Grammars of Faith

A Critical Evaluation of
D.Z. Phillips's Philosophy of Religion

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GRAMMARS OF FAITH

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF
D.Z. PHILLIPS'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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PREFACE

This book is divided into three parts. While it would be possible to read each part as a more or less self-contained unit, dealing with its own particular set of questions, taken together they form a single study. Each part plays its own role in achieving the book's main aim. That aim is to present a critical discussion of D. Z. Phillips's philosophy of religion.

Reading Phillips's work, one can hardly fail to be impressed both by its sheer volume, as well as by the breadth of its scope. Phillips's first book appeared in 1965, and the past four decades or so have seen the publication of well over fifteen titles. In addition, he has edited and annotated various works, including two collections of Rush Rhees's papers, and has contributed numerous articles to philosophical journals. The subjects Phillips engages with cover a wide range of philosophy: from logic to ethics, from the philosophy of literature to the philosophy of education. By far the larger part of his writings, however, is concerned with the philosophy of religion, and it is for his work in this area that Phillips is best known.

Despite the differences in the problems and questions Phillips addresses, his work reflects a unified approach, an approach which is derived, first and foremost, from Ludwig Wittgenstein. The extent to which Phillips's work is inspired by Wittgenstein's mature philosophy can hardly be exaggerated. To be sure, Phillips makes no secret of this. He readily acknowledges that his conception of philosophy has been shaped by Wittgenstein's work. He repeatedly refers his audience to Wittgenstein, quoting at length from his writings. Time and again he urges us to recognise the importance of Wittgenstein's philosophical methods and insights. In part, he sees his task as one of promoting a Wittgensteinian approach within philosophy in general, and philosophy of religion in particular. This is true from his earliest to his latest work. *The Concept of Prayer* (1965) presents itself as the first extended essay in the philosophy of religion influenced by Wittgenstein's philosophy. In Phillips's latest offerings, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (1999) and *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (2001) it is still Wittgenstein's voice which is heard most forcefully.[1]

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[1] Since research on this book was completed, Phillips has published two further titles: *Religion and Friendly Fire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and *The Problem of Evil and The Problem of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004). Unfortunately, these could not be taken into consideration for the present study.

Quite a few commentators have remarked upon the manner in which Phillips has appropriated Wittgenstein's philosophical legacy. Unfortunately, their reviews have tended to be rather narrow and one-sided. First, they have focused almost exclusively on the question whether Phillips can be said correctly to apply Wittgenstein's later methods to the philosophical study of religion. This underestimates the fact that what counts as a correct interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy is a matter of some dispute. If Phillips has appropriated Wittgenstein's views, he has done so in a critical way, taking them in new directions, developing, expanding and transforming them. One of the merits of Phillips's work is that it has contributed to our understanding both of the significance of Wittgenstein's own writings on matters religious, as well as to our understanding of what a correct application of Wittgenstein's methods to the study of religion might involve.

Secondly, to date, and with few notable exceptions, discussions of Phillips's work have been content to treat it as paradigmatic of a distinct and clearly identifiable approach within contemporary philosophy of religion. Discussions of 'the Wittgensteinian interpretation of religion', the 'neo-Wittgensteinian School' and 'Wittgensteinian fideism' readily come to mind. While such discussions are not without merit, they have tended to underplay the originality and uniqueness of Phillips's work. The 'neo-Wittgensteinian' label may have served a useful purpose in referring to those authors who prepared the way for a more thorough investigation of the significance of Wittgenstein's methods for the philosophical study of religion. By now, however, the term has become too imprecise and too heavily burdened with derogatory connotations. All too often, commentators have shied away from the task of properly examining Phillips's own analyses, too readily assuming them to be in agreement with the perceived character of 'neo-Wittgensteinian' philosophy of religion. Where Phillips's writings are explicitly referred to, discussion has concentrated primarily on his earlier writings, displaying too little awareness of the way in which Phillips has, over the years, amended and developed his position. A more comprehensive and balanced study of Phillips's work has not been forthcoming. This book hopes to fill that gap.

In the first part, I explore Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief in the context both of his earlier and his later philosophy. By carefully arranging Wittgenstein's observations on matters religious against the background of his broader philosophical methodology, I hope to achieve a fair assessment of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, as well as to

set a standard by which to measure any attempt at propounding a more comprehensive Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

In the second part of the book, I examine the way in which, in the late fifties and early sixties, Wittgenstein's philosophy was made to bear on the philosophy of religion. After a brief discussion of the earlier works of Rush Rhees, Peter Winch, and Norman Malcolm, I turn to Phillips's first published work, *The Concept of Prayer*. Here, my interest lies mainly in the book's efforts at developing a more comprehensive Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

In the third and by far the larger part of this book, I turn away from the discussion of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, focusing on Phillips's philosophy of religion instead. Phillips's mature understanding of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation is examined, and his descriptive accounts of religious beliefs are subjected to closer scrutiny.

It is my sincere hope that this study may contribute to a more balanced evaluation of Phillips's contribution to contemporary philosophy of religion, and may advance the debate concerning the significance of Wittgenstein's methods and insights for the study of religion. While I believe that the conclusions I reach show a number of dead-ends, as well as point out several directions that may be more fruitfully explored, they are in no way meant to be decisive. Rather, I hope that they shall be taken as an invitation to further discussion.

PART I

Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Wittgenstein once remarked to his friend and former student M. O'C. Drury 'I am not a religious man'.[1] However, one might, as did Norman Malcolm, express some doubt as to whether that assessment of himself was true.[2] Or, at least, as to how it should be understood. Wittgenstein's remark cannot be taken to mean that religion played no role in his life. Although it seems clear that he saw himself quite unambiguously as an unbeliever,[3] Wittgenstein nevertheless had a great and abiding interest in religion and religious belief; certainly on a personal level, and, perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, on a professional level.

The following two chapters set themselves the task of clarifying Wittgenstein's thoughts on matters religious — a task by no means easy or straightforward. There are a number of factors contributing to its difficulty. First, Wittgenstein discussed religion only sporadically. Remarks which deal explicitly with religious belief, with religious worship and ritual, or with God, are few and far between, and are certainly not ordered into anything remotely resembling a systematic account. Anyone hoping to recover Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion — if such a thing can be said to exist at all — has very little indeed to go on.

Secondly, where Wittgenstein does explicitly address the topic of religious belief, his remarks are often difficult to understand, if not obscure. This difficulty becomes all the more pronounced where Wittgenstein's personal and professional interests merge, as is not seldom the case.

Thirdly, Wittgenstein's views on religious belief did not remain the same throughout his life. There is a marked difference between remarks written during the First World War and those written, for example, shortly after the Second World War. To some extent, these changes might reflect changes in Wittgenstein's personal circumstances, and may thus be explained biographically. More importantly, however, they reflect the transformation Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole underwent. Wittgenstein is unique in the history of philosophy in having produced two diametrically

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[1] See Rhees 1981, p. 94.

[2] In his memoir Malcolm remarks that, although Wittgenstein was not religious, "there was in him, in some sense, the *possibility* of religion." (Malcolm 1984, p. 60; cf. Malcolm 1993, pp. 4ff.)

[3] See Hudson 1975, p. 10.

opposed philosophies.[4] The differences between Wittgenstein's earlier and later remarks on religious belief must be understood against the background of these two distinct philosophical world-pictures, crystallized, respectively, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). One's interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion will thus betray certain prior interpretative choices with respect to Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole. Here, one faces a further problem. For Wittgenstein is, perhaps, also unique in the history of philosophy in that his writings, more than those of any other classical philosopher, have been treated to wildly differing, and sometimes outright contradictory, interpretations.[5]

These difficulties notwithstanding, the task of mapping out Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief is an important one. Not just with a view to current debates concerning 'Wittgensteinian' philosophy of religion. But also because they make up an, admittedly small, but significant part of Wittgenstein's philosophical heritage. Whatever conclusions one may draw, questions of value — be they religious, ethical or aesthetic — played an important role for Wittgenstein and, as such, deserve our attention. Of course, I am not the first to make that point. Although early commentators may have tended largely to ignore Wittgenstein's remarks on such matters, the past few decades have seen the publication of a number of works explicitly addressing these issues.[6] While none of these deny the relevance of clarifying Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief, some have gone further, suggesting that these remarks provide the essential key to understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole or, even more controversially, that Wittgenstein's philosophical writings are fundamentally religious as they stand.[7]

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[4] See Hacker 2001, pp. viii, 1.

[5] See Biletzki 2003, p. 7. In fact, although it is common practice to distinguish between 'Wittgenstein one' (*Tractatus*) and 'Wittgenstein two' (*Investigations*), this procedure has not gone unchallenged. It has been argued that such a distinction underplays the natural and obvious continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophical writings. Conversely, in a number of recent publications, arguments have been adduced in favour of recognising a 'third' Wittgenstein, referring primarily to Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty*. (See Biletzki 2003, pp. 24ff.) My speaking of an 'earlier' and 'later' period in Wittgenstein's philosophy is not meant to deny the fact that there are important continuities in Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole. Nor, yet again, to deny that Wittgenstein's latest writings may contain certain modifications, or at the least additions, to his earlier work. Where necessary and possible, I have remarked on these matters. Any further discussion is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this investigation.

[6] The first comprehensive study of Wittgenstein's writings on religion was W. Donald Hudson's *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief* (1975). Since then, various full length studies, as well as numerous articles, have been published.

[7] See, respectively, Weiberg 1997, p. 9 and Shields 1993, p. 2.

Our conclusions shall be somewhat more modest. It cannot be denied that matters religious were important to Wittgenstein. What can and should be denied, however, is that the philosophy of religion constitutes one of the main themes in his philosophical oeuvre. In fact, as we shall see, the claim that there is such a thing as 'Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion' is a dubious one, at best. To arrive at this conclusion, the first chapter discusses Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and his *Lecture on Ethics*. The second chapter turns to the later period, focusing primarily on the *Remarks on Frazer* and the *Lectures on Religious Belief*.

1. THE EARLIER PERIOD

By far the larger part of this chapter is taken up by an examination of the only book Wittgenstein published during his lifetime, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. At first sight, religion seems to play a minor role, if any, in this logically and metaphysically orientated work. Along with ethical and aesthetical expressions, religious expressions are condemned to the realm of the nonsensical. There are, however, strong indications that matters are not so straightforward. Wittgenstein himself once insisted that the main point of the *Tractatus* was an ethical one; and a closer look at his notebooks, diary and correspondence from this period shows him to be much taken up by religious and moral questions. This taken into consideration it is, perhaps, not surprising that when Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in 1929 the first lecture he gave was on ethics. In this lecture light is thrown on certain remarks of the *Tractatus*, lending some support to a more ethically or religiously orientated interpretation. At the same time, it is clear that Wittgenstein had already moved some distance from the position held in the *Tractatus*. The way in which the *Lecture on Ethics* not only looks back but also points forwards, paving the way for Wittgenstein's later dealings with religion (and ethics), is the subject of the second part of this chapter.

1.1 Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

When the *Tractatus* was published in 1921 it was hailed by most as a clear and forceful expression of what later came to be called Logical Positivism. Many, most noticeably the members of the Wiener Kreis, believed it to be the final deathblow to metaphysics and a solid basis on which to build a positivist philosophy. The final five or so pages of the *Tractatus*, in which we are suddenly confronted with a string of aphorisms dealing with the 'mystical', with ethics, God and the meaning of life, were simply ignored or explained away.

> "Given the sheer disproportion in the space allotted respectively to the logico-philosophical preliminaries and these last moral-theological aphorisms, the temptation has been to dismiss the final propositions as *obiter dicta* — like the casual afterthoughts which are put in for effect at the end

of some legal judgment and have no subsequent binding force, since they have no juridical bearing on the case in hand."[1]

Early commentators, with very few exceptions, tended "to follow the injunction of the final paragraph and pass over the last pages of the *Tractatus* in silence."[2] In later studies of the *Tractatus*, however, this tendency has been questioned. There are, so it is argued, numerous indications that matters are not so straightforward. First, there is the text itself — the final pages of the *Tractatus*. Sections 6.4 to 7 in particular prove embarrassing to anyone intent on reading Wittgenstein in a strictly positivist mien. These remarks do not seem to be a feeble appendage and an aberration, to be ignored or somehow explained away. They are certainly relevant and, so it is said, may well constitute the climax or culmination of the whole work.

In support of this view, certain selected passages from Wittgenstein's notebooks from the period prior to the publication of the *Tractatus* are adduced. These supply us with an insight into Wittgenstein's personal life while he was working on the *Tractatus*, revealing a man much taken up by moral and religious questions. More importantly, they were used in composition — quite a few of the remarks in the notebooks found their way, more or less unaltered, into the *Tractatus*. As such they are an invaluable source of material, providing a wider background to the terse remarks of the *Tractatus*. Moreover, so it is argued, they show the importance of ethics and religion — the mystical — within Wittgenstein's earlier thought.

Finally, we are reminded of the fact that Wittgenstein himself confirmed this conclusion. In conversation and in letters he often expressed dissatisfaction with the way the *Tractatus* was received, claiming that all the leading philosophers of his day misunderstood it to varying degrees — Frege, Russell, Moore and, most of all, the Logical Positivists. In a letter to Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein says the following of the *Tractatus*:

"The sense of the book is an ethical one. I once wanted to include in the preface a sentence which actually is not now in it but which I will write out for you here since it will perhaps be a key (to the book) for you. I wanted, then, to write: my work consists of two parts: of that which is under consideration here and of all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part which is the important one [...] I would now recommend you to read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, since these carry the sense to its most immediate expression."[3]

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[1] Janik & Toulmin 1973, p. 23.
[2] Barrett, 1991, p. x.
[3] Engelmann 1967, pp. 143-144.

For Wittgenstein, then, it appears the *Tractatus* is not only a work on logic and language. It is also an ethical book. Now, at first blush, this may seem a somewhat puzzling claim. The *Tractatus* certainly is not what one might expect a work on ethics or a religious treatise to be like.[4] In fact, it argues that, in a very important sense, ethical and religious 'propositions' are nonsensical. Ethics cannot be put into words.[5] And this means, really, that we should consign it to silence. We should say nothing except what can be said.[6] But, as Russell noted, not without irony, Wittgenstein "manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said."[7] Therefore, in the second part of this section, we take a closer look at the *Tractatus* in an attempt to understand what sense there is in the nonsensical; how, as Wittgenstein put it, it is possible to put everything in its place by being silent about it.[8] Of course, as noted above, there is no simple answer as to what constitutes the correct reading of the *Tractatus*. Solutions and interpretations offered are diverse and not seldom incompatible. Within the confines of this work, it cannot be my aim, even if I could fulfil it, to offer a critical appraisal. The best I can do is provide a rough indication of some of the main thoughts, to serve as a background against which the place of the religious and ethical in the *Tractatus* may become more readily intelligible.[9] This should allow us, in the third part, to assess such claims as to the essentially ethico-religious nature of the book.

Let us begin on a more personal level, though, and focus our attention on Wittgenstein's notebooks as well as on a number of biographical references. These provide an invaluable insight into Wittgenstein's thought whilst he was working on the *Tractatus* and facilitate its interpretation.

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[4] It has been suggested, however, that both the design and structure of the *Tractatus* bear affinity to Christian mystical literature. See, for example, Kroß 1993, p. 101; Clack 1999(a), p. 35: "The *Tractatus* can thus be read as a modern *via negativa*." Likewise, Creegan 1989, p. 129 n. 29: "The negative part of Wittgenstein's method is clearly reminiscent of the *via negativa* of theology." However, as Creegan rightly points out, there is no evidence that Wittgenstein had studied the classic sources in this area.

[5] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.421.

[6] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.53.

[7] Wittgenstein 1995, Introduction, p. xxi.

[8] See Engelmann 1967, p. 143.

[9] Our 'rough sketch' stays close to what Biletzki calls 'an analytic' or 'a reasonable' reading of the *Tractatus*, of which P. M. S. Hacker is, perhaps, the most outspoken proponent. (See Biletzki 2003, in particular chapter 4.) This line of interpretation has recently been challenged by a competing reading, originally propounded by Cora Diamond. (See Diamond 1991.) Although the — ongoing — debate is an interesting one, I cannot go into it here. (For Hacker's reply to his critics, see Hacker 2001, chapters 4 through 6.)

1.1.1 Das Leben der Erkenntnis

Although the young Ludwig Wittgenstein received instruction in Roman Catholicism, formal religion played little part in his family life, and, as Wittgenstein told his friend Arvid Sjögren, he lost his childish faith after conversations with his sister Gretl.[10] If anything, Wittgenstein became contemptuous of religion. However, he later told Norman Malcolm that, at about the age of twenty-one, something caused a change in him:

> "In Vienna he saw a play that was mediocre drama, but in it one of the characters expressed the thought that no matter what happened in the world, nothing bad could happen to *him* — *he* was independent of fate and circumstance. Wittgenstein was struck by this stoic thought; for the first time he saw the possibility of religion."[11]

It is not likely that Wittgenstein was instantly converted to Christianity; in fact, he steered clear of formal religion during the whole of his life. It is clear, though, that religion, and in particular the Christian faith, began to play a large role in his life, as is evident from his choice of reading material which turned "intensely Christian".[12]

> "Most of his favourite authors were suggestive and moral, rather than rigorous and logical, in their writings; in addition to Kierkegaard, Saint Augustine, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy are often mentioned. […] He read, and was excited by, William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* as early as 1912."[13]

Particularly the latter two authors, Tolstoy and James, made a great impression on Wittgenstein. During the First World War, in September 1914, Wittgenstein discovered Tolstoy's abridgement of the Gospels — *The Gospel in Brief* — in a bookstore. He read and reread it, keeping it with him at all times, and became known by the other soldiers as 'the one with the Gospels'.[14] As far as James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* is concerned, Wittgenstein believed it morally improved him — it may well have played a role in his decision to volunteer for active duty upon the declaration of the war, even though he could easily have been exempted. Wittgenstein's motives for doing so were not so much nationalistic but, rather, personal. He felt that the experience of facing death would, in some sense, improve him. During the war, he volunteered for the extremely

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[10] See McGuinness 1990, pp. 25, 43.
[11] Malcolm 1984, p. 70. The play was L. Anzengruber's *Die Kreuzelschreiber*; see McGuinness 1990, p. 94.
[12] McGuinness 1990, p. 43.
[13] Creegan 1989, p. 11.
[14] See McGuinness 1990, p. 220.

dangerous post of artillery observer in an advanced position, hoping that nearness to death would bring light into his life.[15] Such a notion, the spiritual value of heroically facing death, is also touched upon by James. He writes that, if a man is willing to risk death, and suffer it heroically, this fact consecrates him forever.[16] According to Ray Monk, there are signs that Wittgenstein wished for precisely this kind of consecration:

> "What Wittgenstein wanted from the war, then, was a transformation of his whole personality, a 'variety of religious experience' that would change his life irrevocably."[17]

This change, perhaps, did occur.[18] When, at the end of the war, Wittgenstein found himself a prisoner of war in a prison camp near Monte Cassino, he and a fellow prisoner, Franz Parak, read Dostoevsky together. Parak believed that Wittgenstein had gone through a religious conversion during the war and that this played a part in his subsequently giving away his inherited wealth. Also, Wittgenstein entertained the idea of entering the priesthood; the four years study of theology would have been too much, however, and he planned, instead, to become a school teacher. "I'd most like to be a priest", he told Parak, "but when I'm a teacher I can read the Gospel with the children."[19]

Wittgenstein's concern with religious belief is perhaps most strikingly encountered in the notes he kept during the latter years of the war. These consist of two parts: one part, written in code, reads as a diary, containing remarks which are predominantly of a personal nature, while the other, non-coded part, consists mainly of philosophical thought, much of which found its way into the *Tractatus*. The former have been published bearing the title *Geheime Tagebücher* and are of particular interest. In the *Vorwort*, Hans Albert comments that they show Wittgenstein

> "als ein durch die christliche Tradition geprägter religiöser Denker, der zum moralischen Rigorismus neigt und der Kierkegaard und Tolstoi näher stehen dürfte als denjenigen, die von ihm Anregungen für die Entwicklung des Programms der logischen Analyse erhalten haben."[20]

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[15] See McGuinness 1990, p. 240; cf. Wittgenstein 1991, p. 22.

[16] See James 1982, p. 364.

[17] Ray Monk 1991, p. 112. Cf. McGuinness 1990, p. 211; Weiberg 1997, p. 22; Kroß 1993, p. 35.

[18] When Wittgenstein returned from the war, Russell was astonished to find that he had become a 'complete mystic'. And Wittgenstein himself would later remark of the war: "It saved my life; I don't know what I'd have done without it." (See McGuinness 1990, pp. 279 and 204.)

[19] See McGuinness 1990, pp. 273-274.

[20] Wittgenstein 1991, Vorwort, p. 7.

The coded notes reveal Wittgenstein's intense struggle for moral and religious purity in all spheres of his life. His ideal was to detach himself from 'externalities', to be able to enjoy the good hours of life thankfully, as a boon, and otherwise face life with indifference.[21] As noted above, Wittgenstein believed that the war provided the ideal circumstances for him to achieve this goal, confronting him "with the simple task of preparing himself for a good death."[22] Often, before going into battle, Wittgenstein prayed, not so much that he should be spared from death, but that he should meet it in the right spirit, without cowardice or loss of himself. However, it was not only from the dangers of the war that Wittgenstein sought to detach himself. In his dealings with his fellow soldiers, he strove after the same goal. This proved particularly difficult for him. Wittgenstein found it almost impossible to relate to his comrades in arms, exclaiming that there was not a decent man among them.[23] The only way to deal with the situation, he decided, was to distance himself as much as possible. One must renounce the flesh and live for the spirit; a resolve not easily sustained:

> "Es ist unendlich schwer, sich dem Bösen immerzu zu widersetzen. Es ist schwer, mit leerem Magen und unausgeschlafen dem Geiste zu dienen! Aber was wäre ich, wenn ich es nicht könnte."[24]

In his philosophical work, Wittgenstein seems to have found some form of refuge. In the middle of hardship he could retreat into himself and his work. But, here as well, moral purity was of paramount importance. The work must not "be simply a way of getting through the time but must be undertaken in a devout spirit".[25] As Wittgenstein said to Engelmann: 'How can I be a good philosopher when I can't manage to be a good man?'[26] It is, says Monk, "as if the personal and the philosophical had become fused; ethics and logic […] had finally come together, not merely as two aspects of the same personal task, but as two parts of the same philosophical work."[27] Clearly, Wittgenstein did not sharply distinguish between his various problems and tasks. His duties as a soldier, his philosophical work, his dealings with others: all these intertwined to make up a single life:[28]

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[21] See McGuinness 1990, p. 222.
[22] McGuinness 1990, p. 220.
[23] See Wittgenstein 1991, p. 19.
[24] Wittgenstein 1991, p. 23.
[25] McGuinness 1990, p. 226.
[26] See McGuinness 1990, p. 227.
[27] Monk 1991, p. 141.
[28] This is strikingly illustrated by the way in which his philosophical task was assimilated to military situations. The circumstances of war led to a '*Militarisierung*' of Wittgenstein's

"Nicht nur das selbstgenügsame, gottgefällige Leben, sondern ebenso die philosophische Arbeit werden als unbedingte Pflicht im Zusammenhang mit dem für Wittgenstein richtigen Leben betrachtet. Die Philosophie ist damit untrennbar mit dem Leben verbunden und der in den *Geheimen Tagebüchern* so häufig angerufene Geist sowohl philosophisch als auch religiös zu verstehen."[29]

Wittgenstein's religious understanding of 'living for the spirit' was informed first and foremost by Tolstoy. As already mentioned, his *The Gospel in Brief* greatly impressed Wittgenstein. He kept it with him at all times and, with an almost evangelical zeal, recommended it to anyone in distress.[30] References to the work abound in his notebooks.

"Immer wieder sage ich mir im Geiste die Worte Tolstois vor: >Der Mensch ist *ohnmächtig* im Fleische aber frei durch den Geist<"[31]

To become free, one must renounce the flesh, the gratification of one's own will and, thus, make oneself independent of outward circumstances. The happy life, the only true life, is the life of the present, without any concern for the past or the future. Whatever happens 'externally', one's innermost self remains untouched, absolutely safe: a thought which, as we have seen, had already struck Wittgenstein some time earlier, when watching *Die Kreuzelschreiber* in Vienna.

It is difficult not to read these remarks as evincing a form of stoicism.[32] But one should tread carefully here. First, Wittgenstein's renunciation is not mere resignation to whatever happens. We are not required to believe that whatever happens is good just because it does happen but, rather, that whatever happens is neither good nor bad — only the ethical will is good or bad. Secondly, there is a strong religious dimension to Wittgenstein's view. His 'stoic attitude' derives not from ancient sources but from a certain kind of Christianity; the Christianity he found in

philosophy. (See Kroß 1993, p. 35.) He speaks of 'laying siege to his problems', 'storming them', 'capturing and retaining forts', and so on. (See McGuinness 1990, pp. 226-227.) And, what is more, here, too, he calls upon the spirit to help and inspire him. (See Monk 1991, p. 126.)

[29] Weiberg 1997, pp. 27-28.

[30] See Monk 1991, p. 116.

[31] Wittgenstein 1991, p. 21.

[32] Clack, for example, believes Wittgenstein's religious and ethical doctrines to be close to those of Spinoza, both prescribing a form of stoicism. (See Clack 1999(a), p. 45.) Despite some similarities, this is a doubtful claim. Henry Leroy Finch warns us that Wittgenstein's treatment of ethics as 'supernatural', as 'outside the world', belonging to a transcendental subject and altering the boundaries of the world, is scarcely congenial to Spinoza. (See Finch 1971, pp. 171-172.)

Tolstoy. If one wants to speak of submission here, it is not so much to
fate but to the will of God:

> "In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that
> is what 'being happy' *means*.
>   I am then, so to speak, in agreement with that alien will on which I
> appear dependent. That is to say: 'I am doing the will of God'."[33]

These themes occur in Wittgenstein's notebooks throughout the latter
years of the war: "Tolstoy's Christianity with a particular stamp given
to it by Wittgenstein."[34] Wittgenstein adds the following entry to his
notebooks in August 1916:

> "How can man be happy at all, since he cannot ward off the misery of this
> world?
>   Through the life of knowledge.
>   The good conscience is the happiness that the life of knowledge preserves.
>   The life of knowledge is the life that is happy in spite of the misery of
> the world.
>   The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of
> the world.
>   To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate."[35]

It is no coincidence that these sentiments are also expressed by Tolstoy, in
his introduction to *The Gospel in Brief*. The Christianity Wittgenstein
found there seemed to him the only sure way to happiness. To live the life
of knowledge[36] — *Das Leben der Erkenntnis* — is to transform one's whole
being. Such a life would constitute the redemption — morally, religiously
and philosophically — that Wittgenstein so desperately sought after.

1.1.2 Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches

As we have seen, Wittgenstein drew no strict boundaries between his
philosophy, his ethical and religious beliefs and aspirations, his worldly
duties — all these make up a single integrated life and cannot fail but
bear upon one another. It would be surprising, then, to say the least, if
Wittgenstein's religious and moral thought had not found its way into
the *Tractatus*. Says Monk:

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[33] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 75.
[34] McGuinness 1990, p. 221.
[35] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 81.
[36] The German word '*Erkenntnis*' translates as 'knowledge', 'insight', 'understanding'
— in this context 'knowledge' should not be understood as scientific knowledge but,
rather, as spiritual or philosophical understanding.

"His logic and his thinking about himself being but two aspects of the single 'duty to oneself', this fervently held faith was bound to have an influence on his work. And eventually it did — transforming it from an analysis of logical symbolism in the spirit of Frege and Russell into the curiously hybrid work which we know today, combining as it does logical theory with religious mysticism."[37]

In the following, we examine the role of the mystical in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. We begin by giving a rough indication of some of the main 'logical' thoughts of the work. In this context, the sudden emergence of the mystical, presents itself as, indeed, mystifying. I hope to show that the mystical becomes more readily intelligible when viewed against the background of Wittgenstein's ethical and religious beliefs, as presented in the preceding section. In doing so, I hope to arrive at an interpretation which is neither exclusively ethical nor exclusively logical, but which can award both these aspects their proper place.

The *Tractatus* presents the world as the totality not so much of things, but of facts (*Tatsachen*). A fact is the existence of states of affairs (*Sachverhalte*) which, in turn, consist of certain determinate combinations of objects (*Gegenstände*). These objects make up the substance of the world which exists independently of what is the case, ensuring that the world shall have an unalterable form. Although objects are, in this sense, independent — they can occur in all possible situations — they are not independent of the *possibility* of being combined to make up states of affairs. The totality of existing states of affairs — which, at the same time determines which states of affairs do not exist — is the world.

Man makes models of reality in picturing the facts to himself. The elements of such a picture (*Bild*) and the way in which they are related to one another, represent the objects and their relatedness in reality. For this to be possible, a picture and that of which it purports to be a picture, must have something in common. This common element is what Wittgenstein calls pictorial form (*Form der Abbildung*). A picture can depict any reality whose form it has; a spatial picture, for example, can depict anything spatial, a coloured one anything coloured, and so on. Now, a picture can be more or less like what it depicts, its pictorial form can be, so to speak, more or less rich. Any picture of whatever form, however, must have something in common with reality in order to be able to depict it in any way at all. This necessary common element Wittgenstein calls logical form (*logische Form*), which is the form of

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[37] Monk 1991, p. 116.

reality (*Form der Wirklichkeit*). Any picture must have logical form in common with what it depicts; every picture is a logical picture in addition to whatever particular kind of picture it may be (for example, a spatial one). By means of their logico-pictorial form, pictures represent possible states of affairs, which may be called their sense. A picture may agree or fail to agree with reality, thereby constituting its truth or falsity. Whether any given picture is, in fact, true, cannot be decided by the picture itself; for this it must be compared to reality.

Wittgenstein then goes on to apply this, which has been termed, 'picture theory' briefly to thought and, at greater length, to propositions. A thought is a logical picture of facts. Only possible states of affairs can be thought of; what is thinkable is possible too. In a proposition, a thought is expressed in a manner perceptible to the senses. Propositions, too, should be understood as pictures: a proposition is a picture of reality, a model of reality as we imagine it. By means of a correlation between the elements of the proposition and the objects in reality, a proposition depicts a *possible* state of affairs.[38] If this state of affairs actually holds, if the proposition agrees with reality, with what is the case, it is true; if not, it is false. For a proposition to have sense, it need not be true, nor do we need to know whether it is in order to understand it. However, although the sense of a proposition is independent of its being true or false, it is by no means independent of this possibility. That is to say, the possibility of being true or false belongs to the essence of (genuine) propositions. Propositions are, so to speak, bipolar in nature. Consequently, the only real propositions, those that can actually say something, are factual, statements of what is or is not the case; all genuine propositions are empirical and contingent.

The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science of which philosophy is not a part.[39] It cannot be the philosopher's task to add to our body of knowledge. Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions' but rather in the clarification of propositions; it is not a body of doctrine but an activity, aimed at setting limits to what can be thought and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought. It will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said.

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[38] In the last analysis, the elements of a proposition are simple unanalysable names (logically proper names), the meaning of which *are* the simple sempiternal objects in reality for which they stand. In this way language is directly linked to reality.

[39] This should not be taken too strictly. That is to say, such propositions as, for example, 'It is raining', 'The book is on the table', etc. can hardly be considered to partake of 'natural science'. Nevertheless, these propositions depict possible states of affairs, they are factual, and may be true or false; they are clearly genuine propositions.

This latter distinction, between what can be said (*gesagt*) and what cannot be said but only shown (*gezeigt*), is an important one. Hacker argues that

> "It provides the rationale for the conception of philosophy propounded in the *Tractatus*, in particular for the view that there are no philosophical propositions, that philosophy does not aim at achieving new knowledge, that philosophy is not a kind of science. The distinction is held to be vindicated by a variety of strands interwoven in the argument of the book, namely the bipolarity of the proposition, the picture theory of meaning, the distinctions between a name and a variable, a material property and a formal property, a genuine concept and a formal concept."[40]

The distinction between genuine and formal concepts plays an important role in demarcating the sayable and the unsayable. As we have seen, the *Tractatus* presents the world as composed of facts which are conceived as concatenations of objects. Objects have both internal and external properties. The former determine with what kind of other objects a given object can combine to make up a fact, constituting its ontological type. The latter are the contingent concatenations into which the object, as a matter of fact, enters. Something similar holds for the names which, in propositions, go proxy for objects. A given name can combine with other names to make up a proposition. The grammatical combinatorial possibilities of a name correspond precisely to the metaphysical combinatorial possibilities of the object which is the meaning of the name. And, just as the combinatorial possibilities of an object constitute its ontological type, so too the grammatical combinatorial possibilities of a name constitute its logico-syntactical category. Names of different objects of the same ontological type belong to the same logico-syntactical category; their shared syntactical form *is* the variable ('colour') of which they are substitution instances ('red', 'green', 'blue'). The variable is therefore the *formal concept* of the type. But variables cannot occur in well-formed propositions. It makes no sense to *say* that red is a colour; this is something that is *shown* by the logical syntax of colour names. The form of an object cannot be described; rather, it is *shown* by the fact that the name of the object is a substitution instance of a given kind of variable:

> "Objects can only be *named*. Signs are their representatives. I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *put them into words*. Propositions can only say *how* things are, not *what* they are."[41]

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[40] Hacker 1986, p. 19.
[41] Wittgenstein 1995, 3.221.

This is but one variation upon the theme of the picture theory of language. As noted, the possibility of picturing depends on there being a common feature between picture and pictured. A picture depicts reality by means of its logico-pictorial form. But, Wittgenstein argues, no picture can depict its means of picturing, much as a painter could not paint his way of painting, although the latter will be *shown* by each of his paintings.[42] This holds true for propositions as well. As pictures, they can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it: logical form. Yet, although a proposition cannot depict logical form, it does show it. Every genuine proposition, in addition to *saying* what it says, *shows* the logical, ineffable, form of reality:

> "Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.
> What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.
> What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language.
> They display it. […]
> What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said."[43]

To repeat, genuine proposition are descriptions of possible states of affairs. They show how things stand if they are true and they say that things do so stand. There are, however, other, would-be propositions which do not picture reality. As such, they cannot or, perhaps better, do not, say anything; they have no sense. First among these are tautologies and contradictions. The propositions of logic, being, in Wittgenstein's view, tautologous, also belong to this category. Although they do not violate the rules of logical syntax — that is to say, they are not nonsensical — neither do they picture possible states of affairs. They do not *say* anything; lacking sense, they can be neither affirmed nor negated. However, although they are *sinnlos* (lacking in sense, or senseless), they are not *unsinnig* (nonsensical). They say nothing, nor do they, in fact, try to say anything. But they do *show* something, namely, the (logical) structure of language and, hence, the world.

Next up are expressions which are not so much *sinnlos* as *unsinnig*. These pseudo-propositions (*Scheinsätze*) not only fail to say anything, they show nothing either; they fail to accord with the rules of logical syntax. Within this domain of the nonsensical there are sentences which can be seen to be nonsense (*bedeutungslos*) straight away, such as, for example, 'Socrates is identical'.[44] On the other hand, there are also

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[42] The example is Hudson's. (See Hudson 1975, pp. 70-71.)
[43] Wittgenstein 1995, 4.121, 4.1212.
[44] See Wittgenstein 1995, 5.4733.

propositions which are not so easily recognised as nonsensical. Such pseudo-propositions do appear to say something, and often something very profound. This is the case, according to Wittgenstein, both with the would-be propositions of philosophy (in its metaphysical doctrinal guise) and expressions of value. The pseudo-propositions of philosophy fail to accord with the rules of logical syntax. They employ formal concepts as if they were genuine concepts in an attempt to say what can only be shown — and what they say, being nonsense, does not even show what they try to say. Likewise, expressions of value, be it ethical, aesthetical or religious, are deemed nonsensical. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. Ethics cannot be put into words; God does not reveal himself in the world. The traditional metaphysical subjects of God and the Good lie beyond the boundaries of language.

In this way, a venerable philosophical tradition has, for Wittgenstein, come to a radical end. Any attempt to describe the essence of things, to attain knowledge about the essential, metaphysical nature of the world, about God and the Good, will unavoidably transgress the bounds of sense, misuse language, and produce nonsense. When confronted with such a venture, the philosopher can only point out its nonsensicality:

> "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science — i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy — and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions."[45]

"All philosophy", Wittgenstein wrote, "is a 'critique of language'".[46] Its main task is to set limits to what can and cannot be said. The essential nature of representation determines these limits; beyond them, nothing can be said. Wittgenstein's movement along the boundaries of sense results in the renouncing of any kind of metaphysical, religious or ethical knowledge. But, where Kant's critique of speculative reason denied knowledge to make room for faith, Wittgenstein's critique of language

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[45] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.53.
[46] Wittgenstein 1995, 4.0031. "Though not in Mauthner's sense", Wittgenstein adds. Fritz Mauthner was an Austrian journalist and philosopher. In his philosophical work Mauthner sets out to show the ways in which language misrepresents thought and reality. This in direct opposition to Wittgenstein who believed that the general nature of thought and reality is identical with the possibilities afforded by language.

allows no such opportunity.[47] Here, knowledge is denied to make room for naught but silence: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."[48]

Yet, having read the *Tractatus*, one might well be left, as was Russell, with "a certain sense of intellectual discomfort."[49] For Wittgenstein seems unable or unwilling to heed his own decree. After all, the propositions in the *Tractatus* are not clarifications of ordinary empirical propositions, nor can they be conceived of as part of natural science. In fact, the book is riddled with statements which are, strictly speaking, nonsensical — as Wittgenstein himself explicitly recognised.[50] These concern not only the sphere of the philosophical but also that of the ethical and religious as, in the latter pages of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein, far from being silent, presents his notion of the mystical. Clearly, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein believed that, although one can not meaningfully discuss it, the ineffable is manifestly there:

> "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical."[51]

In the remainder of this section we shall attempt to clarify a number of aspects of Wittgenstein's understanding of the mystical.[52] We shall see that the pseudo-propositions of the *Tractatus*, though nonsensical, are nevertheless instrumental in acquiring a correct view of the world. To attain such a view is to have solved the problem of life. It is to partake of the mystical in which ethical, religious and philosophical elements combine to constitute the life of knowledge.

"All propositions", Wittgenstein wrote, "are of equal value."[53] All genuine propositions are empirical and contingent. They can only state

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[47] Many authors have noticed and commented upon the relationship between Wittgenstein and Kant. Erik Stenius' work *Wittgenstein's Tractatus. A Critical Exposition of Its Main Lines of Thought* (1960) is perhaps best known for interpreting Wittgenstein's early thought along Kantian lines. For an insightful discussion, not only of the similarities, but also the differences between Kant and Wittgenstein see Hacker 1986, in particular Chapters I and VII.

[48] Wittgenstein 1995, 7.

[49] Wittgenstein 1995, Introduction, p. xxi.

[50] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.54.

[51] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.522

[52] Wittgenstein's notion of the mystical has, in the last decades, been discussed in numerous publications and articles. Once again, we can only touch upon one or two aspects, in line with our immediate goal. Consequently, our account is by no means complete, nor is it intended to be. It will highlight certain elements, by necessity leaving others unexamined.

[53] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.4.

how things are in the world. But this is of complete indifference for what is higher. *In* the world, no value exists:

> "The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists — and if it did exist, it would have no value.
>
> If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.
>
> What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.
>
> It must lie outside the world."[54]

What lies outside the world, beyond the sphere of the empirical and contingent, lies beyond the sphere of language too. Questions concerning value and the meaning of life cannot be put into words. Ethics — and aesthetics, for they are one and the same — is transcendental.[55] About the bearer of the ethical, the will, nothing can be said. As the subject of ethical attributes, it is assigned to the metaphysical subject which "does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world."[56] Accordingly, the good or bad exercise of the will cannot have any influence upon the facts; if it can be said to alter anything at all, "it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts — not what can be expressed by language."[57] Likewise, religion — which is closely connected to ethics — has nothing to do with how things stand in the world:

> "*How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world."[58]

Propositions can express nothing that is higher. They can only say how things happen to be — not what value they possess or what sense they make. Such questions, constituting the problem of life, cannot be posed, let alone answered, within the sphere of the sayable, i.e. within the sphere of natural science:

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[54] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.41. The belief that the good must lie outside the world, such that, from an ethical point of view, the consequences of our actions are unimportant (see Wittgenstein 1995, 6.422) can be encountered in Tolstoy's work as well. In his novel *Anna Karenina* the figure of Konstantin Levin draws the same conclusion: "If goodness has a cause, it is no longer goodness; if it has a consequence — a reward — it is also not goodness. Therefore goodness is beyond the chain of cause and effect."

[55] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.421.

[56] Wittgenstein 1995, 5.632.

[57] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.43.

[58] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.432.

"The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution. [...] We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched."[59]

The problem of life can only be solved by transforming one's whole life and view of the world. The world "must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole. As if by accession or loss of meaning."[60] To solve the problem is to see the world aright, which has nothing to do with seeing new or previously hidden facts: "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical."[61] Rather, it involves seeing the world as a whole in a new light, under the form of eternity:

"To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole — a limited whole.
    Feeling the world as a limited whole — it is this that is mystical."[62]

It is at this point that the merit of the pseudo-propositions of the *Tractatus* finally becomes apparent. For although they are nonsensical, they are not worthless. Rightly understood, they are a way of indicating

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[59] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.4321, 6.52. Again, the resemblance of these remarks to Tolstoy's is striking: "If we turn to the branches of knowledge which are not concerned with the problem of life but find an answer to their own particular scientific questions, we are lost in admiration of the human intellect, but we know beforehand that we should get no answer to our question about life itself, for these branches of knowledge directly ignore the question of life". (Tolstoy 1922, p. 76.)

[60] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 73; Cf. Wittgenstein 1995, 6.43.

[61] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.44.

[62] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.45. Wittgenstein's adoption of the Latin phrase *sub specie aeterni* may lead one to believe he was referring to Spinoza's *Ethics* in which the same terminology can be encountered: *Mens aeterna est, quatenus res sub aeternitatis specie concipit*. This belief may be further strengthened by the title *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* — suggested by Moore — which is an allusion to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Philosophicus*. It is, however, highly unlikely that Wittgenstein knew this work to any great extent and, as far as the phrase '*sub specie aeterni*' is concerned, it is Schopenhauer's quotation of Spinoza he is echoing rather than the original. (See Hacker 1986, p. 98; McGuinness 1990, p. 299.) In fact, the influence of Schopenhauer, particularly upon the latter part of the *Tractatus*, is profound. According to Hacker "it moulded [Wittgenstein's] conception of the metaphysical self and his notion of the mystical." To trace the connections between Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein would, however, take us too far. (For a detailed examination, see Hacker, 1986, Chapter IV). Also, we should not forget that even if, as is evidently the case, Wittgenstein drew greatly upon Schopenhauer, in the end, the notion of the mystical is married to a way of life which has a distinctly Christian flavour. As we have seen, Wittgenstein's understanding of such a life was informed not only by Schopenhauer but also, and even more so, by such authors as Kierkegaard, Saint Augustine, Dostoevsky, James and, most importantly, Tolstoy. Consider, for example, Tolstoy's belief that the essence of religion lies in the establishing of "a relation to the immediate issues of life, a relation to the entire infinite universe in time and space, *conceiving of it as a whole*." (Quoted in Clack 1999(a), p. 110; italics added.)

— showing — the ineffable. The 'language' of the metaphysical and mystical may act as rungs of a ladder that lead the reader to see the world aright:

> "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them — as steps — to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
>
>   He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."[63]

In the end, the various pseudo-propositions of the *Tractatus* serve a common purpose: that of enabling the reader, by transcending them, to gain the correct, mystical, view of the world in which philosophical, religious and ethical aspects are incorporated. To achieve this goal is to transform one's life; one's world becomes an altogether different one. No longer will one be vexed by questions of meaning and value, nor attempt to provide nonsensical and inadequate answers to them. The problem of life will have been solved in the view *sub specie aeterni* in which the world presents itself as a limited, meaningful, whole.[64]

Of course, this solution cannot be put into words. It is seen, rather, in the vanishing of the problem. Which is why, says Wittgenstein, those to whom the sense of life became clear have been unable to state what constituted that sense.[65] Nor can Wittgenstein. Consequently, in the *Tractatus* there is no attempt at describing the meaning of life. However, in his notebooks some indication of its content and the kind of life it engenders can be found. In the entry for the eleventh of June, 1916, Wittgenstein asks himself what he knows about God and the purpose of life. His answer shows the intimate connection between ethics, religion and the meaning of life:

> "What do I know about God and the purpose of life?
> I know that this world exists. […]
> That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.
> That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it.
> That life is the world.
> That my will penetrates the world.

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[63] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.54.

[64] See Kroß 1993, p. 104: "Das Problem des Sinns des Lebens angesichts einer Welt der Tatsachen ohne Werte löst sich in der Betrachtung sub specie aeterni, in der Welt und Leben zum ausdehnungs- und damit grenzenlosen mystischen Punkt der Gegenwart schrumpfen."

[65] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.521. In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* Levin's attaining an understanding of the meaning of life coincides with the realisation that he cannot capture this in words.

> That my will is good or evil.
> Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.
> The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God. [...]
> To pray is to think about the meaning of life.
> I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless."[66]

In the world, such as it is, there can be no value. "*The riddle* does not exist", for, if any "question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it."[67] Yet, when all possible questions have been answered, something remains problematic — the meaning of life. Enter religious belief: "to believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter."[68] The meaning of life we can call God; that is to say: "to believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life [...] to see that life has a meaning."[69] In grasping the meaning of life, the problem vanishes. About a month later, Wittgenstein wonders whether such a life is possible.[70] We have already observed his answer: it is; it is the life of knowledge — *das Leben der Erkenntnis* — "that can renounce the amenities of the world."[71] One must make oneself "independent of the world — and so in a certain sense master it — by renouncing any influence on happenings."[72] In doing so, one's world becomes that of the happy man which is altogether different from that of the unhappy man.[73] The happy man "no longer needs to have any purpose except to live. That is to say, [he] is content."[74] He "is *living* in eternity and not in time."[75] For "only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy."[76] This is to see the world *sub specie aeterni*, to partake of the mystical. Its consummation is the happy life, in which the purpose of existence is fulfilled.[77] Can we be happy at all? Only through the life of knowledge.[78]

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[66] Wittgenstein 1969, pp. 72-73.
[67] Wittgenstein 1995, 6.5.
[68] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 74.
[69] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 74.
[70] See Wittgenstein 1969, p. 74.
[71] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 81.
[72] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 73.
[73] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.43.
[74] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 73.
[75] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 74.
[76] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 74. Cf. Wittgenstein 1995, 6.4311: "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present."
[77] See Wittgenstein 1969, p. 73.
[78] See Wittgenstein 1969, p. 81.

We have travelled different routes to arrive at the same destination: the spiritual life, the life of knowledge. This constitutes a main theme in Wittgenstein's earlier years, unavoidably leaving its mark upon his earlier thought. There are indeed things that cannot be put into words; they can only show themselves. And one might well say that Wittgenstein aspired to do just that: to show the mystical. Both existentially and philosophically — for Wittgenstein, perhaps more so than for any other philosopher, the personal and the professional are inseparable.[79]

The *Tractatus* does not present us with an ethical theory, it does not seek to describe or explain the mystical. It can only, nonsensically, gesture at it. There are no scientific (still less philosophical) answers to the problems of life. Paradoxically, to realise this — as the *Tractatus* enables one to do — is to take the first step towards answering them. In this way "the book serves to produce a kind of *docta ignorantia* and who reads it will be able to say in the right spirit: What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."[80]

1.1.3 The fusion of the logical and the ethical

The *Tractatus* is a book on logic. And in this department, its achievements are not inconsiderable. Yet, the innocent positivist reader may well experience something of an intellectual shock when, having travelled almost the whole distance, the theses he holds dear are suddenly invalidated and that which can be said must make room for that which can only be shown. The sting, so to speak, is in the tail. For the *Tractatus* is also a book on the mystical. And, as Russell realised, it is quite possibly this latter part on which Wittgenstein himself would wish to lay most stress.[81]

For his earlier audience this proved unacceptable. Wittgenstein's insistence that whoever understood him would recognise the nonsensicality of by far the larger part of the *Tractatus* was greeted by philosophers with incredulous indignation.[82] Frank Ramsey argued that either philosophy is of some use, or else it is a disposition we should check. If philosophy is nonsense, then it is useless and we should not pretend, as Wittgenstein

[79] See Kroß 1993, pp. 34-35: "Wie kaum ein anderer Philosoph hat Wittgenstein versucht, sein Dasein und seine Denkweise in Übereinstimmung zu bringen und die Lösung philosophischer Probleme mit der Erlösung seines Daseins zu verknüpfen."
[80] McGuinness 1990, p. 313.
[81] See Wittgenstein 1995, Introduction, p. xxii.
[82] See Hacker 1986, p. 25.

did, that it is important nonsense.[83] In the middle years of the 1920s, when the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle was taking shape, those involved commonly prefaced their work with acknowledgements to Wittgenstein (and his *Tractatus*) whose authority they deeply respected. Little were they inclined to conceive of the book which was to serve as the basic logical structure for their new positivism as, for the main part, nonsensical.

Worse yet were Wittgenstein's remarks on the mystical. The metaphysical streak of the *Tractatus*, ineffable or not, was anathema to the positivist point of view. That Wittgenstein, after so resolutely showing metaphysics to be nonsense, should proceed to let the metaphysician back in through the backdoor of the mystical, was completely unacceptable. Again we may refer to a remark made by Ramsey: "If you can't say it, you can't say it — and you can't whistle it either".[84] Neurath was even more explicit: "One must indeed be silent but not *about* anything".[85]

It is striking that its most influential readers rejected so much of the *Tractatus* and misread it so extensively. According to Janik and Toulmin, what for Wittgenstein was to be an end to philosophy, the positivists transformed into the coming of a new dawn:

> "The logical positivists were overlooking the very difficulties about language which the *Tractatus* had been meant to reveal; and they were turning an argument designed to circumvent *all* philosophical doctrines into a source of *new* doctrines, meanwhile leaving the original difficulties unresolved."[86]

This may be somewhat overstated. True, Wittgenstein was strongly opposed to any philosophy which seeks to construct theories: there are no 'philosophical propositions'. Any attempt to say what can only be shown will unavoidably transgress the bounds of sense and result in nonsense. But this does not mean that philosophy as such has come to an end. Philosophy as an activity, as the elucidation of genuine propositions, may and must still continue. There was still a lot of work to be done. The *Tractatus* was, as it were, only the first step, showing philosophy's actual task. In this respect, Wittgenstein's paper *Some Remarks on Logical Form* is important, as it shows Wittgenstein took this task quite seriously.

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[83] See Hacker 1986, p. 26.
[84] Quoted in Hacker 1996(a), p. 301.
[85] Quoted in Barrett 1991, p. x.
[86] Janik & Toulmin, 1973, p. 216.

Still, much of what was presented under the guise of logical positivism was inimical to Wittgenstein's point of view. That he wanted to have little to do with the positivist enterprise should have been a sign on the wall. From 1922 onward, seminars were held at the University of Vienna to discuss the *Tractatus* and its wider implications, without Wittgenstein's participation. He remained an onlooker, and an increasingly sceptical one. It was not until 1927 that Wittgenstein agreed to meet with Moritz Schlick, and that a series of discussions was inaugurated. There was, Janik and Toulmin report, "a touch of irony about these encounters from the beginning."[87] Schlick approached the first meeting with Wittgenstein with "the reverential attitude of a pilgrim", returning in an "ecstatic state". For his part, Wittgenstein reported to Engelmann that "each of us must have thought that the other was crazy".[88]

The differences between Wittgenstein and the more fervently positivist members of the Circle were real enough; a fact which has long since been recognised. The ongoing publication of Wittgenstein's papers has led to commentators paying more and more attention to the ethico-religious aspects of the *Tractatus*. At times, one feels, taking us too far. If the book was first discussed mainly as a work on logic with a mystical appendage, now it is just as often presented as a treatise on the mystical with some logical preliminaries. A few examples may serve to illustrate this tendency.

For Clack, there can be little doubt that Wittgenstein's consideration of the mystical represents "the very heart of his early philosophy".[89] The *Tractatus* should be read as a modern *via negativa*, an attempt to respectfully evoke the "glorious ineffability of the mystical".[90] The logical doctrines of the *Tractatus*, so we are led to believe, were construed with this end in view:

> "The picture theory of meaning […] is designed to protect 'what is higher' from the perverting, all-too-human encroaches of language. [T]he *Tractatus* sets a limit to what can be spoken (and therefore thought) in order to respect the awesome power of the mystical."[91]

Cyril Barrett should have little to disagree with. He, too, is convinced that, for Wittgenstein, questions of value were "of the utmost importance, if

[87] Janik & Toulmin, 1973, p. 214.
[88] See Janik & Toulmin 1973, pp. 214-215.
[89] Clack 1999(a), p. 50 n. 41.
[90] Clack 1999(a), p. 36.
[91] Clack 1999(a), p. 35.

not of sole importance."[92] The whole thrust of the *Tractatus* is an ethical one; it was "designed to expose the logical status of expressions of value".[93] Clearly, the book is "not primarily a work on logic and language [but] an ethical book",[94] and we would do well to regard its latter pages not as a feeble appendage but, rather, as "the climax and culmination of the book".[95]

Likewise, Janik and Toulmin assert that the point of the *Tractatus* is an ethical one. Its final pages are by no means idle chatter. Rather, "they are — as their position suggests — meant to be the climax of the book."[96] The logical considerations leading up to this ethico-religious pinnacle are merely a means to an end:

> "True, without the example of Russell and Frege before him, Wittgenstein could never have written the *Tractatus* as we have it. But what Frege and Russell did for him was to provide new techniques, using which he was able to solve his own preconceived problems. If this diagnosis is once accepted, no difficulty remains in reconciling the "logical" and the "ethical" aspects of Wittgenstein's ideas. The *point* of his book — as he himself was in due course to insist — is an *ethical* one; its *formal techniques* alone are drawn from propositional logic."[97]

Matthias Kroß, finally, wastes little time in affirming the ethical nature of the *Tractatus*. As Wittgenstein himself indicated, its central problem is that of the possibility of a philosophical ethics.[98] From this premise, Kroß draws a more radical conclusion. Once the primacy of the ethical is realised, new light is shed upon the logical considerations preceding the ethical conclusion. Indeed, no difficulty remains in reconciling the two for, rightly viewed, they can be said to coincide:

> "Die Untersuchung der Logik der Sprache koinzidiert mit einem dieser Untersuchung zugrunde liegenden ethischen Impuls, der die Textualität des Traktates bestimmt und die Anordnung seiner Sätze wesentlich bestimmt. Wenn man davon ausgehen muß, daß das 'Ethische' den textuellen Gravitationspunkt des Traktates darstellt, dann erscheinen seine einzelnen Sätze alles andere denn als Glieder einer Argmentationskette, sondern als

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[92] Barrett 1991, p. xiv.
[93] Barrett 1991, p. 251.
[94] Barrett 1991, p. x.
[95] Barrett 1991, p. ix.
[96] Barrett 1991, p. 168.
[97] Barrett 1991, p. 169.
[98] See Kroß 1993, p. 16: "Wittgensteins eigenen Angaben zufolge kreist der Traktat — in immer neuen Ansätzen — um eine philosophische Zentralfrage: dem Problem der Möglichkeit einer philosophischen Ethik."

> Variationen des *einen* Themas (nämlich des Problems der Ethik), das unter
> verschiedenen Gesichtspunkten paraphrasiert wird."[99]

For Kroß, the *Tractatus* is not a book on propositional logic, nor is it a book *about* ethics. Rather, as a whole, it is a manifestation of the higher: "Der Traktat *ist* Ethik".[100]

We have here a number of forceful arguments advancing a more ethically inclined reading of the *Tractatus*. And, of course, our own investigation has likewise emphasised the importance of the ethico-religious aspects of Wittgenstein's earlier work. However, to say that the final pages of the *Tractatus*, dealing with the mystical, were important to Wittgenstein and should not be ignored is one thing. To say that they are the key to understanding the whole of the book is something else. The latter, more radical view, gives rise to some serious problems. Wittgenstein, we are led to believe, entered into philosophy with his own preconceived problems. He wanted to expose the logical status of expressions of value and designed the *Tractatus* to do just that, using Frege's and Russell's logical techniques as a means of achieving this goal. Clearly then, his motive in writing the *Tractatus* was an ethical one. These claims, however, sit uneasily with the biographical evidence, such as there is, showing too little awareness of the way in which Wittgenstein's interests changed and his thought developed during the years in which he was working on the book. From 1911 onwards, Wittgenstein worked hard on logic — but a logic not yet fused with ethics and religion. In a letter to Russell dated 22 October 1915, Wittgenstein tells Russell that he is in the process of writing the results of his work down in the form of a treatise, with the intention of publishing it.[101] This, the first version of the *Tractatus*, has not survived. But, had it been published, it would have been, in many ways, similar to the work we now know as the *Tractatus*, but for one very important distinction: "it would have contained almost everything the *Tractatus* now contains — *except* the remarks at the end of the book on ethics, aesthetics, the soul, and the meaning of life."[102] Up until 1915 then, there appears to be little or no indication of an allegedly ethico-religious thrust underlying the book. It was only later that the transformation of Wittgenstein's work took place, extending his subject matter from the foundations of logic to the essence

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[99] Kroß 1993, p. 17.
[100] Kroß 1993, p. 24.
[101] See Monk 1991, p. 133.
[102] Monk 1991, p. 134.

of the world and ethics.[103] This change was, not in the last place, occasioned by Wittgenstein's experiences during the latter years of the war. Monk suggests that, had Wittgenstein spent the entire war behind the lines,

> "the *Tractatus* would have remained what it almost certainly was in its first inception of 1915: a treatise on the nature of logic. The remarks in it about ethics, aesthetics, the soul and the meaning of life have their origin in precisely the 'impulse to philosophical reflection' that Schopenhauer describes, an impulse that has as its stimulus a knowledge of death, suffering and misery."[104]

The war had a profound effect on Wittgenstein, as on so many others. The implications of his technical philosophy for the 'philosophy of life' "were not always apparent to him, though no doubt they were unconsciously part of his motivation."[105] But, in the summer of 1916, they struck him so forcefully that they transformed his life and work.[106]

> "But now, in this the worst summer of danger and defeat, somewhere between the shells and the bullets, he began to feel that the two were connected; that grasping the essence of propositions or of an operation had something to do with adopting the right attitude towards life. No longer does his attitude towards his philosophy merely exhibit the same structure as his attitude towards life: the two are now identified. The critic of Russell is fused in the reader of Dostoevsky."[107]

It would appear, then, that the *Tractatus*' turn toward the mystical occurred after Wittgenstein had already completed the larger part of his logical investigations. This alone should cast some doubt on the more radical claims presented above. But, of course, an historical argument such as this presents no conclusive evidence. After all, there is no reason why a book which began in a certain way cannot develop into something quite different. Proponents of a more radically ethical interpretation might well claim that, even if Wittgenstein himself realised it only at a later date — note his letter to von Ficker — the point of the *Tractatus* is

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[103] See Monk 1991, pp. 130, 140, 145; McGuinness 1990, pp. 204, 245-246; Wittgenstein 1969, p. 79.

[104] Monk 1991, p. 137.

[105] McGuinness 1990, p. 245.

[106] This is evidenced by any serious consideration of Wittgenstein's notebooks. The remarks on ethics, God and the mystical occur only in *one* of the three surviving notebooks, from June 1916 onwards. And, judging by the *Proto-Tractatus*, it is doubtful, to say the least, that the lost notebooks would have contained anything like that. To say, as Clack does, that religious themes *pervade* Wittgenstein's philosophical notebooks (see Clack 1999(a), p. 31) is surely to embellish the facts.

[107] McGuinness 1990, p. 245.

still an ethical one. The genesis of a work need not reflect its systematic value or meaning.

Agreed, there is the letter to von Ficker. And yes, in it Wittgenstein does mention that the point of the *Tractatus* is an ethical one. But we should not forget that when Wittgenstein wrote his letter he was in a desperate state. Not only was his life in turmoil, but his hopes for getting his work published were rapidly vanishing. It had already been rejected by a number of philosophical journals, and Wittgenstein was pinning his hopes on von Ficker's literary journal, *Der Brenner*. Surely it is not unthinkable that Wittgenstein exaggerated slightly, emphasising the ethical dimension of the *Tractatus* in the hope of convincing von Ficker that its message "was, despite appearances, consonant with the aims of *Der Brenner*."[108]

But let us put such speculation aside. The real question is whether the final ethico-religious sections of the *Tractatus* can be said to follow from the logical preliminaries in such a way that they may rightfully be said to be both their climax and realisation. This question has, for good reasons, been answered in the negative by Hacker:

> "It is common to view the *Tractatus* as a complete and wholly integrated work, and hence to think that the so-called 'mystical' parts of the book are a 'culmination of the work reflecting back on everything that went before'. This is, I think, at best misleading, at worst erroneous. It is true that these sections of the *Tractatus* are connected with what went before, although the connection is tenuous. It is also true that they were of great importance to Wittgenstein. It is not obvious, however, that they follow from the earlier sections of the book."[109]

Proponents of the more radically ethical interpretation commonly set great store by a number of features common to the logical and the ethico-religious. First, there are no logical or ethico-religious propositions; in both cases we are dealing with pseudo-propositions. Secondly, both logic and ethics are transcendental. Thirdly, the logical and the ethico-religious are both said to show themselves. These supposedly common features, so it is argued, forge the link between the logical and the ethico-religious, integrating Wittgenstein's thought. On closer examination, though, the connections turn out to be rather weak. Both what is meant by the ineffable as well as how it can be said to show itself are quite dissimilar for the logical and the ethico-religious respectively.

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[108] Monk 1991, p. 178.
[109] Hacker 1986, p. 101.

Although both logical and ethico-religious expressions are said to be pseudo-propositions this fails to bring them any closer together. For ethico-religious pseudo-propositions bear little resemblance to their logical counterparts. The propositions of logic are senseless; consisting of tautologies or contradictions they fail to say anything. Again, categorial necessities cannot be expressed in language because any attempt to do so would involve the use of formal concepts and, hence, fail to accord with the rules of logical syntax. But expressions of value

> "are not tautologies or contradictions, and certainly it is not obvious that ethical predicates are formal concepts. If they were, then it would be clear why putative ethical propositions are pseudo-propositions. But equally, if they were, they would incorporate variables taking a range of objects of a given category as their values. But if ethical predicates are formal concepts, what are their correlative 'material' concepts, i.e. the substitution instances of such variables? No clue is given us as to what these might be."[110]

This brings us to the second point: both logic and ethics are said to be transcendental. Now, as far as logic is concerned, we can understand what Wittgenstein meant. As we have seen, the reason why, in Wittgenstein's view, logical form cannot be expressed *in* language is because it is a necessary *condition of* language. This can only be shown; it cannot be explained because any explanation would, by necessity, already be dependent upon that which it seeks to explain. There is no such thing as a non-logical or illogical language. This is why Wittgenstein can say that language itself prevents every logical mistake: "What makes logic a priori is the *impossibility* of illogical thought."[111] Whether or not we agree with Wittgenstein is another matter. At least we can understand what he means when he says that logic is transcendental.

According to section 6.421 of the *Tractatus*, ethics, too, is transcendental. Here, however, it is far more difficult to discover what Wittgenstein had in mind. It may be that, in calling ethics transcendental, Wittgenstein meant to say no more than that ethics does not treat of the world. In the world there can be only facts, never any value. If so, the transcendentality of the ethico-religious has little in common with that of the logical. Whereas the latter is connected with the *a priori* status of logic, the ineffability of ethics, by contrast, would seem to hang "on nothing more than the non-contingency of the ethical, a point asserted rather than argued."[112]

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[110] Hacker 1986, p. 106.
[111] Wittgenstein 1995, 5.4731; Cf. Wittgenstein 1995, 3.03-3.031.
[112] Hacker 1986, p. 106.

On this reading, there is quite a gap opening up between the logical and the ethico-religious. But perhaps there is more to the transcendentality of ethics than first meets the eye. In his *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, Clack offers us two possible interpretations of the mystical.[113] The first, 'anthropological' interpretation emphasises human experience; our desires, religious impulses, and ways of looking at the world. The second 'transcendental' interpretation, which concerns us here, sees Wittgenstein positing a transcendent, extra-human reality. Wittgenstein, we are told, is "aware of a higher order of realities" and is stressing our desire "to gain communion with these realities".[114] The mystical elements of his philosophy should be seen as "attempts to articulate what lies beyond the world."[115]

It is difficult to see how this should help us. First, within the context of the *Tractatus* it is nonsense to speak of 'a world beyond this world' or 'a higher order of realities'. How might a piece of nonsense explain anything? Rather then clarifying the notion of the mystical, such remarks would seem to be part of the mystical themselves. Secondly, Clack's interpretation neglects to address that which would seem to be the central issue. In calling logic transcendent*al*, rather than transcendent, Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to its *a priori* nature: logic is a *condition of* the world. His notebooks show that this is what he had in mind for ethics as well: "Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic."[116] Even if Clack is right and Wittgenstein did want to posit a higher order of realities, it still remains to be shown in what way this 'higher order reality' constitutes a necessary condition for the 'lower order world'. Wittgenstein gives us no clue as to how this might be done.

So far, our investigation has failed to bridge the gap between the logical and the ethico-religious. A consideration of the final point does little to change matters. For although both the logical and the ethico-religious are said to show themselves, what this amounts to is not at all the same thing. Logical form shows itself in propositions, or their components, regarded as symbols. Logically necessary truths show themselves in the senseless propositions of logic, and categorial necessities, though inexpressible in language, are reflected in the formation rules of language.[117] In what way,

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[113] See Clack 1999(a), p. 36ff.

[114] Clack 1999(a), pp. 39-40.

[115] Clack 1999(a), p. 40.

[116] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 77.

[117] Rush Rhees has also drawn attention to this problem. Neither logical necessity nor absolute value can be expressed, but the former can be shown as the latter cannot. We

by contrast, the ethico-religious shows itself is far from clear. Certainly there is no such thing as 'ethical form' which shows itself in ethical or religious propositions. In fact, there are no such propositions. Unlike the pseudo-propositions of logic, which are senseless, ethico-religious pseudo-propositions are nonsensical. They fail to say anything and Wittgenstein gives us no clue as to what, if anything, they can be said to show.

How then does the ethico-religious show itself? One possible answer is that it shows itself in art and in action. But, even if Wittgenstein did entertain this as a possibility, which does not seem unlikely,[118] it is an answer not found in the *Tractatus*. Here, the best we can do is say that the ethico-religious shows itself as the mystical, which, as we have seen, is best understood as realised in certain experiences or feelings. To partake of the mystical is to acquire the correct view of the world, the feeling of the world as a limited, meaningful whole. The ethico-religious might be said to show itself in one's attitude to the world, in one's life being happy (or unhappy). But, if this is the correct answer, the difference between the ethico-religious and the logical has become all the more pronounced.

At this point, there is one final attempt to reconcile the logical and the ethico-religious we should consider. For although the mystical is commonly associated with the latter exclusively, one might well argue that logical ineffability is as much part of the mystical as ethico-religious ineffability.[119] One might even go further and claim that Wittgenstein's logical investigations have a decidedly moral impact.[120] Even if this view is correct, and it has much to recommend itself, it does little to solve our problem. It would not make the logical and the ethico-religious any more alike. Rather, it would show the mystical to be composed of several elements, which, though all conducive to attaining a correct view of the world, are distinct nonetheless.

It seems we must conclude, then, that the supposedly common features fail to point towards some essential connection between the logical and the ethico-religious.[121] There is a genuine difficulty in reconciling

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may show the necessity of logical principles by writing tautologies and contradictions in the T-F notation. But where judgments of absolute value are concerned, the T-F notation is no help at all. (See Rhees, 1996, p. 95.)

[118] See, for example, Hudson, 1975, pp. 94-104; Clack 1999(a), pp. 36-39.

[119] As does, for example, Barrett. (See Barrett 1991, p. 75ff.)

[120] Which, please note, is not the same as saying that they are premises leading to an ethical conclusion.

[121] Hudson is most explicit when he says that the connection appears to be no more than 'a purely verbal coincidence': "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is simply

the logical and the ethical aspects of the book. This difficulty is not resolved by claiming, as Janik and Toulmin do, that Wittgenstein did no more than use the formal techniques, provided by Russell and Frege, to further his own ethical goals. First, Wittgenstein did not simply borrow these techniques. He criticised and developed them. And, *pace* Kroß, there is certainly a good deal of argument here. More importantly, as we have seen, there is no clear-cut path from the logical considerations to the supposedly ethical conclusion. To imply, as Kroß does, that no such path is needed because, rightly viewed, the logical and the ethical coincide, is equally unsatisfactory. For although Kroß boldly states that the remarks in the *Tractatus* can be taken as variations upon the theme of the ethical, he offers little in the way of support. Nor is it at all obvious to see how such a claim could be supported.

To be sure, there is a connection between the logical and the ethico-religious. By far the larger part of our investigation has sought to show the nature of this connection, affirming the importance of the ethico-religious aspects of the *Tractatus* for an understanding not only of the book itself, but also of its author. Our present argument is certainly not meant to deny this. On the contrary, I agree with Hacker that there can be no doubt that when Wittgenstein compiled the *Tractatus* "it was the very fact that the philosophy of logic which he propounded drew the limits of language at the boundary of all that is 'higher' […] which seemed the main achievement of the book."[122] To fail to realise this, is to fail to appreciate an important aspect of Wittgenstein's earlier thought. Be this as it may, we should not overlook the fact that the latter ethico-religious aphorisms do not flow from the preceding logical doctrines as naturally as Wittgenstein may have wanted them to. The tension between the logical and the mystical remains. It is a tension which Wittgenstein was not able — nor, perhaps, inclined — to resolve. To fail to realise this, is the opposite but equal error.

1.2 A Lecture on Ethics

Wittgenstein returned from the war a changed and troubled man. Like many war veterans before and since, he found it almost impossible to

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no similarity between either what is *meant* by the transcendental, or what is *meant* by its showing itself, on the respective interpretations of it which are to be found in the *Tractatus*." (Hudson 1975, pp. 111, 112.)

[122] Hacker 1986, p. 105.

adjust to peace-time conditions. In a very real sense, there was nothing for him to return to. To take refuge in the comfort and security which his family's wealth could provide was out of the question. Within a month, Wittgenstein had disposed of his entire estate. Nor could he return to philosophy. With the completion of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein believed himself "to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems."[123] Everything he really had to say, he had said, and he no longer felt any strong inner drive towards that sort of activity.[124] Following up on a resolution made a year or so earlier, during his stay as a prisoner of war in Italy, Wittgenstein enrolled at the *Lehrerbildungsanstalt* in Vienna. Autumn 1920 saw him on his way to the small village of Trattenbach, in Lower Austria, where he was to become a schoolmaster.

Wittgenstein entered the teaching profession with "a rather romantic, Tolstoyan conception of what it would be like to live and work among the rural poor."[125] As might be expected, his idealistic intentions were to remain largely unfulfilled. Although he enjoyed better than average success in the classroom, his eccentricity and uncompromising nature did not endear him to the parents of his students. Having taught for several years at three different schools, Wittgenstein gave up teaching in April 1926 and, after spending some time as a gardener at a monastery, returned to Vienna. Here, he was asked by his sister Gretl and Paul Engelmann to become Engelmann's partner in the design and construction of Gretl's new house. Wittgenstein took a great interest in the project — so much so that Engelmann felt that the result was not so much his but Wittgenstein's achievement.[126] Wittgenstein approached his task with the same rigor and austerity he applied to his philosophy.[127] Bernhard Leitner has suggested that Wittgenstein was an architect by virtue of (and not in addition to) his being a philosopher.[128] And Creegan has, somewhat cryptically, remarked that the "connection between ethics, aesthetics, and logic expressed in the *Tractatus* is made manifest in the house."[129]

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[123] Wittgenstein 1995, p. 5. Although the truth of the thoughts communicated in the *Tractatus* seemed, to Wittgenstein, unassailable and definitive, they also proved to be virtually unprintable. It was not until 1921 that the work was published, and only by Russell's intervention.

[124] See Monk 1991, p. 223.

[125] Monk 1991, p. 192.

[126] See Monk 1991, p. 236.

[127] Hermine Wittgenstein referred to the house as "*hausgewordene Logik*". (Quoted in Monk 1991, p. 237.)

[128] See Creegan 1989, p. 15.

[129] Creegan 1989, p. 15.

Round about this time, Wittgenstein once again began to take a more active interest in philosophy. During the years spent as a schoolmaster, he had, by mail, discussed the *Tractatus* with both Russell and Frege, and had met with Frank Ramsey, but little came of this. Wittgenstein was certainly not inspired to start philosophising anew. The late 1920's saw a gradual change — Wittgenstein participated in discussions of his work with Schlick and some carefully chosen members of his Circle, and sought to renew contact with old acquaintances in England, reading and commenting upon a paper by Ramsey. In March 1928, Wittgenstein attended a lecture given by the Dutch mathematician L. E. J. Brouwer. This, in particular, seems to have sparked his philosophical interest. Although he found much to disagree with, it may still have convinced him that the *Tractatus* was after all not the final word on the subject.[130] When, in the autumn of 1928, work on Gretl's house was finished, Wittgenstein felt he might return not only to England, but to philosophy as well. In 1929 he did both.

Wittgenstein arrived in England in January 1929. He was received in Cambridge in a manner both cordial and respectful. After all, unbeknownst to himself, Wittgenstein had become "an almost legendary figure among the Cambridge elite, and the *Tractatus* the centre of fashionable intellectual discussion."[131] His official status was that of an 'Advanced Student' reading for a Ph D, with Ramsey as his supervisor. In June of the same year, Wittgenstein was, in fact, awarded his Ph D for his 'thesis' the *Tractatus*, which was instrumental in his acquiring a grant, allowing him to continue his philosophical research. In November, Wittgenstein was invited by C. K. Ogden, the translator of the *Tractatus*, to deliver a paper to 'The Heretics', one of Cambridge's societies. This lecture, the only popular lecture Wittgenstein was ever to give, is the subject of our investigation for the remainder of this chapter.

1.2.1 Absolute and relative value

Wittgenstein chose to speak on ethics — a topic that perhaps came as a surprise for many. A lecture about logic, Wittgenstein felt, would have required a course of lectures, and not an hour's paper. Another alternative, to give a so-called popular-scientific lecture, was likewise rejected. Such a lecture, Wittgenstein opined, is intended

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[130] See Monk 1991, p. 251.
[131] Monk 1991, p. 256.

"to make you believe that you understand a thing which actually you don't understand, and to gratify what I believe to be one of the lowest desires of modern people, namely the superficial curiosity about the latest discoveries of science."[132]

Instead, Wittgenstein decided to speak about something which he was "keen on communicating" and which is "of general importance".[133] The paper starts off with Moore's definition of ethics as 'the general enquiry into what is good' but immediately goes on to use the term in a somewhat wider sense — which includes "the essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics"[134] — by offering a number of, according to Wittgenstein, more or less synonymous expressions each of which could be substituted for this definition:

"Now instead of saying 'Ethics is the enquiry into what is good' I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living."[135]

The thing about all these expressions is that they can be used in two very different senses: a trivial or *relative* sense, and an ethical or *absolute* sense. Wittgenstein tries to clarify the difference between relative and absolute judgements by means of the following example:

"Supposing that I could play tennis and one of you saw me playing and said 'Well, you play pretty badly' and suppose I answered 'I know, I'm playing badly but I don't want to play any better,' all the other man could say would be 'Ah, then that's all right.' But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said 'You're behaving like a beast' and then I were to say 'I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better,' could he then say 'Ah, then that's all right'? Certainly not; he would say 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better.' Here you have an absolute judgment of value, whereas the first instance was one of a relative judgment."[136]

The essence of the difference is that relative judgements are mere statements of facts — they can be rephrased in such a way that they lose all the appearance of a judgement of value. In a relative sense, the word 'good' or the word 'right' "simply means coming up to a certain

[132] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 4.
[133] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 4.
[134] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 4.
[135] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 5.
[136] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 5.

predetermined standard."[137] The right road is the right road relative to a certain goal, the road that gets me where I want to go. Something is good in a relative sense when it satisfies certain predetermined, contingent criteria. Such expressions as these do not present any difficulties. But in ethics we are concerned with absolute judgements of value. The right road in an absolute sense would be the road "which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going."[138] Similarly, the absolute good would be the one "which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about."[139] Here, problems do arise, for "such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge."[140] Wittgenstein's argument at this point clearly echoes that of the *Tractatus*: in the world there can be no value; propositions can express nothing that is higher.[141] In the *Lecture on Ethics* he argues:

> "Now what I wish to contend is that, although all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of fact, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value. [A]ll the facts […] stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial."[142]

As it was in the *Tractatus*, so it remains; ethics cannot be put into words:

> "Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts."[143]

The fact remains, however, that people are tempted to use such expressions of absolute value — Wittgenstein himself among them. In an attempt to get clear about what one tries to express by doing so, Wittgenstein suggests we might investigate certain situations in which we actually use

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[137] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 5.
[138] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 7.
[139] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 7.
[140] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 7.
[141] See Wittgenstein 1995, 6.4-6.421.
[142] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 6.
[143] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 7. Cf. Wittgenstein 1984, p. 3.: "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural. […] You cannot lead people to what is good; you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts."

these expressions. Three examples are offered (the first two of which we have encountered before): the experience of wondering at the existence of the world, the experience of feeling absolutely safe, and the experience of (absolute) guilt. But, again, the first thing to note is that "the verbal expression we give to these experiences is nonsense!"[144] To say that one wonders at the existence of the world or that one feels absolutely safe is to misuse language. One can only wonder, Wittgenstein argues, at something being the case which one can conceive not to be the case; for example, I might wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to it being clouded. But it makes no sense to wonder at the sky *whatever* it is. Similarly, to be safe means that it is physically impossible that certain things should happen to one, but to say that one is safe *whatever* happens is simply nonsense.

According to Wittgenstein "a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions."[145] It seems as if they are just *similes*; as if, when we use the word 'right' in an absolute, ethical sense, what we mean, though not 'right' in its trivial sense, is something similar. This is true for religious expressions as well. For when we talk about God and when we kneel and pray to Him, "all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win, etc., etc."[146] In fact, the experiences mentioned above are easily transferred to the religious domain:

> "For the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct."[147]

It seems, then, as if in ethical and religious language we are constantly using similes. But, Wittgenstein hastens to add, this does not mean that we are any closer to the possibility of ascribing meaning to them. After all, a simile must be a simile for *something*:

> "[I]f I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as

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[144] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 8.
[145] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 9.
[146] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 9.
[147] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10.

> we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense."[148]

The road setting out from certain experiences which seem to have an intrinsic, absolute value leads nowhere. Or, at least, it does not lead to the expressibility of the ethico-religious. This should have been clear right from the beginning. For, after all, to call these 'experiences' *experiences* is to admit that they are *facts*, that they "have taken place then and there, lasted a certain definite time and consequently are describable."[149] And, bearing in mind that no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgement of absolute value, we are forced to admit it is nonsense to say that they have absolute value. This, says Wittgenstein, is the paradox; "the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value."[150] Any attempt to resolve the paradox is rejected. It is not a matter of yet having to find the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions but, rather, of recognising that their nonsensicality is of their very essence. They are attempts "*to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language."[151]

In the end, then, the *Lecture on Ethics* reiterates the view of the *Tractatus* that any attempt to express the ethico-religious leads only to nonsense. Still, as Monk points out, at the same time it makes clearer the fact that Wittgenstein's attitude to this was radically different from that of a positivist anti-metaphysician.[152] Says Wittgenstein:

> "My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. […] But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it."[153]

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[148] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10.

[149] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10.

[150] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10. There can be little doubt that Wittgenstein was here thinking of Kierkegaard. In conversation with Waismann (December, 1929) he described ethics as the thrust against the limits of language and remarked that "Kierkegaard, too, recognized this thrust and even described it in much the same way (as a thrust against paradox)." (Quoted by Waismann in Waismann 1965, p. 13.)

[151] Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11.

[152] See Monk 1991, p. 277.

[153] Wittgenstein 1965, pp. 11-12.

1.2.2 Talking nonsense

Evidently, come 1929, Wittgenstein's account of the ethico-religious was not too far removed from that offered some ten years earlier. Many of the views expressed so starkly and, perhaps, mystifyingly, in the *Tractatus* reappear somewhat more elaborately in the *Lecture on Ethics*. It may well be, as Monk suggests, that Wittgenstein saw in the *Lecture on Ethics* an opportunity "to try and correct the most prevalent and serious misunderstanding of the *Tractatus*: the idea that it is a work written in a positivist, anti-metaphysical spirit."[154] As such, the lecture sheds some light on some of the more obscure remarks of the *Tractatus* and affirms the importance of its ethico-religious aspects.

There are certainly a fair number of similarities between the *Tractatus* and the *Lecture on Ethics*, the most striking of which are the close connection between ethics, religion and aesthetics and the reaffirmation of the nonsensicality of their expression in language. As we have seen above, in the *Tractatus* the ethical, religious and aesthetical are intertwined to such an extent that to speak of one is, perforce, to speak of the other. In the *Lecture on Ethics* matters are no different. Wittgenstein wastes little time in designating aesthetics as part of his subject matter, and the connection between ethics and religion is established when Wittgenstein shows how his prime examples of ethical experiences can just as easily be described in religious terms. More importantly, ethics and religion are one with regards to their inexpressibility; a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through all ethical and religious expressions. Ethics, understood in this wide sense, is an attempt to go beyond the world, beyond language. As such, it can only lead to nonsense; it can be no science and adds nothing to our knowledge in any sense. These theses can all be found in the *Tractatus*; the *Lecture on Ethics* does nothing to dispute them.

Still, these similarities should not make us overlook the fact that there are differences as well. Above all, the connection of the ethico-religious to the *Tractatus*' doctrine of saying/showing has vanished. Like the *Tractatus*, the *Lecture on Ethics* asserts the inexpressibility of the ethico-religious. But, unlike the *Tractatus*, the ineffable does not emerge as the showable. In the *Lecture on Ethics* there is no talk of the mystical in (or as) which the ineffable shows itself. This brings us to our second point. Both the *Tractatus* and the *Lecture on Ethics* maintain,

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[154] Monk 1991, pp. 276-277.

it is true, that expressions of (absolute) value are nonsensical. But where the former culminates, so to speak, in a vow of silence, in the closing remarks of the *Lecture on Ethics* we find Wittgenstein paying his respects to those seeking to express the inexpressible. What is more, Wittgenstein confesses that he himself yields to the temptation of trying to do so. We may even go further and say that, at this point in his life, Wittgenstein considered it important *not* to remain silent. In conversation with Waismann and Schlick he repeated the general lines of his lecture, affirming the nonsensicality of expressions of value and remarking upon the importance of putting "an end to all the chatter about ethics."[155] Even so, for Wittgenstein it did not follow that one should not oneself thrust against the limits of language, and speak nonsense. Wittgenstein was particularly fond of a passage in St. Augustine's *Confessions* which reads: "Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say."[156] In conversations with Waismann and Schlick, Monk reports, the text was translated, rather freely, as: 'What, you swine, you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter!'[157] One may readily agree with Monk that

> "These free translations, even if they fail to capture Augustine's intended meaning, certainly capture Wittgenstein's view. One should put a stop to the nonsense of chatterboxes, but that does not mean that one should refuse to talk nonsense oneself."[158]

Of course, if one does talk nonsense, one is indeed speaking for oneself. What one has is not some general description or explanation, still less an ethical theory — but, rather, if one may say so, a personal confession. In 1930 Wittgenstein remarked to Waismann:

> "At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential. Here, nothing more can be established, I can only appear as a person speaking for myself. *For me* the theory has no value. A theory gives me nothing."[159]

Perhaps Wittgenstein's tentative approval of speaking nonsense helps explain his interests in the actual circumstances in which one is inclined to use such expressions of absolute value. For this interest points to a final important difference between the *Tractatus* and the *Lecture on*

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[155] Waismann 1965, p. 13.
[156] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992), p. 5.
[157] See Monk 1991, p. 282.
[158] Monk 1991, p. 282.
[159] Waismann 1965, p. 16.

Ethics. Whereas in the former Wittgenstein argues, as it were, from a logical point of view, in the latter *examples* play an important role — and not just an illustrative but, rather, a demonstrative one. They provide a context which is instrumental in making the point Wittgenstein is trying to establish.[160] This attention to the surroundings in which language is being put to use, as well as the use of examples as a methodological tool, constitutes a step away from the philosophy of the *Tractatus*. And a promise for what was yet to come. For precisely these issues would play a crucial role in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The consequences this had for his discussions of religious belief is the topic of the following chapter.

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[160] See Rhees, 1996, p. 97.

2. THE LATER PERIOD

Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as elaborated in the *Philosophical Investigations*, constitutes a decisive break with the central doctrines of the *Tractatus*. Although there are certainly continuities between the earlier and later thought, it is safe to say that, in general, the two philosophies represent fundamentally different philosophical methods and ways of viewing things.[1] Our examination of the *Investigations* in the first part of this chapter will highlight some of these differences. For the purposes of our discussion, however, one crucial difference should be mentioned from the outset. As far as the ethico-religious is concerned, the earlier Wittgenstein argued, we had best remain silent. Nevertheless, although nothing can be said, something can be shown; religion enters into the *Tractatus* through 'the backdoor of the mystical'. By contrast, the later Wittgenstein does not seek to integrate the ethico-religious into his philosophy. That is to say, the *Investigations* does not contain any discussion of religion or religious belief, nor, for that matter, of ethics or aesthetics.[2] Fortunately, there are other sources to which one may turn for an indication of how the later Wittgenstein would have applied his philosophical methods to religious belief, as well as of the results he thought should flow from doing so: the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* and the *Lectures on Religious Belief*. These are discussed in the second and third part of this chapter.

2.1 Philosophical Investigations

Wittgenstein's return to England in 1929 marked the beginning of a prolonged period of philosophical activity at Cambridge. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, Wittgenstein worked, more or less uninterrupted,

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[1] See Hacker 2001, p. 4.

[2] As to religious belief, the most the *Investigations* has to offer is the inclusion of 'praying' in a list of examples meant to demonstrate the multiplicity of possible language-games (see Wittgenstein 1994, I, 23), and the parenthetical remark "Theology as grammar" in paragraph 373. While these remarks are interesting — their relevance is discussed below — they obviously cannot be said to constitute a discussion of the nature of religious belief.

on his philosophy. The early 1930s show him moving away from his earlier thought, dismantling the philosophical vision of the *Tractatus*. Slowly but surely, a new philosophical method, and a new conception of language and the relation between language and reality emerged. Successive efforts to compose a book elaborating his transformed philosophy culminated in the composition of the *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953.[3]

The *Investigations* constitutes the most comprehensive exposition of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Like the *Tractatus*, it was composed by the repeated rephrasing and rearranging of paragraphs from notebooks. Despite the similar method of composition, the *Investigations* stands in stark contrast to its predecessor, both in form and content. The *Tractatus* was possessed by a vision of 'the crystalline purity of logic';[4] a purity reflected in the austere style of the book, in its carefully numbered sequence of aphorisms. The *Investigations*, by contrast, provides a string of paragraphs in a conversational tone, rich in illustrations and metaphor, reflecting Wittgenstein's sharpened awareness of the diversity of our forms of language. Where the *Tractatus* sought to reveal the ineffable essence of reality, the *Investigations* hopes to disentangle the knots in our understanding by having us return to 'the rough ground',[5] to a careful weighing of familiar linguistic facts.

In preparing the *Investigations* for publication, Wittgenstein toyed with the idea of publishing his old thoughts together with the new ones. He was convinced that "the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of [his] old way of thinking."[6] Not as if the *Investigations* were merely a reformulation of the *Tractatus*; a slight adjustment to an otherwise sound philosophy. On the contrary, Wittgenstein remarks that he was forced to recognise grave mistakes in his earlier book.[7] As noted above, this does not mean that there are no continuities between the later and the earlier philosophy. Indeed, it may be argued that many of the fundamental insights that informed the *Tractatus* are retained in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Nevertheless, "the insights that are thus retained undergo transformation, are relocated in the web of our conceptual scheme, and are differently elucidated, and

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[3] For an excellent overview of the transition from *Tractatus* to *Investigations*, see Hacker 2001, pp. 1-33.

[4] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 107.

[5] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 107.

[6] Wittgenstein 1994, Preface, p. viii.

[7] See Wittgenstein 1994, Preface, p. viii.

quite different consequences derive from them."[8] Wittgenstein may well have been right that it is only over and against his earlier 'mistakes' that the merit of his later thought can come to the fore.

In what follows, we discuss some of the main themes and key concepts of the *Philosophical Investigations*, highlighting both divergence from and continuity with Wittgenstein's earlier philosophy. Once again, our aim cannot be to provide a comprehensive analysis and evaluation. Rather, our investigation seeks to provide a rough sketch of Wittgenstein's position, against the background of which his later writings on matters religious can be more fruitfully examined.

2.1.1 The nature of philosophy

Already in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* Wittgenstein sharply distinguishes philosophy from natural science. Philosophy is not some kind of science, distinguished from it merely by, e.g., the generality of its subject matter. Nor should philosophy be regarded as the queen — or, for that matter, the underlabourer — of science, in the sense that it could provide the natural sciences with their foundation or ultimate unification. Truth be told, philosophy is of little practical use to the scientist; it "gives no pictures of reality and can neither confirm nor confute scientific investigations."[9] The *Tractatus*, as we have seen, upholds this distinction between philosophy and natural science. It advocates a radically non-cognitive conception of philosophy, denying that there can be any philosophical propositions, any philosophical knowledge. Rather than an attempt to add to our body of knowledge, philosophy should be an activity of elucidation by means of analysis.

Paragraphs 89 through 133 of the *Philosophical Investigations* provide the most detailed statement of Wittgenstein's later understanding of the nature of philosophy. They show that, despite the transformation his philosophy underwent, in this area at least, Wittgenstein's views remained relatively stable. The non-cognitive conception of philosophy evinced in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* and advocated by the *Tractatus* was certainly modified and deepened, but never abandoned. During the whole of his philosophical career Wittgenstein remained convinced that philosophy does not so much contribute to human knowledge but to human understanding — an understanding of our forms of language. If

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[8] Hacker 2001, p. 4.
[9] Wittgenstein 1969, p. 93.

anything, this conviction is more strongly expressed in his later work than in his earlier.[10]

Philosophical problems, the later Wittgenstein argues, arise out of a misunderstanding of our forms of language. This is not because there is anything wrong with our ordinary, everyday language. The author of the *Investigations* agrees with the author of the *Tractatus* that, from a logical point of view, "every sentence in our language is 'in order as it is'."[11] Language is, nonetheless, deeply deceptive. Important differences in kinds of expression, their role and use, are concealed by superficial similarities of form; different grammatical structures may have the same use whereas, often enough, the same grammatical structure is put to a wholly different use. What confuses us, Wittgenstein argues,

> "is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!"[12]

Unfortunately, rather than looking at the application of our language, at the use made of words, the philosopher is mesmerised by their form.[13] The ensuing confusions may take many shapes and forms. All kinds of similes — or 'pictures' — absorbed into the forms of our language produce false appearances and lead us astray.[14] For example, we mistake certain experiences contingently related to our understanding of expressions with understanding itself and start theorising about the relation of these mental occurrences to the spoken word.[15] Projecting our forms of representation onto reality we start asking such questions as 'What is time *really*?' and 'How can I ever *really* know what someone else's pain is like?'.[16]

Simply put, philosophy's task is not so much to replace imperfect theories of understanding by better ones, nor to attempt to answer such questions but, rather, to make us stop constructing such theories and asking such questions in the first place. This can be achieved be *describing* those parts of language that prove troublesome. Philosophy's task is that

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[10] See Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 468ff.

[11] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 98; cf. Wittgenstein 1995, 5.5563.

[12] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 11.

[13] Cf. Wittgenstein 1999, p. 2: "If I had to say what is the main mistake made by philosophers of the present generation, including Moore, I would say that it is that when language is looked at, what is looked at is a form of words and not the use made of the form of words."

[14] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 112-115.

[15] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 143-155.

[16] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 104.

of obtaining an *Übersicht*, a perspicuous representation, of a particular segment of our language:

> "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. — Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. […] The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things."[17]

Philosophy, then, is essentially descriptive. It aims to describe (parts of) our language in order to command a clear view of the use of words — of the grammar which constitutes their meaning. In this manner it seeks to resolve our philosophical perplexity by dissolving it. Clearly then, it would be misguided to think of philosophy as a kind of science. For one thing, philosophy is not a theoretical enterprise. The correct philosophical method is not hypothetico-deductive but, rather, descriptive. Referring to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says that "It was true that our investigations could not be scientific ones." He continues:

> "And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place."[18]

Philosophical problems are conceptual rather than empirical in nature. They arise out of our existing forms of language. Hence, they can be neither solved nor advanced by new information or scientific discovery, but only "by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them."[19] Thus, whereas science searches for new truths, within philosophy there are no discoveries. Philosophical analysis merely *reminds* us of what we already knew, of the rules by which we proceed in applying language. Philosophy sets to work within the realm of the grammar of our language; there is nothing new to be revealed. For anything that is, in fact, unknown is irrelevant; it cannot play any role in our rule-governed practice of using language. Certainly, we can *invent* new rules, but it makes no sense to speak of *discovering* them:

> "The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. […] Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. — Since everything

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[17] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 122.
[18] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 109.
[19] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 109.

lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for exam-
ple, is of no interest to us. […] The work of the philosopher consists in
assembling reminders for a particular purpose."[20]

Finally, whereas science is progressive, solving old problems and mov-
ing on to new ones, philosophy, by comparison, is static. Of course,
certain philosophical methods can be ruled out as illegitimate; certain
philosophical doctrines can be shown to be nonsense. Philosophical
problems can be (dis)solved. One can call this progress, if one pleases.
But if by progress "we mean the accumulation of *knowledge*, discovery
of new facts and construction of novel theories to explain them, then
there is no progress in philosophy."[21] There is no such thing as philo-
sophical knowledge, there are no philosophical propositions. Philo-
sophical analysis does nothing more than remind us of what we already
knew: the rules of grammar. The only possible philosophical proposi-
tions would be expressions of these rules, for example, 'Every rod has
length', 'Human beings have bodies', 'We know things happened thus
and so because we remember them so occurring', and so on. But this is
news from nowhere; 'a synopsis of trivialities',[22] known long and well
before the philosopher came to the scene. If one were to advance such
propositions as philosophical theses, one would never be able to debate
them; everyone would agree to them.[23] Although cognitive claims may
well be the subject of philosophical investigation, they can never be its
result. In other words, strictly speaking, philosophy is not a cognitive
discipline.

Clearly, Wittgenstein's later philosophy adheres to the radical non-
cognitivism advocated by the *Tractatus*. However, there is a crucial dif-
ference one should not overlook. Although the *Tractatus* deprives phi-
losophy of the possibility of stating essential truths, these very truths
were held to be shown by the well-formed propositions of a language.
To arrive at the correct logical point of view would include apprehension
and appreciation of what cannot be said but shows itself, including the
truths of the ethico-religious. While the *Investigations* agrees that there
is no philosophical knowledge, it also rejects the Tractarian doctrine of

[20] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 109, 126, 127.
[21] Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 477.
[22] Cf. Wittgenstein 1980(a), p. 26: "What we find out in philosophy is trivial; it does
not teach us new facts, only science does that. But the proper synopsis of these trivialities
is enormously difficult, and has immense importance. Philosophy is in fact the synopsis
of trivialities."
[23] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 128; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 599.

'linguistically manifest ineffabilia'.[24] The correct logical point of view is no longer held to include the disclosure of the metaphysically necessary structure of the world.[25] It consists of no more than the clarity that comes from a perspicuous representation of our forms of language. By providing a descriptive account — an *Übersicht* — of (that part of) the language that confuses us, our problems can be dissolved. This is the only real achievement the philosopher may hope for — that of dissolving our philosophical problems, that of curing us of talking nonsense:

> "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. — The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question."[26]

The above remark, which marks the end of the sequence of paragraphs dealing primarily with the nature of philosophy, may make it appear as if philosophy's task were wholly negative. An impression which is only strengthened by the fact that Wittgenstein sometimes compared his philosophical method of clarification to psychoanalysis.[27] Philosophy is a cure for diseases of the understanding. Philosophical problems require, not a resolution, but therapy: "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness."[28]

To be sure, it cannot be denied that the *Investigations* has a destructive aspect. Philosophy, in its therapeutic guise, is concerned with dispelling philosophical illusion, with the dissolution of philosophical confusion. However, the *Investigations* also has a complementary constructive aspect to it. After all, when we *are* cured of a disease, surely this is a positive achievement. That is to say, Wittgenstein's later philosophy is also a quest for a surveyable representation of segments of our language. Such surviews may not contribute to human knowledge. But they do achieve

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[24] See Hacker 2001, p. 29. Monk suggests that this marks the real turning point between Wittgenstein's earlier and later philosophy. The decisive moment came, not when Wittgenstein first started to talk of language-games — a notion which many have taken to be the *sine qua non* of Wittgenstein's later philosophy — but when Wittgenstein "began to take literally the idea of the *Tractatus* that the philosopher has nothing to *say*, but only something to *show*, and applied that idea with complete rigour, abandoning altogether the attempt to say something with 'pseudo-propositions'." (Monk 1991, p. 302.)

[25] Of course, the point is not that one *could* arrive at an understanding of the metaphysically necessary truths about reality, just not by means of a philosophical enquiry. Rather, the notion that there is such metaphysical knowledge is rejected as nonsensical; as a philosophical illusion which the *Investigations* seeks to dispel.

[26] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 133.

[27] See Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 486.

[28] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 255; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 133, 254, 593.

a further understanding — a philosophical understanding "of our forms of representation and their articulations, an overview of the forms of our thought."[29]

2.1.2 Grammar, language-game, form of life

The previous section discussed Wittgenstein's conception of the nature and task of philosophical enquiry. This section seeks to elucidate some of the results of Wittgenstein's descriptive approach by means of an examination of the concepts of grammar, a language-game, and a form of life. Not only do these concepts play a crucial role in the *Investigations*, they have also taken centre stage in discussions and applications of Wittgenstein's writings on religious belief. We head off our investigation by taking a closer look at the notion of *grammar*. Next, we shall ask the question 'What is a *language-game*?', to arrive finally at the concept of a *form of life*. One should bear in mind, however, that these concepts are interconnected, the one presupposing and informing the other; they cannot be strictly separated. Discussing them one after the other is somewhat artificial and will, by necessity, suffer from some repetition.

Grammar

One of the fundamental principles informing Wittgenstein's earlier thought is that language functions as a calculus. Language is a logico-syntactical system of rules which, together with assignments of meaning to the indefinables, determines the meaning of every well-formed sentence of the language. In support of this view, Wittgenstein often drew upon the analogy of language and chess. By means of this analogy many aspects of the rule-bound character of linguistic activity may be revealed. For example, like the rules of chess, the rules of language are, rightly understood, autonomous and arbitrary. Furthermore, the use of a word in an utterance is like the use of a chess piece in a move. Again, the meaning of a word is analogous to the powers of a chess piece. And so on.

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[29] Hacker 2001, p. 31. Hacker also suggests a further sense in which Wittgenstein's later philosophy should be regarded as constructive. Wittgenstein's general concern with the nature of (linguistic) representation led him to investigations into psychological concepts and the logical character of explanations of human action. The results of these enquiries, Hacker argues, have, and have been seen to have, profound implications for the humanities. In this sense, and to this extent, Wittgenstein's endeavours may be seen as a defence of the autonomy of humanistic understanding against the illegitimate encroachment of the natural sciences. (See Hacker 2001, pp. 37-39.)

During the mid-thirties, however, Wittgenstein came first to criticise, and later abandon the calculus model. This is not to say that every feature of the model was jettisoned; certain analogies remain valid. But Wittgenstein started more strongly to emphasise the disanalogies. For one thing, he abandoned the notion, inspired by the calculus model, that behind the motley appearance of language some rigid, precise, and definite order must be hidden. At the same time, chess is joined by less rigid games, such as ring-a-ring o' roses, as an object of comparison with language.

To repeat, not every insight derived from the calculus model of language was abandoned. In particular, Wittgenstein never gave up on the idea that language is rule-guided. To speak a language, so he maintained, is to engage in a rule-guided activity. Using and understanding language involves mastery of techniques concerning the application of rules. As in the calculus model, questions about rules are closely connected to questions about meaning: "there exists a correspondence between the concepts 'rule' and 'meaning'."[30] In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein states that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[31] He presents this view as opposed to what he calls a primitive conception of language in which, in brief, words are treated as standing for properties or objects to which they are correlated by means of ostensive definition. It follows that the meaning of a particular word or expression is the object for which it stands.

Wittgenstein spends considerable time criticising this 'theory of meaning'. He points out, for instance, that certainly not all words are used to signify objects.[32] In fact, people do many different things with language. There are many different types of words, different uses of language. By means of illustration, Wittgenstein employs a number of similes and metaphors. The best known of these is probably that in which he compares words to the tools in a toolbox:

> "Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. — The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects."[33]

It is interesting, Wittgenstein says, to compare the multiplicity of tools in language and of the ways they are used with what logicians have said

[30] Wittgenstein 1997, 62.
[31] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 43.
[32] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 27.
[33] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 11.

about the structure of the language. Including, he adds, the author of the *Tractatus*.[34] In order to grasp the meaning of words, we should not look for objects for which they supposedly stand but instead study the diversity of their functions in language. Assertions about meaning are equivalent to assertions about use; consequently, the meaning of a word can be shown by purely linguistic-analytical investigations into the use of a word.

Having said this, there is of course the question as to what constitutes the use of a word. Clearly, Wittgenstein cannot understand 'the use of a word' as the totality of all uses or modes of use of a word in a language. After all, a word can have several meanings, whereas there can be only one totality of uses. Again, 'use' cannot refer to any specific use of a word. We are continually using words in new combinations, constructing new expressions and propositions with them; the list would be endless. Furthermore, the accidental and false uses of a word must be excluded. When a parrot calls out its name we would certainly hesitate to call this meaningful conversation. Again, when one uses a word falsely, this does not constitute a new meaning of the word. Rather, this (mis)use is meaningless.

The latter point in particular pushes us in the right direction. Wittgenstein's view on meaning and use must be understood *normatively*. Among the myriad of individual uses of a word, a number of *regular* modes of use can be distinguished. There are, in other words, certain *rules* that underlie the various modes of use. In equating meaning and use, Wittgenstein always thinks of the modes of use of a word or sign as laid down by rules.[35] These rules are standards for the correct use of an expression which determine its meaning. Wittgenstein used the term 'grammar' to denote these constitutive rules of language (as well as philosophical investigation or tabulation of these rules). He speaks of the grammar of words, expressions, phrases, propositions, and so forth.[36] To give the meaning of a word or expression is to specify its grammar. The philosopher's main task is to clarify grammar, to provide an *Übersicht*. A task which is by no means easy, for, as noted above, the grammar of a certain expression may be far from perspicuous.

Now, in assessing Wittgenstein's normative view of language, there are a number of misunderstandings which must be avoided. The first has to do with the nature of a rule (*functionality*), the second with what it is

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[34] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 23.
[35] See Specht 1969, p. 33.
[36] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 187, 353, 660, etc.

to know and follow a rule (*practices*), the third with whether the rules of grammar can be justified (*the autonomy of language*).

a) Functionality — Wittgenstein's understanding of rules could be termed a functional one. The logical status of any expression is due, not to its linguistic form, but to the way it is used. Whether a certain sentence expresses a rule depends on its role or function within our linguistic practice. A grammatical proposition — i.e. the expression of a rule — functions as a standard of correctness; it plays an active role in our linguistic practices. That is to say, it is used *normatively*: to explain, justify and criticise uses of words.

Rules, thus understood, do not form some *a priori* realm which is given once and for all and which provides the foundations of our linguistic practices. Rather, it is the other way round: the rules are grounded in our linguistic practices. Again, as their function is the determining factor, rules may take various shapes or forms. The domain of the grammatical comprises not only definitions, but also explanations of meaning, colour-charts and conversion-tables, ostensive definitions, explanations by exemplification, etc.

b) Practices — It might be objected that Wittgenstein goes too far in stressing the importance of rule-following in language. Even in Wittgenstein's very liberal sense, rules are not *that* prominent in our everyday linguistic activities. After all, it is not as if we 'check the rules first' before uttering a sentence. Furthermore, if knowledge of all the rules were required for the ability to speak a language, no-one would be able to speak at all. For there must be an enormous amount of rules; surely no man is able to learn and retain all these. Besides, *when* did we ever learn the rules?

These objections, however, should not bother Wittgenstein to any great extent. He does not insist that rules are essential to learning a language, nor that we actually consult the rules before engaging in conversation. What counts is that our linguistic practices can be characterised as rule-governed. Not because, in fact, we have learnt all the rules and continually consult them, but because we could explain, criticise and justify our use of words by reference to rules,[37] and do so when the occasion demands it. Rules play a role in a host of *practices*: in the

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[37] This is somewhat misleading. In the practice of explaining, criticising, justifying, etc., our use of words we are not 'pointing' to the rules — a turn of phrase which suggests that we might imagine these rules as lying beyond these practices, in some Platonic realm of their own. That is to say, in explaining a word we are not so much *referring* to a rule. Rather, the explanation as such *functions as a rule*.

teaching of a language, in the correction of mistakes, in explaining, crit-
icising, evaluating, and justifying. Whether someone 'knows the rules of
the game' is shown by how he plays the game: by whether he makes the
right moves, by how, when challenged, he justifies his moves, by how
he explains the game to others. In other words, the connection between
rule and use is internal and normative, in that understanding an expres-
sion is manifested both in the ability to correctly explain it (i.e. citing a
rule) and in correctly applying it.

c) The autonomy of language — We have seen how, according to
Wittgenstein, a certain use of words can be justified by reference to cer-
tain grammatical rules. It seems only natural that the next question should
be how these rules themselves can be justified. A tempting answer to this
question, one to which the earlier Wittgenstein was clearly drawn, is that
the rules of our language can be justified by reference to reality: language
mirrors the essence of the world. For example, the rules determining the
meaning of, say, the word 'gold' should be formulated by reference to the
'reality of gold'; they should express the essence of gold. Clearly then,
the more we learn about the nature of reality, the better our rules can be
formulated. Captivated by such a view, philosophers and scientists alike
may commence the search for an ideal language, a language which repre-
sents the structure of reality more accurately than ordinary language can.

The later Wittgenstein rejects any such attempts, arguing incessantly
against the view that language should mirror the essence of the world.
Language is autonomous; our grammar is arbitrary, in this sense that it
does not pay heed to any putative essence or form of reality; it cannot be
said to be (metaphysically) correct or incorrect. If there is to be such a
thing as 'essence', it is expressed by grammar, for it is grammar which
determines "what kind of object something is."[38]

Once again, we must be careful not to misconstrue Wittgenstein's
remarks. Calling language autonomous does not mean that we could not
invent or refine language for a specific purpose. We can, and often we
do.[39] But language as a whole is not an instrument for a particular pur-
pose specifiable outside language, and it is in this sense that language is
autonomous:

> "The rules of grammar may be called "arbitrary", if that is to mean that the
> *aim* of grammar is nothing but that of language."[40]

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[38] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 371, 373.
[39] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 132.
[40] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 497.

Again, to say that our grammar is arbitrary is not to say that it is irrelevant, easily alterable or a matter of individual choice. Quite the contrary, the constitutive rules of language are intimately connected to our lives. Language is embedded in a form of life.[41]

What it does mean is that it makes no sense to suppose that we might justify our grammar by reference to reality. One cannot call a rule 'true' or 'false'; rather, it is the rules which allow us to distinguish between true and false, which show us what this distinction amounts to. The essential structure of reality, so desperately sought after by the metaphysician, is, to Wittgenstein's mind, nothing but a 'shadow' of grammar. Grammar constitutes our 'form of representation', laying down what counts as a description of reality. Thus, from Wittgenstein's later point of view, the Tractarian claim that the world consists of facts, not of things amounts to no more than the grammatical statement that what counts as a description of the world is a list of facts, rather than a list of things.

Language-game

Although the term 'language-game' is introduced at a relatively late time — its first occurrence is in the *Blue Book*, compiled in the early thirties — it has a clear ancestry in Wittgenstein's earlier thought. More specifically, its origins can be traced back to the calculus model of language and the analogy between chess and language. As we have seen, Wittgenstein did not completely abandon these earlier ideas. For one thing, the notion that language is a rule-guided activity remained his for the rest of his life. Furthermore, the analogy between chess and language continued to play an important role in Wittgenstein's later work. Not so much because language is like chess, but, rather, because chess is a game and the analogy between games and language is a very fruitful one. It can exemplify many of the features of language as discussed above. For example, like the rules of language, the rules of a game need not always take the same form. Again, just as applying an expression correctly counts as a criterion for understanding it, so too making the correct moves in a game counts as a criterion for knowing the rules of the game. Further, like the rules of language, the rules of a game are autonomous. It is the rules which decide what is and what is

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[41] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 19, 23. The notion of a form of life is discussed in more detail below.

not a valid move. By changing the rules one will not get nearer to the
'essence' of the game, one will simply end up playing a different game.
Perhaps most importantly, Wittgenstein gave up the idea that there must
be some uniform structure underlying all forms of language. Language
differs from a calculus in that it does not have a uniform and well defined
structure. Such concepts as 'language', 'proposition', 'word', etc. are
vague concepts. They embrace many different phenomena which are held
together by certain analogies and which are not uniformly describable:

> "Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am
> saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes
> us use the same word for all, — but that they are *related* to one another in
> many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these rela-
> tionships, that we call them all 'language'."[42]

Once again, this can be brought out by means of the analogy between
language and games. When one compares a number of games to each
other — for instance: chess, tennis, ring-a-ring o' roses — one will be
hard pressed to find any single feature they all share. Rather, one finds a
"complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing".[43]
These similarities Wittgenstein calls 'family resemblances'[44] and, just
as the variety of games form a family called 'games', so too the variety
of linguistic phenomena may be said to make up one big family called
'language'.

   All this, the realisation of the flaws in the calculus model, together
with the emergence of the game analogy in the broader sense, eventually
led to the development of the concept of a language-game (*Sprachspiel*).
To repeat, the term 'language-game' is first introduced in the *Blue Book*:

> "I shall in future again and again draw your attention to what I shall call
> language-games. These are ways of using signs simpler than those in which
> we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. Language-
> games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use
> of words. The study of language-games is the study of primitive forms of
> language or primitive languages."[45]

At this stage of the development of the notion of a language-game
Wittgenstein seems to suggest an analytic-genetic method. Language-
games are conceived of as the forms of language with which a child

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[42] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 65.
[43] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 66.
[44] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 67.
[45] Wittgenstein 1958, p. 17.

begins to make use of words. By analysing these primitive forms of language we can come to understand our more complex, mature use of language.

Surprisingly, although this method is suggested in the *Blue Book*, it is not employed. And, when something like a 'language-game method' does emerge in Wittgenstein's writings, it is a far cry from that conceived of in the *Blue Book*. The first extended employment of the method can be seen in the *Brown Book* (1934-35) — but at this point the analytic-genetic approach has already been abandoned, and it is no part of the conception of a language-game that it is a form of language with which a child begins to make use of words.[46] Rather, Wittgenstein is busily *inventing* language-games which are to serve as objects of comparison. This is the approach dominating the *Brown Book*, perhaps to the point of tedium.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* the language-game method has fully matured and is employed to gain a clear view of our use of language. By studying "the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application [i.e. language-games] one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words."[47] Clearly, 'language-game' here refers not so much to our actual linguistic practices but to *fictional* practices. Such 'clear and simple language-games' serve as 'objects of comparison'.[48] They are supposed to shed light on our actual use of language by way of bringing into sharp relief some of the latter's features. However, the term 'language-game' is not used solely in this capacity. Wittgenstein also discusses actual linguistic activities in terms of language-games. And at one point he even calls the whole of our language *the* language-game. Let us take a closer look at these various usages.

First, 'language-game' may refer to primitive forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. As we have seen, this is the way in which Wittgenstein first introduced the notion in the *Blue Book*. This use of the term, however, plays no role in the *Philosophical Investigations*. One of the important features of the (imaginary) language-games in the *Investigations* is that we are asked to conceive of them as 'complete', something which cannot be said of the language-games children use in learning language.[49] If we are to solve our philosophical

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[46] Although some *invented* language-games might be; see, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 7.

[47] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 5.

[48] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 130.

[49] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 2, 18.

puzzlement about our language by comparing it to primitive forms of language we should not look towards these child-learning situations. For these are simply *fragments* of a larger whole which is itself the source of our puzzlement. In the *Investigations*, the emphasis rightly shifts to (imaginary) primitive languages and away from how a child learns a part of *our* language.[50]

Secondly, then, 'language-game' refers to these fictional primitive languages. It is very important to realise that these are not intended as 'first approximations' of our actual linguistic practices.[51] They are not meant to capture their reality. Rather, as noted above, they are set up as objects of comparison "which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, *but also of dissimilarities*."[52] These invented language-games may display various features which are given varying prominence, depending upon the philosophical purposes at hand.

Thirdly, 'language-games' may designate fragments of our actual linguistic practices. Now, Wittgenstein maintained that, for the purposes of understanding our own concepts, nothing is more important than the construction of fictitious ones. Nevertheless, after the *Investigations*, he focuses more on our actual linguistic activities, describing them against the background of our non-linguistic practices. In the same vein, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein speaks of our language-games with such words as, for example, 'game', 'thought', 'pain', etc.; as well as of language-games surrounding certain linguistic activities such as, for example, praying, lying, giving orders and obeying them, etc.; and also of more complex activities which are not merely speech-acts, although language does play a role, such as, for example, constructing an object from a description, forming and testing a hypothesis, and so on.

This use of the notion of a language-game — as designating an actual or natural part of our language — plays a fairly prominent role in the *Investigations*. Unfortunately, it is also this use which is most likely to engender misunderstanding. Taking one's cue from Wittgenstein's designation of philosophy as descriptive, one might try to tackle the question as to what, precisely, Wittgenstein would have us describe. It is

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[50] Of course, on occasion Wittgenstein still refers to how a word is learned (see, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 244). But the point of these discussions is not to discover how a child *did in fact learn this word* but, rather, what kind of explanations of its meaning might be given. In this way light can be shed on the role of our expressions involving the word under investigation.

[51] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 130.

[52] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 130, italics added.

tempting to answer this question by invoking the notion of a language-game. In the course of their activities people engage in numerous language-games. Although these language-games are connected in a myriad of ways they are nevertheless distinct units. The best way to think of them is as "partial language systems, functional entities or applicational contexts that constitute part of an organic whole".[53] Our task is to describe these entities so that the rules underlying them — their grammar — can be laid bare.

On such a reading, the notion of a language-game starts to play a theoretical, or even a metaphysical role.[54] Language-games are construed as entities which are, so to speak, already there. They constitute the given, the philosophical data. All that needs to be done is to describe them. Thus, for example, Specht suggests that by creating the concept of a language-game, "Wittgenstein analyses language into definite concrete entities that can be examined in relative isolation."[55] Haikola is even more explicit; in his view a language-game is "to be compared with a *thing*. Things and language-games *exist* and can be *described*."[56]

There can be little doubt that such suggestions misconstrue Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game. Wittgenstein did not coin the term to name certain (metaphysical) entities he had discovered. Language-games are not entities which are given independently and which we can then describe — employing well-known methods — as we would describe objects. It would be better to say that the notions of 'description' and 'language-game' are internally related, i.e., it is by its employment as a tool in the course of a philosophical description that the notion of a language-game gets its sense. Henry Leroy Finch expresses this quite clearly:

> "The shift from *logical pictures* to *language-games* is a shift from the *requirement of final analysis* (logical simplicity) to an *instrument of description*. Ordinary language cannot be analyzed *into* language-games (as it can be analyzed into elementary propositions in the *Tractatus*); it can only be analyzed *by means of* language-games. While elementary propositions were, in a certain sense, *internal* to ordinary language, or presupposed by it, language-games remain *external* to language, merely to be used to see more clearly the way language works."[57]

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[53] Specht 1969, p. 42.
[54] See Creegan 1989, pp. 58ff.
[55] Specht 1969, p. 53.
[56] Haikola 1977, p. 1977, p. 105.
[57] Finch 1971, p. 236.

Language-games have no ontological status; they are not themselves facts to be explained. Rather, they are introduced as a heuristic device, which may be employed pretty much as we choose, to bring out similarities and dissimilarities in the functionings of language to prevent us from being misled by apparent similarities and apparent dissimilarities.[58] Misapprehension of this fact misconstrues Wittgenstein's philosophical method and leads to all sorts of misconceptions. For one thing, it casts doubt on Wittgenstein's designation of his philosophy as descriptive. Specht, for example, argues that the fundamental concepts of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, such as that of a language-game, expose Wittgenstein's commitment to "a whole theory of language […] which goes far beyond what could have been discovered by analytical description."[59] But, as Finch rightly points out, language-games are not part of any theory of language; they are simply one way of looking at language as a phenomenon.[60]

The hypostatization of the concept of a language-game has also led to the demand for a more precise definition which will allow us to formulate criteria of individuation for the diversity of language-games. However, once it is understood that language-games are not distinct entities it should become obvious that such an endeavour is pointless. As an instrument of description, Wittgenstein employs the notion of a language-game at different levels of generality. What counts as the same or a different game depends on the level concerned, and on all levels there will be borderline cases.[61] In other words, the vagueness of the concept is a precondition of its applicability;[62] indeterminacy is an essential part of Wittgenstein's methodology. Creegan eloquently drives the point home when he says that if language-games are to be accepted as "more broadly useful ways of grasping the world and thus have continued life, they cannot be sclerosed into schemata of distinct regions, permanently separated by quasi-physical boundaries."[63]

The relevance of Creegan's point becomes clear when we turn to consider the fourth and final way in which Wittgenstein employs the notion of a language-game: "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'."[64]

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[58] See Finch 1977, p. 73; cf. Baker & Hacker 1980, pp. 97-98.
[59] Specht 1969, pp. 189-190.
[60] See Finch 1977, p. 77.
[61] See Glock 1996, p. 196.
[62] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 65-71.
[63] Creegan 1989, p. 121.
[64] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 7.

In this context Wittgenstein also speaks of 'our language-game' or 'the human language-game'.[65] These remarks are important because they show one point where the analogy between language and a game breaks down. Unlike games, the fragments of our language are interrelated, they form part of an overall system.[66] Our linguistic activities are interwoven with, and embedded in, our non-linguistic practices — our language-game with pain, for example, is interwoven with commiseration, care, and what have you. In this sense, language is less trivial than many games are.[67]

This insight, that our linguistic practices are embedded in a larger whole which encompasses more than language as such, plays an important role in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. With the development of the notion of a language-game, he came to stress that the meaning of a word is dependent upon the larger practice in which it is embedded. Consequently, he began to focus more sharply on the way language is interwoven with non-linguistic practices. Earlier, Wittgenstein had argued that a word has meaning only in the context of a proposition. Later, he wrote that "words have meaning only in the stream of life".[68] Our language-games are embedded in the overall practices of a linguistic community, in a *form of life*:

> "Here the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[69]

The notion of a form of life is an important one. It serves as a reminder of the broader context, 'the stream of life', in which our linguistic practices — or language-games, if one pleases — are embedded. Unfortunately, like that of a language-game, the notion of a form of life has given rise to a multitude of misinterpretations. This is, no doubt, partly due to Wittgenstein's rather nonchalant use of the term. It occurs only about half a dozen times in his published work; an extensive account of its meaning is not provided. Nevertheless, a correct grasp of Wittgenstein's use of the term is crucial to an understanding of his later thought. Let us therefore take a somewhat closer look at it.

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[65] See Wittgenstein 1997, 554-559.

[66] Needless to say, the term 'system' should not be taken in a formal sense.

[67] Although, as Hans-Johann Glock poignantly points out, some games may play a more important role in our lives than certain linguistic flourishes. (See Glock 1996, p. 197.)

[68] Wittgenstein 1982, I, 913. The thought is expressed many times in more or less the same words; see, for example, Wittgenstein 1981, 173: "Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning."

[69] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 23.

Form of life

Wittgenstein is not the first to employ the term 'form of life' (*Lebensform*). Indeed, it has a long history in German philosophy, occurring in the works of Hamann, Herder, Hegel and von Humboldt. It also plays a role in Spengler's *Decline of the West*, which may have influenced Wittgenstein. One would be hard-pressed, however, to assimilate Wittgenstein's use of the term to any of these uses. We shall be better served by looking at Wittgenstein's own remarks on the matter, however sporadic they may be.

As we have seen, in his later work, Wittgenstein argued vehemently against any attempt to justify language by reference to reality. Grammar, the rules that constitute our conceptual scheme, is arbitrary. This does not mean, however, that there are no constraints upon our conceptual scheme. Earlier, Wittgenstein conceived of language as a self-contained, abstract system of rules, a calculus. Later, Wittgenstein came to recognise the importance of the surroundings of language. Language functions within a certain framework; a framework which, rightly understood, conditions the concepts we (can) use. Wittgenstein develops this insight in two directions, the first of which might be termed *contextual*, the second *naturalistic*.

Language functions within a certain context. That is to say, a word has meaning only within a context of application, which is itself embedded in yet a larger whole, a communal form of life. These are part of "the framework on which the workings of our language is based."[70] If communication is to be possible at all, people must agree in the language they use. In order even to *disagree* we need some common ground, against the background of which our disagreement can be set up.[71] This, Wittgenstein hastens to point out, is not so much an "agreement in opinions but in form of life."[72]

Communal agreement, however, does not constitute the whole of the framework conditioning our language. Our concepts rest on some 'very general facts of nature' in that, if these were different from what they happen to be, different concept-formations would become intelligible:

> "If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language-games lose some of their importance, while others become important."[73]

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[70] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 240.
[71] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 240-242, Wittgenstein 1997, 156.
[72] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 241.
[73] Wittgenstein 1997, 63; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 230.

These 'facts' fall roughly into two groups. First, the applicability of our language is dependent upon certain general regularities concerning the world around us. For example, objects do not suddenly vanish or come into existence, change colour or size, etc. If they would, our language-games would be thrown into disarray.[74] Our biological nature, secondly, plays a comparable role. This, too, is part of the framework within which we construct and engage in our language-games. For example, our perceptual capacities place constraints upon the concepts we may usefully employ. If we could not distinguish between different colours, our colour-grammar obviously could not get of the ground. Further, our shared patterns of reaction influence our teaching practices. Ostensive definition, for example, could not play the role it does if human beings looked at the pointing finger (as cats tend to do) instead of in the direction in which it points. Similarly, our psychological concepts presuppose shared 'primitive reactions'. If there were:

> "no characteristic expression of pain, of fear, of joy; if rule became exception and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency — this would make our normal language-games lose their point."[75]

Once again, there are a number of misunderstandings which need to be avoided. We briefly discuss three interrelated topics. The first has to do with Wittgenstein's emphasis on the necessity of agreement in language (*agreement*). The second concerns the relation between language and the so-called 'general facts' which Wittgenstein refers to (*facts of nature*). The last centres around the notion of a form of life (*forms of life*).

a) Agreement — Wittgenstein's emphasis on the importance of people agreeing in the language we use has been the cause of certain misgivings. That people, if communication is to be possible, need to agree about definitions seems natural enough. However, according to Wittgenstein, we need to agree not only in definitions but also in *judgements*.[76] This, as Wittgenstein readily admits, seems to abolish logic. Or it would make the correctness of, say, a particular measurement dependent, not on the facts, but on communal consensus.

Wittgenstein denies that such a conclusion necessarily follows. What counts as a correct application of rules (an accurate measurement) is determined by the rules themselves, which are our standards of correctness. Now, these rules neither specify the results of particular measurements nor

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[74] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 80, 142.
[75] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 142.
[76] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 242.

that there is general agreement in applying them. It is no part of the def-
inition of 'a correct measurement' that it is 'that on which people agree';
by no means is 'logic' abolished. On the other hand, if people did not
generally agree on the results of measurements these rules would lose
their point. A technique which produced no constant results could not
qualify as measuring. That is to say that "what we call 'measuring' is
partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement."[77]
Communal agreement may not be part of our grammar, but it is part of
the framework within which our grammar is applied.

b) Facts of nature — Language is autonomous; grammar is arbitrary.
Our concepts cannot be justified by reference to reality, nor does 'the
way things are' *force* us to adopt any specific set of concepts. Neverthe-
less, as we have seen, the framework surrounding language — certain
very general facts concerning both the world around us as well as our
biological nature — do, as it were, have a say. On several occasions
Wittgenstein draws our attention to this point, stating that his interest
"certainly includes the correspondence between concepts and very gen-
eral facts of nature"[78] and that what he is supplying are "really remarks
on the natural history of human beings."[79] Does this not create a certain
amount of tension; a tension between a view of language as being, on
the one hand, autonomous and yet, on the other hand, conditioned by the
facts of nature? Furthermore, if philosophy must take an active interest
in these general facts of nature, supplying remarks on the natural history
of humankind, then, surely, philosophical investigations cease to be
purely conceptual. Rather, they would be, at least partly, empirical in
nature, thus bringing philosophy closer to the natural sciences than
Wittgenstein seems to allow.

Now, it is true that Wittgenstein does not deny that concept-formation
is causally conditioned. There are, indeed, constraints upon grammar,
just as there are constraints upon games.[80] But we should note that these
constraints are not so much constraints *upon logic* but, rather, constraints
within which we construct our grammar. Our concepts have a use within
language-games which are played within a presupposed framework. If
this framework were to change — if, for example, things continually
changed colour and size — our concepts could be thrown into disarray.
But note, first, that the presupposed regularity of the world is not a

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[77] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 242.
[78] Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 230.
[79] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 415.
[80] For example, we do not play chess with pieces which are too heavy to lift.

component element of our concepts. It is no part of the explanation of 'red' that it 'looks red *under such-and-such conditions*'. These background constancies are "part of the framework within which our language-games are played, not part of the games themselves."[81] Secondly, although a radical change of framework could throw our concepts into confusion, it would not make them *false*. There is no such thing as a true or a false concept; for it is by the grace of the concepts we employ that we can distinguish between truth and falsity in the first place. However, it could make our concepts less practical or even useless. Thirdly, even though the framework places constraints upon our grammar, it does not force our hand. Our present grammatical structures are not inevitable or unavoidable, let alone correct. Vastly different conceptual structures can be and have been erected on the same foundations.[82]

In Wittgenstein's view, then, a recognition of the framework within which our grammar is constructed does nothing to impugn the autonomy or arbitrariness of grammar. Nor does this 'paying attention to the facts' run counter to a determination of philosophical investigations as conceptual in nature. The point of Wittgenstein's observations concerning the framework within which our language operates is to expose various fallacies, such as, for example, the belief that our grammar is, in some deep or metaphysical sense, correct. His purpose is not to investigate empirical hypotheses about concept-formation. That is not a philosophical issue:

> "philosophy investigates grammatical, conceptual structures, not the background preconditions that as a matter of fact make them possible, although the *distinction* between these is of utmost importance. Philosophy is concerned with the grammatical articulations of our concepts, and *that* is not a matter of hypotheses in natural science, but of the description of conventions."[83]

Although it is philosophically important to appreciate the framework within which our language-games function, such an appreciation should be distinguished from philosophical investigation proper which, as the examination of conceptual structures, moves *within* our language-games.

Finally, Wittgenstein's remarks on the natural history of human beings are not so much *biological* but *anthropological* or even *cultural*. For him, the natural history of man is the history of a convention-forming, concept-exercising, language-using animal — a cultural animal.

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[81] Baker & Hacker 1985, p. 229.
[82] For a very illuminating example, see Baker & Hacker 1985, pp. 323-324, where an account is given of the traditional Japanese way of measuring time.
[83] Baker & Hacker 1985, p. 232.

"Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing."[84]

c) Forms of life — Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life has suffered much abuse. Philosophers both friendly and unfriendly to Wittgenstein's work have used the notion in a variety of ways which cannot be justified by reference to Wittgenstein's own remarks on the matter. By no means a thorough investigation of the subject, the following remarks serve merely to call attention to some possible misunderstandings.

Wittgenstein's comments on forms of life have often been assimilated to his remarks about the framework in which our language is employed. A form of life has been taken to be primarily a biological concept, alluding to our common natural reactions. These are the 'facts of human natural history' and, as such, should be accepted as given.[85] There is, consequently, only one *human* form of life, which characterises our species and reflects our nature. We might be able to imagine other forms of life, for example, those of animals. But the concepts, if any, arising out of these must be unintelligible to us. In Wittgenstein's own words, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him".[86]

Now, one might glean some support for this interpretation from Wittgenstein's remark that a form of life is "something animal".[87] One might also refer to the example of a tribe with a very different kind of education from that which human beings receive; their life would run on differently, their concepts would be alien to us.[88] Nevertheless, Baker and Hacker argue convincingly that such an interpretation is "a caricature of Wittgenstein's arguments".[89]

First, what is 'natural' for Wittgenstein is not always biological. Looking in the direction pointed at, crying out in pain, etc., may be biologically natural, but ordering, questioning, recounting, chatting, etc., clearly are not. And, for Wittgenstein, these are as much part of our natural history as eating and drinking. His understanding of the natural history of man is, as noted above, largely cultural. Likewise, the notion of a form of life is predominantly a cultural one. Secondly, far from asserting that other conceptual structures would be unintelligible to us, Wittgenstein argues that a little imagination can render

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[84] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 25.
[85] See Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 226.
[86] Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 223.
[87] Wittgenstein 1997, 359.
[88] See Wittgenstein 1981, 390.
[89] Baker & Hacker 1985, p. 239.

them natural.[90] In fact, a different education might give rise to very different concepts — the point being that it is not so much *nature* but *nurture* which is decisive.

Although there are more reasons to reject the interpretation referred to above,[91] we shall leave it at this. There is not one, unique, human form of life; rather, different epochs, different cultures, have different forms of life:

> "Different educations, interests and concerns, different human relations and relations to nature and the world constitute distinct forms of life. For such different cultures form different conceptual structures, adopt distinctive forms and norms of representation."[92]

This is a point of some importance, for it reminds us that different (human) interests, practical needs, historical practices, etc. — i.e. different forms of life — may lead to distinct conceptual schemes.[93] This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's remarks about framework-conditions. Here, too, different conditions might lead to concepts different from the ones we (now) employ. Nevertheless, forms of life are not *part* of the framework. Rather, they are *conditioned* by it, *grafted onto it* just as grammar is. This may perhaps be illustrated as follows. Two tribes of humans, geographically near, yet historically and culturally distant, may develop quite different conceptual schemes. However, the framework-conditions surrounding the language of tribe A are no different from those surrounding the language of tribe B. The difference between the tribes, Wittgenstein might say, is a difference in forms of life. Nevertheless, these different forms of life are grafted onto the same framework. Now, where lions are concerned, matters are not the same. That we could not understand a lion, even if it should talk, does not mean, as Glock points out, that "we could not understand a lion who utters English sentences like 'I'm not interested in you, I've just had an antelope'."[94] Rather, it means that if lions had a *feline* language, consisting perhaps of growls, roars, etc., we could not understand it. Here, the difference

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[90] See Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 230.

[91] Baker & Hacker show, for instance, that, in unpublished manuscripts, Wittgenstein talks about form*s* of life (plural). Also, they point out that such remarks as "To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein 1994, I, 19) and "speaking a language is part of a form of life" (Wittgenstein 1994, I, 23) have as their remote ancestors the observations 'Imagine a use of language (a culture) in which…' and 'Imagine a language (and that means again a culture) in which…', etc. (See Baker & Hacker 1985, pp. 238-243.)

[92] Baker & Hacker 1985, p. 243.

[93] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 569-570.

[94] Glock 1996, p. 128.

between us and a lion is much greater than that between tribe A and B above. For not only do lions have different interests, concerns, needs, etc. from us but, what is more, lions are biologically different from us, enjoying, for instance, very different perceptual capacities. Not only would we not share the same form of life, but the frameworks onto which our respective forms of life are grafted would differ as well.

One final note may be in order. In our discussion we have suggested, somewhat casually, that a different education, different concerns and interests may culminate in divergent forms of life, that cultural differences may constitute distinct forms of life, or even that one might differentiate between animal and a human forms of life. It might be argued that this only goes to show the need for a more precise definition of the concept than Wittgenstein provides, one which will allow us to formulate criteria of individuation for the diversity of forms of life. That demand, however, is misconceived. As Baker and Hacker point out, in advance of a particular question and a specific context it would be quite pointless to draw hard and fast distinctions between what counts as the same and what as a different form of life. Such distinctions depend upon the purpose and context of different kinds of investigation.[95] 'Forms of life' do not denote static phenomena of fixed scope. Rather, the notion serves to remind us "of the general need for context in our activity of meaning."[96] A reminder which the philosopher would be wise to pay heed to.

2.2 Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough

The previous sections sought to provide a sketch of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Rough as the sketch may be, it should suffice to impress upon us the extent of the differences between Wittgenstein's earlier and later thought. Now, it seems no more than reasonable to assume that the transformation of Wittgenstein's philosophical method should imply a transformation of his philosophical dealings with religion. However, lacking any discussion of religion, the *Investigations* cannot validate this

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[95] See Baker & Hacker 1985, p. 243.

[96] Creegan 1989, p. 60. As is the case with the notion of a language-game, one must take care not to hypostatize the concept of a form of life. "What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could say — *forms of life*." (Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 226.) What 'is given', however, are not certain (metaphysical) entities called 'forms of life' but, rather, common ways of acting, some very general (biological) facts of nature, etc.

assumption. Fortunately, there are other sources to which we may turn. The first of these is the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*.

The *Remarks on Frazer* consists, actually, of two parts. In 1930, Wittgenstein and Drury spent a couple of weeks reading Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Although the work consists of some thirteen volumes, they never got "beyond a little way into the first volume, so frequent were Wittgenstein's interruptions to explain his disagreements with Frazer's approach."[97] Wittgenstein felt that Frazer's account of primitive magical ritual as an early form of science robbed the rituals of their depth, reducing them to something infinitely more shallow. His criticism of Frazer's approach, as well as some notes on what the correct philosophical method should be, can be found in the first part of the *Remarks on Frazer*, which was composed in the summer of 1931.

In 1936, Wittgenstein was given a copy of the abridged edition of *The Golden Bough*, which seems to have inspired him to return to the subject of primitive ritual.[98] This resulted in the second part of the *Remarks on Frazer*, which was composed no earlier than 1936 and possibly as late as 1948 or thereafter.[99] These were only rough notes, and have a smaller scope, dealing exclusively with Frazer's account of the fire-festivals of Europe, particularly the Beltane festival of Scotland. Also, they are far less critical of Frazer; here, there are none of the vicious attacks to be found in the first set of remarks.

In what follows, we deal mainly with the earlier set of remarks. First, we examine Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer's anthropological account. Frazer seeks to explain primitive beliefs and rituals as an early and misguided form of science. Wittgenstein rejects both Frazer's method and its results. Instead of trying to explain primitive ritual, we should strive to present it in a perspicuous way. Not only does this allow us other possibilities of understanding, it also shows primitive behaviour to be less alien to us than we might, at first, have thought.

Before we begin, however, a warning. The *Remarks on Frazer* constitutes Wittgenstein's first more or less extended discussion of religious beliefs and practices which belongs to the later rather than the earlier period. As such, it deserves serious attention.[100] However, in commenting

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[97] Monk 1991, p. 310.

[98] See Clack 1999, p. 12.

[99] See Wittgenstein 1979, Introduction, p. vi.

[100] According to Clack, the *Remarks on Frazer* have been unduly neglected by commentators. This, he suggests, may have much to do with a desire to "Christianize" Wittgenstein. (See Clack 1999, p. 6.)

on these remarks one should bear in mind that they are incomplete and were not intended for publication. Had Wittgenstein spent more time on them, he might well have altered or stricken certain remarks, or expressed them differently. In short, they cannot be taken to represent Wittgenstein's considered opinion. As Hacker puts it: "If one wants to learn from them, they should not be squeezed too hard."[101]

2.2.1 Ritual and explanation

"We must begin with the mistake";[102] let us take a quick glance at Frazer's account of primitive magic and ritual, to see what Wittgenstein is arguing against.[103] In his monumental work, *The Golden Bough*, Frazer presents us with a wealth of material concerning primitive magic and ritual.[104] His aim, however, is not merely presentation but, moreover, explanation. Why is it that people the world over have performed such rites? What is the *rationale* behind magic? Frazer's answer is well known: primitive magic and ritual practices arise as a primitive form of science. Primitive man, finding himself in a hostile world which he can neither understand nor control, turns his hand to 'science' and elaborates a theory to explain the workings of nature: magic is the result. Primitive ritual should be seen as a practical application of this theory of magic. Ritual actions are *instrumental* in nature, attempts at achieving concrete (empirical) goals. Of course, these goals will never be achieved by these means for, sadly, both theory and application are mistaken. Primitive man has only a limited grasp of the facts of nature; ignorant of elementary causal connections, his theorising cannot help but be erroneous.

We have here, in short, three claims central to Frazer's anthropological account. First, magic is an attempt at explaining the workings of nature; it comprises of the savage's opinions on what makes the world go round. Secondly, rituals function as instrumental activities, set to achieve specific goals. Thirdly, magic and ritual are in the nature of vulgar errors. According to Clack, these claims mark Frazer's account as a version of *intellectualism*:

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[101] Hacker 2001, p. 75.

[102] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 1.

[103] Our account of Frazer is more in the nature of a caricature than an exposition of his thought, intended merely as a background for Wittgenstein's remarks. For a more thorough examination and partial defence of Frazer's work in relation to Wittgenstein's remarks, see Clack 1999.

[104] It has been contended, though, that Frazer was not always as true to the evidence as one might hope, and that part of Frazer's data sprang from fancy, rather than from fact. (See Clack 1999, pp. 14-15; Hacker 2001, pp. 86-88.)

"A dominant strand of anthropological thinking about religion, intellectualism contends that magic and religion arise and function as explanations of the world and of natural phenomena. What is essential about religion is its theoretical foundation; ritual actions are therefore secondary, and are practical applications of theory. The function of ritual is instrumental, focused on the achieving of concrete, empirical ends. All of these factors are present within *The Golden Bough* […]."[105]

And all these factors are targets for Wittgenstein's critique. Frazer's fundamental mistake, Wittgenstein suggests, is that in his attempt to understand primitive ritual behaviour, he strives to *explain* it. Where Frazer sees terrible and awe-inspiring ritual practices, he thinks to explain their character in terms of primitive science; where he sees depth in certain practices, he thinks to explain their impressiveness by an historical hypothesis. This, according to Wittgenstein, is misguided:

"Even the idea of trying to explain the practice — say of killing the priest-king — seems to me wrong-headed."[106]

And again:

"I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we *know*, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself."[107]

It is important to note that, despite these remarks, Wittgenstein is not claiming that any attempt at historico-anthropological explanation is misconceived.[108] Rather he is stressing the possibility of, and need for, a different kind of understanding:

"An historical explanation, an explanation as an hypothesis of the development, is only *one* kind of summary of the data — of their synopsis. We can equally well see the data in their relations to one another and make a summary of them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis regarding temporal development."[109]

Wittgenstein remarks that one is tempted to say about the material Frazer has collected that 'all this points to some secret law'.[110] And, he admits, one could present this 'secret law' in an hypothesis of development,

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[105] Clack 1999, p. 11.
[106] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 1.
[107] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 2.
[108] See Hacker 2001, pp. 78ff.
[109] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 8.
[110] See Wittgenstein 1979, p. 8. Wittgenstein is quoting from Goethe's poem 'The Metamorphosis of Plants'; see Hacker 2001, p. 89.

as Frazer does. But one could also do it "just by arranging the factual material so that we can easily pass from one part to another and have a clear view of it — showing it in a 'perspicuous' way."[111] Such a perspicuous representation — '*übersichtlichen Darstellung*' — Wittgenstein insists, is fundamental importance:

> "For us the conception of a perspicuous presentation is fundamental. It indicates the form in which we write of things, the way in which we see things. (A kind of '*Weltanschauung*' that seems to be typical of our time. Spengler.) […] This perspicuous presentation makes possible that understanding which consists just in the fact that we 'see the connections'. Hence the importance of finding *intermediate links*."[112]

As Hacker points out, Wittgenstein is not suggesting that Frazer's data is irrelevant to any hermeneutic purpose. Rather, he is advocating a different principle of ordering from Frazer's developmental one. One that allows us to 'see the connections': showing patterns of affinities and differences of ceremonious expression, revealing analogies and disanalogies in the ritualized response to what primitive man everywhere finds impressive, awesome, or sacred. Such an arrangement of the material "will display the specific ceremonial, ritual physiognomy of a given savage practice against the backcloth of whole families of analogous rituals."[113]

Once this is done, the primitive practices may become less alien to us. Frazer presents his material as strange and terrible, as far removed from our modern-day activities. In Wittgenstein's view, what he fails to realise is that in describing the beliefs of primitive man he has at hand words which are perfectly intelligible to us, such as 'ghost', 'shade', 'soul', etc. These words are still very much alive in our own, civilised

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[111] Wittgenstein 1979, pp. 8-9.

[112] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 9. Here, we encounter for the first time that notion of an *Übersicht* which plays such a crucial role in Wittgenstein's later thought. In due course, this remark became paragraph 122 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, "transformed from a comment on anthropological hermeneutics into one on philosophical method." (Hacker 2001, p. 75.) Which has led Clack to suggest that "Wittgenstein's reading of Frazer led to important insights about what the correct method of philosophy should be." (Clack 1999, p. 54.)

[113] Hacker 2001, p. 90. In this context it is interesting to note that Wittgenstein's notion of an *Übersicht* was, in part, inspired by Paul Ernst. In his *Nachwort* to Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* Ernst emphasises that what we need in order to understand myths and folk-tales is not theoretical explanations but 'poetic understanding'. Wittgenstein's search for understanding by means of an *Übersicht* bears some resemblance to Ernst's poetic understanding. (See Baker & Hacker 1980, pp. 535-536; Clack 1999, pp. 107ff.; Hacker 2001, pp. 90-91.)

vocabulary. Compared with this, Wittgenstein adds, "the fact that we do not believe our soul eats and drinks is a minor detail."[114]

> "And when I read Frazer I keep wanting to say: All these processes, these changes of meaning, — we have them here still in our word-language. If what they call the 'Corn-wolf' is what is hidden in the last sheaf; but also the last sheaf itself and also the man who binds it, we recognize in this a movement of language with which we are perfectly familiar."[115]

Their familiarity, Wittgenstein suggests, shows "our kinship to those savages".[116] A kinship which is not merely expressed in our language, but also in our action. After all, people (still) hold religious beliefs and engage in religious activities — activities not that different from those described by Frazer. Says Wittgenstein:

> "The religious actions or the religious life of the priest-king are not different in kind from any genuinely religious action today, say a confession of sins."[117]

And do we not kiss the pictures of the ones we love and smash those of the one's who have spurned us? Again, such actions are not that far removed from those of Frazer's savage who sticks his knife in an image of his enemy.

Both in language and action, civilised man is more primitive — or primitive man more civilised — than Frazer cares to recognise. Wittgenstein's perspicuous presentation has forged a link between primitive and civilised culture, allowing us, in yet a further sense, to 'see the connections'. Ironically, it is only because there are such connections that we might even entertain such explanations as Frazer offers:

> "And Frazer's explanations would be no explanations at all if finally they did not appeal to an inclination in ourselves."[118]

In the *Investigations* we find the following remark:

> "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something — because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. — And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful."[119]

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[114] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 10.
[115] Wittgenstein 1979, pp. 10-11.
[116] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 10.
[117] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 4.
[118] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 6.
[119] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 129.

In an earlier version of this remark, written in the same period as the
Remarks on Frazer, Wittgenstein adds Frazer's name.[120] What is it that
Frazer fails to recognise? Precisely that which forms the foundation of
his enquiry. At the root of primitive ritual behaviour lies not a primitive
form of science born out of ignorance and fear but simple and familiar
things which, once seen, are most striking and most powerful. Those
things which man, primitive and civilised alike, really knows and finds
interesting:

> "That a man's shadow, which looks like a man, or that his mirror image,
> or that rain, thunderstorms, the phases of the moon, the change of seasons,
> the likenesses and differences of animals to one another and to human
> beings, the phenomena of death, of birth and of sexual life, in short every-
> thing a man perceives year in, year out around him, connected together in
> any variety of ways — that all this should play a part in his thinking (his
> philosophy) and his practices, is obvious, or in other words this is what we
> really know and find interesting."[121]

These phenomena are not impressive due to their inexplicable nature.
On Wittgenstein's view, it is not because primitive man cannot explain
fire or fire's resemblance to the sun that he finds it impressive for no
scientific explanation as such would make it less so. Again, none of
these phenomena is particularly mysterious in itself, though any one of
them can become so to us. It is, Wittgenstein says, "precisely the char-
acteristic feature of the awakening human spirit that a phenomenon
has meaning for it."[122] When asked why this is so, Wittgenstein's only
answer is, simply, "Human life is like that."[123]

> "In other words, one might begin a book on anthropology in this way:
> When we watch the life and behaviour of men all over the earth we see that
> apart from what we might call animal activities, taking food &c., &c., men
> also carry out actions that bear a peculiar character and might be called
> ritualistic.
>   But then it is nonsense if we go on to say that the characteristic feature
> of *these* actions is that they spring from wrong ideas about the physics of
> things. (This is what Frazer does when he says magic is really false physics,
> or as the case may be, false medicine, technology, &c.)"[124]

Here, we already have some indication of Wittgenstein's rejection not
only of the form of Frazer's account, but also of its content. Not only is

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[120] See Wittgenstein 1979, p. 6, editor's note; cf. Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 552.
[121] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 6.
[122] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 7.
[123] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 3.
[124] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 7.

Frazer wrong in trying to explain primitive beliefs and rituals, what is more, his explanations lead to gross misrepresentation. They make the beliefs appear as mistakes, which, to Wittgenstein's mind, is most unsatisfactory. "Was Augustine mistaken, then", he asks, "when he called on God on every page of the *Confessions*?"[125] Wittgenstein replies:

> "Well — one might say — if he was not mistaken, then the Buddhist holyman, or some other, whose religion expresses quite different notions, surely was. But *none* of them was making a mistake except where he was putting forward a theory."[126]

According to Wittgenstein, it is ludicrous to present ritual activities as mere mistakes:

> "If the adoption of a child is carried out by the mother pulling the child from beneath her clothes, then it is crazy to think that there is an *error* in this and that she believes she has borne the child."[127]

If anyone can be said to be in error it is Frazer himself. Actually, Wittgenstein remarks sarcastically, Frazer is much more savage than his savages:

> "for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves."[128]

It is only because Frazer presents magic as a form of science that the rituals may appear to be mistakes. To repeat, the error lies not in the observances themselves, but in Frazer's mode of representation. He sees the rituals as flowing from certain primitive scientific views on the world. In the last analysis, the rituals are, as it were, a matter of *opinion*. This is rejected by Wittgenstein: the characteristic feature of primitive man is precisely that he does not act from opinions he holds about things.[129] Commenting on Frazer's example of the king who must be killed in his prime because, according to the notions of the savages, his soul would

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[125] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 1.
[126] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 1.
[127] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 4.
[128] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 8.
[129] See Wittgenstein 1979, p. 12. According to Clack, here lies the main disagreement between Wittgenstein and Frazer. Frazer is convinced that magic, like all human thought and activity, must, to some degree, correspond to scientific endeavour; magical action "must be arrived at by the same process by which science advances, namely hypothesis and experiment. Thus, for Frazer magic arises through ratiocination." Wittgenstein, on the other hand, "insists that magical practices are of a spontaneous, unratiocinated character". (Clack 1999, p. 134)

not be kept fresh otherwise, Wittgenstein remarks that "where that prac-
tice and these views go together, the practice does not spring from the
view, but both of them are there."[130] Magical beliefs do not arise as
attempts at explaining the world. Rather, as we have seen, they find their
roots in that which, though simple and familiar, is most significant to
man:

> "When Frazer begins by telling the story of the King of the Wood at Nemi,
> he does this in a tone which shows that something strange and terrible is
> happening here. And that is the answer to the question 'why is this happen-
> ing?': Because it is terrible. In other words, what strikes us in this course
> of events as terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, &c., anything but trivial
> and insignificant, *that* is what gave birth to them."[131]

Here, we are not confronted with an opinion but, rather, with a symbol:

> "Put the account of the King of the Wood at Nemi together with the phrase
> 'the majesty of death', and you see that they are one.
>   The life of the priest-king shows what is meant by that phrase.
>   If someone is gripped by the majesty of death, then through such a life
> he can give expression to it. — Of course this is not an explanation: it puts
> one symbol in place of another."[132]

Once this is realised, the possibility of a different understanding of
primitive ritual opens up. For Frazer, as we will recall, the rituals are
instrumental in nature, set to achieve certain empirical goals. Of course,
seeing as the underlying reasoning is faulty, their performance is futile.
This, Wittgenstein concludes, not only presents primitive peoples as
in error but also as quite stupid. But, we are admonished, "it never does
become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity."[133] After
all, primitive man possessed considerable skills:

> "The same savage who, apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks his
> knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts
> his arrow with skill and not in effigy."[134]

If Frazer were correct, "we should expect to see the primitive building in
effigy."[135] He would construct a miniature hut and proceed to wait for a
life-size one to magically appear. But, of course, no such thing happens.

[130] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 2.
[131] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 3.
[132] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 3.
[133] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 1.
[134] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 4.
[135] Clack 1999, p. 62.

In fact, the rituals do not seem to be used in such a way at all. Wittgenstein brings out this point as follows:

> "I read, amongst many similar examples, of a rain-king in Africa to whom the people appeal for rain *when the rainy season comes*. But surely this means that they do not actually think he can make it rain, otherwise they would do it in the dry periods in which the land is "a parched and arid desert". For if we do assume that it was stupidity that once led the people to institute this office of Rain King, still they obviously knew from experience that the rains begin in March, and it would have been the Rain King's duty to perform in other periods of the year. Or again: towards morning, when the sun is about to rise, people celebrate rites of the coming of day, but not at night, for then they simply burn lamps."[136]

If the rites were not used in this way then how are we to understand them? Wittgenstein suggest that they may be seen as "the practice of a highly cultivated gesture-language."[137] The rites should be understood as a form of language or, perhaps better, a symbolism, by means of which what is significant in human life, what is found to be impressive or marvellous, is expressed. They do not *aim* at anything; they are not instrumental but, rather, expressive in nature:

> "Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously *not* based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not *aim* at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied."[138]

Besides emphasising the non-instrumental nature of ritual action, the above remark reminds us of our connection to the primitive rites described by Frazer. The 'gesture-language' that is ritual is with us still, when we kiss the picture of a loved one, when we place flowers on a grave, when we take off our hat on entering a church. Such actions are not based on any opinion, nor do they aim to achieve some empirical goal. Rather, they are symbols expressing our values concerning what is deep and important in our lives:

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[136] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 12.

[137] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 10.

[138] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 4. Wittgenstein has often been interpreted as claiming that all magical ritual is purely expressive. This, as Hacker points out, is patently false: "both because even expressive ritual is ceremonial, rule-governed *ritualization* of expressive impulses, and because much magic is, or is also, instrumental." (Hacker 2001, p. 82.) I agree with Hacker, however, that in emphasising the symbolic character of ritual acts Wittgenstein does not commit himself to the view that such acts are *never*, or not *also*, aimed at achieving certain results. The point is to deny that this must *necessarily* be so in all cases: "We should distinguish between magical operations and those operations which rest on a false, over-simplified notion of things and processes." (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 5)

> "A religious symbol does not rest on any *opinion*.
> And error belongs only with opinion."[139]

The *Remarks on Frazer* invite us to question the central claims of
Frazer's account. Instead of trying to explain primitive beliefs and ritu-
als, Wittgenstein presents us with an *Übersicht*, intended to break the
hold of Frazer's anthropological story. Primitive belief and ritual is
not some early attempt at science and technology, but an expression of
what goes deep in people's lives.[140] Moreover, it is not as primitive as
we might care to believe; the gesture-language of ritual has survived
man's coming of age.

2.2.2 *Possibilities of religious meaning*

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Wittgenstein emphasised that he was trying
to effect a change in style of thought. He saw himself as persuading his
students to exchange one style of thought for another:

> "I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed
> to another. […] How much we are doing is changing the style of thinking
> and how much I'm doing is changing the style of thinking and how much
> I'm doing is persuading people to change their style of thinking."[141]

Wittgenstein, Baker and Hacker suggest, was stressing the importance of
what might be termed 'analogical thinking'.[142] He was urging his students
to forego causal or genetic explanations in favour of a comprehensive
survey of similarities and dissimilarities or, in other words, an *Übersicht*.

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[139] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 3.

[140] In his *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, Clack issues a warning to those seeking
to attribute an expressivist theory to Wittgenstein on the basis of the *Remarks on Frazer*.
What Clack has in mind is the kind of theory which, convinced that religious beliefs have
no cognitive meaning — more often than not identified with meaning as such — presents
religious practices as a means of expressing certain attitudes or feelings. The function of
a religious ceremony is to allow its participants to release certain feelings which can be
identified without reference to the ceremony itself. Or again, religious beliefs are a means
of expressing certain attitudes to life and the world which can be understood without
reference to the beliefs themselves. If this is what is meant by saying that religious beliefs
and practices are expressive in nature, then Clack is quite right in claiming it to be a "fun-
damental error to believe that the *Remarks on Frazer* constitute an expressive theory
of religion." (Clack 1999, p. 36.) An explanation of ritual behaviour in terms of function-
ality, as a means of releasing certain feelings or expressing certain attitudes, is simply a
disguised form of instrumentalism. In Wittgenstein's view, religious beliefs and rituals
are not a *means* of expressing something, rather, they *are* the expression of something.
See also section 2.3.2.

[141] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 28.

[142] See Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 540.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the *Remarks on Frazer* is that, here, the notion of an *Übersicht* is first introduced. In the *Investigations* 'clarification by means of surveyability' serves to displace the philosopher's theoretical explanations of the workings of our language. In the *Remarks on Frazer* we are urged to adopt the same method in relation to religious beliefs and practices. What we are dealing with is 'a highly developed gesture-language'; the clarity we are after will not be achieved by means of an hypothetical explanation but by a survey of the workings of this language. The crucial role such a survey plays in Wittgenstein's understanding of religious practices is attested to by Baker and Hacker:

> "Surveyability, in understanding ritual and religious symbolism, plays a crucial role, in Wittgenstein's view, in producing an understanding of what, at first sight, seems bizarre. Just because ritual is *symbolic*, an *Übersicht* of that 'highly developed gesture-language' can resolve perplexity in a way in which a developmental hypothesis cannot."[143]

As we have seen, Wittgenstein does not repudiate the possibility of developmental hypotheses as such. Causal and genetic explanations have their place, but what is truly perplexing cannot be resolved thus. Such explanations do not bring out either the significance or the depth of religious activities; they simply pass it by.

The rituals "can be 'explained' (made clear) and cannot be explained."[144] That is to say, in giving a descriptive presentation of the rituals, we may come to an understanding that was not ours before. If one is so inclined, one might say that the rituals have thus been explained. But such explanations, if one insists on calling them that, are of a different kind from those offered by Frazer. The latter's rationalistic explanations seek to characterise ritual behaviour as the false or confused result of ignorance. Wittgenstein, by contrast, hopes to bring out the meaning and impressiveness of the rituals by, as it were, putting "one symbol in place of another."[145] In this context, the appeal to 'a tendency in ourselves' is a condition of our finding the symbolism of a given ritual intelligible, and of our being able to grasp the beliefs that are partly constitutive of a rite as reasons for the ritual actions.[146] Of course, there is no guarantee that this will always be possible. As Fergus Kerr puts it: "if we cannot

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[143] Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 540.
[144] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 4.
[145] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 3.
[146] See Hacker 2001, p. 96.

imagine what it is to observe rites, enjoy singing hymns and the like, the nature of religion is bound to remain opaque."[147]

The *Remarks on Frazer* constitutes a break with Wittgenstein's earlier thought on matters religious. By the time he wrote the *Remarks*, Wittgenstein had abandoned most, if not all, of the central doctrines of the *Tractatus*. It should hardly surprise us to see this reflected in his dealings with religious expressions, as, surely, it is. The main concerns of the *Tractatus* and the *Lecture on Ethics* have either disappeared or been transformed. Gone is the insistence on the nonsensicality, and hence ineffability, of expressions of value, gone also the tight connection between ethics, religion and aesthetics. Instead, we find a number of themes which are central to Wittgenstein's later thought. Most important of these is the emphasis on the need for a perspicuous presentation. In giving an *Übersicht*, Wittgenstein allows us to recognise possibilities of meaning where formerly there were none. The *Tractatus*' stringent criteria of meaning have been slackened. Religious expressions are no longer presented as going beyond the boundaries of language. Rather, they constitute a language in their own right; a symbolism which does not seek to describe states of affairs but is expressive in nature.

It might be thought that the differences between the *Remarks on Frazer* and Wittgenstein's earlier remarks on expressions of value can, at least partially, be explained by the fact that, in the *Remarks on Frazer*, Wittgenstein is dealing not with current beliefs and practices but with those from a distant past. But that would be a mistake. As we have seen, Wittgenstein explicitly draws the connections between primitive beliefs and rituals and the ways of the civilised. In both our language and our actions we betray a kinship to primitive man. We (still) use and understand such words as 'soul', 'spirit', 'ghost', etc. They are part of a whole mythology deposited in our language, and fulfil a crucial role in the thought and imagination of our culture.[148] Again, we kiss the pictures of loved ones, only to smash them when the love has died, we take of our hats in church, knock on wood, and so on, and so forth. Furthermore, Wittgenstein sees no real difference between the religious actions in the days of yore and those of today, say, a confession of sins or a baptism.[149]

This opens up the possibility of understanding contemporary (Christian) religious practices along the lines of the primitive rituals. Perhaps they, too, are not based on opinions but are expressive in nature? And again,

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[147] Kerr 1986, p. 183.
[148] See Wittgenstein 1979, p. 10.
[149] Wittgenstein 1979, p. 4.

perhaps here, too, what we need in order to understand is not an explanation but a comprehensive survey of similarities and dissimilarities? It certainly appears that Wittgenstein believed this to be the case. For these ideas return in his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, which were delivered some six years later. They are the topic of the next section.

2.3 Lectures on religious belief

Wittgenstein's lectures of the year 1938-39 are unique among his corpus. Rather than dealing with mathematics or philosophy in general, they are concerned with aesthetics and religious belief. A number of central themes which we already encountered in the *Remarks on Frazer* return in these lectures. First, there is the rejection of a 'scientific method'. Instead of offering a theory or explanation, we must make certain comparisons, group together certain cases.[150] In other words, what is needed is an *Übersicht*, a descriptive account which draws our attention to differences and similarities and allows us to see the connections. Secondly, Wittgenstein emphasises the importance of looking at the application rather than at the form of words. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Wittgenstein stresses that, to get clear about aesthetic expressions, we need to focus not so much on the words themselves but

"on the occasions on which they are said — on the enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place, in which the expression itself has almost a negligible place."[151]

Wittgenstein emphasises the need to provide a context for our activities of meaning. We need "to describe the whole environment"[152] in which the words occur as only one element:

"In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living. We think we have to talk about aesthetic judgements like 'This is beautiful', but we find that if we have to talk about aesthetic judgements we don't find these words at all, but a word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity."[153]

In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein had already propounded similar thoughts concerning religion:

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[150] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 29.
[151] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 2.
[152] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 7; cf. Wittgenstein 1979, p. 16: "The *environment* of a way of acting."
[153] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 11.

> "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 non-sense."[154]

The *Lectures on Religious Belief* may be seen as Wittgenstein's attempt to understand religious expressions as 'part of a religious act'. The following examines the results of this attempt.

In commenting on the *Remarks on Frazer*, we argued, one must exercise some caution. These remarks are incomplete, and were never intended for publication. They cannot be taken to represent Wittgenstein's considered opinion. Where the *Lectures on Religious Belief* is concerned, a similar warning applies. These, too, are incomplete and were never meant to be published. What is more, there are not even written by Wittgenstein. That is to say, what we know about the lectures Wittgenstein delivered in the year 1938-39, including the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, has come to us through the notes taken by his students. Wittgenstein actually tried to prevent this from happening. During one of his lectures he told his students to stop making notes:

> "If you write these spontaneous remarks down, some day someone may publish them as my considered opinions. I don't want that done. For I am talking now freely as my ideas come, but all this will need a lot more thought and better expression."[155]

Evidently, his instructions were ignored; the lecture notes have indeed been published. We have been given fair warning: the notes should not be thought of as Wittgenstein's considered opinion. Still, there is little doubt that they more or less accurately portray his thinking on the matters addressed.[156] As such, they provide an invaluable source of information and should not be ignored.

2.3.1 Judgement Day

In 1930, the BBC broadcast a number of talks on the topic of 'science and religion' which were later published bearing the title *Science and Religion: A Symposium*. One of the participants was a certain Father O'Hara who offered an apologetic aimed at showing that the Christian

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[154] Quoted in Monk 1991, p. 305.
[155] Quoted in Monk 1991, p. 403.
[156] See Clack 1999(a), p. 66.

faith is as soundly based in reason as are science and history. The truths of Christianity, according to O'Hara, are reached by the very same intelligence that is operative in science and with the same certainty. For example, Christianity appeals to the historical records contained in the New Testament and asserts that these are trustworthy, even when judged by the severest scientific criticism.[157]

Wittgenstein must have either heard or read Father O'Hara's contribution, for in his *Lectures on Religious Belief* he launches a brutal attack.[158] Father O'Hara, Wittgenstein remarks, is "one of those people who make it a question of science."[159] He is trying to make the whole business appear to be reasonable, which, to Wittgenstein's mind, is ludicrous.[160] Not only is religious belief not reasonable, it doesn't even pretend to be. After all, "Anyone who reads the Epistles will find it said: not only that it is not reasonable, but that it is folly."[161]

O'Hara assumes that the believer bases his belief on certain historic facts, as narrated in the New Testament. According to Wittgenstein, however, closer examination will reveal that the events told of in the Bible are not treated as are ordinary historic facts:

> "Here we have a belief in historic facts different from a belief in ordinary historic facts. Even, they are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions.
>   Those people who had faith didn't apply the doubt which would ordinarily apply to *any* historical propositions. Especially propositions of a time long past, etc."[162]

In the following remark, written a year before he delivered his lectures, Wittgenstein expresses the same sentiment somewhat more elaborately:

> "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."[163]

The 'history' of the Gospels is to be seized on by the believer. It is to make a difference to his life which no ordinary history could. Even if it

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[157] See Barrett 1991, pp. 188-189.

[158] Wittgenstein deals rather harshly with Father O'Hara. For a more equitable discussion see Barrett 1991, pp. 190-191.

[159] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 57.

[160] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 58.

[161] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 58

[162] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 57.

[163] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 32.

were certain that Biblical history is factually accurate, even if there were
as much evidence as for Napoleon, this would not be enough. For such
indubitability would not suffice to make one change one's whole life.[164]

Here, then, we have people who treat this historical evidence, such
as it is, in an entirely different way. A way which may well strike us as
being unreasonable. After all, they base enormous things on evidence
which taken in one way would seem exceedingly flimsy.[165] And yet,
although it is obvious to Wittgenstein that they are *not reasonable*, he
refuses to call them *unreasonable*. If anyone may be called unreasonable
it is Father O'Hara:

> "I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is reli-
> gious belief, then it's all superstition.
>   But I wouldn't ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evi-
> dence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say:
> this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons."[166]

Where religious beliefs are concerned, evidence is treated in an entirely
different way, reasons look entirely different from normal reasons.[167]
Religious believers, Wittgenstein insists, do not base their beliefs on
weak reasons. Rather, religious beliefs are not reasoned at all:

> "I want to say: they don't treat this as a matter of reasonability. […] You
> could also say that where we are reasonable, they are not reasonable —
> meaning they don't use *reason* here."[168]

These points may be further developed by taking a closer look at
Wittgenstein's prime example of a religious belief, the belief in a Last
Judgement. Here we have such an expression as 'I believe that so and so
will happen' which, according to Wittgenstein, is used quite differently
from the way in which we might use it in science.[169] From a scientific
point of view, it appears to be a forecast, referring to some future event
of great consequence. Once again, we might assume that the believer has
sufficient reason to believe that such a thing will happen, that he is privy
to some kind of evidence. Wittgenstein, however, is adamant that this is

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[164] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 57.
[165] See Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 57-58.
[166] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 59.
[167] See Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 56, 57.
[168] Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 58, 59.
[169] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 57. Note that the term 'science' should not be taken too
strictly here. Wittgenstein does not seem to be referring to scientific theory or experiment
but rather to simple everyday empirical or matter of fact propositions, such as 'I believe
it will rain tomorrow'.

not so. Quite the contrary; if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business:

> "Suppose, for instance, we knew people who foresaw the future; make forecasts for years and years ahead; and they described some sort of Judgement Day. Queerly enough, even if there were such a thing, and even if it were more convincing than I have described, belief in this happening wouldn't be at all a religious belief."[170]

True, the believer will probably want to say that he has his reasons, maybe even that he has proof. And there will be cases where we can only conclude he reasons wrongly. That is to say, he reasons in a way similar to us, producing evidence, weighing the facts, etc., and makes something corresponding to our blunders. No doubt, for Wittgenstein, Father O'Hara serves as an example of such a case. Here, Wittgenstein would say, the believer bases his belief on weak reasons; the evidence is simply insufficient. On the other hand, there are cases where the believer seems to be engaged in an altogether different game. Evidence is treated in an entirely different way, reasons look entirely different from normal reasons We are inclined to say that the believer does not reason at all, or in a very different way. Here, it is more difficult to decide whether or not a blunder has been committed. For example, someone has a dream of the Last Judgement and says that, now, he knows what it will be like. Surely, this would not be merely poor evidence, it would be more than ridiculous:

> "If you compare it with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can't credit that anyone would soberly argue: 'Well, I had this dream… therefore…Last Judgement'. You might say: 'For a blunder, that's too big.'"[171]

As soon as we realise that what is presented is 'too big to be a blunder' — not just a bit but altogether absurd — we might be inclined to start looking for an entirely different interpretation. If so, what we need to look at is not the expression of the belief as such. As we have seen, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein argues that, in order to get clear about aesthetic words, we should not so much focus on such judgements as 'This is beautiful' but on the complicated situations in which these expressions may have but a negligible place. The same holds true for religious beliefs:

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[170] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 56.
[171] Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 61-62.

"There are, for instance, these entirely different ways of thinking first of all
— which needn't be expressed by one person saying one thing, another
person another thing.

   What we call believing in a Judgement Day or not believing in a Judge-
ment Day — The expression of belief may play an absolutely minor
role."[172]

We should not focus on the form of the words but on the use to which
they are put. We have to look and see at what is *done* with them, what
follows from them, under what circumstances they are employed, what
difference they make in a person's life, and so on.[173] Once this is done,
a totally different picture may emerge. The belief in a Last Judgement is
not a reasoned belief; there is no appeal to ordinary grounds for belief.
What the believer has is not proof that there will be such a thing as the
Last Judgement but, rather, an unshakeable belief which will show in the
way it regulates for all in his life:

"This is a very much stronger fact — foregoing pleasures, always appealing
to this picture. This in one sense must be called the firmest of all beliefs,
because the man risks things on account of it which he would not do on
things which are by far better established for him."[174]

The firmness, or unshakeability, of the belief lies not in the amount of
evidence which may be garnered in support of it but in the role it plays
in the life of the believer as a guidance for his life; whenever he does
anything, this is before his mind:[175]

"Here believing obviously plays much more this role: suppose we said
that a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or
I always think of it. Here, an enormous difference would be between those
people for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others
who just didn't use it at all."[176]

There would be an enormous difference, indeed. Wittgenstein offers the
following example by means of clarification:

"Suppose someone were a believer and said: 'I believe in a Last Judgement,'
and I said: 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly.' You would say that there is a
enormous gulf between us. If he said 'There is a German aeroplane overhead,'
and I said 'Possibly I'm not so sure,' you'd say we were fairly near."[177]

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[172] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 55.
[173] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 62; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 66, 340; Wittgenstein 1984,
p. 85.
[174] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 54.
[175] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 53.
[176] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 56.
[177] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 53.

In the case of the aeroplane, the dispute is about a matter of fact. Both disputants would agree as to what would count as a German aeroplane and what not, and how one should decide the matter. By contrast, in the case of believing in a Last Judgement, what is in question is not a matter of fact but a whole way of thinking. The disputants would not be disagreeing as much as talking at cross-purposes:

> "Those who said: 'Well, possibly it may happen and possibly not' would be on an entirely different plane.
>
> This is partly why one would be reluctant to say: 'These people rigorously hold the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgement'. 'Opinion' sounds queer.
>
> It is for this reason that different words are used: 'dogma', 'faith'."[178]

Wittgenstein's analysis, then, gives us cause to reconsider the nature of the disagreement between the believer and the unbeliever. We are, perhaps naturally, inclined to think that they contradict each other, the one claiming the opposite of the other. But, in Wittgenstein's view, this is nonsense:

> "If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgement Day, in the sense in which religious people have belief in it, I wouldn't say: 'No. I don't believe there will be such a thing.' It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this.
>
> And then I give an explanation: 'I don't believe in…', but then the religious person never believes what I describe.
>
> I can't say. I can't contradict that person."[179]

If the believer were doing no more than expressing an opinion or offering an (im)probable hypothesis, we "would say they reason wrongly, meaning *they contradict us*."[180] But, if Wittgenstein is right, the believer may be engaged in an altogether different game. Rather than venting his opinions, he is expressing his faith. We are not dealing with a 'rigorously held view' but with an 'unshakeable belief'. Here, there can be no question of the believer and the unbeliever contradicting each other.

Does this mean that it was all just show? That the believer and the unbeliever have nothing much to disagree about? Obviously not. The point is not that there is no disagreement between them, but that the nature of the disagreement is not that of merely a factual dispute. Rather, it pertains to a distinct way of life. The believer thinks and acts differently, saying different things to himself, entertaining different pictures.

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[178] Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 57-57.
[179] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 55.
[180] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 58. Italics added.

Someone might, for example, think of his behaviour and what happens to him in terms of retribution. Whenever he is ashamed of himself he thinks 'This will be punished', when he is ill he takes it as a punishment, and so on.[181] Such a person thinks entirely different from someone who has made no place for the notion of retribution in relation to his life. Yet, Wittgenstein remarks, "so far, you can't say that they believe different things."[182] As far as matters of fact are concerned, there need be no difference of opinion. Rather, the unbeliever does not, as it were, connect the dots in the same way, perhaps not even aware that there are any dots to be connected. Notions of punishment or retribution play no, or an altogether different, role in his life; he entertains no such, or different, pictures:

> "It is this way: if someone said: "Wittgenstein, you don't take illness as punishment, so what do you believe?" — I'd say: "I don't have any thoughts of punishment."[183]

The differences between the believer and the unbeliever are real enough. But they need not show up in anything which is said. One is almost inclined to say that here, nothing can be said, yet everything can be shown. The difference religious beliefs make shows itself in the life of the faithful who no longer rest their weight on the earth but suspend themselves from heaven. And then *everything* will be different, the world has become a wholly different one.[184]

2.3.2 An expressivist account of religious language?

Many have felt that Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religious Belief* are reductionist in nature, reducing religious belief to the mere expression of a certain attitude to life. Although it cannot be denied that certain passages tend to support such a conclusion, I hope to show that there is good reason to reject it.

First, we should remind ourselves that Wittgenstein was not unaware that his later philosophy might give a reductionist impression. In the *Investigations* he anticipates such a reaction. Discussing the nature of sensations, in particular the feeling of pain, Wittgenstein's interlocutor complains that Wittgenstein reduces feeling pain to displaying pain-behaviour.

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[181] See Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 54-55.
[182] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 55.
[183] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 55.
[184] See Wittgenstein 1984, p. 33; cf. Wittgenstein 1969, p. 73.

His analysis makes it appear that the sensation itself, the pain we have, is 'a nothing'. Wittgenstein replies:

> "Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here."[185]

Wittgenstein is not denying that there is a difference between pain-behaviour with and without pain. He is, rather, insisting that the grammar of 'pain' is not the grammar of objects.

Turning to Wittgenstein's treatment of 'God', one might say it is analogous to the *Investigations*' treatment of 'pain'. Is not God made out to be a nothing? Here, too, Wittgenstein might well reply that He is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either. Once again, Wittgenstein is rejecting the grammar which tries to force itself on us: "Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)."[186] The grammar of 'God', Wittgenstein suggest, is not the grammar of objects: "If the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of."[187] Do these remarks show that Wittgenstein is committed to an expressivist account of religious language?

In short, the expressivist argument runs something like this.[188] True, talk of God does not refer to some kind of entity or person; it cannot be construed as factual. Our 'ordinary' beliefs get their sense precisely by virtue of their picturing possible or actual facts. In other words, the belief 'that *p*' has a descriptive or cognitive element; consequently, it may be true or false. Religious beliefs, by contrast, lack this cognitive or descriptive function; they are neither true nor false. But that does not mean they are nonsensical. Their significance is to be found in the way they express certain desires, fears, intentions, attitudes to life as a whole, and so on.[189] This kind of argument has a respectable history, not only in philososphy of religion, but in moral philosophy as well. A. J. Ayer, for

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[185] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 304.

[186] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 373.

[187] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 59.

[188] The term 'expressivism' is used rather loosely. For a brief, but helpful, summary which does justice to distinct forms of expressivist accounts of religious belief, see Clack 1999, pp. 39-44.

[189] Of course, whether or not this amounts to a form of reductionism may be disputed. R. B. Braithwaite's well-known article *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* presents such an account, not as reductive, but as an accurate rendering of the nature of religious belief. (See Braithwaite 1971.)

example, agrees that statements of value fail the test of cognitive signif-icance.[190] Although Ayer admits that they are, thus, factually empty, he refuses to condemn them as nonsensical. Their significance lies in their emotive or expressive force. Similarly, R. B. Braithwaite rules out the possibility of religious expressions having a factual or cognitive mean-ing.[191] Nevertheless, rather than dispatching them as nonsensical, he locates their significance in their expressing a commitment to a way of life. Ayer's 'emotive theory of values' and Braithwaite's 'empiricist's view of religious belief' provide classic examples of expressivist accounts of moral and religious beliefs, respectively.

Expressivist accounts of religious belief trade on a uniform under-standing of description and reference, providing a single, straightforward criterion of what is to count as meaningful. Religious beliefs, having no descriptive content, fail the test. If they are to be something other than nonsense, their content must be non-descriptive. We have observed how the *Tractatus* may, to a certain extent, be said to advocate such a theory of meaning. As such, it played no small part in opening up the possi-bility of a non-descriptive or non-cognitive understanding of religious belief. However, we have also observed how Wittgenstein's later work repudiates many of the central assumptions underlying the Tractarian account. As Clack points out,

> "[Wittgenstein's] relation to the kind of linguistic theories which give birth to the cognitive/non-cognitive distinction is thus quite paradoxical: he is both father-creator and enemy. Consequently, one can use the later work of Wittgenstein in order to criticize those trends in philosophy from which the idea of non-cognitivism springs."[192]

From Wittgenstein's later point of view, there can be no single criterion of what is to count as referential or descriptive and, hence, as meaningful. What is called a description may denote "a great variety of things".[193] Whether or not a given sentence is descriptive really all depends upon the circumstances in which it is used. In short, Wittgenstein's later philoso-phy undermines the philosophical foundations on which the expressivist account of religious belief rests. For Wittgenstein, the hard dichotomy between the descriptive and the non-descriptive, between the cognitive and the non-cognitive, etc., are redundant.[194]

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[190] See Ayer 1971.
[191] See Braithwaite 1971.
[192] Clack 1999, pp. 44-45.
[193] Wittgenstein 1980, 981; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 24, 291.
[194] See Clack 1999, p. 50.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy leaves little room for an expressivist understanding of religious belief. Furthermore, his writings on religious belief provide textual evidence to support a non-expressivist reading. Far from endorsing the non-descriptive nature of religious beliefs, Wittgenstein has no qualms in calling them descriptive:

> "Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For 'consciousness of sin' is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan for instance) are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it."[195]

Finally, the *Lectures on Religious Belief* give evidence to the fact that Wittgenstein was both aware of and averse to the possibility of an expressivist understanding of his remarks. One of his students explicitly raises the issue. Discussing the example of someone, convinced he may never see his friend again, telling him, 'We might see one another after death', Lewy asks whether this is not simply the expression of a certain attitude. Wittgenstein emphatically rejects Lewy's suggestion:

> "I would say 'No, it isn't the same as saying 'I'm very fond of you'' — and it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?" […] 'He could just as well have said so and so' — this [remark] is foreshadowed by the word 'attitude'. He couldn't just as well have said something else."[196]

Of certain pictures, Wittgenstein argues, we say that they might as well be replaced by another. But this is not always the case: "The whole *weight* may be in the picture."[197]

2.3.3 A passionate commitment

The *Lectures on Religious Belief* provide "a paradigm case of [Wittgenstein's] late method of philosophising."[198] Wittgenstein's approach

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[195] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 28.
[196] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 71.
[197] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 72.
[198] Hudson 1975, p. 152. This judgement has been called into question by Haikola. What Wittgenstein says in the *Lectures on Religious Belief*, he argues, "can't in an obvious way be related to the concept of a language-game or the language-game theory." (Haikola 1977, p. 10.) In Haikola's view, the notion of a language-game is the crucial ingredient of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. To apply Wittgenstein's later philosophical method, i.e. the 'language-game theory', to religious belief, one should first locate and subsequently describe religious language-games. On such a view, the absence of

throughout the *Lectures* is practical and descriptive. Renouncing some general definition of 'religion', he sets out instead from a number of examples of expressions of religious belief. By means of a careful scrutiny of such expressions — drawing connections and pointing out similarities and dissimilarities — Wittgenstein seeks to understand their possible use or meaning. In so doing, a number of interlocked themes emerge. Consonant with the *Remarks on Frazer*, Wittgenstein refuses to treat of religious beliefs as hypotheses or opinions. The scientific model distorts the peculiar logic of religious beliefs, masking their unshakeable or absolute character. Laying bare the grammar of the beliefs reveals the regulatory role they play in the lives of the faithful. They are like 'pictures' which are constantly in the foreground, regulating the believer's thought and action. This may also shed some light on the nature of the disagreement between the believer and the unbeliever. Rather than contradicting each other, they may be seen to be displaying different styles of thinking. As Wittgenstein later put it:

> "It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation."[199]

In the *Tractatus*, expressions of religious belief are condemned to the domain of the ineffable. Propositions can express nothing that is higher. They can only picture facts, say what is or is not the case. Expressions of value, be it ethical, religious or aesthetic, are pseudo-propositions. As attempts to express what by its very nature is inexpressible, they can but fail. Although something can be shown, nothing can be said. It should be clear that by the time Wittgenstein gave his lectures on religious belief, he no longer adhered to these conclusions. Certainly, the *Lectures* maintain a distinction between expressions of religious belief and statements

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any explicit reference to religious language-games clearly constitutes a problem. As we have seen, however, the real core of Wittgenstein's late philosophy, if such a thing there must be, lies not in the concept of a language-game, conceived of as a systematic pseudo-metaphysical category, but in a far less systematic, therapeutic approach aimed at attaining clarity. The emphasis on the actual use of language, the careful examination of one or two examples of expressions of religious beliefs, the attention given to the role these beliefs play in the 'weave of our life', the grouping together of different cases, the highlighting of similarities and dissimilarities; *these* features mark the *Lectures on Religious Belief* as a prime example of Wittgenstein's late method of philosophising. The fact that the notion of a language-game is not explicitly referred to is of little or no consequence.

[199] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 64; the remark dates from 1947.

of fact, and the former's significance is still in question. Wittgenstein's criticism of Father O'Hara shows that although Wittgenstein's no longer enjoins the faithful to silence, he still urges them to choose their words with care. But there is no reference to the ineffable or mystical; no distinction between 'saying' and 'showing'; no talk of pseudo-propositions; and so on. Rather than discarding religious language as nonsensical, Wittgenstein seeks to explore its grammar, hoping to clarify what meaning it may have.

Not everyone has welcomed these clarifications. Many have felt that Wittgenstein presents a reductionist account of religious belief. It cannot be denied that certain of Wittgenstein's remarks tend to support such an interpretation. On the other hand, we have seen that there is good reason to reject it. Perhaps we should say that Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief are too fragmentary to draw a definitive conclusion. As we shall see in the following chapters, much depends upon how one develops Wittgenstein's insights, upon the manner in which draws together the various observations and strands of argument Wittgenstein has left us.

CONCLUSION:
WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The previous two chapters focused on Wittgenstein's philosophy, in particular his remarks upon religious belief. Although our aim was, and is, not biographical, we found that recourse to a certain amount of biographical material proved an indispensable aid to interpreting the mystical sections of the *Tractatus*. Though certainly not irrelevant, such biographical references are less germane to an interpretation of Wittgenstein's later dealings with matters religious. I do not wish to deny that there is still a personal dimension to remarks on religious belief from the later period. Certain passages in *Culture and Value* "appear very much to be confessions of faith, or, at the very least, *gestures* in the direction of religious belief"[1] rather than examples of detached philosophical analysis. But such passages are few and far between. On the whole, Wittgenstein takes up a more distant position, drawing a far stronger distinction between his philosophical and his personal views on religious belief than evinced by his earlier work. The remarks are less personal, less in the nature of a prayer, and more of a contemplative bent; at times even displaying a hint of criticism.[2] Where the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and the *Lecture on Ethics* was, one might say, speaking for himself, the Wittgenstein of the *Remarks on Frazer* and the *Lectures on Religious Belief* is content to let the religious beliefs and practices speak for themselves.

   Part of the reason may be that Wittgenstein's new philosophy allowed him little opportunity to speak in the first person. Janik and Toulmin seem to suggest as much. They argue that the *Tractatus*, by effectively thrusting the whole of ethics and religion outside the boundaries of the sayable, underpinned Wittgenstein's original Kierkegaardian attitudes. But, from 1930 on, things had changed drastically:

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[1] Clack 1999(a), p. 52.

[2] Anja Weiberg, among others, has drawn attention to the fact that, from 1937 onward, there is something of an edge to Wittgenstein's discussions of religious beliefs: "Ist der Verfasser des *Tractatus* noch durchaus dem Christentum zuzuordnen, fällt diese Zuordnung später, ab circa 1937, nicht mehr so leicht. Wittgenstein beschränkt sich […] nicht mehr nur auf Anrufungen Gottes und die Feststellung seiner eigenen Unvollkommenheit und Unanständigkeit, sondern reflektiert, durchaus kritisch, verschiedene Aspekte der Christlichen Religion." (Weiberg 1997, p. 62.)

> "we find [Wittgenstein] still adhering to the same ethical standpoint, yet in a new philosophical context; and it is not clear that his new account of *language* continued to provide any longer the kind of support for his *ethical* point of view that the *Tractatus* position had given. […] At the very least, he is no longer in a position to underpin his own individualistic view of ethics by appeal to a sharp dichotomy between the expressible and the transcendental."[3]

It would seem difficult to pin down an ethical standpoint which remained the same throughout Wittgenstein's life. Not seldom a radical shift of philosophical perspective carries a change of ethical or religious understanding in its wake; more often than not, these things go hand in hand. Whatever of that, Janik and Toulmin are certainly right to emphasise the change in philosophical perspective: Wittgenstein's new account of *language*.

The author of the *Tractatus* presents an austere view of human language, even a repressive one, for it denies the intelligibility of much of what we say, including that of our expressions of religious belief. Although religious truth may show itself, as the mystical, any attempt to express what is good and godly will unavoidably transgress the bounds of sense, misuse language and produce nonsense. Of course, the doctrine that religious truths are ineffable has an important place in the history of religious thought. And perhaps we should say that the greatest achievement of Wittgenstein's early philosophy, so far as the philosophy of religion is concerned, is to have incorporated that doctrine into a comprehensive theory of language.[4]

In the early 1930s, however, the Tractarian theory of language began to crumble. Wittgenstein's philosophy was radically transformed, and it was this transformation which both necessitated and facilitated a corresponding transformation of his view of religion. To be sure, Wittgenstein maintains that the language used to express religious beliefs is quite unlike the language used to state matters of fact. But this no longer entails that it is, therefore, a misuse of language. To insist that religious expressions must be nonsensical is to think that the distinction between sense and nonsense is somehow given prior to our actual linguistic activities. But what makes sense is not prior to our use of language but shown in it: *"Practice* gives words their sense."[5] Thus, there is nothing ineffable about religious belief; a proper understanding of religious utterances

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[3] Janik & Toulmin 1973, pp. 233, 234.
[4] See Hyman 2001, p. 4.
[5] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 85.

requires an apprehension of their role within the distinctive form of life or culture to which they belong.[6]

'I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.'[7] We began our investigation by quoting the first half of that remark. But it is more likely the latter half which may have led commentators to insist that a closer scrutiny of Wittgenstein's writings on religious belief conceal a consistent and coherent philosophy of religion, or even that Wittgenstein's writings are fundamentally religious as they stand. By contrast, we have advocated a somewhat more moderate appreciation of Wittgenstein's thoughts on religion. There can be no doubt that questions concerning ethics, aesthetics and religious belief played an important role for Wittgenstein. It would be going too far, however, to claim that such questions lie at the very centre of his philosophy. Furthermore, the 'answers' Wittgenstein presents are not always as clear or as compelling as one might like them to be. One should not lose sight of the fact that Wittgenstein dealt with religion and religious belief in a piecemeal, one might almost say, haphazard way. If the student of philosophy of religion expects to find a detailed organised account of religious belief, or something of the nature of a systematic approach to the problems traditionally associated with the philosophy of religion, he will most certainly be disappointed. Wittgenstein did not bequeath a comprehensive philosophy of religion — the material at our disposal is simply too mosaic, too incomplete. Rather, we are treated to what Iris Murdoch has aptly called a series of 'exasperating hints'.[8]

[6] See Hacker 2001, p. 34.
[7] See Rhees 1981, p. 94.
[8] Quoted in Clack 1999(a), p. 75.

PART II

From Wittgenstein to Wittgensteinianism

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

The first part of this book focused on Wittgenstein's writings on religious belief. At their best, Wittgenstein's remarks reveal a distinct and penetrating understanding of the matter. They are forceful and compelling, promising us new possibilities of philosophically understanding religious belief and inviting us to pursue these further. Just as often, however, one is left with questions to which Wittgenstein pays little attention, let alone provides answers. Wittgenstein does not bequeath a comprehensive philosophy of religion. His writings on the subject are fragmentary and incomplete. This means that anyone seeking to elaborate a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion faces the task of expounding and expanding Wittgenstein's insights. There must always be a certain amount of interpretation and further development.

The following chapter examines the works of a number of authors who took this task to heart. Writing even before Wittgenstein's own remarks on religious belief were made public,[1] they sought to interpret and apply a number of central themes of the *Philosophical Investigations* so as to illuminate the character of religion.[2] As a result, what has been called '(neo-)Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion' became a recognisable phenomenon even before many had had the opportunity actually to see what Wittgenstein himself had to say on the matter.[3] It has been argued that this early Wittgensteinian appropriation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy for the philosophy of religion "has had unfortunate consequences not only for how we have come to understand Wittgenstein's relevance to religion but also for how we have come to understand his work in general."[4] The Wittgensteinians, Joseph M. Incandela contends, distorted Wittgenstein's later philosophy, focusing too narrowly on language-games and forms of life as possessing an ultimacy of intelligibility and justification. As

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[1] None of Wittgenstein's later writings on religious belief were published until 1966.

[2] See Clack 2001, p. 12; cf. Clack 1999(a), p. 78 and Clack 2003, pp. 203ff.

[3] Literature on the subject vacillates between the two terms: 'neo-Wittgensteinian' and 'Wittgensteinian' philosophy of religion. Presumably, the prefix 'neo' is added to underscore the fact that we are dealing, not so much with Wittgenstein's position but, rather, with that of his followers which, though based on Wittgenstein's work, significantly goes beyond it. It is, indeed, important to keep this in mind. Still, in what follows, for no reason other than economy, we shall simply speak of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

[4] Incandela 1985, p. 457.

a result, religious modes of discourse, as distinctive language-games or as (a) distinctive form(s) of life, were awarded a quasi-ontological and epistemological autonomy. While this may seem a useful strategy for safeguarding religious belief against positivistic censure, such a strategy, Incandela argues, was far from Wittgenstein's mind. Unfortunately, such was the impact of the Wittgensteinian reading that many have mistakenly thought these conclusions to be implied by Wittgenstein's own work.

Clack has expressed similar misgivings. The story of Wittgenstein's presence in contemporary philosophy, he argues, is a peculiar and in many ways a tragic one. Even though the later Wittgenstein's own writings on religion did not appear until 1966, due to the work of the early Wittgensteinians, their perceived character had already been established:

> "Wittgenstein's view of religion appeared to be known even before many had heard what he himself had written, and (here's the tragedy) that view was habitually understood in terms of 'fideism': religion was a 'language-game', a 'form of life' neither requiring justification nor susceptible to criticism or explanation. Absence of such notions in Wittgenstein's own considerations of religion seemed to make little difference to these characterisations. The die had been cast."[5]

Our discussion aims to show that Incandela's and Clack's suspicions are not unfounded. Although the early Wittgensteinians remain firmly rooted in Wittgenstein, the use they make of his philosophical heritage does indeed raise a number of problems. The early Wittgensteinians put great effort into elaborating the significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for the philosophical study of religion, fleshing out his fragmentary remarks to pave the way for a systematic, more comprehensive account of religious belief. But there is both strength and weakness here. In giving inordinate weight to Wittgenstein's notions of a language-game and a form of life they lay themselves open to the charge of fideism.

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[5] Clack 2001, p. 12.

3. THE WITTGENSTEINIAN SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

In the first part of this chapter we turn to examine some of the earlier writings of Rush Rhees, Peter Winch, and Norman Malcolm. Our main interest lies in how these authors introduced a number of themes from Wittgenstein's later philosophy into the philosophy of religion, preparing the way for a more comprehensive Wittgensteinian account of religious belief. Thus, we shall not scrutinise their conclusions too closely. Far more critical attention is given, in the second part of this chapter, to D. Z. Phillips's *The Concept of Prayer*. This, Phillips's first published book, constitutes the first sustained and systematic attempt at applying a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophical study of religion. As such, it has played a crucial role in giving shape to what has been referred to as 'the Wittgensteinian School of philosophy of religion'.[1]

3.1 The roots of the School

3.1.1 Rush Rhees

The roots of the Wittgensteinian School may be traced back to the 1950s, when Rush Rhees wrote a series of pieces on religion which "were evidently inspired by, and in many ways were a continuation of, Wittgenstein's later thoughts on the character of belief."[2] Those acquainted with Wittgenstein's work will certainly find much that is familiar in Rhees's writings. It is not too difficult to bring out the similarities. In fact, it is more difficult to spot the differences. One should not forget that although most of the topics addressed by Rhees undeniably have their roots in Wittgenstein's remarks, in every single case Rhees takes the discussion

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[1] While Rhees, Winch, Malcolm, and Phillips may certainly be regarded as eminent members, the list of those who have, at one time or other, been considered as members of the Wittgensteinian School of philosophy of religion is long and variegated. Among others, and in no particular order, G. E. Hughes, Peter Geach, Stanley Cavell, J. M. Cameron, O. K. Bouwsma, Paul Holmer, Don Cupitt, W. D. Hudson, R. H. Bell, and Robert Coburn, have all, in one way or other, been associated with Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

[2] Clack 1999(a), p. 78. These pieces, along with related work by Rhees, have been edited and published by D. Z. Phillips.

further than Wittgenstein did. Where Wittgenstein's remarks are piece-
meal and often, to some extent, personal, in Rhees we find the makings
of a more comprehensive account of religious language. But we must
not move too quickly here. Although there is development, it is not the
development of a system. In fact, Rhees's papers are often just as tenta-
tive and personal as Wittgenstein's. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that
Rhees elaborates on certain themes which have continued, up until this
day, to play a significant role in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.
We indicate three of these below.

   The first theme concerns the nature of philosophical enquiry. Rhees
follows Wittgenstein in claiming that philosophical problems are concep-
tual problems. As Wittgenstein has it, they "are solved, not by giving
new information, but by arranging what we have always known."[3] Rhees
agrees:

> "The perplexity of mathematics and the perplexity of religion are what
> I am calling difficulties with concepts. And the point of that is chiefly that
> in neither case is it a difficulty that comes because we do not yet know
> enough; it is nothing for which we can wait on the result of some further
> observation. It does not come from ignorance, it comes from a confusion of
> concepts."[4]

Now, as we have seen, on the one hand, Wittgenstein's (later) philosoph-
ical method is designed specifically to dissolve philosophical problems.
Hence, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein addresses a philosophical
audience. For example, no one in the medical profession should benefit
from his discussion of the concept of pain. Nor does it seem plausible
that Wittgenstein hopes to reform our everyday practices into which
the concept first enters. Rather, these practices constitute Wittgenstein's
methodological starting point. We need to return to our everyday prac-
tices to solve the problems which occur when we are doing philosophy.[5]
On the other hand, there is a further aspect to Wittgenstein's work where
philosophical clarification is not so much occasioned by specific philo-
sophical problems but, simply, by an urge to understand. One is striving
for clarity, for the sake of clarity. Obviously, these two aspects overlap.[6]

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   [3] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 109.
   [4] Rhees 1997, p. 195.
   [5] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 11, 116-117, 194.
   [6] Alan Bailey has argued that the latter one gains the upper hand in Wittgenstein's
dealings with religious belief. In his view, this explains why Wittgenstein's enterprise
is rather unsuccessful: "the chief reason for Wittgenstein's relative lack of success in
the case of religious language may well lie in the fact that his philosophical methodology
is directed primarily towards the dissolution of philosophical problems rather than the

But one might say that Rhees emphasises the latter aspect more strongly. He is trying 'to make sense of the whole thing'; and it is not just the philosopher who stands to gain from doing so:

> "There are philosophical puzzles in religion, in a way somewhat analogous to that in which there are philosophical puzzles in science, I suppose. One gets into tangles and wonders whether there is any way of making sense of the whole thing. I suppose the philosopher's business then would be to try to help the believer to understand what it is that he is doing and saying; not to interpret it, but to help him to avoid confusions — confusions with other ways of speaking which are foreign to religion, for instance."[7]

The claim that there are philosophical problems *in* religion, as there are *in* science, is somewhat ambiguous. Surely, problems occurring in religion, or in science, are not so much philosophical as *religious* or *scientific* problems. Formally, the distinction may be stated as follows: in the latter case, what constitutes a problem is determined by means of criteria provided by a given linguistic context whereas, in the former case, problems arise due to a lack or confusion of such criteria. Evidently, it is not always easy clearly to draw such a distinction. But it cannot be lost altogether if Wittgenstein's approach is to remain viable. For if philosophical confusion does not so much occur when we are doing philosophy but is inherent in our everyday linguistic activities, we no longer have any

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disinterested clarification of meaning for its own sake." (Bailey 2001, p. 134.) Note that Bailey is not just criticising the results of Wittgenstein's enquiry into religious language. Rather, he is questioning the viability of Wittgenstein's philosophical method in this area of enquiry. The problem, Bailey argues, is simply that the specific form of intellectual confusion that Wittgenstein's therapeutic techniques are intended to eliminate is not widespread in our thought about matters of religion. The most we can do is to investigate without prejudice the way statements about God are used by religious believers. But Wittgenstein's methodology, we are told, is unfit to fulfil this task of disinterested clarification. Now, whether or not one agrees with Bailey that Wittgenstein's conclusions are disappointing is one thing. But it will not do to rule out the applicability of his method of philosophising. For one thing, Bailey distinguishes too sharply between 'dissolution' and 'description', making it appear as if one must choose: either one gets busy dissolving philosophical problems or one engages in the disinterested clarification of meaning for its own sake. This obscures the internal relation that binds these two activities. For Wittgenstein, the dissolution of a philosophical problem is *effected through* the disinterested clarification of meaning. Furthermore, Bailey's suggestion that, where religious discourse is concerned, there are "no characteristically philosophical perplexities to be dissolved" (Bailey 2001, p. 135) is bewildering. The central questions informing Wittgenstein's philosophy have to do with the nature of linguistic representation, with the relation between language and reality, with the intentionality of thought and language, with metaphysics, and so on. To suggest that, where religious language is concerned, such questions do not arise seems systematically capricious and historically inaccurate. If they have not caused philosophical perplexity, they have certainly been the focus of much disagreement.

[7] Rhees 1997, p. 30.

rough ground to be led back to.[8] Furthermore, we would no longer be addressing just a philosophical audience: we are helping the believers to understand what they are doing. If anyone, they stand to gain most from the dissolution of the problems at hand. But the claim that the philosopher is in a better position to understand religious expressions than the believers themselves hardly seems amenable to Wittgenstein's position. Or better: it raises some rather irksome questions concerning the relation between philosophical and religious understanding, questions to which we will return in the course of this chapter.

Turning from methodology to application, Rhees's conclusions do not stray too far from Wittgenstein's. The absolute nature of belief in God is affirmed; religion is tied to a particular form of life; religious language is argued to be confessional rather than speculative; etc. Rhees continually stresses the distinctive character of 'religious language'. In keeping with Wittgenstein, he discusses this in terms of differences in grammar:

> "There is a way in which language is used in religion — what we may call the grammar of religious language — which is different from other uses of language. This appears especially in connection with certain expressions which are the same here and in language that is not religious, but which have a different grammar here."[9]

The addendum, clearly, is that once we lose sight of the distinctiveness of religious expressions we fall into all manner of confusions. Rhees offers quite a few examples, some of which are remarkably similar to Wittgenstein's. Compare, for instance, Rhees's discussion of the proposition 'God exists' to Wittgenstein's:

> "'God exists' is not a statement of fact. You might say also that it is not in the indicative mood. It is a confession — or expression — of faith. This is recognised in some way when people say that God's existence is 'necessary existence', as opposed to the 'contingency' of what exists as a matter of fact and when they say that to doubt God's existence is a sin as opposed to a mistake about the facts."[10]

Rhees is evidently treading familiar ground. However, it is important to note that his examples are more elaborated than Wittgenstein's, and his conclusions more resolute. Rhees's emphasis on the distinctiveness of religious language is particularly strong. He goes so far as to say that, in

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[8] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 107. Of course, one might solve this problem by arguing that not all our linguistic activities are confused; just religious ones. But this is a conclusion neither Rhees nor Wittgenstein is inclined to entertain.

[9] Rhees 1997, pp. 192-193.

[10] Rhees 1997, p. 49; cf. Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 59-60.

religion, notions of truth and reality may acquire a whole new sense.[11] These themes are not lacking in Wittgenstein's work, but are more prominent in Rhees's. It is not too difficult to understand why critics of the Wittgensteinian School have felt uneasy. Too strong an emphasis on the autonomy of religious expressions, one might feel, results in too strong an isolation and immunisation of religious belief. Thus, the charge of fideism may gain a foothold. However, in fairness to Rhees, the autonomy claimed for religious language is not absolute. Rhees continually draws attention to the tight connections which must exist between religious language and activities and other linguistic practices. In fact, in his famous article *Wittgenstein's Builders*, he criticises Wittgenstein for taking the analogy between language and games too far; it becomes almost impossible to see how the various language-games can still be said to make up a language:

> "For the 'cases' of games are all games themselves; and of course they do not *make up* a game. Different languages would not make up a language either. This shows that I am pushing the analogy in a way that it was not meant to go."[12]

The meaning of religious language depends also upon the way in which it is connected to other uses of language. Still, there are grounds for suspicion, if not in Rhees than certainly in Winch's earlier work, where, as we shall see, the isolation of social practices takes a particularly virulent form.

Finally, the similarity between Rhees's and Wittgenstein's remarks on religion is also evident from Rhees's choice of material. One might say that Rhees was particularly interested in a strand of Christianity he found in the writings of, for example, Kierkegaard and Simone Weil, as well as in the work of Russian novelists, such as Tolstoy. The mystical tradition, including figures such as St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart appealed more strongly to him than, say, the natural theology of Aquinas. This ties in with Rhees's distrust of — or, at the least, puzzlement concerning — any kind of rational or natural theology. Rhees rejects the attempt to establish the rationality of belief in God, or prove God's existence. Religious beliefs are not to be understood as dressed up statements of fact, the truth of which may be verified independently.[13]

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[11] See Rhees 1997, p. 285.
[12] Rhees 1970, p. 76.
[13] See, for example, Rhees 1997, pp. 8-12, 16-22, 36-37, 44, 98, 103-104, 129, 285, 293-294.

This should not surprise anyone at all familiar with Wittgenstein's work. From his earliest to his latest writings, he shows little patience for a rationalist approach to theology. And his interest in the mystical, however idiosyncratic, already surfaces in the *Tractatus*. Furthermore, we have remarked upon the influence Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* had upon Wittgenstein, and highlighted his interest in Kierkegaard. But, once again, Rhees goes one step beyond Wittgenstein in awarding these sources a central role in the philosophical study of religious belief. On the whole, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion has followed his lead.

To summarise: Rhees sets off from familiar themes and elaborates and expands upon these. The way in which he does so resonates still in contemporary Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Rhees's work remains close to Wittgenstein's, not just in content, but also in spirit. Like Wittgenstein's, Rhees's remarks are fragmentary; although they contain the seeds of a more comprehensive account of religious phenomena, they eschew the systematic framework required to provide such. As Clack points out, such a framework was in no small part developed by Peter Winch in *The Idea of a Social Science*, first published in 1958.[14] Although the book does not actively engage in philosophy of religion, it had an enormous impact on authors who sought to apply Wittgenstein's philosophy to the study of religion. It did so in at least three ways.

3.1.2 Peter Winch

The Idea of a Social Science sets out "to undermine the idea that the methods of the natural sciences can profitably be applied to the understanding of human and social affairs."[15] Winch takes John Stuart Mill's conception of a social science as exemplary of an approach that flourishes still at the present time.[16] According to this approach, the aim of any scientific investigation is to establish causal sequences, that is: "to show that the temporal succession of A and B is an instance of a generalization to the effect that events like A are always to be found in our experience to be followed by events like B."[17] Of course, such broad statistical generalizations are ultimately not enough. They must

[14] See Clack 1999(a), p. 79.
[15] Clack 1999(a), p. 79.
[16] See Winch 1990, p. 75. *The Idea of a Social Science* was originally published in 1958; all references are to the second edition.
[17] Winch 1990, p. 67.

be connected deductively with the laws of nature from which they result. In short, a scientific investigation aims to explain certain phenomena in terms of the regular laws which govern them. Where the social sciences are concerned, matters are really no different: "there can be no fundamental logical difference between the principles according to which we explain natural changes and those according to which we explain social changes."[18] It follows that

> "The methodological issues concerning the moral sciences should be seen as *empirical*: an attitude involving a wait-and-see attitude to the question of what can be achieved by the social sciences and, incidentally, ruling the philosopher out of the picture."[19]

Winch emphatically rejects this conclusion. The notion of a human society, he argues, involves a scheme of concepts which is logically incompatible with the kinds of explanation offered in science. The issues facing us are not so much empirical as conceptual. And this means that they are the domain of the philosopher rather than that of the scientist. Not to put too fine a point on it, "giving an account of the nature of social phenomena in general, itself belongs to philosophy."[20]

   We shall not aim to reproduce Winch's argument in full. But the main thrust runs as follows. The scientist's task is one of observing regularities and expressing these in the form of generalizations which are connected deductively to the laws governing the phenomena under investigation. Of course, in order to do so, the scientist needs concepts and criteria according to which he determines what shall count as relevant, what shall count as an instance of 'the same thing' occurring. These concepts and criteria must be understood in relation to the rules governing the scientific investigation. But in this respect there is a crucial difference between the natural and social sciences respectively:

> "for whereas in the case of the natural scientist we have to deal with only one set of rules, namely those governing the scientist's investigation itself, here *what the sociologist is studying*, as well as his study of it, is a human activity and is therefore carried on according to rules."[21]

The concept of gravity does not belong essentially to the behaviour of a falling apple but, rather, to the physicist's explanation of the apple's behaviour. The concepts at work in human activities, by contrast, belong

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[18] Winch 1990, p. 71.
[19] Winch 1990, p. 71.
[20] Winch 1990, p. 43.
[21] Winch 1990, p. 87.

essentially to these activities; they are internally related to them.[22] According to Winch,

> "it is these rules, rather than those which govern the sociologist's investigation, which specify what is to count as 'doing the same kind of thing' in relation to that kind of activity."[23]

The conclusion Winch wants us to draw is that we cannot understand social activities without taking into account the ideas which inform these activities. Thus:

> "a monk has certain characteristic social relations with his fellow monks and with people outside the monastery; but it would be impossible to give more than a superficial account of those relations without taking into account the religious ideas around which the monk's life revolves."[24]

Now, if sociology is really philosophy in disguise, we should want to enquire as to the nature of philosophy. First and foremost, Winch rigorously distinguishes philosophy from science. Science aims to explain the nature of certain *particular* natural phenomena; philosophy, by contrast, is concerned with the nature of reality as such and in general.[25] This may seem to amount to a traditional understanding of philosophy as metaphysical ontology. But Winch immediately moves away from such a conclusion. For the question 'What is real?' is "not an empirical question at all, but a *conceptual* one. It has to do with the *force of the concept* of reality."[26] Such questions cannot be solved by empirical enquiry; rather, they involve the elucidation of the concept of reality — or better, the concept*s* of reality. That is to say, Winch rejects a monolithic account of human institutions and practices in favour of "an infinitely extendable number of distinctive modes of social life, each of which can be evaluated only on its own terms."[27] According to Winch, it is of the very nature of a human society "to consist in different and competing ways of life, each offering a different account of the intelligibility of things."[28] It follows, Winch argues, that one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such, for they are only intelligible in the context of various ways of living or modes of social life. There is, in other words, no

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[22] See Winch 1990, p. 128.
[23] Winch 1990, p. 87.
[24] Winch 1990, p. 23; cf. ibid., pp. 52-53.
[25] See Winch 1990, p. 8.
[26] Winch 1990, p. 9.
[27] Clack 1999(a), p. 81.
[28] Winch 1990, p. 103.

single account of truth, meaning, rationality, or, indeed, reality, to which all human institutions implicitly do or must conform. Rather, various social relations express various ideas of truth, reality, etc.[29] Philosophy's task is not to *explain* these ideas, nor to reduce them to a spurious unity but, rather, to elucidate the role they play in their natural contexts of application.

Obviously, Winch's approach should have some significant consequences for the study of religion. That is, if, indeed, religion constitutes one distinct 'category of behaviour', one specific 'mode of social life'. Winch leaves little room for doubt: "science is one such mode and religion is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself."[30] In fact, for a work which does not explicitly engage in the philosophy of religion, the number of examples drawn from the religious field is remarkable.[31] The lesson to be learnt is unmistakable: religious life is conducted according to considerations of its own. It provides its own criteria of intelligibility, criteria which need not conform to those constitutive of other modes of social life. Here, too, our task is not to explain but to elucidate. Religion should be understood in terms of the ideas expressed by the believers themselves:

> "Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (*Luke*, 18, 9). Was the Pharisee who said 'God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are' doing the same kind of thing as the Publican who prayed 'God be merciful unto me a sinner'? To answer this one would have to start by considering what is involved in the idea of prayer; and that is a *religious* question. In other words, the appropriate criteria for deciding whether the actions of these two men were of the same kind or not belong to religion itself."[32]

Two important points come to the fore here. First, the claim that the criteria involved in answering the question raised above belong to religion underscores the distinctive nature of the religious way of life and implies the possibility of drawing a clear distinction between what does and does not belong to this category of behaviour. Secondly, if the question is a *religious* question, it follows that the philosopher "must himself have some religious feeling if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which govern the lives of its participants."[33] These two points, however, raise at least as many

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[29] See, for example, Winch 1990, pp. 23, 107-108.
[30] Winch 1990, p. 100.
[31] See, for example, Winch 1990, pp. 23, 52, 55, 87-88, 96-97, 99-101, 108-109, 135-136.
[32] Winch 1990, p. 87.
[33] Winch 1990, p. 88; cf. Winch 1990, p. 55.

questions. For, first, it is not at all obvious that one can always clearly separate the wheat from the chaff. What is and what is not religious often may be difficult to decide. It may be a matter of dispute not only from an outsider's but, more importantly, from an insider's point of view — as between adherents of two distinct religious traditions. One gets the impression that, having been delivered from a monolithic understanding of human society, one is thrown back to a monolithic understanding of religion. Secondly, one may wonder why the question, as Winch seems to imply, belongs exclusively to religion. Surely the 'same' question may be asked, and answered, from within various disciplines, say psychology. In fact, it would seem to follow from Winch's own analysis that, unless we specify the context in which the question arises, we have no way of knowing what it entails. In other words, although the question *may* be a religious one, it is difficult to see why it *must* be. Furthermore, the claim that the philosopher must have some religious feeling raises questions concerning the relation between philosophical and religious understanding. To say that one needs some acquaintance with the religious movements one is studying seems no more than common sense. However, the demand for some 'religious feeling' on the part of the philosopher is ambiguous. What is the nature and extent of this religious feeling? Does this mean that we must become believers in order to understand? *The Idea of a Social Science* steers clear from answering these questions.

It should be clear, as Clack points out, that "Winch's program for social understanding is an application of Wittgenstein's later philosophical method".[34] In keeping with Wittgenstein, Winch rejects the scientific endeavour to explain, favouring a descriptive approach. Philosophy does not formulate sets of criteria of intelligibility; rather, it describes those criteria which are at work in our social practices, or, as epistemology, describes the conditions which must be satisfied if there are to be any such criteria at all.[35] Philosophy is, thus, uncommitted enquiry; it is not its business to award prizes to science, religion, or anything else, it does not advocate any *Weltanschauung*.

Where Winch significantly goes beyond Wittgenstein, however, is, first, in his relocation of the social studies as a branch of philosophy. In Winch's hands, the injunction that philosophy does not explain anything "entails that sociology should become like philosophy (rather

34 Clack 1999(a), p. 80.
35 See Winch 1990, p. 21.

than biology), *laying bare* the ideas expressed in social institutions, rather than *explaining* them."[36] Secondly, in Winch, the terms 'mode of social life' and 'category of behaviour' seem to play a role similar to that of language-games and forms of life in Wittgenstein. But we would do well to remember that although other Wittgensteinians have followed Winch in claiming that religion is a autonomous mode of social life, or that religious belief constitutes a logically distinct category of behaviour, Wittgenstein himself never put forward so bold a thesis. As we have seen, his notions of a language-game and a form of life play a far more dynamic role than their Winchian counterparts. As Winch would later admit,[37] it is difficult to avoid the impression that *The Idea of a Social Science* presents social practices, traditions and institutions as more or less isolated and self-contained, each going its own, fairly autonomous, way — a necessary ingredient, one might say, for a fideist philosophy.

To summarise: *The Idea of a Social Science* provided Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion both means and mandate. Winch both justified the study of religion *in its own terms*, rather than in terms of some underlying dynamic, and delivered the systematic framework required for doing so. The way in which Phillips criticises well known attempts to 'explain away' religion in his, aptly titled, *Religion Without Explanation* bears witness to the importance of Winch's work. Such critics of religion as Feuerbach, Durkheim and Freud are argued to have failed to incorporate believers' concepts within their explanations.[38] But this is to get ahead of our story. For *Religion Without Explanation* was published in 1976, well after Wittgenstein's own writings on matters religious had been made available. To trace the history of the Wittgensteinian School of philosophy of religion, we should go back some ten years, to 1965, and Phillips's first book, *The Concept of Prayer*. Before we do so, however, let us conclude our examination of the roots of the School by turning to Malcolm's discussion of Anselm's ontological argument(s).

3.1.3 Norman Malcolm

In his paper 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', published in 1960, Malcolm undertakes a defence of Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God. Or at least of *one* of Anselm's arguments, for, remarkably, Malcolm discovers two distinct arguments in Anselm's writings.

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[36] Clack 1999(a), p. 80.
[37] See Winch 1990, 'Preface to the Second Edition', pp. xv-xvi.
[38] See Clack 1999(a), p. 83.

Although he admits that there is no evidence that Anselm thought of himself as offering two different proofs, Malcolm is convinced

> "that in Anselm's *Proslogion* and *Responsio editoris* there are two different pieces of reasoning which he did not distinguish from one another, and that a good deal of light may be shed on the philosophical problem of 'the ontological argument' if we do distinguish them."[39]

The first argument Malcolm recognises in Anselm's writings is the one with which we are familiar. In essence, it seeks to deduce the existence of God from our conception of Him as something a greater than which cannot be conceived. That something a greater than which cannot be conceived, i.e. God, cannot exist *only* in the understanding, for then a greater thing could be conceived, namely, one that exists both in the understanding and in reality. It follows that God exists. Malcolm rejects this argument on the grounds that it rests on the false assumption that 'existence' or 'being' is a 'perfection' or 'real predicate'. Here, Malcolm admits, he is simply restating some of the observations Kant made in his attack on the ontological argument.[40]

According to Malcolm, the idea that existence constitutes a perfection does not play a role in Anselm's second argument, however:

> "[Anselm's] first ontological proof uses the principle that a thing is greater if it exists than if it does not exist. His second proof employs the different principle that a thing is greater if it *necessarily* exists that if it does not *necessarily* exist."[41]

The subtle but crucial difference lies in the presence of 'necessarily' in the second, and its absence from the first proof. This is important because, in Malcolm's view, the concept of 'necessary existence' is radically different from that of 'existence', which he interprets as *contingent* existence.[42] Kant was right to insist that *contingent* existence is not a property, and thus not a perfection. But this criticism does not affect Anselm's second proof. Here, Anselm is maintaining "not that existence is a perfection, but that *the logical impossibility of non-existence is a*

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[39] Malcolm 1960, p. 41.

[40] It may be worth noting, however, that Malcolm seems doubtful whether this critique is sufficient: "It would be desirable to have a rigorous refutation of the doctrine [that existence is a real predicate] but I have not been able to provide one. I am compelled to leave the matter at the more or less intuitive level of Kant's observation." (Malcolm 1960, p. 44.) Whether Malcolm is right to talk of Kant's arguments as being less 'rigorous' than 'intuitive' is a matter I shall not address.

[41] Malcolm 1960, p. 46; italics added.

[42] See Abelson 1961, p. 68.

perfection" or, in other words, that "*necessary existence* is a perfection."[43] Consequently, the second argument holds. Malcolm summarises it as follows:

> "If God, a being greater than which cannot be conceived, does not exist then He cannot *come* into existence. For if He did He would either have been *caused* to come into existence or have *happened* to come into existence, and in either case He would be a limited being, which by our conception of Him He is not. Since He cannot come into existence, if He does not exist His existence is impossible. If He does exist He cannot have come into existence (for the reasons given), nor can He cease to exist, for nothing could cause Him to cease to exist nor could it just happen that He ceased to exist. So if God exists His existence is necessary. Thus God's existence is either impossible or necessary. It can be the former only if the concept of such a being is self-contradictory or in some way logically absurd. Assuming that this is not so, it follows that He necessarily exists."[44]

I shall not be concerned with the question whether Malcolm interprets Anselm correctly, nor shall I seek either to establish or refute this version of the ontological argument.[45] Rather, I wish to draw attention to some of the distinctly Wittgensteinian elements Malcolm brings into his discussion. The first thing to note is the emphasis Malcolm places upon paying attention to the actual use of religious language. Once we do so, we come to see that it makes no sense to treat of God's existence as contingent existence. Anything which exists contingently, one might say, is *dependent* for its coming into existence, and for its continued existence, on other things and events. Thus, for instance, a house is built by a carpenter; its coming into existence is dependent on a certain creative activity. And, evidently, its continued existence is dependent upon many things: that a tree does not crush it, that it is not consumed by fire, and so on.[46] God's existence, by contrast, cannot be said to be dependent on anything:

> "If we reflect on the common meaning of the word 'God' (no matter how vague and confused it is), we realize that it is incompatible with this meaning that God's existence should *depend* on anything. Whether we believe in

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[43] Malcolm 1960, p. 46.

[44] Malcolm 1960, pp. 49-50.

[45] In reply to Malcolm, critics were quick to point out the flaws in his argument. More than that, they expressed their surprise that 'a distinguished Wittgensteinian' should seem 'perfectly serious' in supporting an *a priori* proof of God's existence. For extensive criticism, see the replies to Malcolm's paper by Raziel Abelson, Alvin Plantinga, and Paul Henle in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Jan., 1961), pp. 67-84, 93-101, and 102-109, respectively.

[46] See Malcolm 1960, p. 46.

Him or not we must admit that [God] cannot be thought of as being brought into existence or as depending for His continued existence on any-thing."[47]

Again, of anything that exists contingently it makes sense to ask how long it has existed, whether it will still exist tomorrow, and so on. Where God is concerned, Malcolm argues, such questions make no sense:

"It seems absurd to make God the subject of such questions. According to our ordinary conception of Him, He is an eternal being. […] To ascribe eternity to something is to exclude as senseless all sentences that imply that it has duration."[48]

Of course, even if we allow that believers conceive of God as 'independ-ent', 'limitless', 'eternal', and so on, this does not show that such talk makes sense. Existence, one might argue, cannot be a necessary property of anything. That is to say, every proposition of the form 'x exists' must be contingent. Thus, if Malcolm is right about the way in which believ-ers conceive of God, he has merely shown that the concept is senseless.[49] Malcolm, however, rejects this argument. There are, he argues "as many kinds of existential propositions as there are kinds of subjects of dis-course."[50] We need to look at the use of words rather than manufacture *a priori* theses about it. When we do so, we will come across the reli-gious use of words:

"Here is expressed the idea of the necessary existence and eternity of God, an idea that is essential to the Jewish and Christian religions. In those complex systems of thought, those 'language-games', God has the status of a necessary being. Who can doubt that? Here we must say with Wittgen-stein, 'This language-game is played!' I believe we may rightly take the existence of those religious systems of thought in which God figures as a necessary being to be a disproof of the dogma, affirmed by Hume and others, that no existential proposition can be necessary."[51]

Malcolm seems to imply that the fact that the concept of God has an established use in religious discourse constitutes evidence for the mean-ingfulness and consistency of that concept.[52] Surely, it is not difficult to see why that conclusion should arouse suspicion. Suspicions which may

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[47] Malcolm 1960, pp. 46-47.
[48] Malcolm 1960, p. 48,
[49] See Malcolm 1960, p. 55.
[50] Malcolm 1960, p. 53.
[51] Malcolm 1960, p. 56; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 654.
[52] According to Incandela, these remarks reveal the positivistic bent of early Wittgen-steinian philosophy of religion. This topic is more fully explored below.

well be confirmed when, at the end of his essay, Malcolm turns to consider the question of the relation of Anselm's argument to religious belief. It would be unreasonable, Malcolm tells us, to require that the recognition of Anselm's argument as valid must produce a conversion. We can imagine an atheist going through the argument, becoming convinced of its validity, yet remaining an atheist. The only effect it could have "would be that he stopped saying in his heart 'There is no God', because he would now realize that this is something he cannot meaningfully say or think."[53] At this level, the argument is understood as a piece of logic. But, or so it seems, this is but a shallow or a partial understanding of Anselm's argument. For Malcolm goes on to say that at a deeper level

> "the argument can be thoroughly understood only by one who has a view of that human 'form of life' that gives rise to the idea of an infinitely great being, who views it from the *inside* not just from the outside and who has, therefore, at least some inclination to *partake* in that religious form of life."[54]

If Malcolm's conclusions concerning the religious language-game were a cause for concern, how much more so are these conclusions concerning the religious form of life? Not only does Malcolm's revision of the ontological argument deprive the unbeliever of the possibility of denying God's existence, what is more, he cannot even be said truly to understand the argument that accomplishes that feat. Even if Malcolm may not have intended his remarks to be taken in this way, it should not surprise us that critics have found them to imply some form of fideism.

When we encounter the concept of God as a problem in philosophy, Malcolm argues, we do not consider the human phenomena that lie behind it. Thus, it is not surprising that many philosophers believe that the idea of a necessary being is an arbitrary and absurd construction. For even if we allow that the concept is free of self-contradiction, one would still want to know "how it can have *meaning* for anyone."[55] Why is it that human beings have formed such a concept? Says Malcolm:

> "This is a legitimate and important question. I am sure that there cannot be a deep understanding of that concept without an understanding of the phenomena of human life that give rise to it."[56]

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[53] Malcolm 1960, p. 61.

[54] Malcolm 1960, p. 62.

[55] Malcolm 1960, p. 60. It would seem that Malcolm uses the word 'meaning' in the sense of 'significance' — an ambiguity which returns in Phillips's discussion of the meaning of religious beliefs, as we shall see below.

[56] Malcolm 1960, p. 60.

While Malcolm gives some indication of the direction in which we should look by referring to certain remarks of Kierkegaard's, he feels that he has been unable to provide an adequate account of the human phenomena that lie behind the concept of God. In the following sections, we shall see that *The Concept of Prayer* took it upon itself to fill that gap. Whether, in so doing, it also succeeded in bridging the gap between religious understanding and philosophical understanding remains to be seen.

To summarise: Malcolm's essay seeks to unravel the philosophical problem of the ontological argument. Like Wittgenstein, Malcolm urges us to pay attention to the actual use of our language. Where he goes beyond Wittgenstein is in awarding religious belief the status of a distinct and logically autonomous language-game or form of life. As Malcolm later put it: "Religion is a form of life; it is language embedded in action — what Wittgenstein calls a 'language-game'. Science is another. Neither stands in need of justification, the one no more than the other."[57] It should be clear that these conclusions do not stray too far from Winch's conclusions in *The Idea of a Social Science*. It should be equally clear that they go far beyond anything Wittgenstein said or what can plausibly be regarded as what he meant but did not say.[58]

3.2 D. Z. Phillips: *The Concept of Prayer*

Early Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion reaches its climax in D. Z. Phillips's *The Concept of Prayer*. Published in 1965, this was, perhaps, the first extended essay in the philosophy of religion influenced by Wittgenstein's philosophy.[59] In an early review, Antony Flew opined that the book was likely to be dismissed "by many as an essay in a fashionable religious obscurantism, by Wittgenstein out of Kierkegaard."[60] In the remainder of his review, Flew leaves little doubt that he, at any rate, was prepared to do so. Contrary to Flew's expectations, however, the book provoked a good deal of discussion. Interestingly, this discussion focused not so much on Phillips's actual analyses of different examples of prayer but, rather, on the epistemological issues

[57] Malcolm 1977, p. 156.
[58] See Barrett 1991, p. xi.
[59] See Phillips 1981, p. vii. *The Concept of Prayer* was originally published in 1965; all references, however, are to the second edition which was published in 1981.
[60] Flew 1967, p. 294.

raised by the essay — as far as Phillips is concerned, regrettably so.[61] Nevertheless, our discussion follows suit. At this stage of our investigation, our main interest lies in the way in which Phillips makes bear Wittgenstein's philosophy upon the philosophical study of religion. Of course, 'methodology' and 'description' are interrelated. As Phillips puts it, *The Concept of Prayer* aims at "affecting philosophical antagonism against religion in so far as it attempts to clarify the kind of activity prayer is."[62] Still, we shall focus primarily upon the former aspect. The first section argues that this partiality is justified. *The Concept of Prayer* played a decisive role in shaping people's perception of the character of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. What is more, closer examination suggests that its view of a 'Wittgensteinian' method or approach is less the result of a careful reading of Wittgenstein than of the influence of its direct predecessors: Rhees, Winch and Malcolm. This alone provides sufficient warrant to examine its methodological suppositions.

In inheriting much of its predecessors' point of view, *The Concept of Prayer* also inherits many of their problems. Discussing Rhees's, Winch's and Malcolm's work, we raised a number of questions which may loosely be grouped under three headings: the nature, the task, and the results of philosophical enquiry. In doing so, we encountered a number of problems; problems which have fuelled the charge of fideism. The second and third sections of this chapter examine how *The Concept of Prayer* engages with these issues. As we shall see, although it presents a more thorough examination, it tends further to complicate rather than to dissolve our difficulties.

3.2.1 The Concept of Prayer*, Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians*

Why the emphasis upon the epistemological and methodological? Phillips later argues that we may put this down to the deep-rooted assumption that we can first determine whether God exists or not, and turn to look at worship only if that issue is settled in the affirmative.[63] One of the main points *The Concept of Prayer* seeks to establish is that this assumption betrays a misunderstanding both of the nature of religious discourse as well as of the nature of philosophical investigation. Appealing to Wittgenstein, Phillips argues that philosophical problems are conceptual in nature. They often arise when we try to give an account of concepts

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[61] See Phillips 1981, p. vii.
[62] Phillips 1981, p. 29.
[63] See Phillips 1981, p. vii.

with which we are perfectly familiar. By means of illustration, Phillips cites the famous passage from Augustine's *Confessions*: "What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know."[64] The way to solve such a problem is not by means of an empirical investigation. What we need is a descriptive account of the concepts or activities that puzzle us. Of course, 'descriptive' should not be taken in a naïve sense. Seeking to give a philosophically relevant account of, for instance, the activity of praying, one cannot simply proceed to recite the creeds, or to repeat the words used in the prayer. What is needed is a conceptual account; an account which pays attention to the grammar of a given discourse, and the actions into which it is woven. Such an account leaves, as Wittgenstein said, everything as it is.[65] That is to say, it does not provide any foundations but clarifies what was already there awaiting clarification. As Phillips has it, it is not up to the philosopher to determine whether or not belief in the existence of God is rational. On the contrary, philosophy's task is the much more modest one of trying to understand what belief in God amounts to. Having once descriptively clarified that belief, its work is done.

Clearly, this perspective places *The Concept of Prayer* in quite a critical relationship to many of its contemporaries. The disagreement runs wide and deep, concerning not only the subject of enquiry, but also the nature of that enquiry as such. And, perhaps, that should not surprise us. For no matter what weight one wishes to give to Wittgenstein's philosophy, his is a critical voice. Not just in relation to the kind of philosophy he explicitly opposed, but even in relation to those philosophies which were believed to be more accommodating to his thought. This is still true within the contemporary scene, and it was certainly true in 1965, when Wittgenstein's (later) writings were only just being appropriated. So, although it is perhaps deplorable that the discussion *The Concept of Prayer* provoked focused almost exclusively on the methodological doctrines and epistemological theses it presented, it is also quite understandable. In taking up a distinctly Wittgensteinian standpoint, Phillips takes up a distinctly critical standpoint. The direction his later work has taken only goes to confirm this. Positive themes continue to play an important

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[64] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992), p. 230. See Phillips 1981, p. 2. Phillips's choice of this example is no coincidence. For Wittgenstein uses the same passage from the *Confessions* to make a similar point. (See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 89.)

[65] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 124.

role, but the larger part of Phillips's work is, in fact, negative. Constructive analyses of what religious believers are actually doing are overshadowed by a forceful critique of certain philosophical methods and the accounts of religious activities they engender. Furthermore, attention is given increasingly to the exegesis of Wittgenstein's remarks and the promotion of a Wittgensteinian approach.

To discuss these matters now would take us too far astray. We return to them at a later stage. Luckily, we need not invoke any of Phillips's later works to make our point. For *The Concept of Prayer* already effectively illustrates it. Leslie M. S. Griffiths is surely right that, in the book, there is a predominance of talk about what religion is not.[66] If confirmation is needed, we may turn to Phillips himself:

> "My arguments have a destructive and a constructive aspect: I want to stop ways of talking about prayer which lead to confusion, but also I want to try to say what people *are* doing when they pray. Although these two aspects are interdependent, I must admit that the former tends to predominate […]."[67]

Even when presenting his view of what believers *are* doing when they pray, Phillips's argument often proceeds by way of exclusion: neither this nor that, but like so. Moreover, one does well to remember that the whole of the first chapter of the book is taken up by an investigation into the nature and implications of a specific philosophical approach which is critically contrasted with other, 'traditional', approaches.

The Concept of Prayer draws heavily upon Wittgenstein's later philosophy in explicating this approach. Right from the start, where Phillips quotes paragraphs 123 and 124 of the *Investigations*, he makes it clear that he endorses a conception of the relation of philosophy to religion which derives, at least for a large part, from Wittgenstein's remarks. At times, he comes close to implying that he is merely bringing Wittgenstein's words to our attention.[68] For the most part, however, Phillips should be read as saying that his position is implied by Wittgenstein's remarks. This, indeed, would be the more prudent claim as most of the methodological doctrines and epistemological theses presented in *The Concept of Prayer* are nowhere to be found in Wittgenstein's work.[69] Wittgenstein never actually said that philosophy does not provide a foundation for prayer, that, instead, it merely gives an account of it, leaving

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[66] See Griffiths 1968, p. 609.
[67] Phillips 1981, p. 28.
[68] See, for instance, Phillips 1981, p. 1.
[69] Certainly not in the corpus that had been published in 1965.

everything as it is. He never called religion a distinct form of life which
may only be understood by looking at the things religious believers do
and say. Did he imply these things? Given the fact that Wittgenstein's
writings on religious belief had not yet been published and that his
Philosophical Investigations was only just being appropriated, one might
expect a thorough analysis to support this claim. If so, one will be disap-
pointed. *The Concept of Prayer* never engages in this task. Phillips
quotes Wittgenstein on six occasions only. The first four quotes, all in
the first chapter, derive from the *Philosophical Investigations*; the latter
two from the *Tractatus*.[70] Phillips's discussion of these passages falls
short of a careful exegetical examination. Given the importance bestowed
upon Wittgenstein's thought this is rather surprising. One wonders why
Phillips does not provide such an examination.

Our answer must remain speculative, but it seems a reasonable assump-
tion that Phillips does not do so because, first, this is not his main aim
and, secondly, because it had already been provided. Rhees's, Malcolm's
and Winch's work shows how Wittgenstein's remarks should be taken
and how his descriptive method should be made to bear on religious
belief. The systematic preliminaries had already been dealt with. What
was lacking was a comprehensive descriptive account of a specific reli-
gious activity. This is what *The Concept of Prayer* sets out to deliver.
In doing so, the debt it owes to its predecessors is unmistakable. For
although the initial appeal is to Wittgenstein, the real support is provided
by Rhees, Winch and Malcolm.

As for Rush Rhees — although *The Concept of Prayer* was written
under his supervision his work is not explicitly mentioned. But his voice
may be clearly recognised throughout the book. Rhees emphasised the
importance of recognising the distinctive grammar of religious discourse;
he rejected an understanding of religious beliefs as explanatory or hypo-
thetical; he refused to make philosophy the arbiter of truth in matters
religious, stressing the personal element and arguing that to say Chris-
tianity is true, is to adopt it; he placed great weight upon the works of
Kierkegaard and Simone Weil — all these themes reappear in *The Con-
cept of Prayer*. As for Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch, their work
plays a crucial supporting role in the first chapter of *The Concept of
Prayer*. Extended use is made of Malcolm's analysis of the concept of

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[70] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 123-124, 664, 255 and II, p. 226 on, respectively pp. 1, 8, 10,
27; and sections 6.432 and 6.44 of the *Tractatus* on, respectively, pp. 76, 102. The latter
two quotes are illustrative rather than systematic and are thus less relevant to our current
discussion.

an eternal God, and Phillips leans heavily on Winch in arguing for the distinctiveness of the religious way of life and the autonomy of the criteria of logic which arise in that way of life and from which religious language and the activities into which it is woven derive their intelligibility. Wittgenstein is heard on neither topic. Which is hardly surprising, for his discussion of the concept of God was not yet available and his (then) published works provide little, if any, textual support for Winch's socio-philosophical thesis of the autonomy of categories of behaviour. It is no accident that Phillips turns to Winch, quoting in full the famous, or notorious, passage from *The Idea of a Social Science* where it is claimed that science and religion are distinct modes of social life.[71]

It would seem, then, that *The Concept of Prayer's* understanding of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy owes more to Rhees, Winch and Malcolm than to a careful examination of Wittgenstein's own remarks. This suggestion also helps to explain another remarkable aspect of the book. Rightly or wrongly, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is, by now, indissolubly connected to talk of religious beliefs as distinctive language-games, of religion as a specific form of life. It may, therefore, come as something of a surprise that, in *The Concept of Prayer*, the notion of a language-game is not employed at all, and the notion of a form of life just once or twice.[72] This is all the more puzzling when one recalls that Wittgenstein adds 'praying' to a list of examples meant to exemplify the multiplicity of language-games.[73] As we saw, Winch, too, refrained from extensive use of the terms, opting for talk of 'ways of living', 'modes of social life', 'categories of behaviour' and 'contexts of application'. The fact that Phillips follows Winch in emphasising the distinctive framework, context, or way of life that constitutes religion,[74] lends support to our suggestion that, in *The Concept of Prayer*, Winch takes precedence over Wittgenstein.

Perhaps we should say that it were the Wittgensteinians rather than Wittgenstein who provided *The Concept of Prayer* its primary source of

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[71] See Phillips 1981, p. 24.

[72] Although the notions appear in quotes (see, for instance, Phillips 1981, pp. 18, 27), Phillips does not explore them systematically. Still, where Phillips does employ the notion of a form of life it seems clear that he considers religion, or religious belief, to constitute, in some sense, a distinct form of life (see, for instance Phillips 1981, p. 28); a position wisely abandoned in his later work.

[73] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 23. Surely, one would expect a work which is self-avowedly influenced by Wittgenstein and seeks to give an account of the activity of prayer to seize upon this remark?

[74] See, for instance, Phillips 1981, pp. 22, 23, 27, 36, 37, 127-28, 148.

inspiration. Rhees, Winch and Malcolm play a crucial role in preparing
the way for some of the main themes and key arguments of *The Concept
of Prayer*. What sets Phillips's book apart is the way in which it takes
up these voices and expands upon them. Rhees's remarks, we saw, are
tentative and fragmentary; they lack an overall systematic framework.
Winch provides such a framework but does no more than hint at its
implications for the study of religion. Malcolm's discussion remains
negative and abstract; it falls short of providing an extended descriptive
account of religious belief(s) or practice(s), and of the human phenom-
ena that lie behind it. Phillips, one might say, draws them together into
a more comprehensive account, an account which engages critically with
contemporary philosophical accounts, thus giving a distinctive voice to
Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.

   To summarise, I see no reason to doubt Phillips's word when he tells
us that what he started out with when writing *The Concept of Prayer*
was a cluster of puzzling problems concerning prayer, rather than with
something called a philosophical position which he then applied to
the problems at hand.[75] Nevertheless, in addressing these problems, the
book also aims to elaborate and endorse a conception of the relation of
philosophy to religion argued to be implied by Wittgenstein's remarks;
a specific philosophical approach which is presented as radical and
innovative.[76] It is, indeed, the first sustained and systematic attempt at
applying a Wittgensteinian approach to the philosophical study of reli-
gion. As such, its contribution to the development of Wittgensteinian
philosophy of religion cannot be overestimated. And it is as such that
we discuss it here.

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[75] See Phillips 1970, p. 62; cf. Ramal 2000, p. 56, note 50. Ramal's suggestion
that Phillips "adopts his philosophical position and finds it applicable to religious belief
because, upon investigation, that sort of belief shows itself to be resistant to external
justifications that we force upon it" (Ramal 2000, p. 51), may be of some merit. One
wonders, however, what kind of investigation would show one's philosophical position
to be applicable. The fact that religious belief shows itself to be resistant to external jus-
tifications, if fact this be, may be argued equally well to accommodate a sociological or
psychological explanatory theory. Furthermore, what brings one to adopt a philosophical
position in the first place? As *The Concept of Prayer* rightly points out, the nature and
purpose of philosophical enquiry is itself a philosophical controversy. Phillips argues for
the appropriateness of his Wittgensteinian position over and against other possible philo-
sophical approaches. This argument is not, and cannot be, conducted solely on the basis
of the applicability of a philosophical method to a given subject matter, not in the least
because Phillips believes his descriptive approach to bring about a *proper* understanding
of the subject matter.
[76] See Phillips 1981, pp. 6, 29.

3.2.2 The Concept of Prayer *and philosophical clarification*

In designating the nature and task of philosophical enquiry, Phillips, like
Rhees, emphasises philosophy's hermeneutical task. On the one hand,
Phillips may be understood as arguing that the question of God's exis-
tence constitutes a philosophical problem. By clarifying the grammar of
the concept of God, he believes the problem may be shown to rest on
confusion. Having been led back to the rough ground, our philosophi-
cal problem is dissolved. This would tie in neatly with Wittgenstein's
therapeutic method. On the other hand, various passages suggest that
philosophical clarification need not set off from specific philosophical
problems. Rather, it seeks to attain a clear understanding of religious
phenomena — the language, beliefs and the actions into which they
are woven — trying to make sense of the whole thing.[77] Philosophical
clarification brings not just the dissolution of philosophical puzzles but
a new understanding of the subject under investigation. Here, Phillips
feels, Wittgenstein may be misleading. For, although his remark that
philosophy must leave everything as it is rightly emphasises the relation
of philosophy to the discourse it wishes to investigate, it does not do jus-
tice to the new understanding which such an enquiry brings.[78] The same
goes for Wittgenstein's comparison of the philosopher's treatment of a
problem to a doctor's treatment of an illness:

> "If one is treated for an illness one hopes to be *restored* to health; one
> hopes to return to the state one was in before the illness occurred. But when
> one is rescued from the grips of a philosophical puzzle, one does not return
> to the state one was in before the puzzle occurred. On the contrary, one
> possesses an understanding which one did not possess previously."[79]

The Concept of Prayer thus vacillates between a problem-oriented and a
more hermeneutical designation, placing strong emphasis on the notion
of a philosophical understanding which is, so to speak, philosophy's net
gain. In the following section we enquire into the nature of this new
understanding; for now, let us probe a bit more deeply into *The Concept
of Prayer*'s conception of philosophical clarification.

In 1965, the influence of logical positivism was still very much
noticeable in Anglo-Saxon philosophy of religion. Perhaps the slogan,
'the meaning of an expression is its use' — in many ways traceable to

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[77] See, for example, Phillips 1981, pp. 2-3, 23, 83.
[78] See Phillips 1981, p. 10.
[79] Phillips 1981, p. 10.

Wittgenstein's work — had broadened positivism's narrow criteria of meaning. But Phillips is right to say that religion benefited little from these concessions.[80] Expressions of religious belief were deemed at best false, at worst vacuous or nonsensical. In the hands of believers, our every-day concepts, to use two famous phrases, 'are stretched to breaking point' and are thus 'killed by inches, the death of a thousand qualifications'.[81] *The Concept of Prayer* seeks to overcome these objections by attacking what it takes to be their fundamental assumption. Namely, "that there is a primary context of ordinary use which can self-evidently be taken as paradigmatic for evaluating use in other contexts."[82] This, Phillips argues, is by no means self-evident; on the contrary, to assume such is to be guilty of arbitrary linguistic legislation.[83] *The Concept of Prayer* urges us to abandon 'ordinary language' as a norm of meaningfulness and rationality and to start looking at the use words actually have in the various contexts in which they are employed. Conceptual analysis — that is, philosophical clarification — pays attention to the depth grammar of a given discourse, thus bringing out the criteria of meaning internal to that discourse and revealing what it means to engage in said discourse.[84] The point of a philosophical investigation of religion is not to be found in propaganda either for or against religion. The philosopher wishes merely to understand the grammar of religious discourse. There is no meaning in the claim that philosophy can justify this discourse; it can do no more than provide a further understanding of what religious believers are doing and saying.[85]

There is some doubt, however, as to whether *The Concept of Prayer* truly succeeds in breaking loose from the positivistic assumptions it so vehemently attacks. According to Incandela it does not.[86] He argues that we are offered, what David Pears called, a species of 'linguistic naturalism', which says that

> "'there is nothing but the facts' (but, *pace* the scientific form of positivism, the *linguistic* facts of the use of grammar of a particular mode of discourse — of which religion is one). Pears concludes, 'This kind of answer to philosophical questions is positivistic'; but it is a 'subtle positivism' which

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[80] See Phillips 1981, p. 4.
[81] See, respectively, Hepburn 1958 and Flew 1955; quoted in Phillips 1981, p. 5.
[82] Phillips 1981, p. 7.
[83] See Phillips 1981, p. 10.
[84] See Phillips 1981, pp. 1-3, 8-9.
[85] See Phillips 1981, pp. 23-24.
[86] See Incandela 1985, pp. 464ff; cf. Scott and Moore 1997, p. 409, Clack 1999(a), pp. 100-101.

does not discriminate against those modes of discourse which until Wittgenstein had to sit at the back of the bus."[87]

The logical positivists were concerned to ground meaning and rationality in 'the given', that is, observable, empirical reality. Religious beliefs, they maintained, have a hard time living up to this demand. For instance, when the theist says that God is a mystery which transcends human understanding, A. J. Ayer enquired, is he not really saying that it is unintelligible?[88] Phillips's reply would seem to confirm Incandela's suggestion that *The Concept of Prayer* has not really left positivism far behind:

> "My reply and my argument can be expressed in the following remarks by Marcel: 'Not only does the word "transcendent" *not* mean "transcending experience", but on the contrary there must exist a possibility of having an experience *of* the transcendent as such, and unless that possibility exists the word can have no meaning.'"[89]

Far from dismissing the positivists' criteria of meaning, Incandela concludes, Phillips and his predecessors merely came up with a hybrid form of it they could live with:

> "they still wanted religious acts and statements to be grounded somehow in experience and so discoverable through empirical analysis. The form of life model simply allowed them to interpret these acts and statements within a particular context. […] Hence, while religious beliefs could not possess any meaning for the former group since no sense experience could confirm or disconfirm them; the same sort of beliefs acquired legitimation for the latter group *precisely* because it is an observable fact that people do hold them — that is, that certain people do talk and act in 'religious' ways."[90]

Once again, textual evidence would seem to support this claim. Witness how Phillips continues the passage quoted above:

> "Talking to God is not an impossible feat. People do so when they pray. There are contexts within which concepts such as prayer are used and have their meaning. If religious people speak of God as being beyond human understanding or as a mystery, these are religious ideas which can be understood as such."[91]

The emphasis here is not so much on the individual language user but on autonomous and distinctly religious modes of discourse from which

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[87] Incandela 1985, p. 464. Incandela is quoting from David Pears 1971, p. 184.
[88] See Phillips 1981, p. 39.
[89] Phillips 1981, p. 39. Phillips is quoting from Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (2 vols., trans. by G. S. Fraser and René Hague, Gateway Ed., 1960), vol. 1, pp. 57-58.
[90] Incandela 1985, p. 464.
[91] Phillips 1981, pp. 39-40.

individual religious acts, beliefs, and expressions derive their meaning. Paradoxically, this position does turn out to be more amenable to the positivistic climate in which it arose than to Wittgenstein's view.

This, as noted previously, supports our suggestion that Phillips draws more on his predecessors than on Wittgenstein. For the rationale of these claims is revealed not by direct reference to Wittgenstein, but to Malcolm and Winch. Drawing upon their work, Phillips argues that criteria of truth and falsity are internally related to, and vary systematically with, a variety of contexts. Religion, as Winch indicated, is one of these contexts. Which means that criteria of truth and falsity in religion are to be found within religious traditions.[92] To ask whether or not a religious belief, say, that God exists, is true, is to ask a question "about the possibility of giving an account of the distinction between truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, in religion."[93] That is to say, we must take account of the criteria of meaningfulness where talk of God's existence is concerned. If we fail to do so, our account is in danger of becoming a mere *ignoratio elenchi*.[94]

In the course of his investigation, Phillips, to put it crudely, accuses quite a few of his peers of ignorance. Such authors as Ayer, Flew, Hepburn, and Mitchell are argued to have failed to take due account of the criteria of meaning and truth at work in religious contexts. They construe God's existence as akin to the existence of physical objects, taking it for granted that the concept of God belongs within the conceptual framework of the reality of the physical world.[95] But, Phillips maintains, in so doing they impose an alien grammar upon religious language.[96] Making extended use of Malcolm's work, Phillips argues that the concept of God logically precludes the possibility of His non-existence. That is to say, God's existence is not *contingent*; it is not that as a *matter of fact* God will always exist, but that it *makes no sense* to say that God might not exist.[97] It follows that the rejoinder that we should first decide whether or not there is a God to pray to before we start analysing the concept of prayer, is misguided. On the contrary, it is only by clarifying religious language, by giving a conceptual account of the activity

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[92] See Phillips 1981, p. 27.

[93] Phillips 1981, p. 22.

[94] See Phillips 1981, p. 24. The crux of this argument was already presented in Phillips's article 'Philosophy, Theology and the Reality of God', published in 1963 (reprinted in Phillips 1970, pp. 1-12).

[95] See Phillips 1981, p. 23.

[96] See Phillips 1981, p. 81.

[97] See Phillips 1981, p. 14.

of prayer, that we may come to see what it means to talk of God as exist-ing. The believer, Phillips argues, learns a (religious) language. The suggestion is "that to know how to use this language is to know God. This common knowledge of God is religion."[98]

To many, this was (and is) a startling conclusion. Referring to the pas-sage quoted above, Flew could only conclude that Phillips surely did not intend to say what he actually says.[99] Likewise, Griffiths's review of *The Concept of Prayer* surmises that Phillips is missing the point. After all, no philosopher would wish to deny that the significance or importance of prayer is to be found within the activity of praying. But that is not to say anything about meaning as a property of knowledge-claims:

> "Indeed, answering a question about meaning as a linguistic property, or a question about the assertorial status of religious remarks, by appealing to or recommending that the questioner engage in some sort of activity or performance […] constitutes a commission of what I call 'the performa-tive fallacy'."[100]

In short, questions as to the meaning of prayer, questions as to the status of the purported knowledge-claims which inform or derive from the activity of praying, cannot be answered by looking at "what men are doing when they talk to God."[101] To say that talking to God is not an impossible feat for, after all, people do so when they pray,[102] is surely to dodge the whole issue. Boldly put, it only makes sense to pray when there is a God to receive the prayer in the first place:

> "The crux here is that, although this logically prior question of existence does not of course have actually to be decided before we can begin to analyse the concept of prayer, nevertheless, the philosopher who fails to insist that the practice of prayer does presuppose an affirmative answer is simply not in touch with prayer as conceived by the Saints and the Fathers."[103]

Indeed, it is not hard to see how the suggestion that 'to know how to use religious language is to know god' led many critics to accuse *The Concept of Prayer* of some form of reductionism. Clack, for example, considers this yet more evidence of the book's implicit positivistic tenor. Instead of declaring victory over the phantoms of positivism, Phillips should really admit defeat:

[98] Phillips 1981, p. 50.
[99] See Flew 1967, p. 295.
[100] Griffiths 1968, p. 609.
[101] Phillips 1981, p. 23.
[102] See Phillips 1981, p. 39.
[103] Flew 1967, p. 295.

> "Accepting that after Hume and Ayer there can be no way of justifying the metaphysical claims made by religion, Phillips and other writers of his ilk chose, from some kind of nostalgic yearning, to preserve the *language* of religion while rejecting the objects to which that language had formerly been believed to refer."[104]

Of course, on Phillips's view, we have simply returned to the 'deep-rooted assumption' that has led attention away from his actual analyses of prayer. These analyses are not guilty of being reductionist. On the contrary, Phillips maintains that they do justice to the various features which 'the life of prayer' exhibits.[105] In the following section we will examine whether Phillips can substantiate this claim. For now, one may perhaps reply that Flew and Griffiths are not merely *assuming* that questions as to God's existence have logical priority, they are arguing to this effect. Furthermore, Flew seems willing to engage Phillips on his 'home ground'. For in claiming that Phillips is 'out of touch' with paradigmatic examples of prayer, i.e. prayer as conceived by the Saints and Fathers, Flew is saying that Phillips's account falls short of its self-proclaimed standard: it fails to accommodate the various features the life of prayer exhibits. Finally, we would hazard to say, the reason the assumption is so deep-rooted is because it gives voice to a sentiment which is profoundly right. It would be ludicrous to suggest that a (Christian) life of prayer need not presuppose the existence of God. What to make of the person who is committed to such a life but does not believe that God exists? The suggestion is not even palatable without filling in more of the details of the story. Of course, Phillips does not mean to deny that, on the whole, those for whom prayer constitutes an important part of their life would, if asked, affirm the existence of God. Where he parts ways with his critics is in giving an account of what presupposing or affirming God's existence amounts to. This dispute, Phillips insists, can only be settled by reference to the language of faith. Here, Malcolm's argument can help us no further. For although it is important in warning us of a number of false moves in the philosophical treatment of the existence of God, something more positive than this must be accomplished:

> "One must proceed to say what belief in an eternal God means; that is, what the point of such a belief is. Here, the deductive logic of the previous arguments does not suffice. One must take account of what religion means for religious believers if one wishes to pursue this new enquiry. Otherwise religion will seem pointless and arbitrary to someone *outside* religion. It is

[104] Clack 1999(a), p. 101.
[105] See Phillips 1981, p. 3.

no accident that Malcolm's appeal to the actual use of the concept of God plays such a crucial role in his argument. In this essay, it is with *the point* of religious worship that I shall be concerned."[106]

What is needed is a philosophical clarification of the concepts at work in the religious way of life which, by paying attention to the depth grammar underlying and regulating the use of these concepts, reveals their meaning. But there is an ambiguity in the above passage which needs to be brought out.[107] If one does not, one might be somewhat puzzled by the implication that Malcolm has not yet been engaged in fulfilling said task. Surely a clarification of such conceptual brainteasers as 'God exists' and 'God is eternal' is, in part, what his essay sought to provide. Phillips's point may be understood, however, once we recognise how tight a connection is being drawn between 'having meaning' and 'having a point', and, conversely, between something having no meaning and something being pointless and arbitrary. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Phillips here uses the word 'meaning' as synonymous with 'significance'.[108] The meaning of belief in an eternal God is equated with whatever the point of this belief may be. But this tends to run together various senses of the word 'meaning'. Clearly, there is a sense in which we may say that to see the meaning is to see the point. But when 'meaning' is used in its 'logical', 'grammatical' or 'linguistic' sense, the equation collapses. In this latter sense, something which is pointless need not be meaningless, and vice versa. One may perfectly well be able to understand the meaning of a certain belief without seeing any point in believing it (because, for example, the belief simply is untrue), or while continuing to find the belief an arbitrary one. Indeed, it is not at all clear whether something which is meaningless, in the latter sense, can be called pointless. Rather, what has no meaning is neither significant nor futile, neither necessary nor arbitrary. *The Concept of Prayer* is not always as clear in distinguishing these two senses of 'meaning' as one might wish. As regards the implication that Malcolm has not yet revealed the meaning of belief in an eternal God; here, 'meaning' should primarily be understood in the former sense, that of 'significance'.

Perhaps it is understandable that questions as to the point of religious belief crop up given the strong emphasis on the distinctiveness of religious grammar and the religious mode of life characteristic of early

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[106] Phillips 1981, p. 23.
[107] We encountered the same ambiguity in our discussion of Malcolm.
[108] See Griffiths 1968, p. 609.

Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Where it comes to allowing the
'distinct modes of social life' to overlap and intermingle, *The Concept
of Prayer* evinces the same kind of reserve as Winch's *The Idea of a
Social Science*. Religious beliefs and activities tend to enter into social
isolation. This may guarantee their autonomy, but is hardly conducive
to their significance. That is to say, one invites the question as to why
people would want to engage in religious activities in the first place. The
more one isolates religious concerns from our worldly cares, the more
one starts wondering why these concerns should play a role in anyone's
life. *The Concept of Prayer* hopes to avoid this problem by inviting us
to consider the human phenomena which lie behind religious belief.[109]
After all, religious concepts

> "are not *technical* concepts; they are not cut off from the common experi-
> ences of human life: joy and sorrow, hope and despair. Because this is so,
> an attempt can be made to clarify their meaning."[110]

Before we turn to consider whether Phillips makes good on these words,
we should note that this passage contains the same ambiguity of the sense
of 'meaning' we just now discussed. As it stands, the remark seems to
entail the rather curious consequence that the meaning, if any, of techni-
cal concepts cannot be clarified. It is difficult to see why this should be
so, or indeed what Phillips is after. What, precisely, should the adjective
'technical' denote? A clear answer is not forthcoming. Phillips uses the
term rather loosely, leaving it ill-defined. It is introduced in the discus-
sion with Ayer we already referred to, concerning the believer's claim
that the nature of God is beyond human understanding.[111] Should we not
conclude that to say that something transcends human understanding is to
say that it is unintelligible? This conclusion, Phillips replies, follows only
when we take the religious ideas to be would-be epistemological theories.
But they are not. They are religious rather than technical concepts and
can be understood as such.[112] This, then, gives us some indication of what
Phillips means by technical concepts: epistemological and theoretical
concepts constitute prime examples. If so, then we may safely say that we
employ many concepts which may be denoted 'technical'. And it may
well be true that such concepts are not intimately related to experiences
of joy and sorrow. But surely it does not follow that, therefore, they have
no meaning or that their meaning cannot be clarified.

[109] See Phillips 1981, p. 95.
[110] Phillips 1981, p. 40.
[111] See Phillips 1981, pp. 39-40.
[112] See Phillips 1981, p. 40.

It remains obscure why Phillips should wish to deny this. Unless, that is, one assumes that, once again, the word 'meaning' should be understood primarily in the sense of 'having a point' or 'being significant'. Thus, one might inject some intelligibility into the argument. But, if this is indeed Phillips's position, it remains an awkward one, at best. For not only is the equation of 'meaningful' with 'having a point', as we have argued, a dubious one, but little sense can be made of the claim that technical concepts are pointless or arbitrary. It is either patently false — in their appropriate contexts theoretical and epistemological concepts are clearly neither pointless nor arbitrary — or begs the question as to why being cut off from common experiences of joy, sorrow, etc. should be set up as a standard of conceptual significance. Perhaps more importantly, how can we be so sure that certain religious ideas should not be deemed — in the sense specified — technical in nature? Unless one already labours under the presumption that theoretical or epistemological and religious interests must be, can be, and are, strictly separated, the possibility cannot be excluded *a priori*. At any rate, one's conclusion should be the *result* rather than the *condition of the possibility* of clarification.

All this aside, Phillips's suggestion that we may come to see the meaning, in both the senses discussed, of religious beliefs and activities by examining the human phenomena out of which they arise seems to allow some leeway for explaining religious belief in non-religious terms. And, on occasion, Phillips may appear to come close to doing so. Faced with personal tragedy, the death of a child, believers may recognise their helplessness and seek something to sustain them, the love of God. When the child unexpectedly recovers, they thank God for this turn of events.[113] In this sense, religious activities may be said to arise from common human phenomena of hope and despair. Phillips warns us, however, not to misunderstand the nature of this relationship. For instance, the relation between praising God and what happens is not one of inference.[114] To return to our example, the distressed parents are not asking God to save their child, nor are they thanking Him for having brought it about that the child survives. Rather, their prayers, if they are truly religious, are best understood as

> "an expression of, and request for, devotion to God through the way things go. […] When deep religious believers pray *for* something, they are not

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[113] See Phillips 1981, p. 120.
[114] See Phillips 1981, p. 97.

so much asking God to bring this about, but in a way telling Him of the strength of their desires. They realize that things may not go as they wish, but they are asking to be able to go on living whatever happens."[115]

If, in fact, it were otherwise, that is, if the parents were really out to get God to put things aright, and thanking Him for complying, the prayer, Phillips concludes, would not be religious but, rather, superstitious. They would be praying to, what Phillips, borrowing from Simone Weil, calls a naturalistic god. Which means they were not talking to God at all. No doubt, Phillips argues, many people may worship a naturalistic god. But that is irrelevant. After all, to err is human. Phillips, so he states, is not interested in such mistaken religious beliefs, but in what he takes to be genuine faith.[116]

In a sense, then, and without wanting to be coarse, the life of the child drops out of the equation. Phillips realises as much when he poses the question as to why — if what the prayer really amounts to is 'Thy will be done' — the specific requests are mentioned at all. His answer is as follows:

> "since a man is concerned with hope and meaning in his life, it is the desires which he actually does have which he wants to bring to God. After all, it is these desires and not any others which threaten to overwhelm him, and through which he must seek God."[117]

It would be very uncharitable to suggest that Phillips portrays the parents' desire for their child to be saved as an obstacle their faith must overcome. Still, can his analysis do justice to the strength of the desires? Is the role they are awarded in the prayer in accordance with their 'human phenomenal' content? Phillips places great weight upon Simone Weil's understanding of the spirit of God as the spirit of self-denial. Crudely put, to find the love of God, is to lose oneself. This, for Simone Weil, is the prime use of suffering:

> "If I thought that God sent me suffering by an act of his will and for my good, I should think that I was something, and I should miss the chief use of suffering which is to teach me that I am nothing."[118]

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[115] Phillips 1981, p. 121.
[116] See Phillips 1981, pp. 106, 158. It is not clear whether Phillips would treat of superstition as a mistake or as a confusion. Nor is it clear whether he believes the notion of a naturalistic god to be conceivable, but mistaken, or the result of philosophical-intellectual confusion. Moreover, it would seem that, in his later work, he modifies his position. These topics are more fully explored in the ninth chapter of this book.
[117] Phillips 1981, p. 122.
[118] Quoted in Phillips 1981, p. 102.

There is little doubt that *The Concept of Prayer* presents these words as genuinely and deeply religious. One might agree. And one should certainly see how Phillips's analysis of petitionary prayer fits in well with Weil's remarks. But it is less easy to see how invoking the spirit of self-denial has brought us closer to common human experiences of hope and despair, joy and sorrow. After all, does not the renunciation of the self involve the renunciation or, at least, transformation of these experiences? What Phillips's analysis demonstrates is how feelings of despair, joy, etc., may *occasion* prayers of petition or thanksgiving.[119] But if this is what is meant by saying that prayer is not cut off from common human experiences the relation is rather meagre.

The emphasis upon renunciation may be said to focus more on 'the divine', than on 'the human'. And it is because of this that it raises a further question. This question has been posed eloquently by Clack. Referring to Weil's love of 'being a nothingness', Clack argues that

> "It does not go without saying that such sentiments are not pathological. From the necessity of denying our self-centredness, need we really go this far? Does not this self-abasing, nothingness-seeking religion act as a confirmation of Nietzsche's suspicion that Christianity served only to destroy everything noble, everything vigorous and affirmative in human life, so that the Christian really was the 'sick animal man'?"[120]

Well, need we really go this far? Perhaps that is for the reader to decide. Phillips would seem to indicate so when he stresses the personal dimension in religious belief. Although philosophical enquiry may help us understand the nature of truth in religion, it cannot decide on anyone's behalf who the true God is or which is the true prayer. And this is due precisely to the nature of truth in this context — to affirm the truth of a religious belief, is to adopt it:

> "To say, 'This is the true God', is to believe in Him and worship Him. […] Belief in the true God is not like belief in a true theory. To believe in the former case is synonymous with worship, and […] it is too much to expect such an effect from any philosophical argument."[121]

Seeing the truth of a prayer is indistinguishable from being prepared to pray it. Thus, in so far as the philosopher chooses one kind of prayer, he is making a religious judgement. In doing so, he is essentially on the same footing as anyone else.[122] But does not this contention, that

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[119] See Phillips 1981, p. 120.
[120] Clack 1999(a), p. 103.
[121] Phillips 1981, pp. 149-150; cf. Malcolm 1960, pp. 61-62.
[122] See Phillips 1981, pp. 157-158.

philosophy cannot decide what constitutes true religion, sit rather uneasily with the claim that philosophical enquiry can and should distinguish between what is truly or genuinely religious and what is not?[123] Furthermore, when one starts distinguishing between genuine religious belief and superstition, it is, in Clack's words, "impossible entirely to shake off the pejorative overtone of the term, entailing that what is meant by a superstition is simply a religious practice of which one disapproves."[124] Evidently, Phillips's analysis captures an important strand of Christianity. It fits in well with Simone Weil's understanding of belief in a supernatural God, and perhaps it can accommodate many of Kierkegaard's views. But whether it can do justice to the various ways in which Christianity has historically understood itself remains doubtful. Of course, it need not. In fact, *The Concept of Prayer* denies any claim to completeness. There are, Phillips admits, many prayers which do not fit readily into his exposition: "all I can do is to note them and leave it at that."[125] Given Phillips's persistent use of the distinction between what is genuinely religious and what is superstitious, however, one might feel the prospects for these prayers to be rather bleak.

We began this section by enquiring further into the notion of philosophical clarification. We are left with the question as to whether such clarifications can justify and sustain a criterion of what constitutes genuine religious belief. To answer this question, however, we need to pay attention to the new understanding this clarification engenders. The following section turns to this task. It asks three interrelated questions: what is the nature of this understanding; how does one know that one's understanding is correct; how does one acquire such understanding? In raising these questions, a host of problems comes to the fore.

3.2.3 The Concept of Prayer *and philosophical understanding*

First, what is the nature of this new understanding? It is clear that the understanding gained is a *philosophical* understanding. That is to say, it is internally related to the activity of philosophical clarification and need not coincide with the understanding a believer may have of his religious belief. While praying, a believer may know what he is doing, but

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[123] See, for example, Phillips 1981, pp. 10-11, 106, 117, 121, 124, 158-159.
[124] Clack 1999(a), p. 102.
[125] Phillips 1981, p. 8.

when one asks him to give a non-religious, i.e. philosophical, account of prayer he may well fail to provide an adequate one.[126] There is no reason to suppose that a devout believer must be a competent philosopher, nor does he need to be. After all, for example, we are perfectly capable of telling the time even if we lack the philosophical resources to give an adequate account of the concept of time. But when Phillips tells us that a philosophical understanding of religion may amount to seeing the difference between what is deep and what is shallow in religion, or even between what is truly religious and what is not religious at all,[127] matters become rather more urgent. For, surely, this is the kind of understanding the believer, if not actually needs to possess, certainly would benefit from possessing. Phillips seems to deny this. He argues that someone who makes all the wrong philosophical moves need not lack religious insight.[128] But, if making all the wrong philosophical moves amounts to taking things to be deep which are really shallow, and believing things to be truly religious which, in fact, are not religious at all, then it is difficult to see how this can be maintained. Surely, here, we can only conclude that religious and philosophical insight overlap or go

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[126] See Phillips 1981, p. 2.

[127] See Phillips 1981, pp. 10-11. According to Phillips, the failure to give a conceptual account of an activity with which one is familiar is not peculiar to religion. Rather, it is a general truth. For instance, the capable scientist surely knows what he is doing when he is doing science, but he may make a hopeless mess of giving an account of the logic of scientific statements. Again, the novelist may know what he is doing while writing a novel, but it does not follow that he will have anything valuable to say about the idea of literature (see Phillips 1981, p. 2). Please note, however, that the two examples are hardly analogous. To make them analogous, either the first one should have read 'the competent scientist need not have anything valuable to say about the idea of science', or the second should have read 'the competent novelist may make a hopeless mess of giving an account of the logic of literary statements'. Neither option is palatable. For it is difficult to understand how to fail to say anything valuable about the idea of science constitutes a *philosophical* failure, given Phillips's conception of philosophy as grammatical clarification; and it is even more difficult to understand what we should make of 'the logic of literary statements'. More importantly, these examples are provided to illustrate the point that the devout believer need not be a competent philosopher. But, given Phillips's description of the content of a philosophical understanding of prayer, these examples would seem to collapse. Can we make sense of the idea that the competent scientist, or someone telling the time, should turn out, upon philosophical investigation, not to have been doing science, or telling the time, at all? Surely not. Finally, even in the religious case, the point is dubious. For if the religious believer knows what he is doing while praying, it seems, at best, paradoxical to say that, pending philosophical investigation, we (which, one presumes, includes the believer) cannot know whether he is praying at all. (See also Phillips 1981, p. 2 and p. 11.)

[128] See Phillips 1981, p. 84.

hand in hand so that the "deepening of philosophical understanding
may at the same time be the deepening of religious understanding".[129]

Now, I do not wish to deny that there is clearly something right about
saying, as Phillips later puts it, that someone may be both a spiritual
giant and an intellectual invalid.[130] *The Concept of Prayer* brings out the
point well by reference to Tolstoy's story 'The Three Hermits'.[131] A
bishop is told of three hermits who live together on an island and who
are reputed to be holy men. Upon visiting them, the bishop is amused to
find that the only prayer they ever pray is 'Three are ye, three are we,
have mercy upon us!'. He proceeds to teach them the Lord's Prayer in
the hope of deepening their knowledge of God. With great difficulty, the
hermits finally manage to master the prayer, by repeating it after the
bishop time and time again. Satisfied, the bishop departs. But that night,
when his ship is far from land, the three are seen running on the water,
crying out to the bishop. They have already forgotten the prayer, and beg
to be taught again. Realisation dawns upon the bishop. Leaning over
ship's side, he says, 'Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God.
It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners'.

The story is compelling. But is its point really that religious under-
standing is not intellectual understanding?[132] Should we not say, rather,
that the story can only have the appeal is has because we normally do
associate deep religious belief with some level of intellectual understand-
ing? One should emphasise that the three hermits present an extraordi-
nary case. Their running upon the water provides the point, for both
bishop and reader, where their holiness suddenly breaks through. Nor-
mally, we do not come to learn about any individual's piety by their
ability to walk upon water. The depth of their faith is shown in the way
they live their lives. And, here, the ability to explain and teach, to make
their faith intelligible, is by no means irrelevant. To use a famous phrase,
faith may well be a faith seeking understanding.[133] Phillips may be right
that to gain knowledge of God is not to accumulate facts about an exter-
nal object. But categorically to state that knowledge of God is not a
matter of learning, and that deepening one's knowledge of the divine is

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[129] Phillips 1970, p. 268. This passage, taken from an article published only two years
after *The Concept of Prayer* already indicates that Phillips's later writings are more con-
sidered in this respect.

[130] See Phillips 1970, p. 264.

[131] See Phillips 1981, pp. 60-61.

[132] See Phillips 1981, p. 61.

[133] The reply that the understanding sought is not intellectual but religious is surely
facile.

not a matter of increasing intelligibility, is to go too far.[134] Religious belief need not be scholarly; nor need it be mute. Tolstoy's story teaches us not to overestimate the former; it can only do so if we have also learnt not to underestimate it. In short, religious and intellectual understanding cannot be so strictly separated.[135]

Let us turn to our next question. How should one ascertain that one's philosophical understanding is correct? Here, further problems await us. For, given Phillips's account thus far, it is clear that it will not do to simply ask the believers: one cannot accept what they say as (philosophically or intellectually) true.[136] Phillips's answer is that in distinguishing the good from the bad accounts, the ultimate appeal is to actual usage itself. The account must be judged on the grounds of whether it accommodates the various features which the activity under investigation exhibits.[137] This may seem straightforward but, on closer examination, it is far from thus. After all, even if the appeal to actual usage would consist of mere empirical observation, one would still need to know what constitute the *relevant* features of the activity under investigation. And that presupposes at least some prior understanding of the activity. The question as to what is correct would then repeat itself at this level. More importantly, however, Phillips's notion of the appeal to usage cannot be so understood. For it is determined philosophically as the clarification of the (depth) grammar of the practice under investigation. There is thus always a certain amount of circularity involved. Indeed, an exclusively empirical understanding of the appeal to usage is explicitly rejected. Phillips is adamant that one cannot philosophise 'by Gallup poll'.[138] There is no (need for) empirical research to gather statistical data on believers' views of their belief. Perhaps this also explains why Phillips draws his primary examples not, as it were, from everyday religious life but, rather, from philosophical and literary sources. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Simone Weil and Kierkegaard provide the reminders *par excellence* of 'genuine' religious belief. Of course, these reminders are intended as reminders of actual religious practice. That is to say, they are carried back to the way an average, contemporary, believer experiences and practices his faith. But, given Phillips's distinction between philosophical

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[134] See Phillips 1981, p. 60.
[135] Please note, also, that Phillips tends to run together philosophical and intellectual understanding. This begs the question, as these are not obviously equivalent.
[136] See Phillips 1981, p. 3.
[137] See Phillips 1981, p. 3.
[138] See Phillips 1981, p. 1.

and religious understanding, it is difficult to see how this believer can partake in this dialogue; he remains a silent witness throughout *The Concept of Prayer*.

Clearly then, the appeal to actual usage is far from unproblematic. Indeed, if it were not, one should expect Phillips to be able to reach some level of agreement with his opponents. However, as we saw, this is hardly the case. Flew's objection that Phillips's account is out of touch with paradigmatic examples of prayer, i.e. prayer as conceived by the Saints and Fathers, should itself be taken as an appeal to practice. Flew is saying that *his* analysis, rather than Phillips's, does justice to the various features which the life of prayer exhibits. How to judge between the two? Phillips implies that, at a certain stage, there is no longer any possibility of doing so:

> "What can one say to philosophers who insist on talking in this way? One can ask them to look again at the way people worship, and at what the Saints have written about their Faith. Also, one can point out the implications which their way of talking has for religion, and try to show how the implications of one's own views are truer to religious belief. […] On the other hand, one must not be afraid to admit that one's arguments about religion may reach a stage where all one can say to one's opponent is, 'Well, if you can't see it, that's that!'"[139]

Of course, Phillips would do well to remember that his opponent may reach the same conclusion. Thus, the whole notion of which account is correct would seem to be left hanging in the air. But this belies the tenor of *The Concept of Prayer*. For Phillips leaves little room for doubt that his opponents' accounts are radically mistaken and that this can be philosophically demonstrated. It is perhaps interesting to note that the passage quoted above precedes the one where Phillips argues that philosophers who make all the wrong moves need not necessarily lack religious insight. This may, indeed, be charitable. But one may, perhaps, forgive the philosophers addressed for finding it facetious rather than generous.

At any rate, this brings us to our final question: how does one acquire a philosophical understanding of religious belief? One may reply, simply, 'by taking note of the depth grammar of religious belief'. But, by now, it should be clear that this reply will not do. The philosopher must already have "an idea of what genuine prayer is before [he] can give a philosophical account of it".[140] The philosopher must, in

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[139] Phillips 1981, p. 83.
[140] See Phillips 1981, p. 158.

other words, have some 'feeling for the game'.[141] Winch, we saw, formu-
lated a similar requirement. The problem was that although it seems no
more than common sense to say that some acquaintance with the reli-
gious movements one is studying is required, the demand for 'religious
feeling' on the part of the philosopher is ambiguous. Phillips's account
hardly ameliorates matters. We should not object to Phillips's insistence
that in order to carry out an analysis of religious concepts, some acquain-
tance with such concepts is essential. And we may understand why
he thus limits his field of enquiry to that of 'Hebrew and Christian
prayers'.[142] The question, however, is what 'some acquaintance' amounts
to. When we take into account the close connection Phillips draws
between understanding and believing, the question becomes urgent.
The Concept of Prayer repeatedly emphasises that the relation between
understanding and believing is internal.[143] That is to say, the understand-
ing involved in religious beliefs and activities cannot be separated from
holding these beliefs, and engaging in these activities.[144] Now, unless
one is conflating understanding with believing in this context, it seems
clear that there is a kind of understanding the non-believing philosopher
has to do without. Take, for instance, the notion of divine wrath. Phillips
argues that,

> "where the anger referred to is God's anger, we do not understand anger in
> this context by virtue of the same kind of shared knowledge of what anger
> means[145] […] but by understanding a common religious experience,[146]
> namely, that of being the object of divine wrath. […] I mean that to be able
> to come to see meaning in religious concepts in the sense of being able to
> use them, is to come to see what divine anger means, is to come to view
> one's life in relation to the will of God, and to recognize the horror of
> estrangement from it."[147]

The positivistic drift of this remark can hardly be overlooked. The mean-
ing of the notion of divine wrath is grounded in a certain experience
and so discoverable through analysis. After all, there are contexts in
which the notion is applied, accompanied by the relevant behaviour.
The real difference is that whereas the positivists' appeal is to 'ordinary

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[141] See Phillips 1981, pp. 27-28, 83-84, 158.

[142] See Phillips 1981, p. 27.

[143] See Phillips 1981, p. 79.

[144] See, for instance, Phillips 1981, pp. 47, 50-51, 60-61, 78-79.

[145] That is, the knowledge we gain by participating in a shared language.

[146] It is far from clear what Phillips means by 'understanding an experience'. Does it
amount to recognising or having (had) that experience?

[147] Phillips 1981, pp. 47, 51.

language', Phillips invokes 'religious language'.[148] Whether or not one feels this approach, as such, to be expedient, it does create a problem. For whereas we are all 'ordinary language users', not all of us are 'religious language users'. That is to say, if philosophy's task is to clarify the meaning of religious concepts, such as divine anger, and if to come to see what divine anger means is to understand a common religious experience and to come to view one's life in relation to God's will, then the unfortunate conclusion would seem to be that only a philosopher who is also a believer may accomplish this task. We may come to sympathise with Griffiths's accusing Phillips of 'the performative fallacy'.

Phillips might reply that although, indeed, there is a kind of understanding which only the believer can be said to have, the philosopher does not need to have this understanding to understand that. Somewhat less convolutedly, the philosopher may understand that he does not understand. But, first, this seems an untimely demise for philosophical clarification. Surely it makes no sense to say that we can clarify what this understanding, which we do not understand, amounts to? Secondly, it certainly provides a convenient point of entry for a fideist philosophy. After all, if the understanding involved in prayer cannot be separated from the praying itself,[149] prayer becomes impenetrable to the outsider: if you do not pray, you do not understand.

The demand that the philosopher must have an idea of what constitutes genuine religious belief constitutes a genuine problem. To say that this idea is no arbitrary choice, as it must be justified by showing how it takes account of the complex behaviour of religious believers in various situations,[150] fails to break the deadlock. For the comparison between one's account of religious activities and these activities presupposes a philosophical understanding which presupposes a prior feeling for the game, and so on. Of course, the circle need not be vicious. Coming to understand, one might say, just is dialectical; an interplay between the observer and that which is observed. This, I take it, is precisely the point Phillips makes by insisting that his account can be justified by appeal to actual usage. However, as we have seen, the appeal to usage is far from unproblematic.

We may summarise this section's argument as follows. Following its predecessors' lead, *The Concept of Prayer* moves away from Wittgenstein

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[148] Or perhaps we should say that, for Phillips, religious language is just more ordinary language.

[149] See Phillips 1981, p. 60.

[150] See Phillips 1981, p. 158.

to the extent that it stresses philosophy's 'transformative' task. It is not philosophy's task to reform the practices it seeks to clarify; religious language does not need tidying up.[151] In this respect, Wittgenstein was right to insist that everything is left as it is. Yet, philosophical clarification does transform one's understanding of the object under investigation. One gains a new, philosophical, understanding. *The Concept of Prayer* falters, however, in giving an account of this new understanding. Maintaining too strict a dichotomy between philosophical and religious understanding, it all but eliminates the possibility of a dialogue between the two, obscuring the former and de-intellectualising the latter. By weakening the boundaries, one might go quite some way towards solving these problems. But *The Concept of Prayer* tolerates painfully little overlap between religious and non-religious modes of life. This is almost inevitable given the strong emphasis on the distinctiveness of religious grammar and the religious mode of life characteristic of early Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Showing too little sensibility to Wittgenstein's insight that words only have meaning in 'the stream of thought and life', *The Concept of Prayer* is unable to overcome its self-inflicted positivistic limitations. Thus allowing the charge of fideism to gain some credibility, if not plausibility.

3.2.4 An unscholarly charge?

The term 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' originates in a paper under that title by Kai Nielsen, published in *Philosophy* in 1967. 'Fideism' is commonly used to refer to a position adopted by some religious believers when they contend that belief rests on faith rather than on reason, and that an intellectual justification of religion is therefore unnecessary, or indeed impossible. The Wittgensteinian twist to fideism, one might say, is that the unassailability of religious belief does not rest on an appeal to faith. Rather, it is presented as the logical conclusion from a philosophical argument. According to Nielsen, the Wittgensteinian argument proceeds from Wittgenstein's assertion that what is given are our forms of language which constitute our forms of life.[152] Forms of life taken as a whole are not amenable to criticism; each mode of discourse is in order as it is, for each has its own criteria and each sets its own norms of intelligibility, rationality, reality, etc. Thus, there is no Archimedean point in terms of which a philosopher (or anyone else for that matter)

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[151] See Phillips 1981, p. 11.
[152] See Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 226.

can relevantly criticise a form of life as a whole. On the assumption that religion constitutes one such logically autonomous form of life, or category of behaviour, it follows that the prospects of philosophical criticism are very slim indeed. Qua form of life, religion is a *fait accompli* which neither stands in need of justification nor should fear censure from non-religious forms of life.[153]

Phillips is not on Nielsen's original list of Wittgensteinian Fideists. However, in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* Nielsen returns to the topic of Wittgensteinian Fideism, providing a more comprehensive and sustained critique. Here, Phillips's work is explicitly referred to as presenting "a detailed paradigmatic statement of Wittgensteinian Fideism."[154] Justified or not, many have shared Nielsen's opinion. Phillips is surely right that he has become the author said to be primarily associated with this position.[155] Discussions of his work in terms of Wittgensteinian Fideism are certainly not hard to come by, and continue to be offered up to the present day.[156] Regrettably so, Phillips feels. Phillips tells us he knows of no philosopher who has held the views attributed to Wittgensteinian Fideists. At any rate, he insists that he himself has never done so. In his *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, Phillips undertakes, as he puts it, "the boring, but necessary, task of providing straightforward textual evidence which shows that I have never held the views attributed to me."[157] The persistence of the Fideist critique, in spite of Phillips's rebuttals, has prompted Phillips to suggest that the term 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' is an 'unscholarly creation', since it can be, has been, and still is, used as an excuse for sidestepping the real issues raised by his work, and that of others following Wittgenstein's lead in the philosophy of religion.[158]

I agree with Jacob Joshua Ross that the criticism of Phillips's position as fideist was never more than a half-truth.[159] Phillips is right to insist that, from his earliest work onwards, far from endorsing the fideist theses Nielsen and others attributed to him, he has always argued against them. *The Concept of Prayer* places too strong an emphasis upon the

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[153] See Nielsen 1967, pp. 192-193; cf. Clack 1999(a), p. 84.

[154] Nielsen 1982, p. 200; see also p. 56 where Phillips is described as the 'arch-Wittgensteinian fideist'.

[155] See Phillips 2001, p. 25.

[156] For a number of recent examples, see Rowe & Wainwright 1998, Helm 1997, von Stosch 2001, Addis 2001.

[157] Phillips 2001, pp. 25-26; cf. Phillips 1986, pp. 1-16.

[158] See Phillips 2001, pp. 26, 30; cf. Phillips 2003(a), p. 192.

[159] See Ross 2001, p. 256.

distinctiveness and autonomy of religious forms of discourse. As a result, some of its analyses imply a fideist conclusion; but this conclusion is never explicitly advanced. Furthermore, in Phillips's later work, the main problems that hamper *The Concept of Prayer* are addressed.[160] Rather than stressing the distinctiveness and logical autonomy of our forms of discourse, Phillips increasingly emphasises the way in which they are related to one another. It would be a mistake, Phillips now argues, to treat of religion *as* a form of life, it can only be understood *in* a form of life.[161] Again, the positivistic connection between meaning and experience is abandoned and the relation between philosophical and religious understanding is dealt with far more subtly. Finally, far from seeking to immunise religious belief from external criticism, Phillips argues that philosophical clarification may reveal confusions in religious beliefs and practices.

Does this mean that Phillips is right to suggest that the charge of fideism is an unscholarly one, used primarily as an excuse for sidestepping the real issues raised by his work? That conclusion goes too far. The charge of fideism is, indeed, a half-truth. This means that it is partially false. However, Phillips would do well to remember that this also means it is partially true. Phillips's claim that the fideist interpretation of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion in no manner reflects what Wittgensteinians have actually said, but is rather the result of philosophical prejudice, aided by a certain jargon which has generated a life of its own,[162] cannot be sustained. Nielsen's work did indeed have a huge impact on discussions of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion but, as Clack points out, Wittgensteinians cannot just wash their hands of the fideistic import of such comments as Winch's remark that science and religion are 'distinct modes of social life', each with 'criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself' or Malcolm's parallel claim that religion and science are forms of life, neither of which stands in need of justification. If 'fideism' and 'Wittgensteinianism' have become almost synonymous terms in the philosophy of religion, then the responsibility does not lie with hostile commentators alone.[163] Indeed, Phillips himself has some responsibility in this matter. For although it cannot be denied that he has never explicitly sought to establish the fideist conclusions attributed to

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[160] The distinction between Phillips's earlier and later work is explored in the next chapter.
[161] See Phillips 1986, p. 79.
[162] See Phillips 1986, p. 4.
[163] See Clack 2003, p. 208.

him, neither can it be denied that several passages in his earlier writings encourage a fideist reading. It is, perhaps, regrettable that Phillips has never explicitly corrected these earlier views. Had he done so, certain of his critics might have been more easily persuaded finally to lay the charge of fideism to rest.

CONCLUSION:
FROM WITTGENSTEIN TO WITTGENSTEINIANISM

The early Wittgensteinians did us an invaluable service in putting Wittgenstein's thought centre stage in the philosophy of religion. Their work stimulated the scholarly interest in Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief and provided the fertile soil from which Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion could grow. The 'Wittgensteinian voice' has become a significant ingredient of contemporary philosophy of religion, certainly within the Anglophone field, and increasingly so in the Continental one. The influence each of the works we discussed continues to exert bears testament to their import.

But there is both strength and weakness here. The early Wittgensteinian reading of Wittgenstein is dubious. As Ronald S. Laura once put it, "The problem with most Wittgensteinians is that they are not Wittgensteinian, or at least, not Wittgensteinian enough."[1] The Wittgensteinians placed inordinate weight on Wittgenstein's notions of a language-game and form of life, focusing too narrowly on language-games and forms of life as possessing an ultimacy of sense and justification. As a result, these notions — or their early Wittgensteinian counterparts — begin to play a static as opposed to a dynamic role. Rather than heuristic, methodological, devices, language-games and forms of life threaten to become the socio-linguistic building blocks of a static and compartmentalised social reality.[2] Science is one such logically self-contained universe of discourse, religion another, neither stands in need of justification. While this may seem a useful strategy for safeguarding religious belief against positivistic censure, there is a high price to pay. Drawing attention away from the individual language user and placing it in autonomous modes of discourse all but eliminates any possibility of dialogue. Religious belief tends to become an isolated activity, impenetrable from the outside. Thus, critics have accused the Wittgensteinians of retreating into some kind of 'Christian ghetto'.[3] Our discussion has shown that these misgivings are not wholly unfounded. Against the early

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[1] Quoted in von Stosch 2001, p. 230, n. 98.
[2] See Incandela 1985, pp. 460-462, von Stosch 2001, p. 233.
[3] See McGrath 1997, p. 121.

Wittgensteinian background one cannot prevent the charge of fideism to obtain a foothold.

On the other hand, we should not forget that, by now, some forty years have gone by, years in which the authors we have discussed have further developed and amended their position. This is certainly true with respect to Phillips's work.[4] Nevertheless, discussions of his work in terms of 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' continue to be offered, discussions which, more often than not, tend to focus exclusively on Phillips's earlier writings. It would indeed by a challenge to unearth an article on Phillips which does not pursue the familiar and tired line that he is defensively protecting religion from outside attack.[5] In this respect, one may sympathise with Phillips's exasperation with the fideist label. Perhaps it is time to lay the charge of 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' to rest and focus, not so much on 'Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion' as on Phillips's philosophy of religion.

Before we do so, one final question remains: did the early Wittgensteinian reading have an adverse effect on the way in which Wittgenstein's work was received, as Incandela and Clack suggest? It certainly provoked a good deal of discussion and may well have shaped some people's perception of Wittgenstein's writings such that "readers find in Wittgenstein what they expect to find there rather than what is actually there."[6] On the other hand, we should, perhaps, not overestimate the extent to which it did so. In this respect it is interesting to note that Nielsen — in whose work the 'Wittgensteinian Fideist' critique originates — makes it clear, right from the start, that his target is not so much Wittgenstein as the Wittgensteinians:

> "Let me remark at the outset that I am not sure to what extent Wittgenstein himself would have accepted a Wittgensteinian Fideism. But Wittgenstein's work has been taken in that way and it is thought in many quarters that such an approach will give us a deep grasp of religion and will expose the shallowness of scepticism. [...] But do not forget, what indeed I hope would be true, that Wittgenstein might well wish to say of Wittgensteinians what Freud said of Freudians."[7]

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[4] See Phillips 2003(a), p. 196.
[5] See Clack 1995, pp. 112-113.
[6] Clack 2001, p. 12.
[7] Nielsen 1967, pp. 193-194.

PART III

Phillips's Philosophy of Religion

INTRODUCTION TO PART III

The following chapters turn to examine Phillips's philosphy of religion in the light of his whole body of work. We begin by developing the contrast between Phillips's earlier and his later work, hinted at in the previous chapter. Chapter four examines Phillips's mature understanding of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation. A contemplative philosophy seeks, in a certain way, to give an account of reality, of the reality of concepts in our lives, without meddling in them in any way. Where religious concepts are concerned, matters are no different. Here, too, the philosopher's concern is with doing justice to these concepts, to the role they play in our shared language-games and form(s) of life. Of course, this presumes that there is some reality to religious concepts, that they cannot be explained away as false or illusory. Hence the importance of Phillips's attack on reductionist theories of religion. Phillips develops two lines of argument. On the one hand, he aims to show that the reductionist theories of religon can be shown to be confused on their own terms of reference. Secondly, they can be rejected on the basis of an appeal to the use which language has in many religious beliefs. Chapter five focuses on Phillips's first line of argument, chapters six, seven and eight address the second line of argument through and examination of Phillips's accounts of the belief in miracles, in immortality, and in the reality of God. Finally, the ninth chapter draws our discussion to an end by asking whether Phillips's account of religious belief can be said to be revisionist in nature.

4. PHILOSOPHY, DESCRIPTION, AND CONTEMPLATION

In the previous chapter we discussed Phillips's first book, *The Concept of Prayer*, as exemplifying the way in which, in the late fifties and early sixties, Wittgenstein's later philosophy was utilised for the philosophical study of religion, as well as effectively illustrating Phillips's earlier position. The first chapter of *The Concept of Prayer* presents the methodology which is adopted in the remainder of the book. This is, perhaps, a natural and prudent configuration for any philosophical essay: one first develops one's general philosophical position from which a more or less clearly delineated methodology may be assembled which can then be applied to the problems at hand. Appearances are deceptive, as it turns out. For this, Phillips tells us, was not the case with *The Concept of Prayer*:

> "It might be worth saying at the outset that the first chapter of my book, *The Concept of Prayer*, was written last. Some philosophers have spoken as if I had in my possession first something called a general philosophical position, and then applied this to the life of prayer. [...] This is quite incorrect."[1]

What *The Concept of Prayer* started with was a cluster of puzzling questions concerning prayer. It sought to answer these problems by taking as examples prayers which Christians have heard often enough, and asking what it means to pray those prayers. It was only after attempting to do this, Phillips tells us, that he turned to consider why some philosophers have concluded that these activities are radically confused or meaningless.[2]

The passage quoted above is taken from Phillips's article 'Religious Belief and Philosophical Enquiry', which first appeared in the quarterly *Theology* in 1968. It was reprinted in 1970 in the almost identically titled collection *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*. This collection contains some thirteen essays which, barring one, were all written after *The Concept of Prayer*. Many of them address specific issues regarding the conclusions drawn in *The Concept of Prayer*. Phillips engages commentators and critics, elaborating his position. In tackling some of the problems raised by *The Concept of Prayer*, the essays round off Phillips's position.

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[1] Phillips 1970, p. 62.
[2] See Phillips 1970, p. 62.

Furthermore, whereas *The Concept of Prayer* may be said to focus on a single problem, this collection deals with a far broader range of topics. Thus, it introduces a number of new themes and further develops certain arguments, quite a few of which continue to characterise Phillips's position up to the present day. Finally, in these essays Phillips draws more extensively upon Wittgenstein's work to illustrate and explicate his position, in particular on Wittgenstein's then recently published *Lectures on Religious Belief*.[3]

In short, even though *The Concept of Prayer* was not written from the point of view of an antecedently established, general, philosophical position, many of the articles collected in *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* proceed to defend, or at least clarify, such a position in more or less general terms. In the years that followed, and through numerous publications, this process of development and clarification has continued. It culminates in Phillips's mature position which views philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation.

The notion of contemplation identifies three crucial aspects of Phillips's conception of philosophical enquiry. First, a contemplative philosophy arises out of a sense of wonder. Secondly, Phillips emphasises the independent nature of philosophical enquiry. Thirdly, he insists that philosophical enquiry remains disinterested. The first part of the chapter introduces these three themes, the second part engages in a more thorough examination. The third and final part of this chapter summarises our findings and argues that the distinction between Phillips's earlier and later works may be understood in terms of a gradual shift in attention — a shift from a 'descriptive' to a 'contemplative' understanding of philosophical enquiry.

4.1 The notion of contemplation

What is the philosopher trying to do? What subject matter is characteristically his? The question of philosophical authorship, Phillips argues, cannot be decided by a survey of what philosophers actually do. For

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[3] See, for example, Phillips 1970, pp. 49, 51, 55, 72, 79-80, 84-92, 111ff., 157, 244. Most of these references are to the *Lectures on Religious Belief* although they include some to the *Tractatus*, *Notebooks*, and *Lecture on Ethics*. It is worth noting that Phillips refers almost exclusively to remarks of Wittgenstein's which deal specifically with religious or moral belief. In *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* Phillips does not (yet) systematically explore Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophical logic, epistemology or methodology.

whatever one concludes for oneself there will be philosophers who, as a matter of fact, engage in something different. Nor will it do simply to say that they are not doing philosophy. This will inevitably lead to the accusation that one is operating with an *a priori* conception of the subject:

> "When one looks at the variety of activities that go under the name of philosophy, any attempt to reduce these activities to an essence, or a definition, in any descriptive sense, is obviously futile."[4]

This may lead one to conclude that the matter simply cannot be resolved. 'Philosophy', one might suggest, comes close to being what Wittgenstein called a family resemblance concept. There just are these various ways of engaging in philosophy; some may overlap, others need not share any single feature. In the latter case, lacking any philosophical common ground, the dispute between adherents of adversary approaches will be irresolvable. It has been argued that this is the case in the dispute between Wittgensteinian and other, more traditional, approaches to the philosophy of religion. Richard Messer, for example, contrasts Phillips's work to that of Swinburne. In his view, their dispute is not a matter of disagreement but, rather, of radical disparity. Both contestants are not so much unwilling to settle the issue as unable to do so. Underlying their respective philosophies are 'disparate fundamental trusts',[5] which prevent any kind of resolution to their dispute:

> If they shared a common criterion, or sufficiently similar criterion […] then there would be disagreement, which theoretically could be overcome. However, since they differ and use disparate criteria to reach their conclusions, this element of the debate […] cannot be brought to resolution."[6]

This conclusion, it seems to me, is too hasty. For although one can hardly ignore the variety of competing approaches within any field of philosophy, it will not do to deny any unity to the subject, not in the least where the nature of philosophical enquiry is concerned. Undeniably, the question as to the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical problem which can only be resolved by philosophical discussion. This, in fact, is precisely what Messer does by introducing a radical notion of relativity, entering at a pre-conceptual level, which undermines any possibility of settling the dispute between Phillips and Swinburne.[7]

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[4] Phillips 1999, p. 1.
[5] See Messer 1993, p. 120.
[6] Messer 1993, p. 127.
[7] See Messer 1993, pp. 147-148.

The point is not whether one agrees with Messer's notion of disparate fundamental trusts. The point is to see that his conclusions are themselves an attempt at clarifying the nature of discourse as such and, by implication, of philosophical discourse. These conclusions are not the result of an empirical investigation or descriptive survey. Rather, they are reached by philosophical discussion and need to be supported by philosophical argument. Phillips certainly would agree that he cannot stop Swinburne from calling his procedures 'philosophy', and *vice versa*. What he can do, however, is show the difference between these procedures. This "can only be achieved by philosophical discussion, the philosophical discussion which cannot be bypassed."[8]

Clearly then, Phillips does not rest content with an irresolvable plurality of philosophical approaches. On the contrary, he maintains that "there *is* a common method, that of philosophical discussion, for which there is no short-cut."[9] As we shall see, Phillips has very strong views on what the philosopher can rightfully claim to be his task. In presenting these views, however, Phillips maintains that he is "not *imposing* a conception of philosophy on anyone but rather arguing, philosophically, for an alternative."[10]

The philosophical alternative Phillips proposes is that of a contemplative philosophy. The reference to philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation appears rather late in Phillips's work. It is first discussed in a paper published in 1995.[11] In this paper Phillips is replying to certain points raised by William Wainwright. According to Phillips, Wainwright is not satisfied by Phillips's insistence that, when confronted by varieties of belief and unbelief, philosophy's task is one of conceptual clarification rather than adjudication. After all, clarification shows that adherents of rival perspectives each regard their own perspective as true. In this sense, "holding a moral or religious perspective does commit one to regarding it as superior to its rivals."[12] As Phillips reads him, Wainwright sees no reason why philosophy should not be an aid in establishing which of the rival perspectives is, in fact, the correct one.

Although Phillips is convinced that the notion of philosophy as the arbiter of truth in moral or religious matters is, as such, mistaken, on this

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[8] Phillips 1993, p. 234.

[9] Phillips 2000, p. 42.

[10] Phillips 1999, p. 155; cf. Phillips 1999, p. 2.

[11] 'Epistemic Practices' in *Topoi*, December 1995; republished as 'Epistemic Practices: the Retreat from Reality' in Phillips 2000, pp. 24-44.

[12] Wainwright 1995, p. 91; quoted in Phillips 2000, p. 42.

occasion, that is not the point he pursues. Rather, he asks Wainwright why it should not be possible for him and others

> "to acknowledge that there is a different emphasis to be found in philosophy, whatever they think of it — one which contemplates possibilities of human life rather than seeks answers?"[13]

In Wainwright, Phillips says, there is an emphasis on a desire for answers. According to Phillips, his reticence in providing any such answers leads Wainwright to suspect that he must be committed to holding that there are no common methods for settling such disputes and, hence, no issue of truth or falsity, correctness or incorrectness involved. This is a move similar to Messer's which we discussed above. We already witnessed Phillips's reply that there certainly is a common method, that of philosophical discussion. He now adds that the aim of that discussion

> "is not truth or correctness in Wainwright's sense, but a contemplation of possibilities which leads to an understanding that life can be like that."[14]

The philosophical imperative is to understand rather than to adjudicate or to appropriate. And, surely, we can appreciate more than we appropriate. Given the fact that the philosopher appreciates differing moral and religious perspectives, Phillips asks, how could it be otherwise? The contemplation of perspectives which we do not appropriate personally "can itself deepen our understanding of human life, an understanding which is not a search for solutions."[15] In fact, a desire for finding solutions may block contemplation and understanding. Phillips refers to Rhees who, he believes, brings out excellently how this may happen. For Rhees, philosophy arises from a sense of wonder at the possibility of meaning and understanding. To do philosophy, Rhees feels, one must be able not only to see questions where those not given to philosophy see none, but also to look on these questions in a particular way. Not wanting to dismiss them nor get rid of them through any sort of answer. Such contemplation, Rhees concludes, may be difficult to achieve in our cultural climate:

> "This goes with *contemplation* of the ways in which people think and inquire — e.g. in trying to solve problems in physics, or in connection with moral problems. And this is difficult. Perhaps especially so in a culture which has become as technological as ours — as much preoccupied with getting things done, with how to do things, with results."[16]

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[13] Phillips 2000, p. 42.
[14] Phillips 2000, p. 42.
[15] Phillips 2000, p. 43.
[16] Quoted in Phillips 2000, p. 44.

The article we have examined provides the first explicit discussion of Phillips's understanding of the notion of philosophical contemplation. Three interrelated points are brought to the fore. First, a contemplative philosophy arises from *a sense of wonder* at the variety of phenomena that make up human life. Secondly, the *independent nature* of philosophical enquiry is emphasised. A contemplative philosophy is not an attempt at arriving at any specific answer but an effort to understand the variety of answers that may be given. This means, thirdly, that philosophical enquiry is *disinterested enquiry*: it seeks to understand, not to advocate, nor to appropriate.

In his work after 1995, Phillips further develops his understanding of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation. He argues most prolifically for a contemplative philosophy in his *Philosophy's Cool Place*. Through a discussion of Socrates, Plato, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, the first half of that book seeks to elucidate what such a contemplative philosophy amounts to. Thus, Phillips's aim here is constructive. In the second half of the book Phillips engages in discussions with Rorty, Cavell, Baier, and Nussbaum. Here, his aim is far more critical. The authors discussed all serve as examples of how easily one may be tempted to go beyond such a contemplative philosophy — examples of "how difficult it is not to go 'beyond Wittgenstein'."[17]

Though in quotes, the readiness with which Phillips equates a contemplative philosophy with Wittgenstein's philosophy should not be overlooked. Although his 1995 article discussed above does speak of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation, Phillips tells us he owes this way of putting the matter to his colleague R. W. Beardsmore.[18] Wittgenstein's name is not yet mentioned. In 1999, however, it is mainly by reference to Wittgenstein's work that Phillips seeks to elucidate his understanding of a contemplative philosophy. According to Phillips, Wittgenstein's philosophical writings, and certain critical extensions of it by Rush Rhees, provide excellent examples of a contemplative conception of philosophy.[19] The three main topics of Phillips's previous discussion all return and are related to Wittgenstein's philosophical writings.

Phillips urges us to recognise the independence of the philosophical problems Wittgenstein addresses. The point of struggling with these questions "is not external to philosophy, as though the philosophical

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[17] Phillips 1999, p. 63.
[18] See Phillips 2000, p. 261, n. 31.
[19] See Phillips 1999, p. ix.

reflection were the *means* to attaining it."[20] For Wittgenstein, philosophy is not *for* anything. As noted above, Rhees had his doubts as to whether such a conception of philosophy will find easy acceptance in our culture, obsessed, as he believed it to be, with 'getting things done'. Wittgenstein often expressed similar misgivings. He felt that the surrounding dominant culture was uncongenial to the spirit in which he wrote his philosophy. He often spoke of the 'sickness of the age', the 'poverty and darkness of the times'.[21] In 1930 he wrote the following:

> "It is all one to me whether or not the typical Western scientist understands or appreciates my work, since he will not in any case understand the spirit in which I write. Our civilization is characterised by the word 'progress'. Progress is its form rather than making progress being one of its features. Typically it constructs. It is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure. And even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as an end in itself. For me on the contrary clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves."[22]

For Wittgenstein, the search for clarity is not informed by an end which is identifiable independently of philosophy. This is closely connected to what has been termed Wittgenstein's 'quietism', the demand that philosophical enquiry, as paragraph 24 of the *Philosophical Investigations* has it, 'must leave everything as it is'. According to Phillips, many have felt that here Wittgenstein is carrying matters too far. His hyperbole should be excused as a harmless stylistic flourish. But that reaction, Phillips argues, does great disservice to Wittgenstein's work:

> "It obscures, or even ignores, what a philosophical problem was for him. When we are puzzled philosophically, Wittgenstein argued, what we stand in need of is not additional information, but a clearer view of what lies before us."[23]

In striving for clarity, the philosopher leaves everything as it is. To achieve clarity is not to arrive at a certain judgement but, rather, to understand what arriving at any such judgement amounts to. "The philosopher," Wittgenstein wrote, "is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher."[24] In short, philosophical enquiry is disinterested enquiry.

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[20] Phillips 1999, p. 47.
[21] See, for example, the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*.
[22] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 7.
[23] Phillips 1993, p. 237.
[24] Wittgenstein 1981, 455.

Wittgenstein, Phillips continues, strove after this contemplative ideal in every area of philosophical enquiry he engaged in. And not in the least where the philosophy of religion is concerned. His analysis of religious perspectives remains independent and disinterested. Wittgenstein gives the same kind of attention to religious discourse as to any other discourse. He aims to do justice both to religious perspectives and anti-religious perspectives, both to belief and atheism. As a philosopher, he neither advocates nor appropriates any of the perspectives under investigation. His concern is with their conceptual character, not their truth.[25] Wittgenstein's question is not whether or not God exists, but what it means to believe in God or to deny His existence.[26]

Phillips further illustrates the contemplative nature of Wittgenstein's investigation into matters religious by drawing a contrast between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. There are, as many have remarked, remarkable similarities between Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's work.[27] Both are concerned, one might say, with making grammatical distinctions to dissolve confusion. Kierkegaard believed many of his contemporaries were caught up in a monstrous illusion. They were confused about the true nature of Christianity. Wittgenstein endeavoured to dissolve confusions he thought were widespread on matters of mental concepts, discourse about language and so on. Both employ an indirect method to accomplish this task. In this respect, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is mirrored in the various 'voices' entertained in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Finally, both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard recognise the limits of philosophy. By means of philosophy we may become clear about the nature of Christianity. The monstrous illusion may be dispelled. But no amount of philosophising, Kierkegaard holds, will teach us how to become a Christian. As we have seen, Wittgenstein might be said to agree. Conceptual clarity is not personal appropriation: "Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard called a *passion*."[28]

These similarities may lead one to conclude that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were engaged in a parallel project. According to Phillips, however, this would be a mistake: "there is an important asymmetry between Kierkegaard's qualitative dialectic and Wittgenstein's philosophical

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[25] See Phillips 1993, p. 233.
[26] See Phillips 1999, p. 163.
[27] See, for example, Creegan 1989.
[28] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 53.

method."[29] Kierkegaard, Phillips argues, is primarily a religious thinker, concerned with specific confusions concerning Christianity. His entire work, Kierkegaard wrote, is related to the problem of 'becoming a Christian'.[30] This means that the clarity he seeks is a means to a further end. His main concern is to remove those obstacles on the path of becoming a Christian. Kierkegaard, Phillips continues, has something close to an underlabourer conception of philosophy: "Philosophy clears away conceptual confusions to facilitate clear building and clear living."[31] Wittgenstein's interest, by contrast, lies not "in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings."[32] Given the way Kierkegaard views his task, there is no place in his work to doubt the categories of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.[33] In Kierkegaard's work, the distinction is between the unconfused Kierkegaard and the confused people of Denmark who thought they were Christians when they were not. With Wittgenstein, Phillips argues, things are different:

> "The 'voices' he entertains in the *Investigations* are not the voices of *others* who are confused. Rather, these are tendencies of thought to which he himself is deeply attracted and with which he struggles."[34]

The asymmetry is also displayed when we turn to consider the limits of philosophy. For Kierkegaard, philosophy can do no more than clear up the confusions between the categories of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. It will not make one embark on becoming a Christian. Thus, Kierkegaard "because of his religious interest, gives pride of place to what philosophy *cannot* do."[35] Although Wittgenstein would agree that one cannot philosophise one's way into Christianity, it would be mistaken, Phillips argues, to represent his main interest in his later philosophy as that of clearing up confusions. This fails to recognise the independence of the philosophical problems Wittgenstein addresses and bypasses his concern with what philosophy *can* do. According to Phillips, Wittgenstein is not primarily interested in the meaning of these

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[29] Phillips 1999, p. 27. It is beyond my present purposes to question Phillips's reading of Kierkegaard in this context. My interest lies in Phillips's explication of the notion of philosophical contemplation.

[30] See Phillips 1999, p. 14.

[31] Phillips 1999, p. 25.

[32] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 7.

[33] See Phillips 1999, p.14.

[34] Phillips 1999, p. 47.

[35] Phillips 1999, p. 30.

specifically religious forms of discourse. In contrast to Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein's movement of thought is "not from a concern about religion to the need for conceptual clarification but from a concern about the possibility of discourse to what can be said about religion."[36] This is why Wittgenstein's philosophy remains contemplative, even when dealing with matters religious.

To summarise: in Phillips's view, independence and disinterest reveal the contemplative nature of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical enquiry. Wittgenstein seeks to achieve a clear understanding of the various modes of discourse in which people may be engaged and the forms of understanding they involve. He aims to do justice to these modes of discourse and forms of understanding, showing them for what they are without meddling in them in any way. This remains true, even where religious belief is concerned. Wittgenstein does not set out to determine whether or not we should believe in God. Rather, the questions he raises concern the various possibilities of belief and unbelief, of certainty and knowledge. These questions, Phillips concludes, cannot be treated in a formal or abstract way:

> "What they amount to can be shown only in terms of how people actually do think about things, the things they do not question, the things that go deep with them. Wittgenstein wonders at the fact that people do think in this way. He wants to show this as a direct result of the questions in philosophical logic he raises. To ask what it means to *say* something, for Wittgenstein, is the question that leads him, in the end, to a contemplation of the world pictures which are constitutive of how people think, act, and live."[37]

Note that Phillips speaks of Wittgenstein as 'wondering' at the fact that people act and think in the way they do. We have already referred to Rush Rhees's belief that wonder is characteristic of philosophy:

> "Perhaps it is that thinking about the notions of reality and understanding leads one constantly to the threshold of questioning the possibility of understanding at all, and to *wonder* at the possibility of understanding."[38]

Although Phillips warns us not to conflate various senses of wonder, he nevertheless agrees with Rhees that a philosophical concern with the possibility of sense is linked, in Wittgenstein's contemplative conception of the subject, with wonder at the forms 'sense' and 'saying something' take for different people:

[36] Phillips 1999, p. 38.
[37] Phillips 1999, p. 55.
[38] Quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 55.

"Wittgenstein wondered at the fact that the great problems of philosophy existed at all, a wonder that is internally related to the kind of attention he thought these problems demanded of him."[39]

4.2 A contemplative philosophy

Wittgenstein once expressed his ideal as "a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them."[40] In the first part of this chapter we saw how Phillips explains this remark in terms of the independence and disinterest he takes to be characteristic of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical enquiry. Perhaps one should note that it is not immediately clear whether Wittgenstein was referring specifically to his philosophy.[41] There can be no doubt, however, that the quotation, which serves as a motto for *Philosophy's Cool Place*, articulates Phillips's philosophical ideal. A contemplative philosophy asks that we "give a certain kind of attention to our surroundings without meddling with them."[42]

We noted that Wittgenstein had little hope of his contemporaries welcoming such an understanding of philosophical enquiry. Sadly, Phillips feels, little has changed since Wittgenstein's time. In the present climate of Anglo-American philosophy this conception of philosophical enquiry still proves difficult to accept. Our "technological culture with its primary interest in arriving at answers and solutions",[43] allows little room for a conception of philosophy's task as one of contemplation and understanding:

"Many philosophers want 'to go beyond it'. Not content with the kind of attention Wittgenstein says philosophy asks of us, some philosophers want attention to lead to substantive results: results concerning what we do know, how we ought to live, what we should believe, and the spirit in which we should talk to one another."[44]

Rather than contemplate reality, philosophy should set out to answer substantive questions about it and bring about changes in it where necessary or, at the very least, facilitate this process. This tendency to want

[39] Phillips 1999, p. 61.
[40] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 2.
[41] The preceding and subsequent remarks refer, respectively, to personal and cultural ideals.
[42] Phillips 1999, p. ix.
[43] Phillips 1999, p. 2.
[44] Phillips 1999, p. 63.

to go beyond a contemplative philosophy may be witnessed in any field
of philosophical enquiry. But, Phillips feels, it is particularly strong in
the area in which he has concentrated his writing: the philosophical
study of religion.[45] Here, it is argued, the high degree of disengagement
demanded by a contemplative conception of philosophy cannot be main-
tained. The philosopher needs to show whether it is rational to believe in
God, whether or not God exists. Proponents of this view "are not con-
tent with contemplating where we already are."[46] They may not agree on
where we ought to go, but they are one in their conviction that philo-
sophical enquiry should lead us *somewhere*.

Phillips, it will be clear, rejects such demands. In his autobiographical
afterword to *Philosophy's Cool Place* he tells us that, in his thirty-eight
years of teaching philosophy, he has sought to follow Wittgenstein's
lead, trying to do what he feels to be "one of the most difficult things
to do in philosophy — to go nowhere."[47] This perhaps rather curious
remark serves to articulate the disengagement at the heart of Phillips's
philosophical programme.

In the following we engage critically with Phillips's proposal for
a philosophy 'on a road to nowhere'. The three main characteristics
of a contemplative philosophy — its independent and disinterested
nature, and the form of wonder that lies at its root — are discussed
in turn.

4.2.1 The independent nature of philosophical enquiry

What, precisely, constitutes the independence of philosophical enquiry?
One way to answer this question satisfactorily would be to specify a
subject matter exclusive to philosophy. In 1999, Phillips tells us that a
contemplative philosophy, "is concerned, in a certain way, with giving
an account of reality."[48] To those acquainted with his earlier writings
this remark may come as something of a surprise. Has not Phillips
argued, time and again, that the desire to present the nature of reality in
a single, comprehensive, account is rooted in a deep-seated philosophi-
cal confusion? Phillips admits that there are serious problems connected
to the attempt of giving an account of all things. Nevertheless, he main-
tains that a contemplative philosophy seeks to overcome these problems

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[45] See Phillips 1999, p. 163.
[46] Phillips 1999, p. 163.
[47] Phillips 1999, p. 158.
[48] Phillips 1999, p. 1.

without abstaining from asking the fundamental questions in philosophy about the nature of reality.

To say that philosophy gives an account of reality is to invite the question 'The reality of *what*?'. After all, are not the other arts and sciences concerned with the same thing? Phillips illustrates the problem by referring to Socrates' discussion with Gorgias.[49] Socrates asks Gorgias what it is that he teaches. Although the question seems straightforwardly factual, Phillips believes it goes to the heart of philosophy. For what Socrates is really asking is whether there is anything to teach, whether there is a *logos* in things to be understood. Gorgias claims that his subject has to do with speech; but then he is asked, 'Speech about *what*?'. Whatever substantive reply Gorgias may give, Socrates points out that the subject is that of an already existing art or science. If each of these has its own distinctive subject matter, what distinctive subject matter remains for Gorgias' so-called art of rhetoric? Gorgias might wish to reply that rhetoric is not concerned merely with speech but also with speaking *well*. But this reply, Phillips argues, will not help him. For Socrates could simply employ the same tactic and ask 'Speaking well about *what*?'. After all, whether one is speaking well will be determined by the logos appropriate to the art relevant to the example of speech.

In short, what Socrates shows is that rhetoric cannot be an art. He inverts the claims of the Sophists: the arts and their logoi cannot be reduced to rhetoric; rather, rhetoric is logically parasitic on the very 'knowledge' and 'truth' whose reality the Sophists denied:

> "Persuasion involves a reference to 'truth', because persuasion, even when deceptive, involves a reference to 'what is the case'. The persuader relies on concepts of 'truth' and 'knowledge' in those he is trying to persuade."[50]

Of course, Phillips's main interest lies not with the refutation of the Sophists' claims. The question is whether we can, by the same Socratic questions, have a contemplative conception of philosophy. What if we were to ask Socrates to specify philosophy's subject matter? He, too, might reply that he is concerned with discourse. But, once again, the question is, 'Discourse about *what*?'. Should Socrates say he is concerned with knowledge and understanding, we may retort, 'Knowledge and understanding of *what*?'. Any substantive answer leads back to the arts and sciences. Once we allow these their proper subject matters it seems we can only conclude that philosophy, having no distinctive

[49] See Phillips 1999, pp. 6-7.
[50] Phillips 1999, p. 6.

subject matter to call its own, is not truly an art or science. What then remains of the independent nature of philosophical enquiry?

The tempting reply here would be to argue that the difference between philosophy and the other sciences is one of generality. Whereas the latter are concerned with the reality of this and that, i.e. the reality of a particular state of affairs, philosophy seeks to give an account of reality as a whole. Such an account "is not meant to explain the existence of one state of affairs as opposed to another but to show how it is possible for anything to be real."[51]

This answer, Phillips argues, faces two serious problems. First, it will be clear that an enquiry into the nature of *all* things can no longer be an empirical enquiry. Any empirical investigation will always be into a specific state of affairs, no matter how general. The answers put forward in this context will be hypothetical, that is, will allow the possibility of a counter thesis. But an account of reality as a whole is supposed to rule out the possibility of a counter thesis. In other words, whatever criteria we propose to determine what is real, we invite the question as to the reality of those criteria. This is what Phillips calls the problem of 'measuring the measure':

> "If one provides any measure of 'the real', one can always, in turn, pose a question about the reality of the measure. No measure offered can avoid this difficulty."[52]

Closely connected to this problem is that of what Wittgenstein referred to as 'subliming the logic of our language'.[53] Discussing the relation between a name and the thing named, Wittgenstein asks what the words 'this' and 'that', used, for example, in an ostensive definition, may be said to be names of. Surely, Wittgenstein suggests, if we want to avoid confusion it would be best not to call these words names at all.

> "Yet, strange to say, the word 'this' has been called the only *genuine* name; so that anything else we call a name was one only in an inexact, approximate sense."[54]

This idea, Wittgenstein argues, springs from a tendency to sublime the logic of our language, the tendency to take language out of its actual contexts of application. Thus, Wittgenstein's reply takes the form of a

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[51] Phillips 1999, p. 3.
[52] Phillips 1999, p. 10.
[53] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 38, 89, 94.
[54] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 38. Wittgenstein is referring to Bertrand Russell; see Baker & Hacker 1980, p. 220.

reminder. He reminds us that we call very different things 'names'; the word 'name' is used to characterise many different kinds of use of a word, related to one another in many different ways. Returning to the problem at hand, Phillips argues that the word 'real', likewise, has a variety of applications which are related to one another in various ways. Why should we settle for any one of these applications rather than another?

> "If we face a plurality of measures, why should we favor any *one* above others as *the* account of the reality of 'all things' […] why not settle for recognizing that there are many measures of 'the real', that what we *mean* by 'the real' is not one thing but varies with the contexts in which questions about 'the real' may arise?"[55]

Faced with the problems of 'measuring' and 'subliming' the measure, the prospects for philosophical enquiry as an enquiry into the nature of reality may seem pretty dire. Philosophy, it appears, is left with a purely negative task, the task of exposing its own pretensions: there is no reality to discover, enquire into, or give an account of. This conclusion may result in various conceptions of philosophy. Phillips discusses three possibilities, none of which, he argues, constitute a contemplative philosophy.

The first two possibilities involve a form of scepticism. One "may abandon the whole enterprise of giving an account of reality and embrace a scepticism about any notion of reality" or "one may admit that it makes sense to seek an account of reality but be entirely skeptical as to whether one can, in fact, arrive at an adequate account."[56] Phillips rejects both possibilities. The first option is illustrated by a discussion of the Sophists. They argued that there is no such thing as reality, or, for that matter, knowledge or truth. There is only opinion, which may be strong or weak, but not valid or invalid. The best philosophy can do is to teach us how to express our opinions most forcefully so that we may persuade others of our point of view: philosophy becomes rhetoric. We already considered Phillips's discussion of Socrates' dialogue with Gorgias. Phillips argues that Gorgias robs philosophy of any distinctive subject matter, and fails to realise that rhetoric is logically parasitic on the reality of the notions of 'truth' and 'knowledge' it denies.

The second option is likewise rejected. It fails to realise the force of the problem of subliming the measure. For although it is sceptical about

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[55] Phillips 1999, pp. 4, 5.
[56] Phillips 1999, p. 10.

the possibility of arriving at an adequate account of reality, it still maintains that the notion of such an account is intelligible. According to Phillips, however, the point is not "that no successful account can be given of reality but that the very idea of such an account is confused."[57] This insight leads the way to the third possibility Phillips discusses. As a result of the problems encountered so far

> "one may assume that philosophy cannot give an account of Reality as a whole, because that conception is confused. No one measure of 'the real' can be provided. What we need to recognize is that in human activities there are many conceptions of 'the real' and 'the unreal'. Philosophy must settle for pointing this out, clarifying the differences between them, and locating the confusion of attempting to transcend them in a more comprehensive account of Reality."[58]

For Phillips, this understanding of philosophical enquiry does not amount to a contemplative one. To those acquainted with Phillips's work, his rejection of this conception of philosophical enquiry — for ease of reference let us call it a 'descriptive' one — seems astonishing. After all, it *is* a conception of philosophy which many may feel to be implied by Wittgenstein's later writings. More importantly, we have certainly become familiar with it from Phillips's own work. *The Concept of Prayer* seems to fit the bill rather well. On the methodological level, *The Concept of Prayer* emphasises the importance of resisting the craving for generality, a desire to give an all-embracing unitary account of reality. All too often, one use of the word 'real' is elevated as a paradigm for any use of the word; as we have seen, a mistake Phillips now identifies as that of 'subliming the measure'. Looking back, in 1968, on *The Concept of Prayer*, Phillips tells us that what he tried to do was to urge

> "that the distinction between the real and the unreal does not come to the same thing in every context. To think otherwise is to fall into a deep confusion about the relation between language and reality."[59]

Drawing, once again, on Winch, Phillips reiterates his argument: what is real or not is not given prior to any use of language but is shown in the various uses language has. The philosopher's task is that of "*looking* to see whether there are any such differences, and if there are, *showing* their character."[60] In so doing, the grammar of a given form of discourse

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[57] Phillips 1999, p. 8.
[58] Phillips 1999, p. 10.
[59] Phillips 1970, p. 63.
[60] Phillips 1970, p. 64.

is revealed. This, Phillips argues, is precisely what he sought to do in *The Concept of Prayer*:

> "What I wish to urge is that one can only give a satisfactory account of religious beliefs if one pays attention to the roles they play in people's lives. By comparing these roles with others one can bring out the grammar of religious belief. This is what I sought to do by comparing confessing, thanking, and asking in prayer, with confessing, thanking, and asking in other contexts."[61]

There is little indication here of any philosophical task over and above that of clarifying the grammar of the mode of discourse under investigation, in this case, religious belief(s). Nor is there any hint of a further philosophical understanding of 'reality as a whole' which is the result of such clarification. On the contrary:

> After [philosophy] has sought to clarify the grammar of such beliefs its work is over. As a result of such clarification, someone may see dimly that religious beliefs are not what he had taken them to be. [...] The results are unpredictable. In any case, they are not the business of philosophy."[62]

This point of view is by no means confined to *The Concept of Prayer* and the articles published shortly thereafter. In *Religion Without Explanation*, published in 1976, we find a similar approach. Faced with religious language-games, philosophy's "task is a descriptive one; he gives an account of the use of language involved."[63] Philosophy aims at clarifying the grammar of a given discourse, primarily by means of contrasting it to other modes of discourse and revealing the differences. The emphasis is not so much on understanding 'reality as a whole' as on understanding the distinctive nature of the mode of discourse clarified. Referring to religious belief, *Religion Without Explanation* tells us that

> "More than anything for the philosopher, however, the investigation is a clarification of the nature of activity which has almost always been an important feature of human life. To achieve such clarification it will be important to be aware of differences between human activities, so that we shall not be too ready to assume that what it makes sense to say of one it must make sense to say of another."[64]

Although philosophical description is constructive in that it allows us a clear understanding of the grammar of religious beliefs, this clarity is still mainly understood negatively. Although one hopes to convey

[61] Phillips 1970, pp. 67-68.
[62] Phillips 1970, p. 109.
[63] Phillips 1976, p. 41.
[64] Phillips 1976, pp. 7-8.

something of the meaning and force of religious language, one may achieve no more than to stop people from talking nonsense,[65] and "put an end to much idle speculation carried on in the name of philosophy of religion."[66] In an article first published in 1989 Phillips sums this up nicely:

> "The aim of Wittgenstein's work […] is to find our way from conceptual puzzlement to conceptual clarity. This aim, if achieved, would clarify the grammar of belief and unbelief, and also the grammar of the disagreement between them. It is in this sense that philosophy's task is a humble one, and it is in this sense, too, that philosophy leaves everything where it is."[67]

In his earlier work, one might say, Phillips has no intention of ensuring the independence of philosophical enquiry by claiming, on the model of the empirical sciences, a specific subject matter. In a sense, he concludes that, indeed, philosophy is not really a science at all. That is to say, he follows Wittgenstein in effecting a strict separation between the empirical sciences on the one hand and philosophy on the other. Philosophy is not a cognitive enterprise. It does not compete with any of the empirical sciences. It aims not so much at truth, but at conceptual clarity. The philosopher does not explain, for instance, what 'understanding a sentence' is in terms of a physiological or psychological process. Rather, his aim is to elucidate the import of the concept of understanding in the diversity of human activities in which it is embedded and employed.

   In short: philosophical problems are not empirical problems. They arise out of a misunderstanding of our forms of language. The philosopher's task is to rid us of these confusions by means of conceptual reminders. This is achieved, mainly, through perspicuous representations of those parts of language that give rise to our confusions. It will be clear that this brief summary strays little from accounts to be found in much of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein's later philosophy.[68] More importantly, such a conception of philosophy is certainly strongly in evidence in Phillips's own work. In *Philosophy's Cool Place*, however, it is rejected because it "leaves out the fundamental questions in philosophy about the nature of reality."[69] A contemplative philosophy,

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[65] See Phillips 1970, p. 230.

[66] Phillips 1976, p. 190.

[67] Phillips 1993, p. 31.

[68] And, of course, we have offered a similar reading in the second chapter of this book.

[69] See Phillips 1999, p. 10.

as we saw, is concerned with giving an account of reality. Thus Phillips's main question is the following:

> "How can philosophy give an account of reality which shows that it is necessary to go beyond simply noting differences between various modes of discourse, without invoking a common measure of 'the real' or assuming that all modes of discourse have a common subject, namely, Reality?"[70]

Our discussion so far indicates that it will not be easy to arrive at an answer to this question. Before we turn to consider Phillips's efforts, however, we should examine two further reasons why Phillips rejects a descriptive conception of philosophical enquiry. First, such a conception of philosophical enquiry fails to recognise the independent, or distinctive, nature of philosophical problems and, secondly, it is unable to account for the unity of language. We discuss these in turn.

If we think of the main impetus of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a desire to pass from confused to unconfused thought and equate the essence of his method with that of providing perspicuous grammatical representations, we attribute an underlabourer conception of philosophy to him. The philosopher is called upon to clear away our confusions so that we may continue with our affairs:

> "Philosophy clears away conceptual confusions to facilitate clear building and clear living. Conceptual underlaborers clear up conceptual confusions on one site after another. If we ask underlaborers where there *own* site is, the question betrays our misunderstanding. It does not make sense to attribute a site to them; their work is occasioned by confusions that occur on *other* sites."[71]

On this view, philosophy has no distinctive site of its own. We always have to speak of the philosophy *of* something or other — philosophy of morals, philosophy of psychology, philosophy of religion, and so on. Philosophy is thought of in instrumental terms: as exercises in problem solving or as the therapy that makes one's puzzles go away.[72]

Now, it is true, Phillips admits, that Wittgenstein sometimes spoke of philosophy as if the question is whether the philosophical clarification has done the trick; whether it would relieve the mental cramps of those who are bothered by philosophy. This leaves one to wonder, as Rhees puts it, "whether tranquillizers would not have worked as well."[73] Such

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[70] Phillips 1999, p. 11.
[71] Phillips 1999, p. 25.
[72] See Phillips 1999, p. 56.
[73] Quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 48.

talk, Phillips argues, even when it is Wittgenstein's, does not do justice to his philosophical practice. He refers to Rhees who points out that Wittgenstein was never guided by any thought of the likely effect of his philosophical conclusions on the average student or anything of that sort.[74] Furthermore, Phillips argues, if philosophy is the way to rid us of confusions in our lives it becomes unintelligible why Wittgenstein so strongly discouraged the pursuit of the subject. That is to say, according to Phillips, this view implies too naïve an identification of 'philosophical confusion' with 'confused living'.[75] It is extremely important to distinguish between, say, "philosophical puzzlement about science and doing science."[76] To suggest that the former would lead to difficulties with the latter, that philosophical problems about science might hold up scientific progress, would be, Phillips argues, to underestimate "the *independence* of philosophy, the way its problems and how they are discussed come from the character of the subject."[77] The philosopher "reflects in a subject which has a history, and its own distinctive questions."[78] Such questions as whether moral or religious viewpoints can have any objectivity, how words acquire meaning and how language is related to reality, and so on. Wittgenstein, too, was concerned with these questions. His philosophy is informed not just by the aim of ridding us of confusion by means of distinguishing between different uses of language, but "also by an aim that making these distinctions subserves — to show what is involved in speaking a language at all."[79]

   Although we may agree with the gist of Phillips's arguments, they do raise some concerns. If one were so inclined one could argue that Wittgenstein was never guided by the effects of his philosophy on the average student for no other reason than that he lacked empathy with them. Foolishness aside, this fact can hardly be said to demonstrate that Wittgenstein did not feel that the real discovery of his later philosophy "is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. — The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question."[80] One should not forget that although Wittgenstein certainly wrestled with problems that,

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[74] See Phillips 1999, p. 48.
[75] See Phillips 1999, p. 45.
[76] Phillips 1999, p. 44.
[77] Phillips 1999, p. 44.
[78] Phillips 2001, p. 323.
[79] Phillips 1999, pp. 51-52.
[80] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 133.

traditionally, belong to the subject of philosophy, he was very critical of the solutions on offer. Many of these, he felt, are the product of confusion. More often than not, the emphasis in the *Investigations* is not so much on providing new, alternative solutions but on dissolving the problems. This is why Wittgenstein's method is essentially indirect. Philosophical theses, being unintelligible rather than false, cannot be directly refuted. Phillips agrees that one can get someone to see this only indirectly, by getting that person to appreciate the route that led to his confusion.[81] This certainly implies a move from confusion to clarity. Indeed, it would be quite a challenge to discuss the *Investigations* without referring to the notion of philosophy as a therapy that delivers us from confusion. In addition, we should note that, for Wittgenstein, the dissolution of philosophical problems, is *effected through* conceptual clarification. As we pointed out in reply to Bailey, one must take care not to obscure the internal relation between 'distinguishing language-games' and the dissolution of philosophical problems.

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether Wittgenstein cared much for any attempt strictly to separate confusions we may fall prey to whilst philosophising, from those we might encounter in other walks of life. He did indeed discourage the pursuit of philosophy to some of his students. The biographical material available to us suggests that his reasons for doing so were various and complicated. They had to do not only with his understanding of the nature of philosophy but also with his dislike and moral distrust of the academic milieu, as well as with his feelings for the students involved and his hopes for their lives. Although I do not want to go into this matter to any great extent, suffice it to say that one is struck by the way in which Wittgenstein related his profession to his life. This does not imply any straightforward distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical confusions. On the contrary, Wittgenstein said that working on philosophy is like working on oneself.[82]

Phillips is right, of course, to insist that the philosopher reflects in a subject which has a history, and its own distinctive questions. And, obviously, there is a difference between philosophical puzzlement about science and doing science. But if one conceives of philosophical enquiry as, at least in part, conceptual clarification, it would be silly to deny that this activity has its place and import *within* science as well. If so, it is

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[81] See Phillips 1999, p. 8.
[82] See Phillips 1999, p. 62. We return to this below when we discuss the disinterested nature of philosophical enquiry.

not patently clear why philosophical reflection should have no impact on scientific enquiry. In fact, one might reasonably argue that one can hardly account for the history of either subject without invoking the other. It is not just a case of philosophy *interacting* with science.[83] Various periods in history show that the two disciplines were more strongly interwoven than that.[84] Of course, this is not meant to underplay the importance of seeing the differences between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts, such as science. The point is, on the one hand, a historical one: these differences have not always been as clear as Phillips seems to imply. This, one should mention, is certainly true of Phillips's main subject of enquiry, that of religious belief, or, at least, Christianity. The history of Christian faith and theology and that of philosophical reflection have, more often than not, run on parallel tracks. On the other hand, the point is a more systematic one. Although it is important to draw attention to the differences between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts it is equally important to emphasise the fact that philosophical reflection is situated within the broader context of human life. From these connections philosophy draws its sustenance as well as its import. To deny these connections would not be to ensure philosophy's independence. Rather, it would be to ensure its isolation and, inevitably, as we shall see further on, its irrelevance.

Despite these worries, however, Phillips's main point still holds. It would indeed be a mistake to represent Wittgenstein's chief concern in his later philosophy as no more than that of clarifying distinctions between language-games. Wittgenstein is not so much interested in the forms of meaning realised in any specific type of discourse. The disinterested clarification of possibilities of meaning is carried out, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the (dis)solution of the philosophical problems with which Wittgenstein engages. In fact, as we have seen, the whole notion of a language-game is devised with this aim in mind.

This brings us to Phillips's second reason for rejecting a descriptive understanding of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. If one does no more than clarify the distinctions between language-games one fails to address the issue of how these various language-games hang together. Unless there is a kind of unity to our language, "our dialogues would simply be an absurd collection of arbitrary activities."[85] Here, the analogy

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[83] See Phillips 2001, p. 232.

[84] And, from the point of view of various contemporary philosophers, this is still the case, or, at least, should be.

[85] Phillips 1999, p. 10.

between language and games begins to break down; a point which, as we have already noted, Rhees makes in his article *Wittgenstein's Builders*. It is assumed, Rhees argues, that the *same* language is spoken in each of the various language-games. The problem is how we should understand this. Surely, it makes no sense to say that all the language-games taken together make up one additional language-game, just as different languages would not make up one additional language either.

One might reply that each separate language-game is complete. This is what Wittgenstein seems to suggest when he introduces the language of the builders in part one of the *Investigations*, paragraph 2. Of course, the point of the example is to disabuse us of the idea that any form of language awaits analysis for its completion. This is a point Rhees accepts. He still criticises Wittgenstein, however, for claiming that the language of the builders could be the *whole* language of the tribe. Not so much because its vocabulary is limited but, rather, because the words have no application outside of the activity of building:

> "The trouble is not to imagine a people with a language of such limited vocabulary. The trouble is to imagine that they spoke the language only to give these special orders on this job and otherwise never spoke at all. I do not think it would be speaking a language."[86]

For one thing, this 'language' would contain no standards of correctness. What counts as correct would be no more than what we normally do. For there to be standards of normativity, Rhees argues, it is essential that the vocabulary of the builders be used on other occasions, outside of the activity of building. The meaning of a certain expression *in* a language-game depends, in part, on how this expression is used in other language-games:

> "You might ask why this should make such a difference — the fact that they are used elsewhere. And one reason is that then the expressions are not just part of one particular routine. Their uses elsewhere have to do with the point or bearing of them in what we are saying now. It is the way in which we have come to know them in other connexions that decides whether it makes sense to put them together here, for instance: whether one can be substituted for another, whether they are incompatible and so forth. The meaning that they have within this game is not to be seen simply in what we do with them or how we react to them in this game."[87]

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[86] Rhees 1970, p. 76.
[87] Rhees 1970, p. 78. In Baker and Hacker's commentary on the *Philosophical Investigations* one finds a similar argument. The language of the builders, they argue, has no syntax, contains no rules for sentence formation, is incapable of expressing generality and

Rhees is arguing that a certain generality belongs to language. This is not the generality of a formal system, not that of a calculus, but "the generality involved in a way of living, in which what is said on one occasion has an interlocking intelligibility with what is said on other occasions. Without this, there would be nothing that we would call a language."[88] Clearly, Wittgenstein himself also realised this. That is why he said that we learn what an expression means in a family of language-games, that words only have meaning in the stream of thought and life and that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.[89] This shows that Wittgenstein goes beyond merely noting the differences to enquire into the kind of unity language has. If all we do is show the differences between language-games, this concern will not be addressed. For the differences can only be the differences they are because their reality depends on the place they occupy in the broader context of human life and discourse.[90]

Having now discussed Phillips's first two reasons for rejecting a descriptive conception of philosophical enquiry we may draw the following conclusions. The descriptive conception constitutes a naïve reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. It too readily assumes that Wittgenstein's main discovery is that language really consists of a multitude of independent units or language-games. The only task facing the philosopher is that of describing the various grammars that exclusively constitute meaning in the diversity of language-games. Thus we may come to learn what people mean when they say this or that, and we may assist them in getting rid of their possible confusions by pointing out their transgression of the rules of the particular game they happen to be playing. What this misses, as Phillips rightly points out, is that when Wittgenstein said that language is a family of games, his concern was not primarily with distinguishing one language-game from another, but rather with the question of the kind of unity language has. Human

has only one mood (imperative). This makes it doubtful whether Wittgenstein rightly calls it 'a language': "For one may plausibly think that syntax is essential to language, since it is a prerequisite for the creative powers of language which distinguish arbitrary signs from symbols in language. Equally, the possibility of truth and falsity is commonly thought to be essential to language, but, lacking logical constants and having no assertoric mood, this 'language' contains no possibility of truth and falsity, but only of compliance and non-compliance." (Baker and Hacker 1980, p. 65.)

[88] Phillips 1999, p. 50.
[89] Respectively, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 179; Wittgenstein 1981, 173; Wittgenstein 1994, I, 19, 23.
[90] See Phillips 1999, p. 11.

discourse is not a collection of isolated, arbitrary games. There is a generality to language, be it not the generality of a formal system or calculus. To provide descriptive accounts of various language-games is not the end, but rather the beginning of Wittgenstein's enquiry. That is to say, as we have seen, the notion of a language-game plays a methodological rather than an ontological role in Wittgenstein's philosophy. It is a tool which is employed in the course of addressing problems in philosophical logic, problems, as, once again, Phillips rightfully reminds us, that traditionally and distinctively belong to the subject of philosophy. We have also argued, however, that for Wittgenstein the emphasis lies not so much on resolving as on dissolving these problems. The clarity that should result from his enquiry is not secured by transcending the various modes of discourse, drawing them together in one comprehensive philosophical account of reality. Rather, it consists not in the least in the realisation that this aspiration cannot be coherently expressed. If these conclusions are correct, Phillips's demand that a contemplative philosophy should provide an account of the nature of reality becomes rather disconcerting. One is inclined to say that no room has been left for such an account. How does Phillips propose to overcome these difficulties? For an answer, we must return briefly to the discussion between Gorgias and Socrates.

Phillips left us with the question whether we can, by the same Socratic questions that plagued Gorgias, have a contemplative conception of philosophy. Can Socrates specify philosophy's subject matter? Once we allow the already existing arts and sciences their proper subject matters it seems there is none left for philosophy. According to Phillips, however, we need not embrace this conclusion. When asked what kind of discourse a contemplative philosophy is concerned with, Phillips tells us we could reply, 'Discourse about discourse'. A contemplative philosophy is concerned "with the *possibility* of discourse, the possibility of 'knowledge' and 'truth'."[91] The main question is what it means to *say* something.[92] In answering this question, a contemplative philosophy provides an account of reality.

What are we to make of these remarks? Phillips's initial reply, that the subject matter of philosophy is discourse about discourse, comes across as a play on words rather than a substantial solution to the problem. One might reasonably feel that, apart from the matter of phrasing,

[91] Phillips 1999, p. 7.
[92] See Phillips 1999, p. 49.

this answer is no different from the previous one which suggested that philosophy is concerned with discourse. The problem with this answer is that the subject matter has already been spoken for by, for example, sociologists and psychologists, linguists and grammarians. Of course, Phillips should reply that a philosophical enquiry is a conceptual enquiry. The question is whether we can give an intelligible account of "the possibility of discourse as such."[93] But this proposal faces serious difficulties as well. The suggestion that our object of enquiry is not so much 'discourse about this or that' but 'discourse as such' raises suspicions of essentialism. Given Phillips's analysis of the problems of measuring and subliming the measure, surely he should accept that we are not so much confronted by discourse as such but, rather, by a variety of forms of discourse which need not necessarily share any single common characteristic. How should philosophy transcend these various forms of discourse to arrive at a more fundamental and comprehensive account of reality?

One might conclude that, perhaps, Phillips is proposing some form of transcendental enquiry. But that is not an option, for Phillips explicitly denies this. His aim, he tells us, is not

> "to set up any kind of transcendental project, any kind of demonstration of the conditions of discourse, conditions that seek to get behind, in some way, the possibilities exemplified *in* discourse itself."[94]

A contemplative philosophy, Phillips argues, does not set out to reveal the conditions of our discourse. Rather, it considers, or contemplates, the various possible forms that our discourse actually takes. Thus, Phillips is talking about *possibilities* (plural) of discourse rather than the *possibility* (singular) of discourse as such. These possibilities do not evince some kind of transcendental necessity. We do not talk to one another in the way we do because we *must* — this is simply what we do:

> "What will count as 'sayable' will depend on how people actually talk to one another. Or, better, that people talk to one another in the ways in which they do, that they make the connections they do, will show what is and what is not 'sayable'."[95]

Indeed, this way of putting matters does not imply some form of transcendental enquiry. Then again, neither does it take us any further towards 'an account of reality'. For what should the contemplation of possibilities of discourse, 'knowledge' and 'truth' amount to other than

[93] Phillips 1999, pp. 48-49.
[94] Phillips 1999, p. 155.
[95] Phillips 1999, p. 51.

the clarification of the various conceptions of 'discourse', 'knowledge' and 'truth' that arise in human activities? The philosopher could show the differences and the similarities between these various conceptions, but how should he transcend them to arrive at a more comprehensive account of reality? By contrast, the phrase 'the *possibility* of discourse as such' does imply the prospect of transcending the various possibilities of discourse but only at the cost of introducing some kind of transcendental condition, or set of conditions, which the various possibilities must have in common — once again, a clear-cut case of what Phillips calls 'subliming the measure'.

Let us turn to consider Phillips's final suggestion, the suggestion that a contemplative philosophy enquires into what it means to *say* something. It is difficult to see how this should avoid the problems we have encountered. What it means to say something varies from one context to the next, depending, not in the last place, on *what* is said. If we are conceptually confused about something that is said, philosophical clarification may be of help. Such clarification, however, would not amount to an account of reality but simply to a clear understanding of the meaning of the expression that confused us. To argue that the question does not relate to the meaning of some particular expression but to the meaning of saying something at all, is to assume that saying something must, in some essential sense, always amount to the same thing, if anything can be said to have been said at all. Surely, this constitutes yet another case of subliming the measure. Faced with such a claim, philosophy should point out the various meanings saying various somethings may have and locate the confusion in trying to transcend them in a more comprehensive account of reality.

Perhaps Phillips would reply that we are over-interpreting his notion of 'an account of the nature of reality'. To say that philosophy is concerned with discourse is to point out that a philosophical enquiry is conceptual rather than empirical, aimed at clarification rather than explanation. To say that it is concerned with discourse *as such* is no more than to preserve the independence of philosophical enquiry. The philosopher is not so much interested in the meaning of any specific form of discourse but rather in what is involved in speaking a language at all. Such phrases as 'the *possibility* of discourse' and 'what it means to *say* something' serve only to underscore this and to emphasise the importance of accounting for the kind of unity language has. Finally, to provide an account of the nature of reality is to disclose what characterises our thinking and acting, to show the various world pictures

which are constitutive of how people think, act, and live, for what they are. Thus we learn, for example, that it makes no sense to say that 'reality' gives foundation to our ways of thinking and acting. On the contrary, philosophical contemplation of the possibilities of human discourse reveals that there are various distinctions between 'the real' and 'the unreal', that we learn to make these distinctions in the contexts of our ways of acting and thinking, and that, hence, it makes no sense to try philosophically to transcend these distinctions by invoking a common measure of 'the real'.[96] Does not this teach us something about the way things are, that is, about the nature of reality?

Obviously, I can only speculate as to whether Phillips would agree with this way of putting matters. At any rate, it still leaves questions unanswered. If the notion of 'reality' gets its meaning in the contexts of our ways of acting and thinking, then whence do we derive the notion of 'reality' Phillips employs when he says that philosophy provides an account of the nature of reality? Phillips cannot pick any one of the various notions of 'reality' as a paradigm for all — that would be to sublime the measure. Nor can he argue that philosophy transcends the various distinctions we make between the real and the unreal by explicating the essential feature they all share and which makes them into distinctions of the real and the unreal in the first place. For he accepts that "there are various distinctions between 'the real' and 'the unreal' in discourse and that they do not all have something in common".[97] It is difficult to see how we should conclude anything other than that the philosophical account of the nature of reality "trades on an abstract notion of reality, to which, of necessity, no content can be given."[98]

In paragraph 116 of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein tells us that when philosophers use such words as 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' and try to grasp the essence of the thing we should always ask whether the word is ever actually used in this way in our language where it is at home. He could easily have added the word 'reality' to his list. The aim is to bring the words back from their philosophical or metaphysical use to their natural applications. Phillips agrees: philosophy aims to return us from our confusions to clarity about

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[96] See Phillips 1999, p. 161.

[97] Phillips 1999, p. 10.

[98] Phillips 1999, p. 161. One might add that the phrase 'learning something about the way things are' is no less indeterminate than the concept of 'reality' Phillips employs. Until we situate this phrase in a more specific context its meaning remains unclear.

the natural contexts in which our concepts have their meaning.[99] He adds that this task is one which can never reach a conclusion: old problems keep coming back in new forms and cultural developments may occasion new problems.[100] There is, one might say, no single account of reality, no definitive *Übersicht*, which, once and for all, shall cure us of all our troubles.

One must take care, however, not to make it appear as if philosophical enquiry leaves us empty-handed: we simply return to the way we actually used words all along. This, as Phillips already points out in *The Concept of Prayer*, ignores the new understanding we gain from working through our problems. True; but would it not be highly misleading to represent this understanding as the achievement of an account of reality? Wittgenstein unfailingly rejects the conclusion that philosophical enquiry results in positive theses, theories or explanations. This is connected to the essentially indirect nature of philosophical clarification. As we noted above, according to Phillips, philosophical theses cannot be directly refuted. Such a refutation would suggest that the theses are intelligible but false. But the trouble with such theses is not their falsity but their unintelligibility; an attempt is made to say something that does not make sense. One can get someone to see this "only indirectly, by getting that person to appreciate the route that led to the confusion, so that the person no longer wants to say what he or she did."[101] In this respect, one might say that philosophical understanding shows itself, not in what we say, but in what we abstain from saying. In other words, the emphasis lies not so much on the resolution of philosophical problems as on their dissolution. This does not mean that we abandon the fundamental questions in philosophy concerning 'the nature of reality'. Quite the contrary. But the way in which we engage with these questions is not by answering them directly, by replacing the confused theses — confused accounts of reality — with alternative, better, ones. Rather, we need to work *through* the problems to achieve clarity about the concepts at work in our lives. As Wittgenstein puts it: "the philosophical problems should

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[99] See Phillips 1999, p. 161.

[100] See Phillips 2001, p. 325.

[101] Phillips 1999, p. 8; cf. Phillips 1999, pp. 24-25, 41-42 and Wittgenstein 1979, p. 1. Wittgenstein's so-called 'private language argument' provides a perfect example. When Wittgenstein's interlocutor asks whether we can imagine a private language Wittgenstein does not simply answer 'No'. For that would assume that the notion, although false, is intelligible. Rather, he continues to harass his interlocutor with questions, counter examples, and conceptual reminders until he no longer wants to say what he did.

completely disappear."[102] This is why we could say that, in philosophy, we are 'on a road to nowhere'.

Phillips's insistence on providing an account of reality makes it appear as if there is a shortcut after all. Such an account, presumably, can show us directly why it is confused to seek a philosophical account of Reality (capital 'R'). Apart from the problems we already referred to concerning the indeterminacy of the notion of 'reality', we should note that this makes it unintelligible why we should say that, in philosophy, we are struggling to go nowhere. Not only would we not be going nowhere, moreover, why should there be any struggle? Of course, it may well be difficult to arrive at a correct account of the nature of reality. But it is clear that Phillips is not referring to intellectual or technical difficulties. Rather, in working on philosophical problems a resistance of the will has to be overcome; we have to give up certain ways of thinking.[103] One of these ways of thinking, one might feel, is the idea that the aim of philosophical enquiry is "to 'get somewhere', to make contact with reality".[104]

Let us draw this section to a close by summarising our conclusions. In his earlier work, one might say, Phillips comes close to entertaining a descriptive conception of philosophical enquiry. In his later work he rejects this in favour of a contemplative conception. On the one hand, this is because the descriptive conception does not preserve the independent nature of philosophical enquiry and fails to account for the kind of unity the various language-games it may distinguish have. On the other hand, Phillips argues that a descriptive understanding of philosophical enquiry fails to provide an account of the nature of reality.

As to the latter, it is highly implausible that Phillips is suggesting to develop an account of the nature of reality in any strong sense of the term. He would then face the task of showing how 'the way of thinking and acting' that is philosophy can provide an understanding of 'reality' that somehow transcends the various distinctions between 'the real' and 'the unreal' on offer in our forms of discourse. This would certainly constitute a break from his position in his earlier work. Phillips has argued time and again that it is a deep-rooted confusion to believe that philosophy can provide any such comprehensive account. Of course, a person may change his mind, even if he is a philosopher. But Phillips gives no indication that this is the case. Quite the opposite; even in *Philosophy's*

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[102] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 133.
[103] See Phillips 1999, p. 121; cf. Wittgenstein 1984 p. 17.
[104] Phillips 1999, p. 161.

Cool Place itself, one need not look hard to find remarks which preclude the possibility of giving a philosophical account of the nature of reality. Indeed, Phillips carefully presents his case against any such an attempt in terms of the problems of measuring and subliming the measure. Yet we find no clear answer to the question as to how he proposes to overcome these problems.

We have considered a weaker, or more modest, interpretation of Phillips's understanding of an account of reality. One might say that the clarity about the concepts at work in our lives which results from philosophical contemplation adds up to such an account. We argued that this suggestion still faces the problem of the indeterminacy of the concept of 'reality' Phillips employs. Furthermore, it is difficult to reconcile with an understanding of philosophical enquiry as the indirect dissolution of philosophical problems, an understanding which gives poignancy to the phrase that, in philosophy, we are going nowhere.

Our argument has shown that, if we abandon the problematic notion of a philosophical account of reality, we can still preserve the independent nature of philosophical enquiry. The clarification of the possibilities of meaning realised in specific forms of discourse is informed by and aimed at the (dis)solution of questions and problems that distinctively belong to the history of the subject of philosophy. Furthermore, there is no reason to invoke an account of reality to counter the claim that our forms of discourse are just arbitrary activities. Perhaps we cannot say, directly, that our forms of discourse hang together thus and so. Rather, this is something that can only be, indirectly, shown. At one stage, Phillips compares the unity of our language to that of a conversation or dialogue.[105] As any dialogue, our language is open-ended. One cannot predict in which direction it will go. How, and if, our forms of discourse hang together will depend on how, and if, people actually talk to one another. To put it differently: people do not understand one another because there is a unity to our language. Rather, how, and if, people understand one another shows the kind of unity our language has.

Despite the problems we have encountered, Phillips's discussion of a contemplative philosophy carries the promise of a correction of his earlier views. Many of the difficulties we ran into in our discussion of *The Concept of Prayer* resulted from too strong an isolation of religious

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[105] See Phillips 1999, p. 51. Of course, Phillips does not mean to imply that language is "some kind of 'system' after all, not a system such as a calculus but perhaps one big, all-inclusive dialogue, in which we all engage and have our place." (Phillips 1999, p. 51)

forms of discourse. By paying more attention to the unity of language, these problems may well be resolved. Of course, this also raises new issues. For one thing, it casts doubt on too strong an emphasis upon the independent nature of philosophical enquiry. Philosophy cannot extract itself from the stream of thought and life; philosophical discourse is just more discourse. What is said in philosophical contexts has a bearing on what is said in non-philosophical contexts, and *vice versa*. If so, can we maintain that philosophical enquiry remains thoroughly disinterested? The following section turns to consider that question.

4.2.2 The disinterested nature of philosophical enquiry

The Concept of Prayer awards philosophy a negative role, in the sense that, ideally, philosophy remains thoroughly disengaged from the socio-linguistic practices it seeks to clarify. Philosophy aims merely to understand. And to understand, say, a religious point of view, is neither to appropriate nor to advocate it. Taking its cue from Wittgenstein's remark that his ideal is 'a certain coolness', *Philosophy's Cool Place* would seem to reaffirm this conclusion. A contemplative philosophy gives attention to our surroundings without meddling with them. Philosophers, Phillips opines, are reluctant to do so. Rather than leaving 'ragged what is ragged',[106] they are tempted to make matters tidier than they are.[107] Phillips is adamant that philosophical enquiry can and must leave everything as it is.[108] Although it may reveal what various moral or religious perspectives amount to, it neither advocates nor appropriates any one of them.[109]

Phillips's conclusion that philosophical contemplation remains disinterested follows, in the first place, from the independent nature of philosophical enquiry. The philosopher engages with questions which belong distinctively to the nature of his subject. He is not so much interested in any specific moral or religious perspectives for their own sake. They are treated as examples of the various possibilities of moral and religious sense that are shown in human practice and discourse.

It does not follow, however, that such an enquiry cannot lead to substantive results. We may accept that philosophical enquiry is not informed by the aim of showing which of the various perspectives discussed should

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[106] See Wittgenstein 1984, p. 45.
[107] See Phillips 1993, p. 254; cf. Phillips 1999, pp. 38, 103-104, 111, 122, 127.
[108] See, for example, Phillips 1993, pp. 237-238.
[109] See, for example, Phillips 1999, pp. 1, 5, 7, 37, 95, 99-100, 102, 115-117, 136-137, 143, 154, 160.

be appropriated, if any. But why should we deny the possibility of an answer to this question as a result of one's enquiry? Thus, Phillips needs to justify the stronger claim that, not only is it not philosophy's primary aim to advocate any specific moral or religious perspective but, moreover, philosophy cannot fulfil this aim, even if it so desired. Indeed, Phillips tells us that he is not trying to desist from tasks which philosophy can fulfil but which, for some reason or another, he is not interested in. Rather, he argues that the very conception of these tasks is confused. Philosophy cannot establish whether there is a God, prove why we should heed moral considerations, or determine the nature of the good life. This, Phillips maintains, is itself a philosophical conclusion.[110]

The manner in which he reaches this conclusion should, by now, be familiar. Just as we learn to distinguish between what is real and unreal within a variety of contexts so, too, we learn to distinguish between what is, say, good or bad within the variety of moral practices in which we may engage. These practices disclose various distinctions between 'the good' and 'the bad', which do not all have something in common. It is confused, Phillips maintains, to treat differing perspectives as external objects of comparison and to think that one could have a demonstration, independently of any perspective, to decide which is the right one.[111] We may be misled into thinking so, because from the point of view of one moral perspective we may call another mistaken or false. But "these terms are value judgments, and if they are spelled out, it is in terms of values."[112] Thus, we cannot justify our values by reference to human flourishing, to human good and harm, "because these notions, so far from being independent of our values, are informed by them."[113] We might argue that we can solve that problem by introducing a 'non-moral' criterion. For example, Phillips discusses Annette Baier's suggestion that we should reconsider Hume's attempt to give morality a basis in human capacities for cooperation. The problem, as Phillips points out, is that

> "For anyone with serious moral values, it will not be the conditions of cooperation with others that determine whether cooperation is possible […] we might well remind ourselves that it may be anything but benign to suggest that diverse moral views *must* be subordinated to a cooperative ideal. Everything depends on the moral character of the cooperation."[114]

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[110] See Phillips 1999, p. 160.
[111] See Phillips 1999, p. 143.
[112] Phillips 1999, p. 162.
[113] Phillips 1999, p. 73.
[114] Phillips 1999, pp. 122-123.

Philosophy, by means of perspicuous representations, may help remove
our confusions concerning various moral or religious perspectives or
open us up to possibilities of understanding we had not yet recognised.
Although, as a result, we may come to appreciate the rich variety of moral
and religious perspectives in human discourse, philosophy cannot itself
determine whether any, and, if so, which of these perspectives should be
embraced. What a man makes of such perspectives is a matter of what
man he is; a matter, one might say, of a person's character.[115] Phillips
agrees with Winch that "philosophy can no more show a man what he
should attach importance to than geometry can show a man where he
should stand."[116]

It has been argued, however, that Phillips does not practice what he
preaches. Incandela, for one, feels that Phillips's understanding of the dis-
interested nature of philosophical enquiry exacts a form of moral detach-
ment which ignores the personal involvement Wittgenstein demanded of
the philosopher. Incandela shows how such detachment may tend towards
the comical:

> "[P]hilosophers like Malcolm and Phillips appeared to take Wittgenstein's
> statement that philosophy 'leaves everything as it is' to sanction or at least
> allow a detached withdrawal by the philosopher from the form of life he is
> describing. Here one can imagine such a philosopher clocking out at 5.00
> after a hard day of describing a certain amount of religious grammar."[117]

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[115] See Phillips 1999, p. 143.

[116] Quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 143. Quite naturally, the question arises what philosophy
can do. Phillips argues that perspicuous representations of moral and religious perspectives
subserves contemplation of what moral and religious convictions *are*. (See Phillips 1999,
p. 130.) But how are we to understand this? It is highly implausible that Phillips is suggest-
ing that philosophical contemplation should lead to an account of the reality of morality
and religion in any strong sense of the term. Neither a formal nor a substantive account will
do; both run counter Phillips's claims. The former would abstract from the variety of moral
and religious perspectives, thus failing to recognise the fact that these have no single fea-
ture in common. The latter would inevitably lead to the endorsement of that specific moral
or religious perspective which is deemed 'real'. Against such attempts Phillips argues that
the portrayal of the variety of moral and religious perspectives is important "not to fix our
gaze on the unadulterated form but to keep us from searching for it."(Phillips 1999, p. 162.)
Are we to say then that the understanding that results from contemplating possibilities of
moral or religious sense sheds light on the reality of morality and religion? The problems
this raises run parallel to those we encountered in the previous section. There, we found,
Phillips faced the problem of the indeterminacy of the concept of 'reality' he employs.
Likewise, he now has to explain his understanding of the concept of a moral or religious
conviction. It is quite uncomfortable to conclude that the various possibilities of moral and
religious sense cannot be reduced to a single, formal, principle and then proceed to explain
what moral or religious convictions are. This implies that, after all, some meaning can be
given to the notion of an unadulterated form of such perspectives.

[117] Incandela 1985, p. 465.

But, Incandela continues, the matter may quickly become somewhat less silly. He asks us to consider Phillips's discussion of child sacrifice. Says Phillips:

> "If I hear that one of my neighbours has killed another neighbour's child, given that he is sane, my condemnation is immediate. […] But if I hear that some remote tribe practices child sacrifice, what then? I do not know what sacrifice means for the tribe in question. What would it mean to say I condemned it when 'it' refers to something I know nothing about. If I did condemn it, I would be condemning murder. But murder is not child sacrifice."[118]

Incandela feels certain that, for Wittgenstein, "such moral detachment and reluctance to criticize would have been bitter pills to swallow and ones I am confident his work does not prescribe."[119] Although Incandela does not say so explicitly, he leaves little room for doubt that he feels no philosophy should prescribe them. Nevertheless, examples of the kind Incandela refers to are not hard to come by in Phillips's work. Consider, for instance, Phillips's discussion of the Assyrian practice of inflicting pain upon imprisoned warriors. Here we are perhaps inclined, without hesitation, to speak of 'torture', "even though 'torture' is in the mind of neither the victor or the vanquished."[120] Philosophical contemplation may open us to other possibilities. The pain inflicted may be a way of honouring the captured warriors.[121] Once we come to recognise this, our reactions to the practice may correspondingly change. Phillips argues that such misunderstandings give point to Winch's remark: "If we do not understand, we are in no position to know what we are getting indignant about, or, as the case may be, what forgiving."[122]

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[118] Phillips 1970, p. 237.

[119] Incandela 1985, p. 466.

[120] Phillips 2001, p. 322.

[121] See Phillips 2001, p. 322; cf. Phillips 1976, p. 77. The question, or so it seems, is not whether it *may* be a way of honouring captured warriors, but whether it *is*. If we accept that the situation could be other than we took it to be we should, at the most, suspend our judgement. Sometimes Phillips gives the impression as if philosophical contemplation need do no more than reveal possibilities, rather than actualities, of meaning. We return to this issue in the following chapters.

[122] Winch 1987, p. 193; quoted in Phillips 2001, pp. 322-323. Phillips warns us that, even here, we must beware of generalisations. For example, lack of comprehension of how a footballer can be killed for scoring an own goal need not prevent us from reacting morally: "Indeed, it is part of the sense [our] reaction has: moral or religious incomprehension." (Phillips 2001, p. 323.) I agree, and I wonder why Phillips does not make the same point with respect to the Assyrian practice of inflicting pain on captured warriors. Phillips seems to imply that, if it turns out that the Assyrians think of their behaviour in terms of honouring the captives, we misunderstand the practice if *we* think of it as a form

This latter remark indicates that Incandela's depiction of Phillips's position as one of moral detachment may be misleading. Clearly the emphasis here is not on some kind of moral detachment demanded by philosophical enquiry but, rather, on the difference to one's moral reactions various forms of understanding — including philosophical understanding — may bring about. Let us return for a moment to the example Incandela refers to. Here, too, closer examination reveals that Phillips is not arguing for moral reticence with regards to child sacrifice. Rather he is trying to show how one's moral opinions are bound up in the way of life one leads and the kind of understanding one possesses.[123] The example of child sacrifice was introduced to illustrate the way in which our moral responses may alter with regards to cultures different from our own. A point, one feels, which is difficult to deny.

That Phillips is not arguing, as Incandela suggests, that philosophical contemplation must lead to moral detachment becomes undeniably clear when we consider his discussion of Rhees's remarks on, once again, child sacrifice. Witness Rhees's words:

> "I would not say I was shocked by the practice of child sacrifice in a really living religion, say in some part of Africa. If I learnt that a group of people were practising child sacrifice in some house in London at the present day, this would be entirely — repeat: *entirely* different. I would think the African practice was terrible — or I might say something of the sort. But I should have a deep respect for it. And I should certainly not say that people from other lands ought to break it up."[124]

Phillips proceeds to criticise Rhees for making it appear as if his analysis must lead to a feeling of respect. Understanding may bring clarity, but clarity does not, of itself, convey a specific moral attitude: "The moral or religious response which comes in the wake of clarity cannot be predicted from that clarity itself. This is itself an insight which comes from philosophical contemplation."[125]

Incandela might retort that Phillips has fallen into his own trap. In the concluding chapter to *Religion Without Explanation* Phillips argues that

of torture. But this does not follow. Whether or not we think of certain activities as a form of torture need not depend on how the participants in these activities think of it. Even if we take note of the Assyrian point of view, we may still reject it, saying, perhaps, that torture is no way to honour a person. In this case, to call the Assyrian practice 'torture', is not to explain or describe it but morally to condemn it. That is one form our understanding might take which cannot be ruled out, philosophically, as misunderstanding.

[123] See Phillips 1970, pp. 237, 253 n. 6.
[124] See Rhees 1998, pp. 101-102; quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 57.
[125] Phillips 2001, p. 324.

the philosopher who gives himself to the disinterested contemplation of religious belief must have "respect for the belief he is investigating."[126] Does this not show that, despite his criticism of Rhees, Phillips reaches the same conclusion: philosophical enquiry must lead to a feeling of respect. If I understand him correctly, that is not the point Phillips is making. The respect he refers to is not the result of philosophical contemplation, but its prerequisite. Far from demanding moral detachment, Phillips is emphasising the moral imperative which informs philosophical contemplation.[127] Philosophical enquiry is not personal in that it does not seek to advocate any specific moral or religious point of view. The philosopher's concern is that the moral and religious perspectives under investigation are not misrepresented, but even in the absence of such misrepresentations, one may still want to oppose them. If there is advocacy involved at all, "it is advocacy concerning the conduct of our enquiries."[128] Of course, there is no obligation to be puzzled philosophically. But when people are,

> "it is a caricature to describe them as uninterested, uninvolved spectators who transcend the busyness of life. This is because disinterestedness is not a lack of interest, but an interest of a special kind which has a moral imperative of its own. Philosophical contemplation, in trying to do justice to what it surveys, is not itself an attempt to arrive at a specific moral or religious viewpoint, but an effort to understand the kinds of phenomena we are confronted by in morality and religion."[129]

The 'morality of philosophical enquiry' constitutes an important theme in Phillips's work. In the opening chapter to his *Recovering Religious Concepts* Phillips tells us that one way of looking at his work "is as a series of charges against the immodest methods employed by some philosophers in the philosophy of religion."[130] In *Philosophy's Cool Place* he opines that to cling to the idea that philosophy has the task of telling us what the moral character of our lives should be is "a corruption of philosophical contemplation" which itself displays "a lack of character".[131] Phillips does not deny that use may be made of philosophical distinctions and expertise in the elucidation and advocacy of specific moral or religious perspectives. But, he adds, it is another matter "to

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[126] Phillips 1976, p. 189.
[127] One might wonder, however, whether the same could not be said of Rhees's remarks.
[128] Phillips 1999, p. 58.
[129] Phillips 2001, p. 324.
[130] Phillips 2000, p. 1.
[131] Phillips 1999, pp. 155 and 121 respectively.

claim that such perspectives are *underwritten* by philosophy."[132] In matters moral and religious, everyone has to speak for him or herself. As we saw, as early as *The Concept of Prayer*, Phillips argues that if the philosopher fails to resist the temptation of dressing up his moral or religious decision as philosophy, he introduces an impurity into his philosophy.[133]

Whether or not one agrees with Phillips, it is clear that his replies refute Incandela's objections. There is, indeed, a kind of neutrality connected to Phillips's understanding of philosophical enquiry. A contemplative philosophy, one might say, seeks a position outside existential dialectic in 'disinterest'.[134] It does so in order to do justice to the various possibilities of moral and religious sense in human discourse. This demands that we give attention to perspectives that are *not* ours, however reluctant we may be to do so.[135] But it would be a mistake to depict this as a form of moral detachment. Quite the opposite: philosophical contemplation is strongly committed to a moral imperative of its own.

So far, we have seen that a contemplative philosophy seeks to attain a clear understanding of the various possibilities of moral and religious sense that are realised in human discourse. This task is difficult, not just on the technical level, but also because of the moral demands it makes on the philosophical author.[136] The moral or religious response which may come in the wake of clarity, if attained, cannot be predicted from that clarity itself.[137] Philosophical contemplation does not endorse or appropriate any specific moral or religious point of view. In this sense, it leaves everything as it is.

This latter claim, however, would seem to be by far the stronger one. That is to say, even if no single perspective is appropriated or advocated, does that mean that everything is left as it is? When we discussed Phillips's example of the Assyrian practice of inflicting pain on imprisoned warriors we found that philosophical contemplation may reveal possibilities of meaning that had not yet occurred to us and that, as a result, our reactions to this practice may correspondingly change. Surely, then, it cannot be correct to say that everything is left as it is. Let us consider some further examples.

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[132] Phillips 1999, p. 155.
[133] See Phillips 1981, p. 158.
[134] See Phillips 1999, pp. 37, 116.
[135] See Phillips 1999, p. 145.
[136] See Phillips 2001, p. 319.
[137] See Phillips 2001, p. 324.

First, what about the enquirer? Still on the practice of child sacrifice in a living religion, Phillips argues that philosophical understanding may amount to seeing the difference between this practice and the massacre at My Lai. We may come to see that, whereas in the first case, the sacrifice *means* something deep to the people who take part in it, in the latter there is nothing of the sort.[138] Still, this understanding "has nothing to do with the judgments people may or may not wish to make […] although there will be a difference between judgments made with and without understanding."[139] Phillips neglects to tell us, however, what this difference may amount to. Perhaps he would reply that it may amount to many different things. There is no way of predicting beforehand. But from an ethical point of view, is not a judgement made with understanding better than one made without? After all, Phillips agreed with Winch that, unless we understand, we are in no position to know what we are getting indignant or forgiving about. Or, as Phillips puts it, there "is a difference between reflective and unreflective criticism, the former often being one of the marks of moral responsibility."[140] Even if we accept that philosophical reflection and understanding are not equivalent to moral reflection and understanding, the former clearly informs and, possibly, transforms the latter.

Turning to matters of faith, we might feel that the 'distance' demanded in the philosophical search for clarity is necessarily at odds with the demands of piety. Indeed, many Christians have viewed such enquiry with distrust and dislike. But, according to Phillips, there is no necessary tension between clarity and piety. Quite the opposite; the "deepening of philosophical understanding may at the same time be the deepening of religious understanding."[141] In his paper 'Advice to Philosophers who are Christians',[142] Phillips tells us that the Christian conviction he has indicated, as a Christian who gives himself to disinterested enquiry, might find a place in Simone Weil's words when she said that "if she pursued truth without fear, she would find herself, in the end, falling into the arms of Christ."[143] If philosophical understanding simply leaves everything as it is, the reactions both of those who distrust philosophical

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[138] A rather curious remark. It would not occur to me to say that the events that took place in My Lai did not mean something deep, both to the victims and the perpetrators.

[139] Phillips 1999, p. 58.

[140] Phillips 1993, p. 209.

[141] Phillips 1970, p. 268.

[142] Republished in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (1993), pp. 220-236.

[143] Phillips 1993, p. 236.

enquiry and those, as Simone Weil, who see in it a possible path to a deeper faith, would become unintelligible.

One final example: discussing the Christian virtue of charity, Phillips argues that "clarity does not make one yield to charity but neither is it a necessary hindrance to spirituality, because clarity is *a* condition of seeing the possibility of charity. In certain circumstances, clarity may have a spiritual significance, not least for worship."[144] In *Philosophy's Cool Place* Phillips does not provide a further analysis of what these circumstances are, whether the relation between clarity and worship is external or internal, and so on. But whatever conclusions he should draw, it cannot be said that philosophy has left everything as it is.

It seems philosophical enquiry may have an impact upon the enquirer's moral and religious beliefs. Wittgenstein was right to say that working on philosophy is working on oneself. In 'Authorship and Authenticity',[145] Phillips warns us, however, that Wittgenstein was referring to *philosophical* difficulties rather than *personal* difficulties: "Wittgenstein's problems have their roots, not in his personal life, but in tendencies of thought to which anyone can be susceptible, since they arise from the language we share."[146] But the whole question is whether we can effect such a straightforward distinction.[147] Indeed, a few pages further on Phillips tells us that, although the source of Wittgenstein's problems is not personal, "*the struggle with these problems is personal. In fact, the struggle for clarity has analogies with a moral struggle.*"[148] In *Philosophy's Cool Place* — the second chapter of which is in many ways a sequel to 'Authorship and Authenticity' — Phillips returns to this discussion. Once again, he reminds us that when Wittgenstein said that working in philosophy is like working on oneself, Wittgenstein was referring to difficulties in *doing philosophy*.[149] Yet, at the same time, one finds Phillips agreeing with Peter Winch that, in the *Investigations*, there is "a spiritual dimension seldom met in the works of 'professional philosophers.'"[150] This is not simply because of the passion with which Wittgenstein pursued the subjects he discussed, but also because of the ways he brings out how "a lack of clarity about them can have grave implications

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[144] Phillips 1999, p. 60.
[145] Republished in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (1993), pp. 200-219.
[146] Phillips 1993, p. 212.
[147] See Conant 2002, p. 88.
[148] Phillips 1993, p. 215.
[149] See Phillips 1999, p. 46.
[150] Winch 1993, p. 129; quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 62.

for [people's] relation to life."[151] After all, Phillips concludes, "Wittgenstein said that working on philosophy is like working on oneself."[152] There seems to be some unresolved tension here.

The same tension, I suggest, may be found when we turn from the enquirer to the object of philosophical enquiry. In certain areas, Phillips argues, philosophical enquiry seems to have little effect on the object of enquiry. Not so where moral and religious beliefs are concerned. We cannot say that, whatever answers are given in philosophy, the role which these beliefs play in people's lives goes on regardless. Here, philosophy makes a substantial difference to what is being investigated.[153] The results may be destructive: in exposing certain of our beliefs as confusions, philosophical clarity will force us to give up such beliefs. On the other hand, they may be constructive: we may come to recognise certain moral or religious possibilities, where formerly we saw none. Phillips makes it clear that this does not apply exclusively to those engaged in philosophy professionally. To deny that philosophical enquiry may have an effect on those outside professional philosophy would be to ignore the way in which philosophical discussion impinges upon our everyday moral and religious practices. Indeed, Phillips himself argues that philosophy's influence may be indirect, effecting people's beliefs, whether or not they have ever read any philosophy themselves.[154]

If this is true, how can we maintain that everything is left as it is? Phillips may want to say that, although philosophical clarification may affect a person's attitude to, say, religious belief, it has not in any way interfered with the actual use of religious language. We haven't changed *what* we are looking at, just *the way* we are looking at it. But this runs counter Phillips's claim that philosophy makes a substantial difference to *what* is being investigated, namely, moral and religious beliefs, rather than a person's attitude to, or understanding of, them. Moreover, it is doubtful whether we can draw such a strict boundary between *what* we are looking at and *the way* we look at it. Finally, if one's perspective *is* transformed, one may well want to engage in some reform as a result. If philosophical clarification has exposed certain confusions, one might feel the need to reform the language which gave rise to these confusions in the first place. Of course, the reformer need not be a philosopher. But, first, if we "cannot divorce philosophical enquiry from the life of the

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[151] Winch 1993, p. 130; quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 62.
[152] Phillips 1999, p. 62.
[153] See Phillips 1970, pp. 265, 268.
[154] See Phillips 1970, p. 265.

enquirer",[155] it may well turn out to be. Secondly, even if it is not, philosophy has still been an agent of change, be it indirectly.

Philosophy would seem to make a difference. The examples we have considered tend to undermine rather than support the idea that we could effect a radical severance between philosophical understanding and practical (moral or religious) understanding. In his latest work, Phillips comes close to drawing this conclusion, yet, in the end, shies away from it. The penultimate chapter of *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* reviews Winch's conclusions concerning the problems connected to understanding a culture different, and far removed, from our own. In his earlier writings, Phillips argues, Winch deals with these problems in a very general way. Discussing the differences between European and Zande modes of thinking, Winch argues that, although we cannot deny any conflict here, it would go too far to say they logically contradict each other:

> "It could be that people who interest themselves in cricket find it impossible to take baseball seriously, and *vice versa*: there would be conflict here too, but no contradiction. It would make little sense to ask in the abstract, which game it was 'right' to support [...]."[156]

There is no reference to any speaker, no question of whose understanding we are talking about. The emphasis lies on the analogy between speaking and playing games, on learning and applying new rules. Understanding cultures different from our own seems "like mastering strange games we had not heard of, or getting to know the rules people are following."[157] In his later work, Phillips suggests, Winch comes to realise that these analogies are quite inadequate. The notions of rules and mastering skills have their most natural applications in the context of games or, perhaps, mathematical procedures. But it is unnatural to speak in this way about language, which is more akin to a dialogue or a conversation. What, Phillips asks, would it mean to speak of mastering the rules of a conversation? Discourse, and the activities with which it is interwoven, are rooted in the lives people are leading and the wider social and cultural contexts in which those lives are placed. Language-games are played by people with lives to lead. It will not do to argue, in general terms, that the games, the different forms of life, do not contradict each other. Language-games and forms of life do not contradict each other, people

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[155] Phillips 1970, p. 269.
[156] Winch 1987, p. 201; quoted in Phillips 2001, p. 307.
[157] Phillips 2001, p. 311.

do. Such contradictions must be dealt with when and where they arise.[158] These conclusions have an important bearing on what it is to understand cultures other than our own:

> "Growth of understanding in discourse is not like mastering the complexities of a game. […] Rather, it will be a matter of extending our understanding of human lives which are, in important respects, different from our own."[159]

For example, a sensitive anthropologist who gives a good account of the use of the poison oracle among the Azande may, in that sense, bring us to understand what is going on. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I have *the kind* of understanding the Azande themselves possess. For it makes no more sense to say that the practices of the Azande "could play a role in our lives than it does to apply a map of Central London to the Sahara desert."[160] But what about Evans-Pritchard's claim that, during his field work among the Azande, he organised his practical affairs much as the Azande did, and found it as satisfactory a way of running his affairs as any other? According to Winch, this was possible because these practices play a living role in the lives of the people amongst whom Evans-Pritchard was living. Thus, his actions could be met with the kinds of response and resonance which gives them their sense. Phillips disagrees. He tells us that when Rhees heard of the way Evans-Pritchard had organised his affairs among the Azande he remarked: 'But he still had the return air-ticket in his pocket'. Phillips elaborates:

> "For Evans-Pritchard, consulting an oracle is more like a technique he chose to adopt. But it is not a choice for the Azande, any more than their lives are choices for them. If practices were adopted in the way Evans-Pritchard adopted consulting oracles, then life itself would be a collection of skills. Such a view would leave out the whole aspect of cultural roots and their connection with what constitutes the identity of a people."[161]

Although Phillips certainly has a point, his analysis raises some questions. First, Phillips takes it for granted that Evans-Pritchard embarked on his project as an experiment. He simply wanted to see what it was like to live, for a while, as the Azande do, keeping in mind, always, that he could give it up any time he liked and return back home on the first flight out. That may well be true. But the question is whether there are

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[158] See Phillips 2001, pp. 308ff.
[159] Phillips 2001, pp. 310-311.
[160] Phillips 2001, p. 315.
[161] Phillips 2001, pp. 315-316.

no other possibilities. Might not someone, for whatever reason, give up his old life to live among the Azande, with never a thought of returning home? Perhaps Phillips would reply that, even so, he still chooses to do so. For this reason, though his understanding of the Azande will be different from that of Evans-Pritchard, it will still not be equivalent to the understanding the Azande themselves possess. Our emigrant can always recall the life he lived before joining the Azande, and ponder the changes his decision has wrought. This is something the Azande can never do. Agreed. But on this reading the claim that we cannot have the same understanding as the Azande do becomes a tautology. To have this understanding would amount to no less than being a member of the Azande.[162] One might well develop this argument to such an extent that it becomes doubtful whether we can ever be said to have the same understanding as anyone else: to have the same understanding as Jack or John, one would have to be Jack or John — understanding becomes, in essence, a private affair. My point is not to deny that there will be differences between the understanding the Azande possess and the understanding we possess, or, for that matter, between my understanding and my neighbour's. But, to use one of Phillips's phrases, these differences can only be the differences they are because their reality depends on the place they occupy in the broader context of human life and discourse. Any understanding we might reach of the Azande is attained in relation to their understanding, not only of themselves, but also of us. Understanding, far from being private, is dialectical. In this respect we would do well to remind ourselves that, as a result of Evans-Pritchard's stay among the Azande, their understanding may also be transformed and extended. Rather than stressing the differences between various forms of understanding we should note the way in which they stand in a dialogic relation to one another. To say that this dialogue shows that we can never attain complete understanding, that there is always something we lack, is highly misleading.

Phillips gets it right, I believe, when he concludes that the notion of understanding is indeterminate. The difficulties we have encountered do not pertain exclusively to so-called 'alien' cultures. The idea that our own culture is perfectly transparent to us will not bear closer scrutiny. Indeed, some parts of 'our' culture may be more alien than cultural

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[162] Phillips presents a similar argument in his discussion as to whether, as humans, we can understand what it is to be a bat or, whether, not being poor, we can understand what it is like to be poor. See Phillips 1993, pp. 131ff.

manifestations which are geographically or historically remote. The line between what is and what is not 'alien' is quite indeterminate.[163] This only reinforces the point that the problems we have encountered "spring in a large part from certain peculiarities of our notion of *understanding*, rather than from peculiarities about the relation between one culture and another."[164] We cannot deal with these difficulties in any abstract or formal way; given the indeterminacy in the notion of understanding, we should always ask *whose* understanding we are talking of.

The reader may think that we have gotten sidetracked into a rather lengthy discussion of the difficulties concerning the understanding of other cultures. The conclusions we have reached, however, are pertinent to our current topic. For if understanding is indeterminate, how is this related to the imperative of understanding involved in a contemplative philosophy? Is there not good reason, Phillips asks,

> "to question my contemplative conception of philosophy? Does it not conjure up a picture of the philosopher hovering over the limitations and indeterminacy of our comprehension, or lack of comprehension, under-standing all he surveys? If our actual situation makes such transcendence impossible, why make it the aim of philosophy?"[165]

The complexities we face, Phillips concludes, make us wonder whether there is a distinctive philosophical imperative of the understanding at all. Returning us straight back to the topic of this section, Phillips enter-tains the possibility that, perhaps, "there is no clear distinction, after all, between speaking for oneself about moral or religious questions, and making philosophical observations about such questions."[166] Phillips maintains, however, that this would be a mistake:

> "We look at the philosophical and non-philosophical contexts […] think-ing that a qualitative difference […] must emerge, and being puzzled if it does not happen. We forget the two contexts themselves. It would be foolish to deny interaction between them, but equally foolish to deny their differences. The philosopher reflects in a subject which has a history, and its own distinctive questions."[167]

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[163] See Phillips 2001, p. 316.

[164] Winch 1997, p. 202; quoted in Phillips 2001, p. 317.

[165] Phillips 2001, pp. 318-319. To say that our actual situation makes such transcen-dence impossible is misleading, implying, as it does, the possibility of altering our situation so that such transcendence becomes possible after all. It would be better to attempt to show, indirectly, that no meaning can be attached to this notion of a form of understanding which transcends all limitations.

[166] Phillips 2001, p. 320.

[167] Phillips 2001, p. 323.

For example, the philosopher may puzzle over whether moral or religious viewpoints can have any objectivity. This question can be answered in various ways. For instance, it may be thought that unless different views can be resolved in terms of reasons wider than themselves to which they all appeal, they are reduced to personal preferences and thus lose their imperative. To avoid this unsatisfactory conclusion, it may be thought necessary to say that different viewpoints are perspectives on the same reality.[168] As we have seen, Phillips rejects such an analysis. It is confused to treat differing perspectives as external objects of comparison and to think that one could have a demonstration, independently of any perspective, to decide which provides the better alternative in a given situation. For the agent, moral or religious considerations are constitutive of what he takes the situation to be.[169] This does not take us back to the conclusion that, thus, all viewpoints are equal and that we must be tolerant of them all. Recognising possibilities of religious sense, for example, does not force us to abandon anti- or non-religious values. On the contrary, philosophical clarity would show the opposition in a truer light:

> "the opposition may be seen to be all the stronger. For example, it can now be seen as a genuine clash which does not depend on showing the opposition to be confused."[170]

For whose sake does the philosopher engage with these questions? Phillips replies: for his own sake and for that of anyone else who is puzzled, philosophically, like him.[171] That is to say, Phillips maintains that "these, and many other philosophical questions, need not occur [to] or bother the moral or religious agent who strives to be clear about other viewpoints."[172] But, first, what kind of clarity about other viewpoints is the moral agent striving after if not the kind of clarity we have just discussed? Given Phillips's answers, it seems likely that the agent striving to be clear would, at the very least, not object to learning about them. After all, would not he, too, want to see 'the opposition in a 'truer light''? Secondly, it is simply wrong to say that such questions as whether moral or religious viewpoints can have any objectivity, whether they do not simply express the agent's personal preferences, belong exclusively to philosophy. These questions have been posed, in various guises, by

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[168] See Phillips 2001, p. 323.
[169] See Phillips 1999, p. 126.
[170] Phillips 2001, p. 325.
[171] See Phillips 1999, p. 38.
[172] Phillips 2001, p. 324.

various people in the course of their 'non-philosophical' lives. Of course, philosophy has taken up these question in a specific way. They have been systematically explored in the course of the history of the subject. But the point is that if such an enquiry would not be informed by, and rooted in, concerns that play a role in our everyday moral and religious lives, it becomes difficult to see what significance, or sense, philosophical enquiry has. There are, indeed, differences between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts. But, as we have already argued, these differences may not always be as clear as Phillips tends to imply, particularly so where moral and religious beliefs are concerned. If this is true, why should we expect to be able to draw any *clear* distinctions between speaking for oneself on moral or religious matters and making philosophical observations about them?[173]

Perhaps Phillips would agree that philosophical enquiry has an influence on our everyday lives. After all, he does not wish to deny interaction between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts. He might maintain however that philosophy leaves everything as it is in the sense that it neither advocates nor appropriates any specific moral or religious point of view. Philosophy aims at clarity of understanding. But the "moral or religious response which comes in the wake of clarity cannot be predicted from that clarity itself."[174] On the one hand, we should ask what kind of contrast Phillips is implying. Are there any other forms of understanding people may attain that *will* allow us to predict, without error, a specific moral or religious response? Of course, certain forms of understanding will *show* a person's moral or religious commitments. But does this not hold for philosophy as well? After all, as we have seen, in Phillips's understanding, a contemplative philosophy is committed to a moral imperative of its own.[175] On the other hand, if philosophical clarity shows the opposition between rival moral or religious perspectives in a truer light, it would be naïve to insist that we cannot predict, in any way, what kind of result such clarity will have on certain people. One

[173] That is not to say that we can draw no distinctions whatsoever.
[174] Phillips 2001, p. 324.
[175] At times, Phillips seems to imply that this commitment can be justified in instrumental terms. The philosopher is thus committed because it allows him better to understand the various perspectives he is investigating. This comes dangerously close to the kind of argument which seeks to evaluate a moral point of view on its merits, for example, in terms of human flourishing or human good and harm. Should we conclude that the notions of 'philosophical understanding' and 'clarity', so far from being independent of our values, are informed by them? Although I see no easy answer to this question, it will not do simply to ignore or reject it.

final example should clarify both these points. Philosophical clarification, Phillips admits, may strengthen one's beliefs or weaken them. He maintains, however, that the "results are unpredictable. In any case, *they are not the business of philosophy*."[176] One may find this a harsh decision. Phillips might agree. Take the example of the university teacher who realises that his lessons may have a hurtful effect on certain 'weak students'. What is he to do? Should he spare them the truth? Phillips answers: "harsh though it sounds, I think he must be intellectually honest and admit that in this context truth is more important than people."[177] Perhaps so. But is this not a moral issue, and may not the teacher's decision be challenged? At any rate, I do not see how this challenge could be met by means of disinterested philosophical enquiry.

Let us draw this section to a close. We discussed Phillips's understanding of the disinterested nature of philosophical enquiry, focusing on the relation between philosophy and morality or religious belief. We considered a radical interpretation: philosophical enquiry has no impact on our everyday, personal, moral or religious commitments and understanding thereof. It leaves everything as it is. Our argument has shown that position to be untenable. We then considered a more moderate interpretation: it is not denied that philosophical enquiry has a bearing on what is said in morality or religion. Nevertheless, philosophy leaves everything as it is in that it does not endorse any specific moral or religious point of view. We may still distinguish between speaking as a philosopher and speaking for oneself. Without wanting to deny the differences between philosophical and non-philosophical contexts, we have argued that no straightforward distinctions can be drawn. As we have seen, the fact that, in Phillips's view, philosophical contemplation is committed to a moral imperative of its own, only serves to reinforce this conclusion.

In the previous section we saw that, whereas, in his earlier work, the emphasis lay mainly on highlighting the distinctiveness of various language-games and their logical autonomy, in his later work Phillips more readily draws our attention to the way in which these language-games hang together: "language-games have their sense in *the same* language, otherwise they would say nothing."[178] Our forms of discourse "cut across and impinge on each other in countless ways in the hubbub of voices in our own and other cultures."[179] The differences between various forms

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[176] Phillips 1993, p. 77, italics added.
[177] Phillips 1970, pp. 269-270.
[178] Phillips 2001, p. 324.
[179] Phillips 2001, p. 322.

of discourse have their reality in human conversations where one thing bears on another and *vice versa*. This, Phillips concludes, is the kind of unity that discourse has.[180] As indicated, I believe that Phillips's growing attention to the ways in which our language-games hang together constitutes an important amendment to his earlier views. At the same time it prevents him from envisioning too secluded a position for philosophical contemplation. If philosophy is to *say* anything, it cannot completely extract itself from the 'hubbub of voices' that makes up our language.

But did not Wittgenstein say that the philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas; that his ideal was a certain coolness, to create a temple for the passions without meddling with them? He did. But he also said that working on philosophy is like working on oneself, and he doubted whether one can be a good philosopher if one cannot even manage to be a good man. Our discussion has shown that Phillips's proposal to explain these latter remarks in terms of difficulties concerning the practice of philosophy is unsatisfactory. One might feel this conclusion to be supported by Phillips's claim that Wittgenstein's conception of his philosophical vocation is a quasi-religious one.[181] Phillips explains his remark in terms of the form of wonder that lies at the root of Wittgenstein's philosophy. This is the final topic we must discuss.

4.2.3 Philosophical wonder

The notion of philosophical wonder plays an important role in Phillips's understanding of a contemplative philosophy. In his discussion he draws heavily upon Rhees. We already witnessed Rhees's suggestion that, in thinking about the notions of reality and understanding we may be led to wonder at the possibility of understanding at all. For Rhees, wonder is characteristic of philosophy anyway. He proceeds to sum up various possible forms of wonder: wonder at death, wonder at the beauty of human action, or that of a natural scene and, in the same way, wonder at what is terrible and what is evil, etc.[182] Phillips warns us not to misunderstand Rhees's remarks. He is not claiming that 'wonder' comes to the same thing in all the examples he mentions. Nor is he saying that those who wonder in these ways need be engaged in philosophical wonderment. For Phillips, the point is,

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[180] See Phillips 1999, p. 113.
[181] See Phillips 1999, p. 61.
[182] See Phillips 1999, pp. 55-56.

> "that these other examples of wonder may throw light on the presence of
> wonder in philosophy and that a failure to see any point in these examples
> is likely to be linked, in some ways, with a failure to see any point in a con-
> templative conception of philosophy. For example, if one can see primitive
> ritual only in instrumental terms, it may be less surprising if one can see
> philosophical inquiry only in instrumental terms as well — as exercises in
> problem solving or as the therapy that makes one's puzzles go away."[183]

Phillips makes his point so tentatively that one can hardly take issue
with it. He is not arguing that a specific form of wonderment is the *sine
qua non* of philosophical enquiry. He merely aims to show how various
examples of wonder may throw light on the kind of wonder that informs
a contemplative philosophy. What kind of wonder are we talking about
and how does it relate to Phillips's understanding of a contemplative
philosophy?

Phillips expresses the notion of philosophical wonderment in various
ways. It is, very briefly, "wonder that life can be like that".[184] Somewhat
more elaborately, philosophical wonderment is "wonder at the different
ways in which people think, the kind of problems they have, and what
counts as solutions to these problems."[185] For Phillips, the main import
of these remarks is to shed light on the possibility of an understanding
of philosophy which is neither substantive nor that of an underlabourer.
Philosophical contemplation does not set out to arrive at definite answers
or solutions. Rather, it aims to do justice to the variety of answers and
questions that arise in human discourse:

> "If you think from a certain angle, something must be left out. But there is
> a different kind of reflection characteristic of philosophy: reflection on and
> wonder at the fact that people do think and act from such angles with the
> forms of understanding they involve."[186]

Evidently, Phillips's introduction of the notion of philosophical wonder-
ment serves to shed light on the two topics we discussed in our previous
sections: the independent and disinterested nature of philosophical
enquiry. It is from a sense of wonder that philosophy sets out on a road
to nowhere:

> "I have emphasized a wonder that, I believe, is as old as philosophy
> itself — wonder at the possibility of discourse, at the fact that people
> have spoken and still speak to one another in various ways. […] It is in

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[183] Phillips 1999, p. 56.
[184] See Phillips 2000, p. 42.
[185] Phillips 1999, p. 56.
[186] Phillips 1999, p. 166.

contemplating these possibilities in wrestling with philosophical prob-
lems that we are engaged in the struggle to go nowhere."[187]

Of course, one need not share Phillips's wonder at 'the fact that people
have spoken and still speak to one another in various ways'. At any
rate, Phillips feels sure that Wittgenstein did. This leads him to describe
Wittgenstein's conception of his vocation as quasi-religious. As is well
known, Wittgenstein once said that he could not help seeing every
problem from a religious point of view.[188] Various commentators have
tried to make sense of this remark. In Phillips's view, Wittgenstein's
remark should not be taken to express some form of religious belief.
Inevitably, such a conclusion would raise the question which religion
Wittgenstein's adhered to. Phillips replies that among dictionary defini-
tions of 'religious' we have: 'strict', 'rigid', 'scrupulous', and 'consci-
entious'. He argues that

> "it is dangerous to say more of Wittgenstein's remark: he applied himself
> to philosophy religiously, that is all. It would be absurd to ask in which
> historical religion this application took place!"[189]

This suggests that we should paraphrase Wittgenstein's remark to read
'I cannot help seeing every problem from a 'strict', 'rigid', etc., point of
view'. One may wonder whether that covers Wittgenstein's intended
meaning. Given the importance he attached to matters religious in his
life, it seems unlikely that he meant no more than that he worked very
conscientiously on his philosophy.

In *Philosophy's Cool Place* Phillips moves away from this position,
opting instead for an appreciation of Wittgenstein's understanding of his
philosophical vocation as 'quasi-religious'. He does so because "Wittgen-
stein wondered at the fact that the great problems of philosophy existed at
all, a wonder that is internally related to the kind of attention he thought
these problems demanded of him."[190] This immediately raises the ques-
tion whether not everyone engaged with philosophical contemplation
should understand his vocation as quasi-religious. After all, Phillips has
just argued that that kind of wonder is internally related to a contempla-
tive understanding of philosophy. Luckily, this conclusion need not fol-
low, because it is not at all clear why, if Wittgenstein wondered about
these things — or if anyone else wonders about these things — we

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[187] Phillips 1999, p. 155.
[188] See Rhees 1981, p. 94.
[189] Phillips 1993, p. 212.
[190] Phillips 1999, p. 61.

should invoke the term 'quasi-religious'. Surely, to wonder at the great problems of philosophy has little to do with religion, or religious wonder.[191] Phillips agrees. He argues that in calling Wittgenstein's conception of his vocation quasi-religious

> "we do not imply that it goes over into the religious domain. We cannot equate wonder at the great problems of philosophy with religious wonder, because, in each case, the meaning of 'wonder' in internally related to the context in which it occurs."[192]

Nevertheless, he maintains that there are good reasons for calling Wittgenstein's vocation quasi-religious. Often, Phillips argues, "when Wittgenstein discusses religion, he speaks as an outsider, yet his discussion is infused with a spiritual sensibility."[193] The same sensibility, Phillips continues, is shown in his concern for his friends. He discussed personal problems with them in a "language of spiritual concern",[194] a language, as Winch puts it, "poised on the edge of the religious."[195] This, Phillips agrees with Winch, "shows 'the spiritual importance,' at least in certain circumstances, 'of philosophical clarity concerning the issue raised.'"[196]

Note that there is no longer any mention of 'wondering at the great problems of philosophy'. The whole notion of 'philosophical wonder' seems to have disappeared. Instead Phillips refers to the spiritual sensibility which is shown in Wittgenstein's work and in his correspondence with his friends. But what *kind* of 'spiritual sensibility' or 'spiritual concern' are we talking about? Just as the notion of wonder is internally related to the contexts in which it occurs, so, too, with the notion of spirituality. To say that we are dealing with a quasi-religious context, is really to fail to answer this question. Phillips's discussion does not succeed in clarifying the notion of a 'quasi-religious' vocation. Nor does it demonstrate any internal relation between philosophical wonder and religious wonder, quasi or not. What the discussion does once again show, we may note in conclusion, is that philosophical clarity does not always leave everything as it is. In certain circumstances, Phillips tells us, it may have a spiritual significance.

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[191] Note, that in this case we *would* have to specify *which* religion.
[192] Phillips 1999, p. 61.
[193] Phillips 1999, pp. 61-62.
[194] Phillips 1999, p. 62.
[195] Winch 1993, p. 126; quoted in Phillips 1999, p. 62.
[196] Phillips 1999, p. 62; Winch 1993, p. 129.

4.3 From description to contemplation

To introduce a contrast between Phillips's 'earlier' and his 'later' position may seem a problematic strategy. One might argue that there are no clear breaks in Phillips's oeuvre which justify such an approach. Phillips himself seldom, if ever, explicitly addresses this issue: "I let others speak of periods in my work and of the projects I engage in. I simply go where my puzzles take me."[197]

In the previous sections we have, nevertheless, sought to justify the drawing of such a contrast. We focused on Phillips's latest works in which he develops his conception of philosophical contemplation. If our conclusions are correct, our discussion shows that although there is no sharp line separating the old from the new, it is warranted to speak of a more or less gradual shift of attention. This may be expressed as a shift from a descriptive to a contemplative understanding of philosophical enquiry. We may summarise this shift as follows.

Phillips's earlier work presents philosophy's task as neutral and clarificatory: it provides descriptive accounts of various points of view without advocating any one of them. There is a characteristically strong emphasis upon the logical distinctiveness and autonomy of religious language and activities. Quite some weight is placed upon arguing that religious beliefs constitute distinct modes of discourse or language-games, that religious activities constitute distinctive categories of behaviour or forms of life. Furthermore, although the terminology is, increasingly so, derived from Wittgenstein, it is doubtful that the use to which it is put can be justified by reference to Wittgenstein's writings. We suggested that for quite a few of his main methodological and epistemological doctrines Phillips relies more heavily upon the early Wittgensteinians — Rush Rhees, Norman Malcolm and Peter Winch — than on Wittgenstein.

The later work is characterised, first and foremost, by Wittgenstein's ever increasing presence. Phillips more often and more thoroughly turns to examine and rely upon Wittgenstein's writings first hand. Drawing upon his work, Phillips moves away from a purely descriptive towards a contemplative conception of philosophy. Clarifying distinctions between language-games remains important but the emphasis now lies on the fundamental questions which these distinctions are said to subserve. The philosopher's concern is not just with various specific forms of discourse

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[197] Phillips 1995, p. 126.

but with 'the possibility of discourse as such'. If all we do is show the differences between language-games, this concern will not be addressed. For the differences can only be the differences they are because their reality depends on the place they occupy in the broader context of human life. Human activities cannot be treated as a collection of arbitrary acts; they stand in a dialogic relation to one another.

It is worth emphasising that the contrast we have drawn is by no means absolute. Rather it tries to capture a gradual shift of attention within a more or less stable philosophical frame of reference. Phillips's earlier work may be said to work towards his later understanding of philosophy as contemplative. But it is only in Phillips's later writings that this conception of philosophy finds its mature expression. Given the gradual nature of the shift from description to contemplation, it would be quite artificial to decide upon a year which is to separate the old from the new. If forced to choose, however, one might opt for the year 1976. This year saw the publication of *Religion Without Explanation*, a book which, by our standards, should be considered part of the earlier corpus of works. Phillips's latest offering, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, grew out of the idea of revising *Religion without Explanation* with a view to a second edition. However, Phillips tells us, revision soon became rewriting.[198] *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* extends its earlier counterpart in a number of ways, one of which is the addition of a chapter on Peter Winch.[199] As we have seen, by reference to Winch's work, Phillips seeks to reveal the limits of the analogy between specific uses of language and games, and warns against the artificiality of strict divisions between various categories of behaviour and the inadequacy of the compartmentalised view of social life such division engenders.[200] Winch's earlier work, Phillips allows, may have suffered from such shortcomings. Winch himself later realised as much. Faced with the problem of the notion of understanding, specifically the way in which we either fail or come to understand a different or alien point of view, Winch came to the conclusion that

> "his position up to 1976 needed to be revised [...] After 1976, Winch sees, increasingly, the need to give more complex answers to this question than his earlier analyses would have allowed."[201]

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[198] See Phillips 2001, p. xi.
[199] See Phillips 2001, pp. 289-317.
[200] See Phillips 2001, pp. 304-311.
[201] Phillips 2001, pp. 309, 311.

It is noteworthy, to say the least, that many of the examples provided of Winch's 'earlier analyses' tend to coincide with Phillips's own earlier analyses.[202] Perhaps it is no coincidence that Phillips addresses these issues in a revision of his 1976 publication *Religion Without Explanation*.

[202] For example, Phillips mentions certain key arguments from *The Idea of a Social Science* and *Understanding a Primitive Society* which played an essential role in his own *The Concept of Prayer*. (Compare, for example, Phillips 1981, pp. 9, 24 to Phillips 2001, p. 306.)

5. RELIGION AND REDUCTIONISM

The previous chapter discussed, in general terms, Phillips's later conception of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation. A contemplative philosophy seeks to achieve a clear understanding of the various modes of discourse in which people may be engaged and the forms of understanding they involve. It aims to do justice to these modes of discourse and forms of understanding, showing them for what they are, without meddling in them in any way. Where the study of religious forms of discourse is concerned, matters are no different. The contemplation of religious possibilities of meaning "is simply an application to religion of the more general contemplative character of philosophy itself."[1] Philosophical contemplation enquires into the role concepts play in human life, including religious concepts. Now, as we saw, according to Phillips, a contemplative philosophy finds acceptance difficult in the present climate of Anglo-American philosophy. If anything, Phillips suggests, this is even more so where the philosophy of religion is concerned. Why should this be so?

In the first chapter of *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* Phillips tells us that, ever since Paul Ricoeur's book, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, it has been commonly understood that if we want to understand religious concepts we have to choose between two distinct modes of interpreting religion in religious studies: the hermeneutics of recollection or the hermeneutics of suspicion.[2] The former, Phillips argues, is sympathetic to religion. Its advocates assume that believers are in touch with something real, a message we need to heed. Our task is to recollect, in the sense of retrieve, this message for our age. The new faith which emerges from this dialectical exercise will be one which has been purged by the fires of criticism. By contrast, the hermeneutics of suspicion, denies that there is a divine reality in religion. The very conception of it is said to be the product of illusion. Thus, there is nothing real to recollect or retrieve; rather, enlightenment consists in rescuing us from religious mystification. Here, according to Phillips, the imperative of the intellect is an imperative to be radically suspicious.

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[1] Phillips 2001, p. 4.
[2] See Phillips 2001, pp. 1ff.

According to Phillips, both the hermeneutics of recollection and the hermeneutics of suspicion owe an enormous debt to David Hume. It is, Phillips feels, not extravagant to claim that Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* constitutes the most devastating critique of religion in the history of philosophy.[3] This work,

> "has shaped, if not determined, the terms of reference within which most philosophy of religion is carried on. In any discussion of religion and modernity, there is no way of avoiding Hume."[4]

The fundamental claim of the *Dialogues* is that it is impossible to infer anything substantive about God from the world: everyday facts cannot lead to transcendental conclusions. That being so, it is easy to see how the Hume's work contributes to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Although there may be dispute as to Hume's final conclusions concerning religious belief, it will be clear that, if any inference from world to God is logically problematic, any faith which is dependent on such an inference is, at least, equally problematic.

One may feel that although Hume's contribution to the hermeneutics of suspicion is clear enough, his influence on the hermeneutics of recollection is less obvious. According to Phillips, however, that would be a mistake. The hermeneutics of recollection maintains that there is 'something real' in religion. It does not deny, however, that in retrieving this 'something' various forms of criticism need to be worked through, not in the least those offered in the *Dialogues*. In other words, many philosophers of religion sympathetic to religion attempt to answer Hume in his own terms. According to Phillips, the work of Richard Swinburne can be seen in this light. It is no coincidence that he has been described as a twentieth-century Cleanthes.[5]

Must we choose between the hermeneutics of suspicion on the one hand or the hermeneutics of recollection on the other? According to Phillips, we need not. A contemplative philosophy offers us an alternative: 'the hermeneutics of contemplation'. The hermeneutics of contemplation is also related to Hume's critique of religion. The nature of this relation, however, can only be appreciated, Phillips argues, if one is prepared to go 'beyond Hume'.[6] The main question, philosophically, is whether we *must* accept Hume's terms of reference, whether, in doing so, we are

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[3] See Phillips 2001, p. 55; cf. Phillips 1976, Chapter 2.
[4] Phillips 2001, p. 55.
[5] See Phillips 2001, p. 55; cf. Phillips 2000, Chapter 5.
[6] See Phillips 2001, p. 56.

illuminating or obscuring possibilities of meaning. Phillips speaks very highly of Hume and admits that, in his opinion, Hume's arguments are irrefutable. But what if there are other possibilities of religious belief, possibilities different in kind from those Hume criticises? Phillips maintains that there seems to be good reason to suspect this to be the case, if only on purely historical grounds:

> "It is generally agreed that deism is an attenuated and distorted form of Christianity. It is this deism which is the object of Hume's attack in the *Dialogues*. One would expect philosophers, therefore, to be interested in those other possibilities of religious sense not captured by deism."[7]

According to Phillips, however, this does not seem to be the case. Neither the hermeneutics of suspicion nor the hermeneutics of recollection is willing to go beyond Hume's terms of reference and enquire into other possibilities of religious belief untouched by his analyses. That the hermeneutics of contemplation should be at odds with the hermeneutics of suspicion seems obvious enough. From the latter's perspective, there is little to be said after Hume's conclusions. Religion has been dealt a fatal blow, and that is that. But the hermeneutics of contemplation does not part ways only with religion's detractors but with its defenders as well. Attempts to go beyond Hume will be resisted also within the hermeneutics of recollection, certainly by those who seek to answer Hume in his own terms. These terms, Phillips argues, define how they see their apologetic task. Any effort to go beyond them would be seen as an erosion of the intellectual defence which has to be made.[8] The hermeneutics of contemplation, however, does not come from a request to do any favours for religion. To repeat, the contemplation of religious possibilities of meaning is simply an application to religion of the more general contemplative character of philosophy itself, discussed in the previous chapter. When religious possibilities are elucidated, the aim is not apologetics or advocacy:

> "Rather, that elucidation is part of the more general philosophical contemplation of possibilities of sense, of the kind of philosophical attention which seeks to do justice to the world. Whether a person can personally appropriate the perspective which has been elucidated is always a further question."[9]

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[7] Phillips 2001, p. 56.
[8] See Phillips 2001, p. 56.
[9] Phillips 2001, p. 33.

Whereas the hermeneutics of recollection "has the retrieval of faith as its aim; a faith purged by criticism and, hence, one that can be advocated",[10] the hermeneutics of contemplation aims merely to understand, not to advocate or appropriate. In this sense, it remains independent and disinterested.

This chapter examines Phillips's efforts to go 'beyond Hume'. First, we focus on Phillips's discussion of Hume's *Dialogues*. Next, Phillips's critique of the various explanations of religion the 'inheritors of Hume's legacy' put forward is examined. The third and final part of this chapter sets the stage for the 'other possibilities of religious meaning' Phillips advances, to be explored in subsequent chapters.

5.1 Hume's legacy: *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

Three years after his death, in 1779, David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* were published. In this work, Hume undertakes a thorough criticism of religious belief, specifically of the attempt to infer the existence of God from the world in which we live. Already during his lifetime Hume had criticised religious belief in such essays as *Of Miracles* and *Of a Particular Providence and a Future State* which gained him the dubious honour of being called 'the great infidel'. The *Dialogues*, however, can be seen as the most extended and carefully presented articulation of Hume's point of view and as such has inspired a great deal of discussion. Many consider it the most decisive modern critique of some of the major arguments concerning the nature and existence of God. J. C. A. Gaskin submits that we may think of Hume as the founder of the philosophy of religion:

> "when 'philosophy of religion' is understood in its usual modern sense — as analysis of the truth and meaning of religious beliefs — it is difficult to think of anyone other than David Hume as its founder."[11]

Phillips agrees that Hume has left us a philosophical legacy which cannot be overestimated. In *Religion Without Explanation* and again in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* he discusses Hume's conclusions.[12] Phillips's assessment is ambivalent. In her review of *Religion Without Explanation*, Helen Oppenheimer remarks that, for Phillips,

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[10] Phillips 2001, p. 5.
[11] Gaskin 1978, p. 183.
[12] I refer to the former only where it differs from Phillips's later treatment.

Hume "is both the hero and the villain."[13] On the one hand, Hume's critique of the argument from design is not to be gainsaid. The *Dialogues* renders any inference from world to God logically problematic. On the other hand, Hume's legacy is misleading. Hume believed such arguments to be a necessary constituent of religious belief. Therefore, if these arguments run aground, so, too, does religious belief. According to Phillips, this is a misunderstanding. There are other possibilities of religious belief which are independent of the metaphysical assumptions Hume criticises. If one uncritically accepts Hume's legacy, one will not be able to appreciate these other possibilities.

Hume's criticisms in the *Dialogues* are directed mainly at the argument from design; at the attempt to infer the nature or existence of God from the world in which we have our lives. In these arguments Phillips discerns three levels of increasing severity.[14] At the first level, Phillips argues, Hume imposes restrictions upon what could be concluded from the design argument if it were valid. At the second level, he argues that there is nothing to be gained from postulating a 'Divine Artificer' to explain the order found in the world. At the third level, Hume criticises the argument from design as applied, not so much to various individual parts of the world, but to the universe as a whole.

The first level of criticism is Philo's claim that we cannot infer more about God than the evidence allows. Philo and Cleanthes agree that, as our ideas reach no farther than our experience, and we have no experience of divine attributes and operations, we must infer them from the evidence available to us.[15] The problem, Philo argues, is that the evidence is fundamentally ambiguous. When we look at nature as we know it, we do not find the neat order that the argument from design requires. Instead we find a world of mixed effects, including good and bad features. As Cleanthes sees it, nature 'ravishes into admiration all men'; Philo, by contrast, finds it 'contemptible or odious to the spectator'.[16] No

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[13] Oppenheimer 1978, p. 274.

[14] Precisely how many criticisms of the design argument are individuated in the *Dialogues* depends on how Hume's continuous flow of argument is subdivided. In his account, Gaskin distinguishes ten interrelated criticisms which are set out in four groups. (See Gaskin 1978, pp. 9-40.) Phillips's tripartite classification does not stray far from Gaskin's account. The main difference being that, in his earlier discussion, Phillips claims that, at the third level of criticism, Hume demonstrates the unintelligibility of the attempt to move from world to God. As Phillips admits in his later discussion, this claim cannot be substantiated.

[15] See Hume 1986, p. 15.

[16] See Hume 1986, pp. 15 and 74, respectively.

doubt, Phillips observes, "there is *some* reason, in *some* circumstances, to react in either way."[17] But the point is that, if the evidence is mixed, we can only infer that the character of the Author of Nature is equally mixed. Because of the ambiguity of the evidence we cannot infer any of the infinite attributes of God on the basis of it. Philo states his case as follows:

> "But let us still assert that, as this [God's] goodness is not antecedently established but must be inferred from the phenomena, there can be no grounds for such an inference while there are so many ills in the universe, and while these ills might so easily have been remedied, as far as human understanding can be allowed to judge on such a subject. […] the bad appearances […] may be compatible with such attributes as you suppose; but surely they can never prove these attributes."[18]

On the evidence available, Phillips quips, it would seem that God has his good days and his bad days.[19] At any rate,

> "on such evidence, we can never find grounds for believing in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God. We cannot arrive at such a belief on an experiential or experimental basis."[20]

But, one might argue, neither can we conclusively invalidate such a belief. After all, has not Phillips just admitted that, given the circumstances, we may react to nature in the way Cleanthes does? Perhaps Cleanthes cannot demonstrate decisively the truth of his belief. But can Philo prove him wrong? In his famous parable of the long-neglected garden, does not John Wisdom show that either attempt is hopeless; that the evidence is simply inconclusive? We might insist that we can say no more than that "there are many reactions to the flowers and weeds of the garden in which we live, among them, religious reactions."[21]

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[17] Phillips 2001, p. 58.

[18] Hume 1986, p. 74. In saying that the bad appearances may be compatible with moral characteristics attributed to God in theistic religions, Hume is actually being quite generous. In truth, the situation is worse: if the design argument is valid then the presence of natural evil in the world is *evidence against* God having the moral characteristics attributed to Him in theistic religions. Furthermore, in the fifth part of the *Dialogues*, Hume argues that, if valid, the design argument could establish all manner of conclusions incompatible with theism. For all we know, the world could be the product of a committee of designers, a discarded experiment conducted by some inferior deity, or a creation which has, ever since, been left to its own devices. Phillips picks up on this point in his discussion of Hume's third level of criticism.

[19] See Phillips 2001, p. 59.

[20] Phillips 2001, p. 59.

[21] Phillips 2001, p. 65.

Hume's second level of criticism demonstrates the inadequacy of this reply. At this level, Hume develops three layers of argument. First, he points out that the analogy between works of nature and human artefacts is very weak. Secondly, Hume argues that there is no need to refer to a designing intelligence to explain the facts of nature. Even where certain patterns are observed these can be explained in perfectly natural ways. One might argue, however, that any such natural explanation will itself, in turn, require an explanation. Hume replies, thirdly, that there is nothing to be gained from going on asking questions *ad infinitum*. Why go so far as to postulate the operations of an intelligent agent? Why not stop at the material world?

As long as we think of nature as a garden, Phillips argues, it makes sense to infer a gardener. But why should we think of nature as a garden, as an artefact, in the first place? The legitimacy of the inference from world to God depends on the appropriateness of the comparison. Hume points out that the similarities between human artefacts and works of nature are few, and where they exist the differences of scale on the two sides of the analogy further devalue the argument. Clearly, Phillips concludes, this line of argument is more damaging to the argument from design than the one Hume presents at the first level of criticism:

> "It is more severe to be told, not simply to be careful about one's inferences concerning design, but that the whole notion of design, in this context, is logically inappropriate."[22]

What does Phillips mean when he states that the notion of design is 'logically inappropriate'? At times, he gives the impression that, if only we would observe nature carefully, we should come to see that the inference to a designer is simply false: "Thousands of causes are at work innature, but they are not the result of human-like design or planning."[23] But, surely, this begs the question. For it is Cleanthes' contention that these causes *are* the result of intelligent design. Furthermore, this makes it appear as if, after all, we could settle the matter experientially. If so, Cleanthes' suggestion would not be 'logically inappropriate' but, rather, empirically incorrect.

Alternatively, Phillips's remark could be read as follows. Hume's erosion of the analogy between human artefacts and works of nature opens the way "to the recognition that nature admits of natural explanations, and that the inference to a designer has no basis in nature

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[22] Phillips 2001, p. 67.
[23] Phillips 2001, p. 65.

itself."[24] Hume, Phillips argues, is urging us to 'treat nature naturally'. Such patterns as there are in nature require no supernatural explanation; we may suggest various alternatives:

> "It is vain, therefore, to insist upon the uses of the parts in animals or veg-
> etables, and their curious adjustment to each other. I would fain know how
> an animal could subsist unless its parts were so adjusted? Do we not find
> that it immediately perishes whenever this adjustment ceases, and that its
> matter, corrupting, tries some new form?"[25]

According to Gaskin, Hume's suggestion is of astonishing intellectual daring and foresight. For it is only a small step from the idea that a living organism would not remain in existence as a living organism unless its parts were working in such a way as to preserve it, to the idea of natural selection.[26] Both the theory of natural selection and Hume's anticipation of it have serious consequences for the design argument:

> "In the first place they provide an explanation for the structural order in liv-
> ing organisms. [...] In the second place the teleological argument is fatally
> weakened. If the appearance of purpose, the apparent adjustment of means
> to ends in animate nature, is only the satisfying of conditions which have to
> be satisfied if the organism is to survive, then the analogy in the teleologi-
> cal argument between human purposive contrivances and the seemingly
> purposive parts of nature altogether disappears."[27]

Whether or not Hume's remark in the *Dialogues* provides sufficient ground to claim that he anticipated the theory of natural selection may be a matter of debate. Gaskin admits that Hume claims no more than that his alternative explanation of the order and purpose in nature is log-ically conceivable. Hume's contention is that the design argument is no better grounded in experience than the non-teleological possibility he suggests. Gaskin insists, however, that "This equality is in itself suf-ficient to upset the exclusive claims of design as a way of accounting for the order, in particular the purposive structure, of living things."[28] Now, obviously, for *us*, the idea of natural selection is no longer merely a logical possibility but a very well-evidenced theory. Consequently, its potential for damaging the design argument has greatly increased. But Phillips's remark that the notion of design is *logically* inappropriate seems to imply a stronger claim. According to Phillips, one gathers, it

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[24] Phillips 2001, p. 66.
[25] Hume 1986, p. 51.
[26] See Gaskin 1978, pp. 36-37.
[27] Gaskin 1978, p. 37.
[28] Gaskin 1978, p. 37.

makes no sense to speak of design in nature; such talk is unintelligible. Although this is Phillips's eventual conclusion, it is not Hume's. Phillips is not unaware of this fact. As we shall see in a moment, this constitutes the main difference between his earlier and his later discussion of Hume. Before we do so, however, there is one final argument to be considered. For one might insist that, although natural explanations of order and purpose in the world are not logically inconceivable, they still stand in need of further explanations until we arrive at some ultimate cause.

Phillips rejects this move. He argues that it is not true that particular natural causal explanations are intellectually inadequate, forcing us to go on asking further questions. Whether further questions are asked depends on the circumstances:

> "Sometimes, the insistence on asking further questions is not a sign of commendable intellectual persistence, but of stubbornness and stupidity; a failure to recognise when enough is enough. We all know that it does not take too many questions 'Why' from a child before the child is told not to be silly!"[29]

But, once again, is not Phillips begging the question? The advocate of the argument from design is made out to look like a child playing a silly game. But as it stands, Phillips's ridicule of his opponent's case is not decisive. Agreed; whether or not further questions are in order depends upon the circumstances and, as Phillips adds in his earlier discussion of Hume, "the interests represented in the question. There is no necessity that every answer to the question Why? *must* give rise to a further question."[30] But the circumstances in which the proponents of the argument from design present their case, as well as their interests in doing so, are not those of a child continually asking 'Why?'. It is not enough to point out that there is no necessity to ask further questions. Phillips needs to show why, in *these* circumstances, to ask further questions would be to do no more than to demonstrate one's stubbornness or stupidity. This, Phillips does not do.[31]

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[29] Phillips 2001, p. 67.

[30] Phillips 1976, p. 21.

[31] Phillips provides two additional examples to show that it is not always necessary to ask further questions, both (coincidentally?) refer to children: when one child hits another to the floor, the victim does not need a further causal explanation of why he is on the floor; and when parents explain the facts of procreation to their children, it does not necessitate any reference to grandparents. (See Phillips 2001, p. 67.) Neither example comes close to addressing Cleanthes' marvel at 'the order and arrangement of Nature' and 'the curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature'. (See Hume 1986, pp. 32, 15.)

Hume's own argument, I believe, is of a different nature. If we postulate the operations of an intelligent agent as an ultimate cause, Philo argues, the question is how we shall satisfy ourselves concerning the cause of that being. How can we satisfy ourselves by going on *in infinitum*?[32] Cleanthes objects to the question:

> "Even in common life, if I assign a cause for any event, is it any objection, *Philo*, that I cannot assign the cause of that cause, and answer every new question which may incessantly be started?"[33]

Philo immediately concurs. There is, he admits, nothing wrong with explaining a particular effect by a more general cause, even if these general causes themselves should remain, in the end, totally inexplicable. However, Philo adds, what is not satisfactory is "to explain a particular effect by a particular cause, which was no more to be accounted for than the effect itself."[34] In his analysis, Gaskin points out that the qualification in the word 'particular' needs emphasis. An explanation is good and proper, and need not itself be explained, *provided* the explanation is more general than, or known apart from, that which it purports to explain. Hume's contention is that where the postulation of an agent cause is concerned, this is not the case. That explanation is no more general than the order in nature itself. It is intrinsically no better understood, nor does it stand any less in need of a further explanation:[35]

> "To say that the different ideas which compose the reason of the Supreme Being fall into order of themselves and by their own nature is really to talk without any precise meaning. If it has a meaning, I would fain know why it is not as good sense to say that the parts of the material world fall into order of themselves and by their own nature? Can the one opinion be intelligible, while the other is not so?"[36]

Philo's claim is not so much that Cleanthes has carried on asking questions beyond the point where it becomes silly, but that the explanation advanced is not really an explanation at all. Thus understood, Philo's point seems more damaging to the argument from design than Phillips makes it appear. Given that Phillips is concerned to present Hume's case as strongly as possible, one wonders why he should not mention it. Could it be that Phillips's concern to show that the proponent of the design argument continues to ask questions beyond the point where it makes

[32] See Hume 1986, p. 31.
[33] Hume 1986, p. 32.
[34] Hume 1986, p. 33.
[35] See Gaskin 1978, pp. 33-35.
[36] Hume 1986, p. 31.

sense to do so anticipates his eventual conclusion that the whole argument is logically confused? For Hume, it would appear, there is some meaning to the question 'Who, or what, is the cause of order in the world?'. Phillips, however, doubts whether this is so. Let us consider his arguments to this effect.

One might insist that although parts of the world can be explained naturally, the existence of the world as such cannot. It demands some other form of explanation. Now, the word 'world' might mean the planet earth, or some part of it. But it is clear that both Hume and Phillips take it to mean 'the universe', i.e. 'all there is'. Thus, at this point, we are no longer concerned solely with the argument from design but, more specifically, with the cosmological argument. Whereas the former takes specific states of affairs as its starting-point, the latter begins from the fact that anything exists, in the manner it does exist. Why should there be something rather than nothing? Why should there be this rather than something else?

Hume's examination of the cosmological argument is what Phillips means by the third level of criticism in the *Dialogues*. At this point, Phillips's analysis in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* turns away from the one presented in *Religion Without Explanation*. In his earlier discussion, Phillips believed Hume's arguments to be completely successful. He now argues that Hume does not press his arguments far enough.

When we see a house, Phillips argues, it is perfectly natural to ask by whom it was made, how it came to be. A house implies an architect; does not the universe in like manner imply a designer? After all, like effects have like causes. In this way the argument would have as compare talk of the universe as a whole with talk of houses, of human artefacts. But the legitimacy of the inference depends on the appropriateness of the comparison. As we have seen, Hume points out that the analogy is, at best, very weak. Furthermore, he argues that for a cause-effect relation to hold between objects we must have experience of the cause and effect being frequently conjoined, that is, as Hume puts it, being 'two *species* of objects':

> "When two *species* of objects have always been observed to be conjoined together, I can *infer*, by custom, the existence of the one wherever I *see* the existence of the other; and this I call an argument from experience. But how this argument can have place where the objects, as in the present case, are single, individual, without parallel or specific resemblance, may be difficult to explain."[37]

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[37] Hume 1986, pp. 20-21.

Normally, we infer one thing from the other on the basis of past experience. We can say 'If P, then Q' only because we have learnt from past experience that given P then Q. So we can ask who built this house, even if we have not seen *this particular* house built, because we have experience of houses being built. But how can we say these things of the universe? To ascertain this reasoning it were requisite that we had experience of the origin of worlds. Obviously, as Philo points out, this is not the case:

> "Have worlds ever been formed under your eye, and have you had leisure to observe the whole progress of the phenomenon, from the first appearance of order to its final consummation? If you have, then cite your experience and deliver your theory."[38]

According to Phillips, this shows us that Hume thinks it is idle to seek a substantive answer to the question 'Who made the universe?'. We have no idea of the context in which that question could be answered. This objection cannot be avoided, Phillips adds, by saying that, although the universe is unique, it bears the mark of its Maker. True, when we see a maker's mark on a product, we usually do not check the authenticity of the mark. But the important point is that this could be done, if necessary. The absence of an independent check in the case of the claim that God made the world leads us back to all the difficulties Hume has raised.

Now, in his earlier discussion, Phillips admits, he made a further claim. He argued that Hume did not merely remain agnostic on these questions: Hume "is not simply saying that we can never know whether anyone made the universe. He is questioning the intelligibility of such talk."[39] Phillips now argues that this view is mistaken:

> "It is mistaken precisely because Hume did not press his objections to the analogy between the universe and a house in the logical directions which bring out how severe the criticism can be."[40]

Perhaps, Phillips argues, we should say that Hume realised that asking for the cause of 'everything' is odd. Such questions as: 'How did X come to be?', are usually asked of particular things. In such a case an answer may be provided by referring to the existence of something other than X. But when one asks: 'How did *everything* come to be?', what else is there to refer to? The logically necessary distinction between *explicans* and *explicandum* can no longer be made. Phillips feels, however, that

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[38] Hume 1986, p. 22.
[39] Phillips 1976, pp. 18-19.
[40] Phillips 2001, p. 69.

there are deeper issues concerning the notion of explaining 'the origin of the world' which "Hume either did not pursue sufficiently, or did not recognise at all."[41]

Suppose, Phillips argues, that in asking why anything exists, we mean 'anything as opposed to nothing'. The problem then becomes how we should understand what 'nothing', used in this absolute sense, is supposed to mean. Normally, as when we say there is nothing in the drawer, we establish that there is nothing by establishing what is the case. But when we try to speak of 'nothing' in the absence of any such context it is not clear that our words mean anything at all.[42] Were we to say that *everything* may cease to exist, we would seem to be assuming that 'the world' can be regarded as a thing or class of things. But there are great difficulties in this. If we treat 'the world' as an object, how are we to identify this object?

> "Any object, or group of objects, is individuated against a background of other objects. But against what background do we individuate the world? If 'everything' is thought to be a thing, we cannot answer the question, '*This* thing as distinct from what?'."[43]

Alternatively, if we treat 'the world' as a class of things, by which criteria should we determine whether something belongs to this particular class or not? Clearly, 'Everything' is not a class of things. The notion of a class, Phillips argues, entails the notion of a limit, and a distinction between things inside and outside the limit. But if our class is the class 'containing everything', it becomes anyone's guess as to how we should draw such limits.[44]

Certainly, Phillips raises a number of valid points. But is it true to say that Hume failed to realise these? In his analysis of Hume's *Dialogues*, A. G. Vink does not seem to think so. He argues that Hume is not just saying that we can never know what (or who) caused the universe but that the question cannot even be meaningfully posed.[45] Gaskin agrees; he writes that, for Hume, the cosmic question, 'Why anything?', simply becomes unanswerable,

> "not because of our lack of information, but, in Hume's terms, because in general we lack any possibility of understanding how we should settle questions about 'the origin of worlds'. Thus the question 'why anything?', far

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[41] Phillips 2001, p. 69.
[42] See Phillips 2001, p. 69; cf. Phillips 2000, p. 48.
[43] Phillips 2000, p. 49.
[44] See Phillips 2000, pp. 48-49.
[45] See Vink 1985, p. 136.

from necessitating the answer 'god', is not even comprehensible and what is more (Hume might have added), if the universe had been empty, would the question 'why nothing?' have been supposed to necessitate the same answer which the question 'why anything?' is supposed to necessitate in the universe of things?"[46]

Although Phillips agrees that this greater challenge is latent in Hume's remarks, he insists that Hume himself failed to appreciate this.[47] Hume saw correctly that the design argument allows room for all manner of theories concerning the origins of the world. It could be the product of an infant deity, a committee of deities, and so on. As Philo points out, it is difficult to see why "so wild and unsettled a system of theology is, in any respect, preferable to none at all."[48] But, Phillips argues, if this matter is pressed, as it should be, we can see that this is really just another way of saying that there is no room here for real theories or hypotheses at all. In the absence of any intelligible context for discrimination, these notions "have taken off into metaphysical orbit."[49] Regrettably, this is not Hume's conclusion. He believed that we must remain agnostic on this matter:

> "Hume, in some ways, continues to speak of the universe or the world as though it were a thing, the only problem being that, unlike other things, such as houses, we do not have the kind of experience of it which allows us to frame any definite hypotheses concerning it."[50]

In short, Phillips insists that Hume did think it makes sense to speak of 'the world', and to speculate on what its origins might be. Were this not the case, Phillips argues, "we would not be in a position to appreciate what Hume meant by 'true religion'."[51] Phillips's argument, then, would seem to hinge on our understanding of Hume's notion of 'true religion'. What did Hume mean by this?

In the final part of the *Dialogues*, Philo may surprise the reader when he says of himself that no one has a deeper sense of religion impressed on his mind. It seems clear that, for Hume, the objections to the argument from design do not add up to a total, knockdown, disproof. Hume, through Philo, finds a vestigial design argument convincing:

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[46] Gaskin 1978, p. 70.
[47] See Phillips 2001, p. 87.
[48] Hume 1986, p. 38.
[49] Phillips 2001, p. 70.
[50] Phillips 2001, p. 70.
[51] Phillips 2001, p. 69.

> "A purpose, an intention, a design strikes everywhere the most careless, the most stupid thinker; and no man can be so hardened in absurd systems as at all times to reject it."[52]

Something of the design argument survives: the *possibility* of interpreting the cause of order in the universe as an intelligent agent. Hume sees no logical impossibility in the claim that the order found in nature *could* be explained as the work of an ordering agent.[53] But we should not forget that Hume maintains that this agent cannot be known to have any attributes other than those just sufficient to produce the given result: the power of an agent together with some remote analogy to human intelligence. In part XII of the *Dialogues*, the limitations of this possibility are emphasised:

> "If the whole of natural theology, as some people seem to maintain, resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined, proposition, *That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence:* If this proposition be not capable of extension, variation, or more particular explication: If it affords no inference that affects human life, or can be the source of any action or forbearance: And if the analogy, imperfect as it is, can be carried no further than to the human intelligence, and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to other qualities of the mind: If this really be the case, what can the most inquisitive, contemplative, and religious man do more than give a plain, philosophical assent to the proposition, as often as it occurs […]"[54]

These are the limits within which Hume is willing to give assent to a belief in a god (or gods). But this assent is without value for any theistic religion. It carries no duties, invites no action, allows no inferences and involves no devotion. Gaskin suggests it is perhaps best described as a highly attenuated deism which is not positively advocated. Its sole credo is a diffidently held belief in an intelligent origin of natural order and its sole observance is the morality which would anyway have been followed for other reasons 'were there no god in the universe'.[55]

This then is Hume's 'true religion'. Does it involve Hume in thinking of the world as some kind of object, the origin of which may be speculated upon? It is far from obvious that this is the case. According to Phillips, Hume's 'true religion' is a 'minimal belief' in which, had he

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[52] Hume 1986, p. 77.
[53] See Gaskin 1978, pp. 165-168. As we shall see, Vink disagrees with Gaskin's reading.
[54] Hume 1986, p. 88.
[55] See Gaskin 1978, p. 173.

appreciated the full extent of the logical problems connected to explaining the cause of the universe, Hume would not have indulged:

> "Hume should have heeded his own advice, with respect to other metaphysical theses, when he came to discuss the notion of the origin of the world: consign it to the flames. Instead, we find him conceding that the cause or causes of order in the universe bear some remote, inconceivable analogy to human intelligence."[56]

Now, although, in the second sentence, Phillips paraphrases Philo more or less correctly, the first sentence indicates that he assumes the conception of 'true religion' to arise in the context of the notion of the origin of the world. A few pages further on, this suspicion is confirmed when Phillips states, straightforwardly, that

> "Hume's conception [of 'true religion'] involves a minimal belief in a remote, inconceivable analogy between the cause or causes *of the universe*, and human intelligence."[57]

If this were an accurate rendering of Philo's words then, perhaps, there would be some justification to the claim that Hume continued to think of the universe as some kind of object, the origin of which may be speculated upon. But it is not. As Vink points out, it is important to emphasise that the remote analogy Philo will allow is that between human intelligence and the cause or causes *of order* in the universe. His concession to Cleanthes comes after the latter's attempt to put the design argument to use as a cosmological argument:

> "The argument from analogy Philo is eventually willing to accept has no bearing on the question of the cause of the universe — for Philo, that question is no longer relevant — but relates to the question of the *order* in the universe. In answering this question the analogy advanced by Cleanthes […], however weak and limited, has a restricted use."[58]

According to Vink, commentators have been rather too careless in paraphrasing Philo's remark, making it appear as if his main concern is with a first cause which may explain the transition from 'nothingness' to 'being', rather than with possible causes or explanations of the order

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[56] Phillips 2001, p. 71.
[57] Phillips 2001, p. 83, italics added.
[58] Vink 1985, pp. 136-137: "De analogie-redenering die Philo uiteindelijk bereid is te accepteren heeft nu geen betrekking meer op de vraag naar de oorzaak van het universum — die vraag is voor Philo niet meer terzake — maar op de vraag naar de oorzaak of oorzaken van de *orde* in het universum. Voor het beantwoorden van die vraag is de analogie, zoals die door Cleanthes in zijn ontwerp-hypothese naar voren is gebracht, zwak en beperkt als zij is, gedeeltelijk bruikbaar."

we find in the world.[59] Unfortunately, it would seem, Phillips's discussion is no exception. At the very least, it obscures the distinction to which Vink draws our attention.

One should say 'obscures' rather than 'disregards' because, at other times, Phillips does seem aware of the distinction. He asks why, in the end, Hume awards some measure of worth to the design argument. The reason, Phillips suggests, is that Hume thought "that 'the order' exhibited in our modes of reasoning itself requires explanation in terms of some principle in the universe, although we cannot claim knowledge of it."[60] To account for this principle of order in the universe, Hume believed that one must choose between 'the mental' and 'the physical'. Hume thought it self-evident, Phillips continues, that we should opt for the former. This is why he did not call himself an atheist: "not simply because he believed atheists were too dogmatic about 'the original principle of order', but because he believed, wrongly, that atheists must be committed to materialism."[61]

Here, then, Phillips addresses Philo's concession to Cleanthes in its proper context, i.e. as related to the question of cause(s) of order in the universe rather than to the cause(s) of the universe as such. His judgement, however, is no less harsh. Hume's mistake, Phillips argues, is not just that he thought that, in order to be an atheist, one must embrace materialism. The main problem lies in the choice he forces upon us, the choice between 'the mental' and 'the physical'. This kind of metaphysical dualism, Phillips claims, has been demolished by Wittgenstein. There is nothing to choose between; both categories are equally confused. Thus Phillips rapidly concludes that

> "the notion of 'the original principle of order in the universe' is confused, as are the two candidates to be that principle: the categories of 'the mental' and 'the physical'. But it is in the context of the first of these categories that the equally confused notion of 'true religion' emerges, the supposition that the cause or causes of order in the universe bear some remote, inconceivable analogy to human intelligence."[62]

What are we to make of this? It is difficult to see how Phillips's reading may be supported by the *Dialogues* alone. Nowhere does Hume say, whether he be Philo, Cleanthes or Demea, that we must reject atheism because we must reject materialism. As we saw, according to Gaskin,

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[59] See Vink 1985, pp. 136-137, 170-172.
[60] Phillips 2001, p. 72.
[61] Phillips 2001, p. 72.
[62] Phillips 2001, p. 72.

what remains of the design argument is the *possibility*, not the neces-
sity, of interpreting the cause of order in the universe as the actions of
an intelligent agent. Vink goes even further. He feels that Gaskin is far
too hasty in his assumption that Hume's conception of 'true religion'
involves a belief in an intelligent being or agency. As the argument pro-
ceeds, Vink argues, Philo more and more expresses his preference for
an internal, natural principle of order rather than an external, ideal one.
The analogy between this principle of order and human intelligence
should be understood merely in a structural sense. That is to say, Philo's
belief in the intelligence of the ultimate cause is nothing more than a
belief in its intelligibility.[63] Whatever of this, it should be clear that either
reading casts doubt on Phillips's conclusions. Perhaps we should enquire
whether Phillips's analysis can be sustained by further argument, or on
the basis of Hume's other writings. That task, however, is beyond the
scope of our present investigation. But, apparently, it is also beyond the
scope of Phillips's investigation. For he presents his conclusions rather
hastily and sketchily, without any reference to the source material which
should support them.[64] In the absence of a more detailed examination,
we must suspend our judgement.

However, our reservations may be strengthened by the following, more
general, considerations. It cannot be denied that Wittgenstein argued
against what might be termed 'mentalism' in logic. For example, he
criticised the suggestion that a word is 'physical', and its meaning is its
'mental' correlate and rejected the idea that 'understanding' may be
explicated in terms of mental processes. But it is important to remember
that Wittgenstein was attacking specific, well-defined targets. Phillips's
far more general assertion that the categories of 'the mental' and 'the
physical' are, as such, confused — i.e. have no intelligible application —
is far from clear, let alone self-evidently correct. Consequently, Phillips's
verdict that the idea of 'the original principle of order in the universe' can

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[63] See Vink 1985, pp. 146-147, 176-179, 200-203. It should be clear that Vink objects
also to Gaskin's characterisation of Hume's 'true religion' as a 'highly attenuated deism'.
However, Vink may be somewhat overzealous in his efforts to establish that Hume's
position is thoroughly atheistic, or, Vink's preferred term, 'non-theistic'. On the whole,
Philo's manner of speaking in the twelfth part of the *Dialogues* does seem to favour
Gaskin's reading and, moreover, as Gaskin points out, again and again in private and
published work Hume gives explicit or implicit assent to the proposition that there is a
god. Though the disagreement, as Vink puts it, is not 'merely verbal', one should, per-
haps, not overstate the differences. After all, Gaskin readily acknowledges that Hume's
'true religion' is as damaging to Christianity as any atheism could be.

[64] To my knowledge, to date, Phillips has not engaged in a more thorough discussions
of this matter.

but be confused is difficult to assess. Must it be confused to speak of the laws of nature or, say, the theory of evolution, as pointing towards principles of order in nature? Again, do not the various cosmologies offered by natural science — for instance, big-bang and steady-state theories — establish a theoretical framework which allows us, to a certain degree, to say something about the universe as a whole? Although this may entail some presupposition of structural unity, it need not necessarily commit one to treating the universe as some kind of big object, with all the logical problems this entails. Without wanting to delve too deeply into these matters, it would seem that, unless one deems such efforts unintelligible in advance, one allows the religious apologist a window of opportunity to present his case. It is clear that Phillips sees no such opportunities; the blinds have long since been drawn. It is equally clear, however, that this was not Hume's position.

We have considered Phillips's analysis of Hume's three levels of critique in the *Dialogues*. In his earlier discussion, Phillips believed Hume's arguments to be completely successful. Hume demonstrates

> "that even where people have thought there were grounds in the world we know for inferring divine activity as an explanation of them, such thoughts have been the result of philosophical confusion.[65] The world we know does not stand in need of any transcendental hypothesis to serve as its ultimate explanation. The whole notion of a God and another world which we can infer from the world we know is discredited."[66]

Phillips's later discussion shies away from this conclusion. Hume, Phillips now believes, did not press his arguments far enough:

> "Hume, in his attenuated deism, is still in the grip of conceptions of 'the world' which, elsewhere, he himself criticises. This means that Hume failed to press home the logical implications of some of his best criticisms. Had he done so, his attack on certain ways of philosophising about religion would have been even more devastating."[67]

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[65] Surely Phillips means to say *conceptual* confusion.

[66] Phillips 1976, p. 21.

[67] Phillips 2001, p. xii. Note the suggestion that Hume was attacking certain '*ways of philosophising about* religion'. At the very least, one should conclude that Hume's attack certainly reflected badly on (what Hume took to be) religious belief. He is saying that the *correct* way of philosophising about religion leads to some rather irksome conclusions for believers. Of course, from Phillips's point of view, Hume's criticisms do not really affect the possibilities of religious belief Phillips wishes to bring to the fore. Hume's criticisms are most damaging to what Phillips takes to be distortions of religious belief. Seeing as Phillips believes these distortions to be, at least partly, the handiwork of philosophers, Hume is useful to him in attacking certain ways of 'philosophising about religion'. (See, for example, Phillips 2000, pp. 9ff., pp. 63ff.)

At his strongest, Hume argues that the inference from world to God is logically problematic. But, according to Phillips, these logical difficulties are far more severe than Hume realised, "although this greater challenge is latent in his remarks."[68] The qualification is important, for it allows Phillips to persist in his claim that Hume's critique is entirely successful.[69] *When properly developed*, Hume's arguments demonstrate that the argument from design is fatally flawed. The problem is just that Hume himself failed to appreciate this.

Phillips's line of reasoning depends, to a large extent, on his analysis of Hume's conception of 'true religion'. We have argued, however, that this analysis is questionable: it tends to obscure the distinction between the question of the origin of the world and the question of the cause(s) of *order* in the world. There are good reasons to suppose that Hume rejected the former of these questions. Ironically, on this issue, Phillips's earlier discussion seems nearer the truth. Hume did think that the postulation of 'God' as the 'cause of the universe' is unintelligible. Admittedly, however, Hume accepts the latter question. Although Phillips's later discussion anticipates throughout the conclusion that the argument from design, in all of its guises, is the product of conceptual confusion, this conclusion simply does not appear in the *Dialogues*. Nor do I believe it is helpful to claim that it is 'latent in Hume's remarks' or 'implied by his strongest arguments'. Whether one likes it or not, in the context of the question of the cause(s) of order in the world, Hume concedes that the design argument has a — very limited — applicability. But it is not at all clear that this concession involves Hume in thinking of the world as some kind of object the origin of which may be speculated upon. Neither is it obvious that the notion of a principle of order in the universe must be confused as it trades on a metaphysical dualism between 'the mental' and 'the physical'. Phillips's arguments to this effect are presented in too brief and dogmatic a fashion to be immediately convincing.

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[68] Phillips 2001, p. 87.

[69] See, for example, Phillips 2001, p. 80. For another example, see Phillips's paper *The Friends of Cleanthes: a Case of Conceptual Poverty*. (Phillips 2000, pp. 63-81.) In a footnote Phillips writes: "It has been well argued that Hume's philosophy does allow a form of attenuated deism. My conclusion in the present essay has to do with what I take to be *the implications of Hume's strongest arguments*." (Phillips 2000, p. 262, fn. 61, italics added.) In the main body of the text these implications are spelled out: Hume demonstrates that "an argument from design is *impossible in principle*." His conclusion "is not that it is highly unlikely that the world is the product of a divine plan. Hume's conclusion is that such talk is unintelligible." (Phillips 2000, p. 65.)

If our conclusions are correct, should Phillips be overly concerned about them? Not really. After all, first, Hume's concession to Cleanthes does not annul his earlier criticisms of the argument from design. If a traditional theistic conclusion is drawn from it, then Hume's objections are, indeed, devastating. In allowing Cleanthes a window of opportunity, Hume is really allowing preciously little. At best, Cleanthes may claim that there is probably a remote analogy between the cause(s) of order in the universe and human intelligence. At any rate, in Hume's view, this line of reasoning will never lead to rational belief in anything the religious man might want to call god.[70] To insist, moreover, that it must be the product of confusion may be no more than to add insult to injury.

5.2 The inheritors of Hume's legacy

By now, the reader may well be expected to have become rather curious as to these 'other possibilities of religious meaning' to which, Phillips has it, Hume is blind. What are these other possibilities of meaning? This question has both a formal and a substantive component. The former concerns the logical status of Phillips's other possibilities of meaning. Is it just that Phillips presents us with beliefs which are non-contradictory and which could conceivably be held by (groups of) individuals, or is he advancing descriptions of actual religious beliefs and practices? The latter concerns the content of these other possibilities of meaning: what are they about? We will discuss these questions shortly. First, however, we turn to the 'inheritors of Hume's legacy'. For Phillips's discussion of Hume is a prelude to his critique of the various forms of reductionist explanation which followed in Hume's wake.

Now, it might be thought that Hume's conception of 'true religion' allows some logical space for actual historical religions, in particular Christianity. But, as we have seen, this is hardly the case. Although 'true religion' is rationally unobjectionable and has no pernicious consequences, it has always been confined to very few persons; "we must", Philo insists, "treat of religion as it has commonly been found in the world".[71] And, whatever 'true religion' ought to have been in history and society, it most certainly is not religion as it has been commonly found. *That* religion is characterised by Hume as 'vulgar religion',

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[70] See Gaskin 1978, p. 40.
[71] Hume 1986, p. 85.

'popular religion', 'superstition', and so on. There is never any doubt that 'vulgar religion' contains virtually all the religion there actually is, including practically the whole history of Christianity.[72] The Christian apologist will find no solace in Hume's 'true religion'.

For Hume, 'vulgar religion', i.e. religion as we encounter it the world, and 'superstition' are as good as interchangeable. Not only has religion caused untold harm to mankind, it is also irrational and illusory. If the arguments in the *Dialogues* are sound, as Hume took them to be, the question becomes why people continue to cultivate these illusions. In suggesting that religion is caused by fear and fostered by ignorance, Hume was perhaps the first philosopher to propose that religion can be explained as a wholly natural phenomenon. According to Phillips, Hume

> "reduces religion to a *natural* phenomenon; a phenomenon which helps one understand why religion along with philosophical defences of it, leads one to postulate transcendental illusions. Once Hume's philosophical critique is accepted, the inevitable legacy he bequeaths is simply the task of giving increasingly detailed accounts of how these illusions come to be formed and believed."[73]

The 'inheritors of Hume's legacy' took this task seriously. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw a profusion of natural explanations of religion, devised from within various disciplines, including, but not limited to, (philosophical) anthropology, psychology and sociology. Despite their great diversity of approach and notwithstanding the rival conclusions they draw, Phillips believes these accounts to have at least two features in common. First, their architects all stand in the legacy of Hume. Secondly, the accounts aim to provide a naturalistic, reductionist explanation of religion.

Of course, Phillips does not mean to say that such authors as Emile Durkheim or Sigmund Freud would refer to David Hume as their greatest mentor. Rather, his point is that the authors under investigation were all convinced that it had already been established that religion is a fiction; that God does not exist. What the eighteenth-century enlightenment demonstrates — not in the least in the person of David Hume — is that the inference from world to God is logically flawed. Everyday facts cannot lead to transcendental conclusions. Once this is accepted, and if one agrees with Hume that religious beliefs are dependent upon such an inference, then one can only conclude that these beliefs are

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[72] See Gaskin 1978, pp. 147-149; Vink 1985, pp. 163-164.
[73] Phillips 2001, p. 87.

equally flawed. In this way the terms of reference for the discussion of religion are set. Religion cannot be what it purports to be; religious beliefs are patently false, or, even worse, unintelligible. They have to be explained in some natural way. The 'inheritors of Hume's legacy' sought to provide such natural explanations. By understanding the genesis of religion, they argued, the confusions involved in it can be recognised. Religious belief can then be restated in terms of the realities which produced it, and all talk of religious factors can thus be eliminated.

In *Religion Without Explanation* and again in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, Phillips discusses a number of such explanations of religion. His earlier discussion examines the accounts provided by Tylor and Frazer, Marrett, Freud and Durkheim. His later one adds discussions of Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, Lévy-Bruhl and Peter Berger. The inclusion of Berger in his list of targets should already indicate that Phillips's reason for discussing various reductionist accounts of religion is not primarily historical. Phillips's main interest is not to categorise the numerous forms reductionism has taken in the history of the study of religion. His central target is not any individual reductionist account of religion but, rather, a mode of reflecting on religion which, though it may have found its first comprehensive expressions in the 19th century, still exerts a powerful grip on the contemporary study of religion, not in the last place where the philosophy of religion is concerned. The point of his considerations, Phillips tells us,

> "is philosophical, namely, to enquire whether, if one understands religious beliefs in this way, one is illuminating or obscuring possibilities of meaning."[74]

Not surprisingly, Phillips concludes that the reductionist explanations obscure possibilities of meaning. Evidently, this conclusion may be supported by expounding those beliefs which are distorted by reductionist analysis. In this way, perspicuous representations of counter-examples are part of the response to the reductionist's claim.[75] But Phillips aims to do more than that. His discussion, he claims,

> "also contains something which one does not find very often in discussions of naturalistic, reductionist theories of religion, namely, a demonstration of conceptual confusions in the theories based on their *own* terms of reference."[76]

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[74] Phillips 1976, pp. 26-27.
[75] See Phillips 2001, p. 24.
[76] Phillips 2001, p. 24.

According to Phillips, the attempts to explain away religious belief as a cluster of mistakes or confusions are themselves riddled with conceptual confusions. This may be shown, Phillips has it, "*in terms recognised as their necessary conditions by these modes of explanation.*"[77] Phillips aims to provide such a critique for each instance he examines. For example, in his discussion of Freud and Durkheim, he argues that their treatment of religion is confused even in psychoanalytic and sociological terms. Thus, "the theories are shown to be, not simply descriptively inaccurate, but also conceptually inadequate."[78] In turning to consider religious belief, Freud and Durkheim break their own procedural rules.

In the course of these discussions Phillips advances various criticisms, many of which, I suspect, would be accepted even by those unsympathetic to his work. For example, I take it few would disagree with Phillips's claim that Freud's suggestion that religion has its origins in a common complicity in a murder can hardly be taken seriously as a historical thesis. Again, Phillips is by no means the first to point out that that Freud's individualistic psychology prevents him from giving serious enough attention to the heterogeneity of social and cultural movements. On the other hand, Phillips also presents arguments which are, perhaps, somewhat less clear-cut. For example, as Phillips has it, Durkheim argues that human activities and interests are a function of social solidarity. This, Phillips claims, reveals "a fundamental logical confusion at the very core of Durkheim's system", for "it is not our social bonds which explain our interests, but our interests which characterise our bonds."[79] No doubt, there are those who will be inclined, rightly or wrongly, to take issue with Phillips on this matter.

It cannot be our aim to assess each of Phillips's criticisms on its own merit. That would require an in-depth analysis of the writings of the various authors under investigation which, even if I could provide it, would take us far beyond the scope of our present enquiry. Furthermore, even though it is of importance to Phillips's programme to demonstrate the logical flaws, if such there be, in various reductionist accounts of religious belief, we already noted that these *individual* accounts are not his prime target. Phillips wants to demonstrate, not just that Freud and Durkheim did not get it right, but that the whole endeavour to 'explain away' religion is misguided.

[77] Phillips 2000, p. 68.
[78] Phillips 2001, p. 24.
[79] Phillips 2001, p. 16.

How may this conclusion decisively be established? Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that each and every one of Phillips's criticisms of the reductionist accounts of religion he considers is right on target, would this establish that conclusion? I think not. After all, Phillips's opponents could argue that although, say, Freud's account is flawed, it may be amended and restated in such a way so as to eliminate these flaws. Furthermore, it may be argued that whereas perhaps no *single* reductionist theory can account for every religious belief and practice, every aspect of religious belief and practice can be explained by *some* reductionist theory. One might even add that whereas, at the present time, the social sciences are not yet equipped to provide a 'unified theory of religion' there is no reason to suppose that such a theory will not, one day, be developed. In this way, the general reductionist thesis may be re-established. A demonstration of the flaws in various individual reductionist accounts does not clinch the matter. Something more is needed. Some flaw which is not accidentally related to a specific reductionist explanation of religion but necessarily adheres to any such account. What could this be?

In his essay *Reductionist study of religion and the spiritual dimension of meaning*, H. J. Adriaanse distinguishes two distinct approaches in the study of religion. The first, more moderate approach, rejects wholesale reductionism, arguing that it is possible to do justice to the autonomy of religious belief:

> "Religion need not be approached in a reductionist manner and explained in terms of non-religious factors, such as social or psychological mechanisms. Just as there is a proper domain of the arts or of politics, so too there is a proper domain of religion. As for the study of religion, its task is to describe and elucidate, as best it can, what goes on within this domain."[80]

Adriaanse contrasts this approach to a more radical one which denies religion its autonomy. From this point of view, religion is something that stands in need of explanation and, what is more, to shroud this explanation in religious terms is really to shroud it in mystery:

> "one who does not believe and, therefore, can in no way share the believer's reference to a transcendent reality, such a person has no other option in the study of religion than to reduce religion to non-religious factors. He can but

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[80] Adriaanse 2001, p. 9: "Religie hoeft niet reductionistisch te worden benaderd en in termen van niet-religieuze factoren, zoals sociale en psychische mechanismen, te worden verklaard. Zoals er een eigen domein is van de kunst of van de politiek, zo is er ook een eigen domein van de religie en waar het in de religiestudie om gaat is om dat wat zich binnen dit domein afspeelt zo goed mogelijk te beschrijven en uit te leggen."

opt for a reductionist approach. Or else matters will never be clarified and religion remains, as ever, an inscrutable mystery."[81]

It will be clear that the first, moderate approach is closer to Phillips's position than the latter, radical one.[82] As Phillips puts it in his, aptly titled, *Religion Without Explanation*, religion 'must remain without explanation'. In anticipation of his critics, Phillips immediately adds that he has a certain kind of explanation in mind, the kind which seeks "to characterize religious belief as the false or confused result of ignorance, emotional stress, social pressure or metaphysical impulse, or explanations which seek foundations for faith in philosophical arguments or proofs."[83] Of course, there is no objection to saying that in arguing against such explanations one has oneself 'explained' something about religion. Nor should we object to calling certain forms of elucidation 'explanations'. But these "forms of explanation, if one insists on calling them that, are not those which characterized the rationalistic traditions which have had such a widespread influence on the philosophy of religion."[84] In other words, "reductionist analyses are explanations of religion, but all explanations are not reductionist."[85]

It would be rather surprising should these remarks put the reductionist at ease. Is it not somewhat disingenuous to say that, indeed, religion allows of explanations but only in this sense that we can explain that religious belief cannot be explained? It still seems as if Phillips denies that there can be any non-religious explanations of religion. According to Wayne Proudfoot this is plain silly. Proudfoot draws a distinction between 'descriptive' and 'explanatory' reductionism.[86] The former consists in the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it. The latter consists in no more than offering an explanation of an emotion, practice, or experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet his approval. While Proudfoot admits that descriptive reductionism is unacceptable, he maintains that there is nothing wrong with explanatory

[81] Adriaanse 2001, p. 10: "wie zelf niet gelooft en dus die verwijzing naar een transcendente wereld op geen enkele manier kan meemaken, die kàn als godsdienstwetenschapper eigenlijk niet anders dan religie tot niet-religieuze factoren herleiden. Die móet wel overgaan tot een reductionistische benadering. Anders komt er nooit licht in de zaak en blijft de religie wat zij altijd al was: een ondoorgrondelijk raadsel."
[82] I do not mean to imply that Phillips would agree with Adriaanse's analysis.
[83] Phillips 1976, p. x.
[84] Phillips 1976, p. x.
[85] Phillips 2001, p. 14.
[86] See Proudfoot 1985.

reductionism. In *Religion Without Explanation*, Proudfoot argues, Phillips fails to recognise this distinction; he rules out all forms of reductionism, including wholly legitimate forms of explanatory reductionism.

As may be expected, in *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, Phillips rejects Proudfoot's criticism. Phillips denies that he has ever claimed that religious belief can only be understood in terms of religious concepts. An intellectual interest in activities which are not, primarily, intellectual will, inevitably, bring to bear on those activities concepts which are not used, and may even not be understood, by the participants in those activities. In this sense, Phillips argues, the enquiry is wider than the activity being investigated, as it includes concepts which belong to the interests of the intellectual enquiry in question. This is true, not just of psychology, sociology, etc., but also of philosophical discussions of religion. Furthermore, Phillips insists that his critiques of Freud, Durkheim, etc., need not deny that religion often takes the compensatory forms these thinkers criticise.[87] This means that, far from rejecting reductionist explanations out of hand, Phillips admits that "In certain cases, reductionist, naturalistic explanations will prove to have an application."[88]

Clearly then, Phillips agrees with Proudfoot that it would be silly to deny that there can be non-religious explanations of religion. But, Phillips argues, it would be equally silly to think that in saying this, one is endorsing explanatory reductionism. According to Phillips, explanatory reductionism makes a far more ambitious claim than Proudfoot implies. It is not just that the terms in which the reductionist explanation is presented *need not* be familiar or acceptable to the subject but that they certainly *will not* be acceptable to anyone who wishes to remain a believer. This is because explanatory reductionism advances the general thesis that religious beliefs are, necessarily, the product of confusion:

> "My claim is that explanatory reductionism makes the *general* claim that, after analyses of various kinds, religious belief will be seen to be *necessarily* illusory. [Religious] beliefs are said to be the products of illusion, conceptual confusions which sociological or psychoanalytic analyses may bring out. The authors of reductionist analyses stand in the legacy of Hume, a master of conceptual suspicion. It [is] in this *philosophical* context that I [discuss] the reductionist analyses."[89]

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[87] See Phillips 1996, p. xv.
[88] Phillips 2001, p. 5.
[89] Phillips 2001, p. 14.

At the *core* of explanatory reductionism, Phillips asserts, lies the general claim that religion as such is necessarily the product of confusion. If this is indeed correct, then Phillips's confident dismissal of a radical reductionist approach in the study of religion would seem to be wholly justified. After all, if the attempt to provide a reductionist account of religion is to be a *scientific*, any claim to a necessary conclusion becomes highly suspect. Modern science is empirical science. As such, it reveals no necessities.[90]

One might well expect Adriaanse to agree with these conclusions. But this is not the case. Rather than an outright rejection of radical reductionism we find Adriaanse telling us that he finds the radical, reductionist approach highly appealing. Not only is it candid and resolute, it is also, in principle, quite sensible. After all, how else should the non-believer approach religion but with the hope of reducing it to its natural causes? Moreover, this approach has proven to be quite productive. There can be no denying that there is much to religion which can be, and has been, done away with. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, Adriaanse, too, is inclined to reject an all-inclusive reductionism:

> "The reductionist may reveal some, many, a great deal of religious beliefs to be false or unintelligible, or even worse: vicious, foolish, reprehensible, and in so doing he does us a great service. But can he show all religious beliefs to be false? Is religion *as such* false? At what point has one seen enough of religion to be able to draw that conclusion with a clear conscience?"[91]

Perhaps that day may never come. But just as Adriaanse renounces an overly confident reductionism, so too does he renounce too confident a rejection of reductionism. Adriaanse's choice is a hesitant and tentative one. By contrast, as we saw, Phillips's choice is far more confident: explanatory reductionism can and must be rejected. How are we to explain this? Should not Adriaanse agree with Phillips that the reductionist's claim to necessity should be rejected? The problem is that Adriaanse might well reply — and, I suspect, advocates of radical reductionism certainly will reply — that Phillips has picked too easy a target.

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[90] I do not wish to claim that these statements may not be disputed. But I am fairly confident, at least, that Phillips would accept them.

[91] Adriaanse 2001, p. 12: "De reductionistische godsdienstwetenschapper kan sommige, vele, zéér vele religieuze uitspraken als onwaar of onzinnig, of erger nog: vals, dom, verwerpelijk ontzenuwen en hij doet daar een verdienstelijk werk mee. Maar kan hij àlle religieuze uitspraken als onwaar ontzenuwen? Is religie *als zodanig* onwaar? Wanneer heeft een godsdienstwetenschapper genoeg van religie gezien om dàt met een gerust hart te kunnen zeggen?"

Surely the reductionist can drop any reference to a necessary conclusion. Rather than stating that religion is necessarily false or illusory, he claims no more than that religion, as such, may possibly be, or very likely is, false or illusory.[92] Must such an 'amended' reductionist approach be ruled out in advance? Of course, the reductionist's claim may prove to be factually inaccurate. Waiting on the language of faith we may find that there are possibilities of religious meaning of which, as it turns out, it makes no sense to say they are false or unintelligible. But *must* this be the case? That assumption would seem to suffer from the same kind of confusion Phillips believes to be inherent in explanatory reductionism.

Phillips is right to reject the reductionist's claim to necessity. And he may be right that the reductionist accounts he discusses entail such a claim. But there is no reason to suppose that the reductionist cannot amend his position in such a way as to circumvent these objections. Such an amended reductionism would claim no more than that it is *conceivable* that religion, as such, is false or illusory. This claim may well be offensive to the believer. But must it be offensive to the philosopher? For an answer, let us turn, briefly, to Phillips's discussion of Freud.

Phillips discusses Freud as one of the 'inheritors of Hume's legacy'. Now, as we saw, Phillips agrees that *if* religious belief is what Hume takes it to be, his critique is irrefutable. Of course, he denies that Hume treats 'of religion as commonly found in the world'. At the very least, his terms of reference obscure and distort other possibilities of religious meaning. But unless Phillips wishes to claim that Hume's terms of reference are *never* applicable — that is to say, that the 'other possibilities of meaning' really constitute the *only* possibilities of religious meaning — then Hume's analysis must be at least partially correct. That is to say, sometimes religion is precisely what Hume took it to be and, therefore, susceptible to his censure.

It seems only reasonable to suppose that something similar holds in reference to reductionist explanations of religion. According to Phillips, their authors accept Hume's terms of reference and, as did Hume's, their analyses distort or obscure other possibilities of religious meaning. But, once again, unless Phillips wishes to claim that Hume's terms of reference are never applicable we should conclude that the reductionist explanations can only be, at least sometimes, on the mark. Indeed, as we saw, Phillips admits that in certain cases, reductionist, naturalistic explanations

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[92] Adding, perhaps, that, so far, the accomplishments of reductionist social sciences in this context are nothing to be laughed at.

have an application. What has to be abandoned, at a minimum, is the claim that religion in general is necessarily illusory. In his discussion of Freud, Phillips examines the possibility of such a correction.

Phillips finds a host of problems in Freud's analysis of religion.[93] One problem concerns the way in which Freud judges religious behaviour to be neurotic. Phillips refers to two examples of Freud's. The first concerns a 'primitive' religious practice among the Maori. A Maori chief would not blow a fire with his mouth, for his sacred breath would communicate his sanctity to the fire, which would pass it on to the pot on the fire, which would pass it on to the meat in the pot, so that the eater, infected by the chief's breath conveyed through these intermediaries, would surely die. The second example concerns a patient of Freud's who demanded that a certain household article her husband had purchased be removed from the house because it made the room she lived in 'impossible'. The reason for this was that she unconsciously associated the article with a friend of hers who was at the moment 'impossible' or taboo. Consequently, the article was as taboo as the friend herself with whom she must not come into contact.

Now, according to Phillips, Freud, illegitimately, equates the two cases. He wants to argue that the 'impossibility' of coming into contact with the sacred is no different, and no less neurotic, than the 'impossibility' involved in one woman finding another quite impossible. Freud fails to pay attention to the idea of the sacred which is connected with the Maori practice:

> "Freud wants to get behind the description of the Maori practice to what he takes to be the psychoanalytic explanation behind it. Notice that he is ruling out the concept of the sacred as a *possible* account of the Maori practice."[94]

In order for talk about the unconscious to make sense, Phillips argues, the unconscious reasons or motives ascribed must be intelligible to the person so analysed. In the case of the Maori tribesmen, this is not the case. Freud is saying that their reasons *cannot* be true because they are inherently senseless. Rather, they should be analysed in the way we analyse neurotic behaviour in our own society. This, Phillips argues, makes no sense, for

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[93] See Phillips 2001, pp. 199-228. We touch on only a small number of aspects of Phillips's discussion of Freud.

[94] Phillips 2001, p. 206.

"these assumptions ignore the very conditions of intelligibility which make psychoanalysis possible. The form of neurosis and of unconscious desires depends on the kind of society within which the neurosis occurs."[95]

Although Phillips raises an important point, his remarks also betray a number of rather questionable assumptions of their own. First, in what sense should we understand Phillips's claim that the concept of the sacred provides a possible account of the Maori practice? He cannot mean to say that the concept explains the practice, for this runs counter Phillips's claim that it is confused to think of religious beliefs as explanations:

"A belief that a religion is God-given is not an explanation of that religion, since it is itself a religious belief. What is happening here is that the use of a religious perspective is being confused with talk *about* the perspective, as though one were grounding it in some simple way."[96]

Freud's talk is talk *about* the Maori practice. Obviously, then, the concept of the sacred has no explanatory value to him because it belongs to the practice he is trying to explain. For Freud completely to ignore the concept of the sacred would amount to what Proudfoot calls 'descriptive reductionism'. Freud would then fail to identify the practice under the description by which the subject identifies it. Although it makes sense to demand that, in identifying the Maori practice, we must take due account of the descriptions and reasons brought to the fore by the participants, this does not entail that Freud must accept them as satisfactory. We cannot, *a priori*, exclude the possibility that Freud's explanation can 'get behind' them to reveal their underlying sources. Of course, the argument cuts both ways. Phillips could reply that, likewise, Freud cannot, *a priori*, rule out the possibility that the reasons professed by the Maori are satisfactory. The problem, Phillips argues, is that this is not possible for Freud because he had already decided that these reasons are inherently senseless.

To this we may reply as follows. First, simply to assume that the reasons the Maori profess are senseless, without properly examining them in their natural contexts of application, is, indeed, unacceptable. But even if Freud were guilty as charged, this still does not demonstrate that his account of the Maori practice is incorrect. Secondly, I fail to see why it must be confused to say, after due examination and analysis, that the reasons offered by the Maori cannot be true because they are unintelligible.

[95] Phillips 2001, p. 207.
[96] Phillips 2001, p. 7.

If a psychotherapist judges a patient's account of his reasons to be confused — that is to say, what the patient says is unintelligible and, hence, cannot be true — this need not be a sign that there is something wrong with the psychotherapist. Quite the contrary, it might be a first indication that there is something amiss with the patient. In short, to be a Maori does not protect one from either neurosis or confusion.

However, I believe Phillips is right to insist, both that the unconscious motives ascribed must be intelligible to the patient, and that the form of neurosis and of unconscious desires depend on the kind of society within which they occur. This means that Freud cannot, without further ado, equate the two cases we referred to above. As Winch points out, he would first have to

> "take into account any relevant aspects in which [the Maori's][97] ideas differed from that current in his own society. And it is almost inevitable that such an investigation would lead to some modification in the psychological theory appropriate for explaining neurotic behaviour in this new situation."[98]

Some modification will, no doubt, be necessary. But will this modification rule out the possibility that Freud's account was, after all, correct in this sense that the Maori practice we discussed may, indeed, turn out to be neurotic? It would seem that Phillips believes it will. According to Phillips, despite the flaws in Freud's analysis, a corrective is possible which would render the relation between religion and psychoanalysis unproblematic.[99] The first point that needs to be emphasised is that we cannot explain religion, including primitive religion, in terms of neurosis:

> "social institutions, movements and traditions cannot be explained in terms of neurosis, since it is within the contexts of such institutions, movements and traditions that neurosis has its meaning."[100]

This does not mean that there is no such thing as neurotic religious behaviour. In such a case, psychoanalytic treatment would have to take into account whether religious ideas are involved in a patient's neurosis. But, Phillips argues, it would be impossible to do so without drawing a distinction between normal religious practices and neurotic religious

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[97] Although Winch is discussing another case, his remarks are just as germane to our present discussion.

[98] Winch 1990, p. 90; quoted in Phillips 2001, p. 207.

[99] See Phillips 2001, pp. 207-208.

[100] Phillips 2001, p. 207.

behaviour. Phillips admits that this distinction may not always be easy to draw. But, at any rate,

> "one will not be able, in general terms, to call normal religious practice a neurosis, as Freud did. The task of psychoanalysis, in this context, is to free a person from his or her neurosis, and bring that person back to normality. But that normality might well involve the holding of religious beliefs."[101]

Here, presumably, we have an example of what Phillips means when he says that he is "opposed to the general claims of the hermeneutics of suspicion, without denying that some of its suspicions are well-founded."[102] Although we cannot say that religion as such is neurotic (or the product of emotional pressure, fear, ignorance, etc.), an individual's religious practice may well turn out to be neurotic (or the product of, etc.). Should we also say that, here, we witness a case where a reductionist, naturalistic explanation has been shown to have an application? I suggest Phillips is nearer to the truth when, in conclusion to the discussion of his corrective version of the relation between psychoanalysis and religion, he states that, on his account, "psychoanalysis would no longer be inherently suspicious of religious belief. For that very reason, however, one would no longer be talking of Freud's hermeneutics of suspicion."[103]

Indeed, we would no longer be talking of a reductionist account of religion at all. Not because such an account must involve the claim that religious beliefs are necessarily illusory — as we have seen that claim may be abandoned — but because Phillips's corrective rules out the possibility that religion as such *may* be illusory. To return to the case at hand, the reductionist, I take it, would maintain that despite the flaws in Freud's analysis it is at least *conceivable* that religion can be explained in terms of neurosis. We have already seen two of the arguments Phillips produces to refute that claim. First, social institutions, movements and traditions cannot be explained in terms of neurosis, since it is within the contexts of such institutions, movements and traditions that neurosis has its meaning. Secondly, it would be impossible to speak of religion as neurotic without drawing a distinction between normal religious practices and neurotic religious behaviour. I do not wish to deny the force of these arguments. But are they truly decisive?

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[101] Phillips 2001, p. 208.
[102] Phillips 2001, p. 5.
[103] Phillips 2001, p. 208.

As to the first, the reductionist might reply that 'neurosis' does not so much get its meaning in the variety of social movements, traditions and institutions but in the specific context of psychiatry. Admittedly, as Phillips points out, the forms neurosis may take will depend on the kind of society in which it occurs. But what neurosis *is*, is to be explained in psychological terms. Furthermore, although it makes little sense to say that society as a whole is a form of neurosis, must it be nonsense to entertain the possibility that a specific institution or movement in a society is not what it seems? As to Phillips's second argument, clearly, to call a certain type of behaviour neurotic implies a contrast with normal, non-neurotic behaviour. Consequently, if one calls religious behaviour neurotic, one must be able to contrast it, in some way, to normal behaviour. But why must this normal behaviour be 'normal *religious* behaviour'? Could not the reductionist claim that religious behaviour is a neurotic way of dealing with grief, longing, sorrow, fear, guilt, etc. and contrast it to other, non-religious ways of dealing with these issues?

If these arguments are valid, they cast doubt on Phillips's claim that an amended form of reductionism, in this case psychological reductionism, must, necessarily, recognise the irreducibility of religion as such. Although the reductionist cannot preclude the possibility that certain forms of religious practice do not allow of a reductionist explanation, neither can Phillips rule out the possibility that all the forms of religious belief we attend to may turn out to be explicable in some such manner. In short, the reductionist's claim cannot be ruled out beforehand. We will just have to wait and see.

Before we may draw this conclusion, however, we need to consider one further argument which may be brought against it. It is an argument which, in various shapes, has played an important role in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Perhaps its original expression may be found in Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science*.

As we saw, Winch, too, rejects a wait-and-see attitude when it comes to giving an account of the nature of social phenomena. To study our social relations, Winch argues, is, in a non-trivial sense, to study our forms of language:

> "our language and our social relations are just two different sides of the same coin. To give an account of the meaning of a word is to describe how it is used; and to describe how it is used is to describe the social intercourse into which it enters."[104]

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[104] Winch 1990, p. 123.

Thus, the issues facing us are not so much empirical as conceptual in nature. Social phenomena, being essentially linguistic phenomena, are rule-governed activities. Human society is really made up of an infinitely extendable number of such activities or 'ways of life', each of which offers a distinct, independent account of the intelligibility of things. There is no hope of understanding such activities without taking into account the ideas which inform them. Nor does it make sense to try and explain these ideas. The best we can do is elucidate the role they play in their natural contexts of application.

Winch leaves little room for doubt that religion constitutes one such distinct way of life which is conducted according to considerations of its own. It provides its own criteria of intelligibility, criteria which need not, and, presumably, do not, conform to those constitutive of other modes of social life. It follows that the expectation that religion as such — being an autonomous way of life — might be 'explained away' in terms of another, alien way of life is not just futile but incoherent.

For a more recent example of this line of reasoning we may turn to Norman Malcolm's essay *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* Malcolm presents us with a picture of social reality similar to that of *The Idea of a Social Science*. He, too, argues that to compare our lives to our forms of language, or our language-games, is not actually to compare two separate things. For what would our lives be without our language-games? Every human preoccupation, every striving, every emotion seeks its expression in language. Again, without language there would be no criticism or reflection, nor anything that would come close to resembling human love, or hope, or hatred or joy. In short: "The observation and description of language-games, if it is sensitive and detailed, is actually the study of human life."[105] Furthermore, Malcolm emphasises, perhaps even more strongly so than *The Idea of a Social Science*, that it makes no sense to try and *explain* our language-games:

> "The inescapable logic of [Wittgenstein's] conception is that the terms 'explanation', 'reason', 'justification', have a use *exclusively within* the various language-games. The word 'explanation' appears in many language-games, and is used differently in different games. [...] An explanation is *internal* to a particular language-game. There is no explanation that *rises above* our language-games, and explains *them*. This would be a *super-concept* of explanation — which means that it is an ill-conceived fantasy."[106]

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[105] Malcolm 1993, p. 77.
[106] Malcolm 1993, pp. 77, 78.

'Explanation' is embedded in human activities, in the various practices in which we engage. There is no perspective outside of or beyond our practices as a whole. Wittgenstein teaches us, Malcolm argues, that our explanations come to an end *somewhere*. Where is that? Malcolm's answer affirms the irreducibility of our various, individual language-games and forms of life. Our explanations come to an end

> "at *the existence* of the language-games and the associated forms of life. There is where explanation has reached its limit. There reasons stop. In philosophy we can only notice the language-games, describe them, and sometimes wonder at them."[107]

Philosophy can observe a complicated linguistic practice and describe how one movement is related to another. But philosophy cannot explain why the practice exists. Lest it be thought that we run up to the limits of explanation only when doing philosophy, Malcolm immediately adds that it is not just the philosopher who cannot explain our language-games: "nor can the 'hard' sciences of physics, chemistry, biology; nor the 'soft' sciences of psychology, sociology, anthropology."[108]

So far, we have seen that, according to Malcolm, our language-games, and their associated forms of life, are 'beyond explanation'.[109] The only thing that is lacking, if we are to counter the reductionist's claims, is confirmation of the fact that religious practices constitute distinctive language-games. Malcolm wastes little time delivering the goods:

> "A religious practice is itself a language-game — a pattern in which words and gestures are interwoven in acts of worship, prayer, confession, absolution, thanksgiving. Religious practices are part of the natural history of mankind and are no more explicable than are other features of this natural history. […] The existence of religious practices can no more be explained than can the existence of sports, or of musical composition."[110]

Clearly then, both Malcolm and, in his earlier work, Winch provide a logical argument against the claim that we may reduce religion as such to its non-religious causes. The question, of course, is whether Phillips, too, adheres to this line of reasoning.

Arguably, Phillips's earlier discussion of reductionism implies such an argument. Making use of typical Wittgensteinian terminology, *Religion Without Explanation* reasons that religious beliefs constitute distinctive

[107] Malcolm 1993, p. 82.
[108] Malcolm 1993, p. 85.
[109] See Malcolm 1993, p. 77.
[110] Malcolm 1993, p. 85.

language-games, which need not answer to any criteria of intelligibility other than their own:

> "religious beliefs and practices do not await a further analysis which is supposed to bring a greater clarity, in the light of which one can no longer hold on to the beliefs and practices in their original form. On the contrary, […] religious beliefs are themselves limits concerning what it does and what it does not make sense to say. But if one asks what these beliefs say, the only answer is that they say themselves. What they say may be elucidated […] but it cannot be explained. 'We can only *describe* and say, human life is like that.'"[111]

Of course, one may be interested in investigating the consequences of various religious beliefs for other social movements and institutions, or the historical development of religious beliefs, and so on. But it makes no sense to try and get behind religious beliefs to reveal their underlying explanations, if by that we mean that religious beliefs can be made intelligible in non-religious terms: "in this sense of explanation, religious beliefs are irreducible."[112] Faced by the variety of forms of language, including religious forms of language, the philosopher's task is not one of explanation but of description:

> "the philosopher's task is not to attempt to verify or falsify what he sees, for that makes no sense in this context. His task is a descriptive one; he gives an account of the use of language involved. He can only say that these language-games are played."[113]

Here, we find an emphasis on 'the language-games people play' as the terminus of our efforts to explain social phenomena, similar to that which we encountered in Winch and Malcolm. Of course, *Religion Without Explanation* provides a variety of criticisms of various reductionist accounts of religious belief. These, obviously, need to be judged on their own merits. But, one might argue, behind these — though never developed as explicitly as in Malcolm's essay or Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* — there lurks the final, decisive argument that religious beliefs constitute autonomous 'language-games' or 'ways of life' which, by their very nature, are irreducible.

Clearly, if tenable, this line of reasoning should pose a serious problem for any attempt at wholesale explanatory reductionism of religion. If we can show religious beliefs to constitute distinctive language-games

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[111] Phillips 1976, p. 120.
[112] Phillips 1976, p. 151.
[113] Phillips 1976, p. 41.

then, by the same token, we have demonstrated their irreducibility. Little
wonder then that critics have demanded Phillips provide strict criteria of
identification of (religious) language-games. We need to know *what*, pre-
cisely, constitutes a (religious) language-game. Lars Haikola, for exam-
ple, argues that as long as this fundamental problem is not solved, "one
must regard the whole attempt to describe religious belief in terms of
language-games with scepticism."[114] But the fundamental problem lies
not so much in the Wittgensteinian failure to provide strict criteria to
show what is in and what is out, as in the abuse of Wittgenstein's notions
of a language-game and a form of life. As we have argued, the early
Wittgensteinians misappropriated these notions, making it appear as if
they denote self-governing, onto-linguistic entities. This may result, as it
does in *The Idea of a Social Science*, in far too static a picture of social
reality; social practices, traditions and institutions are presented as more
or less isolated and self-contained units, each going its own, fairly
autonomous, way. Surely Kai Nielsen is right to insist that various social
activities are not sufficient unto themselves. That is to say, there is
enough overlap between the different activities in which people engage,
for us to be able to formulate some more or less general criteria for what
is to count as true, meaningful, rational, etc. Activities are simply not
that isolated.[115] Looking back on *The Idea of a Social Science* some
thirty years later, Winch agrees that his suggestion that modes of social
life are autonomous with respect to each other was insufficiently coun-
teracted by his qualifying remarks about the overlapping character of
different modes of social life:

> "Different aspects of social life do not merely 'overlap': they are frequently
> internally related in such a way that one cannot even be intelligibly con-
> ceived as existing in isolation from others. […] The logico-conceptual diffi-
> culties which arise when ways of thinking which have their roots in different
> reaches of human life are brought to bear on each other cannot be resolved
> by any appeal to a formal system — whether a God-given system of logical
> principles or a system of modes of social life, each with criteria of intelligi-
> bility peculiar to itself."[116]

The extent to which Winch modified his earlier position is also witnessed
by his critique of Malcolm's essay. Winch agrees with Malcolm that, at
some point, our explanations come to an end. But, Winch continues, it is
highly misleading to say

[114] Haikola 1977, p. 92.
[115] Nielsen 1967, p. 208.
[116] Winch 1990, p. xvi.

"that 'Wittgenstein regarded the language-games, and their associated forms
of life, as beyond explanation.' Language-games are not a phenomenon that
Wittgenstein had discovered with the peculiar property that their existence
cannot be explained!"[117]

Our explanations come to an end, Winch rightfully reminds us, not
because we run into something which is intrinsically beyond further
explanation, but for a variety of quite contingent and pragmatic rea-
sons. Consequently, Winch also casts doubt on Malcolm's claim that
neither philosophy, nor the 'hard' or 'soft' sciences, are in any position
to explain our linguistic practices. Winch observes, correctly in my view,
that this seems neither generally true in itself, nor implied by anything
Wittgenstein wrote.[118] Surely, there are many cases in which psycholo-
gists, sociologists or anthropologists give well-founded explanations of
the existence of this or that practice. Why ever not? Wittgenstein was
not concerned with such 'scientific explanations' but, rather, with the
peculiar pseudo-sense in which philosophy, at times, seeks 'explana-
tions'. Spinoza, for example, thought that because explanations have to
come to an end, there must be something which has no further explana-
tion, a *causa sui*.[119] Winch is right to point out that Wittgenstein's view
is not at all like that; rather, it is a *criticism* of such an outlook:

"His criticism did not terminate in pointing to the existence of something
that happens to be beyond the reach of explanation; the force of the criti-
cism lay in his exposure of the confusions involved in the search itself and
in the puzzlement that gives rise to it. The concept of a language-game has
to be understood as a logical instrument in the service of that exposure."[120]

I take it that Phillips would agree with Winch's criticism of his own ear-
lier work as well as with his reservations as regards Malcolm's use of
the notion of a language-game. In the previous chapter we suggested that
the way in which Winch has revised his view corresponds, in Phillips's
later work, to a gradual shift from a descriptive towards a contemplative
understanding of philosophical enquiry. By reference to Winch's work,
Phillips seeks to reveal the limits of the analogy between specific uses of
language and games, and warns against the artificiality of strict divisions
between various categories of behaviour and the inadequacy of the com-
partmentalised view of social life such divisions engender. Philosophy's
task is no longer envisioned primarily as that of describing particular

[117] Winch 1993, pp. 104-105.
[118] See Winch 1993, p. 105.
[119] This is Winch's example; see Winch 1993, p. 104.
[120] Winch 1993, p. 105.

language-games. Rather, philosophy aims at a contemplative understanding of possibilities of meaning in the broader context of human life.

These insights all find their way into Phillips's rewrite of his earlier discussion of reductionism. In *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*, the emphasis is no longer on describing religious language-games: 'description' has made way for 'understanding' as the book's central concept. Consequently, the familiar Wittgensteinian arguments that 'religious beliefs constitute distinctive language-games' which provide 'their own, autonomous criteria of meaning' and, therefore, can only be said 'to say themselves', are couched in far more moderate terms or have disappeared altogether.

Nevertheless, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* still seems confident that religion, as such, constitutes an autonomous, irreducible domain of meaning. For example, against Freud's suggestion that religion may partially be explained in terms of sexuality, Phillips argues that "Science, art, morality and religion are just as definite as sexuality and, therefore, cannot be explained in sexual terms alone."[121] But once the Wittgensteinian line of defence is abandoned, this claim is left hanging in the air. In fact, if we take Phillips's contention that the various reaches of human life stand in a dialogical relation to each other seriously, it becomes rather suspect.

First, to say that religion is just as definite as science, art, morality, etc., implies the possibility of drawing clear boundaries between these various reaches of human life. Now, obviously, we are perfectly able to distinguish between someone checking in at the laboratory to do some hard science, and someone going off to church to do some serious praying. But it is doubtful whether we can draw such distinctions in the requisite sense, namely, to support the claim that each of these reaches constitutes an autonomous domain of meaning. As noted previously, what is and what is not religious often may be difficult to decide. The enormous amount of literature on the subject should suffice to remind us of the way in which moral and religious perspectives impinge on each other. And, for proof of the manner in which science may enter religious belief, one need only visit the Church of Scientology, the Church of Christ, Scientist, or any spiritual healing centre in one's local vicinity. Perhaps less exotically, think of the debates concerning creationism in

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[121] Phillips 2001, p. 217; cf. Phillips 1976, p. 81. I take it that the claim that religion may be explained in sexual terms *alone* would be rejected as overconfident or, indeed, foolish, by all but the most hardened of reductionists. (It would certainly be rejected by Freud.) But, as already argued, this does not further Phillips's case.

biology and of how theology itself makes use of a reductionist approach, not only in accounting for alien religious traditions, but also with respect to certain aspects of its own tradition.[122]

This brings us to a second point. For it is not just that the various reaches of human life overlap but that, as Winch reminded us, they are frequently internally related in such a way that one cannot even be intelligibly conceived as existing in isolation from others. To say, as Phillips does in *Religion Without Explanation*, that religion does not stand in need of further analysis, in the light of which one can no longer hold on to its beliefs and practices in their original form, is to underplay the fact that what constitutes the 'original form' is not given once and for all. Social institutions are not artefacts; perhaps one might better conceive of them as living organisms which, in the course of their lives, adapt and evolve. Our forms of language and the social activities in which they are embedded — including religious forms of language and religious practices — are not static but dynamic. The manner in which believers perceive their own beliefs and religious practices is subject to constant reappraisal, reinterpretation and reform.[123] Such reform may be brought on by all manner of causes, including, not in the last place, the confrontation between religious and scientific discourse. Indeed, one might argue that the character of religious belief in contemporary Western society cannot be understood in isolation from this continued confrontation. To put it in more Wittgensteinian terms, religious language-games can only be understood in a dynamic, dialogical context of mutual interplay and interference with other language-games in a form of life.

Once again, let me emphasise that I do not mean to imply that we can never distinguish the religious from the non-religious, that it is impossible to tell 'science' from 'religion'. To serve particular, practical purposes, such distinctions are perfectly in order. But in generalising these distinctions we arrive at too compartmentalised, static, and a-historic an account of social reality. Perhaps the point I am trying to make may be summarised by the reminder that 'religion as such' is an abstraction. In reality, we are faced not with 'religion' but with various, historically shaped, religion*s*. Moreover, as Phillips himself observes, even within a single religious tradition, 'religion' may mean very different things, at

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[122] See Adriaanse 2001, p. 11.
[123] The fact that whether or not certain forms of reinterpretation may still be said to retain 'the original form' of a given religious tradition may itself be a religious dispute, only serves to underscore this point.

different times, to different people.[124] Once this is realised, we should
come to see that there is little profit to be made from claiming, in gen-
eral, that 'religion as such' constitutes an irreducible domain of meaning.
Of course, the argument cuts both ways. If we should reject the claim
that 'religion as such' constitutes an irreducible domain of meaning, so
too should we reject the opposite claim that 'religion as such' can be
explained away. We need to address each case separately, if and when it
presents itself.

Let us draw this section to a close by summarising our findings. We
examined Phillips's discussion of reductionist explanations of religion.
His primary aim is to demonstrate that a radical reductionist approach is
untenable. Although Phillips's arguments certainly undermine the most
uncompromising forms of reductionism, we suggested that the reduction-
ist theories may be amended in such a way as to remove these problems.
Focusing on his discussion of Freud, we considered the possibility of such
a correction. For Phillips, this correction entails the recognition of an irre-
ducible domain of religious meaning. The arguments Phillips advances to
this effect, however, we found to be inconclusive. We then turned to con-
sider a further, possibly decisive, argument in Phillips's favour. This argu-
ment trades on a specific reading of Wittgenstein's notions of a language-
game and a form of life which has been developed in various strands
of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion and, arguably, is implied by
Phillips's earlier discussion of reductionism. However, we concluded not
only that this argument is invalid but, moreover, that it is no longer feasi-
ble that Phillips should appeal to it in his later work. Although Phillips's
shift from a descriptive to a contemplative understanding of philosophi-
cal enquiry may certainly solve some of the problems encountered in his
earlier writings, it also considerably softens his attack on reductionism.
For once the 'Wittgensteinian line of defence' is abandoned, the *general*
claim that religion as such constitutes an autonomous, irreducible domain
of meaning loses its main argumentative support.

Phillips is right to reject a radical reductionism. Although one cannot
preclude the possibility that some forms of religious belief and practice
may be explained in terms of non-religious factors, one cannot claim, in
general, that all forms of religious belief must be thus explicable. There
can be no claims to necessity here. Furthermore, the attempt to explain
'religion as such' betrays too abstract and general an approach to be fruit-
ful. But, to repeat, there is no reason to suppose why the reductionist

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[124] See Phillips 1967, p. 5.

could not incorporate these insights into his theorising. Indeed, Daniel L. Pals tells us that, looking back on the all-embracing reductionist theories of the past,

> "this hope of forming a single theory of all religions astonishes us by its naïve overconfidence. Thoughtful observers today are inclined to be far more modest. Impressive books have been written just to explain one belief of one religion or to compare a single feature — a specific custom or ritual — of one religion with something similar in another."[125]

Attempts at general theories, Pals concludes, are too ambitious: the future of religious studies lies with the particularists. Here, then, we have an indication of the direction an amended reductionist approach might take. Such an approach eschews any claim to necessity. Nor does it pretend to possess an explanation of all religions or 'religion as such'. It claims no more than that it can explain, or has explained, certain specific religious beliefs and practices. Will all religious beliefs and practices prove susceptible to some kind of reductionist explanation? Which is the more fruitful approach: a moderate non-reductionism or a moderate reductionism? I tend to agree with Adriaanse that it is doubtful whether, by calmly weighing the arguments *pro* and *contra*, we can settle this issue, once and for all.[126] We will just have to wait and see.

   Why, as Phillips asks, should we not settle for this suitably modest conclusion?[127] Perhaps the answer is that from an amended reductionism's point of view, it is still conceivable that all religious beliefs and practices will turn out to be explicable in non-religious terms. As we saw in our discussion of Freud, this Phillips will not allow. In this sense, Phillips's 'anti-reductionism' seems more radical than the moderate reductionism recommended by Pals. However, if the arguments we have presented in the course of our discussion are valid, there is no compelling reason to adhere to it.

5.3 Other possibilities of meaning

Phillips's attack on reductionism is twofold. He aims to show that the reductionist theories are both descriptively inaccurate and conceptually

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[125] Pals 1996, p. 9; quoted in Phillips 2001, pp. 2-3.
[126] See Adriaanse 2001, pp. 10, 12.
[127] See Phillips 2001, p. 3. It is no objection to argue, as Phillips does, that the strategy Pals recommends has been used by others to re-establish the comprehensive claims of a more radical reductionist approach. To abuse a theory is not to invalidate it.

inadequate. Thus, perspicuous representations of counter-examples are part of the response to the reductionist's claim.[128] Indeed, if the conclusions we drew in the previous section are justified this 'part of the response' becomes of crucial importance. If the reductionist theories may be amended in such a way as to remove their conceptual inadequacies then the question as to whether or not religion can be explained in non-religious terms can only be resolved by an appeal to practice. We cannot avoid getting our hands dirty.

Let us examine for a moment in what kind of circumstances a reductionist explanation may be called for. Say, for example, that a man believes his wife is cheating on him. Obviously, he may have good reasons to believe so. When we ask him why he is suspicious of his wife he tells us that he has caught her lying about her whereabouts, and spotted her dining with another man. In this scenario, we would have little reason not to accept the man's account at face value. But now imagine that the man does not offer us any reasonable grounds for his belief. In fact, there is not a single shred of evidence to support it. Nevertheless, he insists that his wife is unfaithful to him, claiming that he can see it in her eyes. Now, in this scenario we might well consider the possibility of another explanation. Perhaps the man's belief is based on a sense of insecurity, or perhaps it is the result of his repressed guilt over a former indiscretion on his own part. Whatever the explanation, in these circumstances we would be justified in seeking some explanation for the man's belief other than the one he himself offers.

Note, first, that in either scenario our judgement of the man's account of his belief does not depend on whether his belief is true or false. In the first case, it might turn out that the man's wife was not unfaithful to him after all. The reason she was lying about her whereabouts was because she was planning a surprise party for her husband and the man she was dining with was an accomplice to this. But this need not bring us to reconsider our judgement and decide that the man must, after all, have been the victim of some unconscious motive or repressed emotion. He was simply mistaken, that is all. Likewise, in the second case, it might turn out that the man's wife was actually cheating on him. But, once again, this would not necessarily lead us to reconsider our initial judgement. He just happened to be right, that is all.

In the case of the reductionist theories discussed, matters are somewhat different. As we saw, according to Phillips, the 'inheritors of Hume's

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[128] See Phillips 2001, p. 24.

legacy' are convinced that religious beliefs cannot possibly be true. Given the fact that God's non-existence has already been demonstrated, belief in God can but be illusory. This means that there is really no point in first examining the reasons or explanations the believer might offer for his belief, for no matter what the believer says, his account of his beliefs cannot be accepted at face value. There *must* be some other explanation. In the example of the wife's alleged infidelity, a reductionist account of the man's belief *might* be called for. By contrast, once we accept Hume's terms of reference, a reductionist account of religious belief is not just a possibility but a necessity.

Now, as we saw, Phillips believes that Hume's arguments are irrefutable, *if* religious belief is what Hume takes it to be. No doubt, the reductionist would agree, adding only that religious belief is, indeed, precisely what Hume took it to be. It is precisely for this reason that some kind of reductionist theory is needed in the first place. Thus, first, Phillips needs to demonstrate that it is possible to go 'beyond Hume' by presenting us with possibilities of religious meaning which are not susceptible to Hume's critique. Secondly, he needs to show that these possibilities of religious meaning coincide, not with some Humean 'true religion', but with religion as it is commonly found in the world. In this manner, reductionism's main incentive would be removed. If it can be demonstrated that there are forms of religious belief which cannot be said to be necessarily illusory, the need for a reductionist theory of religion evaporates. As in our example of the cheating spouse, a reductionist explanation becomes a possibility rather than a necessity.

Thus, Phillips's conceptual criticisms of various reductionist theories must be backed, not in the last place, "by appeal to the use which language has in many religious beliefs."[129] Whether or not this appeal is successful depends not only on the actual content of Phillips's other possibilities of religious meaning but also on their formal status, that is to say, on the sense in which they may be said to be *possibilities* of religious belief. These are the central questions we address in this section.

The idea of describing or contemplating possibilities of religious meaning may seem pretty straightforward. In the course of their lives, people are caught up and engage in various activities, practices, relations, and so on.[130] Amongst these we also encounter religious activities,

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[129] Phillips 1976, p. ix.
[130] It would be going too far, I believe, to imply, as Malcolm does, that to study human life is really to study language. After all, the world around us and the various things it comprises, human beings and the various things they do, none of these are exclusively, or at

practices, etc. The philosopher's task, simply, is to describe, to the best of his ability, these religious language-games, the language and the activities into which it is woven. In this way, we may clarify "the nature of an activity which has almost always been an important feature of human life."[131]

In the course of our discussion, we discovered that things may be a bit more complicated than that. Such questions as what is required of the philosopher for him to be able to understand a specific form of language, how we may tell whether a given description or clarification is correct, in what way the philosophical understanding of a practice is related to the understanding possessed by those engaged in the practice — none of these questions allows of an easy answer. Obviously, for a large part, our answers will depend on our understanding of what the philosopher is doing when he is contemplating possibilities of sense. Phillips's claim that his critique of reductionism is backed by appeal to the use which language has in many religious beliefs should lead us to expect two things. First, that the contemplation of possibilities of sense shall be *descriptively adequate*, in the sense that Phillips is presenting us with examples and clarifications of the way in which language is *actually used*. Secondly, that the contemplation of possibilities of religious sense shall be *non-exclusive*, in the sense that there may well be *religious beliefs* to which Phillips's analysis does not apply.

As we shall see, however, although Phillips's discussions often live up to these expectations, this is not always the case. At times Phillips seems to argue that the possibilities of sense contemplated need not be realised in any actual use of language. It suffices that we can imagine language being used that way. At the other end of the spectrum, or so it has been argued, Phillips's discussions imply that we are contemplating, not just the way in which language is used in some, or many, religious beliefs but, rather, the way language must be used if we are to call the beliefs religious at all. Thus, there are at least three ways of understanding Phillips's contemplation of possibilities of religious sense. We discuss these below.

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all, forms of language. On the other hand, there can be no denying that our understanding of ourselves and the world around us is inextricably bound up with our use of language. As Wittgenstein teaches us, the use of language cannot be understood as a merely linguistic phenomenon. Using language is an *activity*; it is closely connected to and dependent upon other phenomena of human life, such as actions, feelings, objects, etc. Linguistic entities cannot be abstracted or isolated from these other phenomena: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." (Wittgenstein 1994, I, 19.)

    [131] Phillips 1976, p. 8.

Non-descriptive possibilities of meaning

To contemplate possibilities of meaning is to do no more than to imagine ways in which language might be used or to suggest ways in which a given form of language might be understood. Of course, in the first case, to constitute a possible use of language, what one imagines cannot be logically contradictory. And, in the second case, there is the additional requirement that one's suggested interpretation must, at a minimum, bear some discernable relation to the form of language one is clarifying. But one does not commit oneself to the view that language is used, or has ever been used, in this way, nor that the suggested interpretation of a given form of language is in accordance with the way in which the people engaged in this linguistic practice understand it.

Phillips's frequent and extended use of examples may be understood as a contemplation of possibilities of meaning in this sense. Of course, examples may be used to clarify or illustrate a previously argued point, or they may be advanced to confirm a certain hypothesis. In these cases, the examples do not really constitute an essential part of one's philosophical approach. They are no more than tools which might prove helpful. In Phillips's work, however, examples are awarded a more systematic role. Reputedly, during a particularly drawn-out philosophical discussion, Rush Rhees, without saying a word, stood up, moved up to the blackboard, chalked down the letters E. G., and sat down again. Whether or not the story is true, its meaning should be clear. The point is not that examples are needed to illustrate or support one's, more general, philosophical theory. Rather, examples are needed to rid us of the idea that such a general philosophical theory is desirable or even possible. For example, the counter-examples Phillips advances in opposition to certain moral theories are not intended as a prelude to an alternative, better theory. Rather, they serve as reminders of the variety of ways in which morality might enter our lives. This variety is important, "not to fix our gaze on the unadulterated form, but to keep us from searching for it."[132]

This strategy has a solid backing in Wittgensteinian philosophy. As Phillips says, the use of examples, in particular those drawn from literature, constitutes something of a 'Wittgensteinian tradition'.[133] Indeed, Wittgenstein himself argues that the language-games he presents for our

[132] Phillips 1999, p. 162.
[133] See Phillips 1999, p. x.

consideration need not be thought of as approximations to our actual linguistic activities. Rather, they are set up as objects of comparison by means of which light may be thrown on the facts of our language, by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities.[134] Wittgenstein insisted that, for this purpose, invented language-games will do just as well as actual ones; indeed, often they are better. Furthermore, when we feel that a certain practice can only be understood in a certain way, Wittgenstein suggests other possibilities of understanding. His point in doing so is not to replace our explanations with alternative, better ones, but to disabuse us of our methodological assumptions which force a certain type of explanation upon us.

Now, clearly, examples, whether they be trivial ones, made up on the spur of the moment, or more elaborate ones drawn, for instance, from works of literature, do not tell us what a given, troublesome expression or form of language means. I take it that most of us are familiar with the reminder, at the end of a movie, that the characters and incidents portrayed are fictitious and that any similarity to the name, character or history of any person is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Of course, this statement serves a legal purpose. When we recognise ourselves in the characters or situations portrayed in a novel, it would be nonsense to suggest that this is purely coincidental, and unintended by the author. But no matter how well a story succeeds in depicting 'real life', it is still something dreamt up by its author. The point is that Phillips's critics might argue that it is all well and good to produce a plethora of possible interpretations of a given form of language but, surely, the real question is not what a certain expression *might* mean, but what it actually means. To return to the context of the philosophy of religion, J. Samuel Preus protests: "But possibilities come cheap and are no alternative to well-argued theories such as Freud's."[135] Phillips admits that, to some extent, that is a fair comment: "Examples need to be explored in detail"[136] But, surely, the point is not that the examples are not detailed enough, but that they are make-belief. That is to say, they are not examples of what religious beliefs mean, but only of what they might mean. Even if the alternative possibilities of meaning Phillips advances are feasible, at best, they show no more than that a contrary account *might* be inaccurate. To show that it *is* inaccurate, one needs to establish, not just that it

134 See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 130.
135 Preus 1996, p. 211; quoted in Phillips 2001, p. 23.
136 Phillips 2001, p. 23.

excludes *possible* ways of understanding the religious practices under investigation but that it excludes the *right* way of understanding them.

To summarise: one way of understanding Phillips's 'contemplation of possibilities of meaning' is as that of imagining or inventing ways in which language might be used, or of suggesting ways in which a given form of language might be understood. Such a strategy plays an important role, not only in Phillips's work, but in Wittgensteinian philosophy as such, including Wittgenstein's own writings. By means of applying this strategy, we might bring someone to see a given form of language in a different light, or we might get him to re-examine his methodological assumptions. As such, the strategy is a valid and important one. However, its usefulness is limited. In order conclusively to undermine a particular account of a given religious practice one needs to show, not just that the practice might be understood in ways other than suggested, but that the suggested account is descriptively inadequate.

Descriptive, non-exclusive possibilities of meaning

Although the strategy of reflecting upon conceivable uses of language plays an important role in Phillips's work, there can be little doubt that, for the most part, Phillips claims to do more than invent or present imaginary language-games for our consideration. As we saw, in *The Concept of Prayer*, Phillips aims not just to expound various possible ways of understanding prayer in a Christian context but "to clarify the kind of activity prayer *is*."[137] Although, as Phillips admits, there may well be prayers which do not fit readily into his exposition, it is clear that his account aims to show "what people *are* doing when they pray"[138] — or at least, some people. In his second full-length essay on a specific cluster of religious concepts, *Death and Immortality*, Phillips seems to leave more room for doubt. After subjecting various notions of 'survival after death' to philosophical censure he asks whether the *religious* concept of immortality, too, can be thus criticised. What if belief in the immortality of the soul does not presuppose the problematic belief that one may survive death? By examining what this notion *might* mean in a religious context we may come to see that our prior, negative conclusions need to be revised.[139]

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[137] Phillips 1981, p. 29; italics added.
[138] See Phillips 1981, pp. 8, 28.
[139] See Phillips 1970(a), pp. xii, 41.

These remarks may lead one to believe that here, too, Phillips's 'alternative account' makes no claims to descriptive accuracy. But that would be a mistake. It is patently clear that Phillips does not take himself to be presenting us with an account, merely, of what the religious belief in our immortal soul might mean but what we, i.e. religious believers, actually mean by it; what this notion amounts to in its natural setting; the way it is expressed in Christianity, etc.[140] Although, as Phillips remarks, it may be true that, in our day and age, only a small number of people derive sustenance from the 'pictures of immortality' *Death and Immortality* discusses,[141] there is never any doubt that these pictures are not drawn from Phillips's imagination but, or so Phillips has it, have their life in an actual, historical religious tradition and its associated practices.

Here, then, we are no longer conducting the thought-experiment of entertaining mere possibilities of meaning. Rather, in these examples, to contemplate possibilities of meaning is to provide perspicuous representations, or conceptual clarifications, of actual religious practices and beliefs. Thus, in contrast to the understanding of 'the contemplation of possibilities of meaning' discussed above, here Phillips *is* committed to the view that language is used, or has been used, in the manner contemplated, and that a suggested account of a given form of language accurately represents what *at least some* of its users mean by it. The qualifier is important. For although, clearly, in this case, the philosophical account is claimed to have some measure of descriptive accuracy, it need not be prescriptive. With regards to the prayers which do not fit readily into Phillips's exposition, Phillips refuses to deny them the status of being genuine prayers. In other words, the contemplation of possibilities of meaning is descriptive, but non-exclusive. Although Phillips's account may not include certain actual possibilities of religious meaning — say, certain genuinely religious prayers — neither does it, or so Phillips claims, exclude them.

The contemplation of possibilities of meaning understood in this descriptive, non-exclusive sense, constitutes a dominant feature of Phillips's work. Certainly in his earlier work, philosophy's task is conceived of as, essentially, descriptive. By paying attention to the grammar which underlies and regulates the concepts at work in a given practice, the meaning realised in that practice may be revealed. Thus, philosophy "teaches us differences, the grammars of different practices and the

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[140] See, for instance, Phillips 1970(a), pp. xii, 50, 55.
[141] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 78.

different relations in which they stand to each other."[142] Such descriptive accounts, however, are occasioned not just by an urge to understand a particular use of language but also by particular philosophical problems that confront us. As we saw, in his later work, Phillips more strongly emphasises this latter aspect. The descriptive accounts are argued to subserve 'the central questions' in philosophy. Still, this does not mean that they are deemed any less important. To draw our attention to the variety of distinct uses to which language may be put is still taken to be "the essential clarificatory task of philosophy."[143] Nor does it mean that such descriptive accounts are lacking in Phillips's later work. Although Phillips has not again embarked on a full-length essay on a particular religious practice or belief, as he does in *The Concept of Prayer* and *Death and Immortality*, throughout his writings one may find more or less extended conceptual clarifications of various religious concepts, beliefs, and practices.

It hardly needs saying that the practice of providing perspicuous representations of the grammar of our language can be traced back to Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Indeed, this way of putting it is derived from his *Philosophical Investigations*.[144] As we saw, put briefly, Wittgenstein believed that many of our philosophical problems could be resolved if only we could command a clear view of our use of words. Thus, philosophy's task becomes descriptive. We need to bring the words back from their metaphysical use, and remind ourselves of the way in which we actually use them. Throughout his later writings, Wittgenstein presents us with numerous of such reminders; descriptive clarifications of the way we talk about pain, the way such concepts as 'intention', 'imagination', 'memory', etc. enter into our everyday linguistic practices. Wittgenstein is not of the opinion that we really do not know what these words mean, or how these concepts are to be applied. In fact, his philosophical project may be said to depend on our language being 'in order as it is'. The descriptive accounts are not meant to teach us something new. Rather, they aim to bring to our attention, that which we already knew. In this sense, we may agree with Phillips that it would be a mistake to think of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as 'descriptive' if by this we mean that Wittgenstein wanted to disclose certain interesting or particularly puzzling domains of meaning. The reminders are set up for a

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[142] Phillips 2000, p. 14.
[143] Phillips 2000, p. 14.
[144] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 122.

particular purpose, they are instrumental in the context of discussing broader issues, central to philosophical logic.

Clearly then, Phillips's 'contemplation of possibilities of meaning' has a solid backing in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Furthermore, there is no reason to suppose why such an approach may not be fruitfully applied where the philosophical study of religion is concerned. Indeed, we have argued that both in his *Remarks on Frazer* and his *Lectures on Religious Belief*, as well as in various scattered remarks, Wittgenstein gives us some indication of how his later method may be applied in this area, and of some of the results that flow from doing so. We should note, however, that this understanding of 'the contemplation of possibilities of meaning' raises a number of problems which the one discussed above does not. In general, it should be clear that once the possibilities of meaning are claimed to have some measure of descriptive accuracy, this places stricter limits on the philosophy's contemplative task. In presenting imaginary language-games for our consideration, one is limited only by the extent of one's imagination. Of course, different examples may be more or less suggestive, more or less helpful, and so on. But it makes little sense to say that a given example is inaccurate or false. By contrast, once the possibilities of meaning one advances are claimed to describe or clarify actual uses of language, one can no longer, as it were, do as one pleases. One needs to show that one's philosophical rendering of a given practice connects to our prior, non-philosophical understanding of that practice.

Now, for the majority, if not all, of the concepts discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations* this, perhaps, does not pose too much of a problem. Wittgenstein is discussing forms of language we all understand. The concepts clarified run through a multifarious collection of activities and situations in which most of us are engaged or find ourselves on a daily basis.[145] Furthermore, as a rule, we are not puzzled by, nor do we disagree as to our everyday use of such expressions as 'I'm in pain', 'I intended to…', 'I imagine that…', I know that…', etc. Of course, once we start reflecting upon such uses of language, we may be puzzled and may well disagree as to how our puzzles should be resolved. But although such conceptual, or philosophical, reflection is not isolated from, and may well have an impact, directly or indirectly, on our everyday linguistic practices, in an important sense it remains external to them. This is not to say that intellectual reflection plays no role in

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[145] See Phillips 1976, p. 167.

everyday life. But unless we are engaged in, a specific strand of, philosophical enquiry, we do not normally reflect *on* the language we use, but *in* it.

Where religious practices are concerned, matters are somewhat different. First, although the concepts Wittgenstein discusses in the *Investigations* pervade our everyday activities, religious concepts do not. Within contemporary Western society, certainly not everyone is engaged in specifically religious practices. In other words, we are no longer discussing a language we all use and understand.[146] Furthermore, at least in Christianity, reflection on our religious language has always been a crucial element of religious practice. Here, people have been, and are, puzzled about — have disagreed and do disagree as to how — a given religious concept or, say, a biblical phrase, should be understood.[147] In the light of these considerations, one might well find that, in contemplating possibilities of religious meaning, the philosopher will not always remind us of what we know. For some, the philosopher's account may disclose possibilities of meaning they had never before recognised. Others may find that the possibilities of meaning advanced do not remind them of what they know at all.

So far, we have argued that the turn from contemplating mere possibilities of meaning to that of providing descriptive clarifications of actual linguistic practices places stricter limits on the kind of account one may advance. On a general level, one needs to show how one's philosophical representations correspond to the phenomena they seek to account for. On a more specific level, we indicated that, where possibilities of religious meaning are concerned, this may turn out to be more

[146] See Phillips 1986, pp. 42ff. Moreover, one might argue that this is true not just for the non-believer, but, to a certain extent, for the believer as well. I do not wish to deny that many believers are perfectly comfortable employing a broad range of religious concepts or expressions. On the other hand, neither do I think one can deny that there are quite a few religious concepts which are rather difficult to understand for a large group of believers. In Christianity, for instance, think of the highly developed doctrines concerning the triune nature of God. As we saw in our discussion of *The Concept of Prayer*, it will not do to 'de-intellectualise' faith by arguing that such teachings have no role to play in everyday religious practice, or to deny forthrightly that in gaining a reflective understanding of such matters one is not broadening one's religious understanding. And, one might add, perhaps superfluously, that this is not a matter of looking up the troublesome phrases in a dictionary.

[147] Compare Phillips's analysis of the concept of 'prayer' with Wittgenstein's conceptual reminders of the language-games we play with the concept 'pain'. In the latter case, would it not be rather curious to say that, although there are instances which do not fit readily into Wittgenstein's exposition, we should not say that they are not instances of pain but, simply, that we do not understand what is involved in them? (Cf. Phillips 1981, p. 8.)

problematic than with respect to our everyday forms of language.[148] On the other hand, we should note that if these problems can be dealt with satisfactorily, this opens up a potential for criticism which the presentation of mere possibilities of meaning does not allow. As we saw, no matter how feasible the possibilities of meaning one advances are, unless and until one demonstrates that they present not just a possible but the correct rendering of a given practice, they do not conclusively establish that a contrary account of the practice under investigation may be rejected. In other words, if Phillips wishes to establish that his opponents' accounts distort or ignore real possibilities of religious meaning, he needs to provide us with credible alternatives.

To summarise: for the majority of cases, Phillips's contemplations of possibilities of meaning should be understood as more or less extended descriptive representations of actual linguistic practices. Although, both on a general and a more specific level, this is a more challenging task than that of contemplating mere possibilities of meaning, it is an essential part of Phillips's strategy in that it allows him to back up his critique of contemporary philosophy of religion "by appeal to the use which language has in many religious beliefs."[149] We turn to examine a number of these appeals below. First, however, we need to consider one final way in which the contemplation of possibilities of meaning may be understood.

Prescriptive possibilities of meaning

The contemplation of possibilities of meaning understood in either a non-descriptive or a descriptive, non-exclusive sense, are crucial aspects of a Wittgensteinian approach in general, and both strategies are explicitly developed and utilised in Phillips's work. This cannot be said of the third way in which the contemplation of possibilities of meaning might be read. This interpretation does not reflect Phillips's understanding of the matter but that of his critics. It has been argued that, rather than providing descriptive representations of the meaning of certain religious

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[148] No doubt this partly explains why, although many have taken issue with Wittgenstein's philosophical conclusions, few have disputed the actual content of the grammatical clarifications contained in the *Investigations* which facilitate these conclusions, whereas, by contrast, many have argued Wittgenstein's representations of religious beliefs to be descriptively inaccurate or, at the very least, biased. Needless to say, similar criticisms have been offered of Phillips's writings.

[149] Phillips 1976, p. 9.

beliefs or practices, Phillips's clarifications are in fact attempts at reforming these practices and beliefs. Phillips rejects this conclusion:

> "Many philosophers will say that I have reached my conclusions under the pressure of certain philosophical arguments which have led me to forsake what they take to be traditional Christian beliefs. Nothing could be further from the truth. What I am trying to elucidate I have *always* found in Christianity."[150]

Phillips tells us that although he is by no means opposed to reform, it must not be confused with the task of conceptual investigation he is concerned with.[151] Part of this task involves trying to give perspicuous representations of the religious practices that present themselves. Phillips insists that, in so doing, he has never sought to reform anything. His only aim has been to elucidate that which lies before us: "So I am not reforming anything, not going anywhere, but contemplating an old, old story and seeing what gets in the way of telling it today."[152]

Given Phillips's disavowals, it would be rather inappropriate to persist in the claim that Phillips is consciously seeking to reform religious beliefs and practices. Of course, the critic may still argue that, even if unintentionally so, Phillips's descriptive representations are nevertheless revisions of the beliefs and practices they seek to account for. Swinburne, for one, is convinced that Phillips's account of prayer is "a totally false account of the meaning of the prayers of most who have prayed in the Christian and other theistic traditions over many centuries, including the present century."[153] Although Phillips has never denied the possibility that his conclusions may turn out to be confused and those he has criticised turn out to be justified,[154] it is clear that he believes it to be Swinburne's account, rather than his own, that distorts the meaning of the prayers of most who have prayed in the Christian tradition. The dispute thus centres around the question whose account can be said to do most justice to the phenomena under investigation.

Undeniably, this is an important question. Not just because we might want to know the answer, but, perhaps more significantly, because it raises the problem as to how we shall determine the criteria to decide the matter. However, if we focus solely on these concerns we may overlook a further issue which is at stake. As we saw, when Phillips is not

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[150] Phillips 2000, p. 155.
[151] See Phillips 1993, pp. 242-243; cf. Phillips 1995, p. 123.
[152] Phillips 1999, p. 165.
[153] Swinburne 1981, pp. 140-141.
[154] See Phillips 1999, p. 2; Phillips 2000, p. 15.

considering imaginary language-games, the possibilities of meaning
advanced lay claim to some measure of descriptive accuracy, yet deny
any claims to exclusivity. Now the problem, it has been argued, lies
not so much in the former but in the latter claim. Thus, *pace* Swin-
burne, one might feel that, although Phillips's accounts will not satisfy
all, they will certainly strike a chord with a fair number of believers.[155]
Yet the point is not how large the number of non-conformers is, but
how Phillips deals with them. It has been argued that, despite of his
assurances to the contrary, those possibilities of religious meaning that
are not included in Phillips's account, are excluded altogether. They
are thrust aside, treated either as confusions or as forms of supersti-
tion. Thus, Phillips's approach ceases to be descriptive, becoming pre-
scriptive instead.

Not surprisingly, Phillips rejects these allegations. Of course, the
question is whether he is right to do so. At this stage, it is too early to
provide an answer.[156] To do so, we need to examine more closely the
way in which Phillips distinguishes between what is genuinely religious
and what is confused or superstitious. First, however, we need to study
actual examples of the possibilities of meaning Phillips brings to the
fore. The following chapters take up this task.

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[155] See, for example, Messer 1993, pp. 54-55; Clack 1995, p. 113.
[156] We return to this topic below, in Chapter Nine.

6. MIRACLES

In this, and the following two chapters, we examine Phillips's accounts of the beliefs in miracles, in immortality, and in the reality of God. While Phillips provides more or less extended representations of various religious beliefs and practices, this choice is by no means an arbitrary one. First, the fundamental role these beliefs play in the Christian religion needs no argument. Secondly, they occupy a central place in Phillips's writings. Clarifications of the belief that God exists can be found from Phillips's earliest writings to his latest; the belief in eternal life is discussed in his monograph *Death and Immortality*, as well as in various other publications; and the belief in miracles has occupied Phillips in a number of essays as well as in his, to date, most recent book, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*. These 'contemplations of possibilities of meaning' are to be taken in the descriptive, non-exclusive sense, discussed in the previous chapter. That is to say, in each case, it is clear that Phillips's accounts profess to disclose the role these beliefs in fact play in actual religious practice. Whether they actually do so remains to be seen.

6.1 A miracle defined

It would be prudent, upon commencing our discussion, to provide some indication of what we are talking about when referring to a 'miracle'. How should we define the term? Looking up 'Miracle' in the *Bible Encyclopedia* one finds the following entry. A miracle is:

> "an event in the external world brought about by the immediate agency or the simple volition of God, operating without the use of means capable of being discerned by the senses, and designed to authenticate the divine commission of a religious teacher and the truth of his message (John 2:18; Matt. 12:38)."[1]

We are told, further, that a miracle is an occurrence at once above nature and above man; it shows "the intervention of a power that is not limited

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[1] *WebBible Encyclopedia*, entry for 'Miracle'.

by the laws either of matter or of mind, a power interrupting the fixed laws which govern their movements, a supernatural power."[2]

We should take note of two related aspects emphasised in the above definition. First, as Aquinas tells us, those things are properly called miracles which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature. Though a miracle is an event which takes place in our natural world, it is 'unnatural' in that it cannot be produced by natural causes. Hence, the miracle is called 'supernatural', because the effect is beyond the productive power of nature and implies a supernatural origin. That is to say, miracles are brought about by divine agency; they are caused by God, and God alone, who, in performing a miracle, overrules, suspends, or modifies the operations of the ordinary course of nature. Thus a miracle is never a coincidence, no matter how extraordinary or significant. For example, if I miss a plane and the plane crashes, that is not a miracle unless God intervened in the natural order of events causing me to miss the flight.[3] Nor, secondly, are miracles coincidences in the sense that God, as it were, performs them on a whim. A miracle is a factor in the Providence of God over men. Therefore, it must be worthy of the holiness, goodness, and justice of God, and conducive to the good of men. Miracles cannot contain any element which is wicked, ridiculous, useless, etc.: "The efficacy, usefulness, purpose of the work and the manner of performing it clearly show that it must be ascribed to Divine power."[4] Hence, miracles are not on the same plane with mere wonders, tricks, works of ingenuity or magic. A traditional theist might even allow the possibility that certain 'evil spirits' may also perform, rather shabby, 'miracles': works of skill and ingenuity which, relatively to our powers, may seem to be miraculous. Yet, these prodigies "lack the meaning and purpose which would stamp them as the language of God to men."[5]

Now, although 'the glory of God and the good of men' are the primary and supreme ends of every miracle, we may also distinguish secondary ends. Not the least of these is the evidential value the miracles are said to possess. Miracles have traditionally been taken as validations of religious claims, as evidences attesting and confirming the truth of a Divine mission or of a doctrine of faith or morals. The structure and assumptions of this, 'the argument from miracles', go something as follows:

[2] *WebBible Encyclopedia*, entry for 'Miracle'.
[3] See Levine 2002.
[4] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Miracle'.
[5] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Miracle'.

Granted both that the power of performing miracles could only be conferred upon someone by God, and that God would not confer such power upon those misrepresenting him, then any person who performs miracles gives evidence that he has authority from God to deliver a revelation, and hence that the revelation is true.[6] Thus, according to the Gospels, Jesus' ministry was accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders that testified that it was God working through Him. Surely the greatest of these miracles, His resurrection from the dead, is, by many traditional Christian apologists, still frequently taken to be a solid reason for believing in (the existence of) God. In short, miracles are considered not just as objects of faith but, moreover, as evidences of faith.

The rise of the Enlightenment worldview led to the credibility of this conception of a miracle being challenged. The new emphasis upon the mechanical regularity and orderliness of the universe raised doubts concerning the New Testaments account of miraculous happenings.[7] The critics' aim was not to deny that if indeed these events occurred as the Gospels would have us believe they might well be taken as evidences of faith. The question, rather, is whether we are ever justified in believing that these events actually occurred, or even whether it makes sense to assume that such events could occur at all. Hume's essay *Of Miracles* was widely regarded as demonstrating the evidential impossibility of miracles. Hume stays close to the definition of 'miracle' we considered. "A miracle may be accurately defined", he writes, "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."[8] Furthermore, it is clear that Hume's aim is to undermine the traditional argument from miracles. He argues that there are two factors to assess in deciding whether to believe any given piece of testimony: the reliability of the witnesses and the probability of that to which they testify. For Hume it is a matter of principle that no human testimony is adequate to establish the occurrence of a miracle. No doubt to avoid further censure, he does not explicitly single out the New Testament miracles in his critique. But the reader will have little difficulty recognising that Hume's final conclusion — 'a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion'[9] — directly contradicts the conclusion that one particular miracle, namely

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[6] See Gaskin 1978, p. 106.
[7] See McGrath 1997, pp. 359-360.
[8] Hume 1975, p. 115, n. 1.
[9] See Hume 1975, p. 127.

the Resurrection, *has* been so conclusively evidenced that it may be used as the rational ground for accepting the Christian religion.[10]

There can be no denying, as Phillips notes, the enormous influence Hume's critique exerted and continues to exert.[11] The classical starting point for modern and contemporary philosophical discussion of miracles must be Chapter X of Hume's *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*.[12] On either side of the fence, debate still focuses primarily on the (im)possibility of reconciling belief in miracles with our understanding of the workings of nature, and on the epistemological question whether belief in miracles can be rationally justified.[13]

In our previous discussion of Phillips on Hume we noted that Phillips's assessment of Hume is ambivalent. On the one hand, Phillips appreciates Hume's analysis; Hume's critique of the argument from design is completely successful. On the other hand, Phillips is critical of Hume where it comes to his understanding of religious belief. Hume's account, Phillips argues, ignores or distorts various possibilities of religious meaning. Hume was not enough of a sceptical enquirer to recognise "that in the argument from design religion was being as intellectually subverted as reason itself".[14] However, the expectation that Phillips deals with Hume's essay on miracles in like manner proves only partially correct. The critical aspect of Phillips's assessment remains: where miracles are concerned, once again Hume's arguments are said to intellectually subvert the religious beliefs he is discussing. But in this case Phillips's censure is not counterbalanced by an appreciation of Hume's critique of the argument from miracles. Phillips certainly does not feel that, if religious beliefs are what Hume takes them to be, his arguments are completely successful. Presumably, this explains why Phillips's examination of Hume's *Of Miracles* is far more concise than that of the *Dialogues*. Whereas Hume's critique of the argument from design is of value to Phillips in rebuffing certain types of philosophising about religion, Hume's critique of the argument from miracles is not. As Phillips has it, Hume's arguments are, at best, dubious, or even allow of a simple confutation. According to Phillips, the most we can say is that Hume's analysis reflects where the problem lies: "in the enormous obstacle created for the apprehension of miracles by the naturalistic modes of

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[10] See Gaskin 1978, p. 108.
[11] See Phillips 2001, p. 77.
[12] See Levine 2002.
[13] For a recent example, see Philipse 2001.
[14] Phillips 2001, p. 86.

explanation which dominate our culture."[15] But even if Hume may be said to have come close to localising the problem, he failed satisfactorily to develop this insight. Phillips does not deny that there may be general tension between science and religion in a culture. Indeed, where belief in miracles is concerned, he believes this is true of our own. Yet, as we shall see, this is not because science and philosophy have established that belief in miracles is unjustifiable or that miracles are impossible — a view held by Hume and, one might add, quite a few contemporary authors, both critical of and sympathetic to religion. Phillips urges us to shift attention away from 'the inappropriate and misleading categories of natural science' into which the discussion of talk of miracles is typically cast. To argue that we must first establish whether or not we are justified in believing that miracles occur(red) before we may determine their religious significance, is to reverse the conceptual priorities. The use of a religious perspective is being confused with talk *about* that perspective, as though one were grounding it in some simple way. But to say that miracles are of God is not to explain miracles, for 'miracles' is already a religious conception.[16] As such, miracles cannot provide grounds for finding some significance in religion; they presuppose it. Our philosophical task, then, is to elucidate the religious contexts in which talk of miracles has its sense. In so doing, we shed light on the role played by miracles in a religious context, both in Biblical times and our own. At the same time this opens up the possibility of a more fruitful approach to understanding the nature of the conflict between religion and science.

As Phillips is wont to point out, where religious concepts are concerned, the task of philosophical elucidation turns out to be one of conceptual reclamation. In many ways, the intellectual climate in which the believer's claims are discussed has lost all sense of a miracle as a religious category. Thus the intellectual modes of discussion, including philosophical discussion, become ways by which the religious concept comes to be forgotten: exercises in conceptual forgetfulness. In the face of such a crisis,

> "the real philosophical task becomes one of jogging the memory. But this can only be done indirectly, by showing the route by which such forgetfulness occurred. Only by seeing how we came to forget can we be brought to recall concepts we have lost."[17]

[15] See Phillips 2001, p. 77.
[16] See Phillips 2001, pp. 8-9.
[17] Phillips 2000, p. 85.

It seems then, we cannot cut right to the chase. Thus let us begin by tracing our 'intellectual amnesia' to its root: Hume's essay *Of Miracles*.

6.2 Miracles and testimony

Hume's *Of Miracles* possibly has received more critical attention than anything else Hume wrote on religion. Remarkably, philosophical discussion of Hume's essay has not been confined to, or even principally concerned with, whether or not Hume's arguments against justified belief in miracles are tenable. Instead, it has focused on exegetical issues concerning exactly what Hume was arguing.[18] Our present discussion does not pretend to offer any significant contribution to this area of enquiry, nor does it aim to.[19] Hume is discussed for no other reason than to set the stage for Phillips's analysis of the concept of a miracle.

Although Hume never says so explicitly, it is likely that his essay on miracles was intended, at least in part, as an answer to Thomas Sherlock's highly successful *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection* (1729).[20] Sherlock sets out to demonstrate that the testimony of the Apostles establishes the Resurrection as an historical fact. He seeks to refute various arguments which may be brought against this conclusion. We shall only concern ourselves with one of these, the one that is central to Hume's critique. It is the claim that 'the wise man' — the man who learns from the regularities in his experience and proportions his belief to the evidence — will only believe in a miracle if it is supported by overwhelming evidence, evidence stronger than is ever likely to be produced. Sherlock replies that if the sceptic cannot believe reports of a resurrection then:

> "A Man who lives in a warm Climate, and never saw Ice, ought upon no Evidence to believe that Rivers freeze and grow hard in cold Countries; for this is improbable, contrary to the usual Course of Nature; and impossible according to his Notion of Things."[21]

The man's reasoning is clearly mistaken. Ice may be impossible to his experience but his experience is limited. Of course, the implication is that the cases are parallel: the sceptic's experience is likewise limited, therefore his decision to reject the reports of the Resurrection is unjustified.

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[18] See Levine 2002; Gaskin 1978, pp. 105ff.
[19] By and large, I follow Gaskin's account (see Gaskin 1978, pp. 105-125).
[20] See Gaskin 1978, pp. 107-109.
[21] Quoted in Gaskin 1978, p. 112.

In *Of Miracles* Hume refers to the man in Sherlock's example as 'the Indian prince'. He denies that his case is parallel to that of the sceptic. No Indian prince, it is evident, could have experience that water did not freeze in cold climates. This is placing nature in a situation quite unknown to him, and it is impossible for him to tell what would result from it. Furthermore, the freezing of water may be deemed extraordinary and, admittedly, should require a pretty strong testimony to render it probable for people in a warm climate. But still, Hume continues,

> "it is not *miraculous*, nor contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same. The inhabitants of Sumatra have always seen water fluid in their own climate, and the freezing of their rivers ought to be deemed a prodigy: But they never saw water in Muscovy during the winter; and therefore they cannot reasonably be positive what would there be the consequence."[22]

Whereas the Indian Prince's experience has an obvious gap in it, the sceptic's experience that men die and do not rise from the dead does not. There is, as Gaskin puts it, no reply to the sceptic which could take the form 'in *these* conditions, which you have not experienced, resurrections occur'.[23]

Should we say that Hume is begging the question? After all, if the Gospels are to be believed, a resurrection has occurred and, thus, the sceptic's experience is limited in contrast to that of the Apostles, even if it has no obvious gap in it. But, as Gaskin rightly points out, for the sceptic the fundamental question *is* whether the Gospels are true.[24] Hume does not deny that the Indian Prince "reasoned justly" and that "it naturally required very strong testimony to engage his assent to facts, that arose from a state of nature, with which he was unacquainted".[25] Of course, once such testimony is produced, the Indian Prince, as a rational man, is bound to believe in the freezing of water. Likewise, very strong testimony would oblige the sceptic to believe reports of a resurrection. Thus, the question becomes whether sufficiently strong testimony has ever, in fact, been produced. At this point matters become somewhat complicated. For Hume seems to offer us two ways of answering this question. On the one hand, he argues, simply, that such testimony *has not* been produced. But we also find the

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[22] Hume 1975, p. 114, n. 1.
[23] See Gaskin 1978, p. 112.
[24] See Gaskin 1978, p. 112.
[25] Hume 1975, p. 113.

more forceful reply that such testimony *could not* be produced.[26] We discuss the former answer first.

Hume's line of argument runs something as follows. In our experience, certain things happen invariably, for example, that all men die and, once dead, remain dead. In matters of fact, these invariable experiences constitute certainties and are called laws of nature. Other things happen less than always in our experience, for instance, that a day in June is warmer than a day in December. These constitute probabilities which range from strong to weak. Normally, the veracity of human testimony is a strong probability and, as such, constitutes proof that what is reported took place. But sometimes the veracity of testimony should be deemed a weak probability as when, for example, the witnesses contradict each other, they are of doubtful character, etc. Now, when testimony is given which is contrary to our invariable experience, a probability, be it weak or strong, is opposing a certainty and, as a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger, and the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence, the wise man will believe the certainty.

Where the evidence is weak, Hume's argument seems to be valid. For example, few parents would believe their child's claim that there is a bogeyman lurking underneath its bed. As the evidence gets stronger, however, Hume's conclusion becomes less and less certain. As we saw in the example of the Indian Prince, when something extraordinary is reported, the wise man will need more evidence than usual and will check and re-check the evidence very carefully. But there comes a point where "in his accumulation of respectable evidence the wise man would be in danger of becoming dogmatic and obscurantist if he did *not* believe the evidence."[27] Hume feels certain, however, that where it matters, i.e. as regards the miracles and, in particular, the Resurrection, his argument is valid: these have not been established on so full an evidence. Gaskin distinguishes between four considerations Hume offers in support of his conclusion which would justify that no miracle has ever been satisfactorily evidenced. First, Hume argues that evidence for miracles does not satisfy the requirements for such evidence. There is too little guarantee

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[26] According to Gaskin, the latter, more problematic answer, is an 'incautious overstatement of his position' on Hume's part — perhaps Hume 'got carried away' by his own argument. For the sake of clarity, it should be kept apart from the former line of argument which Gaskin refers to as Hume's 'official answer'. Michael Levine, however, seems to reject such a distinction, arguing that Hume's *a priori* argument against justified belief in miracles actually coalesces with his *a posteriori* argument. (See Levine 2002.) We return to this matter briefly below.

[27] Gaskin 1978, p. 115.

against deception, delusion, falsehood, and so on. Secondly, Hume feels that the possibility that 'the religionist may be an enthusiast' susceptible to self-deception, or one who 'for the sake of promoting so holy a cause' may feel inclined to commit falsehoods, becomes all the more likely when we observe in human nature an irrational interest for, and love of, the marvellous. Thirdly, Hume argues that miraculous narratives are devalued by abounding among primitive and barbarous peoples and in 'the first histories of all nations'. Finally, Hume presents what Gaskin calls 'the Contrary Miracles Argument': "If a miracle proves a doctrine to be revealed from God, and consequently true, a miracle can never be wrought for a contrary doctrine. The facts are therefore as incompatible as the doctrines."[28]

Given the weak probability of miraculous events, Hume feels certain that, taken together, these four considerations suffice to warrant the conclusion that we do not have sufficient evidence for justified belief in miracles. Is he right? Phillips, at any rate, does not think so. Like Gaskin, Phillips, too, distinguishes between two lines of argument in *Of Miracles*. On the one hand, Hume argues that we do not have sufficient evidence to justify belief in miracles. On the other hand, however, Hume seems to believe that we *can never have* evidence for miracles, simply because such events are 'absolutely impossible'. Phillips summarises the first argument as follows:

> "Hume argues that no testimony is ever sufficient to establish that a miracle has occurred because miracles are violations of laws of nature. Laws of nature are established, for Hume, by the constant conjunction of cause and effect. This uniformity of experience counts against any miracle, since it will always outweigh any testimony for miracles."[29]

According to Phillips, this view can be criticised. After all, once we ask *whose* experience we rely on in causal generalities, the answer, for most of us is: not our own. We take these generalities on trust from the testimony of those whose experience we regard as authoritative in these matters.[30] But this means that

> "if Hume's argument relies on the fact that testimony is uniform, this turns out not to be the case, since there are those who testify to miracles. We cannot adjudicate between the testimonies on the ground that testimony is uniform."[31]

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[28] Quoted in Gaskin 1978, p. 117.
[29] Phillips 2001, p. 73.
[30] See Phillips 2001, p. 73.
[31] Phillips 2001, p. 74.

Phillips's reply is questionable for a number of reasons. It is clear that in causal generalities I often trust in the testimony of others. For example, I do not believe it is possible to build a *perpetuum mobile*. I have a reasonable enough grasp of physics to be able, more or less, to explain to someone why such a device cannot be manufactured. But I would have to admit that, at various stages in my explanation, I rely on causal generalities which I myself have not established. Indeed, one might say that I take these on trust from the testimony of those I regard as authoritative in this matter. But do I also take it on trust that when, under normal circumstances, I put my hand in an open flame, the fire will burn me? If we are to say that my certainty that the fire will burn me is based on anything at all, surely my own experience will suffice.[32] To return to the case at hand: do we take it on trust that people die and do not rise from the grave? Imagine someone asking us how we know this, or on whose authority we believe this to be the case. We would be at a loss to know what manner of answer he could possibly expect. Are we then to conclude that our confidence is unjustified? We might reply with Wittgenstein: "What people accept as a justification — is shewn by how they think and live."[33] Other than in horror and ghost stories, our lives make little room for the dead walking. This, I suggest, is as true of non-believers as of believers. Perhaps we may understand why certain believers should say that "in devout minds, there is […] a presumption for and an expectation of miracles",[34] but we are as unlikely to find the faithful checking on the graves of their loved ones once a week, just to make sure they have not yet risen, as we are the stoutest of atheists.[35]

[32] In fact, Wittgenstein tries to show that it is awkward to think of my certainty as based on any kind of reasoning at all, let alone an argument from the testimony of others. Rather such regularities — fire burning me, objects dropping to the floor when dropped — set the framework within which our reasoning takes place. (See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 324-325.)

[33] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 325. Of course, I do not mean to imply that Hume was in a position to draw such a conclusion, or would even agree with it. Nor do I wish to deny that there are problems concerning Hume's analysis of causal reasoning and his theory of impressions and ideas — a theory, as Levine has it, "that even staunch empiricists should reject as simplistic." (Levine 2002.) I do maintain, however, that Phillips's apparent suggestion that, for all practical purposes, our trust in causal generalities amounts to a trust in the testimony of others, is overhasty. There is a complex interplay here between reasoning, experience, trust, certainty, etc. — issues that are at the centre of Wittgenstein's attention in *On Certainty*, and which Phillips discusses at length at other places in his work (see, for example, Phillips 1988, pp. 24ff.). Furthermore, I suggest that in developing these issues one may strengthen rather than weaken Hume's case.

[34] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Miracle'.

[35] Perhaps we should say that the believer retains the *possibility* that the dead may rise. At a minimum, based on the testimony of the Apostles, he believes that it has happened

It should be clear that the move from talk about conflicting experiences to conflicting testimonies is important to Phillips's argument. After all, as we already saw, if we should deal with the problem in terms of the former category, Phillips could not argue that experience is not uniform because there are those who have experienced people rising from the grave. For the truth of the latter statement is precisely what is at stake. But let us, for the moment, waive our objections and agree that we are dealing with conflicting testimonies. We should then agree with Phillips that, logically, we cannot adjudicate between the testimonies on the ground that testimony is uniform. But why should this be considered problematic for Hume? First, we should note that Phillips presents a rather uncharitable reading of Hume, turning his argument into a piece of nonsense. It would be rather comical to suggest that we may reject a given testimony on the ground that testimony is uniform: if it were, there would be nothing to reject in the first place. More importantly, secondly, the fact that we cannot adjudicate on the ground that testimony is uniform does not mean we can no longer adjudicate at all. Quite the contrary, we do so on a regular basis. A child may believe that there are monsters hiding in the dark, based on the testimony of his friends who claim to have seen them. Do we accept either belief or testimony? Obviously not. This has to do both with the fact that the witnesses, being children, are suspect, as well as with the fact that what they testify to is highly improbable. As Gaskin says, "Disbelief, when the report is suspect and what is reported is grossly improbable, is both normal and rational, and Hume's argument does little more than codify this response."[36] Now, what about testimony as to a resurrection? I take it Phillips would agree at least that we are justified in believing this to be somewhat improbable. Surely it would not be extravagant to approach reports to this effect with a certain amount of suspicion. We should like to know whether the witnesses are trustworthy, how many witnesses were involved, whether errors on their part can be excluded, and so on. In short, we would be back at all the considerations Hume raises — considerations Phillips does not even begin to address.

We should note that nothing we have said so far rules out the possibility that, after carefully weighing the evidence, we may have to conclude belief in miracles — in the Resurrection — to be justified after all.

at least once before. But this does not affect our argument, for the question remains how this belief shows itself in the believer's life and thought.

[36] Gaskin 1978, p. 115.

Does Hume's argument also allow this possibility? Phillips's reconstruction of it implies it does not. As we saw, Phillips says that, for Hume, 'no testimony is *ever* sufficient' to establish that a miracle has occurred; the uniformity of our experience '*will always* outweigh' any testimony for miracles. It should be clear that, even if Phillips does distinguish between two lines of argument in *Of Miracles*, the manner in which he does so does not correspond to Gaskin's distinction between Hume's 'official' and his 'off-duty' arguments. According to Gaskin, in Hume's official argument there is no attempt to rule out *a priori* the possibility of miracles or anything else taking place. It is strictly an epistemological argument, concerned exclusively with the question whether, on the basis of the evidence and testimony available, we are justified in believing in miracles. Its conclusion is not that there *cannot be*, and, hence, *never will be*, sufficient evidence for justified belief but simply that, as a matter of fact, there is not sufficient evidence.[37] Phillips has not demonstrated that, thus understood, Hume's argument is logically flawed.

Of course, one final question remains. Even if Hume's argument is workable, is it also valid? That is to say, is Hume right that, on the evidence available, we cannot justifiably believe in miracles? It has not been my aim to answer this question. But I will hazard to say that, on the basis of our discussion so far, the odds seem to be in Hume's favour.[38]

6.3 Miracles and laws of nature

So far, we have considered Hume's 'official' argument against miracles. What Hume does not do in this argument, is to establish that miracles could never happen and that the evidence for a miracle could never be

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[37] See Gaskin 1978, pp. 112-115. Even if Gaskin is wrong about this, I see no clear reason why Hume's argument could not be restated in such a way as to obviate Phillips's objections.

[38] Gaskin observes that the New Testament narratives manifestly cannot satisfy the criteria for evidence Hume produces: "The early spread of Christianity in Roman society *could* be accounted for by enthusiastic self-deception together with the interest always excited by the marvellous or odd. Christianity *did* start among uncultured and uncritical people in a remote part of the Roman world, and, because of the exclusivist 'one true God' claims of the early Church, Christianity *is* subject to the Contrary Miracles Argument." (Gaskin 1978, p. 119) Gaskin adds that none of this should be very new or shocking, at least to modern New Testament scholars. The development of modern 'higher criticism' of ancient history in general, and of Biblical history in particular, has tended to add support to, rather than undermine Hume's conclusion.

credible to the wise man. This does not constitute a serious flaw in his argument. I believe Gaskin is right to conclude it is something Hume really need not do:

> "giving his argument the limited application which it requires in order to upset the position of the eighteenth-century rational apologists (and modern fundamentalists) it does all that Hume could have required of it."[39]

Gaskin has to admit, however, that this success is achieved by playing down or ignoring the occasional extravagances in Hume's statements, and by giving more weight than Hume himself tends to give to the restrictions on his argument. For it cannot be denied that at various stages in his argument Hume seems to be claiming precisely that: that there cannot be, and could never be, evidence for miracles, simply because miracles are absolutely impossible. For example, considering the miracles allegedly performed at the tomb of the Abbé Paris, and attested to by a large number of witnesses, Hume concludes:

> "And what have we to oppose to such a cloud of witnesses, but the absolute impossibility or miraculous nature of the events, which they relate? And this surely, in the eyes of all reasonable people, will alone be regarded as a sufficient refutation."[40]

Hume's claim that miracles are absolutely impossible may be related to his understanding of laws of nature. As we saw, Hume defines a miracle as a transgression of a law of nature. But we also find him talking of miracles as *violations* of laws of nature, and arguing that "as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."[41] This is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, conceived of as a transgression of a law of nature, a miraculous event is simply something that is at variance with our past experience. But such an event could also just be an indication that our experience has not been sufficiently extensive for us to be able to formulate the laws of nature correctly. Rather than with a miracle, we are confronted with no more than a, very uncommon, natural event.[42] Hume's conception of miracles as *violations* of laws of nature, laws which are based on *unalterable* experience, allows no real distinction between the miraculous

[39] Gaskin 1978, p. 120.
[40] Hume 1975, p. 125.
[41] Hume 1975, p. 114.
[42] See Gaskin 1978, p. 122.

and the extremely unusual and tends to preclude any possibility of us revising our understanding of laws of nature or reformulating them.

Secondly, Hume seems to think of laws of nature as *constraints* on what can happen. Drawing on a distinction between the 'physically possible' and the 'logically possible', both Gaskin and Levine argue that this assumption is not warranted. Obviously, Levine argues, if laws of nature were descriptive of the scope and substance of everything that could logically happen, instead of their scope being limited to what can happen naturally, then miracles would not be possible. But "that which is 'physically impossible' — impossible within the constraints of the laws of nature — has a narrower scope than that which is logically impossible."[43] In the absence of any further argument to the contrary, one need not assume that the logically and physically impossible are coextensive. Gaskin agrees. Nothing prevents us from saying that certain things are impossible in the sense that they *do not happen*. But such impossibility — 'physical impossibility' — does not imply 'logical impossibility', i.e. that these thing *could not happen*. The point is, Gaskin argues, that our nomologicals certainly imply the physical impossibility of events incompatible with them, but their real authority to say certain events could not happen is no better than the evidence which has been used to establish the nomologicals in the first place: "there is no means of knowing that such evidence is of the sort (whatever that sort would be) which could give the nomological the pseudo-logical strength which it would require in order to rule out certain events as physically impossible in the sense of *could not happen*."[44]

Turning to Phillips's discussion, we find him agreeing that we cannot appeal to laws of nature to show that certain inexplicable events[45] cannot take place:

> "A law of nature does not *prevent* anything from happening, since it is simply a description and systematisation of what *does* happen. […] Given the status of scientific laws, they do not give us any warrant for saying that the inexplicable events […] cannot occur. Certainly, we have no idea of how they can be accommodated within the scientific explanatory context,

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[43] Levine 2002.

[44] Gaskin 1978, p. 124.

[45] We should note that, although not altogether consistent in doing so, throughout his discussion, Phillips uses the term 'inexplicable event' rather than 'miracle'. This is no arbitrary matter. As we shall see, according to Phillips, it is crucial to distinguish between the two notions. To call something 'inexplicable' is not the same as deeming it 'a miracle' and, *vice versa*, the apprehension of an event as miraculous does not depend on its being inexplicable.

or even by a modification of the laws. But this does *not* mean that no inexplicable events can occur which fall outside this explanatory context."[46]

Apart from the confusions inherent in the appeal to laws of nature as constraints on what can happen, there is, Phillips argues, also a far more mundane reason which makes it difficult to say that inexplicable events cannot occur. The problem is that it would involve us in claiming all those who testify to such events to be confused, deluded, or lying. But, Phillips argues, we may have no grounds for such accusations. For example, most of us are familiar with cases where patients, after their doctors had already given up hope, recover from 'incurable diseases', or so we are told. One might argue that, even if we have no grounds for such accusations, it is not inconceivable that the witnesses *were* confused, deluded, or lying. This cannot be denied. But, in the absence of a convincing *a priori* argument against the occurrence of inexplicable events, the claim that no such events ever take, or took, place does seem near impossible to justify.

How may we react to such 'inexplicables'? It will not do, Phillips argues, to insist that there ought to be a scientific explanation of them, and that one day there will be. This, Phillips feels, is simply faith in science. It need not follow from the character of scientific investigation: "there is nothing in the account given of scientific laws which justifies the view that anything can be brought within their orbit."[47] In fact, so far as science is concerned, these inexplicable events are not even on the agenda of unsolved problems. At best, "they are irrelevant curiosities."[48]

To say that certain events are inexplicable is to say no more than that they are not brought under the aegis of science. It is not to say that these events are essentially or necessarily inexplicable. A unique event, or one that happened only once or twice, "may ultimately have to be just accepted by the sceptic as an unpalatable aberration in the nature of things. But an odd event repeated several times would almost certainly be taken as a challenge to explanations of the way the world works".[49] Thus, although it will not do to say that such events must be, and will be, explained by science, neither will it do to say that they will never be explained. This, Phillips argues, is also a kind of faith:

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[46] Phillips 2000, p. 131.
[47] Phillips 2000, p. 132.
[48] Phillips 2000, p. 131.
[49] Gaskin 1978, p. 121.

> "Historically it has been embarrassed on a number of occasions. The story of 'the God of the gaps' testifies to this fact. Too often God's territory is mapped out only for science to encroach on it with explanations which believers had said were impossible."[50]

Indeed, if history has taught us one thing, it is that what seemed inexplicable yesterday may well be explained tomorrow.

So far, Phillips does not seem to introduce any new elements into our discussion. Like Gaskin and Levine, he argues that we cannot appeal to the laws of nature to show that certain inexplicable events cannot occur. We should note, however, that Phillips does so without invoking the distinction between the 'physically possible' and the 'logically possible'. In fact, his discussion of what Phillips calls 'open-door epistemology' implies a critique of this way of looking at things. Consider the example of turning water into wine. The open-door epistemological argument runs as follows:

> "The possibility of turning water into wine makes no sense in science. From this is does not follow that the possibility has been shown to be meaningless. All that has been shown is that the possibility is *relatively meaningless*: meaningless relative to scientific modes of explanation. We cannot conclude, according to this argument, that the possibility of turning water into wine is *absolutely meaningless*."[51]

It is not difficult to see why Phillips should call arguments of this kind 'open-door epistemology'. On this view, *anything* could be an object of belief for *nothing* can be shown to be absolutely meaningless. The problem, Phillips argues, is that the notion of 'absolute meaninglessness' on which these arguments depend is highly misleading. When we say that the possibility of an inexplicable event is only relatively meaningless, rather than absolutely meaningless, the impression is given that a certain kind of meaning has been rescued for these possibilities: although they are ruled out in one context, this does not mean that they are ruled out in *any* context. But, of course, as Phillips points out, that new context must then itself be invoked if we want to say that the words have a meaning. Until this is done, "We are talking about an abstract, not a real possibility."[52]

It should be clear how these remarks bear on our discussion. As we saw, Gaskin and Levine distinguish between the 'physically possible' and the logically possible', arguing that these categories are not coextensive.

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[50] Phillips 2000, p. 132.
[51] Phillips 2000, p. 133.
[52] Phillips 2000, p. 134.

It is physically impossible to turn water into wine, yet the possibility cannot logically be excluded. Thus, we are told that although this is impossible in the sense that it *does not happen*, it nevertheless *could happen*. Phillips's reply is that in the absence of any specific context of meaning, we have no idea what it means to say that water was turned into wine. But might not Gaskin and Levine retort that the story of the wedding at Cana provides us with the necessary context? Here, we are told of an extraordinary event. The phrase 'Jesus turned water into wine' adequately describes this event. And, an apologist might add, 'God performed a miracle' provides the only rational explanation for the event. Where lies the problem?

The problem, Phillips argues, is that we cannot take the phrase 'Jesus turned water into wine' as a descriptive statement, nor does 'God performed a miracle' provide us with any explanation. These conclusions owe much to Winch's discussion of an example drawn from a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer.[53] In it we are told about a man, Reb Zelig, who owns a shed. One morning, Zelig gets up only to find that the shed has gone. At first, Zelig believes he has gone mad. But everyone else confirms that the shed is no longer there, leaving not a single trace. Various investigations are undertaken but they lead nowhere. Any natural explanation seems to be ruled out: the shed has simply vanished. Winch's main question is what could be meant by the phrase 'the shed has vanished'.

One might wonder why Winch should raise this question in the first place. After all, the story we have been told specifies the truth-conditions of 'the shed has vanished' clearly enough for us to be in no doubt what is meant: the shed was there on Monday, it was not there on Tuesday. Winch agrees that no problem is raised by the truth-condition of 'There is a shed in the field on Monday', nor by the truth-condition of 'There is no shed in the field on Tuesday'. Furthermore, we so far have no reason to doubt that these two statements are perfectly consistent with each other. Of course, Winch points out, we shall have expectations that there will be some acceptable story which accounts for the removal of the shed between Monday and Tuesday, and, very importantly,

> "these expectations will be shaped by our understanding of what sheds, fields, etc., *are*. […] We should suppose the shed to have been, perhaps, burned down in the interim, dismantled, destroyed by an earthquake, bulldozed — or destroyed in some other way *consistent with our understanding of what a shed is*."[54]

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[53] See Winch 1987, pp. 81-106.
[54] Winch 1987, p. 87.

Now, one might argue that there are, indeed, all these sorts of ways in which the shed may have disappeared. But our acceptance of the conjunction — 'There is a shed in the field on Monday', 'There is no shed in the field on Tuesday' — as consistent, does not depend on any *particular* story about what happened in the interim. As Winch puts it, a *very* simple-minded logician might think that we have two propositions p and q which are consistent with each other. There are all sorts of propositions r_1, r_2, r_3 … r_n, each of which describes a way in which the shed ceased to exist. The consistency of p and q is quite independent of the truth or falsity of any one of those propositions r_1 … r_n. Hence we can assert p and q and not- r_1 and not- r_2 … and not- r_n. But, as Winch rightly points out, this conclusion does not follow. From the fact that the conjunction p and q is consistent with the falsity of any one of the propositions r_1 … r_n, it does not follow that it is consistent with the falsity of all of them taken collectively. Nor, Winch concludes, is this in fact true:

> "our understanding of the conjunction: 'The shed existed on Monday and did not exist on Tuesday' is such as to presuppose that the shed was destroyed between Monday and Tuesday in *some* intelligible way. And what is an intelligible way is limited by our understanding of what a shed is. That is clear enough if one tries as a substitution for r_1 … r_n a proposition such as 'It died', 'It dissolved in a tumbler of water', 'It went into liquidation' — that is, some report of a mode of ceasing to exist which is conceptually inapplicable to a shed."[55]

If Winch's argument is correct, which I believe it to be, we have not gotten any closer to an answer to the question as to how we should understand the expression 'the shed has vanished'. Winch proceeds on a rather long argument which we shall not follow in detail. Instead let us focus on one of his main conclusions, a conclusion which plays a crucial role in our current discussion. According to Winch, the phrase 'the shed has vanished' can be understood neither as a description nor as an explanation of what has happened. Rather it functions as an expression of bewilderment. Two of Winch's claims, I feel, need little argument. That the phrase 'the shed has vanished' may express bewilderment at the turn of events seems obvious enough. That it does not explain what has happened to the shed seems equally clear. Imagine us asking Zelig what has happened. Zelig replies that his shed has vanished. We should ask: 'How do you mean, vanished?', and we would probably suggest various possible explanations of the shed's not being there anymore. But if Zelig

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[55] Winch 1987, p. 88.

replies: 'No, no, it simply vanished!', we would either reject this, and continue to look for some explanation, or resign ourselves to the fact of there being no explanation.[56] In short, 'it has simply vanished' is not an alternative to such explanations as 'it burned down', etc. Rather, it emphasises that there is no explanation available, as well as, no doubt, expressing a certain amount of bewilderment as to this fact.

However, Winch's suggestion that 'the shed has vanished' cannot function as a description of what has happened is less clear-cut. It seems difficult to deny that it does not tell us what has happened *to the shed*. After all, 'vanishing' is not something that can be meaningfully said of a shed, like 'creaking' or 'collapsing'. Taken in this way, 'the shed has vanished' still masquerades as some kind of explanation which, we have already argued, it cannot be. But what if we take the phrase as a description in a more general sense; not so much as 'what has happened to the shed?' but 'what's going on?'. What I mean is that unless Zelig's words have *some* descriptive content, unless they tell us in *some sense* what has transpired, there would be nothing to be bewildered about, nothing which allows of no explanation.

Winch is aware of this problem. He argues that he intends to do no more than raise some doubts about what it would be to understand Singer's story as a straightforward factual report. Winch does not argue that a sentence like 'it has vanished' is meaningless. It obviously is not; it has a perfectly good meaning, for example, in a story like Singer's. But, Winch insists, being confronted "with a story about a vanishing shed is nothing like being confronted with a vanishing shed. From the fact that I understand the former nothing follows about the possibility of my understanding the latter, or about my ability to envisage what that would be."[57] Of course, we can, without great difficulty, imagine ourselves in circumstances in which we have the impression that there was a shed a moment ago which is no longer there, with no possibility of explaining what has happened. Furthermore, we can imagine ourselves being driven to say 'It has vanished', accompanying the utterance with successive mental pictures in which the shed is first there in front of us and then not there. But, if anyone wants to insist that to imagine this *is* to imagine the shed having ceased to exist, Winch tells us he can do no more

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[56] Needless to say, such 'resignation' need not amount to the same thing for different persons.

[57] Winch 1987, pp. 88-89.

"than remind him again how *thin* a context of utterance this is, how many
of the connections with other ideas, expectations, possibilities of investiga-
tions, etc., are lacking which normally surround our thoughts concerning
the coming to be and ceasing to be of things. And the thought can hardly
remain unaffected by such a drastic impoverishment of its surroundings."[58]

Our, rather lengthy, discussion of Winch's article may perhaps be excused
when we come to see how crucial his conclusions are to Phillips's discus-
sion of miracles.[59] As we saw, it is argued that, although certain things
may be 'physically impossible', this does not necessarily mean they are
'logically impossible', which is to say, they could happen. But Winch's
discussion casts doubt on the possibility of drawing this distinction.
'Although it is physically impossible it could still happen' would seem to
be a candidate for philosophical therapy rather than the prelude to a solid
philosophical argument. The problem is that our understanding of what
is 'physically possible' is internally related to our understanding of what
counts as 'a happening'. Once we separate these notions we are left with,
in Winch's words, so 'thin a context of utterance' that it is difficult to see
what the words are supposed to mean. Or, as Phillips puts it:

"If we say that the possibilities of inexplicable events are not absolutely
meaningless without involving any context, all we are saying is that these
words, meaningless to us, could have a meaning in some other context
were such a context to be provided."[60]

But, we asked, does not the story of the wedding at Cana provide us with
the necessary context? Having examined Winch's discussion of 'the
shed has vanished', Phillips's reply should not come as a surprise. He
argues that the phrase 'Jesus turned water into wine' cannot be under-
stood as straightforwardly descriptive. Talk about miracles is not

"talk which *describes* the events which defy explanation. It would be mis-
leading to suggest that 'brought back from the dead', 'turning water into
wine', are familiar descriptions to us, the only thing missing being the
explanations of them."[61]

Nor will it do to insist that in calling the turning of water into wine a
miracle, we have provided such an explanation. Against the background

[58] Winch 1987, p. 106.
[59] Phillips's main writings on miracles are all offered as contributions to the discus-
sion initiated by Peter Winch. In his article "Waiting for the Vanishing Shed" (Phillips
1993, pp. 171-192), Phillips discusses Winch's article at length, defending it against var-
ious criticisms which have been, or may be, brought to bear upon it.
[60] Phillips 2000, p. 134.
[61] Phillips 2000, p. 130.

of Winch's conclusions, Phillips may argue that there "is not enough substance in the example to allow us to say what 'turning into' comes to in this context."[62] It is of no use to say that we cannot logically exclude the possibility of a supernatural explanation as "a viable alternative and the one that might plausibly be chosen in a case like the Red Sea parting",[63] for how is the reference to a 'supernatural cause' supposed to explain anything? How are we to explain what a 'supernatural cause' is other than by reference to its effects, namely, miracles? But the notion of a 'supernatural cause' was invoked precisely to explain miracles. We are caught in a vicious circle.

Phillips's conclusion that it is highly problematic to think of talk of miracles as either straightforwardly descriptive or explanatory seems difficult to avoid.[64] This does raise the question, however, whether we have any way left of understanding such talk at all. Ironically, while we began by criticising Hume's claim that miracles are simply impossible, Phillips's final conclusions seem to strengthen rather than weaken the argument against miracles. On the basis of Phillips's discussion one might well conclude that, indeed, we cannot justifiably believe that miracles occur because we have no idea what kind of event would constitute a miracle. We cannot even describe such an event, let alone explain it. Not surprisingly, Phillips rejects this conclusion. Rather than searching for a use for talk of miracles, we should recognise that such talk already has a use: "The language concerning the miraculous is already with us, and our philosophical task is to clarify its grammar as far as we are able."[65] This is the final task to which we must now turn.

6.4 The religious concept of a miracle

As noted at the start of our discussion, Phillips's main aim is to shift attention away from what he takes to be the inappropriate and misleading categories of natural science into which the discussion of talk of miracles is typically cast. In such a setting, one cannot rest content with the inexplicable nature of miracles. There *must* be an explanation; if not

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[62] Phillips 2000, p. 130.

[63] Levine 2002.

[64] Of course, even if Phillips's arguments are valid, it does not follow that religious believers do not, and have not, understood talk of miracles as such. If philosophers can be confused, so, too, can believers.

[65] Phillips 2000, p. 135.

a natural one, then a supernatural one. Thus, Phillips argues, religion appears as a form of super-science, God is turned into a super-scientist.[66] By contrast, Phillips insists on the inexplicable character of miraculous events. Such insistence, however, does not render the grammar of the language of miracles unproblematic for "the inexplicable character of the miracles does not, of itself, reveal their religious significance *as miracles.*"[67]

Phillips does not say that we can no longer speak of miracles today, nor that we can never justifiably believe in miracles, nor that miracles, as such, are impossible. His point, rather, is that the resources from which belief in miracles draws its sustenance are largely lacking in our culture. Even if we allow that extraordinary events did happen, and even if they inspire awe and humility in us, we are still likely to wonder at them as extraordinary *natural* events. But that is not to see them as miracles.[68] To see them in that way would be to see them as revelations of God; something that they clearly are in the Biblical accounts:

> "In the Bible, it is the various religious contexts which give significance to the inexplicable events. We, by contrast, hunt for inexplicable events in the hope of hanging on to, or finding some significance for religion."[69]

One might reply that, surely, a person need not be religious first, before he can witness miracles. After all, thousands claim to have come to religion for the first time through witnessing a miracle. But, according to Phillips, this misses the point at issue: "What must be available is a religious surrounding which makes available for an individual *the possibility* of coming to religion for the first time through witnessing a miracle."[70] These surroundings, Phillips argues, are what is largely lacking in contemporary Western society: "What has declined is a pervasive religious culture in which the language of the miraculous has its significance."[71]

I take it few would wish to dispute Phillips's claim that a pervasive religious culture in which 'the reality of miracles is taken for granted' has declined.[72] The disagreement arises with respect to what kind of account we give of this decline. Many would contend that, given our

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[66] See Phillips 2000, p. 135.
[67] Phillips 2000, p. 135.
[68] See Phillips 2001, p. 21; cf. Phillips 2001, p. 76-77.
[69] Phillips 2000, p. 136.
[70] Phillips 1993, p. 189.
[71] Phillips 2000, p. 136.
[72] See Phillips 1993, p. 189.

scientific understanding of the workings of nature, we simply can no longer believe in miracles. In reply, Phillips argues that this conclusion faces a serious problem:

> "It is not feasible to believe that people in Biblical times did not have ordinary causal and technical understanding, yet they believed in miracles. So the mere presence of that understanding clearly does not make it impossible to believe in miracles."[73]

Phillips does not deny that there may be general tension between science and religion in a culture, nor that this is the case in our own. Yet, given our arguments in the previous section, this cannot be because of a supposed contradiction between belief in the laws of nature, and a belief in miracles as violations of those laws. Rather, Phillips argues, the real anomaly lies between what natural explanation asks of us, and what is asked of us in the acknowledgement of a miracle.[74] Thus, for example, Moses' natural reaction, on seeing the burning bush, is to enquire what is happening, but he is told not to do this, but to kneel. In our culture, Phillips argues, it is increasingly difficult not to pursue such enquiries. Or, if we do try to find a place for God, it will more than likely be a supernatural causal power. Such is the prestige of science that, in an attempt to show that religion is free of science, God's agency is thought of in quasi-scientific terms. Thus, ironically enough, the search for miracles, for inexplicable events, as reasons or evidence for speaking of divine intervention, is itself a symptom of the cultural displacement of religion.[75]

What are we to make of Phillips's argument so far? Phillips emphasises that we cannot establish that miracles take place by proving that certain inexplicable events may occur. To recognise that a certain event is inexplicable is not yet to apprehend it as a miracle. The latter reaction is only possible, and has its sense, against the background of a specific religious tradition.[76] What is essential "is the *religious* significance of the events which occur, a significance which has little sense outside the

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[73] Phillips 2001, pp. 74-75. One might counter, however, that it is equally unfeasible to suggest that the kind of 'causal and technical understanding' possessed in 'Biblical times' may be compared, without further ado, to the kind of causal and technical understanding embedded in contemporary society.

[74] See Phillips 2001, p. 76.

[75] See Phillips 2000, p. 137.

[76] Of course, this does not mean that the word 'miracle' can play no role outside of the context of religion, as, for example, when we speak of 'the miracle of childbirth'. The grammar of this use of the word 'miracle', however, may be elucidated without reference to certain religious beliefs or inexplicable events. See also below.

contexts of worship and devotion."[77] These are good points, and a valuable contribution to the discussion. Furthermore, Phillips's observation that the kind of religious context in which talk of miracles may be taken for granted has eroded, is hard to dispute, as is his suggestion that this has much to do with the enormous influence of science. We may even agree that there is a real tension "between the attitude which science asks of us in response to nature, one of explaining, examining, etc., and the wonder involved in response to a miracle which may ask one to rule out or desist from the very responses naturalistic enquiry asks of us."[78] Perhaps one might point out that if miracles are inexplicable events, then to call a certain event miraculous presupposes at least some form of naturalistic enquiry. We must have determined at some stage that the event in question is, indeed, inexplicable.[79] At any rate, as we shall see below, this certainly seems to be the attitude taken by the Catholic Church in determining whether or not an occurrence is 'worthy of belief'. Nevertheless, to say that 'science' has an enormous influence on our culture — not just in terms of what it has accomplished, or the technological advances it has made possible, but also in terms of its 'prestige' — and that in such a way that it has become increasingly difficult to see miracles in nature, does not seem altogether implausible.

There is, however, a far more serious problem that Phillips has not yet tackled. At the end of the previous section we concluded with Phillips that is highly problematic to think of talk of miracles as either straightforwardly descriptive or explanatory in nature. This raised the question whether we can have any idea as to what kind of event would constitute a miracle. What Phillips has done so far, is show that we cannot talk of miracles at all without invoking a religious tradition in which this notion is embedded. We need not just inexplicable events, but also a religious context in which these events may be seen to have religious significance. Agreed. But the problem seems to be that, on Phillips's argument, we have no idea what we are talking about in referring to the 'inexplicable events' which are, from a religious point of view, seen as revelatory of God.

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[77] Phillips 2000, p. 137.

[78] Phillips 2001, p. 21.

[79] Note that when it is *us* witnessing a miracle, it may make little sense to ask what comes first — the determination of the event as inexplicable or the apprehension of the event as a miracle. But, of course, Phillips does not claim to be arguing from personal experience: we are dealing with *reports* of alleged miracles.

Now, it would be absurd if Phillips's argument would make it impossible to speak of inexplicable events at all. For one thing, it would no longer be possible to understand how scientific enquiry could proceed. New theories are often devised precisely to explain certain inexplicable phenomena. Such 'inexplicables' get their sense from the state of the subject, the explanatory power of rival theories, etc.[80] Where faith healings are concerned, matters are already somewhat more difficult. But even here we may have some idea as to how to explain a 'miraculous' healing. Perhaps we would refer to the psychologically therapeutic effects of such a healing session. And in some cases we may at least understand what must, physically, have happened to explain the current status of the patient, even if we have no explanation for how it could have happened, say, so quickly. Where Winch's discussion of Zelig's shed is concerned, however, matters are different. Here, the whole point of the argument is that no surroundings have been provided in which the proposal 'The shed has vanished' has sense, either as a description or as an explanation, of what happened to Zelig's shed.[81] But now the question is: is it any different for the kind of inexplicable events such as 'changing water into wine', 'being raised from the dead', which are said to be miracles? Phillips seems to agree with Rhees that the problem concerning the Biblical miracles is not in accepting that they occurred. With respect to Lazarus, Rhees says 'if it happened, it happened'.[82] But *what* are we asked to accept as having occurred? *What* is it that has supposedly happened? Either Phillips must admit that such phrases as 'Lazarus returning from the dead' and 'the turning of water into wine' are descriptive of certain occurrences after all, or he still owes us an explanation of what he means when he refers to "events such as Lazarus returning from the dead and the turning of water into wine."[83]

Perhaps Phillips would reply that all we need to do is to look at how such phrases are taken up in religious contexts of devotion and worship, at how they are used in religious practice. But if we do so, I suggest, we shall come to see that they are used, at least in part, to refer to *events* which *occurred in the course of history* and which may be accepted as such even by those who do not, as of yet, award these events any religious significance whatsoever. In short, as we already noted at the

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[80] See Phillips 1993, p. 188.
[81] See Phillips 1993, p. 188.
[82] See Phillips 2001, pp. 76-77.
[83] Phillips 2000, p. 135.

beginning of our discussion, for the Christian believer, the New Testa-
ment miracles are not just objects but also evidences of faith.[84]

In Phillips's discussion, by contrast, the 'evidence part', that is to say,
the inexplicable event, seems to drop out of the equation. This may be
seen by a brief look at two examples Phillips provides of the way in
which we may still speak of miracles today, despite the enormous obsta-
cles created by the naturalistic modes of explanation which dominate our
culture. The first is drawn from Winch. Winch tells us of a small church
in the United States where a statue of the Virgin Mary was reported to
be shedding tears. There were many interviews with people who, in the
main, either maintained that this was a genuine miracle — by which
they meant that there was no natural explanation of it; or maintained that
it was indeed explicable, for example in terms of fraud and trickery.
Winch confesses that he found the speakers on both sides of this issue
equally disgusting, or at least mediocre, in their response to what was
happening:

> "What had all this to do with worship of God or veneration of the Virgin
> Mary? There was one interview, however, that to my mind stood out from
> the rest: with a woman who simply asked: why would the Holy Mother *not*
> shed tears at the terrible spectacle of human life in our time?"[85]

What Winch found striking about the woman was that she evinced no
interest in the questions about how what was happening might have been
caused; and equally she had no interest in trying to show that it had no
natural causes.

The first thing to note is that, given Phillips's and Winch's argu-
ments, we should conclude that the phrase 'the statue is shedding tears'
cannot be taken as a descriptive or explanatory. 'Shedding tears' is just
as conceptually inapplicable to a statue as 'vanishing' is to a shed. Of
course, we are told, the woman Winch refers to had no interest in pro-
viding an explanation of 'what was happening'. That may be so. But,
first, we should ask: what does Winch mean by 'what was happening'?
This seems to imply some possible description of an event which has
not yet been provided. Secondly, whereas it seems clear that in Winch's
and Phillips's view, the woman is witnessing a miracle, this view would
not be shared by the Catholic Church of which, I take it, the woman in

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[84] And, one might add, this appears to be the way they have been regarded from the
very beginning, and not merely 'in eighteenth century misunderstandings of Christianity'.
See Gaskin 1978, p. 118.
[85] Quoted in Phillips 2001, p. 76.

question was a member. The 1978 document from the *Sacred Congrega-
tion for the Doctrine of the Faith* lists several criteria to determine the
legitimacy of an alleged supernatural occurrence.[86] We find such condi-
tions as that the persons involved should be obedient to ecclesiastical
authority; that the content of the message must be in conformity with
Catholic doctrine; that one must be able to point to 'good fruit' resulting
from it and enduring: conversions, deeper commitment to prayer, etc.;
and so on. All these clearly show that the significance of the alleged
experiences depends on their being embedded in a religious context of
meaning. As Phillips puts it, "we call them revelations from God by
virtue of the relations in which they stand to the Faith and to the fruits
of the spirit."[87] Personal convictions are insufficient. They have to be
tested in a scriptural context.[88] All this is true. And, obviously, I have
little desire to claim that the woman in the example should not pass
these tests. But we should also note that the first step of the process
is to assign "a commission of experts — theological, medical, psycho-
logical — to investigate everything and everyone concerned" and to
determine that there is certitude "that the event is miraculous, that is,
that normal human explanations fail, at least initially."[89] As we already
noted, this hardly seems to imply a giving up of our inclination to exam-
ine and explain. Quite the contrary, we are told that throughout this often
lengthy and detailed process "Church authorities operate from what we
might call a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. In other words, the claim must
be proved, not presumed."[90]

From the point of view of the *Sacred Congregation*, it is clear that, in
order to speak of a miracle in this example, we must determine whether
something actually occurred, something which does not allow of a natu-
ral explanation. The woman evinces no such interest. In fact, this is why
Winch and Phillips feel that her reaction stands out from the mediocrity
of the other persons interviewed. But it is also clear that the notion of an
'inexplicable event taking place' plays little or no role in her reaction.
There is really no reason to assume that her remark could not have been
made in the absence of any alleged occurrence. That is not to say that we
cannot judge her words to express a deep religious insight — some may

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[86] See Stravinskas 2000.
[87] Phillips 2000, p. 95.
[88] See Phillips 2000, p. 105.
[89] Stravinskas 2000.
[90] Stravinskas 2000.

feel that they do.[91] But I do not believe this example sheds any light on the relation between 'inexplicable events' and 'talk of miracles'.

The same goes for the second example Phillips discusses. This concerns R. F. Holland's well-known account of the way in which a young boy, stuck on a railway track in his toy motor-car, is saved, against all odds, from the oncoming train. There is nothing inexplicable about the child's escape. It is due simply to an amazing sequence of coincidences. Nevertheless, Phillips argues,

> "it is natural to call the child's deliverance a miracle. This is because of the extent of the odds against the child's survival, the significance of the child's life, etc. A believer would say that the child's life was in God's hands. The deliverance of the child is regarded with awe and thanksgiving."[92]

The event need not lead to the reaction mentioned. But, Phillips argues, it is surely not difficult to see how it *can* lead to such a reaction. At any rate, what is important is to appreciate that the presence of religious traditions of piety and devotion, however threatened they may be, gives such reactions their sense.

There is little reason to object to the conclusions Phillips draws from the example. One might want to ask in what way this use of the word 'miracle' differs from a secular use of the word, as when we are talking of 'the miracle of childbirth', or 'the miracle of love', etc. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine non-believers, having experienced such an event, saying that it is a miracle their child was saved. Evidently, the answer lies in the religious significance the event has for the believer, a significance which, as Phillips rightly points out, is dependent upon the presence of a religious tradition. Used in this way, the example may be instructive.

We might also note that in stating, explicitly, that there is nothing inexplicable about the child's survival, the example does not qualify, at least from the perspective of the *Sacred Congregation*, as a 'miracle' at all. As Peter Kreeft puts it:

> "You can empty any word of meaning by stretching it so thin that it covers everything. Sunsets and babies and acts of love are wonderful and beautiful, but they are not miracles. Miracle means supernatural wonder, not natural wonder."[93]

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[91] However, would we also react in this way when, asked about the Resurrection, someone should reply: 'Well, why would Jesus *not* rise from the dead…'?

[92] Phillips 2000, p. 136.

[93] Kreeft 1988.

This may be going too far, but it is clear that there is a difference between these kinds of 'miracles' and the kinds we have been discussing so far, which are essentially connected with inexplicable occurrences. Phillips admits that there are important differences but insists that "*in both cases* what is essential is the *religious* significance of the events which occur".[94] Agreed; but that is not in dispute. The problem, rather, is how, with regards to the latter kinds of miracles, we may speak of an 'event' occurring at all. As in the previous example we discussed, no light has been shed on that issue.

In referring to a miracle, traditional theism would appear to refer to an event which takes (or took) place in the course of history and which is 'supernatural' in that it cannot be produced by natural causes. This is certainly the case where the greatest of miracles is concerned: the resurrection of Christ. There can be little doubt that, for the traditional believer, the Resurrection is taken to constitute an historical event. The New Testament is saturated with the belief that something new has happened in the history of humanity, in and through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and above all through his resurrection from the dead.[95] Furthermore, given the nature of this 'event', at least for the believer, any natural explanation is ruled out. Christ's resurrection is taken both as an object and as an evidence of faith. Any attempt to explain the Resurrection in non-historical or natural terms would seem to minimize the magnitude the event has for the believer and the role it played in the formation of Christianity.[96]

Our examination has shown that Phillips's analysis raises difficulties on both counts, the alleged historical nature of the event as well as its supernatural element. For Phillips, talk of miracles as supernaturally caused events tends to turn religion into some kind of 'super-science', presenting God as the 'super-scientist'. Phillips hopes to steer us away from what he takes to be the inappropriate and misleading categories of natural science into which the discussion of talk of miracles is typically cast and redirect our attention towards the religious contexts of worship and devotion against the background of which such talk has its life. We argued that while Phillips's analysis offers a valuable contribution to the discussion of miracles, his critique is so fierce as to leave one wondering whether, when all is said and done, we may still find our way back

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[94] Phillips 2000, p. 137.
[95] See McGrath 1997, p. 541.
[96] See *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, online version, entry for 'Resurrection'.

to an understanding of miracles as events which are revelatory of God. A seemingly insurmountable chasm opens up between, on the one hand, Phillips's claim that the problem with miracles is not in accepting that they occurred — 'if it happened, it happened' — and, on the other hand, his insistence that talk of miracles cannot be taken to be either explanatory or descriptive.

As a result, Phillips's analysis seems to amount to an argument against miracles rather than a conceptual reclamation of the religious concept of a miracle. For, surely, many believers *have* thought of miracles as events in the external world, brought about by the intervention of a power not limited by the laws of nature, a supernatural power interrupting these laws, in a word, God. Indeed, this, more or less, amounts to the classical definition of a miracle referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Phillips still owes us an account of this religious concept. For although his discussion may shed light on miracles as objects of faith, it does not seem to allow miracles to function as evidences of faith because it provides no account of the 'inexplicable events' to which these miracles are essentially linked. The examples we discussed either seem to treat the supposed inexplicability of the event as irrelevant, or exclude any reference to something inexplicable right from the start. Given the arguments Phillips develops, it is difficult to see how he could do anything else.

If these conclusions are sound, we may well expect similar difficulties to arise in relation to another central Christian belief, the belief in the immortality of the soul. If Phillips's analysis has difficulty accounting for the belief that at least one has risen from the grave, how shall it deal with the belief in the future resurrection of the multitude? After all, the emergence of Jesus from the tomb, as told in the Gospels, was the guarantee, not only of Christ's mission and the seal of redemption, but also of the resurrection of all men. Christ's resurrection gives both foundation and substance to the Christian hope of eternal life.[97] Phillips's account of this hope is the main topic of the next chapter.

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[97] See McGrath 1997, p. 384.

7. IMMORTALITY

In this chapter we examine Phillips's account of the belief in immortality. By cleansing this belief of its metaphysical accruements, Phillips hopes to reveal 'the soul' of religious language about life everlasting. There can be no doubt that Phillips provides us with a picture of 'immortality without metaphysics'. However, whether this picture is one in which the believer shall be able to recognise his or her beliefs is rather more doubtful.

7.1 The doctrine of the resurrection

The doctrine of the general resurrection, or the resurrection of the body, constitutes one of the most fundamental tenets of the Christian religion. The final clauses of the Apostles' Creed express the belief in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. How are we to understand this notion of 'life everlasting'? To be sure, such notions as 'resurrection', 'eternal life', 'immortality', have been developed in diverse ways in different periods of the history of the Church.[1] Although we cannot begin to consider the various teachings and doctrines connected with them, it may prove helpful to provide some preliminary indication of what we are talking about. Corliss Lamont defines immortality as:

> "The literal survival of the individual human personality for an indefinite period after [physical] death, with its memory and awareness of self-identity essentially intact."[2]

Lamont's definition captures two key elements which have traditionally been associated with the Christian doctrine of immortality. First, the doctrine implies the possibility of us living on, or living again, after we have died. As the *Catholic Encyclopedia* tells us, by immortality "is ordinarily understood the doctrine that the human soul will survive death, continuing in the possession of an endless conscious existence."[3] Secondly,

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[1] In the remainder of our discussion these terms will be used more or less indiscriminately. Though this is both historically and systematically imprecise, I do not believe it to affect the main line of our argument.

[2] Quoted in Augustine 1997.

[3] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Immortality'.

the doctrine asserts that people 'survive death' as distinct individuals. *We ourselves* shall in some fashion do things and suffer things after *our own* deaths. In other words, "immortality means *personal* immortality, the endless conscious existence of the individual soul. It implies that the being which survives shall preserve its personal identity and be connected by conscious memory with the previous life."[4] For the purposes of our discussion, we should draw attention to a further crucial element connected with a traditional Christian understanding of immortality, which Lamont's definition does not refer to. This is the moral argument. Paul's conclusion that "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'"[5] reveals the tenable resolution of materialistic hedonism when the resurrection of Christ and the ensuing general resurrection are dismissed. Surely, ours would not be a rational universe, and it would be in irreconcilable conflict with the notion of the moral government of the world by a Just and Infinite God, if goodness were left to suffer and wickedness outwardly triumphs. But were this the only life, were there no future vindication, this would seem to be the case.[6] From this point of view, theodicy is resolved by bodily resurrection. After all, as Flew puts it, "what are three-score years and ten compared with all eternity?"[7] One might argue that the result of such logic led Paul to declare that "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."[8]

In the intensely rationalist atmosphere of the Enlightenment, the doctrine of immortality was subjected to scathing criticism. The Christian hope for 'eternal life' was argued to be an ignorant superstition devoid of any basis in real life. The moral argument, which was used by apologists to justify belief in immortality, was turned against them. Marx's argument that religion seeks to comfort those suffering in the present through persuading them of the joy of an afterlife, thus distracting them from the task of transforming the present world so that suffering might be eliminated, provides a well-known example.[9] In contemporary philosophy of religion, too, we find criticisms of the moral argument. For example, for Rhees, the idea that belief in an afterlife, where all debts are settled, provides us with a reason to believe in God or be good, is

[4] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Immortality'.
[5] 1 Cor. 15: 32.
[6] See *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Immortality'; cf. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Immortal; Immortality'.
[7] Flew 1998.
[8] 1 Cor, 15: 19.
[9] See McGrath 1997, pp. 545-546.

repugnant.[10] On the whole, however, philosophers have targeted the other two key elements of the belief in immortality. Flew, for instance, has argued that the idea that we may survive our own deaths, at best, defies apparent empirical impossibilities or, at worst, is logically incoherent.[11]

As we shall see, Phillips tends to agree with Flew that the belief in immortality, conceived of in terms of 'survival after death', involves serious logical and empirical difficulties. Moreover, there are also difficulties in certain views of immortality connected with notions of divine providence. Whereas such views seek to provide a rational basis for moral considerations, Phillips argues, they succeed only in depicting concerns which seem antithetical to such considerations. Having drawn these conclusions, Phillips acknowledges that it would be appropriate to admit that the belief in the immortality of the soul is the product of a number mistakes and confusions.[12] If this were all there is to it, it would seem we can safely attribute the hope for life everlasting to the pathology of religion. However, in Phillips's view, this conclusion is premature. It is based on the assumption that what we have taken to be presuppositions of belief in immortality really are necessary presuppositions of the belief. But what, Phillips asks, if this were not the case? Surely then we should drastically revise our conclusions. Needless to say, Phillips believes such a revision is called for. He suggests that there are other possibilities of meaning, possibilities which cannot be said to be empirically mistaken, logically confused, or morally reprehensible. In the philosophy of religion, Phillips feels, these possibilities of meaning have, for the most part, been either ignored or misrepresented. When many philosophers of religion speak of 'traditional religious beliefs', what they are really referring to is the traditional philosophical accounts they give of them. But these accounts, Phillips argues, fail to capture what it means to believe in the immortality of the soul.[13] Phillips describes this failure as 'a dislocation of language':

> "In philosophy of religion we are often offered analyses which pay no attention to and, hence, fail to capture the 'soul' in the words of religious beliefs. When this happens we have a dislocation of language, including a dislocation of language concerning the soul."[14]

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[10] Rhees 1999, p. 36.
[11] See Flew 1998.
[12] See Phillips 1970(a), pp. 21, 41.
[13] See Phillips 2000, p. 155.
[14] Phillips 2000, p. 138.

Once again, our task is one of conceptual reclamation. We stand 'to heal these dislocations' by taking due account of the very different ways in which the picture of the soul leaving this life enters into the lives of human beings. In other words, Phillips's aim is to provide what philosophy in the past has failed to provide: a plausible discursive exposition of religious beliefs about the immortality of the soul which is sensitive to the natural habitat of the words used to express these beliefs, and which avoids the confusions he detects in philosophical treatments of the subject.[15]

As Phillips has it, the belief in immortality does not entail the problematic assumption of the possibility of 'surviving death', nor does it entertain the dubious postulation of a world beyond the world we know. Questions about the immortality of the soul are seen not to be questions concerning the extent of a man's life, and in particular questions concerning whether that life can extend beyond the grave, but questions concerning the kind of life a man is living.[16] Hyman has observed that Phillips presents us with "a picture of immortality without metaphysics".[17] "True", Phillips replies, but "what prevails at present is metaphysics without immortality."[18] This chapter examines Phillips's account of the belief in immortality — can the religious belief in the immortal soul survive the death of metaphysics? In other words, does Phillips's account adequately represent what believers have taken their belief in life everlasting to mean?

7.2 Our dislocated soul

Could we survive our own individual deaths? Surely, Flew argues, it is obvious that we *do* not, that we *could* not. Who would be prepared, Flew asks, to contest the truth of the major premise in that most famous of all exemplary syllogisms: 'All men are mortal'; 'Socrates is a man'; and, therefore, 'Socrates is mortal'? Again, after some disaster when the

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[15] See Hyman 1996, p. 252.
[16] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 49; cf. Phillips 1976, pp. 122ff., Phillips 2000, pp. 179ff.
[17] Hyman 1996, p. 252.
[18] Phillips 1996, p. 285. This is taken from the afterword to *Can Religion be Explained Away?* which was constructed from notes Phillips took during discussions the various papers contained in the book provoked. Although presented as a discussion, Phillips does not attribute the various voices in the afterword to specific participants. Given the context, however, there can be no doubt that the phrase quoted, if not a verbatim report, certainly reflects Phillips's view on the matter.

'Dead' and the 'Survivors' have both been listed, what logical space is left for a third category, 'Both'? In short, the idea that we shall survive our own deaths, or are immortal, faces both logical and empirical difficulties:

> "Any doctrine of personal survival or personal immortality has got to find some way around or over an enormous initial obstacle. In the ordinary, everyday understandings of the words involved, to say that someone survived death is to contradict yourself: while to assert that we all of us live forever is to assert a manifest falsehood, the flat contrary of a universally known universal truth, namely, the truth that 'All men are mortal.'"[19]

We may note that the prelude to Flew's argument against immortality does not yet refer explicitly to any *religious* conception of 'life everlasting'. And, one might argue, at least where Christianity is concerned, 'immortality' is something rather more than us surviving our deaths or living forever. The 'immortality' the Bible contemplates is

> "not a condition simply of future existence, however prolonged, but a state of blessedness, due to redemption and the possession of the 'eternal life' in the soul; it includes resurrection and perfected life in both body and soul."[20]

This can hardly be denied. However, it does not really affect Flew's proposed line of argument. We may well admit that to guarantee survival does not yet guarantee immortality, as conceived of traditionally. But, Flew would insist, we cannot be assured of a life everlasting — *whatever* that may involve — unless we establish first that it both makes sense and is true that we shall survive our own deaths. As Keith Augustine puts it:

> "Arguments for survival establish nothing in favour of immortality; however, arguments against survival are arguments against immortality. In other words, immortality presupposes the possibility of survival."[21]

Let us assume for the moment that this is correct, that the possibility of survival is, indeed, a necessary presupposition of any belief in immortality. Can the enormous obstacles which stand in its way be overcome? Phillips considers various ways in which one might seek to do so. He argues that none of these stands up against criticism.[22] There is no circumventing the fact that if the claim that man is immortal is construed

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[19] Flew 1998.
[20] *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Immortal; Immortality'.
[21] Augustine 1997.
[22] See Phillips 1970(a), pp. 1-19.

as a factual claim it contradicts our common understanding of nature: "we know *with certainty* that all human beings die."[23] Perhaps more importantly, Phillips argues, it is doubtful whether we can conceive of the question of life after death as a factual question at all:

> "The question is not whether there is or there is not life after death, where affirmative or negative answers to the question would both be considered intelligible, possible answers, whether they were true or false. The question is whether it means anything to talk of life after death. If one understands what is meant by 'survival' and what is meant by 'death', then one is at a loss to know what it means to talk of surviving death."[24]

It would seem, then, that Phillips agrees with Flew that the empirical and logical difficulties entailed by the presupposition that we shall survive our deaths are insurmountable. If, indeed, the belief in immortality necessarily involves this presupposition, we can only conclude that it is riddled with difficulties and confusions. The whole thing would seem to be a big mistake.[25]

We shall not examine at length Phillips's criticisms of the various attempts at providing a coherent account of the possibility of survival. The main reason for not doing so is that Phillips's own discussion does not amount to a detailed treatment of these topics. As Phillips himself points out, he does little more than indicate lines of thought, and suggest how they might be developed. Indeed, Phillips admits that his observations will hardly satisfy philosophers who have worked on these points in detail.[26] Now, one might argue that this constitutes a rather serious failing on Phillips's part. Hyman, for instance, says that one of the reasons he finds Phillips's account of the belief in immortality unconvincing is because Phillips does not prove that the traditional Christian belief in immortality cannot be formulated precisely without bringing an implicit contradiction to light. According to Hyman, Phillips is wrong to ignore the substantial efforts of Thomist philosophers to expound an interpretation of the doctrine which *is* coherent.[27]

Phillips does not rate the chances of providing such an interpretation to be very high. He says that most philosophers think that the difficulties we have considered are insurmountable, and that, therefore, the presuppositions of the belief in immortality are seen to be confused.[28] Given

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[23] Phillips 1970(a), p. 16.
[24] Phillips 1970(a), p. 15.
[25] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 17.
[26] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 18.
[27] See Hyman 1996, p. 262.
[28] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 18.

the history and state of the subject, it is hard to disagree with Phillips. Most philosophers would indeed regard the attempt to overcome these difficulties with scepticism.[29] Still, one might argue, this does not excuse Phillips from examining such attempts and, if possible, demonstrating their supposed incoherency. Phillips, however, has a further reason for neglecting to do so. He argues that he has, in the main, ignored such pursuits because he does not believe they take us finally to anywhere of very great interest: "success or failure in resolving the logical difficulties we have noted do not have important consequences *as far as belief in immortality is concerned.*"[30] So far, our discussion has been based on one crucial assumption, namely, that the possibility of survival *is* a necessary presupposition of belief in immortality. This is precisely what Phillips denies. Should we agree, it follows that our main task still lies ahead:

> "I do not think that belief in the possibility of the survival of disembodied spirits after the death of human bodies, or in the possibility of non-material bodies living on after the death of material bodies, or in the possibility of bodies resurrecting after death, are […] necessary presuppositions of a belief in the immortality of the soul. Indeed, our major task is still before us, namely, to ask whether an account of a belief in the immortality of the soul can be given which is different from those we have discussed."[31]

On the account we have considered so far, the question of immortality would resemble the question about whether human beings can or cannot exist below a certain temperature. There may be disagreement: 'Yes, they can exist' — 'No, they can't'. It seems, Phillips argues, that what we can say about immortality of the soul depends on such findings. Either 'p' is or is not the case; either we can or we cannot survive our deaths.[32] What we have here, Phillips suggests, is a radical 'dislocation' of religious expressions concerning immortality. What does Phillips mean by this notion?

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[29] We may note that, in spite of his criticism of Phillips, Hyman himself counts as one such philosopher. (See Hyman 1996, pp. 253, 285.)

[30] Phillips 1970(a), p. 18.

[31] Phillips 1970(a), p. 18. The last sentence of this passage raises some suspicion. Surely, the question is not merely whether *it is possible* to provide a different account but also, and importantly so, whether that account engages with what believers take, or have taken, their beliefs to mean. This, the question of descriptive adequacy, marks the distinction between a contemplation of mere *possibilities* of meaning, or, as the case may be, a creative or fruitful form of revisionism, and a philosophical clarification of actualities of meaning, of actual, historic religious practices and beliefs.

[32] See Phillips 2000, p. 148.

Phillips introduces the idea of a 'dislocation of language' by means
of a number of examples. It would be a mistake, he argues, to think that
a dislocation of language occurs every time expectations are not ful-
filled; for example, when intentions or promises are not kept. Thwarted
intentions, broken promises — these are part of the lives and discourse
we share with each other, in which intending and promising have their
sense. We may give reasons why we did not keep a promise, or why
we did not act as intended. But now consider a scene from Beckett's
Waiting for Godot: one character says to another, 'Let's go'. The other
replies, 'Yes, let's'; but neither moves. Here, Phillips argues, we can
speak of a dislocation of language. This is because whereas, normally,
we would expect someone to explain the incongruence between his
words and his behaviour, Beckett's tramps do not think they owe us any
reasons for their immobility. If someone asked them, 'Why aren't you
going? You said you intended to', they would reply, 'What's that got to
do with anything?'. The words have been dislocated from their familiar
contexts. They no longer carry their normal implications.[33]

Phillips invites us to consider some further examples which may
appear even stranger:

> "A person says 'I'm off', but does not move. No contexts […] are present
> to help us understand the situation. The same person says, 'The house is on
> fire' quite passively, with no reactions at all. At other times, the following
> words come out of the person's mouth, 'I'm in agony, are you?', again
> without any facial expression or reactions of any kind."[34]

We would certainly have trouble knowing what to make of such a person.
The problem is that words and phrases with which we are perfectly famil-
iar have been dislodged from their familiar surroundings in which they
have their meaning. We should think of our use of language, Wittgenstein
teaches us, as an activity — our linguistic utterances are embedded in
language-games, they carry certain implications, are enmeshed in specific
patterns of behaviour, reactions, gestures, facial expressions, and what
more. If these connections are severed, language becomes 'like an engine
idling';[35] we might say, with Phillips, that words "are mentioned, but not
used."[36]

The examples we have considered illustrate what Phillips means by
'a dislocation of language'. They may be strange examples, Phillips

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[33] See Phillips 2000, p. 139.
[34] Phillips 2000, p. 140.
[35] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 132; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 38, 281.
[36] Phillips 2000, p. 140.

admits, but we may note even stranger facts about them. For one thing, Phillips argues, they are quite compatible with the way in which many philosophers speak of the soul. According to such philosophers, we fail to appreciate the possibility of the soul because we concentrate on the body. The well-formed sentences that come out of the mouth are indirect communications from the thinking part — the soul — of a person. We understand these sentences. It is only a contingent fact that the behaviour normally accompanying these words is missing.[37] Of course, according to Phillips, this will not do. As we have seen,

> "No amount of uttering of the words will yield sense devoid of practice, and by 'practice' we mean the familiar features of the relationships and everyday lives we share with each other, features which include the various facial expressions we recognise, the gestures we make, the bodily postures we adopt, our laughter and our tears, and so on."[38]

In treating the relation between language and practice as a contingent, external one, "This philosophical picture of the soul dislocates words from practice and tries, in vain, to infuse them with sense."[39] Now, if Phillips is right, if this 'philosophical picture of the soul' is, indeed, incoherent, it follows that any belief in the immortality of the soul construed along these lines is equally incoherent:

> "If the notion of an inner substance called 'the soul' is the philosophical chimera we have suggested it is, whatever is meant by the immortality of the soul cannot be the continued existence of such a substance."[40]

Where does that leave us? With the task, Phillips answers, of healing the dislocation of language concerning the soul. We need to wait on the practices in which talk of the soul, and of the immortality of the soul, has its life. Should we do so, we shall find that there are other possibilities of meaning, possibilities which do not depend on the incoherent notion of the survival of our (dislocated) soul. We turn to consider these possibilities of meaning in a moment. First, however, we should consider a rather serious criticism which has been brought to bear on Phillips's analysis up to this point.

It should be clear, Hyman argues, that the philosophical picture Phillips is referring to is the Cartesian doctrine that the soul is an immaterial thinking substance which interacts with a living body. As Phillips indicates,

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[37] See Phillips 2000, p. 140.
[38] Phillips 2000, p. 141.
[39] Phillips 2000, p. 142.
[40] Phillips 2000, p. 142.

this doctrine implies both that we learn language by associating words
with thoughts, ideas or sensations, and that understanding a language, or
words within a language, is a matter of having certain mental experi-
ences. Hyman agrees with Phillips that this picture of the soul is demon-
strably incoherent, something Wittgenstein shows in the so-called private
language arguments.[41] Hyman is less satisfied, however, with the con-
clusion Phillips draws from his analysis. According to Hyman, the sen-
tence we have quoted — 'If the notion of an inner substance called
'the soul' is the philosophical chimera we have suggested it is, whatever
is meant by the immortality of the soul cannot be the continued exis-
tence of such a substance' — contains the crux of Phillips's argument.
Hyman suggests that Phillips is arguing that if a belief is incoherent,
it cannot be espoused.[42] Clearly, this inference does not follow. There
is no reason why it should be impossible to espouse, seriously and sin-
cerely, doctrines that are demonstrably incoherent:

> "The trick, presumably, is to avoid explicit contradictions; but while it
> may sometimes take a philosopher's ingenuity to do this, when challenged
> or cross-examined, a like-minded community with a reassuring intellectual
> elite seems, to me, quite likely to make it as easy as falling of a log. If the
> immortality of the soul *is* a contradictory doctrine, it does not follow that
> one cannot believe it."[43]

It is difficult to disagree with Hyman. What is more, his criticism seems to
be supported by traditional teachings concerning the doctrine of immor-
tality. For example, under the heading 'Justification of the Doctrine of

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[41] See Hyman 1996, p. 253. Hyman has his doubts, however, concerning the analogy
Phillips draws between this philosophical picture of the soul and the examples we have
considered, for instance, that of the man who said he was off, but wasn't. Hyman points
out that what makes the man who was off difficult to figure out is his failure to act in a
way which makes it plausible that he intends to leave or wants us to believe that he does,
whereas the insuperable difficulty with supposing that we learn language by associating
words with ideas is that this procedure alone cannot possibly endow a sign with meaning.
(See Hyman 1996, p. 254.) Hyman certainly has a point but, perhaps, it is one we need
not linger on too long. Even if the analogy does limp, Phillips's main point seems clear
enough. The reason for considering such examples as that of the man who was off but
wasn't, is not, of course, to establish that such a person would be difficult to figure out,
but to make the more general point that words get their meaning in practice, in the sense
discussed. This is precisely what Phillips believes to be (one of) the problem(s) with the
Cartesian doctrine of the soul. By treating the relation between language and practice as
a contingent, external one, the philosophical picture of the soul dislocates words from
practice. On a further note: no doubt there are those who disagree, that is, who feel that
the Cartesian doctrine, or some version of it, is, in fact, tenable. This, however, is not an
issue I can discuss at this place.
[42] See Hyman 1996, pp. 257, 283.
[43] Hyman 1996, p. 254.

Immortality', the *Catholic Encyclopedia* sums up the chief propositions involved in the building up of the doctrine. The human soul, we are told, "is a substance or substantial principle" which is "simple, or indivisible, and also a spiritual being, that is, intrinsically independent of matter"; furthermore, we learn that by the soul "is meant the ultimate principle within me by which I feel, think, and will, and by which my body is animated".[44] On these remarks, it does seem that something as close to the philosophical picture of the soul as makes no difference has found its way into the Church's understanding of the nature of the soul. Hyman, then, is right to say that people are quite capable of holding incoherent beliefs for, evidently, they do. The problem is that Phillips insists that he has not in any way sought to deny this. In a reply to Hyman, Phillips suggests that Hyman's objection comes from a misunderstanding:

> "I am not saying that because X is incoherent, people can't have sincerely and seriously enjoined X. Of course not: if their espousal were not sincere and serious I shouldn't think it worth combating. […] But if a view is incoherent, then it follows that it cannot mean what its espousers want it to mean. If the immortality of the soul means anything, it cannot be what Cartesian dualism tries to mean by it."[45]

In fairness to Hyman, the crucial sentence on which he builds his case does, indeed, favour Hyman's interpretation. The phrase, I think we may agree, is a rather unfortunate one. Still, it would be a mistake to take it to reflect the crux of Phillips's argument. Phillips is not saying, as Hyman suggests, that his account of the immortality of the soul *must* be the correct one because the traditional philosophical account is incoherent and people simply cannot believe what is incoherent. Of course, this still leaves the question as to whether Phillips's account adequately reflects what, at least some, believers have taken their belief in immortality to mean. The answer to that question will have to wait until we have had a chance to witness Phillips's account for ourselves.

7.3 Pictures of the soul

One source of philosophical confusion, Wittgenstein tells us, are the 'pictures' which are embedded in our use of language. Simply put, by pictures Wittgenstein means 'illustrated turns of speech', or 'figurative

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[44] See *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online version, entry for 'Immortality'.
[45] Phillips 1996, pp. 283-284.

expressions'.[46] Such pictures present iconographic representations of the grammatical structures of our language. As such, they are not false. But misapprehension about their application in our language-games may lead us astray when we are philosophising. Indeed, Wittgenstein later diagnosed this to be one of the main problems with the *Tractatus*: "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."[47]

Phillips discusses three of Wittgenstein's examples of the use of such pictures, and the kind of confusion they might engender.[48] Consider the following expressions: 'While I was speaking to him I did not know what was going on in his head'; 'In my heart I understood when you said that' (pointing to one's heart); 'I can't speak to his soul'. In each case, Phillips argues, we have a vivid picture which may mislead us. As to the first expression, we might be tempted to start looking for the psychical essence of 'thinking'; perhaps certain brain or thought-processes go on inside the head. The second expression may lead us to wonder what kind of processes go on inside the heart whereas the third expression may lure us into postulating some kind of immaterial substance which is actually the thinking part of a person. Of course, Phillips argues, these are not the applications the pictures actually have in our language-games. To demystify them, we might remind ourselves that the expressions mentioned may be replaced by far more mundane expressions, respectively: 'I wonder what he is thinking'; 'I felt a close affinity to you when you said that'; 'I could not relate to him'. If this is so, one might wonder, why then do we not simply drop these misleading figurative forms of language? One answer, Phillips argues, is to say that there is nothing wrong with the picture — it is we who are confused about its use. More importantly, although, to avoid confusion, the expressions can be replaced as suggested, the alternative ones cannot be equated in all circumstances to the original, figurative expressions. The pictures, Wittgenstein insists, should be taken seriously. Although they are figurative expressions, they are not just turns of phrases, not similes or mere figures that we may choose to use. We really *mean* them.[49] In other words, the figurative expressions offer their own contribution to what we (want to) say, and cannot be replaced without loss.

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[46] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 295, II, p. 178.
[47] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 115.
[48] See Phillips 2000, pp. 143-145.
[49] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 427, II, p. 178.

Now, we might want to reject the implied contention that the kind of figurative expressions Phillips discusses have played a historically dominant role in giving rise to certain philosophical theories as an oversimplification.[50] Be that as it may, Phillips is surely right to insist that the application of these expressions in our language-games does not entail, nor depend upon, the kind of theoretical, quasi-empirical considerations mentioned. Furthermore, I have no quarrel with Phillips's claim that these expressions may be indispensable, in that it may be impossible to replace them, without loss, with non-figurative expressions. The question, perhaps, is why Phillips should be interested in such figurative expressions at this stage of our discussion. The answer is pretty straightforward. He believes our expressions about the soul to be figurative expressions in the sense discussed. Here, too, we have a vivid picture — a picture which, although it can mislead us, cannot be replaced without loss. Wittgenstein too implies as much:

> "What am I believing in when I believe that men have souls? What am I believing in, when I believe that this substance contains two carbon rings? In both cases there is a picture in the foreground, but the sense lies far in the background; that is, the application of the picture is not easy to survey."[51]

To believe that men have souls is not *per se* to cling to Cartesian metaphysics. Rather, it is to cleave to a certain form of representation of human experience, relations, and values. If this seems mysterious, Wittgenstein suggests, why then does the scientific picture of carbon rings not seem equally mysterious? In both cases we need to examine the application of the picture, the role it plays in certain language-games.[52]

It is not difficult to think up various expressions figuring the word 'soul'. Consider the following: 'The poor soul'; I can't talk to his soul'; 'He is a mean-souled man'; 'He'd sell his soul for a buck'; and so on. Such expressions, Phillips remarks, are perfectly natural. He adds, quite rightly, that their application does not depend upon, nor entail, any philosophical theory about a duality in human nature. In the cases considered, talk about the soul is not talk about some strange sort of 'thing'; some kind of incorporeal substance. Rather, it is a way of talking about human

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[50] Moreover, one might argue that the kind of philosophical theories Phillips has in mind — say, theories which seek to explain the possibility of our understanding in terms of mental processes — are not flawed at all. Although I agree with Phillips that the criticisms that have been offered against such theories, not in the last place by Wittgenstein, are devastating, this is not the place to discuss that topic.

[51] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 422.

[52] See Hacker 1990, pp. 539-541.

beings. In some cases, the word 'soul' can be used to refer to a person as such. In others, 'a man's soul' refers to his integrity, to the complex set of practices and beliefs which acting with integrity would cover for that person.[53] Now, if we agree with these conclusions, Phillips asks, why should we not agree that talk about the immortality of the soul plays a similar role, i.e. that it is talk bound up with certain religious reflections a man may make on the life he is leading?

Flew provides Phillips with one possible answer. He agrees with Phillips that any number of expressions concerning the soul are perfectly familiar and quite intelligible. Furthermore, he does not deny that, in their everyday understandings, such words as 'mind' and 'soul' are not words for sorts of — in the philosopher's sense — substances. The nature of this 'philosopher's sense', Flew suggests, is best appreciated by considering passages from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*:

> "For to construe the question whether she has a mind of her own, or the assertion that he is a mean-souled man, as a question, or assertion, about some putative incorporeal substances is like taking the Red Queen's dog's loss of temper as if this was on all fours with his loss of his bone; or like looking for the grin remaining after the Cheshire Cat has vanished."[54]

If certain philosophers have been led into confusion by a misunderstanding of our figurative forms of language, Flew is not one of them. There is no dislocation of language here. But Flew is not yet done. He argues that the fact that we can say so many sensible and intelligible things about minds or souls shows that we have concepts of minds or souls; just as the fact that we can talk sensibly about grins and tempers shows that we have concepts of both grins and tempers. But, Flew continues,

> "none of this shows: either that we can talk sensibly of grins and tempers existing separately from the faces of which they are configurations or of the people who sometimes lose them; or that we can talk sensibly about the mind or soul surviving the dissolution of the flesh and blood person whose mind or soul it was."[55]

Of course, this still does not take us to the heart of the matter. For we have already seen that Phillips, on his part, agrees that the notion of surviving death, in the sense Flew has in mind, is unintelligible. The disagreement between them lies elsewhere. The crux of the matter is

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[53] See Phillips 1970(a), pp. 43ff.
[54] Flew 1998.
[55] Flew 1998.

that whereas the everyday use of the concepts of 'souls' and 'minds' is quite intelligible, according to Flew, the religious use is not. When the believer claims that we shall meet again after death, that the righteous shall enjoy life everlasting, that our soul is immortal, etc., the only way to make sense of these claims is to recognise that they imply some sort of dualist view of human nature, as well as the possibility of survival. Unfortunately, although we may thus 'infuse some sense' into the believer's claims, at the same time we demonstrate their intrinsic incoherence.

Phillips, I take it, would reply that whereas Flew may have jumped the first hurdle, he stumbles on the second. Flew sees correctly that we need not construe our everyday talk of souls along Cartesian lines. He fails to recognise, however, that the same conclusion should be drawn concerning religious talk about saving or damning our immortal souls: "talk about the *immortality* of the soul too [has] its place within the same contexts that talk about the soul is appropriate."[56] These expressions are like the figurative ones we discussed above in that, they too, employ certain pictures which offer their own contribution to what we want to say and cannot be replaced without loss. The problem is that the nature of their contribution is easily misunderstood:

> "The trouble is that the language so often offered by philosophy of religion to discuss the soul is one which pays little attention to the 'soul' in expressions concerning the soul. We are offered talk of immaterial substances, disembodied spirits, and so on. Here, too, the religious pictures have misled us. The resultant analyses are a dislocation of the religious expressions."[57]

How should this disagreement be resolved? Perhaps the problem, Phillips suggests, is that Flew simply cannot see any other possibility of sense for the religious expressions than the problematic, metaphysical ones we have been discussing so far.[58] If so, then Phillips is happy to be of assistance. In the next section we turn to examine Phillips's disclosure of these other possibilities of meaning.

7.4 Our immortal soul

In the previous section we saw that Phillips rejects the view that the religious picture of the soul leaving the body must involve a dualist

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[56] Phillips 1970(a), p. 45. Phillips might add that, for quite a few people, such talk is a no less an everyday use of language than what are commonly called 'everyday' uses of language.
[57] Phillips 2000, p. 145.
[58] See Phillips 2000, p. 156; cf. Phillips 1970(a), p. 45.

understanding of human nature and belief in the possibility of survival. There are other possibilities of meaning. That is not to say, however, that the metaphysical understanding of the belief in immortality which Flew, and others, criticise, has not had, and does not have, its fair share of adherents. Rather than claiming that people cannot sincerely and seriously espouse such a belief, it being incoherent, Phillips admits that it has a certain appeal.[59] He distinguishes four ways in which the hope for a metaphysical immortality may enter into a person's life.[60]

First, the belief in immortality may arise from the desire that virtue should be rewarded and vice punished. If we are dependent on our fortunes in this world alone, it seems plain as day that there is no correlation between morality and worldly prosperity. The picture of the soul leaving the body is understood as the promise of a future life after death, where all shall receive their just rewards. Phillips reacts rather harshly to this view. God, he argues, is turned into 'a police-man in the sky'. The obedience induced would not be a virtue since conformity to morality is simply a means to self-interest: 'You'd better be good or you'll get it in the end'. The conception of religion involved, Phillips has it, cheapens morality, and the apologetic appeals made on such a basis are themselves morally despicable. On this view,

> "there is no sense of saying farewell to life. On the contrary, this life's lowest motives and desires seem to determine the conception of immortality involved."[61]

In the second view Phillips considers, the picture of our immortal soul enters our lives as a direct result of tensions and contradictions within morality itself. Morality asks the impossible of us; there is a gap between what we ought to be and what we are. These, our own imperfections, call for an extension of life after death. Although this reaction has a certain strength to it, Phillips reasons that it is hard to see how it addresses the limitations of moral endeavour. After all, would not any further endeavour, after death, be equally imperfect? More importantly, here, too, there is a failure to say farewell to life:

> "There is the feeling that it is intolerable that I should end like this with all my flaws and imperfections, in the tangle of circumstances over which, for the most part, I have no control. My improvement, it seems, *must* be part of the final story."[62]

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[59] See Phillips 1996, p. 284.
[60] See Phillips 2000, pp. 148-153; cf. Phillips 1970(a), pp. 21-39.
[61] Phillips 2000, p. 150.
[62] Phillips 2000, p. 150.

The third view Phillips discusses may seem far more sympathetic. It conceives of immortality as a hope, not for my own improvement, but for the improvement of others. Even if one can say farewell to one's own life, is it not intolerable that others should do the same when their lives have been so wretched? This reaction, Phillips admits, is a powerful one. It recognises that religion must address the conditions in which people live their lives. The belief that we are children of God, vehicles of grace, is empty if it does not have implications for the way we behave towards our fellow beings. Of course, no matter how hard we try, there are no guarantees; the world may not smile upon us. This, Phillips argues, is a further source of power for this view. It recognises the belief that if in this life only we have hope we are the most miserable. Yet, according to Phillips, this reaction still involves an inability to say farewell to life. For what it offers "is a compensatory extension of it; a temporal eternity."[63]

Finally, Phillips argues, the most fundamental source of a metaphysical belief in immortality is, simply, our desire for self-preservation. Indeed, some of the reactions we have considered may be seen to be manifestations of it. This is an instinct that goes deep with us: "The thought that we should cease to exist is intolerable to us. The promise of a temporal eternity allays this fear."[64]

What binds the four reactions we have considered together, Phillips argues, is that they all involve an inability to say farewell to life. It is various concerns within this life that determine the nature of immortality. Life after death seems to be just more life, a prolongation of life which meets our desire for compensation for the various ills and imperfections that characterise our earthly lives. This is why Phillips speaks of such belief as a belief in 'temporal eternity'. On this view, 'the other world' and 'immortality' seem to be versions of this world writ large. Ironically, Phillips argues, such apologists for the supernatural are, in fact, wedded to the natural world. They treat Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross — 'today you will be with me in paradise'[65] — as a transcendentalised version of 'See you later'.[66]

In the four cases discussed, it could be said that the mortal determines the nature of the immortal. This cannot be said of the belief in immortality Phillips wishes to bring to our attention:

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[63] Phillips 2000, p. 152.
[64] Phillips 2000, p. 153.
[65] Luke 23:43.
[66] See Phillips 2000, pp. 153-154, 284-285.

> "In the religious belief in immortality I am concerned to elucidate, the mortal does not determine the immortal. Rather, it is the eternal which gives sense to the temporal."[67]

How are we to understand these words? Phillips draws upon Simone Weil's writings to elucidate them. We feel, Weil writes, that we have a right to a compensation for every effort, be it work, suffering or desire. We live our lives on the expectations of these compensations. Death is horrible chiefly because it forces the knowledge upon us that these compensations will never come.[68] For Weil, Phillips tells us, renouncing our desire for compensation is a condition for passing over into religious truth. This renunciation, Phillips suggests, is what the believer means by 'dying to the self':

> "He ceases to see himself as the centre of his world. Death's lesson for the believer is to force him to recognise what all his natural instincts want to resist, namely, that he has no claims on the way things go. Most of all, he is forced to realise that his own life is not a necessity."[69]

According to Phillips, the metaphysical belief in immortality, as it were, reduces the status of death to the status of sleep: we hope to wake again to a new and better life. But then the lesson religious believers see in death is lost, since death "no longer reveals the fact that there is to be no compensation, but is seen as an additional fact for which compensation must be sought."[70] This, Phillips suggests, is why Weil says that the desire for a temporal eternity is harmful: "this belief is in fact a belief in the prolongation of life, and it robs death of its purpose."[71]

The contrast between the desire for compensation and the religious conception of dying to the self, Phillips argues, is precisely the contrast between the temporal — that is, concern with the self — and the eternal — that is, concern with self-renunciation. In turning away from the temporal to the eternal, the believer is said to attain immortality and to overcome death:

> "The soul which is rooted in the mortal is the soul where the ego is dominant in the way which Simone Weil describes in such penetrating detail in her works. The immortality of the soul by contrast refers to a person's

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[67] Phillips 2000, p. 154.
[68] See Weil 1963, pp. 150-151; the relevant passages are quoted in Phillips 1970(a), pp. 52-53 and Phillips 2000, pp. 152-153.
[69] Phillips 1970(a), pp. 52-53.
[70] Phillips 1970(a), p. 53.
[71] Weil 1963, p. 33; quoted in Phillips 1970(a), p. 53 and Phillips 2000, p. 153.

relation to the self-effacement and love of others involved in dying to the self. Death is overcome in that dying to the self is the meaning of the believer's life."[72]

It will be clear that, on Phillips's account, speculations about continued existence after death are really beside the point. Eternal life is not some kind of appendage to human existence, something which happens *after* human life on earth is over. Rather, for the believer, eternal life is participation in the life of God, a life that has to do with dying to the self, seeing that all things are a gift from God, that nothing is ours by right or necessity.[73] To believe in the immortality of the soul, is to want to give one's life to God. Death is overcome, not by the promise of more life to come, but by saying farewell to life in giving it to God:

> "To die in God is to be able to see one's death as part of the majesty of God's will. Saying farewell to life is not a negative act. It is part of what is meant by giving glory to God. It is in this way that the believer becomes more than he or she is; it is in this way that the mortal puts on immortality, and the corruptible puts on incorruption."[74]

How different this is, Phillips remarks, from those analyses of the belief in immortality where the mortal determines the immortal, and the temporal determines the eternal. As does Flew, those who propose such analyses assume that the interest in immortality *must* be an interest in temporal immortality. After all, 'what are three-score years and ten compared with all eternity'? According to Phillips, the atheist critic is correct in seeing in belief in temporal eternity an inability to say farewell to life. What the critic does not see, however, is a mode of saying farewell to life in which the mortal puts on immortality, and the corruptible puts on incorruption. To appreciate this possibility, Phillips concludes, "is to see the importance of the 'soul' in the words of religious belief."[75]

7.5 Truth and descriptive adequacy

The previous section sought to reproduce Phillips's alternative account of the belief in the immortality of the soul, an account which, Phillips believes, captures the 'soul' in the words of religious belief. Now, even if we accept Phillips's account as a possible way of interpreting the belief

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[72] Phillips 1970(a), p. 54.
[73] See Phillips 1970(a), pp. 48, 54-55.
[74] Phillips 2000, p. 155.
[75] Phillips 2000, p. 156.

in immortality we should still want to ask whether it is true. This question can be taken in two ways. First, it can be understood in rather a straightforward way: 'Is the belief that our souls are immortal true?'. Secondly, it can be taken as a question concerning the descriptive accuracy of Phillips's account: 'Does Phillips's account adequately represent what believers have taken, and take, their belief to mean?'. We discuss these questions in turn.

First, then, is the belief in immortality true? As we saw, no matter what further elements are involved in the 'traditional'[76] belief in immortality, they are all dependent on the factual truth of survival after death. The question of the possibility of survival at least purports to allow for a straightforward 'Yes' or 'No' answer.[77] It has been argued that Phillips's account, by contrast, allows for no such possibility. Hyman, for example, suggests that on Phillips's interpretation "the belief that the soul is immortal cannot be true or false because it is, in the final analysis, an *attitude* towards death."[78]

Phillips's reply is twofold. On the one hand, he agrees that to ask whether expressions of the belief in immortality are true as if they were would-be empirical propositions is to ask the wrong kind of question. On the other hand, this does not mean that the concepts of 'truth' and 'falsity', 'reality' and 'illusion' have no application here. Phillips asks us to consider the following example: a devoted married couple who travelled extensively, their main interest being church architecture. They had a photograph of a church which interested them, but they did not know its location. They hoped to find the church one day, but when the husband died they still had not done so. His wife, along with another widow, continued on her travels. One day, she discovered the church in the photograph. She turned to her side, where no one was standing, and said, 'Here's our church'.[79]

Whenever she found the church, Phillips tells us, the widow believed her husband would be by her side. Now, we might perhaps be inclined to ask whether her belief was true; that is, whether her husband was *really* there. And, should she reply that, indeed, he was, we might want

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[76] At this stage of our enquiry it has become necessary to use scare quotes, seeing as Phillips believes his account better to represent the Christian belief in the immortality of the soul than the metaphysical one his opponents put forward.

[77] As we saw, not a few philosophers would argue that it is neither true nor false that we shall survive our deaths, since the notion is incoherent. It follows that the belief in immortality is equally incoherent. Or perhaps we might say it is false by default.

[78] Hyman 1996, p. 256.

[79] See Phillips 2000, p. 185.

to enquire as to his exact position. However, according to Phillips, we would then be distorting the situation. We would be taking the picture in a direction it is not meant to go.[80] Clearly, her husband was not there in the same sense as the lady's travelling companion was there. But, Phillips argues, it does not follow either that her belief must therefore be deemed false or illusory, or that it is best described as an 'attitude' which can be neither true nor false. Phillips refers us to a passage in Weil's writings:

> "To lose somebody: we suffer at the thought that the dead one, the absent one should have become something imaginary, something false. But the longing we have for him is not imaginary. […] The loss of contact with reality — there lies evil, there lies sorrow. There are certain situations which bring about such a loss: deprivation, suffering. The remedy is to use the loss itself as an intermediary for attaining reality. The presence of the dead one is imaginary, but his absence is very real; it is henceforth his manner of appearing."[81]

When Weil says that the presence of the dead one is imaginary, Phillips explains, she is thinking of illusions, superstitions and imaginings of various kinds. In such cases, we lose contact with reality. Rather than facing the void left by the departed, we fill it with our imagination. To avoid this, we must look for what *is* real in our situation. This, Weil suggests, is to be found in our very loss, our longing, in the void created by the beloved's absence. This longing, which is undoubtedly something real, cannot be grasped except as a longing for that person. He has not become something unreal, imaginary, because mention of him is indispensable to describing the reality of the world as it is: he makes a difference to the world by virtue of his absence. Consider, for example, how, after the death of a loved one, the empty chair at a favourite café table at which one used to sit with him can acquire a new significance. Here, there is no loss of contact with reality. Quite the contrary:

> "it is precisely reality that is embraced, despite the fact that the reality embraced is the realisation that the dead one can only be present in the form of absence."[82]

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[80] Of course, Phillips presents his example under the assumption that it is free from features such as apparitions, strange voices, familiar voices coming through a medium, etc.

[81] Weil 1956, p. 29, quoted in Phillips 2001, p. 121; cf. Phillips 1976, p. 125.

[82] Phillips 2001, p. 122; cf. Phillips 1976, pp. 124-127, Phillips 2000, 181-182, and Phillips 2001, pp. 120-122. In his interpretation of Weil's remarks Phillips draws on an unpublished manuscript by Peter Winch, passages of which are quoted on the pages referred to.

To return to the example of the travelling widow; we may want to ask whether it makes sense to speak of the 'real presence' of a dead husband. In certain circumstances it may even be important to do so, if only to avoid the confusion of thinking that we are engaged in a quasi-scientific investigation of the kind so often associated with the Society for Psychical Research. But, Phillips argues, as soon as *that* option is denied, this does not mean that the only alternative is to say that the wife's conviction concerning her dead husband is, essentially, an attitude she has, say, towards his memory. The reality of her husband 'being there' may be understood, in the sense indicated, as a spiritual reality. Too crude a distinction between 'facts' and 'attitudes' only tends to obscure these matters. Says Phillips:

> "Certain philosophers, uneasy of this talk of spiritual realities, will try to domesticate my remarks within the parameters of their philosophical categories. Often, they operate with a simplistic distinction between facts and attitudes. […] Apart from contrasting it with facts, they seldom bother to tell us what they mean by 'attitude'."[83]

Phillips reminds us of Wittgenstein's remarks on our attitude towards another as a soul in a way which includes our most primitive responses to others as human beings.[84] Who, Phillips asks, would want to contrast *this* attitude with the facts?

Similar conclusions to the ones we have drawn concerning the example of the widow, can be drawn with relation to religious pictures, such as those related to the doctrine of immortality. The belief in life after death cannot be treated as we would a belief that coffee will be served after dinner. As we have seen, according to Phillips, the religious picture of the soul leaving the body should not be understood as a prediction that certain things are going to happen but, rather, as "the expression and embodiment of a reflection on, or vision of, the meaning of life and death."[85] Now, if this is what one means by saying that we are not dealing with 'the facts' but with 'an attitude', fair enough.[86] But, Phillips argues, it does not follow that, because in this context the notion of truth has little to do with verifying whether a future state of affairs is to take place, it cannot play any role at all. That would be to rule out any other notion of 'truth' than the one we employ in relation to empirical propositions.

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[83] Phillips 2000, p. 182.
[84] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 178.
[85] Phillips 1970(a), p. 67.
[86] Indeed, Phillips has himself employed similar expressions; see, for example, Phillips 1976, pp. 136-137.

Rather, we need to explore what truth comes to in various contexts. In so doing, Phillips argues, we shall find that, in the religious context we are currently discussing, 'truth' is confessional in nature:

> "It is of the utmost philosophical importance to recognise that for the believers these pictures constitute truths, truths which form the essence of life's meaning for them. To ask someone whether he thinks these beliefs are true is not to ask him to produce evidence for them, but rather to ask him whether he can live by them, whether he can digest them, whether they constitute food for him."[87]

If one answers affirmatively, then this will have factual consequences for one's life. If a man does believe, say, that death has no dominion over him, that his family are one in heaven, he will make decisions and react in ways very unlike the man who holds ideas such as that everyone has his own life to live, that the old have had their chance and should make way for the young, that life is for the living, and so on. In this way, Phillips concludes, "belief may not simply determine one's reactions [or 'attitude'] to events that befall one, but actually determine what one takes the alternatives facing one to be."[88]

I tend to agree with Phillips that a simple distinction between 'facts' and 'attitudes' is too crude to be of any real significance. Furthermore, I see no immediate reason to object, on some general principle, to the suggestion that the question as to whether or not a certain belief is 'true' may not be a matter of awarding a truth value to a proposition 'p'. That is to say, if we accept Phillips's account of the belief in immortality, then we might as well accept that 'truth' in this context is confessional, in the sense indicated. But then, *should* we accept Phillips's analysis? This brings us to our second question, the question concerning the descriptive adequacy of Phillips's account.

According to Hyman, "it would be perverse to deny that the attitude Phillips describes can be an admirable one."[89] It has some affinity with the attitude which the fifteenth-century treatises on the art of dying were meant to foster — an attitude, Hyman suggests, which will enable a Christian to overcome the temptations that can assail him or her as death approaches. Be this as it may, Hyman feels he should warn Phillips that such an attitude also has a corrupt version; "the morbid egoism of some overenthusiastic martyrs, such as Ignatius of Antioch", and that, more-over, "its diametrical opposite ('Rage, rage against the dying of the light')

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[87] Phillips 1970(a), p. 71.
[88] Phillips 1970(a), p. 71.
[89] Hyman 1996, p. 257.

can be just as admirable and at least as sympathetic."[90] Hyman's remarks echo Clack's observation concerning Weil's 'love of nothingness' we referred to in our discussion of *The Concept of Prayer*. We then asked, do we really need to go this far? That, I replied, is for the reader to decide. According to Hyman, however, Phillips leaves the reader little choice: Phillips's aim is to establish, philosophically, that his account of the belief in immortality *is* preferable, because contrary accounts are, first, incoherent and, secondly, motivationally culpable.[91] Now, I agree with Hyman that, even if the traditional account of belief in immortality can be shown to be incoherent, it does not follow that, therefore, it is worthless. Furthermore, I agree that the 'four examples of beliefs in temporal eternity' Phillips discusses are dealt with far too harshly. To provide one example: the first, as the reader will recall, sought recompense for pursuing a virtuous life. I do not wish to deny that this desire has its perverse forms, as Phillips indicates. But, surely, such a desire may also be understood as arising from a love of and hope for justice. In such a case, it would be grossly unfair to say that, here, "life's lowest motives and desires determine the conception of immortality involved."[92] Furthermore, Phillips's claim that, in each of these examples, we may recognise 'a failure' or 'an inability' to say farewell to life clearly has pejorative overtones. It should be replied that, rather than a failure, we may also be witnessing a *refusal* to do so — an indictment of the pathological forms of self-abasement to which Hyman and Clack draw our attention.

Hyman does well to make these points. I am less certain, however, about his suggestion that Phillips's aim is to establish that his account of the belief in immortality is preferable to traditional accounts, and that this can be demonstrated philosophically. Clearly, Phillips believes his account to do the more justice to the way in which believers understand their belief. If this is what Hyman means by saying that Phillips believes his account to be preferable, then there is no objection. But Hyman seems to imply something else, namely, that Phillips aims to demonstrate, philosophically, that his account is 'religiously preferable'. Such a motive cannot be attributed to Phillips. For it would conflict with Phillips's understanding of religious truth as confessional. Even if Phillips should confess to the belief in immortality as he himself describes it, in Phillips's view,

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[90] Hyman 1996, pp. 262-263.
[91] See Hyman 1996, pp. 261-262.
[92] Phillips 2000, p. 150.

that confession would itself be a religious act. In making such a decision, the philosopher, Phillips insists, is on the same footing as anyone else — he would be speaking for himself.[93]

Let us, however, return to our main question: is Phillips's account descriptively adequate? We may begin by noting that his elucidation of the belief in immortality will certainly strike a chord with many Christians. As Clack points out, Christianity undeniably preaches a message of self-denial.[94] Phillips's account certainly captures this aspect of Christian belief. What is more, we may agree with Hyman that Phillips has succeeded in showing that this 'spirit of self-denial' can be expressed figuratively by saying that the soul is immortal.[95] Even so, Hyman is not convinced that this suffices to justify Phillips's claim that his account reflects what ordinary believers believe. On the contrary, Hyman suspects it to be a creation of a minority within contemporary philosophy of religion: "this is what is meant by the immortality of the soul only *within* a philosophy of religion, albeit an unorthodox one."[96]

Phillips replies that if he thought his account were his own creation, he would give it up tomorrow.[97] He is convinced that his elucidation are elucidations of the belief in immortality as it has been understood historically:

> "What I am trying to elucidate I have *always* found in Christianity. When I read certain writers such as Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton and Rush Rhees, they gave me perspicuous representations, in a philosophical context, of what I had already known in a religious context."[98]

How is this dispute to be resolved? One way to decide whether or not Phillips's elucidation of the belief in immortality is descriptively adequate would be to examine the breadth of its scope. Is it capable of providing a plausible account of the broad variety of expressions, pictures, reflections, etc., which have historically been associated with the belief in immortality? Of course, Phillips's account need not be complete in the sense that it should encompass everything we can think of in this context. That would be a foolish demand. Nevertheless, when more and more aspects are excluded, one's account becomes less and less credible. Particularly so, when the aspects one fails to incorporate clearly play a

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[93] See, for example, Phillips 1967, p. 6, Phillips 1981, pp. 157-158.
[94] See Clack 1999(a), p. 97.
[95] See Hyman 1996, p. 257.
[96] Hyman 1996, p. 257; cf. Hyman 1996, p. 285.
[97] See Phillips 1996, p. 285.
[98] Phillips 2000, p. 155.

crucial and central role in the context of the belief one is trying to elucidate. Now, I do not wish to deny that what Phillips's account reveals to us may be found in Christianity. The point, rather, is that much else is to be found besides. For one thing, it might be argued that Phillips's account tells us something only about the relation of the individual to God during this present life. It says little about the destiny of the soul after death, and since this is an essential part of what has been meant by the immortality of the soul, the offered account is inadequate.[99] Phillips tries to meet this objection by considering the way in which 'eternal predicates' can be ascribed to the dead. While some of his descriptions are unobjectionable,[100] others, I feel, are somewhat strained. Consider, for example, Phillips's version of the belief that the dead pray for the living, or might intercede on their behalf. First, Phillips argues that when we ascribe prayers to the dead, 'prayer' means something else than what it means when the living pray. Secondly, Phillips explains to us what it does mean:

> "The prayers of the dead are prayers *from or in eternity*. […] The activity of the dead is the activity of the eternal in them. What is more, the possibility of this activity depends on the extent to which the eternal was in their lives when they were alive. It is because of the presence of the eternal in the life of the Virgin Mary and of the saints that they, though dead, can yet speak."[101]

Is Phillips's claim that, in this context, 'prayer' means something else, anything more than an *ad hoc* argument to dispose of a religious practice which sits uneasily with his account of the belief in immortality? As to his description of the dead praying for us, if I understand him correctly, Phillips means to say that the lives of dead — depending, of course, on the kind of lives they led — may become objects of contemplation for the living, "a measure in terms of which the individual assesses himself or understands himself and the world."[102] I agree that this can be expressed (figuratively) by saying that the saints still speak to us or, even, that they can still help us. But I find it difficult to accept that the expression 'the dead pray for us' can likewise be accounted for.

Even if I am wrong about this, and my objection should be waived, there is a further point which, I believe, cannot so easily be dismissed.

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[99] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 55-56.
[100] See, for example, his account of the belief that one's dead father is watching over one in Phillips 2000, pp. 179-183 and Phillips 1976, pp. 123-133.
[101] Phillips 1970(a), p. 58.
[102] Phillips 1970(a), p. 58.

Phillips's account concentrates on pictures of the soul: the soul leaving the body, the immortality of the soul, the eternal destiny of the soul, etc. We should not forget, however, that the Christian hope for immortality is a hope for the immortality of the whole person, not just the soul, but also the body. The notion of the resurrection of the body has always played a crucial role in the Christian belief in immortality. Apart from rejecting the notion as non-sensical,[103] Phillips's account does not in any way address this aspect of the belief in immortality. In this context we would do well to remember that it is Christ's resurrection which gives both foundation and substance to the Christian hope of eternal life. Phillips suggests that the belief that we shall all meet again beyond the grave functions as a picture which expresses the belief that people should act towards each other, "not according to the status and prestige that people have acquired or failed to acquire, during the course of their lives, but as children of God, in the equality which death will reveal."[104] Should one account for Christ's emergence from the tomb, and his subsequent appearing to the Apostles, along similar lines? If so, one had better be prepared to forsake a good deal of what, beyond any doubt, should be called traditional Christian beliefs. I feel certain that Phillips would agree to this; that Christ's resurrection calls for another sort of elucidation. And it is difficult to see how he could deny the intimate relation between the hope for eternal life and the resurrection of Christ. Any account of the belief in immortality cannot afford to fail to incorporate this aspect. However, given the problems we encountered in the previous chapter, it is difficult to see how Phillips should accomplish this.

Let us consider a second criterion one might apply to judge whether or not a given account of a certain practice is descriptively adequate. It is a rather simple and straightforward one: one should compare one's account to those given by the participants of the practice under investigation. This criterion becomes all the more important when one agrees with Wittgenstein that one's philosophical account should in no way interfere with what people believe in religion.[105] There can be little doubt that Phillips feels his account satisfies this criterion. As we saw, he refers us to such authors as Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton and Rush Rhees. Now, as to the appeal made to Wittgenstein and Rush Rhees; obviously this will not take us very far. First, they can hardly be taken as representative of average Christian believers. Indeed,

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[103] See Phillips 1970(a), pp. 14-15.
[104] Phillips 1970(a), p. 66.
[105] See Kerr 1986, p. 32; cf. Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 71-72.

neither of them thought of himself as a Christian. Secondly, given the tight connections between Wittgenstein's, Rhees's and Phillips's work, it is clear that if one disagrees with either one of them, one disagrees with all of them. As to Kierkegaard, Weil and Merton; I take it few would wish to deny that these authors enjoy a certain authority in matters religious and that their writings constitute an indispensable part of the history of Christianity. It is equally clear, however, that their views can hardly be considered orthodox. If Phillips's account accords with theirs, this tends to confirm rather than refute Hyman's suspicion that Phillips's account shows us what is meant by the immortality of the soul only within a philosophy of religion, albeit an unorthodox one. We may agree with Richard Messer that there are major strands within Christianity which seem more suited to Phillips's account than to that of his critics.[106] But there are at least equally major strands within Christianity, and probably more so, which Phillips's account cannot be said to accommodate.

When we turn from the 'professional' to the 'everyday' believer, matters do not seem to improve. Quite the contrary. Phillips admits that if we were to ask an 'average' believer whether he believes, say, that we shall *really* meet after death, he would, in all likelihood, answer that we shall.[107] In other words, Phillips does not deny that there will be believers who truly believe, in the metaphysical sense, that we shall meet beyond the grave. Says Phillips:

> "more often than not the believer's faith is a complex tangle of beliefs and confused accounts of those belief. What I wish to stress is the logical independence of the beliefs from the confusions attributed to believers by many philosophers"[108]

If the believer's faith is actually an amalgam of beliefs and confused accounts of these beliefs, as the first sentence says,[109] then surely it is no longer convincing to claim that these beliefs are logically independent of the accounts of them the believer entertains. Both being part of the believer's faith, it seems more plausible to conclude that there will be patterns of interference: the account the believer feels correctly to reflect his belief, confused or not, will have an effect on his beliefs, moulding them and giving shape to the way the believer practices his beliefs. To put it somewhat differently, I do not think it is possible sharply to

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[106] See Messer 1993, p. 54.
[107] See Phillips 1970(a), p. 69.
[108] Phillips 1970(a), pp. 69-70.
[109] Note that the second sentence seems to imply that the confused accounts are imposed externally, by certain philosophers.

distinguish between the account a believer gives of his belief and the belief itself. If the former is confused, the latter will not remain completely unaffected. Furthermore, if it is true, as I have suggested, that there are major strands in Christianity which incorporate the kind of metaphysical beliefs and assumptions Phillips believes to be confused, then the faith of a not inconsiderable group of believers will contain not just confused accounts of the religious beliefs in immortality, but, simply, confused or incoherent beliefs as such.

In conclusion: we began by asking how we should understand the religious belief in immortality. According to Phillips, if this belief is based on the assumption that we shall, in some way, survive our deaths, we can only conclude that it is incoherent. However, Phillips argued, there are other possibilities of understanding. In the previous sections we examined the way in which Phillips develops his alternative account of the meaning of the belief in immortality. Finally, we asked whether Phillips's account is descriptively adequate. We proposed two criteria to settle the issue. First the descriptive range of the proposed account. We argued that Phillips's account fails to address a singularly important datum: the Christian hope for a bodily resurrection, substantiated by Christ's resurrection. Phillips might well be able to incorporate this aspect of the belief in immortality into his account. However, given the conclusions we drew in the previous chapter, this may prove no easy task. The second criterion demands that we measure the proposed account of a given religious practice by the accounts the participants of that practice themselves provide. If we do so, we argued, we find that Phillips's account fails to accommodate the beliefs of a not inconsiderable group of believers. The implications of that conclusion are dealt with in the ninth chapter of this book. First, however, we turn to examine that religious belief, the meaningfulness and truth of which, one might say, must be established before we may even begin to entertain the beliefs in miracles and immortality: the belief that God exists.

8. THE REALITY OF GOD

In the previous two chapters we have examined Phillips's account of, respectively, the belief in miracles and the belief in immortality. It might be argued, however, that these beliefs presuppose a more fundamental belief, viz. the belief that God exists. After all, it is said to be God who performs miracles, God who grants eternal life. The main question thus seems to be how we are to understand this primary belief in the existence or reality of God. Once again, Phillips criticises received opinions on this matter. In his view, rather than being logically prior to religious practice, the belief that God exists acquires its sense *in* its religious contexts of application. Rejecting both theological realism and theological non-realism, Phillips seeks to do justice to the role the belief plays in the contexts of worship and praise in which it has its natural home.

8.1 Realism and non-realism

The point of departure in our previous discussions consisted in giving a definition of the object of the belief under examination. Where belief in the existence of God is concerned, however, this procedure hardly seems promising. The difficulty is that the concept of God is used in a bewildering variety of ways. Detailed discussions soon show that innumerable meanings have, at one time or another, been given to the word 'God' or its equivalents. There seems little hope of tracing a single dominant conception of God, even within Christianity.[1]

Faced with this problem, one might opt for a philosophically inspired, minimal definition. Bailey, for example, suggests that to believe in God is to believe 'in the existence of a causally efficacious divine being'.[2] Of course, such a definition has problems of its own. Being minimal to the point of becoming vague, it cannot hope to encapsulate the wealth of practices and ideas surrounding the belief in the reality of God. Furthermore, it begs the question as to how we are to understand the notion of

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[1] See Messer 1993, pp. 53-55.
[2] See Bailey 2001, p. 119ff. I allude to Bailey's phrase merely for the purposes of illustration. Although Bailey believes it to be more or less synonymous to 'God', he does not present it as a definition proper.

a *divine* being. After all, it is not as if we are already acquainted with
a number of divine beings, just not the one called 'God'. Nevertheless,
one might feel that the phrase succeeds at least in capturing what must
be taken as the bare essentials of the belief in the reality of God. Namely,
that there exist some being, with whom one can enter into a relation-
ship, and who is capable of interacting with the world. And, obviously,
the notion of divinity is introduced to exclude such 'beings' as, say, my
brother and my pet guinea pig from satisfying these conditions. God's
attributes are said to be such as cannot be ascribed to human beings and
animals — e.g. God is timeless, omnipotent, pure spirit — and God is
said to be capable of interacting with the world in such a manner as
no human being or animal can — e.g. performing miracles, granting
eternal life.

It will be clear that the suggested definition carries with it the impli-
cation that the belief in the existence of God shall be understood to be
both cognitive and factual in nature. It states that a certain state of affairs
holds true; that things are thus and not otherwise. It follows that the
belief is, at least in principle, open to verification or falsification. Thus,
Bailey's claim that, at its base level, faith contains the belief in the exis-
tence of a causally efficacious divine being, implies that such faith is
susceptible to external criticism. Like any other causal belief, it can be
assessed as reasonable or unreasonable in the light of the principles of
causal reasoning we all employ in our everyday lives. Any person who
is capable of making competent judgements about the humdrum causal
mechanisms that operate in his or her immediate environment, Bailey
feels, is potentially someone who can arrive at an appropriate determi-
nation of the rationality or irrationality of the kind of religious faith
embraced by most believers.[3]

There can be little doubt that Phillips would object to Bailey's con-
clusions. In his view, to talk about God is not to talk about some kind
of object, the existence of which could be either verified or falsified by
some kind of an investigation. Though, admittedly, they might appear
thus, such statements as 'God exists', 'God is real', Phillips argues, are
not statements in the indicative mood; rather, they are expressions of
faith: "If a person believes in God this is something which shows itself
in his praise and worship. 'I believe in God' is, above all, an expression
of faith."[4]

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[3] See Bailey 2001, p. 136.
[4] Phillips 1976, p. 181.

I assume that Phillips's critics, Bailey included, would not disagree that to say one believes in God is to express one's faith. They would insist, however, that in confessing one's faith, there must be something to confess. As Herman Philipse puts it, "one cannot believe without believing that some proposition is true."[5] Thus, it is all well and good to suggest, as Phillips does, that eternal life for the believer is participation in the life of God, and that this life has to do with dying to the self, with seeing that all things are a gift of God. But to speak of self-renunciation as an imitation of the act of divine self-renunciation at creation and on the Cross, is not to prove the existence of a divine subject who so renounces Himself. Again, to say that everything is a gift from God is not to prove the existence of the Giver.

Phillips anticipates such a reaction. He argues that it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding:

> "I believe these popular philosophical objections to be radically miscon-
> strued. In learning by contemplation, attention, renunciation, what forgiving,
> thanking, loving, etc. mean in these contexts, the believer is participating in
> the reality of God; *this is what we mean by God's reality*."[6]

These remarks have met with different replies. On the one hand, Phillips has been accused of conflating the existence of religious perspectives and their associated practices with the existence of God. Clearly, this will not do. Far from establishing the reality of God, these perspectives and practices presuppose that God exists. After all, we cannot believe in God unless there is a God to believe in; it makes no sense to worship and pray unless there is a God worthy of receiving our worship and capable of hearing our prayers in the first place. In short, Phillips fails to realise the fact, or refuses to acknowledge it, that belief in the existence of God is logically prior to any other religious belief or practice.

On the other hand, Phillips's account of the reality of God has been received, perhaps more charitably, not as a thinly veiled attempt to dodge the whole issue concerning the existence of God but, rather, as a thoroughly non-realist analysis of religious belief and practice. Briefly put, theological realism interprets religious language as referring to a transcendent divine reality, the existence of which is independent of our thoughts, actions, and attitudes. Theological non-realism, by contrast, interprets religious language, not as referring to a transcendent reality, but as expressing our emotions, or our basic moral insights and intentions, or

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[5] Philipse 2000, p. 310.
[6] Phillips 1970(a), p. 55.

as referring to our moral and spiritual ideals.[7] On this reading, Phillips
is not claiming, absurdly, that the fact that believers refer to God demon-
strates that there exists 'a causally efficacious divine being'. Rather, he
is arguing that religious language does not endeavour, successfully or
unsuccessfully, to refer to such an entity at all. This would be one way
of developing Wittgenstein's remark that religious belief is something
like 'a passionate commitment to a system of reference'. Although the
belief in God is a 'belief', Wittgenstein suggests, "it's really a way of
living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this*
interpretation."[8] To say that God exists is not to assert the existence of
some kind of entity: "what is here at issue is not the existence of some-
thing."[9] Rather, it expresses one's commitment to leading a life in which
certain questions will be asked, obligations will be acknowledged, deci-
sions taken and actions performed, which can only be explained or under-
stood in terms of religious concepts.

There is certainly plenty of *prima facie* evidence for such a non-real-
ist interpretation of Phillips's account of the reality of God. For exam-
ple, Phillips tells us that, if someone where to show us pictures of cer-
tain exotic plants as proof of the reality of the plants, one might say,
with justification, 'I shan't be convinced if you can only show me these
pictures. I shall only be convinced when I see the plants'. If, on the
other hand, having heard of people praising the Creator of heaven and
earth, feeling answerable to the One who sees all, someone were to say,
'But these are only religious perspectives, show me what they refer to',
this, Phillips argues, would be a misunderstanding of the grammar of
such perspectives:

> "The pictures of the plants refer to their objects, namely, the plants. The
> religious pictures give one a language in which it is possible to think about
> human life in a certain way. The pictures […] provide the logical space
> within which such thoughts can have a place. When these thoughts are
> found in worship, the praising and glorifying does not refer to some object
> called God. Rather, the expression of such praise and glory is what we call
> the worship of God."[10]

Now, from the realist's perspective, the type of religious belief that
is offered by the non-realist is but a pale shadow of *genuine* religious

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[7] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 402; Hick 1993, p 7.

[8] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 64.

[9] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 82: "*daß es sich hier um eine Existenz nicht handelt*". Hyman
suggests that the translation 'what is here at issue is not an entity' may be preferable. (See
Hyman 2001, p. 11, fn 3.)

[10] Phillips 1976, p. 149.

belief.[11] Admittedly, believing that God exists is unlike believing a hypothesis in history or in science. The differences have to do with the ways in which we may be led to the belief that God exists, and the ways in which this belief will influence our other beliefs and our feelings, commitments and actions. But it does not follow that believing that God exists is *nothing but* 'a passionate commitment to a system of reference'. Indeed, one's belief that God exists will typically be among one's reasons for having and retaining that commitment.[12] Thus, the realist reiterates his contention that the belief that God exists is logically prior to, and stands in an explanatory and, if true, justificatory relation to, a person's commitment to lead a religious life. To dispose of this belief would amount to no less than disposing of religious belief altogether:

> "The minimal content of a religious belief is the proposition that a god, or God, exist or exists, and according to my definition of religion there simply is no religion without acceptance of such a proposition."[13]

According to the realist, then, the non-realist account of religious belief is reductionist. It seeks to retain religious language whilst doing away with the primary object to which this language refers. Thus it dispenses with what is logically indispensable for any notion of belief. What we are left with, one might say, is a kind of 'semantic atheism'.[14]

Whether or not one agrees with this assessment, many have assumed that Phillips's account is best understood as a non-realist account of the nature of religious belief, akin, in many ways, to the kind of accounts presented by, for example, R. M. Hare, R. B. Braithwaite, and Don Cupitt. Phillips's version of theological non-realism, however, may appear to be somewhat more radical than that of the authors mentioned. Non-realists like Hare, Cupitt, and Braithwaite seem little inclined to claim that theological realism *has not been* integral to the faith 'as it is'. Rather, they dispense with something which they admit was once vital to faith, in the interest of preserving and revitalising the rest of it. In this sense, to be a non-realist, is to be a revisionist. By contrast, as noted previously, Phillips does not take himself to be reforming anything at all. Apparently, or so Terence Penelhum concludes, Phillips believes "faith, *as it is*, to be a non-realist phenomenon."[15]

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[11] See Talbert 2000, p. 13.
[12] See Hyman 2001, p. 7.
[13] Philipse 2000, p. 311.
[14] See Philipse 2001.
[15] Quoted in Phillips 1993, p. 34.

This conclusion, however, would seem to be premature if only for the simple reason that Phillips explicitly denies that he has sought to present a non-realist account of the belief that God exists or, for that matter, of any religious belief or practice at all. True, Phillips believes the realist's account to be radically confused. The problem is not that realism is a correct analysis of ordinary beliefs, but just not of religious beliefs. Rather, "realism is a confused account of *any* kind of belief: believing that my brother is in America, that a theorem is valid, that fire will burn me. In short, realism is not coherently expressible."[16] If this accusation is justified, Phillips adds, it follows that "realism has never been integral to faith."[17] This remark raises two important questions.

First, does this not, after all, support a non-realist reading of Phillips's position? That is to say, if realism is incoherent, should we not turn to non-realism for a proper understanding of religious belief? According to Phillips this is not the case. We shall examine Phillips's arguments more thoroughly in a moment. But, in brief, Phillips's main complaint is that theological realism detaches religious belief — the paradigm case being the belief that God exists — from the religious practices in which it has its sense. This effects a divorce between belief and practice which would render *any* kind of believing unintelligible. Now, since only the realist wishes to maintain such a distinction between belief and the 'fruits of belief', Phillips's argument might be seen as playing into the non-realist's hands. But Phillips intends to argue against the cogency of the distinction between belief and fruits of belief, and thereby indirectly argues against the non-realist who takes the distinction to be intelligible but false.[18] Thus, even if we reject theological realism, it does not follow that we must therefore embrace non-realism, and, Phillips argues, his critics are wrong to suggest that he has done so. If realism is confused, so too is its opposite, non-realism: "Theological non-realism is as empty as theological realism. Both terms are battle-cries in a confused philosophical and theological debate".[19]

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[16] Phillips 1993, p. 34. As is evident by his choice of examples, Phillips supports this conclusion — that realism *in general* is incoherent — by his reading of Wittgenstein. (The examples are taken from Wittgenstein's writings; see Wittgenstein 1999, pp. 66-68, Wittgenstein 1994, I, 578, and Wittgenstein 1976, p. 136, respectively.) While I agree with Phillips that it would be a mistake to present Wittgenstein either as a realist or as a non-realist, I shall concentrate on Phillips's arguments against *theological* realism rather than on his arguments against realism *in general* or his arguments in support of a certain reading of Wittgenstein.

[17] Phillips 1993, p. 35.

[18] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 402, n. 3.

[19] Phillips 1993, p. 35.

Secondly, Phillips's claim that, if the realist's position is incoherent, realism has never been integral to faith, might remind one of the kind of argument we encountered in our discussion of Phillips's account of the belief in immortality. Phillips seemed to argue that, if the notion of an inner substance called the soul is incoherent, then whatever is meant by the immortality of the soul cannot be the continued existence of such a substance. Quite rightly, Hyman objected that there is no inconsistency involved in supposing that people hold incoherent beliefs. Likewise, one might argue that, even if realism is incoherent, it does not follow that it is not, or has not been, integral to faith.

Whether that objection is valid, however, depends on what one takes to be involved in theological realism. If theological realism is a species of a more general philosophical theory which purports to explain the nature of belief and language, including, but not limited to, religious belief and language, and if this theory is indeed incoherent, then it follows that realism has never been integral to faith. That is to say, an incoherent theory does not offer a correct explanation of the phenomena it seeks to explain. On the other hand, if one takes theological realism to imply no more than that most believers understand the object of their belief to be 'a causally efficacious divine being' whose existence is independent of our thoughts, actions, and attitudes, then Phillips's conclusion that realism has never been integral to faith is far from self-evident. Even if such a 'realist' belief is incoherent, it does not follow that people cannot believe it. What is more, it would seem extremely difficult to deny that many Christians have held such a belief, and continue to do so.

Thus, the main question becomes whether the descriptive claim — 'when believers say that God is real they affirm their belief in the existence of a causally efficacious divine being called 'God'' — *must* involve the allegedly incoherent methodological assumption that we can detach the belief that God exists from the religious practices which it supposedly engenders. I shall argue that there is no compelling reason to presume this to be the case. One can accept descriptive realism while rejecting methodological realism, and *vice versa*.

Although Phillips does not do so, he seems aware of the possibility of drawing such a distinction between 'descriptive' and 'methodological' theological realism. As we shall see, he develops two distinct lines of argument. On the one hand, theological realism is charged with methodological, or conceptual, confusion. On the other hand, Phillips also claims that theological realism should be rejected on the grounds of descriptive inaccuracy. It misreads what believers are actually doing. In the following

sections, these two lines of argument are discussed in turn. I argue that although Phillips develops a number of forceful arguments against a radical form of methodological realism, he does not successfully demonstrate either that descriptive realism is incoherent, or that it is obviously descriptively inadequate.

8.2 Theological realism is methodologically incoherent

In their article *Can Theological Realism be Refuted?*, Michael Scott and Andrew Moore assess the arguments Phillips presents for answering this question affirmatively. Scott and Moore do not uncritically attribute a non-realist position to Phillips. They recognise that, "far from supporting non-realism above realism, Phillips […] wishes to upset the realist / non-realist debate by showing that the two theories offer equally confused accounts of belief and language, and specifically religious belief and language."[20] Theological realism, Scott and Moore tell us,

> "is the theory that there is a transcendent divine reality, the principal object of religious belief and language, the existence of which is not contingent upon (or, positively, is independent of) our thoughts, actions and attitudes."[21]

In opposition to his realist opponent, Scott and Moore argue, the non-realist maintains that "meaningful religious faith and language are possible without there being any such independently existing entity."[22]

Scott and Moore argue that Phillips opposes the realist's position on two crucial issues. First, whether religious practices are grounded in the belief that God is real. Secondly, whether God may be considered to

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[20] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 401. Phillips might object to this way of putting the matter. As noted above, his point is not that realism offers a confused account of religious belief and language *in particular*. Rather, realism *in general* is incoherent. Thus, in Phillips's view, a realist account of the belief that it is going to rain shall be no less misguided than a realist account of the religious belief that God is real.

[21] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 402. This, I feel, overstates the realist's case. Scott and Moore seem to imply that to be a realist about religious language is to be a believer. But why should the former entail the latter? Non-realism certainly does not entail non-belief. Cupitt and Braithwaite, for instance, provide a non-realist account of religious belief. But they clearly do not present themselves as non-believers. Similarly, could one not be a realist about religious language in that one insists that religious faith and language is meaningful if, and only if, there exists a transcendent divine reality, etc. (or if, and only if, this supposition makes sense), without ascribing to the theory, or belief, that, as a matter of fact, there is such an independent entity? In other words, I would prefer to portray the realist's position more along the lines of Scott and Moore's depiction of that of the non-realist.

[22] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 402.

be an object.[23] These two issues correspond roughly with what I have termed Phillips's 'methodological' and 'descriptive' lines of argument, and Scott and Moore do well to keep them apart. The second line of argument addresses the realist's assumption that the belief that God is real should be construed, essentially, as the quasi-empirical hypothesis that, as a matter of fact, a certain object (or entity) exists. It is discussed in the next section. Phillips's first line of argument purports to establish that in separating the belief that God exists from the religious practices in which it is embedded, the realist "effects a divorce between belief and practice which would render *any* kind of believing unintelligible."[24] Thus, theological realism becomes vacuous. It fails to (and cannot) give an account of what believing in God — what 'God exists' — means. In this section we examine whether Phillips can make good on this claim.

Theological realism, Phillips argues, takes itself to be the expression of a truism: we cannot believe in God unless there is a God to believe in. If that were denied, it seems the belief that God exists would be robbed of its object, namely, God. Aren't we all realists? What we need to realise, Phillips replies, is that, as of yet, no grammatical work has been done to elucidate the relations between belief and its object. Instead of elucidating these relations, Phillips adds, somewhat sarcastically, theological realists often indulge in 'philosophy by italics'.[25] We are told that we would not worship unless we believed that God *exists*. We are told that we cannot talk to God unless He is *there* to talk to. We are told that, for the believer, God's existence is a *fact*. And so on. But, Phillips remarks, nothing is achieved by italicising these words. The task of clarifying their grammar when they are used remains:

> "by all means say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. *But please remember that, as of yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place*. We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in this religious context, what speaking of 'reference', 'object', 'existence', and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms."[26]

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[23] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 401.

[24] Phillips 1993, p. 40.

[25] See Phillips 1993, pp. 29, 35.

[26] Phillips 1995(a), p. 138. I believe Scott and Moore to be mistaken in their claim that this way of putting the matter reflects a 'recent change' in Phillips's position. (See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 414.) From his earliest work onwards, Phillips's critique has been aimed, not at certain phrases we may or may not use, but at what we take these phrases to mean. The words do not really matter, it is what you do with them that counts.

Theological realists, Phillips argues, speak of the relation between belief and its object as though the character of that relation can be taken for granted. But is the relation between a belief and its object the same, no matter the character of what is believed? According to Phillips, we cannot give the same account of 'belief' in every context. To say that the relation between a belief and its object varies, is to say that the contexts of application vary.[27] For example, the belief in the immortality of the soul might be taken to involve a belief that a future state of affairs will take place. On this account, the belief is similar, in relevant ways, to the beliefs, say, that my brother will return home tomorrow, or that I shall be unemployed come spring. Phillips, we saw, does not deny the viability of this account; that is to say, he does not deny that, for some believers, this is what believing in eternal life amounts to. But *must* it reflect what believers take the belief to mean; are there no other possibilities of meaning? This is a genuine question; a question, Phillips argues, which can only be answered by attending to the contexts of application of the belief, i.e. to the role the belief plays in religious practice. The problem with realism is that it "prevents us from answering this question by ignoring the very circumstances which would enable us to answer it; the circumstances in which really believing has its sense."[28] The realist accuses the non-realist of conflating 'believing' with 'the fruits of believing'. The fruits of believing — the role a belief plays in human life, the commitments it engenders, the actions it induces, etc. — are said to be the consequences of believing. Thus, we first believe in the reality of various states of affairs, and then, as a result, act and behave in the characteristic ways we do. On this view, Phillips argues, the essence of believing cannot be found in our shared practices, in anything we do or say, since, according to the realist, these practices are themselves based on something called 'belief'. Phillips's criticism is that this is tantamount to trying to give an account of the meaning of a belief, of the relation of that belief to its object, without reference to *any* context of application.[29] Such an attempt, Phillips concludes, is doomed to fail. What, Phillips asks, does this conception of belief amount to? Is it not entirely vacuous?

> "The realist, by placing 'belief' outside all possible language-games, places it beyond all possible techniques of application in which it could have any

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[27] See Phillips 1993, p. 40.
[28] Phillips 1993, p. 36.
[29] See Phillips 1993, p. 49.

sense. The belief would have to tell you what it is without any such context
— an incoherent supposition."[30]

To return to the case at hand, the realist's claim is that believing in God
is logically independent of the role it plays in religious life. That is to
say, the belief that God exists is logically prior to religious language-
games. After all, we would not pray unless we believed there to be a
god capable of hearing and, perchance, answering our prayers. But, once
again, what does this conception of belief amount to? Having cut off
the belief that God exists from its religious context(s) of application, the
realist, Phillips claims, is no longer able to provide a coherent answer to
this question:

> "Religious language does not determine the truth of the proposition 'God
> exists'. What *that* depends on is there being a God.[31] What religious lan-
> guage determines is *the sense* of the proposition. By placing religious belief
> outside all religious practices, realists like Penelhum, Trigg and Badham can
> give no indication of that sense."[32]

Thus, if I have understood it correctly, runs Phillips's first line of argu-
ment. Its first premise is that what believing something amounts to is
shown in the context of application of a belief, i.e. the activities, com-
mitments, practices, etc. that surround the belief. Its second premise is
that realism severs belief from the activities, commitments, practices,
etc. which give it its sense. Given the truth of both premises, the objec-
tion then arises that the realist makes as a contingent consequence of
an agent's belief the very activities, commitments and practices that
must be in place for the belief that the agent holds to have meaning.[33]
In other words, realism, in general, is unable to give an account of what
believing something amounts to. More to the point, theological realism
cannot specify what it means to believe in God. The argument, as it
stands, seems valid enough. To uphold the realist position, one would
have to take issue with the truth of either of its premises. Thus, for
example, Scott and Moore argue that Phillips claims too much in his
remarks on the relationship between belief and behaviour, and that

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[30] Phillips 1993, p. 23.
[31] These remarks may seem to favour the realist's position. But, as Scott and
Moore note, "Phillips is conceding nothing in saying that the truth of the proposition
'God exists' depends on there being a God, which he takes to be the trivial claim that
'God exists' is not true simply by being asserted or believed." (Scott & Moore 1997,
p. 403.)
[32] Phillips 1993(a), p. 197.
[33] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 405.

he fails to appreciate the importance of establishing the second premise altogether.[34] Let us take a closer look to see whether these criticisms are valid.

Now, it does seem rather difficult to deny that our believing various things may lead us to do various things. To believe that p provides us with reasons to act in certain ways, depending on what is believed, that is, depending upon the nature of p. But, surely, it does not follow, therefore, that the nature of the relation between belief and object varies from case to case? To believe any given p is simply to affirm or assert p. We may readily agree that the content of p may vary and, accordingly, the actions we may or may not undertake on the basis of our believing any given p. But why should we accept that what 'believing' various p's amounts to must vary correspondingly? Furthermore, one might argue that Phillips has not yet provided any compelling reason to force us to abandon the realist's claim that a belief that p is logically prior to the actions or behavioural patterns to which it may or may not give rise. This seems no more than common sense. For a simple example, consider my belief that it is going to rain. Surely, it will not do, as an account of what this belief amounts to, to point out that I might take an umbrella with me when I go out. Rather, my taking an umbrella, should I do so, is a consequence of my antecedently held belief that it is going to rain. Phillips, one might conclude, is really advocating some form of behaviourism: a reductionist analysis of belief in terms of behaviour. Now, admittedly, a person's behaviour is often important in determining the sincerity or, indeed, the nature of that person's belief. But it goes too far to claim, as Phillips does, that there is an 'internal relation' between a belief and the behaviour associated with it, such that 'a belief is not conceivable without the endeavours it informs'.[35] This seems a wholly implausible position. First, having a particular belief does not prescribe any particular form of behaviour: people who act in different ways may nevertheless be judged to share the same belief and, *vice versa*, people who act in similar ways need not share the same beliefs. Secondly, even if one allows that an agent's actions provide the evidence upon which we attribute beliefs to that agent, one need not accept that, independently of that agent's actions or capacity for performing actions, attribution of meaningful beliefs to that agent is confused or even mistaken. A believer may be disposed to act in certain

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[34] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 405.
[35] See Phillips 1993, p. 46.

ways but never do so because the appropriate occasions never arise. Or, again, an agent may form a belief but never act on it as a result of being, for example, completely paralysed.[36]

To summarise, Phillips, it might be argued, has not established that what 'believing' amounts to varies, depending upon the nature of what is believed. Nor has he demonstrated that we cannot think of a given belief as being logically prior to the endeavours it informs. Nor, yet again, that reference to an agent's behaviour is both necessary and sufficient in determining what that agent believes. In other words, Phillips has not established the first premise of his argument, namely, that what believing something amounts to is shown by the role the belief plays in the believer's life, i.e. the activities, commitments, practices, etc. that surround the belief. Should we accept this conclusion?

I do not think Phillips should be overly concerned about the objections raised so far. He need not hold to the thesis that the slightest difference in practice evinces a distinct, unique relation between a belief and its object, requiring a distinct, unique account of what that belief, in those surroundings, amounts to. That thesis tends to become absurd, for we would end up with an innumerable number of different relations, not just for different beliefs, but even for the same belief. After all, one and the same belief provides reasons for an indefinite number of actions or behavioural patterns. All Phillips has to do is show, first, that the relation between belief and the object of belief does not *always* amount to the same thing and, secondly, that these differences are shown in the context of application of the belief in question.

Phillips adduces a number of examples, drawn from Wittgenstein's writings, to show that we cannot give the same kind of account of 'belief' in every context. What are the criteria that we believe something? There is, Wittgenstein argues, no single, general, answer to this question. Consider the following: I believe 'that fire will burn me'; 'that every rod has a length'; 'that it is going to rain'; 'that love will conquer all'; 'that the earth existed long before I was born'. My saying that 'I believe that '…'' will have different properties and different consequences in these various cases. The differences are shown in the practices into which the beliefs enter, in the things we do and say, in our shared language-games and form(s) of life. Says Phillips:

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[36] See Scott and Moore, 1997, p. 409.

> "The differences in character of these beliefs are shown by the practices of which they are a part. The practices cannot be cut off from the beliefs in the way suggested by the realist's account of 'believing'."[37]

To underscore his point, Phillips invites us to consider the difficulties we should have in ascribing beliefs to agents who fail to act in appropriate ways. For example, imagine an observer who, as it were automatically, says what he is observing. He sees, say, the enemy approaching, and reports it, describes it, but he does not act according to his observations. Of him, one might say that he speaks what he sees, but that he does not *believe* it. We already discussed examples similar to this one — examples which ask us to imagine "a severe dislocation between a man's words and his beliefs"[38] — in our discussion of the belief in the immortality of the soul. The point of presenting such examples is to remind us of the fact that our linguistic utterances, including our avowals of belief and ascriptions of belief to other agents, are embedded in language-games: they carry certain implications, are enmeshed in specific patterns of behaviour, reactions, gestures, facial expressions, and what more. If these connections are severed, language becomes 'like an engine idling';[39] "words are mentioned, but not used."[40]

One cannot divorce belief from practice, as the realist would have one do, for it is to practice, to what people do, that one would look to determine whether someone believes something or not, and to determine what believing that something amounts to. Nor will it do to say that, as a matter of grammar, we can reduce all these instances of believing to a single case in this sense that believing something is believing some proposition to be true. This simply relocates our problem. For now "the sense of the proposition seems to be given independently of any context of application."[41] We must determine what ascribing to the truth of a proposition amounts to in various cases. Once again, we shall find that saying that ''…' is true' will have different properties and different consequences. For example, Wittgenstein draws a contrast between empirical propositions and, what he calls, grammatical propositions.[42] Although

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[37] Phillips 1993, p. 41.
[38] Phillips 1993, p. 41.
[39] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 132; cf. Wittgenstein 1994, I, 38, 281.
[40] Phillips 2000, p. 140.
[41] Phillips 1993, p. 38.
[42] That is not to say that the class of grammatical propositions is a homogeneous one. Nor is the contrast between empirical and grammatical propositions a sharp one. Even in the *Investigations* we see Wittgenstein abandoning the sharp distinction between the logical and the empirical which is so prominent a feature of *On Certainty*. (See Phillips 2003, p. 138.)

Wittgenstein does not deny that we would say that the grammatical proposition 'Every rod has length' is true, he does urge us to examine what we mean by saying this. It is important to note that it is not like saying that an empirical proposition is true. For one thing, of an empirical proposition we can say what it would be like if it were false. We can understand it without knowing whether it is true or false. And to understand an empirical proposition is also to understand its negation. None of these features characterises grammatical propositions. For the negation of a grammatical proposition does not yield an untrue proposition but a piece of nonsense. To allow for the truth of a grammatical proposition does not make it any more like an empirical proposition. After all, to say that a proposition is true is to affirm or assert it. But what assertion or affirmation amount to may differ from one context to the next.[43]

Consider a further example. Anne Frank said that she kept her ideals in spite of everything because she still believed that people are really good at heart. What was it for her to believe this? Perhaps we should say that Anne Frank took the (empirical) proposition 'all men are good at heart' to be true. We might challenge her to provide circumstances in which one could say that this proposition had been falsified.[44] Sadly, the evidence is pretty much against it. Given the path Anne Frank's life took, we might be somewhat surprised that she did not herself draw the conclusion that the belief is false.

Would not this betray a gross misunderstanding? I am inclined to think of Anne Frank's belief, not as expressing a would-be empirical proposition, but as expressing her commitment to certain moral ideals, as expressing, if one pleases, her faith in humanity. The truth of this belief depends not on what others did to her, but on how she did unto others, how she lived her life. But perhaps I should suppress my initial inclination to reject the contrary account. Perhaps Anne Frank's belief should be understood as an hypothetical description of human nature, which has predictive value, and is therefore susceptible to either confirmation or rejection on the basis of the evidence available. The fact that Anne Frank seemed to hold on to her belief no matter what, might be seen as a telling indication of her *need* to believe it, rather than as a sign of the inadequacy of the suggested account. Perhaps so. But we should note, first, that the possibility of our contemplating these two distinct accounts of Anne Frank's belief depends upon there being the relevant

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[43] See Baker and Hacker, 1985, p. 277.
[44] Cf. Flew 1955. I am not in any way suggesting that Antony Flew would wish to approach Anne Frank's belief in this manner.

and distinct contexts of application which set the conceptual parameters
for both beliefs. Thus, taken in the moral sense, the belief that people are
really good at heart would have its sense against the background of our
shared moral practices, in which we talk of good and evil, of virtues and
vices, of the state of a man's soul, and so on. Taken in the empirical
sense, it will function against the background of our everyday empirical
forms of discourse, or perhaps our scientific practices, in which talk of
checking the facts, verifying an hypothesis, etc., has its sense.[45] Sec-
ondly, although either account is conceivable, and no doubt, we could
think up more possibilities, it is difficult to see how we should decide
which account is most accurate without referring to the way in which
Anne Frank took up this belief, without referring to the role it played in
her life. The matter cannot be decided *in vacuo*. As Phillips says, it is to
practice one must turn to determine what a given belief amounts to, and
whether someone believes it or not.

   It will not do simply to assume that we can give the same account of
'belief' for every instance of 'believing that *p*'. Indeed, I tend to agree
with Phillips that we shall not be able to do so. Of course, that conclu-
sion may be challenged; one might insists that a single unified account
of 'belief' shall prove possible after all. But it is difficult to see how
such a claim could be justified in the absence of any appeal to practice:
we will have to look and see. However, even assuming that Phillips's
critics recognise this point, a further objection may be brought forward.
Phillips's emphasis on the importance of an agent's behaviour in deter-
mining what that agent believes might lead one to suspect that he is
actually proposing a behaviourist analysis of belief. Indeed, Scott and
Moore suggest that Phillips adheres to "a neo-behaviourist position,
which makes reference to an agent's behaviour the essential part of
any satisfactory account of an agent's belief."[46] From this point of view,
the essence of belief is found in action rather than in what the believer
thinks or feels. In a footnote, Scott and Moore add that Wittgenstein
seems to have had a rather more measured view, by which they mean that,
in contrast to Phillips, Wittgenstein allowed that, in certain circumstances,
believing is characterised by what goes on in the 'believer's soul'.[47] But

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[45] That is not to say that these contexts of application cannot overlap, or never do so.
[46] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 406.
[47] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 406: n. 11. It is unclear whether or not Scott and
Moore judge Phillips's allegedly neo-behaviouristic analysis of belief to be reductionist in
nature. On the one hand, they state, explicitly, that "Phillips does not offer a reductionist
analysis of belief in terms of just dispositions behaviour". (Scott and Moore 1997, p. 406.)

nothing Phillips says rules out such a conclusion. His point, rather, is that we learn what goes on in a person's soul through his behaviour, i.e. the things he does and says, the way he reacts in certain circumstances, the way he lives his life. If this connection were cut, we could say that anything or nothing goes on in his mind. In this sense, a person's behaviour is, indeed, an essential part of any satisfactory account of an agent's belief.

Although this may allay the critic's worst fears, he is unlikely to be satisfied. Perhaps Phillips does not then deny us the possibility of talking meaningfully of what goes on in a person's mind, that is, of attributing certain 'mental states' to a person. Nevertheless, Phillips still seems to claim that reference to an agent's behaviour is both necessary and sufficient in determining what that agent believes. But, surely, that will not do. As noted already, first, a particular belief does not prescribe any particular form of behaviour, and, secondly, even in the absence of any significant actions on the part of the believer, we may still meaningfully attribute beliefs to him. How does Phillips deal with these problems?

It is certainly true that people who act in different ways may nevertheless be judged as sharing the same belief. After all, a particular belief may mean different things to different people, and people may react in various ways in response to a particular belief. For example, believing that one is about to be consumed by flames, one might be expected to do anything to avoid them. But equally, one might do nothing if one were, say, incapacitated by fear; one might even approach such an end fearlessly, if one believed it to be one's fate.[48] Consider, if you will, the beliefs that one will die, in the near future, due to a serious illness, or that one's spouse is cheating on one. One could associate innumerable patterns of behaviour with these beliefs. Evidently then, a person's behaviour alone often will not suffice to tell us what that person believes. Someone takes his umbrella with him when he leaves the house. Does he believe that it is already raining, that it is going to rain, in an hour, two hours, three? Surely this casts doubt on the claim that a believer's actions alone are sufficient to show what is believed.

Indeed, it does. However, one might provide Phillips's critic with a preliminary reply by pointing out that he leaves us empty-handed as to

On the other hand, they clearly imply that Phillips fails to take due account of the possibility of offering an analysis of belief which takes belief to consist not just of certain forms of behaviour but also certain dispositions and 'mental states'. (See Scott and Moore 1997, pp. 406-407.)

[48] The example is taken from Scott and Moore 1997, p. 408.

an alternative. For example, Scott and Moore argue that Phillips places far too high a degree of confidence "in the evidence of a believer's actions alone being sufficient to show the meaning of what is believed, when it is often an inadequate basis for judging *what* is believed."[49] However, I see no reason why Phillips should not agree that we can easily imagine situations where, going on a person's behaviour, on the things he says and does, the practices he engages in, etc., we may well turn out to be mistaken in attributing any particular belief to that person. How does the critic propose to remove this possibility of a mistake? He cannot say that we should ask the believer what 'mental state' he is in at present, i.e. what he believes. For one cannot rule out the possibility that one may be lied to, or that the believer himself is unclear about what state he is in. Moreover, one would be attributing a very narrow understanding of behaviour to Phillips: what a person says is no less 'behaviour' than what he does. Nor will it do to say that we can circumvent reference to a person's behaviour in that we can attribute beliefs to that person on the basis of his disposition to act in certain ways, should the appropriate conditions arise. For how do we decide whether or not someone has the disposition to act in certain ways, given certain circumstances? The answer, I suggest, is either retrospectively, by witnessing what he actually does in those circumstances, or else by reference to other things he says and does, has said and done.

At this point the second objection mentioned will come in to play. It will be argued that, even if we allow that an agent's actions provide the evidence upon which we attribute beliefs to that agent, it does not follow that, independently of that agent's actions or capacity of performing actions, attribution of meaningful beliefs to that agent is confused or mistaken. For example, there seems to be no inconsistency involved in saying that a person may form a certain belief but never act on it because, e.g., he is completely paralysed.[50] Scott and Moore do not develop their example, nor do they provide any examples of the kind of beliefs we might meaningfully attribute to such a person. Perhaps they agree that extensive use of such an example to make a philosophical point tends to become somewhat distasteful. Although we will need to take a closer look at the example, fortunately, we need not dwell on it too long. For it soon becomes clear that it does not present as big a challenge to Phillips's position as Scott and Moore seem to think.

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[49] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 408.
[50] Scott and Moore's example; see Scott & Moore 1997, pp. 408-409.

It makes sense, I suppose, to say of a person who is completely paralysed that he believes that, given his physical disabilities, his life is no longer worth living. I suppose it also makes sense to say that, on the contrary, he believes that his condition does not rob his life of all purpose or value. Although our attributing either belief to him cannot be based on any current behaviour on his part — assuming that the person in question has also lost the capacity for communicating with us in any way — this does not establish that we can sever the connection between belief and behaviour. Quite the contrary; for our judgements concerning the paralytic's current state of mind will be based on our prior acquaintance with, and understanding of, that person, i.e. on what he did and said before he became paralysed.

It might be argued, however, that this does not yet settle the issue. No doubt, should a dispute arise, we would support our claim that the paralytic holds either of the two beliefs mentioned above by referring to our prior acquaintance with him. But it does not follow that, in the absence of such prior acquaintance, attribution of meaningful beliefs to that person is confused. Perhaps this becomes clearer when we think of examples which do not involve a person's views on what makes life worth living, examples which do not involve, one might say, his moral or religious beliefs. For instance, he believes that the alarm on the heart-monitor will go off should his heart rate drop below a certain rate; that, as time goes by, his relatives will visit his sickbed less frequently; that the lights will be turned off at ten; and so on. Although we have no way of knowing whether the person in question actually holds any one of these beliefs, it is still logically conceivable that he does.

Perhaps this should be admitted. Note, however, first, that on this account, we can attribute *any* belief to the person in question. As far as we are concerned, anything goes. This, I believe, should cast some doubt on the claim that it makes sense to attribute any *particular* belief to him. Secondly, even if we waive this point, we should not forget that the attribution of such beliefs to a person depends upon us treating him as 'a normal person'. By this I mean that it only makes sense to suppose that a person holds any of these beliefs if that person understands what it means to believe any of these things, if he has learnt what is involved in believing such things by participating in our shared human practices, our language-games and form(s) of life. This becomes clear when we imagine a person whose paralysis is not the result, say, of some tragic accident, but who has been paralysed and unable actively to participate in common human activities from birth. Of course, I do not mean to say

that we should not treat such a person 'as a person'. But here it is far
from obvious that it makes sense to say that this person believes today to
be a particularly pleasant day.

These latter remarks, I believe, point us in the right direction. As indi-
cated, the above may provide a preliminary reply to Phillips's critic.
However, it does not get to the heart of the matter. It might still be
thought that Phillips's position implies some sort of behaviourist analy-
sis of belief, or, at the very least, that Phillips overestimates the relation
between a belief and the actions and behavioural patterns associated
with that belief. To disabuse the critic of this idea, one needs to empha-
sise that when Phillips says that 'the meaning of a belief is shown in the
context of application of that belief', he is *not referring exclusively*, *nor
even primarily*, to the believer's behaviour. Phillips should insist, rightly,
I believe, that it is to a person's behaviour, to what he says and does, that
one would look to determine whether someone believes something or
not. However, if I have understood him correctly, Phillips is *not* claim-
ing that the meaning of a particular belief is constituted by however any
individual believer happens to behave. That would completely miss the
fact that it is only within the broader context of our common practices,
our shared language-games and form(s) of life, that a certain kind of
behaviour is intelligible as behaviour properly associated with a particu-
lar belief. A particular belief may not prescribe any *particular* form of
behaviour, but this does not mean that *any* behaviour, whatsoever, can
be associated with a particular belief. After all, not only do we attribute
beliefs to agents on the basis of their words and deeds, but we also judge
the sincerity of their beliefs, the trustworthiness of their avowals of
belief, etc., on this basis. The criteria by means of which we do so are not
dependent on the particular behavioural patterns of any single individ-
ual. Rather, they are laid down in our common practices, "through acts
of mutual acknowledgement in the lives we share with one another."[51]
One would do well to remember that, with regard to the belief that God
exists, Phillips argues that the meaning of 'God exists' is determined,
not by the behavioural patterns of individual believers, but by *religious
language*; that is to say, the meaning of the proposition 'God exists'
is laid down in the broader context of our shared, historical, religious
practices.

Once it is realised that, for Phillips, 'the context of application of
a belief' does not refer exclusively to the behaviour of any individual

[51] Phillips 1999, p. 91.

believer, but should be understood in a far broader sense, the objections we have been discussing lose their sting. One or two examples should clarify this point. First, consider one's belief that a person is in pain. Whether or not someone believes another to be in pain, and what that belief means to that person, is shown in his behaviour, in what he says and does.[52] True, there are many forms of behaviour compatible with that particular belief. For some, it will be a great source of sorrow — it is their best friend who is suffering. For certain others it may be a source of joy — it is their worst enemy. But there are limits to what will count as intelligible behaviour. These limits rest on our broader understanding of the concept of pain and of the various ways in which it enters into our shared lives. Consider: we see someone scratching his nose and pulling his left ear. We assume that he is itching, or perhaps the movements are part of some kind of sign language? But, to our surprise, the person tells us he is doing so because he believes his friend to be in pain. Should we also find him tending to his friend's pain, commiserating with him, etc., then we might disregard his odd behaviour, considering it a nervous twitch. But, in the absence of any such further patterns of behaviour, would we say, 'Well, that's just another way of expressing the belief that one's friend is in pain', or 'that's what the belief means to him'? Surely not. Rather, we should conclude that, if he is not simply mad, he does not understand *what it means* to believe that someone is in pain.

For a final example, consider ordinary beliefs concerning matters of fact, for instance, the belief that there is a chair in the next room. According to Phillips, one cannot say that one holds this factual belief, and yet have nothing to do with the familiar ways in which we check this fact:

> "[I]f I said '[I believe] there is a chair in the next room', while ignoring the familiar ways of checking, I would not be making an assertion at all. I would not be saying anything."[53]

It has been suggested that these remarks reveal that Phillips is operating with a covert positivism.[54] That conclusion, however, is mistaken. Phillips is not so much asserting a link between the sense of a proposition and the method of its (empirical) verification. Rather, he is drawing

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[52] Although, perhaps, it may not always be advisable, or even possible, to distinguish sharply between what a belief means, *sec*, and what it means *to* a person, it seems clear that, often we can, and do, draw such a distinction.

[53] Phillips 1993(a), p. 197.

[54] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 404, n. 10.

our attention to the broader context of our shared practices in which talk about naming, counting, locating, etc., physical objects has its sense. In other words, he is clarifying the grammar of 'there is a chair in the next room', which determines what would and would not be sensible to say or do in connection with this proposition. Thus, when someone says that (he believes that) there is a chair in the next room,[55] it makes sense to ask him how he knows, whether he is sure, whether he has checked recently, and so on. Of course, this does not mean that we must have actually witnessed someone checking the next room to see if there is a chair before it makes sense to attribute to him the belief that there is a chair there. Nothing Phillips says is meant to deny the fact that people may not act on their beliefs, for example, because they want to keep their beliefs secret, or, indeed, are incapable of acting on them. But this does not undermine the claim that there is a 'normative', 'conceptual' or, if one pleases, 'internal' relation, between belief and behaviour. For there is no doubt as to what will count as intelligible behaviour on the part of those who do not act, if they were willing to do so or capable of doing so.[56] Should a person act, as it were, in violation of these internal relations — for example, when asked whether he has checked that there is a chair in the next room, he replies, like Beckett's tramps, 'What has that got to do with anything?' — we would not know what to make of his avowal of belief. The words he uses no longer carry their normal implications; they have been torn from their familiar contexts. To be sure, the point is not that *the words he uses* have no meaning. Rather, *the use he makes of them* is unintelligible, or, perhaps better, his utterance of these words does not constitute an intelligible use. In this sense, as Phillips puts it, the person would not by making an assertion, would not be saying anything at all.[57]

Our discussion so far should suffice to show that Phillips's claim that one cannot divorce belief from practice, i.e. from its context of applica-

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[55] Phillips reminds us that, in many circumstances, 'I believe that *p*' can be replaced by '*p*', e.g. 'I believe it will rain' by 'It'll rain'. See Phillips 1993, p. 36; cf. Wittgenstein 1980, 477.

[56] Of course, it will be possible to think up various background stories to explain why all manner of idiosyncratic or odd forms of behaviour can nevertheless intelligibly be associated with a particular belief. But it should be clear that the fact that such explanations are required only serves to underscore the fact that the relation between the meaning of a belief and the believer's behaviour is a normative one.

[57] As in the previous example, we should note that the person's wayward behaviour does not, all of a sudden, create a new sense for the belief that there is a chair in the next room. Rather, it is only the broader context of application of a belief that makes certain kinds of behaviour intelligible as 'belief-behaviour'. (See Hacker 1996, pp. 459ff.)

tion, is not based upon a behaviourist analysis of belief which encounters difficulties in accounting for the fact that having a particular belief does not prescribe any particular form of behaviour, and for the fact that, independently of that agent's actions or capacity for performing actions, attribution of meaningful beliefs to that agent need not be confused or mistaken. There is, however, one final objection we need to consider. As we saw, one reason to uphold a distinction between belief and the fruits of belief is to accommodate the seemingly common-sense supposition that, often enough, we act on the basis of antecedently formed beliefs, e.g. I take an umbrella with me because I believe it will rain. Does this not imply that a belief is logically prior to (at least some of) its consequences, and does this not cast doubt on Phillips's claim that one cannot divorce a belief from its context of application, in that a belief is not conceivable without the endeavours it informs?

By now, the answer to that question should no longer pose any difficulties. To say that we cannot divorce belief from practice is not to say that the belief that it will rain *is* the actions we may or may not perform on the basis of that belief, nor yet to say that in the absence of certain predetermined patterns of behaviour it makes no sense to attribute that belief to a person. Rather, it is to remind us of the fact that the broader context of our shared practices in which we talk about the weather, make weather forecasts, prepare for the coming rains, etc., operates as a background to the belief that it will rain. Although, evidently, one might well form the belief that it will rain prior to one's deciding to take an umbrella with one, one's belief that it will rain cannot sensibly be said to be logically prior to the contexts of application of that belief, to this broader context in which it is determined what it means to say that it will rain, and in which the conceptual parameters are set as to what it makes sense to do and say in relation to the belief that it will rain. A similar case can be made with regards to the (religious) belief that God exists. Perhaps we should allow that it makes sense to say that someone can form this belief prior to being engaged in 'the endeavour it informs', i.e. prior to being engaged in any religious practice, such as praying, worshipping, etc. However, what we cannot allow, Phillips argues, is the realist's claim that the belief that God exists is logically prior to the totality of our religious practices, that is, to any religious context of application. For it is within the broader context of our shared religious practices and the historical traditions in which they are embedded that the proposition 'God exists' has its sense. Belief, one might say, is 'a phenomenon of human life';

to have significance, it requires an appropriate surrounding and an antecedent history.[58]

Let us take stock of our argument so far. Phillips's conclusion that (theological) realism is incoherent, we argued, depends on the truth of the following two premises: first, that the meaning of a belief is shown in the context of application of that belief, and, secondly, that realism severs belief from the activities, commitments, practices, etc. which give it its sense. We considered a number of possible objections to the first premise. We sought to defuse these by emphasising that in referring us to the context of application of a belief, Phillips is not referring us to the contingent behavioural patterns of individual believers. If my arguments are sound, the upshot of our discussion is that Phillips successfully establishes the first premise of his argument. One cannot separate belief from practice, from its contexts of application. The question, of course, is whether the realist is committed to doing so. In other words, does Phillips establish the second premise of his argument?

If one upheld a distinction between belief and fruits of belief, such that one argued the latter to include the totality of possible contexts of application of the belief, including all actions and dispositions intelligibly associated with it, then one would indeed be in difficulty explaining what belief could consist in. But there is no reason why the realist should uphold such a rigorous distinction between belief and fruits of belief. He could easily adopt a more moderate distinction between belief and fruits of belief. That is to say, he may admit that it is not possible to give an account of the meaning of 'God exists' without reference to *some* context of application, and yet insist that it is possible to do so without referring to any *religious* context of application, that is, without referring to our historical religious practices and the attitudes, forms of behaviour, commitments, etc., associated with them. For example, Scott and Moore argue that "there is no a priori reason why the realist should not be able to do this in terms of, for example, scientific practices, i.e. the belief that God exists can be understood as a type of scientific hypothesis."[59]

Now, I take it Scott and Moore do not mean to suggest that the primary or paradigmatic contexts of application of the belief that God exists are to be located within science. That would be a rather curious suggestion. For, unless I have been very much misinformed, the hypothesis that God exists plays, at best, a rather marginal role in contemporary

[58] See Wittgenstein 1994, II, p. 174.
[59] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 403.

scientific practices. Rather, their point seems to be akin to Bailey's which was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. That is, the belief that God exists can be understood as the hypothetical, factual, and cognitive belief that a certain being or entity, called God, exists. In other words, we can account for the belief that God exists in much the same way as we would account for many of our ordinary, everyday empirical beliefs. It has its sense in our talk about physical objects, a familiar feature of which, one might add, is our indifference to the existence of many of them. Thus, just like, for example, the (false) belief that unicorns exist, or the (true) belief that platypuses exist, the belief that God exists, true or false, need not involve any commitment, affective state or attitude at all, let alone of a religious kind.

Phillips is not ignorant of the kind of objection entailed by such a more moderate version of theological realism. He recognises that his conclusion that theological realism is methodologically incoherent may be argued to be premature:

> "What the realist is urging, it may be said, is not that the essence of religious belief can be understood without reference to a context of application, but that the context involved does not feature the characteristic commitments of the religious life."[60]

Although Phillips believes that this is 'too generous' to the philosophical implications of realism, he is willing to suppose that the objection stands, and consider its implications. The revised realist's argument is not obviously invalid. It is at least logically conceivable that belief in God's existence can be understood in the manner specified. However, one should not forget that in designating 'our talk of physical objects' as the correct context of application for the belief that God exists, one has set the conceptual parameters within which our talk of God is to take place. That is to say, it should make sense more or less to do and say the same things in connection with the belief that God exists as it makes sense to do and say in connection with our other beliefs concerning the existence of certain physical objects or entities. This is precisely what Phillips denies. He argues that there are profound disanalogies between talk of God and talk of matters of fact, disanalogies which the realist either ignores or fails to take into account. This conception of belief in God provides, "not the essence of believing the realist seeks, but, at best, deviations, distortions, and approximations, when compared with what

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[60] Phillips 1993, p. 49.

really believing in God involves."[61] To put it differently, to treat 'God' as a substantive and to say that one is indifferent to the existence of the 'something' it 'stands for' is

> "to import an alien grammar into our language concerning God. To make *this* assertion of God's existence the essence of believing, the realist would have to show otherwise; he would have to show that grammar is appropriate."[62]

It should be clear that Phillips is no longer accusing the realist of methodological confusion. Rather, his claim is that the realist's account of 'God exists' is descriptively inadequate. Can Phillips substantiate that claim? We turn to that question in the next section. However, we shall approach this question, not primarily, as Phillips suggests, by asking whether the realist can show that his account of the grammar of 'God exists' is appropriate but, rather, by asking whether Phillips can establish that it is inappropriate.

8.3 Theological realism is descriptively inadequate

"Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is."[63] If we want to understand the meaning of a certain concept, if we want to understand in what sense, if any, the concept can be said to refer to an object, we must investigate the grammar of the concept in question. We need to reflect on the contexts of application in which the concept is embedded. According to Phillips, in the case of the reality of God this requirement has all too often been overlooked or taken for granted:

> "Because the question of divine reality can be construed as 'Is God real or not?' it has often been assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever is over *a matter of fact*. The philosophical investigation of the reality of God then becomes the philosophical investigation appropriate to an assertion of a matter of fact."[64]

More often than not, Phillips argues, it is assumed that the word 'God' functions as a name. One then starts looking for the object or entity it stands for. In this way, talk about God comes to be treated as talk about matters of fact. According to Phillips, such a treatment misrepresents the religious concept. An investigation of the grammar of the concept shows that talk about God's existence cannot be construed as talk about the existence of an object or about a matter of fact:

[61] Phillips 1993, p. 52.
[62] Phillips 1993, p. 51.
[63] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 373.
[64] Phillips 1993, p. 1.

> "To say that *x* is a fact is to say something about the grammar of *x*; it is to indicate what it would and would not be sensible to say or do in connection with it. To say that the concept of divine reality does not share this grammar is to reject the possibility of talking about God in the way in which one talks about matters of fact."[65]

As noted, Phillips does not claim that 'God' cannot refer, or that the believer must be confused when he says that it is a fact that God exists. The point is that we need to contextualise such expressions. We need to examine what they amount to in their natural contexts of application. Once we do so, Phillips argues, it becomes clear that talk about God cannot be assimilated to talk about matters of fact:

> "The main reason for these differences is that God's reality is not one of a kind; He is not a being among beings. The word 'God' is not the name of a thing. Thus, the reality of God cannot be assessed by a common measure which also applies to things other than God."[66]

Phillips provides a number of reasons why we should reject a factual understanding of 'God' as grammatically improper. To begin with, to say that God's existence is a matter of fact implies that God is revealed and discovered in the world in the same way that physical facts are revealed and discovered. Furthermore, this suggests that God's reality is a contingent matter and that, as with the existence of physical objects or entities, it should make sense to say that God may cease to exist, or pass away. Finally, like our normal beliefs concerning the existence of a certain objects or entities, one should expect the belief that God exists to be held more or less tentatively, depending upon the evidence available. According to Phillips, when we examine belief in God in its natural, religious contexts of application, we come to see that none of these suggestions holds true. Let us consider them in reverse order.

When someone tells us he believes that some type of being exists, say the platypus, it makes sense to ask him whether he is quite sure, whether he has checked the facts, how long such a strange animal has existed, whether it still exists, where, exactly, it is located, and so on. None of this, Phillips argues, makes any sense in relation to the belief that God exists. Again, Phillips reminds us, we find religious believers saying that it is a terrible thing not to believe in God. Believing in God is called a virtue, and failing to believe a sin. Believing is something capable of growth, and this growth is said to be the increasing presence of God in one's life. None

[65] Phillips 1993, p. 2.
[66] Phillips 1993, p. 62.

of *this* makes any sense where belief in platypuses is concerned. If believing in God is to believe in the existence of a thing, or a certain type of being, one might wonder why it is so terrible to say that the thing in question might not exist. Indeed, one might be puzzled as to why there is such a fuss about these matters anyway, since religious believers only *believe* them to be true. We might say, as we would normally in such cases, 'You only believe — Oh, well…'.[67] But, Phillips asks, surely this is not the way in which the word 'belief' is used in religion? Would it not be queer to say of worshippers, 'They only believe there is a God'?

Phillips's point is that in treating the belief in God as a factual belief, we fail to capture the conviction involved in a confession of faith. Where our beliefs concerning matters of fact are concerned, there is always logical space for some degree of uncertainty. It makes sense to ask for further evidence in support of any given belief and, should the evidence turn out to be inconclusive, either to exercise some reserve towards the belief, or abandon it altogether. No such uncertainty and tentativeness, Phillips argues, enters into talk about God's existence.

This might lead one to think that talk about believing in God is better served when compared with talk about *knowing* something. When someone claims to know something there also does not seem to be any uncertainty involved. That God exists, one might conclude, is something the believer claims to know beyond reasonable doubt. But, according to Phillips, this still misses the point. God's existence is still construed as a matter of fact, something which can be argued. After all, when someone claims to know something it makes sense to ask *how* he knows; what evidence or proof he has. But in the case of religious beliefs such questions would be out of place. It would be an insult to the God of Scripture to argue for His possible existence as such an argument *presupposes* the possibility of His non-existence:

> "Making God subject to the assessment of probabilities makes Him subject to criteria of assessment which seem to be endowed with greater authority than the divine object of assessment. […] for the believer, God is the sovereign measure of all things. For him, how can such a measure be subject to measurement?"[68]

The point is that whereas empirical matters are matters of contingency, God's existence is not; it is characterised by a kind of necessity; it cannot be questioned. Religious believers are not prepared to say that God

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[67] See Phillips 1993, p. 62; cf. Wittgenstein 1999, p. 60.
[68] Phillips 1988, p. 11.

might not exist. Not, Phillips adds, because "as *a matter of fact* God will always exist", but because "it *makes no sense* to say that God might not exist."[69] The question of God's existence, as something for which evidence must be sought, simply does not find a place in the traffic of religious discourse.[70] Religious beliefs, Phillips insists, are not taught as beliefs which require further evidence or reasons to justify them. The word 'God' may be among the earliest learnt. We learn it through pictures, stories, catechisms, etc. But, Phillips warns us, this does not have "the same consequences as with pictures of aunts. I wasn't shown [that which the picture pictured]".[71] Normally, we come to learn about the existence of something or someone by having this thing or that person pointed out or presented to us. But, surely, we do not make our acquaintance with God by getting to meet Him and shake His hand.[72] Although there are images of God, there are no pictures of God. And although the believer may say God is present in his life, God cannot be presented to us as we could be introduced to an aunt we have not yet met. In this sense, God, unlike physical objects or persons, is necessarily unavailable. This point may be expanded by considering the way in which we establish identities where objects or persons are concerned: the same aunt, the same animal, the same planet, and so on. Nothing of this kind, Phillips argues, enters into considerations as to whether two people worship the same God:

> "In a dispute about whether two people are discussing the same person there are ways of removing the doubt, but the identity of a god is not like the identity of a human being. To say that one worships the same God as someone else is not to point to the same object or to be confronted with it."[73]

How did Paul, for example, know that the God he worshipped was also the God of Abraham? What enabled him to say this, Phillips argues, was not anything like an objective method of reaching an agreement as, say,

[69] Phillips 1993, p. 1.
[70] See Phillips 1988, p. 10.
[71] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 59. Cf. Phillips 1976, p. 148; Phillips 1993, pp. 44, 63.
[72] Of course, one might reply that in the case of 'normal' objects and persons, this also need not be the case. For example, I need not actually have seen any platypuses in the flesh in order to have a justified belief that they exist, based on the testimony of those who have seen them, or based upon pictures I have been shown. It should be clear, however, that this does little to challenge Phillips's argument. Although I have never seen a platypus, I have at least seen pictures of them. Furthermore, it is logically possible that, one day, a platypus should be pointed out or presented to me. Obviously, where God is concerned this is not the case. Needless to say, the rejoinder that we shall all meet God after we die serves only to underscore the disanalogies between talk of God and talk of platypuses.
[73] Phillips 1993, p. 3; cf. Phillips 2000, p. 231.

in the case of two astronomers who check whether they are talking about the same star. Rather, what enabled Paul to say that he worshipped the God of Abraham was the fact that although many changes had taken place in the concept of God, there was nevertheless a common religious tradition in which both he and Abraham stood:

> "it is to these contexts of religious traditions and above all, of worship, that we must turn if the idea of God's identity is to have any sense. So if someone asks *how* a person knew it was God, he could only answer in terms of what worship and praise mean to him. The question cannot be answered in the way one could answer the question, 'How do you know it was that person and not another one?'"[74]

To see whether two people mean the same by 'God', we need to refer, not to some object called 'God', but to what belief comes to in their lives, to what worship and praise amount to for them.[75] In other words, we need to examine the contexts of application of religious beliefs, to see how their sense is mediated in the lives of the believers. Now, in the previous chapters, we have sought to do so where the belief in miracles and the belief in eternal life are concerned. No doubt the realist would argue that these beliefs are logically dependent upon the (factual) belief that there is a God; a causally efficacious divine being, who can perform miracles and grant eternal life. Phillips, as we saw, rejects these conclusions. To apprehend a certain event as a miracle is not to explain the inexplicable in terms of divine causality. Rather than the inexplicable giving significance to religion, it are the various religious contexts which give significance to the inexplicable; a religious significance, which has little sense outside the contexts of worship and devotion. Again, to talk of life after death is not to refer to some future state of affairs which only God can be said to bring about. Rather, the immortality of the soul refers to a person's relation to the self-effacement and love of others involved in dying to the self. Death is overcome in that dying to the self is the meaning of the believer's life; this is what is meant by giving glory to God. In short, the belief in miracles and the belief in immortality are not to be construed as factual beliefs, as explanations or hypotheses which are based on the axiom that there exist a causally efficacious divine being. Rather, they provide the religious contexts which constitute the meaning of the believer's life. Far from being prior to them, the sense of

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[74] Phillips 1976, p. 174; cf. Phillips 1993, pp. 3ff.
[75] See Phillips 1993, p. 45.

the reality of God has its significance in these religious contexts. Let us examine one final example to complete the picture.

Consider, if you will, how the notion of the inscrutable will of God may enter into human life. Once again, the realist will insist that the possibility of talking of the will of God depends on the prior belief that there is a god who can will certain things. And, once again, Phillips reject this assumption. The first thing we should realise, Phillips argues, is that God's will does not *happen* to be inscrutable to us. Rather, the notion is born of what is *necessarily* inscrutable to us. It is when confronted with the contingencies of human life — such as the death of a child — that people may react by saying 'It is the will of God'. According to Phillips, this is not a consequence of some previously held belief. People do not react in this way because they have reached the *prior* conclusion that, because they are not responsible for the death of the child, someone else, namely God, must be. On the contrary, the sense of belief in God is itself rooted in reactions such as these. Neither is the reaction an attempt to *explain* what has happened. To say 'It is the will of God' is not to answer the question 'Why is this happening?'. Rather, it is one way of coming to terms with the explanations that have been given, e.g. 'the child died of pneumonia'. The notion of God's will "is formed, not in a search for explanations, but in the abandonment of explanations."[76]

Of course, Phillips reminds us, people need not react like this. There are many other possibilities:

> "Faced with the events which befall them men have said, 'It's Fate', 'It's absurd', 'It's meaningless', 'That's how things are', 'That's life', 'That's the way the cookie crumbles' as well as 'It's the will of God'."[77]

What is important, Phillips argues, is that all these other possibilities are just as much *reactions* as the religious response. They are not inferences or arguments; none of them represents *the rational* reaction as opposed to the others. According to Phillips, no further justification can be given of these reactions, nor can any alternative account explain them away. The best one can do is to bring out their force by showing the life — or lack of life — which surrounds them. For example, recognition of the will of God will have a bearing on specific events in people's lives. A sense of 'being in God's hands' leads the believer to see that nothing is his by right and this will have consequences for the satisfaction and dis-

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[76] Phillips 1988, p. 282.
[77] Phillips 1988, p. 280.

appointment of his desires. After all his efforts are done, he sees the out-
come is in the hands of God:

> "For the Christian, the necessity and unavoidability of death show the essential
> contingency of all things, his own creature-hood, that all things are a gift, that
> nothing is his by right. His response to this is one of humility and gratitude."[78]

In this way, the sense of the will of God is mediated in the life of the
believer. It provides him with a perspective which makes it possible to
think of human life in a certain way. Phillips insists that it would be a
grave misunderstanding of the grammar of such religious perspectives to
say that they are descriptive or referential. Rather, one should say they
are expressive. What they express is called the worship of God. The reli-
gious perspectives

> "give one a language in which it is possible to think about human life in a
> certain way. [They] provide the logical space within which such thoughts
> can have a place. When these thoughts are found in worship, the praising
> and the glorifying does not refer to some object called God. Rather, the
> expression of such praise and glory is what we call the worship of God."[79]

According to Phillips, when someone comes to see that there is a God,
when God becomes a reality in his life, one can hardly say that this has
come about by his discovering an object. What has happened "is that he
has found God *in* a praise, a thanksgiving, a confessing and an asking
which were not his before."[80]

> "Coming to see that there is a God is not like coming to see that an addi-
> tional being exists. If it were, there would be an extension of one's knowl-
> edge of facts, but no extension of one's understanding. Coming to see that
> there is a God involves seeing a new meaning in one's life, and being given
> a new understanding."[81]

Clearly then, Phillips concludes, to ask whether God exists is not to ask a
factual question. Despite appearances, such expressions as 'God exists'
or 'God is real' are *not* statements in the indicative mood but, rather,
expressions of faith. Whether or not God exists is not something that can
and should be determined before one commits oneself to leading a reli-
gious life.[82] To find one's way to God is to embark on a spiritual journey;
embracing the reality of God is itself a religious act: "Acknowledgement

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[78] Phillips 1976, p. 147.
[79] Phillips 1976, p. 149.
[80] Phillips 1976, p. 181.
[81] Phillips 1970, pp. 17-18.
[82] The 'before', of course, should be understood in a logical rather than a temporal or
biographical sense.

of a spiritual reality takes the form, not of a factual assertion, but a confession: 'Thou art God.'"[83]

At this stage of the discussion, it may be helpful to remind ourselves of the thread of the argument so far. Phillips's aim is to establish that the realist's analysis of the reality of God is descriptively inadequate: it "obviously fail[s] to capture the primary language of faith."[84] To this end, Phillips draws our attention to certain disanalogies between talk of God and talk about matters of fact which, or so Phillips claims, the realist either neglects or fails to account for. At the same time he presents an alternative analysis of the reality of God which, Phillips believes, *is* capable of taking these differences into account, *and* does justice to the role belief in God plays in its religious contexts of application. Are Phillips's arguments conclusive? I do not believe they are. First, I am not convinced that the realist is unable to accommodate the disanalogies Phillips brings to the fore. Secondly, Phillips's suggestion that religious beliefs function as 'grammatical' or 'basic' propositions raises a number of questions which are not so easily resolved. Finally, one may well doubt whether Phillips's account performs any better than that of the realist where its descriptive adequacy is concerned. In the remainder of this section I hope to justify these contentions.

First, then, is the realist really at a loss to account for the disanalogies between talk of God and talk of matters of fact to which Phillips draws our attention? As we saw, Phillips reminds us that denials of God's existence tend to attract moral condemnation whereas the existence of anything or anyone else can be denied without attracting such criticism. But, as Bailey points out, even if we accept this as a fact, it is not at all clear why it should pose a problem for the realist. If 'God' is the name of a causally efficacious divine being of surpassing power and goodness who has freely chosen to create and further the welfare of all human beings, and if the statement 'God exists' is true, then this is a fact about the world that is of overwhelming importance to everyone. Now imagine a non-religious statement about something that would be regarded by most people as a matter of considerable importance, say, someone tells me my son suffers from a serious disease which requires immediate medical attention. It seems obvious that, if my only reaction is to reply 'Possibly, I'm not so sure myself', I actually believe that this statement has no chance of being true at all. Thus, as Bailey observes, the realist can readily argue

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[83] Phillips 2000, p. 241; cf. Phillips 2000, pp. 123-124.
[84] Phillips 1993, p. 53.

"that it is the potential importance of the claims made by these statements that accounts for the way in which a response like 'Well, possibly' constitutes a dismissive rejection of such statements rather than an acknowledgement that there might be something of substance to be said on their behalf."[85]

Phillips's other examples are likewise inconclusive. The doctrine that God cannot begin to exist or cease to exist, the realist might admit, reveals a difference between the object 'God' and the object 'table'. But it does little to establish that, as Wittgenstein puts it, what is here at issue is not the existence of something. To adopt an example of John Hyman's: "If Democritus believed that atoms cannot begin or cease to exist, it does not follow that he did not believe that an atom is *eine Existenz* — an entity, or something which exists."[86] Again, Phillips's reminder that believing in God is something capable of growth, and that this growth is said to be the increasing presence of God in one's life, does not demonstrate conclusively that the belief that God exists cannot be thought of as a factual belief about the existence of a certain entity. In overcoming my doubts, reservations, temptations, etc., my belief that God exists may grow, in the sense that it becomes more of a certainty for me and, consequently, begins to play a more important role in my life: God's presence in my life is increased. To put it differently, the realist can argue that the fact that God's presence in my life can be said to increase does not indicate a grammatical peculiarity about the belief that God exists but refers to the way in which my relation to and participation in religious practices, such as prayer and worship, may change over time. After all, believing in God involves more than asserting the existence of an entity. The realist only claimed that the former implies the latter, not that it can be reduced to it.

Let us consider one final example. Phillips observes that, unlike any other physical object, God is not identified by being pointed to or presented. According to Scott and Moore, this observation is unlikely to impress the realist. He can simply claim that the fact that we cannot point to or present God does not prove that 'God' does not designate something, but is due to the peculiar properties of God. God, unlike any other physical object, is transcendent, and one cannot point to or present something that is transcendent.[87] As Scott and Moore realise, Phillips would reject this conclusion as an attempt to explain away what is an evident grammatical difference between talk about God and talk about

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[85] Bailey 2001, p. 127.
[86] Hyman 2001, p. 8.
[87] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 415.

physical objects. According to Scott and Moore, it is a crucial part of Phillips's argument "that God's unavailability is a grammatical fact about the concept 'God' rather than a fact about God".[88] Although this is partly right, it is also misleading, for it seems to imply that we simply stand to choose: 'unavailability' could indicate either a difference in grammar or a property of a particular object. But what would it mean to say that a certain object is unavailable in the relevant sense? If I have understood him correctly, Phillips's point is not to deny, as intelligible but false, that God is an object, though, as it happens, a transcendent one. Rather, he aims to remind us of the fact that where our talk about physical objects is concerned, such notions as 'unavailability' and 'transcendence' have no clear application. To understand these notions we have to examine them in their natural, religious contexts of application. Once we do so, Phillips argues, we come to see that 'transcendence' or 'unavailability' are not God's way of hiding from our view. Quite the contrary; they are His mode of appearance. Coming to know God *is* coming to see He is a hidden God:

> "language is not a screen which hides God from us. On the contrary, the idea of God *in* the language we have been explaining, is the idea of a hidden God — *Vere tu es Deus absconditus.*"[89]

In other words, God's unavailability is part of the very grammar of the concept of God. It is the way in which this notion is mediated in the believer's life which determines the sense it has.[90] I agree; at least to the extent that I believe it is not very helpful to insist that it is highly debatable that it is a criterion for x being a physical object, or something analogous to a physical object, that x can be pointed to or depicted. Scott and Moore argue that a physical object can be so small, or have such a brief existence, or undergo such rapid changes, or be so chaotic or diffuse, that it would be impossible for us to construct an accurate depiction of it. Again, they ask us to consider sub-atomic particles. These, too, cannot be pointed to — indeed under certain circumstances they lack a position — and can only be presented indirectly by their effects on other objects. Surely, Phillips would not wish to deny, bluntly, that sub-atomic particles are objects. Rather, his position would have to be that, because they cannot be picked out ostensively, their reality is not the same as the reality of mountains, books, people, etc. But, for the same reason, the

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[88] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 415.
[89] Phillips 1988, p. 289.
[90] See Phillips 1988, pp. 255ff.

reality of sub-atomic particles is analogous to the reality of God. Surely, this must weaken Phillips's argument?[91]

Perhaps so. While I do not wish to deny the ingenuity of Scott and Moore's line of reasoning, I cannot help but feel that a comparison between God and sub-atomic particles tends to comedy rather than to a more comprehensive understanding of the reality of God. Scott and Moore might reply, however, that I have misunderstood the drift of their argument. They are not suggesting that we can learn what is meant by saying that God is real by means of an investigation of sub-atomic particles. Rather, they are questioning the adequacy of Phillips's notion of 'grammar'. Talk about God is, quite clearly, not on a par with talk about tables or chairs. Again, believing that God exists is admittedly very unlike believing a hypothesis in history or in science. Then again, talk about my loved ones is also very different from talk about tables and chairs, and believing that there is some milk left in the fridge cannot, without further ado, be assimilated to believing in the theory of evolution. To say that there are grammatical differences between our talk about God and our talk about matters of fact glosses over the fact that 'talk about matters of fact' does not designate a clearly demarcated area of discourse characterised by a uniform grammar. In other words, we need not deny the grammatical disanalogies Phillips brings to our attention. But we do need to ask what these differences imply. Are they superficial or profound? What aspects of a term's grammar enter into a decision about the sense in which that term designates?[92] Scott and Moore's complaint is that Phillips does not supply an adequate notion of 'grammar' to determine these issues; Phillips does not "explain what he means by 'grammar' in sufficient detail to show what would be entailed by our conceding that 'God cannot be pointed to' is a grammatical statement."[93] This, I believe, is a serious criticism of Phillips's account, and one which deserves careful attention. This brings us to the second problem concerning Phillips's analysis of the reality of God.

Phillips's account of God's existence as inescapable, unquestionable, in a word, as *necessary* existence, raises at least two questions. First, it might lead one to suspect that Phillips is advocating some revised version of the ontological argument. However, this argument, in its various forms, has been subjected to severe criticism and is widely held to be invalid. Is Phillips's account not similarly vulnerable? Secondly, if God's

[91] See Scott and Moore 1997, pp. 415-417.
[92] See Scott and Moore 1997, p. 415.
[93] Scott and Moore 1997, p. 415.

existence is indeed necessary in such a way that it makes no sense to question or deny it, then how does Phillips account for the undeniable fact that it *is* questioned and that such questioning is not seldom the prelude to rejection?

As to the first question, it is easy to see how one might reach the conclusion that Phillips's account suffers from problems not unlike those that plague the ontological argument. As far as the realist is concerned, Phillips's talk about certain perspectives within which the reality of God has its meaning obscures the main issue, namely, the fundamental disagreement about the existence of God. Some say there is a God, some say there is not. The dispute centres around the assertion or denial of something or other, an entity of some kind. Talk of perspectives obscures this, since these perspectives presuppose the reality of God. Just as we cannot pass from various assertions concerning the kind of being God would have to be if He existed, to His existence, so, too, no talk of perspectives can replace enquiry into the question as to whether God exists.

Needless to say, according to Phillips, this argument is misconceived, in that it is based upon the assumption that God is a being who may be said to *exist*, and that this existence is such that it makes sense to say that God may or may not exist. As we have seen, Phillips insists that it makes no sense to suppose that God might not exist. Of course, the ontological argument also purports to establish that one cannot sensibly deny God's existence. The problem is that it may still be taken as an attempt to establish that a certain *state of affairs* holds true, albeit necessarily true. What is correct about the ontological argument is that it recognises that 'God exists' is a necessary, rather than a contingent empirical proposition. But whereas empirical propositions can be said to describe *possible* states of affairs, necessary propositions cannot be said to describe *necessary* states of affairs. Their role is normative rather than descriptive. This, Phillips argues, is what Wittgenstein is after when he says that the believer has "what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for all in his life."[94] As Phillips puts it, religious beliefs, such as 'God exists', provide the believer with a language in terms of which the believer's conduct is to be understood:

> "It is a language which in itself gives the believer certain possibilities in
> which to live and judge his life. Hence the kind of necessity connected with
> religious beliefs. They are certainly not hypotheses. It is even misleading to

[94] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 54.

call them propositions. Though the term has dangers of its own, to avoid the associations of the above terms, it would be better to call the religious beliefs dogmas: the absolutes of faith."[95]

Given these remarks it should not come as a surprise that Phillips suggests that we should compare the role these 'dogmas' play to the role played by what Wittgenstein calls 'grammatical propositions'. As we saw, according to Wittgenstein, necessary propositions function as, or are linked to, grammatical propositions; sentences which are typically used to express grammatical rules. Although, like empirical propositions, grammatical propositions can be said to be true, their 'truth' consists not in stating how things are, but in accurately expressing a rule. These rules are standards for the correct use of an expression, which determine its meaning: to give the meaning of a word, is to specify its grammar. Clearly, there is no such thing as an empirical falsification of a grammatical proposition. For its normative status means that the grammatical proposition itself is constitutive of the meaning of its constituent terms. For example, the role of the grammatical proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried' is not to make a true statement of fact about bachelors but to explain the meaning of 'bachelor'. It cannot be overthrown by the putative statement 'This bachelor is married' for the latter is a nonsensical combination of signs. We do not *call* a married man a bachelor. Thus, as Hans-Johann Glock observes, the denial of a grammatical proposition "displays not factual ignorance but linguistic misunderstanding. Most importantly, it excludes not a genuine possibility, but only a nonsensical form of words."[96]

Now, does Phillips propose to treat religious beliefs as grammatical propositions in the sense explicated above? One important indication that this is indeed the case may be found in the way in which Phillips develops Wittgenstein's rather cryptic remark 'theology as grammar'.[97] According to Phillips, theology is best understood as 'the grammar of religious belief', in the sense that it provides the rules that regulate the use of religious concepts, constituting their meaning. In this way, "theology decides what it makes sense to say to God and about God."[98] Thus, in Phillips's view, at least certain religious expressions can be understood as grammatical propositions:

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[95] Phillips 1976, p. 144.
[96] Glock 1996, p. 133.
[97] See Wittgenstein 1994, I, 373.
[98] Phillips 1993, p. 4; cf. Phillips 1988, pp. 195ff.

"our talk of God, for example, saying that 'God is love' is constitutive of
what we mean by divine reality. 'God is love' is not a description of God
which may be true or false, but a grammatical rule for one use, albeit a pri-
mary one, of the word 'God'. In the mouth of the believer it takes the form
of a confession of faith."[99]

Evidently, to treat 'God is love' as a rule for the use of the word God,
i.e. as a grammatical proposition, has the advantage that it supports
Phillips's contention that this expression cannot sensibly be denied. How-
ever, it also raises a number of questions. First, it is important to note
that Wittgenstein has a functional or dynamic conception of grammatical
rules. A grammatical proposition as 'All bachelors are unmarried' is a
logical or an analytical truth in the traditional sense of the term. It can be
reduced to a tautology by substituting synonyms for synonyms.[100] Thus,
'All bachelors are unmarried' is transformed into 'All unmarried men
are unmarried'. However, as Glock points out, Wittgenstein's distinction
between grammatical and empirical propositions deviates from the posi-
tivists' analytic/synthetic distinction, at least in this respect that many of
his grammatical propositions do not fit into even the most generous list
of analytical truths. Wittgenstein characterises grammatical propositions,
not in terms of their form or structure, but by reference to linguistic
behaviour. Whether a given utterance expresses a grammatical propo-
sition, i.e. is used to express a linguistic rule, depends on its role on
occasion of utterance, on whether in the particular case it is *used* as a
standard of correctness.[101] Thus, should Phillips wish to stay true to
Wittgenstein's account of grammatical propositions — and there is noth-
ing that indicates otherwise — he cannot mean to say that the fact that
'God is love' is a grammatical proposition follows from the nature of
this expression as such. Phillips needs to show that this expression is, in
fact, *used* as a standard of correctness. Now, although one can perhaps
imagine circumstances where 'God is love' is employed to express a
rule,[102] it does not seem plausible to suggest that this is the only role the
expression plays. As Phillips himself indicates: 'in the mouth of the
believer the expression takes the form of a confession of faith.' But,

[99] Phillips 1988, p. 146.
[100] Something, we may note in passing, that seems quite impossible where 'God is
love' is concerned.
[101] See Glock 1996, p. 131.
[102] For example, when someone says 'God couldn't care less' and the believer replies
'No, God is love', it does not seem altogether implausible to suggest that 'God is love' is
used normatively, i.e. as a standard of correctness.

surely, to confess one's faith is to do something more, or something else, than to provide a rule for the meaning of 'God'.

It seems evident that these considerations point to an important difference between religious beliefs, and such grammatical propositions as 'All bachelors are unmarried'. After all, it makes little sense to say that in the mouth of the 'ordinary language speaker' the latter takes the form of a confession of faith. In this respect, von Stosch reminds us that grammatical propositions regulate our linguistic practices, and our behaviour, for the most part without us being consciously aware of this. By contrast, religious expressions, e.g. 'God is love', are, on Phillips's account, constitutive of a way of looking at and judging one's life to which the believer must explicitly and consciously commit himself.[103] In Wittgenstein's words, religious belief is something like a *passionate* commitment to a system of reference; it's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation.[104]

The second question I wish to raise concerns the way in which we teach someone the meaning of a word (or correct someone's misuse of a word). Evidently, in order to explain the meaning of a word or expression to someone, this person must be acquainted with the meaning of the words in which our explanation is couched. For example, one cannot explain the meaning of 'bachelor' by saying 'All bachelors are unmarried' to someone who does not know what 'unmarried' denotes. To apply this to the case at hand, in order for the explanation of the meaning of the word 'God' by means of the grammatical proposition 'God is love' to be successful, the person addressed must already know how meaningfully to apply the word 'love'. The problem is that, according to Phillips, the Christian concept of love has little in common with our 'normal' concept of love, i.e. the love between husband and wife, children and parent, friend and friend, or the love for a particular type of food, a particular type of sports, and so on. In fact, Phillips argues, the religious concept of love can only be understood in relation to the concept of an eternal, loving God.[105] If so, then 'God is love' tells the uninitiated next to nothing about what it makes sense to say of God. We might as well say that 'God is love' provides a grammatical rule for the use of the word 'love' rather than the other way round. Of course, Phillips might reply that these concepts, in their religious contexts of application, simply are interrelated and connected to one another in a myriad of ways. One cannot

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[103] See von Stosch 2001, p. 225.
[104] See Wittgenstein 1984, p. 64.
[105] See Phillips 1970, pp. 233ff.

explicate one, without explicating the other. Fair enough. Neverthe-
less, one would like to know whether there is any overlap, as it were,
between the grammar which regulates our non-religious practices and
the grammar which regulates religious practices. It is difficult not to
share von Stosch's suspicion that, sometimes, Wittgensteinian philoso-
phers of religion seem to claim that *all* religious expressions either are,
or can be derived from, grammatical propositions.[106] For example,
Robert L. Arrington argues that not only 'God is love' should be under-
stood as a grammatical proposition, but, so too, should 'God exists',
'God is omnipotent, omniscient and eternal', and 'God is my Creator'.
Likewise, the belief that Jesus rose from the dead, and belief in miracles
in general, should be understood in terms of "a commitment to a way of
conceptualising the world, a commitment to a set of grammatical propo-
sitions."[107] At one stage, Arrington seems to take a step back, reassuring
us that his thesis does not entail that *all* religious statements are gram-
matical in nature. Some may be understood as factual or descriptive, for
example, 'I am a sinner', 'God loves me' and 'God has a purpose in tak-
ing this child'.[108] However, this concession is short-lived; in a footnote
Arrington adds that we could just as well argue that these assertions,
too, express grammatical propositions. Indeed, a few pages further on, we
find that the believer who moans 'I am a thoroughly worthless wretch'
or 'I have sinned' is, according to Arrington, "simply applying to him-
self the religious grammatical rules defining human nature."[109]

   Arrington's, in my opinion, over-enthusiastic utilisation of the notion
of a grammatical proposition may lead one to wonder whether religious
believers ever get round to *saying* something *about* something.[110] Sure;
to play a game one needs some set of rules. But where religious lan-
guage-games are concerned it starts to seem as if the whole point of the
game consists in citing the rules! Perhaps more importantly, the more

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[106] See von Stosch 2001, p. 269.
[107] Arrington 2001, p. 179.
[108] See Arrington 2001, p. 173.
[109] Arrington 2001, p. 177.
[110] Given Wittgenstein's functional conception of grammatical propositions, to say
that 'I have sinned' *is*, as such, a grammatical proposition, is to say that it is used in the
context of explaining the use of, or correcting misuses of, the word 'sin'. Thus, when the
believer says 'I have sinned', he is not saying anything about himself, not describing him-
self or his state of mind, nor is he referring to anything he has done. This seems to me a
wholly implausible suggestion. That is not to say that one could not, perhaps, imagine a
context in which 'I have sinned' *is* used to express a grammatical proposition, although I
believe 'All men are sinners' would be a better candidate; for example: someone says
'Well, at least *I* have never sinned', and the believer replies 'All men are sinners'.

religious assertions one designates as grammatical propositions, the more one immunises religious language and religious practices.[111] Such a strategy may seem appealing to an apologist. That same apologist should be aware, however, that such immunity does not come cheap. By claiming a grammatical status for a given religious expression one insulates it from external criticism. After all, nothing counts *against* a grammatical proposition. At the same time, however, one drains it of meaning. For, in a rather significant sense, grammatical propositions are also not *about* anything.

Now, in spite of his understanding of 'theology as grammar', and his remarks concerning the grammatical status of 'God is love', I believe it is clear that Phillips has no intention of claiming that *all* religious expressions should be treated as grammatical propositions. Rather, his claim is that certain (basic or fundamental) religious expressions should be treated as grammatical in nature. In the context of our present discussion, the main question, of course, is whether 'God exists' should be considered as a grammatical proposition, and, if so, what this implies. Does it follow that 'God' does not refer to an entity, and that there is nothing factual involved in the religious belief that God exists? Before we can answer this question, we need to take one further step in our argument. For although Phillips claims some sort of grammatical status for 'God exists', he does not compare it to such grammatical propositions as 'All bachelors are unmarried'. Rather, Phillips suggests that 'God exists' should be explored as we would explore, what Phillips calls, the 'basic propositions' which are at the centre of Wittgenstein's attention in *On Certainty*: 'The earth has existed for many years past', 'I have two hands', 'I have never been on the moon', 'Human beings sleep', etc.

Are these propositions 'grammatical propositions'? As we have already noted, the class of what Wittgenstein calls grammatical propositions is not a homogeneous one. What is important, however, is that we note not only similarities, but also a number of crucial differences between these 'basic propositions'[112] and a grammatical proposition as 'All bachelors are unmarried'. First, in contrast to 'All bachelors are unmarried', with many of these basic propositions, it seems quite natural to add 'I believe' to them, for example, '*I believe* that the earth has existed for many years

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[111] See von Stosch 2001, pp. 230ff. While I agree with von Stosch that it is a mistake to argue that all religious expressions can be understood as grammatical propositions, I believe he is wrong to suggest that Phillips is guilty of this mistake.

[112] For the remainder of this discussion I shall adopt Phillips's terms 'basic propositions' and 'basic beliefs' to denote the kind of propositions and beliefs under investigation.

past'. This is connected, perhaps, to the fact that they seem to express straightforward empirical matters of fact, rather than linguistic rules. In this respect it is important to note that there is no logical contradiction in imagining their denial; they are not in the usual sense *a priori* propositions.[113] This does not mean, however, that their 'truth' can be denied at will. The reason, Glock suggests, "is not that their negation is excluded as nonsensical by a specific grammatical rule, but rather that abandoning them would undermine our whole system of beliefs."[114] From this, it should not be concluded that we simply decide, for pragmatic reasons, not to abandon these basic propositions. The rejection of a basic proposition would not be considered a mistake, nor an irresponsible decision, but rather perhaps some sort of mental disturbance. As Wittgenstein puts it, were someone to deny a basic proposition, "we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented."[115] There is simply no room for doubt here. Nor can there be any question of providing reasons or evidence for basic propositions. With an ordinary empirical belief it is the evidence of experience that justifies the belief; we test the belief against experience. Note, however, that for something to count as evidence for a claim, there needs to be a conception of what would count *for* the claim, and what would count *against* it. With such propositions as 'The earth has existed for many years past' or 'I am a human being', *everything* counts for them, *nothing* against them.[116] The point is that although we might well call these basic propositions 'true', they are not, or no longer, tested by experience. Rather, they have become rules or measures of testing experience; they form the background or 'scaffolding' of our thinking: "The truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference."[117]

One might counter that, at least where certain basic propositions are concerned, we can quite easily imagine circumstances where their denial not only makes sense, but could correctly describe a state of affairs. For example, 'I do not have two hands; one has been surgically removed'. It should be clear, however, that this does not count as an argument against Wittgenstein's treatment of basic propositions. Wittgenstein's account is, as noted, a functional one. The logical status of basic propositions depends, not on their form or structure, but on the role they play in our

[113] See Vasiliou 2001, p. 39.
[114] Glock 1996, p. 133.
[115] Wittgenstein 1997, 155.
[116] See, for example, Wittgenstein 1997, 4.
[117] Wittgenstein 1997, 83; 211; cf. Wittgenstein 1997, 151, 309.

linguistic practices and, hence, is subject to change: "any empirical proposition can be transformed into a postulate — and then becomes a norm of description."[118] It is also quite possible to imagine a move in the opposite direction: what was once a norm of description, turns into a 'normal' empirical proposition. For example, *On Certainty* was written before the days of space travel. It is now easy to imagine circumstances where it would make sense to say 'I doubt whether I have been on the moon'. Although some critics have thought that this fact shows a short-coming in Wittgenstein's remarks, Phillips argues that it simply illustrates the point he is making:

> "namely, that he is not talking of propositions which cannot be questioned because of their inherent nature. They enjoy the status they have because of the place they occupy in the language people use, a language the content of which is not independent of the complex of activities which go to make up the culture of a people. In these activities there are things we do not question, things we take for granted, and it is the propositions which are connected with such things that Wittgenstein is interested in."[119]

Wittgenstein's treatment of basic propositions is a topic that has inspired, and continues to inspire, a great deal of discussion. Our brief exposé does not pretend to contribute to this discussion. Rather, I wish to focus on Phillips's contention that 'God exists' can be understood as a basic proposition. The first thing to note is that, in calling 'God exists' a *basic* proposition, Phillips does not mean to imply that it is, either in a logical or temporal sense, the first proposition a person must accept in order to become a believer. In other words, religious practices are not, as the realist assumes, *grounded* in the belief that God exists. The basic propositions Wittgenstein examines in *On Certainty*, Phillips argues, are not the foundations or the first principles on which all other propositions are based. We could not *start* with these basic propositions, "because they have their sense, are held fast, by all that surrounds them"; they "have their life *in* the ways we think and behave."[120] According to Phillips, a child is not first taught 'the basics'. Rather, it is introduced to basic propositions in being taught *other* things.[121] For example, the child does not believe in the existence of chairs and tables because it has been taught that material objects exist. It is taught to sit down on a chair or at a table, and that, Phillips argues, is what shows its belief in material

[118] Wittgenstein 1997, 321.
[119] Phillips 1976, pp. 160-161.
[120] Phillips 1988, p. 40.
[121] Cf. Wittgenstein 1997, 476-480.

objects. Again, a child comes to know people in its dealings with them — its mother, father, brothers, sisters, friends, the butcher, the milkman, the grocer, etc., etc. In this, Phillips argues, is shown its belief in human beings. That is to say, "the belief is not the presupposition of its actions, but shows itself, has its sense, in those actions."[122] These beliefs, the basic propositions, Phillips argues, hang together; they constitute what Wittgenstein calls our 'world-picture'.[123] The child is introduced to this world-picture as it grows up, but not by being given a course of instruction in it. To repeat, Phillips insists that our world-picture cannot be thought of as the foundation of our thinking. If anything, it is the other way round: our world-picture is 'grounded' — held fast — by our ways of thinking and acting. It is what shows itself by being taken for granted *in* our ways of acting and thinking. Similarly, we cannot think of our world-picture as the presupposition of the ways in which we think and act, as though those ways of thinking and acting could be derived from it. We cannot, as Phillips has it, *first* identify our world-picture and *then* go on to describe the ways in which we think, because it is only in terms of how we think that we can speak of our world-picture. In short: "We are not talking of any priority over the ways we think, logical or temporal, when we speak of our world-picture."[124]

According to Phillips, similar conclusions can be drawn with respect to the proposition 'God exists'. This proposition, too, is not prior to religious practice in either a temporal or logical sense. A child — or perhaps we might also say a convert — is not taught, first, that God exists.[125] Rather, it is told certain stories, it is introduced into religious practices, such as prayer and worship, and so on. The notion of the reality of God, Phillips argues, is formed in the actual story-telling and religious services.[126] It would be a mistake to think that these religious practices are *grounded* in the belief that God exists. Quite the contrary; these practices

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[122] Phillips 1988, p. 41.

[123] 'Weltbild'; see Wittgenstein 1997, 93-97, 162, 167, 233, 262.

[124] Phillips 1988, p. 41; cf. Phillips 1976, pp. 151ff. Phillips's reading of Wittgenstein's notion of a world-picture is, in my opinion, a feasible one. However, I shall not comment any further on the exegetical accuracy of Phillips's account, nor do I intend to re-open the discussion presented in the first part of this book. Our main task, at this point, is to examine the implications of Phillips's suggestion that we should treat 'God exists' as a basic proposition, in the sense Phillips explicates.

[125] Although this claim seems disputable, I shall let it pass.

[126] See Phillips 1993, p. 4.

"constitute the context within which belief in God has its life and meaning. The meaning of belief in God is shown in the light it casts on all that surrounds it. Not: 'God be the foundation of my thinking' but 'God be *in* my thinking'. The basicality of the belief is shown in this involvement."[127]

The import of these perhaps somewhat cryptic remarks may become more clear once we recognise that, in Phillips's view, they point to an important difference between his account of the necessity connected with the belief that God exists and that entailed by the ontological argument. In the latter, Phillips argues, this necessity comes from the intrinsic nature of the concept of 'God'. If we understand what 'God' designates, we can no longer deny the existence of God. Thus, that God exists, can be established without reference to religious practice and, consequently, can function as its foundation. By contrast, according to Phillips, the reality of God

"does not get its unshakeable character from its inherent nature, or from the kind of abstraction which philosophy tries to make of it so often, but from its surroundings, from all the activities that hold it fast. Above all, those activities involving the language of praise and worship."[128]

The 'unshakeability' of the proposition 'God exists' comes from the role it plays in a whole complex of thought and action, that is, from the role it plays in its religious contexts of application. That is why it is so misleading to say that religious perspectives *presuppose* the reality of God. We cannot think of 'God exists' as the presupposition of religious practice, as though the latter could be derived from it, because it is only within the context of our religious practice that 'God exists' has the meaning it has.

The upshot of this discussion should be clear: according to Phillips, 'God exist' should be taken as a basic proposition of the religious world-picture. It should be equally clear that to construe 'God exists' in this manner has the advantage that it explains the necessity connected with belief in God, and that it can account for the fact that, as Phillips contends, it makes no sense to ask for evidence in support of this belief. Furthermore, it lends further support to Phillips's claim that we cannot give an account of what it means to believe in God without referring to the religious contexts of application in which this belief is embedded. Unfortunately, it also raises a number of questions. These questions, as will become clear, are interrelated. I have, however, tried to divide them into five groups.

[127] Phillips 1988, p. 43.
[128] Phillips 1976, p. 172.

First, some of the questions raised above remain equally valid in this context. For one thing, there seems to be an important difference between such basic propositions as 'I have two hands' and 'The earth has existed for many years past' and the proposition 'God exist', in this respect that, in contrast to the latter, the former do not function as confessions of faith, nor do they require or evoke anything like the conscious, passionate commitment associated with belief in God's existence. Furthermore, whereas we do not seem to have any alternative for such basic propositions as 'I am a human being' or 'I have two hands', religious assertions, like ethical ones, certainly allow for many alternatives. As von Stosch observes, the diversity of religious forms of life can hardly be overestimated.[129] This also raises the question as to how our 'general', or non-religious world-picture(s) interact with a religious world-picture. The debate between evolutionary theory and creationism springs to mind. Should we construe this dispute as a clash between distinct basic propositions, or world-pictures, where 'each man declares the other a fool and heretic'?[130] No doubt, these sentiments sometimes play a role. But it is difficult to deny that many of the participants, on either side of this dispute, seem to think that there is something more at stake:[131] that is, a conflict between distinct hypotheses which offer distinct, mutually exclusive, explanations of certain facts and phenomena. We should also remind ourselves of our discussion of miracles. Here, there seemed to be a conflict between what can intelligibly be said about the world and what believers want to say. 'When people are dead, they stay dead' might well be taken as a basic proposition, one which sits rather uneasily with the believer's (basic?) belief that Jesus rose from the dead. As we saw, Phillips's attempt to resolve this difficulty is far from satisfactory.

The second question I wish to raise is somewhat similar to the one Scott and Moore submitted earlier in our discussion. What would be entailed by our conceding that 'God exists' is a basic proposition? According to Phillips, "Just like 'Physical objects exist' or 'Human beings exist' so 'God exists' should be explored in this way."[132] But even if we accept

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[129] See von Stosch 2001, p. 269.

[130] See Wittgenstein 1997, 611.

[131] Or perhaps we should say something *less* at stake.

[132] Phillips 1988, p. 92. It might be argued that these examples favour Phillips's position, in that they widen the gap between empirical propositions and the proposition 'God exists'. Clearly, 'Physical objects exist' and 'Human beings exist' are far removed from anything we should normally wish to call an empirical proposition. By contrast, as noted, many of the examples typical of Wittgenstein's discussion in *On Certainty* are more easily assimilated to regular empirical propositions.

that there is no room to doubt that human beings and physical objects
exist, nor any question of providing evidence for either assertion, it still
does not follow that talk about 'human beings' does not refer to entities,
nor, absurdly, that talk about 'physical objects' does not refer to phys-
ical objects.[133] Nor does it follow that I cannot have straightforward
factual beliefs about either physical objects or human beings. Similarly,
if we accept that 'God exists' is a basic proposition, it follows that, for
those who share the relevant religious world-picture, there is no room to
doubt God's existence, nor is there any question of providing evidence
for it. But should we also accept that, therefore, 'God' does not refer to
an object or an entity, or that nothing factual enters into the belief that
God exists?

The third question, or rather a set of questions, is related to the kind
of propositions Wittgenstein discusses in *On Certainty*. Phillips appreci-
ates that one prominent feature of Wittgenstein's discussion is the fact
that the contrast drawn between the empirical and the grammatical is not
a sharp one.[134] Most of the propositions Wittgenstein examines have the
form of straightforward, empirical propositions. Indeed, it would be ludi-
crous to argue that many of them do not make claims about how things
stand. After all, I *am* a human being, I *actually* have two hands, and the
world has, *in fact*, existed for many years past. What is interesting about
them, one might argue, is not that they have the form of empirical propo-
sitions yet do not state matters of fact, but rather that, like empirical
propositions, they state matters of fact but are not held, and cannot be
rejected, on the basis of evidence. Furthermore, as we saw, we can imag-
ine circumstances where a basic proposition, e.g. 'I have two hands', *can*
function as a falsifiable empirical proposition. Finally, given Wittgen-
stein's functional conception of basic propositions, it is clear that the
logical status of certain propositions can change. Empirical proposi-
tions are 'hardened' into basic propositions,[135] while basic propositions
may have their status revoked. Such changes can be motivated by vari-
ous reasons, ranging from new experiences to simplicity, fruitfulness or
sheer beauty.[136] Sometimes, as the example of space-flight demonstrated,

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[133] For example, a sign in a zoo or a chemical plant: 'No human beings allowed
beyond this point', and a sign on a can of paint: 'You should remove all physical objects
from the room before spray-painting the ceiling'.

[134] See Phillips 2003, pp. 133ff.

[135] See Wittgenstein 1997, 96.

[136] See Glock 1996, p. 133. We may agree with Phillips, and, for that matter, Glock, that
these changes cannot be construed simply as the falsification of a hypothesis or a theory.
(See Phillips 1988, p. 64.)

changes may be incited by scientific advances, or the bringing to light of new, hitherto unknown, matters of fact.

Now, the question is whether Phillips allows us to draw the same conclusions with respect to the, allegedly, basic proposition 'God exists'. Thus, first, does Phillips allow that we cannot draw a sharp contrast between 'God exists' and regular empirical propositions? Secondly, does Phillips allow that, like 'I have two hands', 'The world has existed for many years past' etc., 'God exists', too, states a matter of fact, even though it is not held, nor can be rejected, on the basis of evidence? Finally, does Phillips allow that scientific discoveries, or the bringing to light of new matters of fact, could lead to the basicality of 'God exists' being revoked? With respect to all of these questions: if so, then what are the implications for our understanding of the proposition 'God exists'; if not, then does this not point to certain disanalogies between the basic propositions Wittgenstein discusses and the proposition 'God exists'; disanalogies which need to be accounted for?

A fourth question arises in connection with one of the differences between such grammatical propositions as 'All bachelors are unmarried' and such basic propositions as 'The earth has existed for many years past'. As we saw, although, like grammatical propositions, basic propositions leave little room for denial, unlike grammatical propositions, their negation is not excluded as nonsensical by a specific grammatical rule; there is thus no logical contradiction in imagining their denial. If this is correct, and 'God exists' is, as Phillips contends, a basic proposition, then Phillips's oft repeated claim that 'it *makes no sense* to say that God might not exist' is rather misleading.

This brings us to the fifth and final question. We have already touched upon it several times, but it still awaits adequate discussion. It is this: how does Phillips account for the fact that God's existence, necessary as it may be, is nonetheless often questioned and denied? If everything counts *for*, nothing *against* a basic proposition, it would seem that Phillips's analysis leaves no room for such denials. Of course, Phillips does not think so. Quite the contrary; he insists that his "thesis is as necessary in explaining unbelief as it is in explaining belief."[137] Says Phillips:

> "Clarifying the grammar of religious beliefs is important, not simply in order to see what worship means, but also in order to see what rebellion, fear, dread, etc., may come to in this context."[138]

[137] Phillips 1993, p. 8.
[138] Phillips 1970, p. 68.

Here, too, one must be very careful not to distort the character of what one is trying to clarify. One form such a distortion may take is that of presenting the non-believer as someone who *contradicts* the believer; as someone who asserts the *opposite* of what the believer asserts. According to Phillips, this is misconceived in that it is based upon the assumption that the believer and the non-believer participate in the same mode of discourse. After all, contradictions can only be located within a shared mode of discourse.[139] But, as Phillips has it, the disagreement between the believer and the non-believer cannot be construed as such. Rather, their dispute is of a grammatical nature:

> "The dispute between belief and unbelief is not one in which probabilities and evidence are weighed within a common system. The gap between what the believer wants to say and what the unbeliever denies is itself a *grammatical* gap. To reject religion, or to come to God, is not to reject a hypothesis within a common way of looking at things, but, rather, to reject or embrace a whole way of looking at things."[140]

It is not a question of the non-believer believing the opposite of what the believer believes, but of his not sharing or having that belief at all. He has no use for the religious belief, he does not live by it, it does not regulate his life. In other words, the non-believer does not share the religious world-picture, its basic propositions are not 'held fast' in *his* life.

Clearly then, Phillips does not deny that there are alternatives to religious belief. His claim is that the conflicts or tensions between such alternatives are falsified if one presents them as conflicts between mutually exclusive hypotheses or explanations. Rather, they present different frames of reference, different ways of making sense of one's life:

> "one cannot say that there is no alternative to 'God created heaven and earth', since 'I don't believe it' or 'I don't accept that' expresses such alternatives. These are genuine alternatives since they indicate that the person has no use for the religious belief, that it means nothing to him, that he does not live by such a belief, or that he holds other beliefs that exclude religious faith. In this latter case, however, the alternatives are not alternatives within the same mode of discourse, but rather, different perspectives on life."[141]

Phillips's insistence that it makes no sense to say that God does not exist need not entail that all propositions to the contrary are meaningless. Non-belief is no non-sense. What about a person who says 'There is no

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[139] See, for example, Phillips 1976, pp. 165ff.
[140] Phillips 1988, p. 80.
[141] Phillips 1976, p. 168.

God', meaning something along the lines of 'As a matter of fact the being in which the believer believes does not exist although he might have'? I take it Phillips should not say that the rejection of religious belief is nonsensical, in that it will surely have an effect on a person's life, on the way in which one understands oneself and others. On the other hand, presumably we should also say that that person is confused, at least in this sense, that he does not understand what it means to talk about God, what role the concept plays in religious language-games. No doubt, in certain cases, the rejection of religious belief may take this form. But, Phillips insists, nothing forces us to construe all instances of non-belief in this manner. Denial may mean something altogether different. It may simply point to the fact that a person does not pray, does not praise. As Wittgenstein puts it, he thinks differently, in a different way; says different things to himself; has different pictures.[142] Religious beliefs and activities play no role in his life, he does not live by such beliefs or, perhaps, holds other beliefs which exclude religious faith. No general answer can be given. We will have to consider each case separately and look at the role these denials play in the lives of those who utter them. Then we should come to see that just as 'There is a God' is not an indicative statement, neither is 'There is no God'. Rather, it is "a denial; it may indicate one of a number of possible negative relations in which a man may stand to the affirmation of faith."[143]

Phillips's portrayal of the conflict between belief and non-belief is successful in that it shows that his account of God's existence as necessary or unquestionable does not commit him to the view that God's existence cannot be denied, or that such denials must be confused or nonsensical. This, Phillips tells us, is what is wrong with Anselm's ontological argument, and also Malcolm's reading of it.[144] On one level, Phillips argues, we can see that Anselm throws light on the logic of belief in God: God's existence is necessary, it cannot be denied. On this view, his conclusions can be seen as grammatical conclusions. However, Anselm wanted to go further. He wanted, by means of his proof, to end with the recognition, 'And this being Thou art, O Lord, our God'. He wanted his proof to end in praise, to issue in an affirmation of faith, such that all denials of these truths are ruled out. This, Phillips argues, is where Anselm (and Malcolm) go wrong. For the grammatical insights they give us can be

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[142] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 55.
[143] Phillips 1976, p. 181.
[144] See Phillips 1976, pp. 175ff; cf. Chapter Three above.

shared by believers, atheists, or others who may not want to describe themselves in either of these ways:

> "Here Anselm was confused, since he abstracted the affirmation from the very contexts which could give birth to it, so introducing the kind of ambiguity into his arguments which we have also found in Malcolm's discussion of them. There is a mixture of what must essentially be kept apart; a mixture of philosophical grammatical observations and affirmations of faith."[145]

Phillips's main claim is that denials and affirmations of faith cannot be located within a shared mode of discourse. I do not wish to deny — indeed, it could hardly be denied — that, often enough, believers and non-believers talk at cross-purposes. But must this always be the case? We should not forget that, although the believer and the non-believer obviously do not share a religious frame of reference, there is much that they do share, certainly within contemporary Western society. Does this not provide them with enough common ground, not just to understand one another, but also to contradict one another? The belief that God exists, Phillips argues, is basic; it is not taught as a belief which requires further reasons or evidence to justify it. But this seems to fly in the face of the fact that both believers and non-believers do pretend to be able to give reasons and evidence for their beliefs (or non-beliefs). Throughout history, they have engaged one another in conversation, each of them convinced that, at the end of the road, the other should recognise the force of the arguments presented and either abandon or embrace their religious beliefs. Of course, Phillips might say that, in so doing, both the believer and the non-believer are confused. Just as Anselm was confused when he thought that his proof could issue in an affirmation of faith. Although there is no logical contradiction in such a claim, it seems neither very feasible nor very palatable.

This brings us to the third and final problem concerning Phillips's account of the reality of God. Is it descriptively adequate, that is, can it do justice to role belief in God plays in the lives of the faithful? One important aspect of the way many Christians talk about God, Bailey argues, is their willingness to construct or deploy in argument with non-believers alleged proofs of God's existence.[146] Bailey kindly presents us with a number of examples, the first of which we have already come upon: Anselm's ontological argument. The other examples he mentions

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[145] Phillips 1976, p. 179.
[146] See Bailey 2001, p. 128.

are Bishop Berkeley's arguments, Paley's teleological argument, and St. Thomas Aquinas's cosmological argument. Now, it should be clear that a realist like Bailey, who argues that believers conceive of God as a causally efficacious being, will have little difficulty in accounting for the fact that believers have sought to provide such proofs for His existence. How does Phillips deal with them? He does not deny that the formal proofs of God's existence have played a role in the history of Christianity, nor is he overlooking the fact, or so he argues, that the abstract concepts contained in these proofs have found their way, by various routes, into creeds and declarations of Faith. Phillips insists, however, that "to the extent that they have any life there, it will not be by forming the abstract foundations of Faith, but by having a lively application within them."[147] The formal proofs of God's existence should be understood as attempts to intellectually elucidate the religious responses which are logically prior to them:

> "so far from it being the formal proofs which give a rational foundation to the beliefs of the faithful, it was the lives of the faithful which breathed into the formal proofs whatever life they had."[148]

If these religious reactions should fall into decline, the intellectual arguments would lose any force they may have had; they would become no more than empty shells.

There are at least two problems with Phillips's reply. First, one may agree with Phillips that the formal proofs of God's existence arose out of living faith, and that their force and import depends on their having an application within that faith. One may well wonder, however, what kind of application they could possibly have. Given Phillips's account of the reality of God, to attempt to prove the existence of God is to fall prey to confusion. Rather than 'intellectual elucidations', it would seem that, on Phillips's account, we have no option but to consider them intellectual misunderstandings and distortions. Does this not commit us to the view that the bishop, archdeacon and saints mentioned by Bailey have failed to understand correctly the status of their own religion?[149] Arrington seems to have little qualms in ascribing such a view to Wittgenstein. Anselm and Aquinas, he tells us, "would be held responsible by Wittgenstein for much of the confusion that surrounds the question of the existence of God."[150]

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[147] Phillips 1988, p. 228.
[148] Phillips 1986, p. 91.
[149] See Bailey 2001, p. 128.
[150] Arrington 2001, p. 177.

I am not at all certain that Wittgenstein would share that opinion. At any rate, I agree with Hyman that it would be foolish to maintain that Anselm and Aquinas were peddling superstitions.[151] As Bailey observes pointedly, although other Christians encountering the formal proofs have often accused them of being fallacious or useless as a means of bringing about a genuine religious conversion, "the allegation that they misuse the word 'God' is a relatively rare response and one that has attained a significant degree of prominence only in the twentieth century."[152]

As we saw, according to Phillips, theology may be understood as grammar in that theological doctrines "are seen as laying down the grammatical parameters of the faith: they are concerned with what should and should not be said of God."[153] Does this mean that the whole of theology is grammar, in other words, does theology only concern itself with what is meaningful to say of 'God' rather that what is true to say of God? Phillips rejects this conclusion. He argues that seeing theology as a kind of grammar does not entail that the theologian can no longer talk of God as an independent reality, nor that he must cease to make truth claims concerning God. However, in saying this, Phillips is conceding nothing to the realist, for he immediately adds that "such talk should be understood within the grammar of the religious discourse in which it is made."[154] Thus, although the theologian can certainly be said to make truth-claims about an independent reality, these are not to be construed like the kind of truths-claims we might make concerning the 'independent reality' of an object or a person. This claim, it seems to me, can certainly be disputed. We may agree that certain doctrines present grammatical rules, and it seems clear that certain theological disputes can best be understood as grammatical controversies, controversies over what it makes sense to say about God. However, it seems equally clear that we cannot entirely dispense with the element of propositional truth in religion. Surely, Patrick Sherry is not too far off the mark when he says that the "early Fathers of the Church clearly intended the Creeds and other doctrinal formulations to express true propositions, i.e. ones giving correct descriptions of actual states of affairs, difficult though it be for us to understand the metaphysical and eschatological strands in them."[155] I do not think it is credible to suggest that this is not what they took themselves to be doing.

[151] See Hyman 2001, p. 8.
[152] Bailey 2001, p. 128.
[153] Phillips 1988, p. 211.
[154] Phillips 1988, p. 211.
[155] Sherry 1977, p. 43.

Furthermore, even if we should wish to maintain that, in doing so, they were confused, it is difficult to see how this could be established by reference to *the* grammar of religious discourse. For their confusions, if such they be, form a not inconsiderable part of that very grammar. Theology does not just arise out of a living Faith, it partly constitutes that living Faith, giving shape and substance to the religious community of which it is a part. Needless to say, a religion, or at any rate Christianity, is not a homogeneous whole. There are various religious communities, various theologies, some further apart than others. One could of course argue that a certain theology, i.e. a certain grammar, is misconceived, by reference to another grammar. But such a strategy cannot escape being charged with being preferentialist, or with having revisionism as its aim.

It is time to draw some conclusions. We began by considering certain disanalogies between talk about God and talk about matters of fact. These disanalogies cannot be denied, and they certainly challenge too facile an assimilation of religious language to physical object language. However, we argued that they do not demonstrate *conclusively* that 'God' cannot be construed in realist terms.

We then turned to consider Phillips's account of the reality of God as necessary and unquestionable. Phillips's analysis provides us with a viable account of the nature of the conflict between belief and non-belief, an account which manages to retain the necessity associated with religious beliefs without denying the possibility of a rejection of these beliefs. Phillips is right, I believe, to insist that religious belief is not so much a matter of entertaining certain hypotheses as the embracing of a frame of reference, or a world-picture. Furthermore, the notions of a 'grammatical proposition' and a 'basic belief' may well help us better to understand the way in which certain propositions or beliefs function within this religious frame of reference. Phillips's claim that the realist's treatment of certain religious assertions fails to take account of their grammatical status, should not go unheeded.

However, we also argued that Phillips's analysis raises a number of rather irksome questions; questions which require further attention. Perhaps most importantly, it is not obvious that, should we accept Phillips's suggestion that 'God exists' constitutes a basic belief, this demonstrates that 'God' cannot de said to refer to an entity, in the realist sense, or that nothing factual enters into the belief that God exists. It is not obvious that a religious world-picture cannot involve falsifiable factual and historical beliefs, and even metaphysical beliefs, as well as 'basic beliefs', which are not held on the basis of evidence, each in a mutually supporting

relation.[156] Furthermore, it does seem extremely difficult to deny that the Christian world-picture has involved, and still involves, such beliefs. The suggestion that they are the result of a misunderstanding of the grammar of religious belief fails to convince, and casts doubt on the descriptive adequacy of Phillips's analysis. Does this mean that Phillips's account should, after all, be deemed to be revisionist in nature? The following chapter seeks to answer that question.

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[156] See Hyman 2001, pp. 8-9.

9. A REVISIONIST ACCOUNT OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF?

The contemplation of possibilities of meaning plays a central role in Phillips's work. It can be understood in either a descriptive or a non-descriptive sense. The latter involves imagining or inventing ways in which language might be used, or of suggesting ways in which a given form of language might be understood. As we have seen, although such an approach may be helpful, its usefulness is limited. For no matter how feasible the possibilities of meaning one advances are, unless and until one demonstrates that they present not just a possible but a correct rendering of a given practice, they do not conclusively establish that a contrary account of the practice under investigation may be rejected.

The second, descriptive approach, however, does make claims to some measure of descriptive accuracy. Here, the suggested possibilities of meaning should be understood not as mere possibilities, but as more or less extended representations of actual linguistic practices. There can be no doubt that Phillips's accounts of the belief in miracles, the belief in immortality, and the belief in the reality of God, examined in the previous chapters, belong to the latter category. Phillips claims his accounts to represent, not just what these beliefs might possibly mean, but what they actually do mean, in their historical contexts of application.

Phillips's critics, however, are not convinced. It has been argued, time and again, that Phillips's conclusions do little justice to the nature of religious belief. The suggested 'possibilities of religious meaning' are said to depart from traditional religious belief to such an extent that we may wonder whether we should call them religious at all. Hyman, for example, opines that we should regard 'a passionate commitment to a system of reference' "not as a religious belief — certainly not Christian religious belief — but as one of the heirs of what used to be called Christian religious belief."[1] As to whether or not one should bid Christianity's successor a warm welcome is a question Hyman does not address. Stewart Sutherland, by contrast, is more explicit. He writes that he indeed welcomes Phillips's accounts of, for example, petitionary prayer and belief in eternal life. However, he agrees with Hyman in that he welcomes them *as*

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[1] Hyman 2001, p. 10.

> "interesting constructions upon or revisions of the Christian tradition rather than as they are apparently offered, descriptions of the most essential or continuing elements of that tradition."[2]

The main point, it seems, is not so much whether or not we should embrace Phillips's alternative to traditional Christian religious belief but, rather, that we should recognise that it is, in fact, an *alternative*. That is to say, we should recognise that rather than providing descriptive representations of the meaning of certain religious beliefs or practices, Phillips's clarifications are in reality attempts at reforming or revising these practices and beliefs.

As we have seen, Phillips rejects this conclusion. He argues that although he is by no means opposed to reform, it must not be confused with the task of conceptual investigation he is concerned with.[3] Part of this task involves trying to give perspicuous representations of religious practices. Phillips insists that, in doing so, he has never sought to reform anything. His only aim has been to elucidate that which lies before us.[4] As noted, given Phillips's disavowals, it would be inappropriate to persist in the claim that Phillips is intent on reforming religious beliefs and practices. Even so, this does not rule out the possibility that his accounts may, after all, be misconceived. Of course, Phillips does not deny the possibility that his conclusions may turn out to be erroneous and those he has criticised turn out to be justified.[5] However, it is clear that he believes it to be his critics' accounts, rather than his own, that distort the nature of religious language. The issue thus becomes whether Phillips or his critics is providing a more accurate account of the phenomena under investigation.

That question is extremely difficult to answer if only for the fact that the 'phenomena under investigation' display a bewildering diversity, even when we narrow our investigation solely to the Christian religion, with which both Phillips and his critics are concerned almost exclusively. According to Messer, this alone suffices to undermine the charge of Phillips as a revisionist:

> "There is simply too great a diversity amongst religious believers to be able to assert one historically dominant strand against the others. Equally, there are simply too many different conceptions of what constitutes the normative essence of Christianity, and the ways in which we could decide

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[2] Quoted in Phillips 1993, p. 242.
[3] See Phillips 1993, pp. 242-243; cf. Phillips 1995, p. 123.
[4] See, for example, Phillips 1999, p. 164-165, Phillips 2000, p. 155.
[5] See Phillips 1999, p. 2; Phillips 2000, p. 15.

which conception is correct, for us to expect the simple charge of revision-ist […] made against Phillips to stand."[6]

While Messer does not deny that there are forms of Christianity which Phillips's account does not accommodate, he argues that, on the other hand, there are "major strands within Christianity which seem more suited to Phillips's account than to that of his critics."[7] Similarly, Clack argues that

> "whenever [Phillips] is dealing with matters of Christian faith, what he writes is generally convincing. At any rate, he certainly stands full square within a reputable branch of Christianity, that characterised most ably by Kierkegaard and Simone Weil."[8]

I agree; at least to the extent that it would go too far to suggest that Phillips's possibilities of religious meaning fail utterly to engage with the way in which believers have practiced, understood, and experienced their faith throughout the history of Christianity. Our examination has shown that Phillips's accounts undeniably capture certain key elements and aspects of 'traditional Christian belief'. As such, they will undoubtedly strike a chord with a fair number of believers. On the other hand, our discussion in the previous chapters also indicates that we cannot expect everyone to be satisfied with Phillips's conclusions. His analyses are unorthodox in that they exclude certain crucial elements which have traditionally been associated with the beliefs in question. Despite Phillips's vehement objections, there is some justification to the claim that Phillips presents a non-realist analysis of the nature of religious belief. And while Clack and Messer are right to suggest that Phillips's account is tailored to suit certain strands of Christian belief, one should perhaps not overestimate the magnitude of these strands. Surely Terrence W. Tilley has a point when he says that, rather than representative of 'mainstream' Christianity, Phillips's exemplars are, as Tilley puts it, the 'odd ducks' of religious communities:

> "[Phillips's] modern favorites include Søren Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, and 'Revelation', the short story by Flannery O'Connor. While no one would deny their significance and deep interest, they are clearly not anywhere near the 'standard' of religious practitioners. They are post-Reformation Christians who stand in opposition to many of the everyday beliefs and practices held by members of their traditions."[9]

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[6] Messer 1993, p. 59.
[7] Messer 1993, p. 54.
[8] Clack 1995, p. 113.
[9] Tilley 2000, pp. 351-352.

The point is not to insist that Phillips's clarifications can only be seen as attempts at reforming traditional Christian religious beliefs, nor to contend that, as descriptions of these beliefs, they are wholly inaccurate. Rather, it is to insist that although Phillips may accurately describe *certain* possibilities of religious meaning, there are many other possibilities besides, possibilities which have played at least as important a role in the history of Christianity, if not more so. How does Phillips deal with these other possibilities? As we shall see, the extent to which Phillips's account of religious belief may justifiably be said to be revisionist in nature depends, in no small part, on the answer to that question.

In the following sections we discuss three ways in which Phillips might deal with forms of religious belief which his account fails, or refuses, to accommodate. Each of these entail certain problems. The first two options diminish the number of non-conformers by eliminating seeming counterexamples. They may be discarded as confusions, either on the part of the philosopher or on that of the believer. I argue that although these strategies are not entirely invalid, unless their application is strictly limited, it is difficult to see how Phillips may evade being charged with revisionism. The third option, by contrast, permits of the possibility of genuine counterexamples to Phillips's analysis. Although this allows Phillips to avoid the charge of revisionism, he also runs the risk of seriously weakening his own position.

9.1 Descriptive licence

Phillips's emphasis on the descriptive nature of philosophical enquiry may be taken to imply that the validity of an account of a given religious belief or practice can be determined by reference to what the believers themselves say of that belief or practice. Any discrepancy between their account and the philosopher's should cast doubt on the feasibility of the latter. If this is so, Phillips's critics have argued, Phillips is surely in trouble. We have already noted that, to Swinburne's mind, Phillips's account of the meaning of Christian beliefs is simply false. This would be confirmed, Swinburne feels certain, by a straightforward survey of what religious believers take their words to mean. As we saw, according to Phillips, the reality of God cannot be construed as the reality of an object; to say that there is a God, is not to assert, as a matter of fact, the existence of a particular being. I have little doubt that Swinburne would approve of John Searle's remark that

"You have to be a very *recherché* sort of religious intellectual to keep praying if you don't [believe] there is any real God outside the language who is listening to your prayers."[10] John Hick, too, seeks to cast doubt on the descriptive accuracy of Phillips's clarifications by means of an appeal to the testimony of the faithful. According to Hick, when asked 'Are you assuming that there actually is a Being whom you are addressing (or referring to) and who is eternal, omnipotent, etc.?', the 'typical religious man' will unhesitatingly reply 'Yes'.[11] Does this not indicate clearly that Phillips's Wittgensteinian portrayal of religious language is revisionary rather than descriptive?[12]

How does Phillips respond to such a line of argument? The first thing to note is that Phillips feels little inclined to contradict the suggested examples. As to Searle's remark, Phillips argues that surely *everyone*, he himself included, would say that it is futile to pray to God unless there is a God to pray to. However, Phillips adds, the conceptual disagreement is precisely over *what saying that amounts to*. In other words, as Phillips has it, one cannot say, as though it were an *argument* against his account of the reality of God, or his account of prayer, 'when ordinary people pray it is because they think there is a God up there listening', since it is precisely the grammar of such 'ordinary' talk that is being discussed. One cannot take that grammar for granted.[13] As Phillips has it, this becomes all the more clear where Hick's example is concerned. Once again, Phillips does not deny that, when asked 'Are you assuming that there actually is a Being whom you are addressing, etc.' most if not all believers will answer with assent. Put like that, Phillips asks, how could the reply be any different? After all, the unstated alternative is to say that 'God' is an illusion. Phillips suggests, however, that Hick may be too quick in drawing his conclusion. Says Phillips:

> "I have no doubt, however, that *the same* believers who say that the existence of God is a fact would, if pressed, admit that the discovery of God is not like the discovery of a matter of fact, and that there is no question of God ceasing to exist, of having existed for a certain length of time, or of having come into existence."[14]

Now, assuming that Phillips is right, an atheist critic might conclude that this just serves to demonstrate the incoherency of the grammar of

[10] Quoted in Phillips 1993, p. 23.
[11] See Phillips 1970, p. 71.
[12] See Hick 1983, pp. 92-93.
[13] See Phillips 1993, p. 29.
[14] Phillips 1970, p. 71.

the would-be religious language-game. Religious beliefs, he might argue, are a mixture of implicit, very vague, empirical hypotheses — crude, plainly false, empirical propositions plainly disconfirmed — and rather esoteric metaphysical claims which should be held to be nonsensical not just by positivists, but by Wittgensteinians as well.[15] Of course, this is not the conclusion Phillips would have us draw. In his view, it just goes to show that we cannot take the grammar of religious expressions for granted. The believer may well say that God is real, that the existence of God is a fact, that there is a God 'up there' listening to our prayers, and so on. But in pursuing philosophical clarification we cannot take the grammar of such expressions at face value. We need to examine the role they play in the believer's life, the way they function in their proper contexts of application, etc. This, one might say, is to investigate the 'depth grammar' rather than the 'surface grammar' of, e.g., 'God exists' where 'God exists' appears to be of the form 'a particular fact is the case'.[16]

Having already examined Phillips's account of the 'depth grammar' of talk of God's reality in the previous chapter, there is no need to return to that topic now. What is important here is to see how Phillips, without actually contradicting the examples brought to the fore, may nevertheless eliminate them as counterexamples to his analyses of religious belief. The problem lies not with the language itself, but with the gloss the philosopher puts on it: mesmerised by the form of the expressions, the philosopher misconstrues their grammar.

While this strategy has some application, it will not take us very far. It is one thing to warn us not to be misled by the 'surface grammar' of religious expressions. But, surely, it will not do to discard any account opposing one's own as the result of one's opponent's misapprehension of the grammar of the expressions under investigation. Phillips's critics may well agree that the conceptual disagreement is precisely over what saying such things as 'God is real', 'There is a God listening to our prayers', etc., amounts to. But, obviously, in their view, it is Phillips's account, rather than their own, which is guilty of misconstruing the grammar of these expressions. Surely, the only way to settle the issue is by an appeal to the faithful. The believer's account is final. One should present one's philosophical account to those who hold the beliefs it seeks to account for. If they reject it, their rejection is the last word on

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[15] See Nielsen 2001, p. 159.
[16] See Messer 1993, p. 53.

the matter. Phillips's critics feel certain that, were this procedure followed, Phillips's clarifications would not be well received.

Phillips agrees that, in distinguishing the good from the bad accounts, the ultimate appeal is to actual usage itself. The account must be judged on the grounds of whether it accommodates the various features which the activity under investigation exhibits. However, this does not mean that the philosopher is simply conducting a survey of what religious believers say of their beliefs, when asked. Analytical issues, Phillips insists, cannot be solved in that way: one cannot philosophise by Gallup poll. This is true not just for the philosophy of religion, but for any form of philosophical enquiry, e.g., the philosophy of mind. Says Phillips:

> "Imagine conducting *any* philosophical enquiry in this way. Would we settle the conceptual issue of what it is to think about something, by asking people to tell us what they do when thinking? […] We would not dream of answering questions in the philosophy of mind by counting heads and concluding 'The Cartesians have it!' Why do we contemplate such a procedure in the philosophy of religion?"[17]

Thus, Phillips has no intention of denying the possibility that his account(s) of religious belief(s) may not accord well with what many religious believers say about their beliefs, when asked. Quite the contrary; he readily admits that the disagreement undoubtedly exists, but what of it? Why should we be any more impressed by that fact than we would be by the fact that many give Cartesian answers when asked about the nature of thinking?[18] One cannot take the testimony of the faithful at face value. The ability to believe is not the same as the ability to give a philosophical account of one's belief. A person may pray, and know what he is doing when praying, but may be unable to give a reflective or conceptual analysis of what they are doing when praying. There is no inconsistency, Phillips argues, in saying that a person may be both a 'spiritual giant' and an 'intellectual invalid'.[19] Consequently, one must look not so much at what a person says, but at what he does, at the way he lives his life:

> "It is not sufficient to listen to what he says about his beliefs, since what he says may be radically confused. What one must pay attention to is the role a belief plays in a person's life, the difference it makes to his life. It is in this context that the meaning of the belief is discovered best."[20]

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[17] Phillips 2000, pp. 40-41, Phillips 1993, p. 28.
[18] See Phillips 1993, p. 28.
[19] See Phillips 1970, p. 264.
[20] Phillips 1970, p. 263.

In disputing the gloss on religious beliefs which theologians, believers or philosophers may give, Phillips does not take himself to have tampered with these beliefs in any way. His touchstone is what is shown "in a believer's practice, not in his philosophisings about them."[21] This, Phillips argues, is what Wittgenstein means when he says that he is merely making grammatical remarks, which can only be verified by the consequences a person does or does not draw: "All I wished to characterize was the conventions he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant."[22]

It should be clear that the distinction between 'the ability to believe' and 'the ability to give an account of one's beliefs', the distinction between the way a believer practices his beliefs and what he says about them, his 'philosophisings' about them, provides Phillips with yet another strategy by means of which apparent counterexamples to his account of religious belief may be eliminated. It cannot be denied that this strategy has some application. However, once again, its use is limited.

Phillips may well be right that conceptual issues cannot be decided 'by Gallup poll'. At times, however, Phillips makes it appear as if it really matters little whether or not the participants can recognise the clarifications provided. For example, Phillips tells us that when *The Concept of Prayer* appeared in 1965 it annoyed many philosophical attackers and defenders of religion because it urged them to give up a common game they were playing. Religious newspapers, however, greeted the book as characterising a faith they knew. Phillips does not quote this fact to counter his critics' appeal to the faithful, "but to show that you cannot philosophise by Gallup poll."[23]

Now, the example seems designed to accomplish precisely what Phillips denies it is meant to do, namely, to counter his critics' appeal to the faithful. After all, it shows that those taking up, as it were, an external point of view — 'the philosophical attackers and defenders of religion' — rejected the book, whereas the actual believers themselves welcomed it. If matters were reversed, one wonders whether Phillips could so confidently present the example. More to the point, if an account of a given religious practice is welcomed by some, yet rejected by others, why should we conclude that this just goes to show that one cannot philosophise by Gallup poll? Would it not be just as reasonable, if not

[21] Phillips 1993, p. 244.
[22] Wittgenstein 1999, p. 72.
[23] Phillips 2000, p. 41.

more so, to say that the account manages accurately to characterise the faith of some, but not of others?

Certainly, to conduct a philosophical enquiry into religious belief is not just to take an opinion poll. Were that the case, all we needed to do was to have a significant number of representative believers fill in a questionnaire. Even so, it seems to me that one cannot do away with any notion of empirical confirmation whatsoever. As noted above, once the possibilities of meaning advanced are intended as descriptions or clarifications of actual uses of language, one can no longer do as one pleases. One needs to show that one's philosophical rendering of a given practice connects to the participants' prior, non-philosophical understanding of that practice. When the gap between the philosopher's account and that of the believer becomes unbridgeable, this tends to raise suspicions with respect to the former rather than the latter. One can only go so far in saying that although the believer may think that *this* is what he believes, what he *actually* believes is '…', before one damages one's credibility.

Note that this does not contradict Phillips's point that we must not expect every believer to be capable of giving a philosophical account of his beliefs. There may well be cases where we should wish to say that a believer's account of his own beliefs must be rejected. Such a claim is justified if we can show there to be significant disparity between what the believer says of his belief and the way he practices it. However, as I have already argued, it will not do to 'de-intellectualise' faith. The aspiration of attaining a reflective understanding of one's faith is by no means foreign to religious practice, certainly not where the Christian religion is concerned. In this context, we do well to bear in mind that a believer's 'philosophisings' are not just his own invention, but are received from the religious community in which he lives. His belief, and his understanding thereof, are basically determined by what he learns from the Scriptures and their interpretation by the church to which he belongs. Theological reflection on the nature, function or meaning of religious belief will have a bearing on the actual religious practice of individual believers. Or official statements issued by the Church will have their bearing on theological research as stimulating, refraining, provoking, etc., or on believer's religious practices, etc. Of course, Phillips never denies these interdependencies. Nevertheless, his rather narrow focus on the role a belief plays in a particular individual's life tends to underplay the role of this larger religious community which, as Ignace D'Hert points out, constitutes in the most fundamental sense of the word

the context of life within which the believer understands his faith. This means, D'Hert concludes, and rightly so, that the meaning of religious beliefs cannot simply be read off from the meaning they have for any particular small group, or individual, irrespective of tradition and world-church which constitute exactly the touch-stone quarry for the authenticity of these beliefs.[24]

To reflect upon one's beliefs, to reassess them, justify them, criticise them — such activities have always been part of religious 'practice', and will have an influence on what a belief means to a person and the role it plays in his life. Of course, more so for one individual than the next. But it simply will not do to draw too hard a distinction between the way believers practice their faith, and their 'philosophisings' about it. This becomes patently clear when we turn from 'ordinary' believers to what I have, in jest, called 'the professionals'. I guess it is up to the individual to decide whether or not such authors as Anselm, Augustine, Aquinas were spiritual giants. But I for one would not care to regard them as intellectual invalids.[25] Phillips may of course try to demonstrate that their writings have been misconstrued, and that, properly understood, their understanding of religious belief — of the nature of God, of immortality and miracles, etc. — does not conflict with his own. But if the conclusions we have drawn in the previous chapters are anywhere near correct, this seems a difficult task to say the least. At any rate, to date, it is not one on which Phillips has embarked.

In summary: we have considered two possible strategies Phillips might employ in order to reduce the number of counterexamples to his account of religious belief. Although both these strategies have a valid application, their use is limited. It will not do to discard every example which is brought against Phillips's account as the result of either the philosopher's or the believer's misunderstanding of the grammar of religious belief. Phillips cannot deny the existence of genuine counterexamples, i.e. examples which can be justified by an appeal to religious practice. How may Phillips deal with these? He may either regard them as the product of confusion — confusion not so much about the grammar of religious belief or practices, but confused beliefs or practices. Or he may recognise them as genuine forms of religious belief, possibilities of religious meaning other than those he has sought to account for. We discuss these possibilities in turn.

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[24] See D'Hert 1975, pp. 61ff.
[25] I am merely making a point; needless to say, Phillips implies no such thing.

9.2 Superstition

Phillips's descriptive accounts of the religious beliefs in miracles, immortality and the reality of God present themselves as accounts of what these beliefs actually mean, in their historical contexts of application. Wittgenstein once wrote that the philosopher

> "ought to be no more than a mirror, in which [the] reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right."[26]

It cannot be denied, we argued, that some believers will recognise themselves in Phillips's mirror. Others, however, shall judge the mirror to be deformed, rather than their own thinking. For them, Phillips's accounts do not characterise a faith they know. The main point, we argued, is not so much how large the number of 'non-conformers' is, but how Phillips deals with them. To misrepresent their understanding of religious belief or to fail to account for it are, as it were, philosophical misdemeanours. A far more serious crime is committed when they are excluded from partaking in the religious domain as such. But this, or so it is argued, is precisely what Phillips's strategy results in. Despite his assurances to the contrary, those possibilities of religious meaning that are not included in his account, are excluded altogether. William Wainwright, for example, complains that Phillips refuses to call any beliefs he cannot endorse 'religious', calling them 'confusions' or 'superstitions' instead.[27] Clack, too, has criticised Phillips's use of the term 'superstition'. Not only is it impossible entirely to shake off the pejorative overtone of the term but, moreover, Clack fears that if we accept Phillips's understanding of the nature of superstition, practically everything that has formerly gone by the name of religion is in fact superstitious.[28] This leads Clack to suspect that Phillips's motive for using the distinction between genuine religion and superstition is not that of disinterestedly describing our religious forms of language:

> "[Phillips] is in many ways a present-day Henry Bourne, the eighteenth century clergyman and antiquary, who under the guise of describing the superstitions of the vulgar was in fact passionately seeking to reform what he saw as (Romish) religious abuses. In such a manner, then, Phillips is best seen as making propaganda for what he sees as 'true religion', and employing the religion / superstition distinction to do so."[29]

[26] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 18; cf. Phillips 1993, p. 237.
[27] See Wainwright 1995.
[28] See Clack 1999(a), p. 102.
[29] Clack 1995, p. 114.

Tilley has expressed similar concerns. On the whole, Tilley tells us, he is very sympathetic to Phillips's work. Like Clack, however, he finds fault with Phillips's distinction between 'genuine religion' and 'superstition':

> "'Superstition' is at home in critical discourse in which religious rituals or beliefs — typically of others' rather than one's own tribe — are rejected as not worthy of one's practice or belief. To redefine 'superstition' as a merely descriptive term is not a move Phillips could make and be consistent with his philosophical practice."[30]

The general thrust of these remarks is clear. Phillips's accounts of religious belief are said to be *prescriptive* rather than descriptive. We are contemplating, not just the way in which language is used in some, or many, religious beliefs but, rather, the way language must be used if we are to call it religious at all.

Not surprisingly, Phillips rejects these conclusions. We have already noted that he disavows having any interest in theological reform. What is more, he also denies the suggestion that in distinguishing between 'genuine religious belief' and 'superstition', the philosopher's account ceases to be descriptive, becoming prescriptive instead. Evidently, if one is convinced that a certain religious belief or practice is confused or superstitious, it is difficult to see how one could still endorse it. But, Phillips argues, this does not mean, as Wainwright implies, that in applying these categories, one is doing no more than dismissing those beliefs or practices one does not approve of. The conclusion that a given religious practice is superstitious does not flow from personal preference, nor from some prior distinction between what is genuinely religious and what is not. Philosophy waits on practice. Whether or not a given practice is confused or superstitious will show itself in the character of that practice, in what its participants do and say, in their expectations and in the tensions between these and our common understanding of ourselves and our surroundings.[31] The question as to whether a given religious practice or belief is confused or superstitious, is not one to which the philosopher can give any general, theoretical answer. The relation of philosophy to religious practice cannot be summed up in any once-and-for-all fashion. Neither can the practices themselves be summed up in this way. To demand that philosophy shall once and for all separate the wheat from the chaff "would simply be a refusal to let the interests of

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[30] Tilley 2000, p. 350.
[31] See Phillips 1995, p. 123; cf. Phillips 1993, p. 245.

human beings be the ragged, mixed phenomena they are."[32] Philosophers, Phillips tells us, are reluctant to leave things alone. They are tempted to make matters tidier than they are. But, as Wittgenstein teaches us: "what is ragged must be left ragged."[33] I agree. As we shall see, however, matters might well be a bit more ragged than Phillips's account may lead us to believe.

9.2.1 The nature of superstition

What is the nature of superstition? In 1948, Wittgenstein draws a distinction between religion and superstition as follows:

> "Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from *fear* and is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting."[34]

Wittgenstein's characterisation of superstition is not too far removed from what one might find in a dictionary; for example, superstition is

> "a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation [...]"[35]

Central to both definitions is the claim that superstition springs, not so much from reason, but from fear or ignorance, and involves a misunderstanding of how nature works — 'a kind of false science', 'a false concept of causation'. In Phillips's discussion of superstition we find the same emphases. Consider the following examples: a boxer crosses himself before a fight; a mother places a garland on a statue of the Virgin Mary; parents pray for their child lost in a wreck.[36] Are these superstitious acts? For an answer, Phillips argues, we must look at that which surrounds these activities. That is to say, we must look at what the people involved say of their actions, what they expect of them, what role they play in their lives. Does the boxer believe that if he crosses himself before a fight he cannot come to serious harm? Does the mother believe that the garland's value is prudential? Do the parents believe that all true prayers for the recovery of children lead to that recovery? If so, Phillips argues, the beliefs are clearly confused:

> "If these questions are answered in the affirmative, the beliefs involved become testable hypotheses. They are, as a matter of fact, blunders, mistakes,

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[32] Phillips 1999, p. 38.
[33] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 45.
[34] Wittgenstein 1984, p. 72.
[35] Merriam-Webster online dictionary. (Available from http://www.m-w.com)
[36] See Phillips 1993, pp. 101-108.

regarding causal connections of a kind. We can say that the people involved are reasoning wrongly, meaning by this that they contradict what we already know. The activities are brought under a system where theory, repeatability, explanatory force, etc., are important features, and they are shown to be wanting, shown to be blunders."[37]

In other words, the role these beliefs play — if taken in the way indicated — is the same as that of causal explanations. Therefore, they are answerable to the criteria which are valid in the mode of discourse in which talk of causal explanations has its life. Clearly, according to these criteria, they fail miserably; they are mistakes, blunders. After all, we know that the causal connections in which the beliefs place their trust do not exist. We know that being hit on the nose is no less painful when I have crossed myself an hour previously than when I have neglected to do so. It is in this sense that the beliefs may be said to 'contradict what we already know'.

Now, I believe Phillips is right to suggest that the examples above may all involve a belief in 'some kind of queer causal connection'.[38] On the other hand, it seems somewhat strained to say that the beliefs simply become testable hypotheses which can readily be shown to be mistaken. For one thing, it seems highly unlikely that these beliefs shall be taken seriously as testable hypotheses, and actually shown to be mistaken. This point may become more clear when we turn to consider some examples other than the ones provided. Phillips's examples all have a clear connection to religious practices and religious beliefs. But there are many beliefs or practices which most people would consider to be superstitious which do not necessarily involve any reference to religion. For example, a person may knock on wood to avert misfortune, or avoid walking under ladders. A gambler may attribute his sudden luck at blackjack table to the 'lucky chair' he is sitting on rather than to the law of averages. Clearly, we might wish to say that these examples involve a belief in some queer causal connection — a connection so queer, in fact, that I believe many would hesitate to say that 'this particular chair causes me to win at cards' is a testable hypothesis which can simply be shown to be mistaken.[39] One is reminded of Wittgenstein's remark: 'this

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[37] Phillips 1993, pp. 72-73.

[38] See Phillips 1993, p. 245. As we shall see below, Phillips allows the possibility of another, 'non-superstitious' interpretation of the examples mentioned.

[39] The point I am trying to make is that such beliefs would be discarded by most, not as an empirical hypothesis which could have been true but happens to be false, but as nonsense; or indeed as superstitious. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that

is too big to be a blunder'.[40] One might also point out that many people who hold superstitious beliefs cannot be said to be completely ignorant of causal connections. It is not at all unimaginable that the person who is an accomplished scientist is the same person who places his trust in a lucky charm, when he visits the casino.

Considerations such as these have led Phillips to correct his account of the examples we have considered. Looking back on his earlier analysis, Phillips argues that it is an error to say that the beliefs are brought under a system where theory, repeatability, etc., are crucial features, and are thus shown to be mistaken. Says Phillips:

> "But this is of course what we do not do. Just as it would be crazy to accept the invitation to treat some patients medically and to pray over others, with a view to comparing results. That makes them look like competing treatments within the same system, one of which is mistaken."[41]

Phillips's later analysis does not deny that the examples discussed involve a belief in some queer causal connection. However, it emphasises that such beliefs are not so much *mistakes* as *confusions*. The difference between a mistake and a confusion, Phillips argues, may be brought out by the following example:

> "A person who wants to poison another mistakenly buys a harmless potion. His belief that the potion is poison is false, but it might have been true. But can we say the same when I stick pins in a picture of someone, believing it will harm him? Can we say that sticking pins in the picture might have been effective, but in fact is not?"[42]

Surely, Phillips answers, we cannot; we have not the slightest idea of what it could mean to say that sticking pins in a picture could harm someone else. Such a belief is not so much mistaken as nonsensical:

those who believe such things might not actually believe that an empirical investigation would prove them right.

[40] See Wittgenstein 1999, p. 62.

[41] Phillips 1995, p. 122. It should be clear that I agree with Phillips that one cannot treat the kind of superstitions we have examined as mere empirical mistakes. On the other hand, one should take care not to underestimate the extent to which people believe in the (causal) efficacy of certain methods or procedures which others might find superstitious. Certainly, no doctor would condone an experiment where certain patients are given medication, whereas others have to make due with prayer, or at least I hope not. Nevertheless, Phillips's example is perhaps somewhat unfortunate, for where 'faith healing' is concerned, many practitioners certainly believe that prayer has been instrumental in overcoming illness, and are, in fact, quite willing to adduce evidence to support this claim.

[42] Phillips 2001, p. 170; cf. Phillips 1988, p. 308, Phillips 1993, p. 108, Phillips 1995, p. 122.

> "What we have here is not a false, but a meaningless belief. Yet people may feel a strong compulsion to believe it. This should not surprise us, since we are by no means immune from such compulsion ourselves. Although we may not be ignorant of causal connections, our superstitions may still flourish alongside them."[43]

For the reasons mentioned, I think Phillips does well to correct his earlier analysis. His later emphasis on treating superstitious beliefs as confused or meaningless, however, raises some new problems. For one thing, it is somewhat awkward to say that although the beliefs are meaningless, people may nevertheless believe them. 'What, exactly, do they believe?', one is inclined to ask. If the beliefs are truly meaningless, in the logical or grammatical sense of the term, it is difficult to see how this question may be answered. According to Phillips, however, we need not draw this conclusion. He asks us to imagine a person who tells us that the misfortune which has befallen him is the result of the ghosts of slain warriors. According to Phillips, the belief is clearly confused, involving a belief in some queer kind of causal connection which is manifestly absent. But although the belief makes no sense, we should not conclude that it can therefore not be believed:

> "Can a man believe what does not make sense? It is important here to resist the temptation to answer in the negative, just as it is important not to deny that the metaphysician means what he says. It is not that these people do not mean what they say. They do. The point to emphasize is that what they want to say cannot be said."[44]

These remarks, I feel, are not as straightforward as Phillips seems to believe. One is still inclined to reply that, if what they want to say cannot be said, so, too, what they want to believe cannot be believed. Let us, however, focus upon another aspect Phillips brings into the discussion, namely, the reference to the metaphysician. Phillips suggests that we may distinguish between a 'magical' and a 'logical' conception of language. The former involves a 'belief in the power of words', a belief that the meaning of a word resides, not in its application, its use, but in a power which resides in the word itself. For example, a person might think, confusedly, that it is an inherent power in the gesture of beckoning which makes someone come to him. He does not see that the gesture has its sense in the application, an application which he shares with the person beckoned. It is not so hard to recognise, Phillips argues, how

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[43] Phillips 2001, p. 170.
[44] Phillips 1976, pp. 108-109.

such a confusion may enter into ritualistic activities. For example, when someone beckons in a ritual, in the absence of the person beckoned, one can see how he may feel that his gesture has an inherent power to make the person summoned come to him.[45] According to Phillips, the confusion involved here is not so much a mistake about causal connections. Rather, it is

> "a confusion which springs from a misunderstanding of the logic of our language, a misunderstanding which has a deep hold on us. These misunderstandings give rise to metaphysics."[46]

I shall not go into the question as to whether or not this is a feasible diagnosis of the source of metaphysics. The point is that, on this account, the confusion involved in superstitious or magical beliefs is determined as a linguistic confusion, the result of a misunderstanding of the logic of our language.

The idea that magical or superstitious beliefs have their roots in a 'magical conception of language', in a belief in 'the inherent power of words' may perhaps shed light on some cases.[47] On the other hand, Phillips should take care to maintain some distinction between what is 'linguistically confused' and what is 'superstitious'. Surely not every linguistic confusion counts as a superstitious belief. If Phillips is right that philosophical problems arise mainly out of a misunderstanding of the logic of our language, then philosophers should be considered the most superstitious people on earth! This would be a rather idiosyncratic use of the notion superstition.[48] Conversely, there are many acts, commonly thought of as superstitious, which are not so easily recognised as linguistic confusions. Think of such practices as knocking on wood, the use of a lucky charm, the refusal to walk under a ladder, the saluting of magpies, and so on. It is not immediately obvious that such activities, and the beliefs surrounding them, can be accounted for as linguistic confusions.

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[45] See Phillips 2001, pp. 170-171.

[46] Phillips 1993, p. 109.

[47] I do not mean to imply that Phillips's suggestion that magical or superstitious ideas may have their source in a 'magical conception' of language, a belief in the 'inherent power of words', has no merit whatsoever. Wittgenstein, too, suggested such a comparison, and, as Clack points out, the thought that, for example, 'name magic' (the belief that one can harm a person by acting on his name) has its roots in a primitive philosophy which confounds the name with its bearer, is a common enough one in the anthropological literature. (See Clack 1995, p. 118.)

[48] In this context, however, it is interesting to note that Wittgenstein's earliest uses of the term 'superstition' are in fact applied to philosophy and our general tendencies, rather than to religion. See Ferreira 2002, p. 162.

Tilley provides us with the following, rather charming example. He tells us about a girl who attempted to stand perfectly still during the reading of the Gospel of John on Good Friday. Her Irish-American tradition had taught her that, if one did that, a soul would be released from Purgatory. She did devoutly attempt to be perfectly still during that reading because she thought it sad that anyone would have to be in Purgatory on Easter, and she wanted to help as much as she could.[49] Now, perhaps one would want to say that the girl was confused, although I am not quite sure what one would gain by doing so. However, even if we decide she was indeed confused, it is not at all self-evident that her confusion was the result of a misunderstanding of the logic of our language.

The main point is that although we might want to say that superstitious beliefs or practices involve some form of confusion, be it linguistic or otherwise, it will not do to say that every time we are confused, we are in the grip of a superstition. Unfortunately, Phillips's analysis makes it difficult to see how we should draw such a distinction. Clack, too, has remarked on this, criticising Phillips for failing to make the distinction between confused and superstitious beliefs or rites entirely clear, and often blurring it altogether.[50] Phillips's reply to this criticism places it in the context of the difference between his earlier and later accounts of superstition. He seems to assume that Clack is accusing him of not being consistent in his account of superstitious beliefs or rituals, treating them sometimes as mistakes, sometimes as confusions. As we have seen, Phillips admits that his earlier analysis, which, indeed, suggests that superstitions are some kind of mistake, is inadequate. He insists, however, that, in his later corrections, he is "consistent in referring to superstitious rituals as confused."[51] Now, perhaps due to the fact that Clack does not further develop his criticism, I fear that Phillips may have misunderstood his objection. The point is not that Phillips is not consistent enough in referring to allegedly superstitious rites as confused but, rather, that he is somewhat *too* consistent in referring to supposedly confused rites as superstitious.[52] This makes it appear as if there is *no* distinction between a confused and a superstitious rite — surely a questionable assumption. In a moment, though, we shall see that Phillips's judgement of a belief or ritual as superstitious does seem to imply something more than the mere presence of confusion in that belief or ritual. First,

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[49] See Tilley 2000, p. 349, n. 6.
[50] See Clack 1995, p. 115.
[51] Phillips 1995, p. 122.
[52] Although I cannot be entirely sure, I believe this is the point Clack wishes to make.

however, we need to discuss a further objection to analysing the confusions inherent in superstitious or magical beliefs as linguistic confusions. An objection brought to our attention, once again, by Clack:

> "The problem with producing an account of magic which appeals to linguistic confusions and specifically to a 'misunderstanding of the logic of language' is that it is all too simple to slip toward a view of the worthlessness of magic."[53]

Clack feels that there is a curious depth to the kind of acts and beliefs we have been considering, a depth which goes beyond their characterisation as merely 'mistakes about causal connections' or 'linguistic misunderstandings'. Most superstitious actions, he argues, manifest the idea that something extremely important depends upon the performance (or withholding) of something apparently insignificant. In this manner, our everyday superstitions have much in common with actual magical actions. Consider the Cambodian 'King of Fire', possessor of a magic sword, which if ever drawn from its scabbard would bring about the end of the world.[54] Looked upon in an overly rationalistic manner, one will undoubtedly conclude that there is some deep confusion involved here. However, rather than concerning ourselves with the confusions involved in thinking that a sword could have this property, we should reflect on the fascination that envelops us when we entertain the notion that it *might*:

> "We may then come to recognise the essentially poetic nature of such acts: a sword is drawn and the world ends, a raven cries and calamity falls. And this is the case for all sorts of actions hastily dismissed by Phillips as 'superstitious'; actions which are rife in our society. […] Indeed, we may understand these actions, not in the pejorative sense of 'superstition', but under the rubric of *Aberglaube*, that which Goethe referred to as '*die Poesie des Lebens*'."[55]

In Phillips's understanding of religion, Clack suggests, there may be no place for such thoughts and actions, simply because it is exceptionally 'high-minded'. Phillips, of course, rejects that conclusion. In reference to the Cambodian 'King of Fire', he says he agrees wholeheartedly with Clack's assessment of the essentially poetic nature of such a thought.[56]

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[53] Clack 1995, p. 117. Clack's criticism is aimed primarily at Phillips's account of primitive ritual and magical practices. It is, however, quite relevant to our current discussion.

[54] The example is drawn from J. G. Frazer's *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, volume two (London: MacMillan, 1911). See Clack 1995, p. 114.

[55] Clack 1995, p. 114.

[56] See Phillips 1995, p. 124.

I suspect, however, that this agreement is an apparent, rather than a real one. Although I am not quite sure how Phillips would analyse the example, it seems unlikely he should have us reflect on the fascination that envelops us when we entertain the notion that the King's sword *might actually have the property ascribed to it*. Consider, for instance, the way in which Phillips develops an example mentioned above, that of a man who attributes his current misfortune to the ghosts of the slain warriors. Beliefs concerning the dead need not be the product of confusion; they need not imply any kind of theory concerning causal relations between the dead and events in people's lives. Rather, they may be understood as expressing certain values and concerns which play an important role in the lives of the people concerned. Thus, Phillips argues, we may come to recognise the depth of these beliefs and the actions and rituals associated with them.[57] Perhaps so; but this analysis does appear to leave little room for 'the fascination that envelops us when we entertain the notion that the dead *might* be the cause of our misfortunes'. *That* notion, we saw, is clearly confused, superstitious, perhaps even pathological.

More generally, Phillips does not deny that metaphysics and certain forms of superstition may make a deep impression on us. Although we may not be able to formulate exactly why this is so, we feel certain that whatever is going on here cannot be something trivial or insignificant. But this perceived depth, Phillips argues, lies not in the metaphysical conclusions or superstitious beliefs themselves, but rather in the kind of questions and problems, the kind of hopes and fears, they address. Once this depth is correctly located, one will no longer hold on to the metaphysical or superstitious beliefs. In fact, *until* this is done, the true nature of the depth involved cannot be recognised:

> "In the case of metaphysics and superstition or neurosis the recognition of what is deep involves no longer being in the grip of the metaphysical or superstitious statements [...] While the metaphysician clings to his system and conclusions we cannot say that he has attained an understanding of his problem open to him. While the neurotic or superstitious person clings to his beliefs he cannot be said to possess the understanding of his situation open to him. To possess this understanding they must give up that which grips them."[58]

These remarks leave little to the imagination. Although superstitious beliefs may arise from things that go deep with us — our hopes and fears — the beliefs themselves are confusions of which we should

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[57] See Phillips 1976, pp. 108-116.
[58] Phillips 1976, p. 115.

rid ourselves. They are worse than worthless, in that they prevent us from attaining a true understanding of 'what is deep'. Now, admittedly, should a person truly believe, say, that his streak of bad lack is caused, in 'some queer way', by the ghosts of the dead, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that he is in some way mistaken or confused. And, depending on the kind of hold such a belief has on a person's life, we may even need to speak of a form of neurosis. On the other hand, I find it hard to disagree with Clack that there is a curious depth to such notions. They are the heart and soul of ghost stories and fairytales, where the dead may wander the earth and swords can bring about the end of the world. Perhaps we cannot actually believe such things, but we can imagine them. Such imaginings, in various shapes and forms, have, throughout the history of mankind, enthralled and captivated people. I have little doubt that Phillips would agree. But it is difficult to see how an analysis which seeks to account for superstitious beliefs exclusively in terms of mistakes, linguistic confusions, or neuroses, should enable us to come to grips with the fascination such notions exert.

9.2.2 Religious belief and superstition

So far, we have raised some concerns about Phillips's account of the nature of superstition. These alone may serve as a warning against too eager a philosophical appropriation of the term. But there are further reasons still why we should exercise caution in applying it. These may be brought out by examining Phillips's analysis of the distinction between what is 'genuinely religious' and what is 'superstitious'. According to Phillips, such a distinction is extremely important.[59] I tend to agree with Clack, however, that it is an unfortunate, and radically unworkable one.[60]

Let us return to the examples mentioned at the outset of our discussion: a boxer crosses himself before a fight, a mother places a garland at a statue of the virgin Mary, parents pray for the recovery of their children lost in a shipwreck. At times, Phillips seems to imply that the confusion involved in these practices and the associated beliefs — their dependence on 'non-existent quasi-causal connections' — shows them to be superstitious. But, as argued above, this does not seem a sufficient account of superstition. Even if we accept that a given practice or belief

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[59] See Phillips 1993, p. 73.
[60] See Clack 1995, p. 113.

is confused, why should we accept the additional claim that it is, there-
fore, superstitious?[61]

It soon becomes clear, however, that the kind of confusion supposedly
inherent in the examples is not the sole criterion on the basis of which
Phillips judges them as being superstitious in nature. Consider the way in
which Phillips develops the example of the mother placing a garland on
a statue of the Virgin Mary. What characterises her act as superstitious?
First, Phillips replies, there is the trust in 'non-existent, quasi-causal con-
nections': the belief that someone long dead can, if she so desires, deter-
mine the course of an individual's life, keep him from harm, and so on.
However, this is only part of the reason why we should call her act
'superstitious'. More important is the fact that the Virgin Mary

> "is seen as a means to ends which are intelligible without reference to
> her: freedom from harm, successful ventures, etc. In other words, the act of
> homage to the Virgin Mary has no importance in itself; she is reduced to
> the status of a lucky charm."[62]

What distinguishes superstition from religion is not just the confusion
involved in placing one's trust in 'non-existent quasi-causal connections'.
Rather, superstition enters into religious practice by "changing internal,
religious relations into external, prudential relations."[63] The mother's acts
have only an extrinsic relation to the results she seeks to attain. That is
to say, paying homage to the Virgin is only important in so far as it pro-
duces the desired results. If there were other, better ways of obtaining the
same results then these would be adopted. This, Phillips argues, com-
pletely ignores the *religious* character of the homage paid, reducing it to
its efficacy as one way among others of securing certain ends which can
be understood without reference to the Virgin.[64] It is for this reason that
we should call the mother's acts superstitious rather than religious.[65]

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[61] Perhaps one could reply that there is no additional claim involved at all. To say that
a belief or practice is superstitious simply *is* to say that it is the product of confusion: this
is what we *call* superstition. But, as we have seen, that suggestion will not do. If one is
committed to calling every confused belief superstitious, one can no longer distinguish
between confusion and superstition. As noted above, that involves a quite peculiar use of
the term 'superstition' rather than a reflection of 'what we call superstition'. Such a stip-
ulative strategy sits rather uneasily with Phillips's supposedly descriptive approach.

[62] Phillips 1993, p. 74.

[63] Phillips 2000(a), p. 360.

[64] See Phillips 1993, p. 74.

[65] In Phillips's view, similar conclusions can be drawn with respect to the other exam-
ples. Thus, the boxer's crossing himself and the parents' prayers are superstitious, not just
because these acts involve a trust in 'non-existent quasi-causal connections' but, more

It should be clear that these conclusions presume the possibility of contrasting the superstitious act of bringing one's child to the Virgin, to the religious one. And, indeed, Phillips warns us that it would be a mistake to conclude that *all* acts of homage to the Virgin must be understood in the manner suggested above. Although the example is presented as an example of a superstitious act, it is important to recognise that Phillips's judgement is hypothetical. It takes the form: 'If it is the case that … then we should say that …'. As we saw, whether or not a given belief or act is superstitious depends on 'what surrounds it'. In this sense, Phillips argues, the distinction between religion and superstition is a personal one.[66] That is to say, the same religious pictures, the same form of words, may be superstitious in one context, but not in another. This does not mean that it is up to the individual to decide whether a given belief or act *is* superstitious. Someone else may recognise it to be such when the agent or believer does not. It does mean, however, that we cannot decide the matter in general, without examining the application the belief or act has in human life. In short, the point is that although bringing a child to a statue of the Virgin may be superstitious for the reasons given, it need not necessarily be thus:

> "A mother may bring her new-born baby to the mother of Jesus in an act of veneration and thanksgiving; one mother greets another at the birth of a child. Connected with this act of greeting are a number of associated beliefs and attitudes: wonder and gratitude in face of a new life, humility at being the means of bringing a child into the world, and, in this case, recognition of life as God's gift, the givenness of life."[67]

Of course, it is still true to say of this mother that she seeks protection for her child. But what needs to be recognised is that this protection must be understood in terms of her religious beliefs and attitudes:

> "These virtues and attitudes are all contained in the person of Mary, the mother of Jesus. For the believer she is the paradigm of these virtues and attitudes. They constitute her holiness. Now, when her protection is sought, the protection is the protection of her holiness: the mother wants the child's life to be orientated in these virtues. The first act in securing such an orientation is the bringing of the child to the Virgin. This orientation is what the believer would call the blessing of the Virgin Mary."[68]

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importantly, because the religious significance of these acts is either ignored, or reduced to their efficacy as possible ways of securing certain results which can be understood without reference to religious beliefs and attitudes.

[66] See Phillips 1993, p. 247.
[67] Phillips 1993, p. 74.
[68] Phillips 1993, pp. 74-75.

Here, first, there is no distortion of what we already know, no trust in 'non-existent quasi-causal relations'. Secondly, and more importantly, in this case, the relation between the act of paying homage and its consequences is internal, rather than external or prudential. It is not the protection received which determines whether the act of bringing the child to the Virgin and the alleged holiness of the Virgin have been efficacious or not, but the holiness of the Virgin which determines the nature of the protection. The blessing of the Virgin is not one way among many of obtaining certain results which can be understood without reference to her. On the contrary, the request for a blessing can only be understood by referring to the religious significance the Virgin has for believers.[69]

Thus, Phillips provides us with a second criterion to distinguish religion from superstition. But this hardly improves matters. For one thing, it is doubtful that it will be possible always to distinguish clearly between cases where the relation between an act and its expected or intended consequences is strictly 'internal' and cases where it is merely 'external' or 'prudential'. It is not at all unimaginable that a mother brings her child to the Virgin, as Phillips puts it, 'to orientate it in the virtues contained in Mary', while at the same time believing that the Virgin can, if she so wishes, intervene on the child's behalf, say, to protect it from physical harm, or from falling into vice. The act of bringing the child to the Virgin is seen as the first step in securing both consequences. Again, certain groups of believers will refuse certain kinds of medical treatment even if this puts their lives at risk. They pray for their sick, and such prayers may well involve the belief that God can, if He so wishes, intervene on their behalf. Clearly, the prayers involve an instrumental rationale. But I fail to see why this should entail that, therefore and thereby, the religious significance of the prayers is completely ignored, or reduced to their efficacy as one way, among others, of securing the desired consequences. Clearly it will not do to say that the prayers are important only in so far as they produce the desired results and that, if there were other, better ways of obtaining the same results, then these

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[69] Once again, it is clear that similar conclusions can be drawn with regard to the other examples. A boxer crossing himself before a fight, parents praying for their children; although these acts may be superstitious, they need not be: "Perhaps the boxer is dedicating his performance in crossing himself, expressing the hope that it be worthy of what he believes in, and so on. [...] The parents may be making their desires known to God, wanting the situation which has occasioned them to be met in Him." (Phillips 1993, p. 73.)

would be adopted. If that were the case, the medical treatment would not have been refused in the first place. As to the 'religious significance' of petitionary prayer — the prayers may well be motivated by a wish 'to make one's desires known to God, wanting the situation which occasioned them to be met in Him',[70] *as well as* by the belief, and hope, that these desires may be realised through such prayers. The one does not rule out the other.

Phillips might reply that nothing he has said rules out the possibility of mixed motives and expectations of practitioners within what is, nominally, the same practice.[71] While this, obviously, cannot be denied, our discussion of the examples above may lead one to suspect that the motives of the devout may be more consistently mixed than Phillips's account assumes.[72] However, even if we allow that we can distinguish between internal and external relations in the manner Phillips suggests, this still leaves the question whether, in so doing, we are distinguishing between religious and superstitious practices. Bear in mind that Phillips is not just contrasting various motives and expectations that may play a role in religious practice. Rather, he claims to be contrasting *religion* to *superstition*. But this simply begs the question. To return to our previous example, why should we say that petitionary prayers which involve an instrumental rationale are superstitious? Of course, one can call this superstitious if one wants. But this seems more of a stipulation than a description. One is simply stipulating that a religious practice motivated by instrumental concerns is not *genuinely* religious.

In Phillips's earlier discussions, the contrast between superstitious and genuinely religious beliefs is particularly strong. By taking account of what the people involved say of their actions, what they expect of them, what role they play in their lives, etc., we come to see "that many religious practices can be distinguished from superstition, while other so-called religious practices turn out to be superstitious."[73] Clearly, the implication is that superstitious practices are not genuinely religious. Ferreira has suggested, however, that in his later discussion of superstition, Phillips softens the contrast:

> "Initially Phillips contrasted superstition and religion; on such a view one can see why philosophy cannot correct religion, although it can show that what purports to be religion is not. Later he claims that religion and

[70] See Phillips 1993, p. 73.
[71] See Phillips 1995(a), p. 126, Phillips 2000(a), p. 360.
[72] Cf. Tilley 2000, p. 349.
[73] Phillips 1993, p. 76.

superstition are not mutually exclusive: there are 'superstitious' forms of
religion, as well as 'ugly', 'banal' and 'vulgar' forms of religion."[74]

Phillips does indeed refer to 'ugly', 'vulgar' and 'banal' forms of reli-
gion. He warns us, however, not to conclude that if a certain religious
belief is, in our opinion, 'ugly', etc., it must be superstitious or confused.
Whether we find particular expressions of belief 'high' or 'low' is a per-
sonal matter. It will not do to conclude that because we find it low, it
cannot be a genuine form of religious belief:

> "This is something the philosopher of religion ought to point out. It means
> that in considering reactions to religious beliefs, we cannot divide them
> neatly into reactions to beliefs we find spiritually impressive, and reactions
> to beliefs we find superstitious or confused. Philosophers must find room
> for the ugly, the banal and the vulgar for these, too, may be forms of reli-
> gious belief."[75]

Rather than demonstrating that religion and superstition are not mutually
exclusive, these remarks tend to affirm the contrast between them.

As to the claim that there may be 'superstitious forms of religion';
Phillips does not in fact say this. What he actually says is that "super-
stition sometimes takes a religious form", and that religion "is capable
of making a distinctive contribution to superstitious practices."[76] It is
unfortunate that Phillips does not expand on these remarks, for, as they
stand, their import is far from clear. Unless the notion of a 'religious
form' is taken in a technical or theoretical sense, to say that superstition
may take a religious form seems to imply no more than that superstitious
practices may resemble religious ones in their outward appearance. Sim-
ilarly, to say that religion may make a distinctive contribution to super-
stitious practices seems to imply no more than that religious practices
may generate superstitious ones, or may themselves degenerate into super-
stitious ones. In short, once again, Phillips confirms rather than refutes the
possibility of contrasting between what is superstitious and what is gen-
uinely religious.

It is doubtful, then, that Phillips's later discussion entails a substan-
tive modification to his (earlier) account of the distinction between reli-
gion and superstition. This is confirmed when, in the same paper to
which Ferreira refers, we find Phillips affirming both the possibility and

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[74] Ferreira 2002, p. 166, fn 24. Ferreira is referring to Phillips's essay *Religion in
Wittgenstein's Mirror*, first published in 1991 (reprinted in Phillips 1993, pp. 237-255).
[75] Phillips 1993, p. 250.
[76] Phillips 1993, p. 251.

the importance of drawing such a distinction, employing the following examples to expound it:

> "For example, it is superstitious to think that there is some kind of queer causal connection between sin and worldly punishment. Being distanced from God is not a causal consequence of sin. Sin, pride and envy, for example, create the distance in simply being what they are. Praying to avoid God's anger is thus not a praying to avoid consequences, but a praying to avoid becoming a certain kind of person."[77]

When a person believes his sins have caused God to punish him, he misunderstands the nature of sin. When he prays to avoid God's anger in the hope of avoiding certain horrific consequences, it seems we can but conclude that he is, in fact, not praying at all. In other words, superstition misconstrues the grammar of religious belief; it distorts the meaning of religious concepts. Such a conclusion, however, presupposes a normative conception of religion. Thus, we are brought back to our initial problem. Why should we say that praying to avoid God's anger is not a praying to avoid consequences? Do we know this in any other way than by stipulative definition? Surely, that is prescription, rather than description. Phillips, one might conclude, is simply imposing his view of religion on practices that deviate from it.

This would certainly be the case if we should agree with Ferreira that Phillips's account of the distinction between religious and superstitious beliefs reveals, at heart, a moral critique of superstitious beliefs:

> "It seems to me that [Phillips's] objections to the boxer, mother and parents who rely on quasi-causal connections or instrumentalism are objections to what one could call moral unworthiness, perhaps specifically moral cowardice."[78]

I doubt whether Phillips would welcome this conclusion. As we saw, some may find certain religious beliefs shallow, trivial, meaningless, or even evil. These responses, Phillips argues, cannot be justified in any external way. Of course, one can still criticise such beliefs. Nothing prevents us from saying that they *are* ugly, vulgar or, indeed, immoral. But it would be a misunderstanding to characterise such criticism as *philosophical* criticism. There may be no grounds for philosophical criticism, which is to say, one may find such beliefs vulgar, etc. but this does not mean they are necessarily confused or superstitious.[79] Thus, even if Phillips would

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[77] Phillips 1993, pp. 245-246.
[78] Ferreira 2002, p. 163.
[79] See Phillips 1993, pp. 77, 247-250.

morally object to the beliefs Ferreira refers to, that objection cannot justify the charge of superstition.

In fairness to Ferreira, however, she does offer some further considerations with which, I believe, Phillips will be more likely to concur. She agrees that the distinction between religion and superstition cannot be justified externally. Rather, the superstitious character of a given practice or belief "can be determined, and only determined, by reference to the other commitments held by religious believers."[80] Thus, the problem with an instrumental construal of petitionary prayer is not so much that it is morally blameworthy — if indeed we should deem it so — but that it distorts the character of religious belief:

> "The qualifier 'Not as I will, but Thy will be done', which is inherent in the absoluteness to which the believer is, at least at one level, committed, is ignored when someone relies on quasi-causal connections, which have only an extrinsic relation between the religious and the 'good' consequence. […] 'Not as I will…' is a metaphor for the unconditionedness, the absoluteness, of religious belief — describing this element of religious practice is the corrective to the other expressions of religious practice which attempt to belie it."[81]

On this view, the normative conception which enables us to distinguish between religion and superstition is not imposed from the outside, but derived from religious practice. Rather than a stipulative presupposition, it is itself the result of a descriptive account of religious belief. In short, the charge of superstition is justified by an appeal to practice.

Unfortunately, this suggestion will not do. The reason is obvious: unless one has decided beforehand that instrumentally motivated 'religious' acts, involving, perhaps, a belief in 'queer causal connections', are not part of genuine religious practice, then no descriptive account can justify their exclusion. Phillips cannot have it both ways. Either we admit that so-called superstitious acts and beliefs are genuinely religious. If so, then it will not do to say that they ignore or distort the character or significance of religious practices; in part, they determine the character of these practices, and constitute their significance. In that case, the possibility of contrasting between religion and superstition, in the manner suggested by Phillips, simply collapses. Or we decide that the so-called superstitious acts and beliefs are not genuinely religious. That conclusion, however, presupposes a normative conception of religion which is

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[80] Ferreira 2002, p. 164.
[81] Ferreira 2002, p. 164.

impossible to reconcile with Phillips's supposedly descriptive approach. Of course, this does not mean that we can no longer say that certain religious beliefs display confusions. Phillips may well be right that a belief in some kind of causal connection between petitionary prayer and certain consequences, say, the retrieval of my long lost car keys, does not bear closer scrutiny. Nor does this mean that we cannot distinguish petitionary prayers which express a commitment to such prudential concerns, and those which express a commitment rather to 'the unconditionedness and absoluteness' of religious belief.[82] And, finally, this does not mean that there shall be no tension between these kinds of commitments.[83] What it does mean, first, is that neither the presence of confusion, nor that of instrumental concerns in a religious practice, justifies the identification of that practice as superstitious.[84] Secondly, one can of course, as Ferreira suggests, employ one's description of certain expressions of religious belief as a corrective to other expressions of religious belief. But while this may be a worthwhile theological endeavour, it is impossible to reconcile with an explicitly descriptive or contemplative philosophical approach, such as Phillips professes to adhere to.

Let us review our findings. In the first part of this section we argued that, while it seems quite natural to say that superstitious beliefs or

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[82] Although, as I have already argued, I seriously doubt whether any hard and fast distinction shall be possible.

[83] Although there need not be.

[84] In his discussion with Clack, Phillips argues that Clack's disagreement with his identification of certain beliefs or practices as superstitious commits Clack to the claim that they are *not* superstitious. According to Phillips this puts Clack in some difficulty: "in arguing that they are not superstitious, he is invoking a category he holds to be unworkable." (Phillips 1995(a), p. 124.) However, it seems to me that the point is not to argue that these practices are *not* superstitious — inviting the follow-up: 'whereas *these* are' — but that the distinction between religion and superstition is philosophically suspect. It will not do to say *either* that certain beliefs are *or* that they are not. In Clack's words, the category is 'unworkable'. A similar conclusion can be drawn on the basis of Phillips's discussion with Tilley. Like Clack, Tilley rejects Phillips's use of the term 'superstition'. Phillips replies that Tilley cannot mean to say that there are no superstitions. For example, someone who thinks that eating the wafer at mass cleanses one from sin, in the same sense in which a tablet clears up a stomach upset is, surely, superstitious. Indeed, Phillips asks, "was not the Church's condemnation of mechanistic views of the Mass meant, in part, to combat that superstition?" (Phillips 2000(a), p. 357.) Tilley's reply is a perceptive one: "No. Those views may have been eventually condemned as 'heresy', but not as superstition. Having as part of its arsenal Phillips's allegedly descriptive concept of 'superstition' would be hard, if not impossible, for a church condoning relics, indulgences, and bleeding hosts." (Tilley 2000, p. 363.) Of course, Phillips is right in this sense that Tilley would not deny that the concept of 'superstition' has been employed in the history of religion. But, here, the philosophical task would be one of clarification rather than appropriation.

practices involve some kind of error, or some form of misunderstanding, Phillips's analysis of the nature of superstition in terms of causal mistakes or, in later corrections, (linguistic) confusions is inconvenient. It may be said to be both too broad and too narrow. Too broad, because some beliefs and practices which are commonly regarded as superstitious in nature are not obviously mere mistakes or linguistic confusions. Nor will it do to say that whenever we happen to be mistaken or confused we are in the grips of a superstition. Too narrow, in that neither the notion of a 'mistake' nor that of a 'linguistic misunderstanding' manages to cover the way in which certain superstitious thoughts or actions tend to capture our imagination.

   The second part of this section focused on Phillips's account of the distinction between genuine religion and superstition. According to Phillips, superstition ignores or distorts the character of religious beliefs and practices by changing internal, religious relations into external, prudential relations. We argued that, even if we allow the possibility of drawing such a distinction, the identification of the latter category as superstitious presupposes a normative concept of religion which, though perhaps theologically valid, cannot be justified philosophically by an appeal to practice.

9.3 Grammars of faith

In this chapter we have been concerned with the question whether Phillips's account of religious belief can be said to be revisionist in nature. I suggested that the answer to that question depends on the way in which Phillips deals with counterexamples: examples of religious beliefs and practices which his account fails, or refuses, to accommodate. We examined two possibilities, possibilities which diminish the number of non-conformers by eliminating seeming counterexamples to Phillips's analyses. First, Phillips may try to show that, despite appearances, these beliefs do fit his analyses. Secondly, he may simply say that these beliefs are confused. They are not genuine religious beliefs, but superstitions. Both 'solutions' entail certain problems. As to the first; sometimes the believer's account of his beliefs may indeed be confused. Such a claim is justified if one can show that there is significant difference between what the believer says of his belief and the way he practices it. But one can only go so far in saying that although the believer may think that this is what he believes, what he actually believes is '…'. As to the second;

I have tried to show that there are serious flaws in Phillips's account of the distinction between religion and superstition. Even if I am wrong about this, it will hardly do to call all beliefs that do not fit into one's analyses forms of superstition, particularly given the large group of beliefs and practices which seem to fit Phillips's criteria for superstition.

It seems clear, however, that Phillips admits that there are certain religious beliefs or practices which his account fails to accommodate. They cannot be made to fit his analysis by an appeal to the believer's misunderstanding of his own beliefs, nor can they be discarded as confused or superstitious:

> "In face of prayers which do not fit readily into my exposition, all I can do is to note them and leave it at that. I do not say that they are not prayers (who is a philosopher to say that?), but simply that I do not understand what is involved in them."[85]

Here, we see the third and final way in which Phillips may deal with religious beliefs which do not fit his analysis. Rather than eliminating them, he may simply accept them as authentic counterexamples. Perhaps we might say that they constitute 'other possibilities of religious meaning'.

Of course, whether or not this allows Phillips to evade the charge of revisionism depends upon the number of such authentic counterexamples Phillips is willing to accept. With regards to the prayers mentioned in the quote above, Phillips says that he does not understand what is involved in them. This seems to rule out as possible candidates for authentic counterexamples the kind of religious practices which involve, for example, a belief in bodily resurrection, in a natural God who can intervene in this world by bringing about miracles, or in the instrumental efficaciousness of petitionary prayer. In the previous chapters, and the previous sections, we have seen that Phillips knows only too well what to make of such beliefs: they are confusions, misunderstandings of the grammar of religious belief, superstitions. However, surprisingly enough, sometimes Phillips seems inclined to a different interpretation.

Let us return for a moment to Phillips's account of the reality of God. As we saw, the reality of God cannot be construed as the reality of an object. God is not a being among beings, not an agent among agents. To think of God in such a way misconstrues the grammar of religious belief. It might be said to constitute 'naturalistic fallacy' in religion. This fallacy, Phillips suggests, can be found in two contexts:

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[85] Phillips 1981, p. 8.

"First, it can be found at a *religious* level. I may say that certain prayers are not talking to God because they commit this fallacy. In doing so, I am making a moral and religious judgement. Secondly, the naturalistic fallacy can be found at a philosophical level. If a philosopher is aware that the God of whom he is giving an account is a natural God, an existent among existents, and an agent among agents, there is no philosophical objection to what he is doing. On the other hand, if he thinks that this conception of God is the only possible one, the only intelligible notion of divinity, he is making a mistake."[86]

Given our previous discussion, these remarks may come as something of a surprise. First, consider the 'religious level'. Phillips argues that if the naturalistic fallacy is committed at this level, if a person's belief can be shown to be belief in a natural God, we may morally and religiously criticise it. But surely we should expect Phillips to say that it can also be *philosophically* criticised? After all, has not Phillips gone to great lengths to show that one *cannot* construe the reality of God as a being among beings, that it would be confused to do so? Confused, both in the sense that it misconstrues the grammar of religious belief, as well as in the sense that the notion of a natural God entails precisely those metaphysical assumptions Hume has shown to be logically flawed? Certainly then, there are many philosophical objections to this kind of belief.

When we examine the second, philosophical level at which the naturalistic fallacy may be encountered, similar questions arise. Phillips argues that if a philosopher is aware that his account is that of a natural God, there is nothing wrong with it. Only if he thinks that this is the only possible conception of God, the only intelligible notion of divinity, is he mistaken. This seems to imply that Phillips thinks the notion of a natural God *is* an intelligible one, albeit not the only one. But, again, has not he shown that such a notion of God is *not* intelligible; that the notion of a natural God is incoherent, as Hume so successfully demonstrates?

It is difficult to understand why Phillips should suddenly be so hesitant. One would expect him to conclude that such naturalistic notions of God are confused, perhaps even superstitious. But the same kind of reserve — or perhaps one should say tolerance — can be found at other places in his writings. In his paper *Religion and Epistemology: Some Contemporary Confusions*,[87] Phillips discusses the kind of belief the truth of which depends on the way things go in the world. Here, belief in God plays the role of an explanatory hypothesis. Such a belief,

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[86] Phillips 1981, p. 158.
[87] See Phillips 1970, pp. 123-145.

Phillips writes, can certainly be questioned and would be rejected by many. Phillips tells us he has no wish to defend those people who hold such beliefs, he *only* wants to stress that there is *another kind* of belief in God.[88] These remarks seem to indicate that Phillips considers belief in God as a kind of 'super-explanation' to be a genuine form of religious belief. He does not find it impressive, he may even go so far as morally and religiously rejecting it, but, from a philosophical point of view, there is nothing wrong with it.

Once again, given our discussion in the previous sections, these remarks are somewhat puzzling. One would have expected Phillips to point out that this kind of belief is clearly superstitious. Phillips comes close to doing so earlier in the same paper. He considers the example of a mother of a mentally handicapped child who says: 'It is terrible for my child at the moment, but he is to be compensated later on.' It need not necessarily be so, but let us assume that, in this case, the difference the mother's belief makes is the difference between a set of empirical facts being or not being the case. Her hope is in certain facts being realised. Says Phillips:

> "Although I sympathize with the mother's hope, I do not find it impressive religiously. Indeed, I should want to go further and say that it has little to do with religion, being much closer to superstition."[89]

Here, clearly, Phillips does point out that this kind of belief is not so much religious as superstitious. But, as we have seen, in what follows, he does not drive the point home.

On the basis of these remarks alone, one might be tempted to conclude that Phillips is not trying to give an account of *the* grammar of religious belief; rather, his aim is to clarify *a* grammar of religious belief, one possible use of religious language. To be sure, there are many others, many different forms of religious belief. Some of these involve a natural God, others take the shape of an explanatory hypothesis. Perhaps one does not find such beliefs spiritually impressive or morally uplifting; if so, one is making a religious or a moral judgement. But it will not do to deny either that, for some believers, this is what religious belief means, or that such beliefs are not genuinely religious. They constitute authentic counterexamples to Phillips's account.

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[88] See Phillips 1970, p. 129.

[89] Phillips 1970, p. 128. We may note, in passing, that this once again shows that to identify a certain belief as superstitious, is to imply that it is not genuinely religious.

It should be clear that if one takes this to be his position, Phillips avoids the charge of revisionism. The problem, obviously, is that the few remarks we have considered above can hardly be taken as representative of Phillips's writings. Phillips's clarifications of religious beliefs are not presented as clarifications of what these beliefs *may* mean. Rather, they are presented as descriptions of what these beliefs actually *do* mean, in their historical contexts of application. Furthermore, the results of these clarifications form a crucial weapon in Phillips's critical arsenal. If they are taken as accounts of one possible grammar of religious beliefs, one in a variety of grammars of faith, they can no longer play this role. The point may be brought out by examining one of Phillips's examples of the possibility of criticising certain notions of God. Phillips tells us that Yuri Gagarin's concept of God as an object that he would have observed, had it existed, during his first space flight, can be shown to be confused in two ways: "first, by reference to what one can reasonably expect to observe in space, and secondly, by reference to what is meant by the reality of God."[90] But if Phillips were to admit that the construal of the reality of God as the reality of an object among objects does not constitute a misunderstanding of the grammar of the religious belief in the reality of God but, rather, constitutes one possibility of religious meaning, then he can no longer say that Gagarin's concept of God can be shown to be confused by reference to 'what is meant' by the reality of God. As if there were only one notion of the reality of God. The question would be: 'God's reality *according to whom*?' The most Phillips could say is that Gagarin's concept can be shown to be confused by reference to what *some* mean by the reality of God. To understand the meaning of religious beliefs, Phillips insists, one must look at the role they play in their contexts of application. By exploring the way believers talk about God we can come to understand what is meant be the reality of God. But now, the first question would be '*which* believers are we talking about?'. The concept 'God' can apparently be used in many ways. Surely we can never discover 'what is meant by the reality of God', but only what some mean by it, and what others mean by it. And, if Phillips considers the notion of a natural God to be, not so much a misconstrual of religious grammar as one possible grammar in a variety of grammars of faith, people may mean very different things indeed.

[90] Phillips 1970, p. 72.

In the end, then, it appears that the existence of religious beliefs which do not fit his account presents Phillips with a dilemma. He may deny that there are such beliefs, or deny that these beliefs should be called religious, but I believe Phillips would thereby lay himself open to the charge of revisionism. Or he may admit that there are such beliefs and that these simply constitute other kinds of religious belief, other possibilities of religious meaning. None of these can be said to distort *the* grammar of religious belief; each, in its own way, constitutes a part of that grammar. In that case, however, Phillips would seriously weaken his own position. As a result, his persistent dismissal of the practice of traditional philosophy of religion will have to be significantly moderated, if not rejected altogether.

CONCLUSION:
PHILLIPS'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

From a 'classical point of view', philosophy of religion is concerned with the rational justification of religious belief. While there have always been dissenters, the dominant strand of Western philosophical thought has considered it entirely appropriate to either prove or disprove that God exists.[1] Precisely such an understanding of philosophy of religion has prompted Fergus Kerr to call for a change of subject. Kerr does not deny that these questions are important, yet he feels they evince a one-sidedness and too strong an identification, at least within the Anglo-American analytical tradition, of philosophy of religion with one particular set of problems — what used to be called natural theology or Christian apologetics.[2] From Kerr's point of view, this state of affairs is detrimental to the philosophy of religion as such. Phillips could not agree more. As we saw, Phillips suggests that we may look on his work as "a series of charges against the immodest methods employed by some philosophers in the philosophy of religion."[3] As philosophers, Phillips argues, we are tempted again and again to become too familiar with holy things by putting religion at the mercy of our philosophical methods. As a result, we lose sight of the role religious concepts play in our lives. Phillips's main aim, one might say, is to reclaim the conversations of mankind by bringing religious language back from its metaphysical to its everyday use. The clarification of meaning is to rescue religion, in the philosophical field, from being the aim of a believing or atheistic apologetic.[4] Writing in 1976, Phillips seemed confident that philosophical enquiry, by the aid of such grammatical reminders, "should at least put an end to much idle speculation carried on in the name of the philosophy of religion."[5] Yet, despite Phillips's best efforts, now, some thirty years later, such 'idle speculation' seems to continue unabated. Religious belief is still "at the mercy of a method which rides roughshod over the conceptual distinctions which need to be drawn."[6]

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[1] See Messer 1993, pp. 4ff.
[2] See Kerr 1986, p. 171.
[3] Phillips 2000, p. 1; cf. Phillips 2000, p. 259, Clack 1995, p. 112.
[4] See Phillips 2000(a).
[5] Phillips 1976, p. 190.
[6] Phillips 2000, p. 3.

Phillips attacks the classical approach in philosophy of religion on two fronts. On the one hand he challenges the conception of philosophical enquiry it involves. Philosophy, Phillips argues, cannot tell us whether or not we should believe in God. It has the far more modest task of contemplating possibilities of meaning, possibilities of belief and unbelief. Phillips's conception of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation is informed, first and foremost, by Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Phillips follows Wittgenstein's lead in emphasising the conceptual nature of philosophical investigations. Philosophy does not so much contribute to human knowledge but to human understanding — an understanding of our forms of language. The philosopher's concern is not with whether it is true to say this or that, but with the concepts of truth and falsity. By contemplating various possibilities of meaning, the philosopher seeks to do justice to the reality of our concepts, to the application they have in our lives. The contemplation of *religious* possibilities of meaning is simply an application to religion of the more general contemplative character of philosophy itself. Here, too, the philosopher seeks to do justice to the reality these concepts have in our lives, to show them for what they are without meddling in them in any way. In this sense, philosophy is 'on a road to nowhere': everything is left as it is.

Phillips second line of attack is based on an appeal to the use which language has in many religious beliefs. When religion is placed at the mercy of our philosophical methods, matters are not left as they are. Possibilities of religious belief are either ignored, or distorted. Here, too, Wittgenstein' philosophical methods are of immense importance. They would involve discussions of uses, possibilities of meaning which, perhaps, we never recognised, or which we have distorted by imposing alien criteria of meaning on them. Such discussions, Phillips feels, are sorely needed in contemporary philosophy of religion. And it is such discussions that Phillips hopes to provide.

Phillips's hermeneutics of contemplation constitutes a powerful application of Wittgenstein's later philosophical methods to the philosophy of religion. More than any other, Phillips has developed Wittgenstein's methods and fragmentary writings on religious belief, and highlighted their significance for philosophical reflection on religion. We may certainly agree with Clack that we owe a great debt to Phillips for his trailblazing work.[7] In many ways, Phillips's account of religious belief can be said to develop Wittgenstein's insight that religious belief is something

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[7] See Clack 1995, p. 112.

like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. By means of often compelling examples, Phillips presents an elegant and persuasive account of the way in which religious belief may grab hold of a person, shaping his life and his understanding of himself and the world in which he lives. Phillips's contemplations of religious possibilities of meaning give us an insight into the, perhaps irreducible, reality of the religious domain of meaning. As such, they offer a valuable and stimulating contribution to contemporary philosophy of religion.

We have, of course, also encountered a number of difficulties. Phillips's suggestion that a contemplative philosophy is concerned, in some way, with giving an account of reality proves difficult to reconcile not only with aspects of Wittgenstein's work, but with Phillips's own writings as well. Furthermore, Phillips's account of the independent and disinterested nature of philosophical enquiry implies too strong a dichotomy between a first-order, participant's understanding and a second-order intellectual or philosophical understanding of our various modes of discourse. Finally, Phillips's demonstration of the conceptual confusions in reductionist theories of religion is only partially successful. In the end, the attempt to establish the irreducibility of the religious domain of meaning trades on a specific reading of Wittgenstein's notions of a language-game and a form of life which has been developed in various strands of Wittgensteinian philosophy and, arguably, is implied by Phillips's earlier discussions of reductionism. We argued not only that this argument is invalid but, moreover, that it is no longer feasible that Phillips should appeal to it in his later work.

Where Phillips's account of religious belief is concerned, we argued that his claim that he is doing no more than clarifying the meaning religious beliefs actually have in their historical contexts of application can be questioned. His analyses exclude certain crucial elements which have traditionally been associated with these beliefs. Phillips's account of the belief in miracles adequately reflects the way in which miracles function as objects of faith. But his insistence that talk of miracles cannot be construed either as descriptive or explanatory in nature leaves little room for the traditional understanding of miracles as evidences of faith. Again, Phillips's interpretation of the belief in immortality as a message of self-abnegation undeniably captures an important strand of thought within Christianity. However, it fails to address a singularly important datum: the Christian hope for a bodily resurrection, substantiated by Christ's resurrection. Finally, Phillips's analysis of the belief that God exists effectively manages to cast light on the necessity associated with the reality of God, and provides a provoking account of the fundamental role the belief

plays in religious practice. Furthermore, it contains a scathing critique of too intellectualist a reading of God's reality, demonstrating the untenability of an overly facile assimilation of the belief that God exists to the matter of fact belief that a certain state of affairs holds true. However, Phillips's contention that no factual element whatsoever enters into the belief that God exists, fails to convince. It drives an intolerable wedge between our religious and our everyday, empirical modes of discourse, leaving us unable to account for the fact that, throughout history, believers and non-believers alike have sought to provide natural reasons and factual evidence in favour either of embracing or rejecting the belief that God exists. Phillips's suggestion that such attempts display a misunderstanding of the concept of God is far from credible. It all but commits us to the view that many, if not most Christians, have failed to understand correctly the status of their own religion.

While it cannot be denied that Phillips's analyses capture certain key elements of 'traditional Christian belief', it is equally clear that they either overlook or discount at least as many others. Despite Phillips's vehement objections, his resolute refusal to incorporate any straightforwardly factual, historical, and/or metaphysical components into the religious frame of reference marks his account as an unorthodox account of (Christian) religious belief. This conclusion immediately raises the question whether Phillips's analyses are revisionary in nature. The answer to that question depends on the way in which Phillips deals with possibilities of religious belief which his account fails to accommodate. At times, Phillips seems to suggest that these should be discarded as either confusions or forms of superstition. Such a strategy, however, can no longer lay claim to be doing no more than elucidating the meaning religious beliefs have in the lives of the faithful. It would be hard here not to suspect that some sort of revisionary exercise is being undertaken, rather than the purely descriptive work avowedly performed.[8]

Perhaps a more modest reading sees Phillips as presenting, not *the* grammar of religious belief, but one possible grammar amongst a variety of conflicting and overlapping grammars of faith. Phillips, one might say, aims to establish *an* order in the use of religious language; "one out of many possible orders; not *the* order."[9] While this necessitates a moderation of Phillips's critique of classical philosophy of religion, I believe it to be by far the more sympathetic and, indeed, the more fruitful reading. Of course, whether Phillips should agree is not for me to say.

[8] See Clack 2001, p. 27, n. 8.
[9] Wittgenstein 1994, I, 132.

AFTERWORD

'The difficulty here is: to stop'

In *Zettel*, paragraph 314, Wittgenstein describes what he calls 'a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation':

> "the difficulty — I might say — is not that of finding the solution but rather of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. 'We have already said everything. — Not anything that follows from this, no *this* itself is the solution!'
>
> This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it.
>
> The difficulty here is: to stop."[1]

Wittgenstein is referring to the urge we might feel, as philosophers, to go beyond a certain point in a search for explanations, justifications and foundations.[2] He asks us to resist this urge; to recognise that what we are really looking for already lies open to view. Many commentators on Wittgenstein have written penetratingly on these matters, and I have no intention of furthering that discussion in these final pages. What I would like to do, is to borrow Wittgenstein's remark and consider a number of contexts where one might say that the difficulty lies, in some way or other, in knowing when to stop.

My main objective was to present a critical study of Phillips's philosophy of religion. It soon became clear that, given the influence of Wittgenstein's writings on Phillips's work, and the importance Phillips bestows upon Wittgenstein's writings, there was no way of getting around Wittgenstein's philosophy. Thus, in the first part of this book I set out to explore Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief, both in the context of his earlier and his later work. Several commentators have suggested that Wittgenstein's writings contain the makings of a comprehensive philosophy of religion. Others have gone further and argued that an understanding of Wittgenstein's religious thought may well be crucial to an understanding of his philosophy in general, or even that Wittgenstein's work is fundamentally religious as it stands. Given the importance religious belief

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[1] Wittgenstein 1981, 314.
[2] See Phillips 1993, p. 79.

played in Wittgenstein's life, it is certainly tempting to award his remarks on religion a more central role in his philosophical oeuvre. But one must take care not to go too far; one must know when to stop. Thus, I emphasised the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the material available to us. Some, or even many, of Wittgenstein's observations are inspiring and thought-provoking; others seem obscure or one-sided. Together, they cannot be said to constitute a coherent philosophy of religion, let alone the key to understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy.

That is not to say, as some commentators have suggested, that Wittgenstein's philosophical methods are ill-suited to deal with religious belief. Quite the contrary, I believe that the application of his methods to the study of religion has proven to be a fruitful addition to contemporary philosophy of religion. The point is that in elaborating a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, one faces the task of interpreting and further developing Wittgenstein's insights. In the second part of this book, I examined the works of a number of authors who, at quite an early stage, played a crucial role in this regard: Rush Rhees, Peter Winch, Norman Malcolm, and D. Z. Phillips. These 'early Wittgensteinians' have often been criticised for (ab)using Wittgenstein's methods in an effort to immunise religious belief from philosophical censure. In 1967 Kai Nielsen coined the term 'Wittgensteinian Fideism'; a label which, perhaps unfortunately, seems here stay. Although Phillips was not on Nielsen's original list of Wittgensteinian Fideists, he has become the author primarily associated with this position. By far the majority of critical commentators on Phillips's work has, at one time or other, affirmed that Phillips is, indeed, a fideist. Conversely, those sympathetic to Phillips's work have taken it upon themselves to defend Phillips from these charges. With occasional lapses, the debate continues up unto this day.[3]

Clearly, any examination of Phillips's philosophy of religion cannot simply ignore this discussion. On the other hand, I was somewhat reluctant to get caught up in it. For one thing, I feel that while the matter is certainly not irrelevant, the dominant role the Fideist label has played in the reception of Phillips's work has drawn away attention from far more interesting topics of discussion. More importantly, I am not at all convinced that Phillips ever held, let alone argued in favour of, any of the fideist theses attributed to him. The charge of Fideism, I argued, is a half-truth. Although there are certain passages in Phillips's earlier writings which encourage a fideist reading, the fideist conclusion is never

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[3] For two recent examples, see Addis 2001 and Amesbury 2003.

explicitly advanced. Moreover, in his later work, Phillips provides the critic no reason to suspect him of any fideistic foul play. The time has come, I suggested, to lay the charge of Fideism to rest, and put a stop to the debate. Perhaps Clack is right to say that it may be too optimistic to think that the label of Wittgensteinian Fideism will ever entirely be dropped from discussions of Phillips's work.[4] But if my conclusions are correct, I hope they may go some way towards accomplishing this.

The third and by far the larger part of this book engages critically with Phillips's philosophy of religion. I focused my examination on two central topics: Phillips's discussions on philosophical methodology, and his descriptive accounts of religious beliefs. On each topic, I strove to present Phillips's points of view as truthfully as I could, in an effort to show not only their possible weaknesses, but also their strength. I began by developing the distinction between Phillips's earlier and his later work, implied in the second part of my discussion, aiming to show that it is both justified and fruitful to draw such a contrast. Although there are no clear breaks in Phillips's oeuvre, there is a gradual shift in attention. Phillips's mature understanding of philosophical enquiry as a form of contemplation shows him to be primarily a philosopher, rather than a philosopher *of religion*. The philosopher seeks to attain a clear understanding of our various forms of discourse, to show the grammars of different practices and the different relations in which they stand to each other. He does so, not for the sake of these practices, but for his own sake. That is to say, the clarifications subserve the central questions of philosophy, questions which have to do with combating scepticism, the denial of the possibility of sense in various contexts.

To treat Phillips's work as if it presents a comprehensive, systematic account of the nature of philosophy would be to distort its character. But it is true to say that the philosopher's aim, as well as the methods he employs to achieve it, remain the same whether the questions addressed arise in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of mathematics, or, indeed, the philosophy of religion. This idea, that philosophy, despite the differences in the problems it addresses, reflects a unified approach comes largely from Wittgenstein. On Wittgenstein's (later) view, philosophical problems are the products of a certain lack of clarity in the way in which they are formulated, a lack of clarity which has its roots in confused ways of extracting sense from our forms of language.[5] To solve our

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[4] See Clack 1995, p. 111.
[5] See Whittaker 2002, p. x.

problems, we stand in need, not of new information, but of a clear view
of what lies before us. More than anyone else, Phillips has shown the
power of such a 'grammatical', or 'contemplative', approach in the phi-
losophy of religion.

Phillips presents us with a vision of philosophy as the pursuit not of
knowledge but of understanding. This is a task of enormous difficulty,
not just on a technical level, but also because of the moral demands it
makes on both the writer and his audience, who may have strong moral
or religious commitments and be hostile to certain other possibilities of
meaning. In some cases, we may well refuse to understand. In others, we
may simply fail to understand. What we lack is not so much an under-
standing of the logic of a given form of language, but a certain sensibil-
ity which would allow us to make sense of it. The language 'does not get
off the ground' for us, we do not take it 'in the right spirit'.[6]

If anything, Phillips's clarifications of religious belief display remark-
able sensibility for the language of the spirit. With apparent ease, Phillips
presents a wide range of examples of how religious belief may shape a
person's life, drawing our attention to possibilities of sense which we
may have never recognised before, or which we may have been led to
ignore. Phillips's reminders often seem *intuitively* correct;[7] a testimony to
Phillips's affinity with his subject matter. One is almost inclined to sus-
pect Phillips of a religious virtuosity, a virtuosity seldom encountered in
academic discussions of religion.

The possibilities of religious meaning Phillips would have us contem-
plate may not appeal to everyone. And there is no reason to think that
this could not be true of those who actually hold the religious beliefs
Phillips seeks to account for. The language simply does not get off
the ground for them. In this context, Klaus von Stosch has suggested
that Phillips's analyses should be awarded a 'regional worth'.[8] What he
means is that Phillips's account of religious belief is an unorthodox one;
it may appeal to a (relatively small) group of believers, but certainly not
to all. In my discussion, I have tried to show that there is some truth to
this claim. At this point, however, I would like to draw attention to
another way in which Phillips's account may be said to be a 'regional'
one. Phillips's philosophy of *religion* is, on the whole, an account of that
particular religious tradition called Christianity. Phillips has seldom, if

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[6] See Phillips 1988, pp. 328-329 and Phillips 1993, pp. 115-117.
[7] See Whittaker 2002, p. xi.
[8] See von Stosch 2001, p. 232: "Diese Neuinterpretation mag zwar der Herangehens-
weise einer Minderheit von Gläubigen in ihren Glauben entsprechen, und insofern kann
man ihr durchaus einen regionalen Wert zusprechen."

ever, applied his contemplative approach in the context of other religious traditions. Of course, this is not all that surprising. As Winch points out, most contemporary philosophical discussions of religious meaning take as their starting point certain expressions which are thought to be fundamental in the religious beliefs and theological doctrines of the world religions of today. And, quite naturally, in Anglo-Saxon discussions the examples used tend to be taken from the religions with which the authors are most familiar, roughly the Judaeo-Christian.[9] That Phillips has concentrated his writings on the Christian religion, one might say, is just a matter of prudence. As regards other religious beliefs or practices, say, Islamic or Buddhist, Phillips's contemplative approach simply awaits application by someone more at home with these traditions.

Although I do not wish to deny this, I believe that there are some further questions to be asked here. First, Phillips's subject matter is, in a word, *language*. His philosophical approach is directed primarily at the clarification of possibilities of meaning realised in human discourse, and the dissolution of philosophical problems. But it has been shown that, for example, Anselm's ontological proof and Kant's criticism of it do not even make sense in Chinese.[10] Again, in his account of religion Phillips focuses primarily on (the meaning of religious) *doctrines* and *beliefs*. But it would seem that in many Asian traditions doctrines and beliefs play a negligible role. If they are mentioned at all, they are not primary, but added as 'after-thoughts'.[11] I am not saying that Phillips's contemplative approach could not be applied in such a context, but I suspect this would require some amount of extension and modification. A further investigation into this matter may well lead to a deepening of our understanding not just of the nature of religion, but of the nature of philosophy as well.

A second, related question concerns the 'phenomenon' of religion as such. Could a philosophy of religion be concerned with religious practices and forms of discourse, rather than with the practices or forms of discourse characteristic *of any particular tradition*? What marks a given practice or form of discourse as *religious* in the first place? Is it possible to speak of religion as a human phenomenon rather than a cultural phenomenon? Could we arrive at a perspicuous representation of religion *as such*, drawing the connections between various rituals, practices, beliefs, etc., and revealing, as it were, their secret law?

[9] See Winch 1987, p. 107.
[10] See Staal 1990, p. 418.
[11] See Staal 1990, p. 390.

Such questions might be said to harbour deep confusions. After all, to talk about 'religion as such' is to talk about an abstraction. In reality, we are faced not with 'religion' but with various, historically shaped, religions; or better: with a variety of practices and forms of language which are embedded in specific contexts of application or, if one pleases, specific forms of life. From a Wittgensteinian point of view in particular, the attempt to transcend these various practices to arrive at some common notion of religiosity, may be taken to be a primary example of failing to realise when one should stop. Maybe so. But perhaps a cautious consideration of these questions may turn out to be of some merit. Such an enquiry could do worse than begin by further developing Wittgenstein's remark that we could almost say that man is a ceremonious animal. He immediately adds that this is partly false, partly nonsensical; but insists there is also something in it.[12]

Let us return, however, to the present work. In his introduction to the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein tells us that he is convinced of the truth of the thoughts the book communicates; the problems have, on all essential points, been finally solved. Although I hope to have offered a contribution to the problems and questions discussed in this book, I have no illusion that I have managed conclusively to solve or answer them. I doubt whether, in philosophy, such a thing is at all possible. Old problems keep coming back in new forms, and various developments may occasion new problems. No doubt, as Phillips puts it, "someone, and perhaps myself, will ask of the present work, 'What about this? What about that?' And so it will go on."[13] Indeed, in the introduction to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes that he was forced to recognise grave mistakes in what he wrote in his earlier book. I have little doubt that I, too, will be forced to recognise mistakes in what I have written here.

It is no coincidence that, having arrived at the final pages of this book, I was reminded of Wittgenstein's remark in paragraph 314 of *Zettel*. When one has worked on a body of text over an extended period of time, it is difficult to resist the temptation to add one further paragraph, one further argument. To try and remove that one ill-conceived expression and replace it with a better one. Of course, there comes a time when one must let others be the judge of what one has written. Perhaps, here too, the difficulty is: to stop.

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[12] See Wittgenstein 1979, p. 7.
[13] Phillips 2001, p. 326.

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INDEX

SAMENVATTING

D. Z. Phillips is de bekendste voorvechter van een Wittgensteiniaanse benadering in de filosofische studie van de religie. Zijn werk is toonaangevend en heeft nieuwe richting gegeven aan het hedendaags godsdienstfilosofisch debat. Het heeft veel – vaak kritische – reacties opgeroepen, maar tot dusver ontbreekt een grondige studie. Dit boek wil in die lacune voorzien. Het is opgebouwd uit drie delen die ieder hun eigen rol spelen bij het tot stand komen van een kritische evaluatie van Phillips' oeuvre.

In het eerste deel (Hoofdstukken 1 en 2) worden Wittgensteins opmerkingen over religieus geloof besproken in de context van zijn vroege en late filosofie. Door zijn beschouwingen over de religie zorgvuldig tegen de achtergrond van zijn bredere filosofische methode te plaatsen komt het onderzoek tot een weloverwogen oordeel over Wittgensteins godsdienstfilosofie. Tegelijkertijd wordt daarmee een maatstaf gegeven waaraan iedere poging een meer uitgebreide Wittgensteiniaanse godsdienstfilosofie te presenteren moet worden gemeten. In het tweede deel (Hoofdstuk 3) wordt uiteengezet hoe in de late jaren vijftig en het begin van de jaren zestig Wittgensteins methode werd betrokken op de wijsgerige bestudering van de religie. Na een bespreking van de vroege werken van Rush Rhees, Peter Winch en Norman Malcolm, wordt Phillips' eerste boek *The Concept of Prayer* behandeld. Hier staan Phillips' inspanningen om vorm te geven aan een meer uitgewerkte Wittgensteiniaanse godsdienstfilosofie centraal. In het derde en omvangrijkste deel van het boek (Hoofdstukken 4 tot en met 9) verschuift de aandacht van Wittgensteiniaanse-naar Phillips' eigen godsdienstfilosofie. Phillips' opvatting van filosofisch onderzoek als een vorm van contemplatie wordt geanalyseerd en zijn beschrijvingen van godsdienstig geloof en religieuze praktijk worden aan een nader onderzoek onderworpen.

In hoofdstuk 1 worden aan de hand van zowel passages uit Wittgensteins dagboeken en aantekeningen als biografisch materiaal de rol en het belang van de mystieke passages in de *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* verhelderd. Duidelijk wordt, dat de ethisch-religieuze opmerkingen in de *Tractatus* op gespannen voet staan met het daaraan voorafgaande geheel van logische stellingen. Wittgenstein kan deze spanning in de *Tractatus* niet oplossen, wellicht wilde hij dat ook niet. Het hoofdstuk besluit met een bespreking van Wittgensteins *Lecture on Ethics*. Deze tekst werpt niet

alleen licht op de manier waarop in de *Tractatus* over religieus geloof wordt gesproken maar bevat ook de kiem van Wittgensteins latere behandeling.

Hoofdstuk 2 begint met een analyse van een aantal van de centrale thema's en concepten uit de *Philosophical Investigations*. Daarna komen Wittgensteins latere beschouwingen over de religie aan de orde, waarbij de nadruk ligt op de *Remarks on Frazer* en de *Lectures on Religious Belief*. Steeds wordt gewezen op de fragmentarische aard van het materiaal. Hoewel Wittgenstein enige aanwijzingen geeft aangaande de manier waarop zijn filosofische methode zou kunnen worden gebruikt bij de studie van de godsdienst en ook over de resultaten die hij daarvan verwachtte, kan men zijn opmerkingen niet zien als een uitgebreide of systematische filosofie van de religie. Wie een Wittgensteiniaanse godsdienstfilosofie wil presenteren is gehouden Wittgensteins summiere opmerkingen toe te lichten en uit te breiden.

In het derde hoofdstuk worden de eerste toepassingen van Wittgensteins latere filosofische methode binnen de godsdienstfilosofie onderzocht. Het eerste deel van het hoofdstuk richt zich op de vroege werken van Rush Rhees, Peter Winch en Norman Malcolm. Aangetoond wordt dat deze auteurs verscheidene aspecten van Wittgensteins filosofie verkeerd geïnterpreteerd hebben. Met betrekking tot Phillips' eerste boek *The Concept of Prayer* moet een soortgelijke conclusie getrokken worden. Net als zijn voorgangers legt Phillips te veel nadruk op de logische autonomie van religieuze taalspelen en levensvormen waardoor te weinig ruimte wordt gelaten voor de overlap tussen het religieuze en het niet-religieuze. Door bovendien de betekenis van religieuze concepten te relateren aan bepaalde religieuze ervaringen laadt Phillips de verdenking op zich een fideïstisch motief te hebben. Ondanks deze kritische conclusies wordt in het laatste deel van het hoofdstuk beargumenteerd dat een heroverweging van Phillips' godsdienstfilosofie in het licht van zijn latere werk noodzakelijk is. De wijze waarop Phillips zijn positie heeft aangepast en ontwikkeld, heeft tot dusver te weinig aandacht gekregen.

In het vierde hoofdstuk wordt het contrast tussen Phillips' vroege en late werk nader uitgewerkt. Getoond wordt dat het maken van een dergelijk onderscheid gerechtvaardigd en vruchtbaar is. Al is er geen duidelijke breuk in Phillips' oeuvre, wel is er sprake van een geleidelijke verschuiving van de aandacht, een verschuiving van een descriptieve naar een contemplatieve opvatting van de filosofie. Het onderzoek verheldert de aard van deze verschuiving en haar implicaties. In plaats van de nadruk te leggen op de logische zelfstandigheid van verschillende

taalpraktijken, besteedt Phillips steeds vaker aandacht aan de hun verwevenheid en samenhang. Daarmee wordt een belangrijke stap gezet tot
het oplossen van de centrale problemen die besloten liggen in zijn eerdere denken. Het onderzoek brengt echter ook een aantal nieuwe problemen aan de dag. Met name Phillips' bewering dat de filosofie dient
om een zekere weergave van de realiteit te geven wordt weersproken op
andere plaatsen in zijn werk. Verder impliceert Phillips' kenschetsing
van de onafhankelijke en belangeloze aard van filosofische contemplatie een te sterke dichotomie tussen een filosofisch- en een deelnemers
perspectief.

Phillips' kritiek op reductionistische verklaringen van religie, die een
belangrijke rol speelt in zowel zijn eerdere als zijn latere werk, staat centraal in het vijfde hoofdstuk. Het hoofdstuk bevat een grondige analyse
van Phillips' lezing van David Humes *Dialogues Concerning Natural
Religion*. Phillips wil Hume als mede- en als tegenstander naar voren
brengen. Het onderzoek toont aan dat op beide strategieën het nodige valt
af te dingen. Bovendien wordt beargumenteerd dat Phillips' bewering
dat reductionistische verklaringen van de religie conceptueel verward
zijn, geen stand kan houden. Hoewel Phillips' kritiek de meest radicale
vormen van reductionisme ondermijnt, kunnen de theorieën zo geherformuleerd worden dat ze zijn kritiek omzeilen. De overgang van een
descriptieve naar een contemplatieve opvatting van de filosofie mag
dan sommige van de problemen in Phillips' eerdere werk ondervangen,
het leidt er ook toe dat zijn kritiek op het reductionisme aanmerkelijk
moet worden afgezwakt. De algemene stelling dat religie als zodanig een
autonoom, irreducibel betekenisdomein constitueert kan niet langer worden volgehouden.

De hoofdstukken 6, 7 en 8 bevatten gedetailleerde analyses van Phillips'
beschrijvingen van, respectievelijk, het geloof in wonderen, het geloof in
onsterfelijkheid en het geloof dat God bestaat. Uit de bespreking blijkt
dat Phillips niet kan volhouden enkel de betekenis te verhelderen die
deze vormen van geloof in hun historische gebruikscontexten hebben.
Phillips' beschouwingen zijn onorthodox aangezien ze bepaalde cruciale
elementen die traditioneel met de genoemde vormen van geloof worden
geassocieerd veronachtzamen. Phillips' beschrijving van het geloof in
wonderen geeft de manier waarop wonderen functioneren als geloofsobjecten adequaat weer, maar laat geen ruimte voor de traditionele opvatting van het wonder als rechtvaardiging en bewijs van het geloof. Zo
weerspiegelt ook zijn interpretatie van het geloof in onsterfelijkheid als
een boodschap van zelfverloochening een belangrijk element uit het

christelijk gedachtengoed. Een minstens zo belangrijk gegeven verdwijnt daarbij echter uit het zicht: de christelijke hoop op een lichamelijke opstanding. Phillips' analyse van het geloof dat God bestaat, tenslotte, doet recht aan de noodzakelijkheid die met de realiteit van God wordt verbonden en verschaft inzicht in de fundamentele rol die dit geloof speelt in de religieuze praktijk. Aan de andere kant kan Phillips' bewering dat waar het gaat om de realiteit van God er geen feiten in het geding zijn, niet overtuigen. Daarmee zou een kloof ontstaan tussen het religieuze en het alledaagse, empirische discours. De vele pogingen om het geloof dat God bestaat met natuurlijke redenen en feitelijk bewijs te staven dan wel te ondermijnen, worden dan zonder meer terzijde geschoven. Phillips' voorstel dergelijke pogingen als een misbegrijpen van het concept 'God' te beschouwen, zo concludeert het hoofdstuk, is verre van geloofwaardig.

Phillips' resolute weigering om feitelijke, historische en/of metafysische componenten te incorpereren in het religieuze referentiekader verraadt het onorthodoxe karakter van zijn godsdienstwijsgerig project. In het negende hoofdstuk wordt getoond dat in Phillips' werk de onmiskenbare neiging bestaat deze elementen als verward of bijgelovig van de hand te doen. Het onderscheid tussen echt geloof en bijgeloof dat Phillips introduceert is echter hoogst verdacht. De conclusie dringt zich op dat door middel van dit onderscheid Phillips zijn lezers in plaats van pure descriptie eerder een vorm van theologisch revisionisme verschaft. Daar waar Phillips volhoudt de grammatica van het religieus geloof te beschrijven is deze kritiek onvermijdelijk. Een meer bescheiden lezing ziet in Phillips' werk niet een verheldering van *de*, maar van *een* mogelijke grammatica te midden van een veelvoud van conflicterende en overlappende grammatica's van het geloof. Al zou deze lezing Phillips dwingen zijn kritiek op klassieke godsdienstfilosofie danig in te perken, dit is, zo besluit het onderzoek, verreweg de meer vruchtbare lezing.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Peter Frederik Bloemendaal werd geboren te Den Haag op 13 mei 1969. Van 1981 tot 1987 volgde hij middelbaar onderwijs aan het Groen van Prinsterercollege en aan de Dalton Scholengemeenschap te Den Haag. Na het behalen van het VWO diploma studeerde hij vanaf 1989 theologie (vrije studierichting) aan de Universiteit Leiden. Voor het doctoraal examen, dat hij in 1997 behaalde (met lof), verdiepte hij zich in de vakken godsdienstwijsbegeerte en ethiek. Van april 1998 tot januari 2004 was hij als onderzoeker in opleiding, in dienst van de Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO), verbonden aan de Universiteit Leiden.