, but there is no reason whatever for the strong to take it seriously.

It is as though the Melians are saying: "You can't treat innocent people like that"; and as though the Athenians were replying: "Can't we : just watch!". And as though they thought this response were not merely the sick joke it in fact is, but a genuine logical rebuttal. They claim that the Melian use of "cannot" has no sense; it is nothing more than a rhetorical *façon de parler*, not expressive of any genuine impossibility. And do they not show, by their subsequent actions that indeed there is no such impossibility as the Melians allege?

I have put the matter in a way with which I think many contemporary philosophers would agree. Their agreement is an expression of the idea (to which "theories of meaning" are a monument) that language cannot be allowed to look after itself: that it is not enough to point to the fact that we do as a matter of fact speak in a certain way; our way of speaking, our grammar, have to be justified, it has to be shown that they correspond to something real. Many - perhaps most - philosophical attempts either to refute or provide rational grounds for religious belief are an application of this idea. The Thrasymachian idea that there is a justice that is "natural", and that any use of the word which does not correspond to this nature expresses a mere illusion, is another application.

IV

Philosophical Rebuttals

There are two ways of rebutting the [Athenian] position which are radically distinct, but easy to confuse. One is to try to replace one apologetic metaphysics with another: to argue, for instance, that nature is other than what the Athenians claim. The other (as I think, the sounder one) is to argue that our attitudes and practices - religious for instance - do not have that sort of relation to nature and hence cannot be either rejected or supported on such grounds.

The second, anti-metaphysical, conception is the one really required by Simone Weil's account of concept formation (of concepts as expressive of our practices). What is confusing is the way in which her *philosophical* arguments tend to be conflated with the articulation of a distinctive *religious* outlook.

Consider the following striking remarks from an important passage in one of her last notebooks:¹⁴

"The Gospel contains a conception of human life, not a theology. If I light an electric torch at night out of doors I don't judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up. The brightness of a source of light is appreciated by the illumination it projects upon non-luminous objects. The value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world. Earthly things are the criterion of spiritual things. This is what we generally don't want to recognize, because we are frightened of a criterion if a man gives bread to a beggar in a certain way or speaks in a certain way about a defeated army, I know his thoughts have been outside this world and sat with Christ alongside the Father who is in Heaven. If a man describes to me at the same time

two opposite sides of a mountain, I know that his position is somewhat higher than the summit. It is impossible to love at the same time both the victors and the vanquished, as *The Iliad* does, except from the place, outside the world, where God's wisdom dwells".¹⁵

On the one hand talk of a "place outside the world, where God's wisdom dwells" or where we can sit "with Christ alongside the Father" may seem to imply some religious metaphysics, or theology, which *explains the possibility* of such phenomena as the understanding and love expressed in *The Iliad*, or the non-Christian Roman senator who quite gratuitously gave his life to save his Christian slave (another of her examples). If what she says is construed in that light, as a piece of philosophico - religious metaphysics, it seems positively to invite Spinozistic criticisms of any such phrase as "a place outside the world".

My reference to Spinoza at this point is quite deliberate: Simone Weil had studied him deeply and was even influenced a good deal by him in certain aspects of her thinking. It is not at all likely that she was unmindful of the force of his insistence that "a place outside the world" is no place at all. Furthermore the remark earlier in the section seem clearly to rule out such an interpretation and to imply on the contrary that the sense of such apparently metaphysical talk is to be seen only in those (earthly) phenomena which are a "criterion" of the spiritual.

To say that the value of such a life as Christ's or of a view of human conflict like that of *The Iliad* or of the Roman senator's sacrifice of himself for his slave, is apparent only from a place outside the world, is to say that there is nothing in the world to justify us in attributing value to it, which is to say that there is *nothing* (period) to justify it, which is to say that it is without justification. However, if we express it like that, what has become of the supposed answer to Thrasymachus, or to the Athenians at Melos? It looks as though we are now just agreeing with them. "As far as the gods are concerned, we see no reason why we should fear to be at a disadvantage", is what the Athenians said: i.e. there is nothing in the nature of things to justify a view contrary to ours. And am I not now interpreting Simone Weil as saying much the same thing? As saying, as I may now express it, that philosophy can provide no justification for viewing the world in a way opposed to the Athenians' way?

The answer to these questions is yes. But that does not mean that the preceding argument has led us nowhere. One thing it shows is that the Athenians are by no means entitled to claim that philosophy is on their side rather than on the side of the Melians. Philosophy is not on anybody's side. [In Wittgenstein's phrase], "It leaves everything where it is". If there is no justification for the conception of justice the Melians appeal to, there is equally no justification for that of the Athenians. The Athenians may be right to claim that it is a fact of life that most people most of the time think as they do. But it is equally a fact of life that *The Iliad* was written, that Christ lived, that the Roman senator (like countless others) sacrificed himself for another when there was no argument to *demonstrate* that he should; and so on. And moreover, and I think this is very important, it is also a fact of life that people who contemplate, or hear about, such actions (we for instance) tend to be struck by them in a certain way, with a sort of awe.

Few people would find themselves admiring the Athenians : and those who did might well be ashamed of themselves for so doing.¹⁶ Admittedly there is no justification for this. But it is a tendency as rooted in human nature as is the tendency expressed by the Athenians. Indeed as Simone Weil noted, the way in which Thucydides has the Athenian ambassadors express themselves, betrays how “when they perpetrated cruel abuses of power, (they) were aware of doing so”.¹⁷

I have left one of the threads of my discussion conspicuously dangling. If the religious imagery in expressions like “his thought has been outside this world and sat with Christ alongside the Father who is in Heaven” or “the place, outside the world, where God’s wisdom dwells” is not to be construed metaphysically, what is its function? Are we not simply left with certain attitudes to the world and towards human behaviour which can be expressed less misleadingly in other terms and which, indeed, there will be no need to characterize as “religious”? With regard to the second part of that question: It does seem to me, I must confess, natural to characterize such attitudes as religious attitudes, whether or not these quasi-theological expressions play any major part in their expression. But I am not going to argue about that; and it seems to me relatively unimportant whether or not one uses the label “religious” as long as one recognizes them clearly for what they are.¹⁸ But I do want to say something about the suggestion in the first part of the question that such explicitly religious forms of expression serve no useful purpose and only mislead. Fortunately for me perhaps, I do not however have much [space] left to say anything very substantial about this.

Let me take: “It is impossible to understand and love at the same time both the victors and the vanquished, as *The Iliad* does, except from the place, outside the world, where God’s wisdom dwells”. I want to compare this expression with what is said in geometry: that two parallel lines meet “at infinity”. Correspondingly to Simone Weil’s characterizing this “place” as “outside the world” one might say that the phrase “at infinity” in this context does not designate a position in space. And one might argue, in a way parallel to that in which I argued about the religious example, that since it is possible for lines to meet only at a place, and since infinity is not a place, to say of lines that they meet at infinity is simply a way of saying that they do not meet. And, (if we leave the “simply” out of account), that is perfectly true. Somebody not versed in geometry may be inclined to think that if what is meant is that parallel lines do not meet, it would be better to say that and not to talk so misleadingly. One could show such a person the point of the expression only by pointing out its use and fertility within geometry, the constructions, proofs and theorems that would be impossible without it. Another way of putting this would be to say that the sense of the phrase is not *derived* from the phenomenon of parallel lines to which it is applied, but lies in the geometrical uses to which it is put. Thinking of parallel lines as meeting at infinity makes these uses possible: but it would be quite misleading to say that it “justifies” them: as though there could be a discovery that it is not after all the case that parallels meet at infinity and that, therefore, all those constructions and proofs that depend on that conception are invalidated! It would be more accurate to

say that the problematic conception is itself "justified" by the constructions, etc. it makes possible.

It is an analogous way that the author of *The Iliad*, say, can be said to occupy a perspective of "supernatural justice" which is "outside the world", or that it is the perspective of "the wisdom of God the Father". The point of speaking like this can be seen only by attending to its use within the practices of religion, to other contexts in which similar expressions are used, to the relations between it and other forms of religious expression, to the ways in which these expressions serve to articulate religious practices and attitudes, to the ways in which one's understanding of things is different, when expressed in such terms. It does not have any independent status which qualifies it to justify all these ways of speaking, thinking and acting.

These religious practices, and the attitudes which go with them, stand or fall with the appeal they are or are not able to make to human sensibility. Philosophy may attempt to remove misunderstandings about their nature. But it can neither demonstrate nor refute their validity.

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NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* Oxford: Blackwell 1980, p.16e.
2. It is no new discovery that the logical character of an utterance cannot always infallibly be read off from its superficial linguistic form. Though I believe that the realization of the extent of the potentiality for being misled here is something which has been developed in philosophy in the [twentieth] century as perhaps never before.
3. Kant's Critical Philosophy is one of the most obvious examples. One of the most interesting aspects of the work of Wittgenstein, or so it seems to me, is the way in which his unprecedentedly fastidious and persistently critical attitude towards the metaphysical "craving for generality" begins itself to take on the appearance of a powerful vision of human life of a sort that it is tempting to call "metaphysical" - though I think it best to resist this temptation.
4. E.g. *Lectures on Philosophy, Oppression and Liberty, Notebooks*.
5. There is a hilarious lampooning of what is involved in such a verificatory conception in O.K. Bouwsma's *Without Proof or Evidence*, in the form of an anecdote about a wandering Greek who inadvertently stumbles on a meeting of Zeus and his subordinate divinities on Olympus.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p.1e.
7. One central aspect of such disagreements can be pursued by comparing Winch's discussion of the gods with that of Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity* and that of Martha Nussbaum in 'Transcending Humanity' in *Love's Knowledge* (Ed.).
8. Book V. Chapter 7.
9. In 'The Great Beast', *Selected Essays*, p.115.
10. 'Are We Struggling for Justice?' trans. Marina Barabas, *Philosophical Investigations*.
11. I realize of course that I am here compressing a complicated argument in a way that can hardly be convincing or even intelligible. That is the price I must pay for the foolhardiness of trying to discuss such an enormous topic in

the course of a single lecture. [For a detailed discussion see Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance* C.U.P. 1989 (Ed.)]

12. The parallels with certain modern utilitarian philosophies hardly need to be pointed out.

13. I was for instance very interested to see Stephen Jay Gould reported as calling Jane Goodall's ecologically conscientious study of chimpanzee communities the most important contribution to biological science of recent times; and I think he meant: precisely in virtue of its ecological conscientiousness. I am afraid that I cannot report this accurately.

14. *First and Last Notebooks*, pp.146-8.

15. This last remark is best seen as (using Wittgenstein's phrase) "the determination of a concept".

16. I was struck by the following reaction, so reminiscent of Alcibiades, of an accountancy student at Brooklyn College to Plato's *Gorgias*: "Gee, that guy Socrates. First of all when you read him you think you agree with him. Then a bit later you think: Hell no, that's not what I think! And then that guy Socrates makes you feel a jerk".

17. The same sort of ambivalence is of course brilliantly exploited by Plato in his account of the arguments between Socrates and people like Thrasymachus, Glaucon, Gorgias, Polus and Calicles. This is not the place to discuss this, but I think Plato clearly did think that Socrates' interlocutors could be refuted by philosophical argument; in the sense that Socrates' own view of things could actually be established. Of course I am doubting this.

18. I do as a matter of fact suspect that reluctance to use the term itself arises partly from confusions about the relation between religion and metaphysics. But I am not going to attempt to argue that either.