WITTGENSTEIN, RELIGION, AND THE REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS

Mikel Burley
University of Leeds, UK

Abstract: This paper examines recent criticisms of Wittgensteinian elucidations of religious beliefs, and aims to show that those criticisms are misplaced. Firstly, I consider Severin Schroeder's claim that, due to Wittgenstein's commitment to three jointly inconsistent propositions, there is a tension in his conception of Christian belief. I argue that none of the three propositions adduced by Schroeder well represents Wittgenstein's view, and hence that Schroeder has not highlighted a genuine tension. Secondly, I consider John Haldane's claim that D. Z. Phillips' account of Christian belief amounts to an endorsement of naturalism, and argue that this claim is unfounded. I draw attention both to differences and to commonalities between Schroeder's and Haldane's criticisms, and propose that these criticisms derive in large part from a shared misconception of what Wittgenstein's rejection of metaphysics amounts to in the context of a grammatical investigation of religious belief

Introduction

Despite having written relatively little that relates directly and explicitly to religion, Wittgenstein's influence on the study of religion has, since the mid-twentieth century, been considerable. Many philosophers of religion and theologians have been impressed by the potential that Wittgenstein's approach to philosophical problems offers for the investigation and elucidation of religious uses of language. This approach involves examining the relevant concepts and expressions as they occur in their particular contexts of use rather than abstracting them from those contexts; and it eschews questions of the veracity of religious beliefs in favour of questions of their meanings. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the meaning of a religious belief cannot be straightforwardly stated but can be shown by means of a careful articulation of its similarities and differences with other uses of language. The philosopher's task is held to consist in the highlighting of conceptual connections between the salient belief and other aspects of the language and form of life that surround it, and also highlighting differences between the meanings of particular religious expressions on the one hand and non-religious expressions with which their grammar could be easily confused on the other. By means of this two-pronged approach,

the Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion hopes to provide, or at least go some way towards providing, a perspicuous representation of certain religious uses of language.

In view of its emphasis on doing justice to religious forms of language as they are actually used by religious practitioners, and also by non-practitioners, in everyday life, and its overt neutrality on questions of truth, it might be surprising that the Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion has provoked so much strong criticism, and occasional hostility, from other philosophers working in this area. But it certainly has provoked such criticism, and it will, I think, be philosophically instructive to consider why this is the case. As the starting point for my paper I will outline some criticisms of Wittgensteinian approaches to philosophy of religion that have been made recently by two philosophers, each of whom is, to some extent, sympathetic to certain aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy more generally; these two philosophers are Severin Schroeder and John Haldane.

In the article by Schroeder that I will be discussing the author argues that there is an 'unresolved tension in Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion' (2007, p. 442), which consists roughly in the attribution to Christian believers of a firm commitment to the existence of metaphysical entities or states of affairs combined with an avowal that these entities or states of affairs are extremely unlikely to exist. Haldane, meanwhile, has targeted his criticisms at the Wittgenstein-inspired approach taken by the late D. Z. Phillips, and has argued that, despite an admirable hermeneutical sensitivity on Phillips' part, the account that Phillips provides of prominent religious beliefs ultimately misrepresents those beliefs. It misrepresents them because it amounts to a kind of naturalism, according to which the putative objects of the beliefs do not really exist even though the beliefs themselves can facilitate moral edification.

In my view, the criticisms made by Schroeder and Haldane respectively epitomize some serious and prevalent misconceptions about a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion and to philosophy more generally. In particular, they evince a confusion about what, for Wittgensteinians, a rejection of metaphysics amounts to. By means of a critical engagement with the views of Schroeder and Haldane, I hope to illustrate how a more careful appreciation of alternative possible meanings of the term 'metaphysics' in the

context of philosophy of religion may help to dissolve some persistent misunderstandings of a Wittgensteinian approach.[1]

1. Schroeder's criticisms of Wittgenstein

The tension that Schroeder thinks is exhibited in Wittgenstein's thoughts on religious discourse consists not in a straightforward contradiction, but in an inconsistency between three propositions, which on Schroeder's view Wittgenstein holds to characterize the psychological predicament of honest religious believers. This predicament, suggests Schroeder, amounts to 'almost a split personality' (p. 461), and thus evinces an untenable feature of Wittgenstein's account. The three propositions in question are the following:

(1) As a hypothesis, God's existence (&c) is extremely implausible. (p. 443)

(2) Christian faith is not unreasonable. (ibid.)

(3) Christian faith does involve belief in God's existence (&c). (p. 447)

To most people who are at all familiar with what Wittgenstein says about religious belief, in for example his 'Lectures on Religious Belief' from the late 1930s or in the various remarks scattered throughout *Culture and Value*, the claim that Wittgenstein holds these three propositions to be characteristic of Christian faith is liable to seem highly contentious to say the least. So let us consider why Schroeder attributes them to Wittgenstein.

Schroeder's interpretation of Wittgenstein's position comprises two main strands. Firstly, he maintains that Wittgenstein did not intend to elucidate the views of ordinary Christians, but wanted rather to present 'an approach to religion that appealed to him personally – however uncommon or even idiosyncratic that approach might be' (p. 445). It would, therefore, be inappropriate on Schroeder's view to criticize Wittgenstein for failing to give an account of religion that applies to religious believers in general, or even just to practising Christians in general. I think this interpretation of what Wittgenstein took himself to be doing when he reflected upon religious uses of language is badly mistaken, and is not at all well substantiated by Schroeder; however, since it is not among the main issues that I wish to focus on in this paper, I shall let it pass here.

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[1] This paper draws substantially upon material from two as-yet unpublished papers of mine, namely: 'Is There a Tension in Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion?' (forthcoming in *The Heythrop Journal*) and 'Religious Meaning and Truth, and the Rejection of Metaphysics' (unpublished manuscript).

The second strand of Schroeder's interpretation involves a denial of the common, but undoubtedly misguided, view that Wittgenstein propounds 'a purely expressivist construal of credal statements' (p. 445), according to which the assent of believers to those statements 'should be seen merely as figurative expressions of a certain attitude towards life, or as part of a ritualistic practice expressive of such an attitude' (p. 443). As an instance of those who attribute religious expressivism to Wittgenstein, Schroeder cites D. Z. Phillips; he mentions Phillips' book *Wittgenstein and Religion* in a footnote but does not refer to any specific chapters or passages. Sadly, despite Phillips' repeated insistence that neither he nor Wittgenstein endorsed any sort of anti-realist, reductive, or expressivist conception of religious belief, misinterpretations of his work remain pervasive.[2] Schroeder's view is unusual only inasmuch as he attributes expressivism to Phillips without also attributing it to Wittgenstein. Against expressivist misrepresentations, Schroeder ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that Christian faith involves really believing in such things as God's existence and Christ's resurrection (see Schroeder, p. 445).

Taken at face value, the claim that Wittgenstein did not endorse expressivism should be fairly uncontentious. We might bring to mind, for example, the exchange between Wittgenstein and Casimir Lewy during the third of the Lectures on Religious Belief, where Wittgenstein denies that expressing the hope that one might again meet a friend after death is equivalent to expressing, say, an attitude of fondness: '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?' (*LC*, p. 71). In the light of this and other remarks of Wittgenstein's, Schroeder's proposal, that for Wittgenstein a Christian's belief in God and in the Resurrection of Christ involves the belief that God exists and that Christ was (or is) resurrected, appears innocuous. However, Schroeder characterizes beliefs such as these as involving 'a belief in religious metaphysics' (see, especially, Schroeder, pp. 453–54). This makes the proposal highly controversial, since it seems to contradict the widely held view that Wittgenstein's later philosophy involves a rejection of metaphysics. What, then, does Schroeder mean when he

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[2] For Phillips' rejection of expressivist conceptions of religious language, see for example his critical discussion of R. B. Braithwaite's position in Phillips 1976, ch. 9. Cf. Phillips 1970, p. 77: 'When … moral or religious pictures … decline, there is often no substitute for them. This is why the role of such pictures is trivialised if one considers them to be mere stories which serve as psychological aids in adhering to moral truths whose intelligibility is independent of them … .' And see also Phillips 1993a, esp. pp. 97–98.

identifies a religious belief such as the belief in God with 'a belief in religious metaphysics'?

In a discussion of Wittgenstein's notion of 'religious pictures and ideas', Schroeder implies that there are only two available options with respect to what believing in them amounts to: either they are regarded as merely expressive of 'certain emotional [or perhaps other non-cognitive] attitudes' or 'the further step is taken' of believing 'those pictures and ideas … to be literally true' (p. 452). We might wonder, however, what 'literally true' is supposed to mean here. Schroeder focuses on the belief in Christ's Resurrection, and suggests that Wittgenstein, while being unable to believe in the Resurrection himself, nevertheless understood that 'it is essential for a Christian to believe in [it]' as a 'supernatural' event (p. 446). What Schroeder seems to be doing here is drawing a close conceptual connection between three forms of belief: firstly, believing in something metaphysical; secondly, believing some proposition to be literally true as opposed to merely figurative; and thirdly, believing in something supernatural. Although this may seem like the beginnings of a useful investigation, there are some severe problems with it.

2.   Problems with Schroeder's position

One problem with the points Schroeder makes is that he seems to suppose that he is telling us something significant about Wittgenstein's view of what a belief in, say, the Resurrection consists in, when in fact all the serious grammatical work remains to be done. Moreover, it is difficult to see how closer scrutiny of Wittgenstein's works could substantiate Schroeder's interpretation, given that Wittgenstein nowhere talks about religious beliefs as beliefs in religious metaphysics or of religious pictures as being literally true. Indeed, in the case of the examples of religious pictures that Wittgenstein actually discusses, it is far from clear what could count as taking them to be literally true, especially if treating them in this way is supposed to mean something like taking them to be true in the way that propositions concerning empirical phenomena can be taken to be true (or false). Wittgenstein in fact consistently aims to distinguish religious forms of belief from non-religious forms, such as beliefs about historical or empirical facts.

Speaking of the belief in the Last Judgment, for example, Wittgenstein is reported to have said of the Christian that 'He will treat this belief as extremely well-established, and in another way as not well-established at all. … There are instances where you have a faith –

where you say "I believe" – and on the other hand this belief does not rest on the fact on which our ordinary everyday beliefs normally do rest' (*LC*, p. 54). I take Wittgenstein here to be contemplating a difference between, on the one hand, non-religious beliefs about empirical things and events, and on the other hand, specifically religious beliefs; the latter are typically such that they are established by means other than empirical evidence. Wittgenstein explicitly considers the common claim 'that Christianity rests on an historic basis', and he muses that 'It doesn't rest on an historic basis in the sense that the ordinary belief in historic facts could serve as a foundation. 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' (p. 57).[3] Earlier in the same lecture Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that, in the case of religious beliefs, 'if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business' (p. 56).

Wittgenstein could be blamed for putting the point too starkly here.[4] It does seem to be hyperbolic to claim that the historical facts about Jesus have, or should have, *no* bearing on the Christian's faith. There is certainly a historical dimension to most Christians' belief in Christ that is radically different from, say, their belief in the story of Adam and Eve (and this is not to say that the latter story need be regarded as 'merely mythological'). But in Wittgenstein's case, as in that of a writer such as Kierkegaard (whom he deeply admired),[5] occasional hyperbole can perhaps be excused when we observe that what he is protesting against is the obfuscating tendency among many interpreters of religion, and of Christianity in particular, to treat religious beliefs as though they were, first and foremost, hypotheses about historical events.

In the light of what Wittgenstein actually says, then, it remains obscure what Schroeder could mean when he claims that, on Wittgenstein's view, religious pictures are understood by believers to be literally true. And since it is in terms of a religious picture's being believed to be literally true that Schroeder tries to explicate what a belief in religious metaphysics amounts to, this notion of a belief in religious metaphysics remains obscure as

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[3] The notion of its being inappropriate to class Christ's resurrection as an historical event will be familiar to readers of certain recent and contemporary theologians. See, e.g., Moltmann 1996, p. 69: 'Christ's resurrection is … not a historical event; it is an eschatological happening …'.

[4] In a reported conversation with Maurice Drury he puts a similar point even more starkly, claiming that, from the standpoint of faith, 'It would make no difference if there had never been a historical person as Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels;' although, he adds, 'I don't think any competent authority doubts that there really was such a person.' M. O'C. Drury, 'Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rhees 1981, p. 101.

[5] For more on Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein, see Schönbaumsfeld 2007, esp. ch. 1.

well. The claim that Wittgenstein attributes to the believer in Christ's Resurrection a belief in a supernatural event is perhaps more in tune with the spirit of what Wittgenstein says, but this claim does little to support the highly contentious proposal that Schroeder wants to make concerning the tension in Wittgenstein's overall position.

When we examine the three propositions which, according to Schroeder, generate this alleged tension, we see that there are severe problems with attributing any of them to Wittgenstein as they stand. In the case of the first, that 'As a hypothesis, God's existence (&c) is extremely implausible', it is difficult to see how this proposition could have any place in Wittgenstein's understanding of religion. Wittgenstein's whole emphasis seems to be on denying that religious beliefs are well understood as hypotheses at all. So even if some sense could be made of a belief that construed God's existence, or the Resurrection of Christ, as a hypothesis, this would not, on Wittgenstein's account, amount to a *religious* belief, and so, *a fortiori*, it cannot constitute a religious belief (or proposition) that is in tension with some other religious belief.

The second proposition, that 'Christian faith is not unreasonable', while not as blatantly misconceived as the first, is nevertheless misleading. Wittgenstein does indeed maintain that Christian faith is not unreasonable, but this is not because he holds it to be reasonable; rather, it is because he holds reasonability to be beside the point (at least in most instances; Wittgenstein is not obviously precluding the *possibility* of exceptions). In the Lectures on Religious Belief Wittgenstein says he would call Father O'Hara 'unreasonable' precisely because O'Hara is someone who thinks the reasonable assessment of evidence is, as a general rule, pertinent to religious belief (*LC*, p. 59).[6]

As for the third proposition adduced by Schroeder, that 'Christian faith does involve belief in God's existence (&c)', this is supposed by Schroeder to be informative—to tell us something about the kind of commitment the Christian believer is held by Wittgenstein to be making. But it does nothing of the sort. To say that Christian faith involves belief in God's existence, or in the Resurrection (etc.), tells us nothing about the sorts of things God and the Resurrection are taken to be. As Wittgenstein notes, the sort of investigation that needs to be undertaken is 'a grammatical one' (*PI*, §90); it is grammar that 'tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)' (§373). To be told that believing in God

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[6] Father C. W. O'Hara was someone who gave one of a series of talks on BBC radio in 1930, which were published in 1931 under the title *Science and Religion: A Symposium*. I am grateful to Bloemendaal for this information; see his 2006, p. 84.

involves believing in a metaphysical being, or that believing in the Resurrection involves believing in a supernatural event, is not to be told very much. For, as Wittgenstein might put it, 'metaphysical' and 'supernatural' are not super-concepts (*Über-Begriffen*) that somehow reach out beyond our language; they are as humble as any other, and their use must be investigated accordingly.[7]

So we can see that there are some serious problems with Schroeder's proposal, the principal one being that he seems, in this particular context of the philosophy of religion, to have forgotten the importance that Wittgenstein places upon grammatical investigation. At crucial moments in his argument he replaces such an investigation with a reliance on the employment of terms such as 'existence', 'metaphysics', and 'literally true', as though the significance of these terms in relation to religious belief were self-evident. This inattention to Wittgenstein's emphasis on the need for thorough grammatical investigation is a common thread running through much of the critical treatments of Wittgensteinian approaches to the study of religion, and we will find it again as we now turn to consider John Haldane's recent criticisms of the work of D. Z. Phillips.

3. Haldane on Phillips

While Haldane's criticisms of Phillips differ from Schroeder's criticisms of Wittgenstein in some striking ways, they nevertheless share some common assumptions. I hope that these shared assumptions will become evident in the course of my discussion. The first thing to note is that Haldane would no doubt concur with Schroeder that Phillips' account of religious beliefs amounts to a kind of expressivism. As Haldane puts the point, 'religious claims [on Phillips' view] do not have metaphysical range, but are confined to the world of human imagination and commitment'; thus what Phillips offers us is, in effect, a form of naturalism (see Haldane 2008, p. 252) dressed up with religious-sounding expressions. This is reminiscent of the old charge, made by John Mackie for example, that Phillips is really an atheist in disguise (see Mackie 1982, pp. 228–29). Unlike Schroeder, Haldane does not forthrightly assert that Phillips has misunderstood Wittgenstein's approach to the study of religious uses of language, although he does insinuate at one place that Phillips is more of a 'linguistic idealist' than Wittgenstein was (see Haldane 2008, pp. 259–60). Here I do not

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[7] For the notion of words being 'humble'—that is, as having a meaning, not all by themselves, but only insofar as they have a place within the everyday operations of our linguistic practices—see *PI*, §97.

wish to get sidetracked into a discussion of the sense or relevance of ascribing 'linguistic idealism' to either Wittgenstein or Phillips. Rather, I want to bring out what seems to me to be a misunderstanding of a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophical inquiry on Haldane's part, which I shall come to shortly.

Another important point of agreement between Schroeder and Haldane is that both of them seem to be operating within a theoretical paradigm according to which there are strictly two main options when it comes to the understanding of religious beliefs: one can construe such beliefs either as involving a commitment to the existence of some being (e.g., God) or event (e.g., the Resurrection of Christ), or as being merely imaginative ways of expressing emotional or ethical attitudes that could, in principle, be expressed in purely non-religious terms. What is especially interesting about this way of setting up the opposition between alternative accounts of religious beliefs is that it tends to presuppose that the notion of being committed to, or believing in, the existence of some being or event wears, so to speak, its meaning on its sleeve. According to this presupposition, either one does, or one does not, believe that God exists; either one does, or does not, believe that the Resurrection 'really happened'. The thought that the philosopher might have to engage in some further inquiry in order to understand what believing in God or believing in the Resurrection means in someone's life hardly enters in at all.

Thus the most important difference between Wittgensteinian philosophers on the one hand, and the likes of Haldane and Schroeder (at least in the context of the philosophy of religion) on the other, can be characterized as a methodological one. To put it briefly: where the Wittgensteinian hears expressions such as 'I believe in the Resurrection', 'the reality of God', 'God's transcendence', and so forth, and is prompted to wonder what such terms as 'belief', 'reality', and 'transcendence' mean in these contexts, the critics of Wittgensteinian approaches have tended to hear such expressions and assume that it is already obvious what the salient terms mean. The dispute is made more complicated by the use of the terms 'metaphysics' and 'metaphysical' in order to capture something about the nature of religious belief, or about the objects of such belief. This complication can be illustrated by examining a passage from Haldane in which he puts forward an analogy between the views of the fourth–fifth century monk Pelagius on spiritual progress on the one hand and Phillips' conception of Christian belief more generally on the other:

> Contrary to Christian orthodoxy [Pelagius] maintained that man has the ability to advance spiritually without divine grace, since he denied the traditional economy of sin and its effects. One way of putting the point is that Pelagius introduced a new spiritual system of motive, action and effect independent of that of justification through grace. Christ remains in the picture but as a model of human goodness to which we might seek to attain, however imperfectly. I hear echoes of this in the Phillipsian rendition of religious practice, maintaining the autonomy of that form of life *apart from metaphysical objects and causes*: religion *without a transcendent reality* being a transposition into a new key of the old heresy of goodness without transcendent grace.
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> (Haldane 2008, p. 259; my emphasis)

Here we see Haldane accusing Phillips of portraying religious practice as a 'form of life' that is autonomous in the sense that it functions without 'metaphysical objects and causes' and 'without a transcendent reality'. The accusation is, as it stands, ambiguous. One thing that the passage *could* be claiming is that, although Phillips does not deny the existence of metaphysical objects and causes or a transcendent reality, he does deny that religious practice needs to make reference to these things in order to function perfectly well in human life. It is far more likely, however, that what Haldane is claiming is that Phillips does indeed deny that our religious practices need metaphysical objects and causes or a transcendent reality *and* that Phillips is denying the existence of these things. What makes this interpretation of Haldane's point more likely is that it is made against the background of a conception of Phillips' position that I mentioned earlier, namely a conception of it as amounting to a kind of naturalism.

I think there is something seriously wrong with this assessment of Phillips' position, and what is chiefly wrong with it seems to derive from a misunderstanding of what a Wittgensteinian is rejecting when he or she claims to reject metaphysics. I will now elaborate this point.

4. Rejecting metaphysics

What Haldane seems to think is going on when Phillips rejects metaphysics is that Phillips is denying the existence or reality of certain kinds of objects or causes; and clearly Haldane takes these objects or causes to include paradigmatic items of Christian belief, such as God and the Resurrection. This is why he regards Phillips' position as a form of naturalism. But if we look at what Phillips himself says, and also at what Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations*, we see that there is another way of understanding the rejection of

metaphysics. As is well known—but perhaps not so well understood—Wittgenstein distinguishes his own approach from that of other philosophers in the following way:

> When philosophers use a word—"knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", "name"—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?—
> What *we* do is bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.
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> (*PI*, §116)

Here it should be obvious that Wittgenstein is not making a claim about what exists and what does not exist. He is not, for example, denying the existence of things that we might call metaphysical objects and causes. Rather, he is advocating a method of investigating language, a method that involves scrutinizing the everyday use of the words one is interested in.

To better understand what the method is that Wittgenstein is rejecting—and which he has just characterized in terms of trying 'to grasp the *essence* of the thing'—we must read further. In the immediately following paragraph, Wittgenstein writes:

> You say to me: "You understand this expression, don't you? Well then—I am using it in the sense you are familiar with."—As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application. (§117)

So what Wittgenstein is rejecting is the method of doing philosophy that involves assuming that words, and especially certain philosophically salient words such as the ones Wittgenstein mentions in §116, have their meanings essentially, prior to any particular context of use. In other words, he is rejecting precisely the assumption that the likes of Haldane and Schroeder seem to be making when they imply that one either does or does not believe that God exists, and if one believes that God exists, then one has 'a belief in religious metaphysics' (Schroeder) or one believes in 'metaphysical objects and causes' or 'a transcendent reality' (Haldane). Wittgenstein's point—and the point that Phillips frequently emphasizes—is that it is not enough to invoke the words on their own: we must also look to the roles they play in language; and in the case of some particular domain of language such as religious discourse, we must compare and contrast how the words in question operate in that domain with how they operate in other domains.

Of the many passages from Phillips' works that would be pertinent to the present discussion, I will here select two that I think give especially poignant expression to the

methodological issue that is at stake, although not necessarily in entirely felicitous ways. In an essay published posthumously in 2007, Phillips considers the objection that his elucidations of the belief in God seem to diminish or dispense with the notion of God's transcendence. Against this objection he writes:

> My conclusions, so far from dethroning God, ask us to look to religious contexts to see what belief in a transcendent God comes to. In other words, one cannot go from conclusions about the demise of metaphysical transcendence to conclusions about the demise of religious transcendence. (Phillips 2007, p. 27)

Here the inclusion of the expression 'metaphysical transcendence' is almost bound to cause trouble; for, by rejecting this sort of transcendence, Phillips will be taken by many of his critics to be denying that God is a metaphysical being, and hence further to be denying that God has any independent or transcendent reality.

But, of course, the point that Phillips is making is that we must not simply assume that we know what 'religious transcendence'—the 'transcendence of God'—means in advance of any grammatical inquiry. When he announces the 'demise of metaphysical transcendence', I take Phillips to be announcing, albeit far too optimistically, the demise of the metaphysical method that Wittgenstein decries when he distinguishes his own method from that which tacitly supposes the sense of a word to be like an atmosphere or halo that surrounds it.[8]

The other pertinent passage from Phillips that I want to cite here is that in which, with no small degree of frustration, he concedes to his opponents that they can go ahead and speak about the objects of religious belief, such as God, in the ways that they characteristically do, but they should not suppose that the words taken in isolation reveal to us their meanings. '[B]y all means', writes Phillips,

> 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 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. (Phillips 1995, p. 138; Phillips' emphasis)

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[8] For Phillips' stress on the need for a grammatical method of inquiry, see, e.g., his remarks on God's 'independent reality': 'There is a conception of an independent reality in religion. Yet, to see what this conception of an independent reality amounts to, we must pay attention to the grammar of the religious concepts involved' (Phillips 1993b, p. 25).

The expression 'how it differs, *in obvious ways*' is perhaps unfortunate here. I take Phillips' point not to be that, as soon as we look at the use of certain terms within religious contexts, it becomes obvious how they are being used; if this were the case then the grammatical task of philosophical investigation would be easy. Rather, I take his point to be that, when we look carefully at the use of these terms, it becomes obvious that their use in religious contexts is not identical to their use in other contexts. This discernment of difference on our part is a necessary condition for undertaking any rigorous grammatical inquiry, but it does not imply that what the grammatical inquiry seeks to disclose is already obvious (yet neither does it imply that the object of the inquiry is hidden from view).

The main point to be emphasized is that, from the Wittgensteinian perspective, the grammatical inquiry cannot be avoided entirely, for this is *the* method for investigating the sense that expressions have. What Haldane and others seem to fear is that by turning towards language in order to see what the reality of God consists in, the Wittgensteinian is turning away from God and denying that God has any reality *apart from* language. But what the Wittgensteinian is claiming is simply that we must look to language in order to see the *sense* of terms such as 'God's reality'. Many philosophers, as a consequence of failing to listen carefully to this methodological claim, hear only a dogmatic denial of God's reality.

5. Summary of misconceptions exhibited by Schroeder and Haldane

I think we are now in a position to draw this paper to a close by summarizing the assumptions, or misconceptions, that seem to underlie the sorts of criticisms brought forward of Wittgenstein by Schroeder and of Phillips by Haldane. Some of these assumptions are shared by Schroeder and Haldane whereas others are not. In any event, although I have focused only on these two critics here, I take it to be highly probable that their assumptions are typical of ones which extend widely across the philosophy of religion, and which have an affinity with assumptions in other areas of philosophy as well.

Firstly, Schroeder, as we have seen, treats religious beliefs as though they were hypotheses which can be probable or improbable. Although this treatment is not unusual among philosophers of religion, Schroeder is certainly unusual—and thoroughly mistaken—in attributing it to Wittgenstein. Haldane does not make this mistake.

Secondly, Schroeder attributes to Wittgenstein the view that religious beliefs are not irrational or unreasonable. We have noted that this is, at most, a half-truth, and hence is misleading, since Wittgenstein's real view is better expressed by saying that religious beliefs are neither reasonable nor unreasonable, at least in the sense that they are not typically formed on the basis of rational evidence. For Wittgenstein, it seems, reasonability is just not the right sort of criterion to apply to religious beliefs. Again, Haldane does not share this misleading interpretation with Schroeder.

A third misconception stems from the view that really believing in God involves believing that God exists, and to believe that God exists is to believe in something metaphysical, or transcendent, or independent. Schroeder maintains that Wittgenstein accepts this view. Both Haldane and Schroeder hold that Phillips denies it. But what is common to Haldane and Schroeder is the assumption that it is somehow evident what it means to believe in something metaphysical prior to any grammatical inquiry, or that merely characterizing the belief as directed towards a metaphysical entity somehow informs us about the nature of the belief.

A fourth misconception—and perhaps the main one that I have tried to bring out in this paper—concerns the sense in which a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy involves a rejection of metaphysics. When we examine pertinent remarks by Wittgenstein, and also by Phillips, we see that Wittgenstein and Phillips concur in their rejection of the view that words or concepts, whether religious or not, have their meanings essentially and hence carry them around from one context to another. This latter, essentialist conception of meaning overlooks the need for careful consideration of the particular grammatical context, or language game, in which a term or expression occurs in order to see what the term or expression means. It is precisely this nonchalant inattention to the need for grammatical investigation that Wittgenstein and Phillips associate with a philosophical method that they call *metaphysics*, and which they want to reject.

In their respective discussions of Wittgenstein and Phillips, neither Schroeder nor Haldane seems to fully grasp this latter point, and hence they both imply that a rejection of metaphysics consists in the denial of the existence of certain types of entities which we might, following Haldane, call 'metaphysical objects and causes'. Curiously and unusually, Schroeder suggests that Wittgenstein does *not* reject metaphysics in this latter sense. Although this suggestion is, in a sense, correct, the way in which Schroeder makes it ends up being exegetically unhelpful for two reasons: firstly because Schroeder implies that, for

14

Wittgenstein, a belief in God (for example) is a belief in something metaphysical but doesn't say anything useful about what believing in something metaphysical might amount to; and secondly because, by failing to attend to the sense in which Wittgenstein *did* reject metaphysics, Schroeder is liable to leave many readers confused about what Wittgenstein thought of metaphysics or whether he rejected anything that could be called metaphysics at all. Haldane is similarly inattentive to the sense in which metaphysics is being rejected by Phillips, and hence misinterprets Phillips to be denying the existence of the objects of religious beliefs such as a belief in God or in the Resurrection of Christ. It is this misinterpretation that leads Haldane to characterize Phillips' position as a form of naturalism.

I thus conclude that Schroeder has not shown there to be a tension in Wittgenstein's remarks on religion, and Haldane has not shown Phillips to be a disguised naturalist. There may—indeed there almost certainly do—remain features of Wittgenstein's and Phillips' respective views on religious beliefs that require further investigation and elucidation, and perhaps criticism, but we should be especially careful not to carry with us into those investigations misguided presuppositions about what a Wittgensteinian rejection of metaphysics amounts to.

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