

God and Hinge Proposition

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The issues in traditional Western philosophy of religion revolve around theism and its counterview. At the heart of theism is a belief in God, a personal being and creator of but organically different from the universe. And this God is believed to be knowable through revelation, or reason, or both. A counterview of theism would be the position that denies that there is such a being as God, and that the universe came to be by means other than what is narrated by theism. In defense, theists had made a tradition trying to justify their belief in God over and against the doubts and denials of the counterview.

Wittgensteinians, and maybe Wittgenstein himself, had wanted to dismiss the issues that had long concerned mainstream philosophy of religion. These issues are deemed underpinned by a fundamental mistake and pursuing them necessarily means demanding for proof far beyond the stage where it makes sense to ask for them (Phillips 1970, 124). In effect, if not in intention, God is treated as if it is a hypothesis that needs to be tested (Phillips 1970, 72). But if one takes a hard look at religion, God is other than what theology and philosophy had conceived it to be. God is neither a knowable being nor a factual entity that can be referred to in propositions; rather, God forms the core of a world picture that underwrites religious practices (Wittgenstein 1972, 63; Wittgenstein 1980, 50, 82; Phillips 1970, 2, 17-19, 71, 85, 86; Phillips 1992, 136-138). So if Wittgensteinians would have their way, belief in God would be, to use Wittgenstein's own term, a *hinge proposition*. It is by its very nature *immune to doubt* and *beneath the propriety of justification*. Thus, efforts to justify, or undermine, belief in God is superfluous, confused and self-undermining. Their argument we phrase thus:

Hinge propositions are immune to doubt and beneath justification. Belief in God is a hinge proposition. Therefore belief in God is immune to doubt and beneath justification.

Hinge propositions are so basic to any discourse that no coherent doubt can be raised over them and no justification at all can be called for. Wittgenstein had made some remarks about hinge propositions and taking cue from a secondary Wittgensteinian text (Glock 1996, 78-9) we sum up the remarks thus:

- [1] They are certain for all reasonable persons.
- [2] Misgivings about them are an aberration rather than an error.
- [3] They are inherited fiduciary artifacts accepted fortuitously rather than by virtue of their demonstrated truth.
- [4] Their sense is less clear than empirical propositions.
- [5] They transcend both doubt and justifiability.

We may take these points together as the defining features of hinge propositions. A proposition having *all* these features is *incontrovertibly and ineluctably* a hinge proposition; but the "hingeness" of one lacking some of these features may not be ineluctable, and certainly not incontrovertible.

The statement 'I know I have two hands' is a hinge proposition, a kind of proposition "affirmed without special

testing; ...which have a peculiar logical role in the system of our empirical propositions" (Wittgenstein 1969, § 136). Any misgivings about it, such as raising a query "But how do you (or I) know that you (or I) have two hands?" would therefore be misplaced. Says Wittgenstein:

One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth. Whether someone knows something can come to light, assuming that he is convinced of it.

But if what he gives is of such a kind that the grounds he can give are no surer than his assertions, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes. (Wittgenstein 1969, § 243)

One can say that he knows if and only if at some prior point in time he had not been aware of that fact which he had since then known. But, barring extraordinary circumstances such as a serious neurological problem, it is unimaginable that a normal person at some point in his self-conscious life would for one moment cease to be aware that he has two hands such that he needs to be reoriented to the fact that it was so. To him, his "having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that (he) could produce in evidence for it" (Wittgenstein 1969, § 250). None, in other words, can be more fundamentally certain than the belief that one has two hands as to be capable of obtaining something else to lend credence to it. To him the cognizance of having two hands is not one of knowing but of having, in Wittgenstein's words, an *irreversible belief*. Any propriety of justifying this belief is from the start redundant and unfeasible. No point in justifying the statement 'I know I have two hands' can ever be shown, and no room for doubt about it can ever be made.

Going by Wittgenstein, the fact about a belief being "shared by every reasonable person" is a mark of the irreversibility of that belief (Wittgenstein 1969, § 252, § 254). If a person in his right mind would not in any circumstance cast doubt on and demand justification for a belief, then it must be to him irreversible. And if every person in his right mind shares this sense of irreversibility of the said belief then it means that that irreversible belief is ineluctable and incontrovertible. Only a person with an unhinged mind would bother cast doubt on an irreversible belief such as his having two hands. Anyone with two hands who in all earnestness has misgivings about his having two hands and thinks of ways and means to try to reassure himself that he really has two hands would be deemed mentally aberrant. Wittgenstein would "take him to be a half-wit" (Wittgenstein 1969, § 257). The society at large would call him "demented," "mentally disturbed," or "insane" – unless he is a comedian, or is in the business of philosophizing (Wittgenstein 1969, § 467).

Theists believe in a God whom none could be greater than, one who is God whether or not there exists any other being who would believe that God is God. This God ought to be aseitic. And if the aseitic God had caused to exist the universe that each and every person takes for granted, and if it would so absurd to think that the universe could have come into existence without God, then belief in God *ought* to be an ineluctable and incontrovertible hinge proposition. But it seems that theism is not one school of

thought that offers a model of God such that belief in God would have to be an ineluctable and incontrovertible hinge proposition – something attested to by the need to demonstrate the existence of God.

Wittgensteinians may be right in insisting that belief in God ought to be a hinge proposition. But it seems they do so for the wrong reason. The Wittgensteinian God does not seem qualified to figure on that hinge proposition. Such a God is merely embedded in a world picture (frame of reference or form of life). God does not have a being of its own. It is not clear what this world picture might be but it is unlikely that this could be thought to have a being of its own akin to platonic essence. If humans who happen to conduct their lives according to the world picture with God embedded in it all perish or even just experience mass epiphany and switch world pictures, God will simply fade into oblivion for without the living there will be no form of life and without sentient beings there will be no world picture. The Wittgensteinian God is merely contingent on those who believe it. And it seems to show: belief in God, even the Wittgensteinian God, does not entirely fit Wittgenstein's description of a hinge proposition.

It is true that belief in God possesses hinge proposition features [3] and [4] mentioned above. But if this belief at issue were really a hinge proposition then it expresses would have been so ineluctable and incontrovertible that it cannot be helped but be shared by all reasonable persons. Yet it looks like it differs in some significant ways from other recognized hinge propositions. The belief that the universe exists is necessarily ineluctable and incontrovertible for all reasonable persons. No person of sound mind would entertain for a moment the thought that the universe might not exist – not that he refuses to do so but that it is simply a given state that he just cannot bring himself to do so without feeling silly or ironic or both. Thus the belief in the existence of the universe is ineluctably and incontrovertibly a hinge proposition. But the classic Christian belief in the existence of God is in fact something not shared by all serious and reasonable persons. Anyone clearly can have the option not to postulate the existence of God and still make a coherent discourse. Many a famous person held in high esteem for their rational achievements have taken that option.

It is methodologically necessary for *every person* to postulate the existence of the universe to make any sane, coherent and rationally sustainable discourse; a person can never have the option to be exempted from having this postulate and still remain sane and make any coherent discourse. Any misgivings about the existence of the universe would undermine virtually every reasonable discourse, including the very discourse that makes even such misgivings coherently conceivable. To doubt the existence of the universe would lead to all sorts of odd consequences such as doubting one's self's very own existence for in fact one is an organic part of the universe. Sans any one's self there cannot be any doubter. Sans a doubter there cannot be any state of doubt. In effect, to doubt the existence of the universe is to doubt whether there could be a state of doubt. A person who would doubt the existence of a state of doubt and would demand proof for it to assure him that indeed there is such a state is either a comedian or is insane. On the other hand, postulating God is, by all appearance, not a methodological necessity. If the existence of God were to be placed in doubt, only the theistic discourse would be undermined. One can eschew belief in the God of the theists without forfeiting one's wit. Indeed, one can deny the existence of God and make a discourse out of it without necessarily risking ludicrousness and incoherence. To say in earnest-

ness 'This universe could not have been created by God because no such being could be proven to exist' does not entail obvious incoherence and would not evoke odd notions or make impressions of weirdness as it would to say 'It shall one day be proven that the universe does not exist'.

A believer in God may have only fortuitously imbibed rather than deliberately chosen his belief in God, yet is it conceivable that he may deliberately forsake it. This would not likely be enough for him to lose his rational equilibrium; he still may remain equally capable of making reasonable judgments, if not more so. Not everyone thinks that belief in God is a prerequisite to sane discourse. While, other than being a philosophical joke, doubting the existence of the universe may be an index of an aberration, misgivings about belief in God are not at all deemed similarly. Unbelievers who deny belief in God dismiss the believers as "superstitious." In turn, believers adjudge those who deny their beliefs as "erring" or even "fools." Those who are skeptical are said to be "in the dark." There is no mention of insanity or being a halfwit or a moron in the exchange of uncomplimentary labels for linguistic conventions that Wittgenstein holds almost sacred as not to be tampered with does not warrant labeling believers as such.

Justification of hinge propositions is uncalled for because, to start with, it cannot be meaningfully doubted. Casting doubt on it will lead to incoherence and absurdity. The doubt will creep over to many beliefs that sane, serious and reasonable persons take to be certain. The same doubt will cast doubt on beliefs that form the basis upon which one doubts. One would end up with a doubting game that entails doubting one's own doubt. This is a game that only lunatics play, perhaps along with comedians out to elicit a good laugh, or philosophers going out of their way to probe the limits of reason. So doubting religious belief, being supposedly a hinge proposition, is misplaced. Still this begs some questions, such as why religious language is not shared or cannot be easily shared by all reasonable persons as hinge propositions are supposed to be, or why doubting religious belief is not deemed an index of an aberration as doubting a hinge proposition is. These questions cast doubt on the Wittgensteinian position that belief in God, or at least the God presented by the theists, is really that immune to doubt as the belief that one has two hands or that the universe exist. One therefore cannot be easily faulted for not treating belief in God as an ineluctable and incontrovertible hinge proposition. Justifying belief in God is probably still a sensible thing to do for the believer.

Literature

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