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Wittgensteinian Fideism vs. Classical Theism

Abstract: *In this paper, we will present and discuss Wittgenstein's views on religious beliefs, in order to see if and to what extent they give a plausible account of religious belief and their epistemic status. In the first part of this work, we will present and discuss Wittgenstein's views on the subject, while in the rest of the paper we aim to show that Wittgenstein's treatment of religious belief might lead to a number of unpalatable conclusions.*

Keywords: *Wittgenstein, Religion, Fideism, Theism, Belief.*

Resumen: *En este artículo presentamos y discutimos las perspectivas de Wittgenstein sobre las creencias religiosas, para ver si, y en qué medida, aportan una explicación plausible de la creencia religiosa y su condición epistémica. En la primera parte, presentamos y discutimos las perspectivas de Wittgenstein sobre el tema, mientras que en el resto buscamos mostrar que el tratamiento de Wittgenstein sobre la creencia religiosa podría llevar a varias conclusiones desagradables.*

Palabras clave: *Wittgenstein, Religión, Fideísmo, Teísmo, Creencia.*

1. Wittgenstein on Religion; a Minimal Reading

In this section, we will present and briefly discuss Wittgenstein's main thesis on religious

beliefs. The first thesis that can be extracted from Wittgenstein's somewhat unsystematic remarks about God and religion goes as follows: "God does not reveal himself in the world [...] Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is" (1961, 6.432, 6.44).

There are at least two themes worth mentioning in this passage; the first is that Wittgenstein does not seem to exclude the existence of God; the second is that what he seems to exclude is that God, whatever being he might be, could reveal himself in the world. A second interesting claim about God in Wittgenstein's writings on the subject goes as follows:

What do I know about God and the purpose of life?

I know that this world exists. That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.

That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it . . .

The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.[. . .]

To pray is to think about the meaning of life. (1979, 72–3, 4 July 1916)

In this passage, Wittgenstein seems to elucidate his conception of God; *The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God.* That is to say, reading backwards, we can call God the meaning of life. God is an "umbrella term" to define both the meaning of life and the problematic, unclear aspects of reality.

Finally, let's consider the following claim:



To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.

To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.

(1979, 74, 8 July 1916)

According to Wittgenstein, then, the belief in God is not merely reducible to the belief in the existence of a Supreme Being; rather, he claims, to believe in God is to believe that the “facts of the world” have a meaning. In other words, to believe in God means to believe that both human life and human history have an objective meaning.

Accordingly, religions are first and foremost consequences of the particular meaning that different cultures attribute to human life and to human events. Religions are the cultural expression and manifestation of different answers to the same problematic; namely, the meaning of life.

Hence, religious statements cannot be, strictly speaking, true or false, as if they were empirical statements about facts. Therefore, any attempt at justifying or criticizing religious beliefs on the basis of evidence or reasons is, claims Wittgenstein, misguided in the first place. To understand this point further, consider this passage:

A proof of God’s existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that believers who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their ‘belief’ an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves could never have come to believe as a result of such proofs. (1980, 85)

If religious beliefs do not describe facts but at most express a worldview, then they cannot be strictly speaking true or false. Hence, the very idea of trying to “prove” the existence of a Supreme Being or some of the basic tenets of Classical Theism is a somewhat misguided attempt if not plain nonsense.

A worldview, claims Wittgenstein, cannot be proved or disproved; to the extent that, he claims, even if it was proved the historical falsity of religious beliefs, this will have little or no consequence on the life and the worldview of a believer:

Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. Here you have a narrative, don’t take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it ...Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this ... because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believingly (i.e. lovingly). That is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-as-true, not something else. (1980, 32)

2. Classical Theism and Facts

To sum up, Wittgenstein’s views about religion and religious beliefs can be summarized as follows:

1. God is first and foremost a linguistic abstraction to express what a particular religion-culture considers to be the Meaning of the world. Hence, he exists more as an umbrella term to *express a worldview* than as a personal being.
2. Religious beliefs are not beliefs about facts; hence, any attempt at proving or disproving religious beliefs, or even at arguing for their rationality or irrationality, is somewhat misguided.
3. Questions of truth and falsity are so irrelevant when it comes to religious beliefs that even if it would be possible to show that the

historical facts about a particular religion, i.e. Christianity, are strictly speaking false, this would have no impact on the believer, as religious beliefs express both a way of thinking about the meaning of life and a way of living.

We will now consider these points in turn, in order to see if and to what extent Wittgenstein's views on religious beliefs are tenable and also if they represent a plausible account of the epistemic status of religious beliefs.

Firstly, while it is true that religious beliefs do indeed provide a sort of framework by which a believer observes reality and lives, or tries to live, this does not necessarily exclude the fact that a religious believer is also committed to the belief in the existence of a Supernatural Being which, at least according to Classical Theism, is Benevolent, Omniscient, All-powerful, etc.

That is to say, religious beliefs cannot be merely reduced to a way of looking at human life and history; they also involve a *strong metaphysical commitment*, that can be thus evaluated, whether positively or negatively. Take for instance Plantinga's Ontological Argument (1965):

1. It's possible that a Maximally Great Being (MGB) exists.
2. If it is possible that a MGB being exists, then a MGB exists in some possible world.
3. If a MGB exists in some possible world, then it exists in all possible worlds.
4. If a MGB exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. If a MGB exists in the actual world, then a MGB exists.
6. Therefore, a MGB exists.

Now, consider another contemporary argument in support of the existence of God, offered by William Lane Craig (1979)

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

To see if and to what extent these and similar arguments do succeed in order to, if not prove,

at least argue for the rationality of religious beliefs is not a task we should set ourselves here. However, the main point we want to make is that these arguments, and the criticisms of these arguments, are not misguided but a legitimate philosophical task that can, if successful, show whether the metaphysical commitments held by religious believers are at least *prima facie* sound or not.

Also, has been pointed out among the others, by Kai Nielsen (1967), to exclude religious beliefs from any kind of epistemic evaluation would lead to an unbearable form of Fideism. That is to say, to state that religious beliefs are not in the market for epistemic evaluation of any sort, we would allow for any incoherent and or irrational belief, as long as they express a "religious worldview" of a community of believers.

Take the case of someone that believes, on the basis of the geological empirical evidence available, that the Earth is approximately 4.543 billion years old, and a proponent of Young Earth Creationism (YEC), namely the view based on a literalist reading of the Bible which holds that the universe, Earth, and all life on Earth were created by direct acts of God less than 10,000 years ago.

If the account of the structure of religious belief proposed by Wittgenstein is correct, then it is hard to see how these agents could resolve their dispute; not only from a practical, but also and more importantly from an *epistemological* point of view. This is so because following this account, it would be impossible to *rationaly* address, let alone solve, the dispute at issue, at least by using rational means such as evidence or reasons.

This is not to say that a proponent of the "Old Earth Theory" can not settle the dispute with his YEC opponent (or vice versa): this disagreement can practically be settled, but in a somewhat "epistemically unsatisfactory" way. Consider the following remarks of Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty* (1969; henceforth OC):

"Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic" (OC, 611).

"I said I would 'combat' the other man - but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how

far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives)” (OC, 612).

Now, is the view according to which the Earth is approximately 4.543 billion years old and YEC both equally plausible, as YEC “expresses a worldview” and as such is not open to epistemic evaluation? Is a proponent of YEC being epistemically rational, when he disregards the huge amount of empirical evidence against his deeply held, a-rational religious convictions? Can “persuasion”, which according to Wittgenstein is based on nothing more than “all sorts of slogans (OC 610) rather than evidence and reason, be the only way to settle the dispute between a proponent of YEC and OET? Hardly. However, following Wittgenstein’s account of religious beliefs, we might be led to these and similar implausible conclusions.

A second line of criticism that can be moved against Wittgenstein’s remarks of the epistemic status of religious belief can be stated as follows. Recall that according to Wittgenstein, historical facts are so irrelevant for a religious believer that even if the basic tenets of, say, Christianity, were proven false this will have little to no impact to the religious worldview.

It should be noted that this notion is completely at odds with how religious beliefs are formulated, at least in Classical Theism. Just consider the New Testament (henceforth NT); the life, ministry and death of Christ are narrated three times in the synoptic gospels with historical emphasis, in special in the gospel of Luke, to the extent that the author(s) strive to locate these events in human history. Moreover, the main events of the life of Christ are mentioned not only in the gospels, but also all over the NT, with a particular emphasis on both their historicity and the importance of these facts in order to stress the truth of the Christian faith:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. (Acts 2:32)

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is

useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. (1 Corinthians 15:13-18)

You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. (Acts 3:14,15)

Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. (Acts 13:28-31)

In these passages, we can see how important is from a religious point of view that the events narrated in the Gospels are real events, occurred to real people in the course of real human history. Of course, these events might be false or have, also, an allegoric meaning;¹ however, what matters is that whether religious beliefs can be rationally held or not depends also, *pace* Wittgenstein, on whether the plausibility of their historical claims can be defended or not. This is especially true when it comes to the belief in the Resurrection of Christ, which according to Christianity is not an event but *The event* on which the Christian faith is based.

On this score, William Lane Craig has famously proposed the following facts order to argue for the plausibility of the Resurrection (1985):

1. After his crucifixion, Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea.

2. On the Sunday following the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.
3. On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.
4. The original disciples believed that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary.

Setting aside whether Craig's argument is successful, what matters is that religious beliefs are also factual ones; beliefs about the existence of a Supreme Being and beliefs about the occurrence of certain facts. As such, the rationality of these beliefs is not, or at least, should not, be exempted from epistemic evaluation.

3. On God and the Meaning of Life

Before concluding, it is worth considering the relationship between religious beliefs and the meaning of life.

So far, we have argued that Wittgenstein's conception of religion, according to which religious beliefs are outside any form epistemic evaluation, is not tenable. This is so because religious beliefs do not express merely a worldview, but are also *factual* in nature; that is to say, are beliefs about the existence of a Supreme Being and the occurrence of certain events. As such, their plausibility or implausibility can and should be assessed.

Before concluding, we will discuss the relationship between religious belief and the meaning of life. As we have seen, according to Wittgenstein religious beliefs are a sort of outlook on life, by which religious believers see attribute to life a particular meaning.

If from a side is undeniable that, according to Classical Theism, to affirm that God exists is also an affirmation of a peculiar meaning of human life and human history, there are nonetheless some objections that could be raised at this point.

Consider a Deistic scenario, in which a Supreme Being exists but He is fundamentally uninterested and uninvolved in his creation, there is no Revelation, no History of Salvation etc. It is hard to see which meaning, if any, the belief in a similar Being would give to human life and history.

To the contrary, according to Classical Theism, human life acquires a new and profound meaning not only because a Supreme Being exists, but because this Supreme Being reveals Himself to humanity and acts within human history. That is to say, according to the Theistic worldview, human life acquires its meaning due to the special relationship that God chooses to have with its own creation. Revelation, Scriptures, the History of Salvation, and the historicity of the main events of the life of Christ all concur to give a specific meaning to human life in the Classical Theist framework; hence they are part of what Wittgenstein calls "The Meaning of Life," according to a Theistic worldview, and are thus not so irrelevant to the religious system as in Wittgenstein's account.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have presented and discussed Wittgenstein's account of religious beliefs. We have argued that his observations do not represent a viable account of the epistemology of religious beliefs and that they can also lead to a number of implausible conclusions. This is because religious beliefs, far from merely expressing a worldview, are also factual beliefs, whose rationality or irrationality is open to epistemic evaluation.

Notes

1. This is not to say, of course, that all that happened in the Bible is an historical narration of should be taken literally; here, we are just stressing the fact that the various author of the Bible, both in the Ancient and in the New Testament, do not simply express a worldview, but taken themselves to relate historical facts and do not merely express a "worldview".

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