Wittgenstein and Theological Studies

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Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* appeared posthumously in 1953. The anniversary deserves commemoration. The publication of much more of his late work, not to mention the flood of exposition and commentary, would in any case prompt reflection.[1] But, even after thirty years, with its status as a philosophical classic securely established, the *use* of the book remains as difficult and controversial as ever. It is appropriate, in these pages, to concentrate on the effect the study of Wittgenstein's later work might have in the context of *theological studies* – in fact as an essential therapeutic propaedeutic.

I

To put it like that is already to suggest that Wittgenstein's work has had very little effect on the practice of theology in the past thirty years. That is to say, we need not linger long upon the mare's nest of "Wittgensteinian Fideism". This nomenclature was introduced, I think, by Kai Nielsen (in *Philosophy*, July 1967, if not already somewhere else). As an atheist Nielsen wants to go on arguing that religion is nonsense. He therefore objects to the way that certain Christian philosophers, or certain philosophers who are also Christians, try to make out that religion is a practice which can be understood only by the insider. Any outsider, such as a committed atheist, could not even know what he is talking about when he argues against the existence of a god or whatever. Religious language would be intelligible only to those who participate in the "form of life" in which it is at home. Religious discourse would moreover constitute a distinctive and autonomous "language game" which could be understood, let alone criticized only by adepts. This counts as Fideism, in the textbook sense: the propositions and concepts of the Christian faith would simply be unintelligible to people who have not yet been "saved".

Fideism obviously has quite a lot going for it. The Catholic Church, however, has officially resisted that line of thought. It was rejected in 1869, at the First Vatican Council. It does not follow that official condemnation has eradicated Fideism from Catholic thinking.

Wittgenstein comes in here because his work is supposed to license the doctrine that religious discourse might be an autonomous "language game", with its own rules intelligible only to the insider, and so forth. Religion as a practice or institution might be what he meant by a "form of life", of the sort that just "has to be accepted" (*Investigations*, p 226). Religion would thus be just one of those things, irreducibly *there*, and you cannot even discuss it properly unless you enter the game. That is the picture.[2]

This line of thought has no foundation in Wittgenstein's text. It is a misunderstanding of what he meant when he spoke of "language games" and "forms of life". He introduced the term "language *game*" (his italics), so he says (*Inv.* no 23), to emphasize that the *speaking* of language is always intricated with some *activity*. Such an activity he calls a "form of life". Theorists then go on from there to suppose that he has in mind the large-scale practices and institutions that constitute our whole social order. It then becomes possible to raise questions about how politically conservative or revolutionary his work may be, and the like. In fact the text couldn't make it any plainer that he has very basic small-scale activities in mind, without which no human society whatever would exist, whether classless or otherwise. His catalogue of the activities that count as "forms of life" runs as follows (ibid.): "Giving orders, and obeying them; describing an object by its look or by measurements; making an object according to a description (drawing); reporting ... surmising ... forming, and testing, a hypothesis; presenting results ... making up a story ... play-acting ... singing ... guessing ... joking ... doing a sum ... translating ... beseeching, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying".

No doubt the list warrants explication. It has been elaborated from the list given in the Blue Book (dictated 1933-34, p 68), where it comes up as an illustration of how "a great variety of games is played with the sentences of our language". Wittgenstein is explicitly attacking the standard doctrine that *asserting*, together with *questioning*, and maybe *commanding*, may be regarded as privileged uses of language. He wants us to see that there is just *far more* to *speaking* than the traditional grammatical categories of indicative, interrogative and imperative encompass. He is debunking what Gilbert Ryle was later to call "the fetish of the indicative". But the point here is simply that nothing could be plainer than the *level* of micro-practices with which Wittgenstein is concerned when he speaks of "forms of life". He means the open-ended multiplicity of social skills embodied in our workaday interaction with one another and consequently with things. Language is not some reified object, standing over against us, either at our disposal or dominating us. It is firmly rooted in what we do together. The "forms of life" are such primitive, biological and physical interactions as pleading, caressing, saluting, teasing, and so on. Obviously such basic social responses develop into quite complex habits and customs which may be interwoven with the fabric of one social order differently from that of some other. Not all human societies have gone in much for hypothesis-framing. Praying might conceivably cease in some societies. These activities are not fixed, "given once for all". On the contrary, "new language games ... come into existence and others become obsolete and forgotten". But his "forms of life" are the shared responses that weave the intricate patterns of our everyday life. Religion as such could not be a "form of life" in Wittgenstein's sense. Religious discourse could not be a "language game" either. There might, on the other hand, be certain language-involving social interactions without which religion would not exist.

Norman Malcolm, as long ago as 1954, in his much reprinted review of the *Investigations*, noted the special meaning Wittgenstein gave to the phrase "form of life". A good example of a "form of life", so he said, would be the complex of gestures, facial expressions, words and activities that compose what we identify as pitying and comforting a wounded person or animal. But, in the celebrated essay by Saul Kripke which will very likely dictate the next generation's reading of Wittgenstein, it is once again taken for granted that the phrase means our human form of life as a whole, as distinct from e.g. the form of life of big cats. This is, of course, a natural way of using the phrase, but it is not what Wittgenstein had primarily in mind.[3]

Comforting a wounded fellow creature, as a distinctive activity that ordinarily involves speaking, could not be isolated from quite different but plainly related responses and initiatives such as mourning, encouraging, deploring, and much else, according to circumstances. The notion that any single language game might function in isolation from any and all others has no basis in Wittgenstein's text. The famous and beautiful comparison of language with an old town suffices to show how contrary to his mind such a notion would have been (*Inv.* no 18): "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses".

There are no grounds in Wittgenstein's text for the version of Fideism (so called) which makes great play with his notions of "form of life" and "language game". This doesn't mean, on the other hand, that much of what he is reported to have said specifically about religion might not reasonably be held to move in the direction of a certain Fideism.[4]

II

The question, however, is whether something a bit more interesting than good old-fashioned so-called Fideism may emerge from studying Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. Con Drury reports a conversation with him "when he was working on the latter part of the

Philosophical Investigations" – apparently in 1949.[5] He records two remarks. Firstly: "My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age, I have to swim so strongly against the tide. Perhaps in a hundred years people will really want what I am writing". This concurs with several other remarks Wittgenstein made at one time or another. There is even, up to a point, agreement about what he very likely meant.[6] The second remark runs as follows: "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view". Drury seems to have taken that remark as bearing on the work upon which Wittgenstein was engaged at the time. Every problem discussed in the *Investigations*, then, must have been regarded (in some sense) "from a religious point of view", even if the writer himself was "not a religious man". The remark is not altogether perspicuous. Certainly, as Drury says (writing in 1976), there has not been much evidence in all the commentary on the later Wittgenstein's work that its "religious" dimension has even been detected, let alone explicated.

Wittgenstein once constructed a definition of what it is to be a religious person.[7] You count as religious, so he suggested, if you think that you are not so much just "imperfect" (anybody with any decency would think *that*), but that you are "sick" (*krank*), "wretched", "indigent", "in need of help" (*elend*). Von Wright, however, doubts if Wittgenstein was religious "in any but a trivial sense of the word".[8] Yet he himself reminds us that Wittgenstein had a strong sense of doom, had no difficulty in envisaging a divine Judge, and spoke of people's helplessness to improve themselves in accents reminiscent of some doctrines of predestination. No doubt it depends what you expect of a religious person. In the early 1930s Wittgenstein gave a copy of Dr Johnson's *Prayers and Meditations* to Drury; in 1945 he repeated the gesture with Norman Malcolm: "This is the little book I promised to send you. It seems to be out of print so I'm sending you my copy. I wish to say that normally I can't read any printed prayers but that Johnson's impressed me by being *human*. Perhaps you'll see what I mean if you read them".[9] It seems difficult to believe that such a gesture was made, or such lines written, by a man who was religious only in "a trivial sense of the word". In fact the conversations recorded by Drury, stretching over the last twenty years of Wittgenstein's life, demonstrate an uncommon depth of interest in religious matters. The remarks from the notebooks which von Wright himself selected for publication (as *Culture and Value*) frequently corroborate this judgment. But Wittgenstein once made the following remark to Drury, when they had been talking about prayer: "But remember the Christian religion does not consist in saying a lot of prayers, in fact we are commanded just the opposite. If you and I are to live religious lives it must not just be that we talk a lot about religion, but that in some way our lives are different".[10]

In what sense might the problems discussed in the *Investigations* have been considered "from a religious point of view"? Drury's explanation is to the effect that the *Investigations*, for all the radical and obvious differences from the *Tractatus*, retain the same deep intention which Wittgenstein expressed in connection with the earlier book. Having failed in three attempts to get it published (including one in which Frege proved no help), Wittgenstein appealed to Ludwig von Ficker, the editor of an Austrian journal *Der Brenner*. He hoped that a journal which published Theodor Haecker, who was then beginning to make the work of Kierkegaard known, would be sympathetic towards the *Tractatus*. Explaining the manuscript to Ficker in 1919 Wittgenstein wrote as follows, warning him that he might not get much out of reading it – "Because you won't understand it; the content will seem quite strange to you. In reality, it isn't strange to you, for the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it. Therefore the book will, unless I'm quite wrong, have much to say which you want to say yourself, but perhaps you won't notice that it is said in it".[11] The book is thus offered as an ascetical exercise in learning to acknowledge what *can* be said, so as to respect that which is finally incomprehensible in our situation.

The theme certainly seems constant. Consider this remark in the so-called Lecture on Ethics (1929/30): "Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it".[12] Again, in the Blue Book (p 45): "The difficulty in philosophy is to say no more than we know". In the unpublished part of the so-called Big Typescript the following remark occurs: "As I have often said, philosophy does not call on me for any sacrifice, because I am not denying myself the saying of anything but simply giving up certain combinations of words as senseless. But in another sense philosophy demands a renunciation, but a renunciation of feeling, not of understanding. Perhaps that is what makes it so hard for many people. It can be as hard to refrain from using an expression as it is to hold back tears or hold in anger".[13]

The drawing – from inside – of the limits of our language requires a renunciation of a very powerful desire in our nature. The ethical demand of all Wittgenstein's work, as Drury sees it, is "the simple demand that we should at all times and in all places say no more than we really know". But it is what we remain silent about that is the important thing. As Drury concludes: "It is this watching brief in the interests of the absolute that gives a depth to his work that I do not find in those who have followed after him or tried to simplify the complexity of his thought".[14] It seems hard not to find a certain religious quality in this discipline of reticence.

III

Ordinands in the Catholic Church are (still!) obliged to study philosophy. Why, or what it amounts to, would be difficult to answer. What it came to, in the first year, a quarter of a century ago, in the English Dominican study-house, was the traditional threefold introductory course: Logic, Cosmology, and Rational Psychology. Of the first two the least said the better. As it happened, however, the third was taught by the late Fr Cornelius Ernst, who, some ten years previously, had attended, in the Easter term of 1947, Wittgenstein's last lectures at Cambridge. The texts prescribed for the course were Aristotle's *De Anima*, together with the Commentary thereon by St Thomas Aquinas and Questions 75 to 89 inclusive of the Prima Pars of the *Summa Theologiae*.

Our first task was to write an essay on what the word "soul" meant – perhaps I should say: meant to *us*. My own effort (I blush at the memory) consisted of a lengthy exercise in free association, making out in the end that the word "soul" could never translate the Latin word "anima", or the Greek word "psyche", let alone the Hebrew word "nephesh", which I had newly discovered. The *meaning* of a word, at any rate of such a basic word, is an *experience*, and the experience crystallized and hoarded in any one of these words was simply untranslatable into any of the others. But this is the imagist or associationist theory of meaning, with roots as far back as Aristotle. The classical articulation is John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690. He was the ideologist of the so-called Glorious Revolution. It is no coincidence that he wrote the foundation document of liberal-bourgeois democracy (*Two Treatises of Government*), as well as the most influential statement of British Empiricism (so called).

The line is basically that the meaning of a word consists in the word's power to produce or evoke in the mind of the hearer an associated mental image. As Locke says, "unless a man's words excite the same ideas in the hearer which he makes them stand for in speaking, he does not speak intelligibly". That surely sounds obvious and harmless. It is supported along such lines as these: "Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight, yet they are all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs whereby those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others., For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds which with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make". Words, then, "by a voluntary imposition", become "arbitrarily" the "sensible marks" of these "invisible ideas" which are "hidden from others". Indeed, according to Locke, the mental image that a violet produced in one man's mind might be the same as a marigold produced in another man's – and there would be no way of telling, "because one man's mind could not pass into another man's body to perceive what appearances were produced by those organs".[15]

A clean break with all this kind of thing occurred (as Professor Michael Dummett rightly insists) in the work of Gottlob Frege, in a book that appeared in 1884. Nobody noticed at the time. In fact it was only as Wittgenstein (deeply conscious of his debt to Frege) returned to philosophical work in the early 1930s that methods were at last developed to identify and neutralize the notion of thinking as a process inside the head, in a completely encapsulated space, thus making of thinking something essentially "occult" (*Zettel,* no 606). Much currently fashionable work in philosophical psychology, from behaviourism to so-called cognitive science, would make one wonder whether Wittgenstein's (or Frege's) discoveries had even penetrated the grove of Academe.[16] But as regards everybody else, and perhaps especially Catholics, nothing shows that the lesson has been learned. On the contrary, people are if anything more prone than ever to consider "beliefs", "thoughts", and the rest, as invisible goings-on in the head, to which the subject alone has direct access. Nobody ever knows what anybody else is thinking. What one thinks or feels may be characterized in logical isolation from one's social and physical setting – or else it is behaviouristically reduced to its setting. Of course anybody can repeat the thesis that what goes on inside our heads (or hearts), far from being invisible and hidden from others, is plain on our faces and in the ways that we interact in conversation and community. But the little man inside is still looking out through the window of his eyes at the surrounding forest of strangers. The difficult exercise is to acknowledge the grip on oneself that is exerted by the myth of the self as a soul merely using a body (St Thomas's formulation). From beginning to end, Wittgenstein's *Investigations* lay bare the ramifications of this myth.

We start from inside ourselves. All my knowledge rests on my own private experiences, sensations, thoughts, etc. Thoughts are in one's head. Words are only there to communicate one's thoughts. It is a familiar and enchanting picture. Wittgenstein, however, begins outside in the public world of human communication. For him, it is shared practices, common actions, reactions and interactions, among human beings, that constitute the framework in which one's identity is created. My sense of myself, let alone the contents of my mind, depend radically on my being with others, my being in touch with others, my being attuned to others of my physical and social kind. Wittgenstein's discovery (one might say) is the depth of *community* in human life. But his results cannot be separated from the multiple probings in which they are embedded. They make sense only to those who have felt in their own experience the spell of transcendental egotism. It is far from clear that the message has been received by the clergy.

As for the young friars of twenty-five years ago, our first essays all showed our belief that the soul, whatever it was, must at least be invisible. In fact one member of the class delighted our instructor by comparing the soul with a round white disc (I had a student who did exactly that, last year); but that thought would take us right into old-fashioned piety, First Communion, the Prisoner in the Tabernacle, etc. For that matter, it isn't hard to see the links between a belief in the invisibility of the soul and some forms of crypto-docetic Christology. Our therapy, in effect, was to absorb the shock of Wittgenstein's famous aphorism (*Inv.* p 178): "The human being is the best picture of the human soul". The best "model" for the human soul is *der Mensch:* man alive. Another man's soul is in his face. Another person's soul isn't something the existence of which I only postulate or deduce. As Wittgenstein asks: "Do I *believe* in there being a soul in another man when I look into his eyes, with astonishment and delight"? Of course I can hide my thoughts from others – "But I can hide my thoughts from someone by hiding my diary. And in this case I'm hiding something that might interest him". Of course also you look at a face and sometimes wonder what is going on behind it – but you don't *have to* do so: "You don't *have to* regard the face as a facade behind which mental energies are working away privately". Wittgenstein concludes one great set of notes thus: "The idea of the human soul as being something you either see or don't see, is very like the idea of the meaning which goes alongside the word, either a process or an object".[17]

Is it seeing the problem "from a religious point of view", to bring meaning out of the head into the public world of the community? Or to find the human soul in the face? It's certainly a good start for a theological student.

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1 Two volumes of *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, 1980, with two volumes of *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology* due to appear this winter, all published by Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

2 F. C. Coplestone, *Religion and Philosophy*, 1974, p xiii

3 Malcolm's review appeared in *The Philosophical Review*, October 1954 and has been reprinted in his *Knowledge and Certainty*, 1963, as well as in George Pitcher's *Wittgenstein*, 1968, and elsewhere. Malcolm's incautious remark in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 1958, p 72, is probably at the root of all the talk about religion as a "form of life". See Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, 1982, p 96.

4 Drury, however, insists that Wittgenstein could never have succumbed to Pascal's kind of Fideism; see *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, edited by Rush Rhees, 1981, p 108.

5 They met in 1929 when Drury was studying philosophy in Cambridge, still intending to become a priest of the Church of Ireland. He eventually trained as a doctor and became a psychiatrist in Dublin, where he died on Christmas Day 1976. He had Wittgenstein and his friend Francis Skinner to stay in Connemara in 1934 and saw him a great deal when he stayed in Dublin in 1948-49. Drury was present at Wittgenstein's death and took the responsibility for asking Fr Conrad Pepler O P to say the office for the dying. The two remarks quoted occur on p 94 of the Rhees book.

6 The judgment of David Pears in his *Wittgenstein*, 1971, p 183, is representative: "All his philosophy expresses his strong feeling that the great danger to which modern thought is exposed is domination by science, and the consequent distortion of the mind's view of itself".

7 See *Culture and Value*, 1980, p 45. The remark is dated circa 1944 and presumably comes from the 52 pages numbered 128 in the *Nachlass:* "the most important manuscript on religion", according to Garth Hallett – see his *Companion*, 1977, p 426. On the same page Hallett records an utterance by G. E. M. Anscombe, Wittgenstein's chief literary executor and translator, to the effect that "nobody understood Wittgenstein's view on religion".

8 See the Malcolm *Memoir*, p 20.

9 See the Malcolm *Memoir*, p 44.

10 See the Rhees book, p 109.

11 *Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker*, 1969, p 35; translated in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, edited by C. G. Luckhardt, 1979, p 94 f.

12 *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), p 7.

13 Cited by Anthony Kenny, in *Wittgenstein and His Times*, edited by Brian McGuinness, 1982, p 16; Rush Rhees published selections from the Big Typescript in 1969 – in translation as *Philosophical Grammar*, 1974.

14 See the Rhees book, p 99 f.

15 The quotations are from Locke's *Essay* Book III, Chapter II, and Book II, chapter XXXII.

16 See *Thought and Object*, edited by Andrew Woodfield, 1982.

17 The last few quotations come from the end of Wittgenstein's *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, volume 1, 1982.