

Contemplation of the Variety of the World

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In this paper I shall discuss some central questions concerning the method of philosophy in the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, but will not directly deal with Wittgenstein's own views. I am primarily concerned with D. Z. Phillips (1936–2006), who has been the leading exponent of the Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion in recent decades.

During the past fifteen years Phillips has developed a notion of philosophy as a form of contemplation. This conception is inspired by Phillips's former teacher in Swansea, Rush Rhees. After Rhees's death in 1989 Phillips edited several volumes of Rhees's previously unpublished papers. Rhees's interpretation of Wittgenstein has strongly influenced Phillips's thought, and he sees contemplative philosophy as "truly" Wittgensteinian philosophy.

I will start by describing two conceptions of philosophy which collide with Phillips's and Rhees's contemplative conception of philosophy. These are labelled "philosophy as a guide to life" and "the underlabourer conception of philosophy". After that I explore some central tenets of contemplative philosophy. Finally, I deal with problems that have to do with the alleged neutrality of contemplative philosophy of religion.

1. Two rival views

a) *Philosophy as a guide to life.* Pierre Hadot in his well-known book *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* argues that in ancient thought philosophy was regarded as a way of living. For ancients, philosophy was not only a theoretical matter but "a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being" (Hadot 1995, 265). Thus, for the ancients, philosophy was not only what philosophers say – i.e. abstract philosophical discourse – but also what they do, their way of life.

Nowadays philosophers in Western universities do not see philosophy as a spiritual matter: for them philosophy is not "a way of life" in Hadot's ancient sense of the word. Nevertheless, the idea of philosophy as a guide to life has not wholly vanished. Many philosophers still think that philosophy transforms life and they have – in the name of philosophy – advocated and criticised various kinds of political, moral and religious views.

Phillips's contemplative conception of philosophy stands in sharp contrast to the conception of philosophy as a guide for living. According to him, philosophers whose interest is to offer answers and solutions to substantive questions in ethics, politics, and religion go beyond what philosophy can offer. He insists that the ethical and religious judgements offered by philosophers are not, in fact, grounded on philosophy. Phillips is not denying that philosophers have, of course, their own views on ethical and religious matters, but he holds that these are personal value judgements, which are not "underwritten by philosophy" (Phillips 1999, 160).

b) *The underlabourer conception of philosophy.* Phillips's also rejects the purely negative conception of philosophy, which is referred to as the "underlabourer conception of philosophy". According to this conception, philosophy does not offer any positive understanding of reality. Philosophy merely helps us to understand conceptual difficulties in other areas of thought, e.g., in science, politics and religion, but it has no subject matter of its own. According to Phillips, some philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein, such as James Cavell and Stephen Mulhall, advocate the underlabourer conception of philosophy. These philosophers see philosophy as therapeutical techniques which aim only at clarifying conceptual confusions without dealing with fundamental philosophical questions. Phillips finds this interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy inadequate (Phillips 1999, 25. See also Phillips 2007; Mulhall 2007). Although one task of philosophy is to clarify confusions by distinguishing between different uses of words and sentences, it is not philosophy's main concern.

2. Fundamental Problems of Philosophy

Phillips argues that philosophy has its own problems and its own positive subject matter. In his book *Philosophy's Cool Place*, he points out that from the times of pre-Socratic philosophers, a central question in philosophy has been "What is reality?" or "What is the reality of all things?" (Phillips 1999, 3). The question of the nature of reality is also a central concern of contemplative philosophy, and, following Rhees, Phillips holds that this concern is entangled with the question of the nature of language. Thus, to understand what language is is to understand the central ideas of philosophy, such as those of reality and truth (Rhees 1969, 135). Philosophy's chief concern is, as Rhees often says, with "what it means to say something" or "the possibility of discourse" (see, e.g., Phillips 2007, 50; Rhees 1998). The deep philosophical question is what makes language possible or what is involved in speaking language at all?

In asking "What does it mean to say something?" Rhees and Phillips are not in search of the epistemological, metaphysical or transcendental foundations of human discourse. Rather, contemplative philosophy is opposed to the normative tradition in philosophy. Philosophical investigation of reality does not tell us whether scientific, moral or religious claims are true or not, instead it is concerned with the various senses which these claims can have.

Philosophical contemplation is not a matter of determining what can or cannot be said. Instead, it is concerned with what is actually said. Phillips borrows the term "world picture" from Wittgenstein's *Certainty* and says: "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" (Phillips 1999, 55).

According to Phillips, an analogy exists between contemplative philosophy and literature. A contemplative philosopher, like a great writer, shows the variety of the

world and tries to do justice to different ways of speaking, acting and thinking. The task of great literature and the task of contemplative philosophy is to show the world in all its variety and complexity.

In accomplishing this task the contemplative philosopher also seeks to do justice to moral and religious views which are at variance with his or her own. Following Winch, Phillips stresses that this makes hard ethical demands on a philosopher and on a writer who has strong moral or religious commitments of his or her own. (Phillips 2001, 245; Winch 1996, 173.) Thus, although Phillips is against advocacy in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, he holds that there are ethical demands in philosophical inquiry, which have to do with its own distinctive kind of interest, i.e., doing justice to the variety of the world.

3. Philosophical Contemplation and Personal Religious Commitments

According to Phillips, the task of philosophy of religion is not to provide rational justification for religious beliefs or views, it is instead concerned with the meaning or the sense of religious talk. It aims to do justice to the variety of religious life and to the possibilities of religious sense and tries to be neutral with respect to personal religious and ethical commitments.

Several kinds of questions arise from Phillips's allegedly neutral and descriptive approach to philosophy of religion. One of them has to do with the philosopher's ability to understand perspectives other than his own.

According to Richard Amesbury, Phillips seems to hold that fair-minded philosophers can, in principle, overcome their limitations in contemplating possibilities that are at variance with their own. Phillips seems to think that obstacles to the contemplation of the variety of the world are obstacles of will, e.g., prejudice (Amesbury 2007, 212). (On a more general level, 'obstacles of will' have to do with unwillingness to give up a certain way of thinking.)

Amesbury argues that Phillips's description of the philosopher's ability to understand different perspectives is misleading. Incomprehension of foreign perspectives are not always due to obstacles of will, but sometimes "an incomprehension of certain perspectives can be constitutive of others" (Amesbury 2007, 213). Therefore, according to Amesbury, Phillips misrepresents the atheist's perspective: "An atheist who claims not to be able to 'see the point' in religion is not implicitly acknowledging that there *is* a point to which she is blind". Whether religious beliefs "have a point is not simply a disinterested question. The answer will vary with the perspective in question". The atheist's inability to appreciate religion is, according to Amesbury, "simply a condition of her perspective – not a misunderstanding, but a feature of how she *does* understand the world" (Amesbury 2007, 214).

Amesbury sees limits of understanding (or Kierkegaard's "conditions of existence") as the conditions that make contemplation and description possible. Thus, one cannot distinguish sharply between the personal and the philosophical, and Phillips is wrong, "to conclude that one's life should not be allowed to shape how one philosophises" (Amesbury 2007, 215). As Kierkegaard noted, philosophers are human beings too. (See also Mulhall 2007.)

However, it is somewhat unclear what Amesbury means by the conditions or limits of understanding: why should we think that the *inability to understand* certain

views or perspectives is a condition of human existence? I do not see why Phillips or anyone else should see conditions of understanding in this way at all. Of course our religious and ethical perspectives differ in many ways, and sometimes these differences and distances between us are so huge that we do not understand what others do and say. But there are no necessities involved in that. In the Phillipsian/Wittgensteinian view, our limitations of understanding are not fixed and are subject to change. In addition, it is important to note that the notion of the "unity of language" plays a central role in Phillips's and Rhee's thought. Therefore, Phillips does not have to see different perspectives as radically incompatible.

The inability to understand religion is not a general condition of adopting atheism. It is possible that in some cases an atheist has a better understanding of religious beliefs than those who regard themselves as believers. In fact, Phillips claims that Nietzsche gave a better account of Christianity than some of its friends (Phillips 2004, 20).

Amesbury's criticism is, however, on the right track. Phillips himself was puzzled by the same problem. He wondered whether the contemplative conception of philosophy did "not conjure up a picture of the philosopher hovering over the limitations and indeterminacy of our comprehension ... understanding all he surveys"? And he asked, "If our actual situation makes such transcendence impossible, why make it the aim of philosophy?" (Phillips 2001, 318-319).

Phillips thus admits that, e.g., the lack of religious sensitivity may make philosophical contemplation or religious possibilities impossible, and in this way, the philosopher's personal perspective gets in the way of philosophical contemplation. Therefore, there are good reasons to doubt that in religious matters the personal and the philosophical can be distinguished from each other so sharply as Phillips sometimes seems to do. (For a recent discussion on this theme, see Schönbaumsfeld 2007, Chapter 2.)

However, we can still make a distinction between 'understanding religion' and 'being a religious believer'. The former is, in principle, possible also for those who are not religious. The sense of religious beliefs can also be available to those who do not commit themselves to these beliefs. But this implies, as Phillips has suggested, that philosophers have some sort of "the possibility of belief" in them (Phillips 2005a, 172-173). Acknowledging this possibility is, however, not a confession of faith, but rather it has to do with Wittgensteinian anti-scepticism, i.e., the thought that at least some uses of first-order discourse in religion are in order. Contemplative philosophy of religion is thus a denial of the view that *all* religious beliefs are meaningless and incoherent (see Phillips 2005b, 371). Only then, does it make sense to speak about philosophical wonder at the possibilities of religious sense.

Literature

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