The 'Language and World' of Religion[*]

Anat Biletzki, Tel Aviv

Language-games and forms of life are not the same.

Both these constructs carry astounding philosophical capital, and, in the way of all holders of capital, can be dear or cheap. Having become popular currency, they are used, especially the former, in multifarious contexts, not necessarily, or not even, Wittgensteinian contexts. So it is one thing to engage in the interpretative enterprise of asking "what is a language-game?" and what does it do for Wittgenstein, or "what is a form of life?" and how does it do anything for Wittgenstein; it is quite another to conscript these two expressions for the purpose of analyzing or investigating issues exempt from Wittgensteinian interests.[1] In the case of religion, however, the two agendas come peculiarly close. There is great fascination in unearthing what it is exactly that Wittgenstein said and thought about religion, mostly because his – not gargantuan – mention of the practices and beliefs of religion is relatively sparse and appears to be inscrutably vague. Not unlike other Wittgensteinian topics, there are several competing *interpretations* of his words; in the case of religion, however, his discussion of religion is so minimal[2] that the door is open for flights of under-

---

[1] I have, in the past, alluded to this as the interpretation-use distinction, cf. Biletzki (2003).

[2] In chronological order we usually point to passages in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, very few sections in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), some thoughts in "A Lecture on Ethics" (ca. 1929), the remarks in "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" (1931), three lectures in "Lectures on Religious Belief" (ca. 1938), scant comments in *Philosophical Investigations* (ca. 1945), and some others in *On Cer-*

standing. In parallel, we come across a so-called Wittgensteinian explanation of religion – what it is, what religious practices mean, what religious beliefs consist of – that is sometimes divorced from questions of Wittgensteinian interpretation and rather *uses* Wittgensteinian tools in asking about and explaining religion itself. These are cases of justified opportunism, so to speak – the utilization of Wittgensteinian insights and terminology in the service of theology and religious studies.

I venture to categorize the readings of Wittgenstein that purport to establish his views on religion. These include: a) the attribution of the "mystical" to religion, placing religion in the realm of the ineffable and, accordingly, being placed mostly in readings of the early Wittgenstein; b) religion as an attitude; c) religion as the expression of emotion, sometimes termed "expressivism" or "emotivism"; d) religion as a personal experience of faith, wherein we find the Kierkedaardian association with Wittgenstein; and e) religion as a language-game or form of life. This list is, perhaps, not completely comprehensive; neither do its members mutually exclude one another. Still, it gives a general lay of the land and evinces the types of interpretation that have become common ground in understanding Wittgenstein in the context of religion. Without engaging in quantitative estimation, I also venture that it is the last of these groupings – religion as a language-game or form of life – that has been most vocal and provocative even while seeming to some the most natural reading while to others the most vulnerable to critique.[3] Furthermore, it has travelled most fruitfully beyond the arena of Wittgenstein interpretation into the domain of theology and religion *per se*, providing theology with a novel means of analysis.

The idea of religion as a language-game or as form of life acquired, early on, the label of "Wittgensteinian fideism." Coined by Kai Nielsen in

---

tainty (ca. 1950); out of chronological order there are a few remarks in the editions of later work such as *Zettel* or *Remarks on Color*, and the several allusions to religion in *Culture and Value*.

[3] I may be referring here to the interpretative community's proclivity (concerning Wittgenstein on religion) of a decade ago. The recent upsurge in writings on this subject seems to exhibit greater nuance and, specifically, a newfound interest in the Kierkegaard-Wittgenstein connection. Also of note is that the Kierkegaardian connection has, on occasion, be seen itself as a version of the religion-as-a-form-of-life reading (See Hustwit 1978).

Nielsen 1967, this reading is noteworthy, to my mind, for two substantial reasons. First, and somewhat oddly, it uses Wittgenstein's own conceptual inventions ("language-game" and "form of life") in reading him on an apparently unrelated matter. Nowhere does Wittgenstein himself say that religion is a language-game or a form of life (although he does draw near with "… it is after all a way of living…", *Culture and Value*, 64). This is rather an interpretative tactic of his readers, who find that the force of these constructs (with their attendant complexities and complications) is of good explanatory value in understanding Wittgenstein's thoughts on religion and also, as intimated above, in understanding the phenomenon of religion itself unrelated to textual interpretation. Secondly, more significant than this methodological interpretative ploy is, indeed, the deciphering of content that one encounters when viewing Wittgenstein on religion via language-games or forms of life. The highlights of these readings have to do with the instinctive, primitive quality of language-games and forms of life; with their construal as practices; with their self-regulation; with their insularity; with their inscrutability from outside vantage points; and with their provision of internal standards and criteria of meaning (and rationality). Such common characterizations of both language-games and forms of life make it facile to use them interchangeably. Subsequently, D.Z. Phillips, the acknowledged leader of Wittgensteinian fideism, called religious beliefs "distinctive language-games," (Phillips 1970) and James Cook in critical mode went even further, showing how language-games are utilized (wrongly, to his mind) in the analysis of religion.[4] Nielsen, however, began his diatribe by targeting forms of life, quite haphazardly talking about "forms of language," "forms of life," "modes of discourse," "way of life," and even saying that "way of life" and "mode of discourse" come to the same thing (Nielsen 1967, 193).

One can argue with Wittgensteinian fideism, *grosso modo*, on two counts. One can, firstly, deny it as a satisfactory interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of religion and thence move on to one of the other interpretations that we have adumbrated. This interpretative feud leads to dissecting

---

[4] Cook 1988. The misunderstood elements of language-games grafted on to religion, according to Cook, are behavior, primitive behavior, instinctive reaction, in-house explanation and internal justification.

Wittgenstein's enigmatic thoughts on religion in a more detailed fashion. It can and should take into consideration the option that reading Wittgenstein might enable several simultaneous insights: religion as being beyond meaningful language, religion as an attitude, religion as an expression of personal experience, and so on. But secondly, assuming that Wittgenstein would acquiesce to talk of religion as a language-game and as a form of life, one can then also argue *with* Wittgenstein: if language-games and forms of life are insular, inscrutable, self-regulating, and self-providing for norms of meaning and if, consequently, Wittgensteinian religion is thus-wise disconnected from other ingredients of human life, then Wittgenstein must be wrong in his depiction of the religious arena.[5]

My specific current argument grows from different roots. Proceeding with affinity towards the fideistic tradition – I find it the most promising of strategies in understanding Wittgenstein, able to countenance the contributions of other readings within its own complexities – I would like to make some internal distinctions that can reinforce fideism while still permitting it to take additional Wittgensteinian steps. First and foremost, I make note again of the fact that, as just mentioned, especially in the case of religion, but rampantly all the same, language-games and forms of life are perceived as serving identical purposes and are, indeed, used by commentators as utterly exchangeable. Now, it is clearly beyond the space of this article to interrogate separately the Wittgensteinian icons of "language-game" and "form of life" and the attendant, sometimes strident and always vast, roster of their interpretation. Nor do I dispute their undoubted closeness: "Here the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (*PI* 23). Still, there is great explanatory value, or, being Wittgensteinian we should perhaps prefer to say great philosophical descriptive worth, in speaking of religion as a form of life; far less so, it emerges, in putting forth an offering of the language-game of religion.

---

[5] Cook's main disagreements with this type of Wittgensteinian religion deal with a) the unnecessary amalgamation of primitive reactions and the meaning of religious terms, b) the unconvincing placement of practice before belief, c) the wrong view of religious persons impervious to rational reflection. Nielsen weighs in strongly against the thought that the autonomy of the religious form of life (or language-game) precludes (philosophical) argument with it.

Language-games are a rule-governed human activity. In Wittgenstein we see them being used to help us understand the learning of language; to illustrate basic functional traits of language (see primitive language-games like the builders); to emphasize the multiplicity of language uses (see the famous list in *PI* 23); and sometimes, rare-times, to speak of language, on the whole, as one interconnected game. Paradoxically, there is something both natural and artificial in the Wittgensteinian presentation of language-games. On the one hand, the term is exploited in Wittgenstein's turn from the formal, ideal language posited in *TLP* to ordinary language and its ordinary uses, trumpeted by the later Wittgenstein.[6] On the other hand, there is a somewhat synthetic, simulated, even fictive aura to the sometimes contrived examples which are brought forth as emblematic language-games. Whichever the case, the clichés of "language-game of religion" or "religious language-games," though seemingly intuitive, need to be investigated further before we can accept them as a fitting terminology or as an appropriate framework for what it is that we, or the faithful, do in religious contexts.

This investigation goes two ways. First, it must be ascertained whether the aspects of language-games that function in Wittgenstein's thought, for his purposes in discussing the workings of language in general, are relevant for *his* views on religion. Most instructive – and touching – are D.Z. Phillips' own "misgivings," as he calls them, concerning his original use of the cliché (possibly before it became a cliché) (cf. Phillips 1970, 24). With perceptive acuity, Phillips realizes that the very dealings in language-games, which are characteristic of the interpretative enterprise, go far beyond what Wittgenstein would have meant by the nomenclature, definitely beyond what he meant about religion. Whether ultimately natural (as a part of ordinary language) or inherently formalistic (because rule-governed), language-games could not and should not, in a legitimate Wittgensteinian reading, be utilized in the organized, theoreticized manner in which Witt-

---

[6] I'm clearly making short shrift here of two enormous interpretative issues: a) the question of whether it is really a formal (and ideal) language which is the object of *TLP* or actually ordinary language itself. (See *TLP* 5.5563: "In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.") b) the ultimate question about the (dis-)continuity between early and later Wittgenstein, specifically concerning his move from formal to ordinary language.

gensteinians who adhere to religion-as-a-language-game treat them. Specifically, their application to religion suffers when they are thus manipulated, most importantly because religion and language-games cannot be seen though such convoluted and manufactured prisms. And this leads immediately to our second pursuit, regarding religion itself, not religion in or for Wittgenstein. Of the critiques mounted against fideism in its classical rendition, very telling is the view which quarrels especially with the idea that a language-game – and religion is here posited as an independent language-game – is necessarily autonomous, independent of and disconnected from other language-games. In other words, the rules which are self-constituted in and by a language-game control the meanings, beliefs, and practices concerning the concepts that function in that language-game *irrespective* of other language-games. That is, in a sense, the principal facet of religion as a language-game that is touted by fideism; and it is tasked as plainly wrong since the religious components of a religious life are not detached from other parts of that same life. On the contrary, religion has everything to do with the other ingredients of a human life and therefore its depiction as a sovereign language-game misses the point of a life lived religiously.

Things are different when we talk about forms of life and religion as a form of life. Famously, Wittgenstein only called on "form of life" five or six times in the *Investigations*. And although this construct, too, has become a ubiquitous coin of the Wittgensteinian and philosophical empire, it has, nevertheless, a more amorphous air about it. True, it has given rise to readings of Wittgenstein that place him in an anti-realist, relativistic, even postmodern camp. But that is not, for me, the strength of the term or the trajectory I want to travel with it. Rather, following Hanfling, I want to emphasize its meanderings between the pluralistic (rather than relativistic) recognition of diverse forms of life and the Wittgensteinian insight that these are all human forms of life.[7] This acknowledgment of both difference

---

[7] See Hanfling 2002. Hanfling makes it clear that Wittgenstein nowhere says "*human* form of life." These are, literally, Hanfling's words, which are based, however, on (Hanfling's understanding of) Wittgenstein's ascription of "human" to "form of life."

(similar to parochialism[8]) and (a certain) universalism makes room, then, for the existence of distinct forms of life – whether in different cultures, for different persons, or even, I dare say, in one individual's life – but also for communication, i.e., human communication between them. As opposed to the strict reading of different language-games as being incommensurable and therefore of there being no possibility for religious and secular language-games to interact in any way, this acceptance of a human form of life underlying particular forms of life – and let us not forget that Wittgenstein insists that if lions could speak we would not understand them (*PI* p. 223), whereas we do understand one another while speaking different languages because we all speak a human language – offers a stage upon which the religious form of life and the secular one can perform together. Wittgenstein did not speak about religion as a language-game *or* a form of life; but he did, we have seen, invoke the latter with "it is after all a way of living…".

What advantages might this bifurcation between language-games and forms of life have for our understanding of Wittgenstein on religion and perhaps, by way of his insights, of religion and the religious way of life? Here we must tread more gingerly since working out some of the following suggestions may point us back in the way of conjoining forms of life and language-games. This re-attachment, however, is meant to illuminate religion differently than the automatic, synonymous identification of the two constructs did.

The readings of Wittgenstein that find parallelisms between his thought of religion and the Kierkegaardian view are strikingly powerful. The highlight of those readings is the emphasis put on religion as a personal (perhaps even ineffable[9]) experience of faith. But where can we go from there? What explanation and interpretation of religious belief and religious practice can follow upon that very astute identification of the religious person as having a special, personal, private, religious (transcendental?) experience through revelation or similar mystical experiences? It is

---

[8] See Travis 2004.

[9] This use of "ineffable" is at a distance from the more usual "ineffability" that is encountered in readings of religion in Wittgenstein that harp on the Tractarian posit of the mystical (and therefore the religious) as beyond the limits of language.

here that language must appear, for only through the medium of language – call it even religious language, credit it even with the label "religious *language-game*" – can any part of that experience be made explicit. Yet that language, which might report about a sublime awakening or vision, which can enumerate in supposed propositional form the contents of religious beliefs (such as "god exists," "the waters parted," "Jesus walked on water," etc.), or which functions to facilitate religious rituals and ceremonies (such as confession or prayer[10]), is populated by several religious language-games, regulated by their own rules that confer meaning upon their concepts and provide for consistent and coherent use of linguistic tools. An interesting insight about this move from the personal experience of faith to language can be obtained through Hintikka's articulation that language-games are the mediator between world and language.[11] The straightforward uptake of Hintikka's thought here would be that the "world" of religious experience is mediated to a meaningful language by the language-games that are prescribed by religious practice. It is our further ability to describe those same language-games, that is to say, to make explicit, as far as possible, the rules and goings on of those games, that affords us an understanding of religion and even of the religious person's experience. Clearly, the "world" spoken of here is not some preternatural reality, a divine being, miraculous events, or any of the transcendent elements usually supposed to inhabit the world which is supposedly represented in statements of religious belief. Rather, the experiential world of the believer is brought forth, into human language, using religious language-games. The philosopher's perspicuous representation of these language-games is merely her description of this religious grammar, her exposition of the use we put our language-games to when using language in religious contexts. This is, however, not "religion as a language-game" but rather the use of language-games that display specific peculiarities (having to do, e.g., with the use of terms like "god" and institutions like prayer) in a religious form of life.[12]

---

[10] Wittgenstein does call prayer a language-game in *PI* 23.

[11] Hintikka's clear pronouncement of this can be found, among other places, in Hintikka 1979: "…language-games [are] the mediators between language and reality" (8).

[12] Insisting on fastidiousness, we might distinguish between the maligned "religion as a language-game" and the more appropriate "religious language-games" or even

One additional step can now be taken. Speaking about the experiential world of the believer as being mediated by language-games to the language we all understand, we can now find added value in the shift from language-games to form of life, more clearly moving us from the private (i.e., religious experience) to the public (i.e., religious practices, religious institutions). In keeping with, or actually in parallel to, the private-language argument as regards personal sensations, we may just as forcefully say that there is no foothold to a private language of religious experience. This is, in fact, the unacknowledged strength of the fideistic reading of Wittgenstein's religion. Not only does it divorce religious belief and practice from any transcendence, it furthermore calls our attention to the societal, communitarian essence of religion and of the religious form of life – and to Wittgenstein's awareness and embrace of this essence (an admittedly un-Wittgensteinian term). Although private, perhaps ineffable, religious occurrences might be a part of human experience (and then again, they might just be pathological hallucinations, or psychotic mental activities), only by being manifested in language as a part of a public, religious form of life can they be admitted into meaningful contexts. Put differently yet again – the "world" of religion is not the world depicted by the Bible, propounded by stories of faith, inhabited by mythological gods, fairies and what not. It is, rather, an easily recognizable social world, full of hierarchies and institutions and regulations and rituals that give meanings to the notions which function constitutively in them: a veritable form of life. And the language-games that serve this form of life are necessarily communal *because* our human forms of life – especially religious forms of life – are those of a human community. If the very personal, very private, very exclusive, perhaps sublime, perhaps divine aspects of religious faith seem to be belied by this admission of a more mundane and societal world of religion, then that is, to my mind, all to the good.

"language-games of religion," on condition that the latter two do not exhibit the extremes of insularity, autonomy, and self-regulation that were inappropriately (for religion) identified in language-games in general.

Literature

Biletzki, Anat 2003: (*Over-)Interpreting Wittgenstein.* Leiden: Kluwer.

Cook, James W. 1988: "Wittgenstein and Religious Belief", *Philosophy* 63, 427-452.

Hanfling, Oswald 2002: *Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life.* London: Routledge.

Hintikka, Jaakko 1979: "Language-Games", in: Saarinen, Esa (ed.): *Game-Theoretical Semantics*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1-26.

Hustwit, R. E. 1978: "Understanding a Suggestion of Professor Cavell's: Kierkegaard's Religious State as a Wittgensteinian 'Form of Life'", *Philosophy Research Archives* 4, 329-347.

Nielsen, Kai 1967: "Wittgensteinian Fideism", *Philosophy* 61, 191-209.

Phillips, D.Z. 1970: "Religious Beliefs and Language Games", *Ratio* 12, 24-46.

Travis, Charles 2004: "The Twilight of Empiricism", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, 104, 247-272.