
WITTGENSTEIN, FAITH AND THEOLOGY AS GRAMMAR

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Abstract

The paper explains some important foundations and elements of Wittgenstein's view on faith and Theology: his concept of grammar, his conception of philosophy as therapy, and of Theology as the grammar of religious discourse, his view on the importance of certainty for faith, and the nature of religious certainty. Wittgenstein distinguished between factual and grammatical propositions. Theological propositions are grammatical propositions of a particular religious discourse. Their certainty rests on their grammatical nature. The aim of a religious discourse is not to prove, but rather to direct, stimulate, clarify and convert. The paper also addresses some critiques of Wittgenstein's understanding of faith and their failure to take into account the distinction between theological and factual propositions.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, faith, certainty, therapy, grammar

1. Introduction

A proper understanding of the nature of faith, religion and Theology is very important for a correct understanding and cultivation of the relationship between Science on the one hand and faith, religion and Theology on the other. The Wittgensteinian account of religion is one of the most important approaches in modern Philosophy of religion, which influences many investigations of religion in the Humanities and Social sciences [1]. Therefore it certainly deserves a closer investigation, (re)evaluation and (up to date) contextualisation and application. In this paper I will present the most important elements of Wittgenstein's account and – on this foundation – its importance for cultivation of a human way of being which respects the specifics of particular persons, communities, discourses and forms of life but at the same time provides an appropriate (theoretical) basis for dialogical attitude between them.

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2. Wittgenstein's concept of grammar and philosophy as therapy

According to Wittgenstein, certainty is a very important element of faith because it is a necessary condition of redemption. Thus in 1937, Wittgenstein wrote: "But if I am to be REALLY saved, – what I need is certainty – not wisdom, dreams or speculation – and this certainty is faith. And faith is faith in what is needed by my heart, my soul, not my speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind. Perhaps we can say: Only love can believe in the Resurrection. Or: It is love that believes the Resurrection. We might say: Redeeming love believes even in the Resurrection; holds fast even to the Resurrection. What combats doubt is, as it were, redemption. Holding fast to this must be holding fast to that belief. So what that means is: first you must be redeemed and hold on to your redemption (keep hold of your redemption) – then you will see that you are holding fast to this belief. So this can come about only if you no longer rest your weight on the earth but suspend yourself from heaven. Then everything will be different and it will be 'no wonder' if you can do things that you cannot do now. (A man who is suspended looks the same as one who is standing, but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless quite different, so that he can act quite differently than can a standing man.)" [2]

In order to truly understand Wittgenstein's view that certainty is possible in faith, we have to shed light on his view of Theology as religious grammar [3]. Grammar means order, tradition and human practice. If we speak Slovenian, we follow the rules of Slovenian grammar even if we cannot state them. In other words, following a rule does not entail that we can state it, are in this sense aware of it and consciously consult it [4]. When Wittgenstein talks about grammar, what he has in mind is not the grammar of words, but the grammar of concepts carried by words. Concepts are not words, but in our lives they operate through words and therefore exist for us in the way we use words. The philosophical grammarian is, like the grammarian of English or any other natural language, beholden to a certain tradition. This tradition is a body of concepts embedded in our every-day thought, speech and practices, that is, ordinary concepts expressed by words such as 'simple', 'same', 'time', 'true', 'pain', 'name', etc. We use these words fluently and interconnect them in our daily activities even though most of us cannot (quite) describe the rules or regularities of this use in language, which we speak fluently [4, p. 145]. Wittgenstein believed that a large part of Philosophy, for example, the philosophy of such famous philosophers as Plato and Kant, is a sort of a mental disorder resulting from the loss of touch with the rich tradition considered above. If we pay too little attention to the depth-grammar of words, then we can be misled by the surface-grammar of language to the extent that we perform "unnatural" acts with them [4, p. 145]. This leads to (philosophical) quandaries, which are only seeming and disappear the moment we realise they are merely a consequence of an inappropriate use of language. In *Philosophical Investigations* [3], we find numerous exercises through which we are supposed to become aware of the

various ways a language works. These exercises are conceptual therapy, which does not give us the answer to philosophical questions, but relieves us from asking philosophical questions. What Wittgenstein aims at with his exercises and reflections is to make us better in the sense of liberating us from debilitating compulsions. He wants to help us find our way back to truly (human) life after having wandered in the far country of conceptual vanity and illusion [4, p. 146]. Such an attitude and purpose are in accordance with the advice to his students that they should study something else, something serious, since philosophy is no profession at all and also with his rejection of the position of Professor of Philosophy, which he characterised as “being buried alive” [5].

Grammar authorises some linguistic or conceptual uses, but not others, and a large part of Wittgenstein’s oeuvre consists precisely of grammatical remarks. But what is the difference between grammatical remarks and other kinds of remarks, say psychological? Roughly speaking or to begin with, we can say that psychological remarks are about people, while grammatical remarks are about concepts, even if the concepts in question are psychological ones, that is, concepts which help us understand people, explain their behaviour, and refer to the essential aspects or elements of humanity. Such a concept is, for example, love. Psychological remarks talk about what motivates people, what causes their behaviour or experience, how their psyche is structured, what is easy or hard for people to do, and why or how most people act under some given conditions, etc. [4, p. 152]. Grammatical remarks, on the other hand, ‘locate’ a concept, the concept of love, for example, vis-à-vis other concepts. In Christianity, such concepts are the concepts of compassion, patience, understanding, renunciation, (self-)sacrifice, humility, forgiveness, clemency, etc. However, with his therapy, Wittgenstein does not want to bring us closer to a Christian or some other such tradition that we have become alienated from as is the case with Kierkegaard, whom Wittgenstein held in such high regard, but to help us find our way back to the ‘tradition’ that is not only different from the Christian one, but of a completely different kind. Both thinkers wanted to help us ‘find’ (again) a certain (lost) ‘wisdom’, but each had a different wisdom in mind. When using the word ‘wisdom’ in reference to Wittgenstein, we need to be careful since we find in *Culture and Value* the following remark from 1946: “Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a passion” [2, p. 53; 6; 7]

Wittgenstein’s programme is therapy, helping people afflicted by philosophy find a way out of senseless frustrations and recover after the injuries suffered by living in a fly-bottle (Wittgenstein’s metaphor for the position of those caught in the trap of meaningless philosophical problems); he wanted to help people find a way out into the real world where they would find peace in ordinary language anchored in the activities of everyday life. He wanted to return us to the ‘tradition’ we had been steeped in since childhood [4, p. 153]. Here, we can certainly notice another characteristic of Wittgenstein’s style: even when he writes about concepts and grammar, he does it in a way, or at least he often manages to do it so that ideas are not conveyed in an arid, ‘lifeless’,

‘scholarly’ way, but his sentences touch the reader’s ‘heart’ [4, p. 165]. In this, he resembles Kierkegaard [8], Nietzsche, Adorno...

3. Factual propositions versus conceptual or grammatical propositions

For the purpose of this contribution, it is worth noting the difference between factual propositions on the one hand and conceptual propositions on the other. Wittgenstein rejected metaphysics because it blurs the distinction between the two [8, p. 169]. Let us take talk about physical objects. Wittgenstein writes about the proposition ‘A is a physical object’ being a piece of instruction for someone who does not understand what ‘A’ means or what ‘physical object’ means [9]. It is an instruction on the use of words. But because ‘physical object’ is a logical concept, we cannot say ‘There are physical objects’, as such a proposition is incorrect. (Instead of ‘logical concept’, Wittgenstein sometimes used the term ‘grammatical category’ [10].) This is a logical or conceptual mistake, a violation of logical or conceptual grammar [8, p. 169]. Metaphysicians make precisely such claims and that is why Wittgenstein rejected metaphysics due to its incorrect use of language. This leads to unsolvable problems, which are only seeming problems since they disappear the moment we realise that they originate in the ‘grammatical’ mistakes made during language use. What is essential is to be aware that conceptual or grammatical propositions are not descriptions of things in the world but instructions on the use of a certain word. They do not describe a fact, but express a rule about what a certain word means or how it is to be used. In his later writings, Wittgenstein names such conceptual rules ‘grammatical remarks’ [8, p. 171]. He also used the term “grammatical statements” [8, p. 170]. Such statements are used to explain the meaning of certain terms. Grammatical propositions are not factual or empirical propositions and there is nothing wrong with metaphysical statements if we understand them as grammatical remarks [8, p. 171]. Statements about God (as omniscient, all-powerful, eternal...) are grammatical statements. They are not statements about a fact in the world, but statements about the use of the word ‘God’ in a religious discourse [8, p. 172]. In his Cambridge lectures, Wittgenstein ascribed to Luther the claim that theology is the grammar of the word ‘God’, which was a claim he agreed with [11]. (This is not the only similarity between Luther and Wittgenstein [1]. For the relevant characteristics of Luther’s view [12].)

Grammatical statements given by Theology authorize and limit a certain mode of discourse – the religious mode. ‘Enlightened’ by Strawson’s ‘analogical’ definition of philosophy as grammar, we also could say that theology is the grammar of religious discourse. On the one hand, it explicitly states the rules that the believers automatically and ‘implicitly’ use, while on the other hand it itself directs this talk and sets norms for it. It does for religious discourse what a linguistic grammarian does for a language [13]. However, theological statements being grammatical does not entail that they are merely ‘descriptive’. Some are such, for example, ‘I’m a sinner’ or ‘God loves me’,

while others are proscriptive, they instruct us on how to live. It is precisely the proscriptive statements that Wittgenstein places at the heart of religious discourse and not any speculations on Cosmology, the nature of the world, etc. [14]. Theological statements are grammatical statements directing the believer's actions and feelings, while some of them are also 'descriptive' and refer to certain persons and events. It is a great mistake if we consider theological statements to be statements about facts or the world. Such talk dismisses religious discourse and introduces naturalistic discourse [8, p. 174]. Let us look at another example of a theological grammatical statement, the proposition "God exists and is my creator" [8, p. 175]. According to Wittgenstein, this proposition is used differently in religious discourse than in Science. This is not a proposition demanding evidential support like the usual propositions about contingent causal connections. Nevertheless, this proposition also expresses a belief, but in a different sense, in the sense of accepting the grammatical proposition 'God exists and is my creator'. Such a statement tells us how we should speak about God – we should speak about him as a being that exists and is my creator. If we talk about God as believers, then that is how we must talk about him because that is what a true believer means with the word 'God'. Grammatical propositions are necessary because they provide inflexible rules for the use of words [8, p. 178]. If someone talks about God, they must talk about him as existent. Otherwise they are misusing the term 'God'.

4. Grammaticalness as the foundation of the certainty of theological propositions

Wittgenstein noticed that believers do not accept their central claims as merely probable, but with unshakeable certainty even though they do not think they have any "exceptional" evidence for them [8, p. 176]. This implies that they are grammatical statements since, according to Wittgenstein, if someone is unshakeably certain about a statement they are using it as a grammatical statement. For a believer, 'God exists and is my creator' is a grammatical statement. This statement is not merely a presupposition accepted as true, but something that gives sense to all that a believer says about the world. What is at issue here is an entire system of representation and reference to the world and things and the relation to them, to which a believer is passionately committed. For a believer, those not accepting their grammar are alienated from God, separated from Him. Talk of miracles also belongs to theological grammar. A miracle is grammatically something we cannot comprehend. It is a belief in divine causality that we cannot comprehend. The acceptance of the use of the concept of miracle as meaningful is part of the Christian theological grammar. Christ performing miracles is not based on any historical evidence, but is part of the grammar of Christian faith. According to the grammar, God is a being revealed through miracles. We can say that grammar is the basis of our notion of the world. We can thus talk about two fundamentally different notions or pictures of the world: the naturalistic and the revelational. Some subscribe to the

first and some to the second. Religious believers do not find the secular explanation of their belief, according to which the revelational picture is a defective way of explaining empirical reality, appropriate. In their opinion, such an explanation is fundamentally misguided because it does not accept and understand the revealed truth. However, according to Wittgenstein, there is no neutral or objective viewpoint. The need for naturalistic proof and evidence is part of some form of life [8, p. 181]. In line with this is Wittgenstein's view – which he explained in *On Certainty* - that certainty is a necessary condition for doubt and not the other way round. This means that this or that grammar that we do not doubt is the condition for doubt. In the field of theological and philosophical topics, this means that an a priori acceptance of this or that fundamental picture of the world, that is, a 'theology', be it naturalistic or revelational, is the necessary condition for us to be able to talk, think and thus doubt. So the opinion that one can begin with a radical doubt is merely an illusion.

5. Conclusions - response to some critiques

Wittgenstein's view on faith has been subject to many critiques [15], some of them also justified, but the most important ones are, in our opinion, at least partially unjustified since they do not sufficiently take into account the elements and distinctions of Wittgenstein's view presented above. Let us take a look at some of the most frequent and most important critiques. The first objection says that Wittgenstein's notion of religion is inadequate and that every religion includes a metaphysical doctrinal part, which clearly talks about, for example, God as a causally efficacious being etc. It involves not merely grammar, but clearly expressed metaphysical claims. Opposed to such a view on faith is the bare expressive view, which some ascribe to Wittgenstein [16] and according to which theological statements claim nothing, but merely express the believers' notions or views. These critics claim that Wittgenstein did not consider the metaphysical part to be an essential part of religious-ness. We can refute this criticism by saying that religions do indeed have their metaphysical doctrinal part and that an adherent of Wittgenstein's view can accept this, but this doctrinal part does not consist of any contingent propositions about the world, but of grammatical statements. Because these critics do not distinguish between factual and grammatical propositions and place the latter in the category of the first, they falsely infer that if Wittgenstein claimed that factual propositions are not part of religion, he also claimed that religions have no metaphysical doctrinal part.

The second objection says that Wittgenstein's view implies that we cannot criticise any religion or doxy. Based on this view, it is impossible to criticise believers and their actions. This critique builds on reproaching Wittgenstein with a disdain for the significance of evidence for the truth of religious statements and views and with the ascription of too great an autonomy to religious discourse and doctrine compared to other discourses and views (for example, Science) [17,

18]. These critiques are based on Wittgenstein's claims that grammar is independent of reality, autonomous in view of reality, not accountable to any reality etc. Such a position often goes hand in hand with the accusation that Wittgenstein's view implies an unacceptable arbitrary and unreasonable relativism, which is opposed to the view that a reasonable person creates a picture of the world based on a reasonable equilibrium among different discourses. The reproach that Wittgenstein's view of faith prevents any critique of the thoughts and actions of believers could also be based on Wittgenstein's emphasis on their unconditional submission to authority, which in the Bible is so distinctly illustrated by Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac. We can agree here that Wittgenstein did reject the possibility of us proving, verifying or refuting the sentences of faith or religion the way we do scientific hypotheses [15, p. 129ff]. The expression of one's religious belief is not like an ordinary claim, prediction or scientific hypothesis. Religious beliefs cannot be verified or refuted as scientific hypotheses, they are immune to such verification or refutation. According to Wittgenstein, such a proof-game does not belong to the language-game of faith. Whoever tackles such a proof does not understand the language-game and, according to Wittgenstein, confuses faith with superstition [17, p. 7]. Thus, for example, statistical data can refute the superstitious belief that an amulet can protect one from illness. However, religion is not such superstition and those who collect evidence in favour or against religious beliefs confuse faith with superstition. There is also a psychological distinction between the two. In 1948, Wittgenstein wrote the following: "Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from fear and is a sort of false science. The other is trusting." [2, p. 72]

The naturalistic approach in assessing faith is therefore misguided as it does not respect religious discourse or the religious language-game and from the very beginning excludes it, 'cuts it down' in favour of the naturalistic picture, which is itself only one of the possible ones. However, this does not amount to complete relativism or arbitrariness regarding the acceptance of this or that picture of the world. There is another, non-naturalistic possibility of assessment – the genealogical approach [19]. For we can point out the implications of a certain world picture, its consequences, which values it foregrounds, which it pushes to the side or even rejects... Such an approach respects the discourse that is part of some form of life and world picture and does not a priori dismiss it. We can subject religious world-pictures to an ethical inquiry, but, based on Wittgenstein's view, this does not mean that, through a rational scientific or naturalistic approach, we can come to know what is right and what not or reach the rules or norms of how we should act, rather we must understand ethics as an inquiry into what is encompassed, included and implied in a certain complex form of life, such as a Christian form of life [20]. Perhaps it might be difficult to find explicit textual evidence proving that Wittgenstein personally nurtured such a genealogically oriented belief, but it does cohere nicely with his view. However, what Wittgenstein doubtlessly personally rejected was the view that we can logically or 'scientifically' prove something decisive in favour or against

a fundamental world-picture. In this respect, he felt not only as Kierkegaard, but also as Nietzsche. Recall only Nietzsche's critique of Socrates from the beginning of his philosophical path, from *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* [21]. Wittgenstein's words from 1931 sound very similar: "Reading the Socratic dialogues one has the feeling: what a frightful waste of time! What's the point of these arguments that prove nothing and clarify nothing?" [3, p. 31] Religious discourse is not intended to prove, but to direct, encourage, explain and convert. In this regard, Ule pointed out certain similarities between Wittgenstein and the Christian mythical tradition (Dionysius the Areopagite, Teresa of Avila, etc.), but also noted that this is no reason to consider Wittgenstein as a continuer of this tradition and that similar parallels can also be found in other great religious traditions, for example, Buddhism [22].

In general, we can conclude that many critics of Wittgenstein do not sufficiently take into account his distinction between factual and grammatical propositions. When taken into account, numerous philosophical problems disappear, which according to Wittgenstein is the goal of philosophical analysis [8, p. 182]. The Wittgensteinian starting point enables both believers and non-believers, Christians and others to preserve their discourses, their language-games and forms of life, which are part of the world's diversity. But it also enables communication, dialogue and discussion between them and encourages opening up to one another [23]. Thus around 1944 Wittgenstein wrote: "No cry or torment can be greater than the cry of one man. Or again, no torment can be greater than what a single human being may suffer. /.../ The whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a single soul. The Christian faith – as I see it – is a man's refuge in this ultimate torment. Anyone in such torment who has the gift of opening his heart, rather than contracting it, accepts the means of salvation in his heart. Someone who in this way penitently opens his heart to God in confession lays it open for other men too. /.../ A man can bear himself before others only out of a particular kind of love. A love which acknowledges, as it were, that we are all wicked children. We could also say: Hate between men comes from our cutting ourselves off from each other." [3, p. 5]

Both, diversity and dialogue or discussion are a composite part of a humane way of being and what we can positively name civilisation. "Our failure to actualize our human potential' in competent and genuine discussions and 'in living as persons (i.e., relational, authentic self) in personal relationships with others contributes to the movement of depersonalization, the end result of which is dehumanization and unfathomable destruction." [24] Wittgenstein did not want us to create problems, but to realise that they are only seeming, which would make them disappear. He was also deeply aware that if one's need for meaning is not satisfied, one cannot be content or happy. Perhaps his wish for a happy and meaningful life did come true in the end, for one of the last statements on his dying bed was that he had had a wonderful life [14].

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