

WILLIAM JAMES
AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN:
A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO
SPIRITUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

First of all I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for accepting a philosopher as a speaker.¹ I am very glad to be here, among a majority of therapists, because members of this profession have something to rely on which philosophers normally lack. This is the experience of accompanying real people when they take real steps towards a better life, while philosophers in most cases restrict their activities to speculations about what the good life could be. So it is the experiential side stressed in the title of this conference that I hope to learn something more about on this occasion.

But of course I also hope to give something. Firstly, my aim is to contribute to a clarification of the concept of spirituality. And secondly I will try to defend what is designated by this term against charges of irrationality and esotericism. My main inspiration comes, as far as the phenomenology is concerned, from William James, but I will interpret his descriptions not in the way he himself does, but with the help of ideas developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

I think it is the clarification of concepts in which the genuine work of philosophers consists. And when I take a closer look at the title of this conference I have the impression that it *doessignal* a need for clarification. It carefully speaks of a 'spiritual dimension' of psychotherapy. It thereby circumvents the noun 'spirit' and thus avoids a reference to objects. This might be felt to be necessary in order not to invite the association with 'spiritualism', i.e. the belief in ghosts, which seems to lurk in the background.

When I was reading some material in the preparation of my talk, I found a paper in which Harry Van Belle (Van Belle, 1990: 47) expressed his unhappiness with Carl Rogers' 'move toward mysticism'. And in a more recent paper about 'Therapeutic Presence' Shari Geller and Leslie Greenberg (Geller & Greenberg, 2003: 79) quote a therapist who expresses some uneasiness about his or her use of esoteric language. I hope that I will be able to dispel some of the uneasiness and fear connected with the charges of esotericism.

But I think that there indeed is a danger of going astray here. Given a broad

1. An earlier and much shorter version of this paper has been published as Schneider (2003). Once more I would like to thank my friend John Granrose for checking my English.

enough concept of rationality, I suppose we all want to avoid a sacrifice of our intellects on the altar of an esoteric creed that would have to be rejected when examined by the court of reason. But what is a broad enough concept of rationality? And what is a rational goal of psychotherapy to be formulated inside the boundaries of a broad enough field of reason? Sigmund Freud's double specification that, as an effect of his cure, the patient should regain her ability to work and her ability to love, seems to be too modest, not only for person-centred therapy, as I understand it, but also for that part of the *philosophical* tradition that has for long been concerned with the 'highest good', not to speak of the ambitions of our religious traditions. Sanity seems to lie on a road that many see as leading on to some kind of 'salvation', some 'spiritual' well-being that it is hard to be clear about. So opinions differ over how we could and should describe it without becoming esoteric or mystical (in the negative understanding of these terms which reduces them to synonyms for 'irrational' and 'unclear'). So my aim in this paper is to present a proposal as to how a certain understanding of the 'spiritual dimension' of life can be defended against charges of irrationality.

As I have indicated, my proposal will consist of two steps. The first is a sketch of what I take to be the main points we can learn from William James' famous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1982). Arguing from the stronger to the weaker, I want to say that if we can accept as rationally accessible what James describes as religious experience (and I think we can), then we should have no difficulty with what is called the 'spiritual dimension', for this latter way of speaking will probably involve weaker claims than James'. So in my first step I want to take the phenomena described by James as circumscribing the 'spiritual dimension' of human life. Accordingly, when (following James) I will speak of religion, I will use this term in a very broad sense, including, for example, Buddhism as a non-theistic religion. I have the impression that it is the broader, more inclusive sense of the word 'spirituality' that makes some people prefer it to the terms 'religious' and 'religion'. A second reason why James fits well into the frame of this conference is that methodologically one can well say that his approach is (in its descriptive or phenomenological part) an 'experiential' one.

I will part company with James, however, when it comes to the metaphysical conclusions he is drawing. James thinks that, given the phenomena he has described so carefully, we are rationally justified in entertaining the hypothesis that there exists a transcendent being that causally affects happenings in our world. This is the point at which critics like Van Belle, Geller and Greenberg would (I suppose) see mysticism and esotericism at work. They hesitate to take the step from certain kinds of experience to existence claims about transcendent beings. For many people such beings are too much like ghosts and spirits, so they fear to end up in spiritualism after all. Accordingly, I will try to develop the idea of a 'spiritual dimension' of our lives in such a way that such reference is clearly excluded.

So my main point in this paper is to show that metaphysical conclusions of the type tentatively proposed by James are unnecessary if we have a good philosophy of language. And furthermore I also think that it is against the spirit of religion to couch what it has to say in the terms of hypotheses, however well-meaning William James

might have been when he did so. So this move of his is for my understanding both inadequate to religion and unnecessary to safeguard its meaning. One way of expressing the first point would be to say that James here missed the difference between an 'experiential' and an 'empirical' approach. Surely spirituality should be related to our experience as human beings and should in this sense be approached 'experientially'. But from this it does not follow that it can or should be treated with the methods developed in the empirical sciences. Only in the very loose sense of 'turning to the real world' can empirical or scientific methods be applied to the subject matter of spirituality, it seems to me. One reason why this point is not appreciated more clearly, I think, is the fact that university psychology has a strong tendency towards desiring for itself the status of a science like physics; as a result, psychologists are often very uncertain about their methods (see Bruner, 1990).

Consequently, in the second part of my paper I will offer an alternative philosophical interpretation of William James' phenomenological material, one that avoids his metaphysical conclusions as well as his understanding of the spiritual as something that is accessible for scientific hypotheses. This alternative is inspired by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, on the one hand by his thoughts about the subject, and on the other by his method, namely a reflection on the language involved in the area under discussion. More specifically: I claim that if religious language is able to articulate an experience that has a deep and decisive significance for the person concerned, this very fact, this success in articulating and guiding the experiences of the persons concerned, is sufficient to secure its meaning. An additional reference claim for the expressions involved is superfluous. But if this is correct, an hypothesis about causal influences producing these experiences is unnecessary. The *experiential* activity of articulating, sharing, and guiding experience has to be differentiated from the *scientific* activity of reporting an empirical observation that can be repeated at will in the laboratories around the world, independently of differences in forms of (spiritual) life. Both uses of language have to do with experience, of course, but in very different ways. And only the latter has to involve a reference to objects whether they are literally observed, like the moon, or only postulated as theoretical entities with a place in a scientific model, like some subatomic particles or entities in outer space.²

So my way of avoiding James' belief in a transcendent world that is causally effective in our world rests on observations in the philosophy of language. Certain expressions of language that according to a common understanding refer to peculiar (in our case: transcendent) objects will in my interpretation be deprived of such a referential function. What appeared to be a reference to a peculiar kind of object will instead be understood as a peculiar kind of using our language, a usage that only on the grammatical surface appears to be a kind of reference. Actually, so the claim goes, there is as little 'reference to something' as we see in the use of the word 'it' in the phrase 'it is raining'; there is no 'something' that the 'it' of this phrase refers to.

2. The difference between experiential and theoretical entities in psychology is worked out more fully in Schneider, 2000.

By this methodological turn to the philosophy of language, the *explanandum*, i.e. that which has to be explained, is shifted from the allegedly designated transcendent object to the workings of language, understood as an integral part of the forms of practical human life. With Wittgenstein's help I think we can see that this peculiar kind of depriving the act of reference of its object does not make the linguistic articulations empty and irrelevant. The non-existence of the object as object does not transform the corresponding utterances into purely ritualistic pieces of language that are isolated from the rest of life. Therefore it is not 'only language' that we are left with when we give up transcendent entities, as it seems to be in some conceptions of language developed by proponents of postmodernism. As I understand it, the interpretation proposed here can preserve the importance that is traditionally given to the forms of speech under discussion.

I would like to conclude my introduction by mentioning two facts about my background: as is visible in what I have said so far, my main fields of work are epistemology and the philosophy of language. But I would not dare to speak about the topics raised here if I were without any experience in the field of spirituality. So I might mention that I have been a practitioner of Zen meditation for many years now, and this experience has certainly influenced my reading of William James as well as Wittgenstein.

WILLIAM JAMES AND 'THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE'

THE PROBLEM AS SET BY JAMES AND HIS METHOD OF TREATING IT

James' book grew out of his Gifford Lectures and these stand under the general title of a 'Natural Religion'. In order to see the specific character of his approach it will be helpful to set it against the one chosen by David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume, 1980). Hume's project was to inquire into the chances of a 'reasonable' religion in the sense that, firstly, all reference to special religious sources of knowledge (revelations like holy scriptures) should be excluded and secondly (and here he differs from the first steps taken by James) the appeal to reason is understood by him as an appeal to the methods of the *sciences* that began to flourish in his days.

Hume takes as his starting point certain articles of faith (notably: that a benevolent god has created the world) and then proceeds to inquire whether they can be validated by a kind of experience that would be accepted by the sciences. The result is very meagre indeed. Hume sums it up in the words: '... the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence' (Hume, 1980: 227).

James, on the other hand, does not begin with a religious statement and then ask for its empirical justification, but he proceeds in the opposite order. He starts with a large and generously chosen number of reports about candidates for religious experiences; he brings them into some order and tries to give a general characterization of their main traits. Only then does he proceed to investigate whether it is possible to develop on this basis a convincing concept of the realm of the 'religious'. So for James the

question is: Can it be made plausible that in human life as we know it (i.e. in our life, as we experience it) there are episodes that might be felt and understood as forming the occasions around which the realm of the religious may crystallize and develop?

It is noteworthy that James himself once had an experience that he felt was religious (James, 1982: 160–1). It was on an occasion when he suddenly remembered being confronted in an asylum with an epileptic patient, an ‘entirely idiotic’ youth, ‘looking absolutely non-human’, when a sudden awareness struck him, that the self-assured attitude he had developed as a trait of character was without foundation. He was different from this poor creature, no question, but it was not by his own merit that he was, and it occurred to him that he could in no way make sure that this difference would remain stable, would be guaranteed. A panic fear took possession of him, and later he had the impression that only his spontaneous prayers had saved him from becoming insane. This experience was of major importance for his whole life; so when he gave his lectures, James felt that he knew what he was talking about.

His method is the following: from a huge bulk of reports of life-changing events of different kinds from very different people he derives general characteristics of a subgroup of his material that might meaningfully be described as religious in a sense that is not tied to a particular religion. As was customary in his time and for the members of his social background, he often uses Christian terminology or words that were commonly used in Christian contexts, like ‘god’, ‘godhead’, ‘godlike object’, ‘the cosmos’, ‘the universe’, ‘the invisible order’. But he makes it clear that he means to refrain from dogmatic claims and from an exclusively Christian terminology. This is why I think we can at many places substitute the expression ‘spiritual’ where James uses the word ‘religious’. Accordingly, the ‘spiritual dimension’ of life would be the realm that traditionally has been expressed in words at home in one of the existing religions.

It is James’ aim to interpret the reports of his witnesses as far as possible in a ‘natural’ way. This term is understood by him to refer to common sense, not to the methods of the natural sciences. So James’ understanding of these reports rests on his (and his readers’) own experience. This ensures that religious experience is not understood as something that occurred only in the old days. He makes it plausible that the kind of experience he is looking for does indeed exist and that in principle such an experience can happen to anybody. It is not restricted to ‘special’ people and in this sense it is nothing esoteric. It normally has a decisively positive effect on the lives of the persons who do have such an experience.

In a second step, James tries to state the core characteristics of the specifically religious or spiritual variant of these experiences and thereby makes a proposal for differentiating them from related forms and optional but not universal phenomena that might accompany them. This then is his phenomenological basis, the richness and liveliness of which, together with his systematization, constitute the main value of his book for me. In a third step, finally, James steps back from his material and tries to formulate a philosophical interpretation of it.

According to his original plans, this last part of the project was meant to have the same quantity, to cover roughly the same amount of pages, as his systematized collection

of reports. In its actual form, however, it is much shorter. What he has to say in it, he calls his personal 'over-belief'. He makes it clear that concerning this part of his investigations it is not his intention to convince his audience. So he explicitly allows different 'over-beliefs' to be formed by different readers on the basis of the same material. The phenomenological facts are indubitable for him, but on their basis a reader of James might, with his explicit encouragement, form his or her own 'over-belief'. This invites the question, whether there are systematic reasons for the rather slim character of this part of the book, and more specifically, whether and in what sense it is possible to do without any 'over-belief' as far as it involves a belief in certain causally effective entities. My own interpretation tries to answer this last question in the affirmative.

THE CONCEPT OF 'RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE'

The most important traits of James' concept of a religious experience are the following: Firstly: The experience is one that relates to the attitude the person undergoing it has to the whole of his or her life and the surrounding world. What is meant here is a whole as experienced (an 'experiential whole', one could say), not a spatial or temporal whole as a collection of entities in the sense at home in a scientific cosmology.

Secondly: This whole includes suffering and evil, like loss, pain, sickness, and death. A sober comprehension and a practically effective integration of these aspects of life into the attitude to the whole is the core of religious experience. The experience is always a positive turn in the way in which the aspect of suffering is perceived and accepted. Using a modern philosophical distinction one might say that the result of a religious experience in James' sense is an improvement in the province of *knowing how* (to live) rather than an addition to the stock of items of *knowing that* or of information.

Thirdly: A closer look at this turn reveals three steps. Its starting point is the experience of a total defencelessness against suffering and evil, often accompanied with a feeling that everything in one's life has lost its meaning. When this helplessness is admitted, the person concerned (in the second step) give up the impulse to be in complete control of his or her life. And then the third step is a (subjectively surprising) experience: this giving up or 'letting go' does not result in catastrophe, in a kind of 'drowning'. On the contrary, the person concerned will experience being a part of an 'invisible order' and she will experience this not as a (moral) yoke, but as the 'highest good'.

For appreciating the religious (or spiritual) character of the phenomenon it is important that it is the giving up of one's own impulses that brings rescue, and that this is experienced as the feeling that there are processes at work which are outside one's own little conscious self. So the encounter is not the result of one's own practical activity or one's own thinking, rather it is something that 'befalls' one, which comes to the person as a surprise.

Such an encounter has a deep significance for the person concerned. It is experienced like a 'second birth', as a step from the unreal (naïve, deceitful) to the real life. In its highest form, its result is 'a superior denomination of happiness, and a steadfastness of

soul with which no other can compare' (James, 1982: 369).

Characteristically this kind of state is constituted by a loss of fear and solicitude and a belief that one's situation is agreeable at a deep level, regardless of what will happen.³ After this 'second birth' the world is seen in a positive light without having undergone any objective change. The suffering aspects of life are neither denied, nor is the positive attitude a result of the fantasy that higher powers will by their special intervention keep unpleasant or painful events from the particular person concerned.

And as a fourth trait of the concept of religious experience James mentions that in most cases the described change lasts; it brings a lasting mental equilibrium.

I would like to quote one articulation of such an experience from James' book. The linguistic expressions we find here often have the form 'it was as if', followed by the description of an episode, of an element in a story, that speaker and hearer are supposed to be able to share, i.e. that the hearer is supposed to understand. My example will show how freely and individually chosen phenomenological language can go hand in hand with established religious forms of expression. We read:

Suddenly there seemed to be a something sweeping into me and inflating my entire being—such a sensation as I had never experienced before. When this experience came, I seemed to be conducted around a large, capacious, well-lighted room. As I walked with my invisible conductor and looked around, a clear thought was coined in my mind, 'They are not here, they are gone'. As soon as the thought was definitely formed in my mind, though no word was spoken, the Holy Spirit impressed me that I was surveying my own soul. Then for the first time in all my life, did I know that I was cleansed from all sin, and filled with the fullness of god. (James, 1982: 253)⁴

We have to keep in mind that for James it is the change in attitude, and this means the practical ability of the person concerned to come to terms with her life, that is at the centre of religious experience and that he does not call into question. This is what makes such religious experiences important. Only in a second step James turns to what he calls his 'over-belief', i.e. to what he thinks he can conclude from such experiences as a philosophically minded psychologist.

JAMES' 'OVER-BELIEF'

I think that one of the advantages of James' method is that it invites and enables us to regard the traditional religious articulations primarily as expressions of the just discussed very special life-enhancing quality of this kind of experience. Theoretical aspects of

3. Here we are reminded of Wittgenstein's reference to the formulation 'nothing bad can happen to me'; see Malcolm 1984: 58.

4. From a Buddhist perspective one might want to discuss whether the experience described as 'they are gone' (the sins, the ego-worries) bears a family resemblance to 'emptiness'.

traditional religious articulations (for example, cosmological claims) can then be interpreted as results of secondary interests, for example the interest in explaining phenomena in the world of nature, like the coming of day and night. Accordingly it would be in the religious experience as described by James where one would look for the key for understanding religious or spiritual articulations, not theoretical claims about matters like the origin of the universe. It is interesting to note that the older traditions of Buddhism explicitly attempt to dissuade us from trying to find out the answers to cosmological or metaphysical questions, because they are largely irrelevant for the character of our lives.

When I now turn to the philosophical interpretation of these experiences, I see two possibilities. The first, more traditional approach (which I will call the 'referential') presupposes that the referring expressions of religious language (for example the words referring to divine beings like the Holy Spirit)—that such words have independent meanings of the same kind as the meanings of other referring expressions, for example for persons, rivers or cities. The meaning of a referring expression is accordingly taken to be the object denoted. So in the religious case, the meanings of religious expressions are taken to be known to the members of the linguistic community, for example from stories they have heard or read. Loosely speaking, this view can be expressed as: in principle we know what kind of things gods and spirits are, today we are just not sure whether they exist. So for this approach (as for Hume) the next questions to be posed would be: do the relevant expressions indeed have a reference and if so, how would one go about finding out whether the pertinent sentences about the objects referred to are true or false?

As far as his 'over-belief' is concerned, James sticks to this traditional referential understanding. But since his book leaves no doubt that the experiences he has collected and systematized are much more important to him than their philosophical interpretation, the reader in our days may at this point take a different route without hurting the spirit of James' project, as we shall see presently. Knowing the materialist and reductionist tendencies in the sciences of his day, however, James seems to fear that his colleagues would want to deny the reality and importance of the experiences he had described if he did not insist on extra-psychological entities referred to by the terms used to express them. Otherwise, he seems to have feared, they would be placed under the same category as dreams experienced in a fever. This he certainly wants to avoid; he wants to secure the special importance he himself had felt of his own experience. And he seems to think that the only possible remedy against a devaluation is the claim that there exist transcendent entities which either themselves are the objects of the pertinent experience (they are that what is experienced), or are what is causally responsible for the occurring of the experience.

This leads him to a rather traditional picture that differentiates between three worlds, a world of material objects, a world of subjective psychological objects like impressions and feelings, and a transcendent or spiritual world of objects which are neither material nor psychological. To say of something that it exists by itself, that it is independent of us (especially, that it is more 'real' than the 'merely psychological' objects

of our dreams and fictions), means to say (according to this position) that it belongs to a world outside our sensory and mental apparatus, and this means either to the material or to a transcendent, spiritual world. Admittedly, both of these worlds we are able to know only via our sensations, feelings, thoughts, etc. But what is only in the world of felt experience and does not point to something 'exterior' (i.e. to a member of either one of the other two worlds, the material or the transcendent) is taken to be 'only psychological', in a devaluating sense. Again I would like to remark that here it would have helped to make a difference between the experiential (the sphere of the full ordinary life, with real experience, not only hallucinations) and the empirical as the sphere of the science laboratory, and this means of the material world. Without this distinction James is lost between either denying the importance of his findings or of trying to save them by binding them to independently existing transcendent entities.

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION INSPIRED BY LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

WITTGENSTEIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

Wittgenstein's philosophy of language opens an alternative view which I will call the 'criterial'. This word is meant as a contrast to the word 'referential' in the view just discussed.

First of all, Wittgenstein has an understanding of what religion is according to which it would constitute a grave mistake to think that it puts forward hypotheses about the existence and the nature of 'transcendent objects' like gods. For Wittgenstein (and here his position differs sharply from views such as put forward by David Hume) religions are not theories. Especially, they should not be seen as early and immature attempts of mankind to practice science. Such a view would imply that religious objects would be only a little different from but still of the same kind as other objects like trees and rocks. Instead, the very status of 'being an object' has to be called into question when we look at what religious expressions are taken to mean or to 'refer to'.⁵

I think that Wittgenstein here is in harmony with the pragmatic spirit of the phenomenological part of James' book. His view is that an understanding of religion that treats it as a kind of theory would not do justice to the role of religious ideas in the lives of the people having these ideas. In the relevant case, a believer would have (I quote Wittgenstein) 'what you might call an unshakable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life' (Wittgenstein, 1966: 54). Unshakable beliefs, so we think after Karl Popper, are impossible in science. It follows that if such beliefs are typical for the realm of the

5. For a more comprehensive treatment of Wittgenstein's understanding of religion see Canfield, 2004. A considerably extended version is Canfield, 2005.

spiritual, this realm cannot be understood as having to do with hypotheses in a sense we know from the sciences.

THE LANGUAGE GAME APPROACH AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE PROBLEM OF EXISTENCE

The positive side of Wittgenstein's criterial view is an application of his language game approach to problems of (purported) reference. The language game view can be characterized as the claim that the general picture according to which words stand for things and these things are what gives meaning to them is wrong. This picture has to be substituted by the view that the meaning of a word is its use, that is to say, it is the way in which the word functions in practical and social activities. It is true that the use of words in many cases does involve things, like when we speak of flowers and cars, but often it does not, and this absence of corresponding things does not have the consequence that the words concerned have no meanings. Wittgenstein seems to have first discovered this for the logical connectives, i.e. for words like 'and' or 'if'. They clearly do not stand for anything but they are far from meaningless. There are clear criteria for their correct application, but there is no reference.

Much of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language of his later period is captured in the following quotation. On occasion of a discussion of the mind-body problem and traditional paradoxes associated with it he writes:

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please. (Wittgenstein 1953: § 304)

In our context we can add to this list: thoughts about God or other transcendent powers or persons. His claim here is that we do not have one semantic relation, a word standing for an object, and an admitted plurality of kinds of objects, but that there are many semantic relations which are of radically different kinds. Gods are not peculiar objects, but the language games involving 'talk of god' are peculiar language games, differing deeply from language games concerned with trees and cars.

What this means for the question of reference can be easily understood from a comment Wittgenstein makes in the field of mathematics. It is especially apt for our context, because mathematicians are not normally taken to be likely subjects for charges of mysticism or esoteric language.

The problem is whether numerals like 'one', 'two', 'three', ... can be meaningful only if there exist objects to which such expressions refer, objects that we normally call 'abstract' and refer to as numbers: the number two, for example, to which we can refer using signs in Arabic or Latin or in any other suitable script. The German logician Gottlob Frege (Frege, 1960) was convinced that when we pose this question ('what kinds of entities are the numbers?') we are confronted with the following alternative

(since Frege excludes psychologism, the claim that numbers are psychological entities, as obviously wrong, he is left with only two possibilities); either (this is the first horn of the dilemma) we take the material sign tokens (i.e. the traces of ink on a piece of paper or the chalk left on a blackboard) to be the numbers the mathematician is talking about. If for example he claims that two is even he is referring to a material sign token '2' that he has produced on this occasion. Or (and this is the second horn) we postulate the existence of an extra realm of transcendent entities, as Plato had done with his realm of ideal forms. Immaterial objects like 'propositions' and also numbers would be taken to be located in this 'third realm', which has to be postulated as existing beside the material and the psychological realms.

Now the first horn of this dilemma is obviously absurd in the mathematical case. Ink and chalk do not have mathematical properties like being even or giving four when multiplied by itself. Consequently Frege decided for the second option, the existence of a transcendent world of numbers. This choice is quite in line with that of William James when he opted for transcendent entities in order to guarantee the meaningfulness of religious language and the importance of the involved kinds of experience. He could not think of securing their significance without postulating that there must be 'something' that the words used in articulating these experiences refer to.

It is in this situation that Wittgenstein sees a third possibility. He comments on Frege's view of the dilemma about numbers with the following words:

For Frege the alternative was this: either we deal with strokes of ink on paper or these strokes of ink are signs *of something* and their meaning is what they go proxy for. The game of chess itself shows that these alternatives are wrongly conceived—although it is not the wooden chessmen we are dealing with, these figures do not go proxy for anything; they have no meaning in Frege's sense. (Wittgenstein, 1979: § 105)

(Meaning in Frege's sense is reference; the object referred to.) And then Wittgenstein adds his own claim: 'There is a third possibility, the signs can be used the way they are in the game' (ibid.). And this means: they have a significance, a role, an importance, although there is no object (in the usual sense of 'object') referred to.

Transferred to the realm of religion, the first horn of the dilemma corresponds to the claim that what religious articulations are talking about is something 'merely' psychological or (from a different perspective) even neurological, something happening 'inside' an individual person in a metaphorical or material sense that is relevant only to the person concerned and to nobody else. This would be a radical devaluation as in the mathematical case would be the proposition that numbers are nothing but ink and chalk (or, even more absurd for Frege, that numbers are psychological entities). In this view, only the mental (or neural) states of experiencing are real, there is no way in which the experience points to something other than its individual occurrence. So the content of religion would consist in 'mental episodes' (for example in 'nice feelings') and would therefore be of the same kind as 'mere fantasies'. It is clear that William

James, with all the understanding and empathy that shows in his phenomenological account and that is rooted in his own experience, could not opt for such a position. From his point of view it must look as absurd as the claim that the objects of our mathematical knowledge are traces of ink. It is for this reason, I suppose, that James (like Frege in the realm of mathematics) opted for the existence of a 'third', a transcendent world, beyond the material and the psychological.

Now in contradistinction to James and Frege, for Wittgenstein *both* horns of the dilemma are unacceptable for his understanding both of mathematics and of religion. His analogy to the game of chess is meant to open a third option for mathematics: numerals are meaningful, but not thanks to special 'third realm' objects of reference (and not because they denote psychological or neurological entities), but thanks to their role in our activities. It is with respect to this role (and not to problems of the existence of special entities) that we must in a particular case of utterance decide whether in the case at hand the sign token has a meaning or not. It has no meaning, for example, when it is an empty repetition or blind copying of a traditional piece of language. The meaning stems from the role of the word in our life (its 'experiential role'), not from a transcendent entity of which the word is the name and about which there could be empirical research of the type conducted in the sciences.

LESSONS FOR THE FIELD OF SPIRITUALITY

I think that this solution can be transferred to the field of spirituality. The occurrence and the life-changing importance of the experiences described by James suffice for giving a meaning to their articulations in religious language. Hypotheses about the existence of transcendent entities are unnecessary. That does not mean, however, that cases of empty copying, of meaningless babble, of mere traditional talk unconnected to important aspects of life are impossible. It is the context, the use of language in the particular situation that allows us to distinguish meaningful from empty speech; it is not the question of whether there is an entity referred to. There are independent criteria for this distinction that are not in need of special entities.

Here it is important to avoid a misunderstanding of what is called a 'pragmatic approach to language'. Sometimes Wittgenstein compares words with tools in order to say that they have a function in our lives. But this comparison does not mean that when one speaks of language games the words concerned must always be interpreted to have a technical function. Not all linguistic functions can appropriately be described as technical functions. In the case of religious experience, language works in the context of encounters, of what befalls a person, similar to the case of words like 'pain'. James and Wittgenstein agree that words get their meaning through their role in practical contexts or episodes, but these need not be activities, they include the more passive aspects of life.

It is also important to see that Wittgenstein's talk of 'language games' is not meant to suggest that language use is always playful. Accordingly, if we apply the concept of a language game to religion (which is, as we have been taught by James, concerned with a person's life as a whole, with all its suffering included), this does not mean not to take

religion seriously. So again, if one wants to secure a deep significance for religious language and wants to avoid the impression that it consists of 'playing games', one is not forced to postulate special 'objects of reference'. My impression is that many theologians would be ready to agree to this claim and would confirm that in their field 'reference' has always been a debated concept. The Christian God is no object or person like other objects and persons and 'talk about God' (*theo-logia*) has always been a problem that demanded extra considerations.

The situation can be compared to one mentioned by Wittgenstein on an occasion when he comments on the expression 'to describe the state of my mind'. He thinks of a case of silently beckoning to someone and then (for some reason or other) having occasion to explain this act retrospectively, for example with words like 'I did not want you to come, but him'. Wittgenstein writes: 'One can now say that the words "I wanted N. to come to me" describe the state of my mind at that time; and again one may *not* say so' (Wittgenstein 1953: § 662). So on the one hand it is legitimate to talk in the traditional way about a 'state of mind' as if it were (the state of) an object. Turning to religion, we can say that the Christian tradition (among others) has shown that it is possible to articulate the content of a religious experience in theistic terms, i.e. as if one would refer to a person. But when one thinks that God is a person like other persons (or, returning to Wittgenstein's example, that the mind is like a physical object which has states, like the lung when it is fully inflated or less so, or that the mind really or 'lastly' is identical with the brain), then, I think, the other half of Wittgenstein's comment has to be applied, namely '... one may *not* say so'. The reason is that these ways of expressing oneself invite and encourage illegitimate (i.e. meaningless) ways of carrying on. These can be even funny, as when someone would not only speak about the eyes of God that see everything, but would go on from there to speak about God's eyebrows (Wittgenstein, 1966: 71). Or such a move can result in what one could call 'esoteric language' in a derogative sense, meaning a language that purports to speak about hidden entities that are like material entities or objects, but are at the same time hidden from the eyes of science. What is claimed here is that, in the religious case, 'speaking about' means something different from the case of 'speaking about objects', whether these are common material things or entities imagined to be similar but (in a way left unclear) also not similar to them.

In a fashion parallel to the quoted comments about a person's 'states of mind' Wittgenstein treats pain. He insists that my toothache is not an object like my tooth. And then in his typical dialogical style he develops the following argument:

'But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?' Admit it? What greater difference could there be? 'And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a nothing.' Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either ... We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here. (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 304)

Similarly, returning to William James and the topic of religious experience, one could say: when we compare a life that is felt as empty and meaningless (like James' own life in his long period of crisis) to a life felt (despite the full acknowledgement of its suffering aspects) as enlightened and unified by the kind of experience he describes in his book, it is quite appropriate to exclaim as Wittgenstein did in the case of pain: 'What greater difference could there be!' But this does not force us to entertain an hypothesis about transcendent objects. This is so, I believe, because we can say with respect to religious language what Wittgenstein says about sensations like pain: what we are (grammatically) talking about '... is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either'. It is not a thing (not something), not an object. But still the language concerned has deep experiential relevance; it has a practical relation to our whole lives, to our knowing how to live. But meaning, as we have seen in the simple case of numbers, does not always demand objects and entities talked about in more than a merely grammatical sense.

If this point is overlooked, we easily get into empty quarrels that Wittgenstein describes in the following way: 'The one party attack the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being' (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 402). For my understanding quarrels about 'the existence of God' often have this character. Does He exist or not? Is the person who answers negatively arguing against a way of expression or against a substantial claim? It seems to me that the question to be treated first is: what would it mean to advance either claim? How do the relevant language games function? How would a difference show in our experience? Here we need the 'experiential' approach and nothing like experimental science could help us, as our glimpse at Hume's futile attempt was meant to show. We can find that our life as we know it indeed has a 'spiritual dimension'. Only after we have experienced this can we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different religious language games (Christian, Buddhist) to articulate this dimension. If we follow Wittgenstein at this point in that we are ready to accept a great variety of semantic relations, we can avoid unnecessary quarrels about 'designated objects'. For example we can avoid 'esoteric language' if by this expression we mean a purported quasi-scientific 'reference' to 'ineffable objects'. Instead we can use a language of experiential articulation for which the problem of 'reference to an object' does not arise. With this understanding in place we no longer postulate dubious entities and this means we leave esotericism and spiritualism behind. There are no ineffable ghostlike entities about which there is a secret teaching, reserved for special people.

The spiritual dimension of our lives is no secret but it is open to the experience of everybody. Of course, for a person unaware of such experiences it is difficult to understand what people who are familiar with them are talking about. In this completely harmless sense the language of religious experience is a language for 'insiders', as is the language of wine connoisseurs. In this sense it can be called 'esoteric'. But in our days we are in the lucky situation that in both cases nobody (or more carefully speaking: probably no one among the readers of this paper) is excluded from the relevant experiences.

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