

Rectifying Misconceptions of Wittgenstein and Phillips: *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life* by Mikel Burley

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Burley, Mikel, *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips*. London: Continuum, 2012.

Mikel Burley states the purpose of *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life* as follows (4): “A large part of my task will be to rectify misconceptions that continue to inhabit such an appreciation [of the contributions of Wittgenstein and Phillips to the study of religious forms of life]” With respect to this, the book is mostly successful. But is this a fruitful purpose? I will come back to that question at the end of the review.

Since the book is about rectifying misconceptions, understanding what Burley is discussing and the points he is making requires being fairly well-read in Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion as well as being acquainted with the standard criticisms of its various forms. Even if the title of the book may give rise to different expectations, this is not an introduction to Wittgenstein’s and Phillips’s philosophies of religion, nor a

discussion of what “contemplating” might mean in this context.

The six main chapters are independent papers, each devoted to one specific question concerning Wittgenstein’s (1-3) and Phillips’s (4-6) discussions of philosophical questions pertaining to religious belief. If there is anything substantial that holds the papers together, it is the way in which Burley rectifies the misconceptions he is discussing. His main point, as I read the book, is that Wittgenstein’s and Phillips’s critics have misunderstood what the Wittgensteinian rejection of metaphysics is all about. For Wittgenstein and Phillips, this rejection is not a claim that “metaphysical things” do not exist; what is rejected is the idea that there are concepts “whose sense somehow transcends all domains of practical usage” (63).

After a first, thin chapter on Wittgenstein’s remarks on Frazer’s

Golden Bough, chapter two discusses Wittgenstein's saying, in "A Lecture on Ethics", that he has had "the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe" (33). In particular, Burley is criticizing Peter Winch for drawing connections between this feeling and moral goodness. According to Burley, the feeling is on the contrary "a recognition that there is a perspective from which everything, without exception, is all right; perhaps it is a feeling that we are all loved" (50). Unfortunately Burley breaks off his discussion soon after having pointed this out, without going into detail about how it should be understood. For example, he does not discuss the great difference between the two suggestions he has given.

The next chapter discusses a paper by Severin Schroeder on a putative tension in Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion. It does not take much knowledge of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion to see the mistakes in Schroeder's understanding of it, but Burley points them out in a clear way and he has important things to say about some of the questions he brings up for discussion, especially the resurrection of Christ (71-74).

The second part of the book, dealing with Phillips's philosophy of religion, opens with a chapter on the realism/non-realism-question. The chapter does not add much to what Phillips has already said about the issue, but is a fine report on it. In chapter 5, Burley discusses Phillips's rejection of the possibility of life after death, and the alternative under-

standings of eternal life that Phillips presents. As Burley instructively remarks (112-114), some of Phillips's points of criticism regarding the notion of life after death are confused, being based on metaphysical arguments of a traditional kind. However, Burley is much too uncritical towards Phillips's other points of criticism. Using the notion of life after death might be harmful to one's religious sensibility – but *must* using it be harmful? Can't we imagine a use of it which is conducive to such a sensibility (cf. 120)? Phillips stresses self-renunciation – but might that notion not be harmful, as it is so close to self-contempt and thus to contempt in general (cf. 117, 161-63)? Within the space of a review I can do no more than pose these questions, but what the first one points to is a general problem with one way of understanding the relation of meaning and use. For one thing that is characteristic of religious concepts is that a clarification of their meanings cannot be exhaustive. For example, reciting the creed in the Mass is not so much about stating one's agreement with things one is or could be perfectly clear about, as an opportunity to find new meanings of well-known phrases in new situations during the course of one's life; in such a context, the fruitful undertaking would be to try to see what role "the resurrection of the dead / of the body" might have in one's life right now, and here imagination and existential clear-sightedness are needed. The alternative understandings of eternal life

that Phillips presents could be read as examples of this, the problem being the lack of imagination he manifests when not seeing any edifying role for the notion of life after death, and the lack of existential clear-sightedness he sometimes displays in the kind of criticism he directs to that notion.

This brings us to the last chapter of the book, dealing with Phillips's reading of literature. Burley's point in this chapter is that Phillips here partly deviates from his avowedly contemplative approach, letting his readings be informed by his own spiritual preferences, and that this shows the difficulties of living up to the contemplative ideal. However, since the word "preference" does not do justice to what is at stake here, the way one sees things existentially not being given but an object of self-examination, we have not reached bed-rock just because this feature of Phillips's readings has been established. And does this not show that the contemplative ideal is confused?

Are really philosophical questions best understood as sharply distinguished from personal questions?

Burley has set himself the task of rectifying misconceptions of Wittgenstein's and Phillips's philosophies of religion, and he mostly succeeds in doing that. The strength of a philosophical approach is not demonstrated in that way, however, but in its being capable of shedding light on problems in unexpected ways, often to the detriment of precision. Aiming at the latter is, by contrast, a sign of degeneration, and there is consequently a risk that the task Burley has set himself is a symptom of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion not being very vital at the moment. However, here and there in *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life* it is evident that Burley has important things to say on his own, and I hope that he will try to write such a book in the future. That book would certainly be well worth reading.