

‘Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one’s beloved. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied.’ – Wittgenstein. What bearing, if any, do these observations have for our understanding of religious belief?

This question raises several issues centred on the nature of religious belief and the role of ritual within it. The quotation originates in anthropology and thus touches the relationship between ritual and culture. From a secular viewpoint, we can also use it to investigate the link between theory and praxis. And on a wider reading, we can ask ‘is it even possible to translate the language games constitutive of other forms of life into those we find ourselves immersed in?’¹ Lastly, the quotation raises issues of realism/non-realism in religion. I will explore these topics and argue that it is not the case that these actions are carried out with no aim at all. Wittgenstein’s complete separation of religious practice from theory is too binary: I posit instead a sliding epistemological scale depending on how closely practice is aligned to (or driven by) a belief or other form of rationale (whether conscious or not).

The Wittgenstein quote comes from his *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*,² the origins of which are ‘as complex and unclear as its checkered editorial and translational history’.³ Fortunately, it is not necessary to go into deep analysis of what Wittgenstein

¹Stephan Palmié, ‘Translation is not Explanation’, in Giovanni da Col and Stephan Palmié, *The Mythology in our Language* (2018, HAU Books), p. 2.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*’, trans. by Stephan Palmié, in da Col and Palmie, *Mythology*

³Id. p. 1.

was doing in these remarks because the question allows us to take the quotation as it stands and comment on its application. However, some context probably helps to point up the levels of analysis that can be undertaken.

Wittgenstein was not an anthropologist but he was interested in the mystical, which perhaps explains why he started reading Frazer. Frazer of course was an anthropologist although it would not be unreasonable to assert that his idea of anthropology is not considered mainstream: his biographer admits that 'he wrote vast, assured tomes about primitive religion and mythology without ever leaving the library'.⁴ In particular, he 'lacked the idea of culture as the matrix ... that gives meaning to social behaviour and belief'.⁵ This may indicate why Wittgenstein took such an objection to *The Golden Bough*, which is now regarded as something of an unfortunate footnote in the discipline of social anthropology.

Frazer's intellectualist approach to the history of religion held that religious beliefs are just mistaken theories about the world, hence religious rituals are mistaken attempts to bring about changes, which work, if at all, only by chance. Frazer believed the earliest human philosophies were concerned with magic, for example the burning of effigies, which later thinkers realised was futile. Such thinkers transferred their theorising to belief in gods or deities, making religion the second, but equally futile, philosophy. Although Frazer understood that pre-Enlightenment thinkers based their hypotheses on religion in

⁴ Robert Ackerman, (1987) quoted in Palmie, 'Translation', p. 4.

⁵ Ibid.

the absence of any other explanation, science subsequently proved them wrong and thus religion is just a mistaken belief, honestly held: a false science.

Wittgenstein, whose sympathy towards religion was far more pronounced, indeed avowed, found this 'a bizarre conclusion, produced by the illusion that all human action and belief must be akin to one paradigm: the scientific'.⁶ Primitive rituals did not mean that the practitioners were stupid: they did not plough their fields in effigy, so the effigy-burning must have been done for some reason other than a theory that it would be effective. Indeed, Wittgenstein says that no religious believer was making a mistake 'except where he was putting forth a theory'.⁷ This is because religion, for Wittgenstein, is not theoretical in character. We could say that Wittgenstein tears the phenomena of religious behaviour away from adherence to a theory, as a way of demonstrating that Frazer's equation of the two was a category mistake. I will argue that this scission is too abrupt and that we should allow for degrees of separation.

Clack somewhat confusingly summarises that 'belief in God is not to be equated with adherence to the hypothesis that somewhere or other there is a being called "God"'.⁸ What this seems to mean is that belief in god is not the same as having a theory about god, or it could alternatively be a description of non-realist religious belief, which I address below.

⁶ Beverley Clack and Brian Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion* (2008, Polity), p. 124.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Remarks', in da Col & Palmié, *Mythology*, p. 32.

⁸ Clack, *Religion*, p. 124.

A theory is something that can be tested by philosophy, on its own terms. In other words, the tools that we use to elaborate the theory are the same tools we use when we do philosophy: this allows the philosopher to deconstruct the theory. But religious belief is not the same as theory, Wittgenstein suggests, therefore the tools of philosophy are not appropriate. Rather, 'it strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference ... it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation'.⁹

From this, I want to explore two avenues: the distinction between theory and praxis and the notion that religion is one form of language-game. Taking the latter first, 'if we proceed to say that religion is a language-game ... it cannot be judged by another language-game, such as science'.¹⁰ This seems to me about as unhelpful as Wittgenstein's early notion that 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' in that it conceivably leads to a postmodern relativism where nothing can be usefully discussed. Boghossian disparagingly calls it the doctrine of 'equal validity', namely that 'there are many radically different yet "equally valid" ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them'.¹¹ This interpretation also seems to trivialise religious belief, suggesting that it is just another pastime like cricket, not susceptible to intelligent analysis, whereas I imagine that trivialising religion would have been antithetical to Wittgenstein: indeed he did not himself say that religion is a language-game.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1980) quoted in Clack & Clack, *Religion*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Clack, *Religion*, p. 127.

¹¹ Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*, (2006, Clarendon Press), p. 2.

Moreover, this interpretation risks pushing one into what Nielsen terms 'Wittgensteinian fideism'.¹² This would mean that philosophers could not criticise forms of life (including religions) unless they were themselves adherents of such forms of life, or in other words that 'religious utterances or propositions are in order as they are'.¹³ This brings to mind a Chinese proverb that 'two people of differing religions have nothing to say to each other', which has a certain poetic elegance but, if true, would be sad.¹⁴ Rorty also famously suggested that religion is a conversation-stopper.¹⁵ Fortunately, in real life, inter-faith dialogue is frequently practised and sometimes fruitful.

Turning to the first avenue, the distinction between theory and praxis does seem to be borne out in various experiences of life. Starting with praxis, there are many mystical things that seem to work in practice but not in theory, for example acupuncture or homeopathy. One could derive a lot of benefit from the practice of yoga without exploring the theory at all: conversely, a family member is a highly-respected French scholar of Buddhism but her daily life is a complete mess. It is feasible (indeed fun) to drive a car without knowing the theory of the combustion engine. In short, it seems possible to choose between theory and practice, perhaps all the more in the context of religious belief. My ex-wife is a devout practising Catholic but she cannot explain why. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury famously doubted the existence of god: it does not seem to matter. Religion is something one does, it's 'a way of living' and that may be

¹² Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy*, (1967) 42:161, pp. 191-209.

¹³ Id., p. 194.

¹⁴ As Google does not know this proverb, I must have imagined it.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, 'Religion as a Conversation Stopper', *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999, Penguin), pp. 168-74.

enough for some people. The phenomenology of the religious life might actually be constitutive of the religious belief.

Taking this rationale further, I posit that we can arrange a variety of practices along a kind of epistemological scale. At one end, we can place scientific practices backed up by empirical theory (the theory and the practice align, Frazer would be happy). One step along the scale are religious rites undertaken on the basis of a belief that they will effect some change, say bring about a cure (there is a practice, there is a hypothesis, but there is no scientific rationale aligning the two). Next on the scale, the same rite could be performed by an unbeliever for whom religion is nonetheless a 'way of living', perhaps even a passionately-held interpretation to use Wittgenstein's language. Here, there is no theory, just praxis accompanied by some kind of normative motivation or duty. Not much further along, we could place superstition: here, we do things because even though we don't subscribe to any hypothesis about black cats, we avoid them anyway because we 'ought' to. Perhaps next on the scale there are things like kissing a picture of one's beloved or throwing darts at a picture of Hitler. These are indeed not based on a belief that they will effect any change, and unlike with superstitions there is no 'ought', but we do them to exercise (exorcise?) some emotional energy. Finally, at the Wittgensteinian end of the scale, there may be things we do simply out of instinct, that have no underlying 'aim' at all.

I am not sure that my sliding scale will stand close scrutiny: my point is just to illustrate that the space between Frazer and Wittgenstein is not necessarily empty.

A final way in which this question helps us to think about religious belief is that it can characterise the difference between religious realists and religious non-realists. The former 'hold that their beliefs are about what really exists independent of the human beings who are having those beliefs',¹⁶ whereas the latter (possibly including Wittgenstein) posit that religious claims are not about something 'out there'. To the extent that religious rituals are part of a form of life, or some kind of culturally-specified activity, the religious non-realist would contend that they do not have to be 'aimed at' a transcendent god in order to have religious meaning. In other words, one could conceive of a rite as not being a supplication to an external god but rather as constitutive of a 'way of living', perhaps like certain yogic practices, probably towards the Wittgensteinian side of my scale.

Clack¹⁷ uses this distinction to explore the nature of Wittgenstein's objection to Frazer. Many scholars understood Frazer as saying that ritual was an attempt at an instrumental action, backed by an explanatory theory, whereas Wittgenstein saw ritual as purely expressive and the accompanying belief not as an attempt at explanation: in short, a distinction between religion as cognitive (Frazer) or non-cognitive (Wittgenstein). Clack argues that the battle was actually about 'whether rituals arise through a similar process to that by which science advances (namely hypothesis and experiment), or whether they are spontaneous in character, entirely natural things for human beings to perform'¹⁸, which he says is closer to Wittgenstein's intention. Indeed Wittgenstein uses the term 'instinct-actions'. But this still seems to me incomplete: if all Wittgenstein is saying is that

¹⁶ Chad Meister, *Introducing The Philosophy Of Religion* (Routledge, 2009), p.15.

¹⁷ Brian Clack, 'Wittgenstein and Expressive Theories of Religion', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, (1996), 40:1, pp. 47-61.

¹⁸ *Id.*, p. 59.

we do some things not in expectation that they will effect change but simply because they are instinctive or spontaneous, I still want to know why they are instinctive, or what makes them spontaneous.

To this extent, I do not agree with Wittgenstein that they 'aim at nothing at all': if they did, we wouldn't bother doing them. Rather, I posit that we do these things because of some probabilistic or even evolutionary urge. Kissing a picture of one's beloved is a way of demonstrating to ourselves the strength of our feeling for them: it does have this as its aim. Not walking under ladders is a sensible precaution, unlike the black cat superstition, but both behaviours reflect an analysis of past outcomes (the cat one just gets the calculus wrong). Throwing a dart at Hitler's photo is a way of expressing disgust, and also strengthens the bond between the soldiers doing it: from an evolutionary perspective it would be important to build trust among fellow warriors. Finally of course, there is the point that 'we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied': we feel more in control of our life if we reject the hotel room numbered 13; we feel a surge of love when we kiss the picture. It is not enough to say that these are instinctive behaviours: we do them for a reason but that reason is perhaps more susceptible to psychology¹⁹ than to philosophy. Religious rituals can also be explained to some extent by probabilistic, evolutionary or even political motivation. Many of the practices one observes seem 'aimed' in some way: perhaps to reinforce the authority of the priest (the clothes, the kneeling of the congregation, the lecturing), or indeed to control the behaviour of the populace (no meat on Friday). Some may stem from old probability analyses such as the difficulty of ensuring hygiene along the pork food-chain. In fact, religious belief itself

¹⁹ (Or neuropsychology: the role of dopamine in kissing the photo, burning in effigy etc. would be interesting to explore.)

may be the product of an evolutionary urge: Richard Dawkins²⁰ writes of the spread of the 'God-meme' throughout human populations. Referring again to my scale, what I am saying is that almost all behaviour can be fitted somewhere along it before we get to the extreme Wittgensteinian end where there seems to be no explanation at all.

In conclusion, Frazer was mistaken in thinking that every human behaviour is underpinned by an attempt to implement a scientific hypothesis so as to effect some change. This only happens at one end of my epistemological scale. But Wittgenstein was also mistaken in suggesting they are simply instinctive and have no aim, which is the other end. It is true that theory can be separated from praxis, but there can be degrees of separation rather than the categorical one Wittgenstein envisions. Practices (religious or other) may be based on irrational beliefs, inherited (evolutionary) motivations, no beliefs at all (for instance, habit), or triggered by other psychological or chemical factors of which we are not even aware. Ultimately, perhaps the distinction to be made is one of explanation versus justification: it might be difficult to justify the practice but there is always an explanation.

²⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006, Houghton Mifflin), pp. 199–200.

Bibliography

Boghossian, Paul, *Fear of Knowledge*, (2006, Clarendon Press)

Clack, Brian 'Wittgenstein and Expressive Theories of Religion', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, (1996), 40:1, pp. 47-61

Clack, Beverley and Brian Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion* (2008, Polity)

Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* (2006, Houghton Mifflin)

Meister, Chad, *Introducing The Philosophy Of Religion* (Routledge, 2009)

Nielsen, Kai, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy*, (1967) 42:161, pp. 191-209

da Col, Giovanni and Stephan Palmié, *The Mythology in our Language* (2018, HAU Books)

Rorty, Richard, 'Religion as a Conversation Stopper', *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999, Penguin)