

Book Review:

Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?

by Norman Malcolm

edited with a response by Peter Winch

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I

Wittgenstein was a profoundly troubled man. Some of his earliest known writings--the letters to Engelmann from 1916--reveal his wretchedness and lack of faith. No systematic expression of Wittgenstein's views on religion have come to light, nor is it likely that any hitherto unknown theological treatise lies buried in the as yet unpublished portions of the *Nachlass*. What we have are tantalizing remarks scattered throughout the *Nachlass*, and equally tantalizing fragments from conversations he had with friends. The longest continuous prose piece is the *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*--but this shows not so much Wittgenstein's views on religion, as his views of someone else's view of some other religion, neither Frazer's nor Wittgenstein's. Drury declared that there were dimensions to Wittgenstein's work which were being neglected--an ethical, mystical, or religious dimension. Scholarly interest is quickening in this other dimension to Wittgenstein's work, and Malcolm's book comes opportunely.

"This essay by Norman Malcolm was the last piece of philosophical work he was able to complete before his death.... The word 'complete' needs qualification. He did indeed bring the essay so far that he was willing to have it published. Indeed, he attached so much importance to the subject that I think it is correct to say that he was anxious that it should be published. ... he was still working at it as far as he was able, and thinking of improvements until shortly before he died. ... No apology needs to be made for publishing the essay in its present form. It is a characteristic piece of work, written with the same sturdy elegance to which his readers are accustomed, showing no signs of lack of vigor and ... exuding the same unaffected intellectual honesty which was always one of the main strengths of his writing."

So writes Peter Winch in his preface. Winch has some substantial disagreements with Malcolm but reserves them for his own essay at the back. Malcolm's essay consists of an introduction and seven chapters; a bibliography and index are included.

II

Malcolm begins: "When Wittgenstein was working on the latter part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he said to his former student and close friend M. O'C. Drury: 'My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age; I have to swim so strongly against the tide.' In the same conversation he said: 'I am not a religious man but I cannot help

seeing every problem from a religious point of view.' For a long time I have been puzzled by this second remark. My understanding of Wittgenstein's thought seemed to be threatened. For the 'problems' to which he was referring were not the problems of poverty, disease, unemployment, crime, brutality, racial prejudice, war. The problems he meant are philosophical: those very perplexities and confusions with which he grapples in the *Investigations*."

Malcolm next offers a disclaimer: "I am going to present an interpretation of what it could mean to say that there is, not strictly a religious point of view, but something analogous to a religious point of view, in Wittgenstein's later philosophical thought." In the following chapter, he unpacks the statement "I am not a religious man".

He begins by recounting anecdotal evidence from the memoirs of various people (including himself, Drury, Pascal, and Rhees). These show that Wittgenstein had a genuine and profound concern for what we call matters of conscience. He prayed, made confessions, believed in a last judgement, had a stern sense of duty, and so on. He once said to Drury, before Drury was to be sent to the front as a medic in WWII, "If it ever happens that you get mixed up in hand to hand fighting, you must just stand aside and let yourself be massacred."¹

Malcolm next considers a number of remarks from Wittgenstein's journals, published in English as *Culture and Value*, which explicitly deal with such topics as Christianity, the Gospels, faith, the last judgement, the resurrection, and so on. Malcolm writes:

"He thought that the symbolisms of religion are 'wonderful'; but he distrusted theological formulations. He objected to the idea that Christianity is a 'doctrine' For Wittgenstein, the emphasis on religious belief had to be on doing -- on 'amending one's ways', 'turning one's life around' Once I quoted to him a remark of Kierkegaard which went something like this: 'How can it be that Christ does not exist, since I know that he has saved me?' Wittgenstein's response was: 'You see! It isn't a question of proving anything!'"²

Malcolm notes that "his religious sense was Christian; but he distrusted institutions" [RPV, p. 21] and he refers to another remark Wittgenstein made to Drury: "...one of the things you and I have to learn is that we have to live without the consolation of churches."³ "Wittgenstein had an intense desire for moral and spiritual purity," Malcolm continues [RPV, p. 23], but never felt at home in any established religious institution, church, or doctrine. "We can say with confidence that he knew the demands of religion" [RPV, p. 23] Malcolm concludes; what he leaves unsaid is that one of the things that troubled Wittgenstein throughout his life was the realization that he could not, or would not, meet those demands: "I cannot kneel to pray," Wittgenstein wrote, "because it's as though my knees are stiff."⁴

"Religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference, ... a way of living..."⁵ Wittgenstein wrote. It must be no mere detail in your life, but the purpose which informs it--otherwise it isn't religious, but something else (however intensely you may feel it). Evidently Wittgenstein did not commit his life to a system of reference, such as Roman Catholicism, and that is the sense in which he was not a religious man.

Chapter Two of Malcolm's book is a summary of the *Tractatus*. He concentrates on logic, the Picture Theory of Meaning, and explanation in terms of simples and complexes. This would be fine if it led to some insights into the so-called mystical conclusion of the *Tractatus*. It does not. Malcolm has nothing to say about the *Tractatus* on ethics, the Mystical, the ineffability of the solution to the problem of life, the freedom of the will, "God does not enter into the world", "the world of the happy is a different world from that of the unhappy", and so on. That is consistent with the *Tractatus*, but it looks more like an omission than a considered elucidation of the original.

Better summaries of Wittgenstein's logic are available, and Malcolm's is marred by two blunders. On p. 36 he writes: "if the words of a sentence designated only complex things, and those complex things no longer existed, then the words would not designate anything at all, and so the sentence would not have any sense." Malcolm has got it wrong here. Sense is the logical possibility that the complex exists, not the fact that it does; if the complex does not exist in fact, then the proposition is false, not senseless. Furthermore, his account of elementary propositions assumes that they consist only of names. This ignores the distinction Wittgenstein drew between *names*, which have meaning (i.e., the objects they represent), and *logical operators* (if, and, or) which have no meaning but which constitute the logical structure of the proposition within which the names show how things stand. A language which consisted of names with no logical operators would be a list of names, not a language.

Wittgenstein underwent a religious conversion or spiritual awakening while fighting on the Russian front in 1916. His entries in the *Notebooks* allow us to date the experience exactly, during the period from 4 June 1916 until his meeting with Engelmann in October 1916. During this time Wittgenstein was writing into his notebooks such things as "Fear in the face of death is the sign of a false life", "To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning", "Ethics and aesthetics are one," "He who lives not in time, but in the present, is happy. There is no death for those who live in the present." and so on. These thoughts occurred to him while he was posted at the front during some of the fiercest fighting, the Brusilov Offensive, in which some 200,000 Austrians were captured by the advancing Russians. It was a time of extreme danger and horror, and Wittgenstein distinguished himself more than once for conspicuous bravery. The so-called mystical portions of the *Tractatus* all date from this time; the logical portions, the Picture Theory of Meaning, and so on, were already complete before this time. It is from Wittgenstein's own correspondence that we know that he had come across a copy of Tolstoi's *The Gospels in Brief* and that it had "virtually kept him alive."⁶ A serious discussion of the sense in which Wittgenstein might later have meant that he saw every problem from a religious point of view, if it is to start with the *Tractatus*, ought to concentrate on the later 'mystical' conclusion of the *Tractatus*, not the earlier logic of it, and might profitably proceed by investigating the possible or probable influences of Tolstoi's *The Gospels in Brief* and Wm. James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on the young Wittgenstein--or leave well enough alone. But Malcolm is determined to follow his own course, and his discussion of the *Tractatus* turns out to be a tack in another direction before coming round to the point.

In Chapter Three, Malcolm jumps from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* and takes up Wittgenstein's rejection of the notions that everything can be explained and that an explanation ought to provide whatever it is that is essential or common to di-

verse phenomena (e.g., the general form of proposition, a complete analysis to absolute simples, and so on).

In Chapter Four Malcolm considers Noam Chomsky's theory that an innate universal grammar, or hidden mechanism, must be supposed in order to account for language acquisition. In the following chapter, he considers a number of other ordinary phenomena, such as thinking, remembering, knowing what one was about to say before one was interrupted, and so on, for which philosophers are often tempted to suppose that they have adequate explanations (and he gives a variety of examples); Malcolm dismisses them all as "failed explanations".

In his penultimate chapter, *The Limit of Explanation*, Malcolm outlines what Wittgenstein proposed in place of philosophical explanation: 'look, don't think!', 'leave everything as it is and just describe it', just accept that certain language-games are part of our form of life and that this fact neither has nor needs any explanation, and so on.

I shall not offer a detailed critique of Malcolm's central chapters, since Winch does this anyway in his own essay. I shall only remark that they offer something quite different to what one was led to expect from Malcolm's title. The central five chapters have little if anything to say about Wittgenstein's religious point of view or what Wittgenstein might have meant by saying that he had one; a better title might have been Wittgenstein on 'Explanation'.

Malcolm comes round to the point in his final chapter, *Four Analogies*: "In the *Introduction* I indicated that there is a link between Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook and a religious view of the world. This link is perhaps better called 'analogy' than 'resemblance'. The first analogy pertains to the concept of explanation: how it reaches a limit, and when pressed further it loses its sense." He then considers the concept of God (or a concept of God) as the point where certain kinds of explanations (reasonings, justifications, and so on.) stop. "When overwhelmed by calamity, [people who believe in God] arrive at a kind of reconciliation once they come to feel that [their] sufferings are God's will. They would see no sense in asking why God willed these troubles to occur. To speak of God's will is, for them, an end to explanation." [RPV, p. 84]

It is presumptuous to ask for God's reasons (Malcolm cites the Book of Job). This is part of the Judeo-Christian concept of God: it is not that God needs no reasons or justifications, but rather that this concept has a special role in the language-games of explaining and justifying.⁷ "When Wittgenstein wrote that 'we must do away with all explanation', this cannot be attributed to an eccentric dislike of explanations. The remark is an expression of Wittgenstein's conception of the peculiar nature of philosophy." [RPV, p. 4] That is, it is not the task of philosophy to explain everything--this theme runs throughout his work, from early to late. The task of philosophy is to cast into relief--to *show* rather than attempt to state--the nature of our concepts (and of our occasional misunderstanding of them). Wittgenstein did this by, among other things, demonstrating that: (1) explanations (reasons, justifications, etc.) stop at an uncertain point (or an uncertain grey area); (2) that it is not the same point in all cases, the point is different in different contexts, and that reveals something about our concepts, for that is the point where grammar meets essence⁸; and (3) that our concepts are often based not on a *priori* principles but contingent facts ('just something we do'). But it is the peculiar nature of philosophy (or perhaps the philosophical mind) to lead us to the point where explana-

tion stops, and then to tempt us to explain farther, to seek out, to invent, to confabulate, First, Last, or Highest Principles why it must be so and cannot be otherwise. And that too reveals something about our concepts--of philosophy and of what it is to explain something. That is the gist of Malcolm's chapters on pseudo- and failed explanations, namely, they all result from trying to explain too much, past the point where we should stop. In Western philosophy, unlike Western religion, it is not thought impertinent to continue asking questions where there are no answers⁹--or, what comes to the same thing, there is no generally acknowledged point passed which there are no sensible answers. 'God' is that point for theologians--but for philosophers, 'God is dead'. That is something which Wittgenstein wished would change.¹⁰

Malcolm's point is well-taken, but it does not provide an insight into the sense of Wittgenstein's remark that he could not help seeing problems from a religious point of view. What it shows is that Wittgenstein viewed religious language-games in the same way as other sorts of language-games, but not the sense in which his view of problems (philosophical or otherwise) constituted a religious point of view.

Analogy is a finely tuned instrument, and unless it is played with virtuosity, the result tends to be vague. Moreover, analogy is a weak solo instrument; it sounds better as an accompaniment. As Anscombe once said, "Wittgenstein is highly resistant to generalization." For an analogy alone to yield a definite insight into one of Wittgenstein's more cryptic remarks, it is necessary to specify in what respects the analogy holds and in what respects it does not. Perhaps this was self-evident to Malcolm--alas, it is not to this reader. It is not self-evident that if one interprets Wittgenstein's views on religion analogously to his views on philosophy, language, and explanation, then one will understand what Wittgenstein meant by saying that he saw problems from a religious point of view. It may yet turn out that that is the correct interpretation--or one of several fruitful interpretations--but Malcolm's essay does not establish that.

Malcolm's essay, ostensibly about Wittgenstein on religion, concentrates on everything but the obvious: it concentrates on Wittgenstein's early Picture Theory of Meaning, the metaphysics of objects and atomic facts, and so on, and, in Wittgenstein's later work, on his struggle against faulty explanations and pseudo-explanations. Of Wittgenstein's so-called mysticism in the *Tractatus*-period, there is not a whisper. Of the "ethical point" of the *Tractatus* (as Wittgenstein himself insisted in a letter to Ficker), Malcolm makes no mention. He barely mentions the "Lecture on Ethics" [1929] (and his remark that wonder at the existence of the world is "analogous" to being struck by the peculiarities of certain language-games, is properly qualified by Winch later on). These are the obvious places to start unpacking the question, what Wittgenstein might have meant by "a religious point of view". If these items are not clear enough, if it should be necessary, further, to go poking around in the man's private life for clues to interpret these items, then the next places to start looking are the influences on the young Wittgenstein of Tolstoi, Wm. James, Schopenhauer, and Weininger. Malcolm, unfortunately, offers no insight on these points; for such insights, the reader is better advised to turn to Engelmann's *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, and Ray Monk's biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*.

Malcolm proposes further analogies, but they are little more than adumbrations. One is based on the observation that "there is something wrong with us" [RPV, pp. 87-

90]. He relates Wittgenstein's remark that "People are religious in the degree that they believe themselves to be not so much imperfect, as ill"¹¹, to the idea, common in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, that philosophy is a kind of therapy to cure philosophers of the disease of philosophy (symptoms of which include pseudo-explanations, hidden mechanisms, spurious arguments, and so on). But, Malcolm cautions, "the analogy between the sickness of the spirit that is of religious concern and the intellectual diseases that philosophy would like to heal must not be exaggerated. The analogy only means that in both cases something is wrong with us--on the one hand, in the way we live and feel and regard others; and on the other hand, in the way we think when we encounter a philosophical question."¹² Unquestionably, philosophical temptation is a large and significant topic in Wittgenstein's work. There is, however, an important disanalogy here, as Winch points out, in that the philosopher is, in principle, able to cure himself by his own intellectual effort; whereas, in the Judeo-Christian tradition (although not in the Buddhist tradition), the original sinner is not able to attain salvation by his own effort, and it is not, in any case, an intellectual endeavor.

Malcolm's final analogy is based on the observation that, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy and especially in *On Certainty*, language-games ultimately come down to actions, not thoughts, explanations, or principles. 'Analogously', Wittgenstein's view was "that what is most fundamental in a religious life is not the affirming of creeds, nor even of prayer and worship--but rather, doing good deeds--helping others in concrete ways, treating their needs as equal to one's own, opening one's heart to them, not being cold or contemptuous but loving." [RPV, p. 92] Hereagain, I would say that the analogy is valid, as far as it goes; however, what it shows is that Wittgenstein tended to view two things in the same way, but not the sense in which that way of viewing things could or should be called religious. There is nothing specifically religious about the observation that language-games, as well as religious rituals, are ultimately based on cultural practices rather than on theories and explanations.

III

Winch's "Discussion of Malcolm's Essay" offers a detailed critique of many of Malcolm's points. Moreover, Winch, with characteristic precision, puts his finger on a problem in Malcolm's whole essay, namely that of offering an "analogy". As Winch writes, "By most people's standards Wittgenstein was obsessively precise about the way he expressed himself. ... he did not speak of an 'analogy' between philosophical and religious problems, but of 'seeing every problem from a religious point of view'." [RPV, p. 97] What Wittgenstein might have thought a religious point of view consisted in is the question Malcolm's title poses, but which his analogies persistently dodge, and Winch takes him to task for it.

As for Malcolm's account of Wittgenstein on explanation, Winch adds the important qualification that "Wittgenstein never thought that convincing the philosopher that explanations come to an end would be enough to stop the obsessional insistence on asking unanswerable questions. The real work that had to be done was to make clear the misunderstanding from which that insistence arose." [RPV, p. 103] I agree completely. Moreover, as Winch rightly points out, different kinds of explanations come to different kinds of ends, in religion, in philosophy, in science, in everyday life, and what

we do when we reach those ends is different in the different cases; Malcolm tends not to take this into account and thereby vitiates much of the force of his analogies.

What Wittgenstein sought through philosophy was not, as Malcolm would surely have agreed, a First, Last, or Highest Principle (like Descartes's *Cogito*), or a rationalization of *prima facie* irrational habits (as Kant had sought to defuse the radical skepticism of Hume), or a justification or foundation for any theory (as Kant had tried to found ethics on pure reason, and as Russell and Hilpert had tried to found mathematics on logic). As Wittgenstein already realized in the *Tractatus*-period, the whole project of trying to insert foundations under things is profoundly misguided: "Logic must take care of itself" he declared, and that means that it needs no foundations. Of course, Wittgenstein pondered over philosophical puzzles and often gave explanations (of a sort) of how such puzzles had arisen; this was essential to his method, but it was never his objective. What Wittgenstein sought through philosophy was something like the *ataraxia* of Pyrrho: not an explanation of how and why the facts came to be, but a clear overview of what the facts *are*--in order to achieve peace, in order to put an end to certain kinds of philosophical questions which trouble the mind and bring philosophy itself into question.¹³

This is "against the tide" of traditional methods and objectives in academic philosophy; thus, we may take Wittgenstein's remark to Drury, that his type of thought was not wanted, *together with* the remark that he saw problems from a religious point of view. Malcolm, apparently, did not see any connection between these two remarks. Winch does, and cites the Preface Wittgenstein wrote to the *Philosophical Remarks*: "I would like to say, 'this book is written to the Glory of God', but nowadays it would not be correctly understood. It means the book was written in good will, and so far as it was not but was written from vanity etc., the author would wish to see it condemned. He cannot make it more free of these impurities than he is himself." Winch is right to connect these remarks, and this supports his contention, contrary to Malcolm, that the problems Wittgenstein claimed to see from a religious point of view were not only philosophical problems (such as what a proposition is, or where explanation stops). Further such remarks supporting Winch's contention may be found throughout *Culture and Value*.¹⁴ If we also add Kraus's remark, known to Wittgenstein, that 'half a man cannot utter a whole sentence', then we begin to see how the vocation of philosophy could have been connected, for Wittgenstein, with matters of conscience or with a religious point of view not bound to any particular religious tradition or church. In 1946 Wittgenstein wrote: "Understanding oneself properly is difficult, because an action to which one might be prompted by good, generous motives is something one may also be doing out of cowardice or indifference. Certainly, one may be acting in such a way out of genuine love, but equally well out of deceitfulness, or a cold heart. Just as not all gentleness is a form of goodness. *And only if I were to submerge myself in religion could all these doubts be stilled.* Because only religion would have the power to destroy vanity and penetrate all the nooks and crannies."¹⁵ Pace Malcolm's claim that Wittgenstein placed more emphasis on doing good than on prayer, I would say that Wittgenstein's understanding of religiosity focused on the interior life, and actions (such as doing good to others) were relevant as indicators of the interior life.

His religious point of view seems to have had little or no content--Drury neatly described this as "intellectual asceticism": Wittgenstein consistently pared away all that was inessential from his 'mysticism', from his religious point of view, from his ethic. That

is, he pared away all doctrine, all dogma, all argument, all theory--and was left with: a) ineffability (what can only be shown, not said), b) a form of life (as Malcolm somewhat simplistically said, doing rather than thinking and explaining), and c) a rigorous sense of duty and a relentless desire to purge himself of all vestiges of "vanity, etc." He was vain about his intellectual abilities¹⁶ and about his writing style in the *Investigations*, and yet many remarks published in *Culture and Value* betray repeated doubts about the originality of his thinking.¹⁷ These are some of the places where one ought to look for clues to the sense in which Wittgenstein saw problems (philosophical and otherwise) from a religious point of view, from a point of view in which his own troubled conscience was always reflected and always in danger of betraying itself as half a man trying to utter a whole sentence.

Winch offers an analogy of his own, between architecture and philosophy. He cites two remarks in which Wittgenstein connects architecture with gesture.¹⁸ To understand a gesture is to catch a glimpse of the character of the one who makes it, "and if I am wrong about that, then I am wrong about the character of the gesture", Winch writes. He continues: "Wittgenstein's comparison between architecture and philosophy suggests we may say something similar about the relation between a piece of philosophical work and its author. And clearly he himself invites us to do so in the passage from the Preface to the *Philosophical Remarks*. [quoted above] ... His philosophical work was for him one of the most important expressions of his life (the scene, as it were, of some of his most important 'gestures'). It is to be expected therefore that there should be a religious dimension to his work."¹⁹

What happened to Wittgenstein's early 'mysticism' of the *Tractatus*-period? Did he simply outgrow it? Was it merely a youthful idealistic phase he went through? Did the accumulation of adult experience and wisdom eventually bring about the ascendance of a more earthy pragmatism and the gradual lapse of his youthful idealism? On the face of it, the development of Wittgenstein's philosophical work suggests just such an interpretation: the *Investigations* rejects all the idealistic metaphysics and transcendent ethics of the *Tractatus* and puts in their place a pragmatism immersed in ordinary, mundane, earthy detail. The *Investigations* has nothing whatever to say of an ethical, much less mystical or transcendent, nature.

But another interpretation has been suggested, by, among others, Drury, Malcolm, and Winch, namely that Wittgenstein's early 'mysticism' was enriched and broadened through experience, and that its ineffability was even more rigorously observed than before. The clues are to be found scattered among his miscellaneous remarks and in the memoirs of those who knew him. I agree with the second interpretation, but readily admit that the difficulty of substantiating it is formidable.

In Sum

Malcolm's essay has a lot more to say about Wittgenstein on explanation than on religion. Winch's qualifications of Malcolm's remarks on explanation are well-taken. Malcolm offers anecdotal evidence of Wittgenstein's view of religion, but for insights into Wittgenstein's *religious point of view*, the reader is better served by Winch's commentary. Winch's contribution alone is worth the price of admission.

NOTES

1. Rush Rhees ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford, 1984, p. 163. In WWI Wittgenstein was not such a pacifist: he volunteered for the post of artilleryman. What is the difference between killing people with a bayonet and with cannon fire?
2. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* [hereafter: RPV], Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 19.
3. Rhees, *ibid.*, p. 129.
4. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, [hereafter CandV], tr. by Peter Winch, Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 56:1.
5. Wittgenstein, CandV, p. 64:4.
6. Wittgenstein, letter to Ficker, 24.7.15.
7. Wittgenstein, CandV, p. 50:6: "The way you use the word 'God' does not show whom you mean, but rather what you mean."
8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [hereafter: PI], Macmillan, Third Edition, tr. by G.E.M. Anscombe, 371: "Essence is expressed by grammar."
9. In the Buddhist tradition also, the story is often told of a master who strikes a pupil for asking too many questions.
10. See Wittgenstein, CandV, pp. 61:1, 61:5, and especially 61:4: "I am by no means sure that I should prefer a continuation of my work by others, to a change in the way people live [sic--not merely think] which would make all these questions superfluous."
11. Wittgenstein, CandV, p. 45:6.
12. RPV, p. 89.
13. Wittgenstein, PI 133.
14. See, for example, Wittgenstein, CandV, pp. 16:5, 33:2, 35:7, 48:1, 49:4, 65:3: "...the greatness of what a man writes depends on everything else he writes and does."
15. Wittgenstein, CandV, p. 48:1, my italics.
16. "I am a very vain person" he said to Bouswma, cited by Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, The Free Press (Macmillan), 1990, p. 554.
17. Wittgenstein, CandV, p. 18-19 (Jewishness), 36:5, 53:2, p. 59-60 (taste), 63:3, 65:5, 72:5, 75:8.
18. Wittgenstein, CandV, pp. 22:7, 42:9.19. RPV, p. 132.