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'A Picture of a Human Being with Holes in It'

Wittgenstein on Grammar and its Significance for Understanding Religious Language

1. Introduction

In an illuminating late conversation with Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein says:

> Our statements about God have a different grammar from our statements about human beings. And if you try to talk about God as you would talk about a human being, you are likely to come to talk nonsense, to ask nonsensical questions and so on. In talking about God we often use images or parts of images that apply to human beings. This is so when we say: 'Wherever you are, God always sees what you do.' We know how this statement is used, and that is all right.
> So we may speak also of God's hearing our prayers. You might say then that in our picture of God there are eyes and ears. But it makes no sense if you then try to fill in the picture and think of God as having teeth and eyelashes and stomach and tendons and toenails. So we might say that our picture of God is like a picture of a human being with holes in it. Which means that the grammar of our language about God has holes in it if you look at it as the grammar of statements about a human being.[1]

In this passage, Wittgenstein is making the following four points:

(1) If you try to talk about God as you would about a human being, you are likely to speak nonsense (ask nonsensical questions etc.).

(2) In talking about God, we nevertheless use images or parts of images derived from ordinary talk about human beings.

(3) These similarities may obscure the grammatical differences between 'God-talk' and ordinary 'human being' language.

1 R. Rhees, On Religion, 413.

(4) If so, this may either lead us to conclude that the 'grammar of our language about God has holes in it', or we come to realize that the similarities to human being language notwithstanding, 'our statements about God have a different grammar from our statements about human beings.'

In this contribution, I will explain the significance of this passage as well as the far-reaching implications that Wittgenstein's concept of grammar has for the meaning of religious language. This will clear up some conceptual confusions about 'God-talk' and enable us to avoid incoherent ways of thinking about religious language.

My strategy is as follows. In the next section, I provide a brief outline of some of the key themes from Wittgenstein's later philosophy that enable us to make sense of Wittgenstein's notion. In section 3, I apply the lessons learnt to theological language, such as Barth's conception of the Trinity. In the final section, I return to a discussion of the aforementioned passage, in order to show how a recognition that 'our statements about God have a different grammar from our statements about human beings' can help us avoid a pernicious 'gaseous vertebrate' conception of God.

2. The Augustinian Picture

It is one of the most distinctive features of Wittgenstein's later philosophy that he believes that it is impossible to *solve* philosophical problems, as these are spawned by conceptual confusion and illusion. Rather, these problems can only be *dissolved* by putting together what we have always known, but have somehow lost sight of. In other words, philosophy is not a body of knowledge for Wittgenstein, consisting of a set of metaphysical truths, but rather the *activity* of logical (grammatical/conceptual) clarification or elucidation.[2] As Wittgenstein says: 'A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation

2 This was a view that Wittgenstein already held in the *Tractatus* and that he never changed his mind on, despite his later conception of philosophy being in many respects very different from his earlier one.

produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in "seeing connections"'[3].

The particular form our language takes can mislead us. The most basic misconception that Wittgenstein identifies in this respect – one that gives rise to a whole host of philosophical difficulties and misbegotten theories – is the temptation to think that 'where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit* [*Geist*].'[4] In other words, because our language is full of substantives, and we naively assume that the meaning of a word is the object it refers to – Wittgenstein calls this the 'Augustinian' picture of language, as it is by no means peculiar only to philosophy – if we are unable actually to find such an object in the world, we take it that there must be a 'supernatural' object or spirit that the word can refer to instead. Arguably, this was behind Plato's theory of the Forms – the 'Form of the Good' or of 'Beauty' can never be found in the myriad different objects we apply the words 'good' or 'beautiful' to, but only in a metaphysical realm of 'Forms' populated by the abstract objects that are allegedly the referents of these unadulterated essences. Similarly, mathematicians (including philosophers of mathematics) think that since number words cannot refer to empirical objects in the world, they must refer instead to abstract objects. Contemporary metaphysicians, moreover, believe that propositions, properties and 'truth-makers' are abstract objects to be investigated and theorized about. Last, but not least, philosophers of religion, theologians and ordinary religious people think that the word 'God' is the name of a supernatural object or entity.

The arguments in favour of these assumptions are often surprisingly thin, but we do not notice this, because it seems to us that things *must* be the way the Augustinian picture suggests. That is to say, we are primarily taken in by the fact that words like 'beauty', 'proposition', 'one', 'God', appear to operate in exactly the same way as more ordinary words whose referents we can straightforwardly point to: 'cat', 'table', 'chair'. From this we go on to draw the conclusion that in the former case, too, there must be objects these words stand for, it's just that they are not empirically locatable. In other words, we are taken in by the 'surface grammar' of our words –

3 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §122.
4 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §36.

how our words appear to function linguistically in a sentence – even though this may not be a good guide to what is really going on. Wittgenstein explains:

> In the use of words, one might distinguish 'surface grammar' from 'depth grammar'. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the sentence structure, the part of its use – one might say – that can be taken in by the ear. – And now compare the depth grammar, say of the verb 'to mean', with what its surface grammar would lead us to presume. No wonder one finds it difficult to know one's way about.[5]

The surface grammar of the verb 'to mean' suggests that it's the name of a mental process going on in the hidden medium of 'the mind' (another substantive we mistake for the name of an entity), whereas Wittgenstein's investigation shows that its depth grammar is actually quite different. Rather than referring to a hidden process, 'to mean' is much more similar to 'to be able to do something': A competent language-user can mean 'X' rather than 'Y', not because something special goes on in their mind (or brain), but because they are generally able to apply the words 'X' and 'Y' with facility. Whether a speaker meant 'X' or 'Y' can, therefore, be determined, not by looking into the speaker's mind, but by ascertaining whether the speaker has mastered a particular technique, what the speaker goes on to say and do, what consequences the speaker would be prepared (or not prepared) to draw etc.

So, when Wittgenstein says, at *Philosophical Investigation* §122, that our grammar is deficient in surveyability, what he means is that the 'depth grammar' is still unclear to us. All we see is the surface grammar, the mere syntactical structure of the word or sentence – 'the use that can be taken in by the ear' – not the actual use, what early Wittgenstein would have called the 'logical syntax' of the sign: the rules for the correct use of the word, which can be hidden underneath the word's apparent use (the 'surface grammar') in the way that the real form of a body may be obscured by a person's clothes.

Attending to the 'depth grammar', however, requires a willingness to look beyond the surface; to refuse to be taken in by superficial

5 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §644

linguistic appearances that may lead one astray. This is difficult, as the surface appearance may be attractive and tempt us to want to continue to view the problem in the accustomed manner. For this reason, Wittgenstein thinks that the struggle for clarity requires both an intellectual effort, as well as an engagement of the will. We need the intellectual acumen to see through the deceptive appearances, but also require the will-power to resist the spell that language casts: 'A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language only seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.'[6]

The Augustinian picture seems natural and intuitive, as it reduces the diversity of the actual function of words to an easily graspable common denominator: 'the words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names.'[7] Wittgenstein himself was tempted by something like such a view in his early work, the *Tractatus*. Later Wittgenstein realizes, however, that language is not as uniform as the Augustinian picture would have us believe, and whether a word functions as the name of an object is not something that can be settled independently of attending to the context in which the word is used. It is the overall role the word plays in the language-game or linguistic practice that tells us what kind of word it is and what it does. This is why Wittgenstein says: 'For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning" – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.'[8] Just as the significance of the different chess pieces can be explained by describing the moves these pieces can make in the game of chess, so the significance of a word can be explained by looking at how the word is employed in a particular language-game. This is not to advance a new theory of meaning – hence the warning that Wittgenstein's suggestion is not meant to apply across the board – but to give us the tools to free ourselves from enslavement to the Augustinian picture that made us believe that there is only one way that things can be.

6 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §115.
7 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §1.
8 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §43.

3. The Grammar of 'God'

Let us now apply the lessons learnt in the previous section to an understanding of religious language. In *Philosophical Investigations* themselves there is only one (famous) remark about theology: 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.).'[9]

Wittgenstein believes that one of the main confusions that arise in philosophy (and elsewhere) is to mistake a grammatical (logical) feature of a concept for an empirical one and to end up predicating of the thing what lies in the mode of representation.[10] The comparison with theology and the concept of 'God' serves to make this perspicuous (which is perhaps why theology is the first thing that occurs to Wittgenstein in this regard). A passage from the recently published lectures from the early 1930's throws more light on what Wittgenstein might have in mind here: 'Now (a) suppose "god" means something like a human being; then "he has 2 arms" & "he has 4 arms" are not grammatical propositions but (b) suppose someone says: You can't talk of god having arms, this is grammatical.'[11]

If we think the word 'God' is the name of something very akin to a human being, then saying that this god has two or four arms would not be different from offering a straightforward empirical description of something, e. g., 'this animal has two legs' or 'this animal has four legs'. Here we are describing something contingent that could be otherwise, had the world been different in some way. But if we say something like: 'It makes no sense to speak of God having arms', then we are making a grammatical remark that shows that it is part of the concept of God that we can't attribute certain physical features to him – it's not that God is an entity who just happens not to have these characteristics.

The essential features of our concepts are specified by the grammar of the concept. To give a non-theological example, to say that 'one is a number' is not to attribute some predicate (that of numberhood) to an abstract object, but to tell us how the word 'one' functions in our language – namely, as a number-word. To say that

9 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §372.
10 See L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §104.
11 L. Wittgenstein, Lectures, 321.

'red is a colour' is similarly to say something about the grammar of 'red', not to give a description of an esoteric object. To think otherwise, is precisely to predicate of the thing what lies in the mode of representation: to believe one is tracing the thing's nature when in fact you are giving a rule for the correct use of a word (i.e., something grammatical).

Many philosophical and theological problems arise if one doesn't heed this distinction. If, for instance, one believes that the word 'God' functions like the name of a 'gaseous vertebrate'[12] then it would make sense to ask where such an entity could be found, whether it had certain (invisible) physical features, if it ever got bored, etc. Wittgenstein thinks that such questions are nonsensical. As he says in the conversation with Rhees already cited: 'Our statements about God have a different grammar from our statements about human beings. And if you try to talk about God as you would talk about a human being, you are likely to come to talk nonsense, to ask nonsensical questions and so on.'[13]

Why does Wittgenstein think that one would come to speak nonsense if one tried to talk about God as one would about a human being? Primarily, because this betrays a category mistake: the word 'God' is not the name of a 'gaseous vertebrate' with invisible stomach and toenails, even if the 'surface grammar' of the word would perhaps, at first sight, suggest this. But to follow the surface grammar here would be to turn the concept of God into that of an idol; into that of an in principle perceivable entity, such as a Golden Calf, for example, or a god who lives on Mount Olympus – God-conceptions very different from that of the Christian God with whom Wittgenstein is primarily concerned.

Now one might think that, apart from some militant atheists, who believe that people engage in religious practices out of foolishness[14], there are not many Christian theologians or religious believers who

12 The phrase is Ernst Häckel's and mentioned by Wittgenstein in L. Wittgenstein, Lectures, 319. See further discussion below.

13 R. Rhees, On Religion, 413.

14 A notion that Wittgenstein particularly criticizes in the case of English anthropologist, Frazer, who interpreted the magical rituals of primitive tribes as forms of false science: 'All that Frazer does is to make the practice plausible to those who think like him. It is very strange to present all these practices, in the end, so to speak, as foolishness. But it never does become plausible that people do all

would be happy to ascribe such a crude grammar to the word 'God'. But such an appearance would be deceptive, as quite often, an anthropomorphic conception of God comes dressed in metaphysical garb, which can make the crudeness harder to spot. For example, the God of analytic theism is conceived as an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good 'person without a body' – where a 'person without a body' is usually regarded in Cartesian manner as a purely 'mental substance'[15]. Here the idea is that human beings have both a mind and a body – where, if you are a Cartesian (or neo-Cartesian), these words refer to distinct substances (or entities). Hence, if God is like a person, but lacks a body, he comes out, on this view, as being a super-powerful 'mental substance'. This shows that the God of analytic theism is a 'gaseous vertebrate'. As Häckel perceptively pointed out more than a hundred years ago:

> In the higher and more abstract forms of religion this idea of bodily appearance is entirely abandoned, and God is adored as a 'pure spirit' without a body…Nevertheless, the psychic activity of this 'pure spirit' remains just the same as that of the anthropomorphic God. In reality, even this immaterial spirit is not conceived to be incorporeal, but merely invisible, gaseous. We thus arrive at the paradoxical conception of God as a *gaseous vertebrate*.[16]

Quite apart from all the other problems that such a conception raises[17], the 'gaseous vertebrate' view is clearly driven by the Augustinian picture of language: the meaning of a word is the object it stands for. 'God', being a proper name, i.e., the name of a person – but obviously not of a physical one with tendons and toenails – must, therefore, be the name of a disembodied one: a purely 'spiritual' being. In other words, the 'surface grammar' of the word 'God' might tempt us to think that 'God' is the name of a gaseous vertebrate when, actually, the 'depth grammar' is quite different.

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this out of sheer stupidity' (L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough, §1).

15 See, for example, R. Swinburne, Philosophical Theism; R. Swinburne, The Coherence of Theism.

16 E. Häckel, The Riddle, 288.

17 For further discussion, see G. Schönbaumsfeld, A Confusion of the Spheres; G. Schönbaumsfeld, Ludwig Wittgenstein; G. Schönbaumsfeld, No Gaseous Vertebrates.

But how do we work out what the depth grammar is? In the same way as we would with any other word: by attending to its overall use in the language or practice. Wittgenstein says:

> Really what I should like to say is that here too what is important is not the *words* you use or what you think while saying them, so much as the difference that they make at different points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? And just the same thing goes for the Trinity. Theology that insists on *certain* words & phrases & prohibits others, makes nothing clearer. (Karl Barth)
> It gesticulates with words, as it were, because it wants to say something & does not know how to express it. *Practice* gives the words their sense.[18]

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying here is that it is not possible to find out what someone means – or, indeed, whether two people mean the same – merely by looking at the words these people use. For they can use the *same words* and yet mean something completely different. The Augustinian picture glosses over this important insight by insisting that all that matters to meaning is reference: as long as we have some idea of what the objects are that the words in question are supposed to refer to, we know what the words mean. But this, of course, is very simplistic. Not only is 'reference' itself a word in the language, which might not have a context-invariant use (i.e., 'reference' might mean slightly different things in different contexts), but knowing only that the word stands for some object, does not give you the rules for the correct use of the word. This is why Wittgenstein spends so much time talking about ostensive definition at the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations*. An ostensive definition will only teach me the use of a word, if the overall use of the word in the language is already clear[19] – i.e., if I already know what a name is, for instance, and how it functions: 'When one shows someone the king in chess and says "This is the king", one does not thereby explain to him the use of this piece – unless he already

18 L. Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 97/85 (The first number refers to the 1998 edition of *Culture and Value*, the second to the 1977 version; the translation is from the 1998 edition).

19 See L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §30.

knows the rules of the game except for this last point: the shape of the king.'[20]

I take it that when Wittgenstein mentions Karl Barth in the passage from *Culture and Value* 97/85, he is referring to Barth's conception of the Trinity (God Father, God Son and Holy Ghost) as 'three ways of being' *(Seinsweisen)*[21]. Barth wanted to replace standard 'three-personal' or 'modal' conceptions of God – where God is regarded as manifesting himself either as three persons or as one person in different 'modes' – with his own preferred version of *Seinsweisen.* Presumably, Wittgenstein is criticizing Barth for merely insisting on a different form of words, instead of clarifying the actual *use* of the word 'Trinity'. That is to say, Wittgenstein seems to think that banning one form of words, while allowing another, will not deepen my understanding of the relevant concept, unless the new form of words makes a significant difference to the religious practice itself. If it makes no difference which form of words is used, then these words are idle wheels: 'a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it is not part of the mechanism.'[22]

If, for example, I think that god is an invisible super-human with four arms, then this must, if it is to count as a genuine belief – rather than as an empty mouthing of words – have some implications for how I relate to this god and the rituals that I participate in. If, on the other hand, what I believe makes no difference to what I say and do, then this casts serious doubt on whether I really mean what I claim to mean.

Now, one can whole-heartedly endorse these points, but nevertheless wonder whether Wittgenstein's criticism of Barth is entirely fair. For, regardless of what Barth's own, specific intentions were, one could read Barth's proposal in a more Wittgensteinian manner as an attempt to clarify the grammar of the concept 'Trinity'. That this would then not merely be an idle move, would manifest itself in a way similar to what Wittgenstein himself wants to achieve in philosophy: the vanishing of a problem and the loss of the desire to ask certain nonsensical questions.

20 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §31.
21 K. Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 1, 355.
22 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §271.

Let me explain. Barth thought that talk of a 'three person' God leads to the two standard (theological) ways of conceiving of the Trinity – 'tritheism' and 'modalism' – both of which he found extremely problematic. Tritheism, for example, makes people ask: How can one God be three distinct persons, and how is this compatible with the alleged monotheism of Christianity? Modalism, on the other hand, is the thought that God is not 'triune' in and of himself, but merely manifests himself that way 'in history'. This, as Molnar notes, 'leads to a search for a God behind the God who makes himself known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, modalism not only posits a 'hidden Fourth' behind the God who is eternally one and three, but for modalism, 'the divine subjectivity is sucked up into the human subjectivity which enquires about a God that does not exist' (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1, 382)'[23]. In other words, modalism leads to a kind of regress problem, where we have to posit a fourth God 'hidden' behind his 'historical' manifestations, which might lead one to wonder whether there are further 'Gods' behind the fourth and so on *ad infinitum*.

Of course, one might question whether this can really be the correct way of understanding talk of 'personhood' in this context, and whether Barth, by making these criticisms, is not precisely exhibiting the confusion that Wittgenstein is trying to extirpate: that of being taken in by the surface grammar of the concept, instead of looking at how the 'depth grammar' actually functions[24]. Indeed, this is presumably the reason why Wittgenstein is taking issue with Barth in the first place: A theology which insists on the use of *certain particular* words and phrases, and outlaws others, does not make anything clearer. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to offer an interpretation of Barth's move that can avoid this objection. This may not be an interpretation that Barth himself would have endorsed, but it allows us to read what Barth is doing in a way that is more consistent with Wittgenstein's intentions.

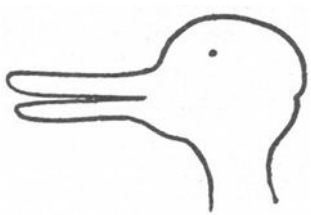
My proposal is as follows. By introducing the concept of '*Seinsweisen*', Barth is aiming to help someone, who is puzzled by the notion of a triune God. If our understanding of the concept (of the Trinity) is obstructed by the thought that 'personhood' must imply either

23 P. Molnar, Barth on the Trinity, 23–33.

24 My thanks to Farid Suleiman for pressing me on this.

tritheism or modalism, then conceiving of 'personhood' as a 'way of being' might liberate one from having to draw these (nonsensical) conclusions. Naturally, this presupposes – and as Wittgenstein says – that we have a clearer grasp of what it means to speak of God's *Seinsweisen* than we do of talk of God's 'three personhood', and this may be questionable. Nevertheless, should it turn out that this new way of speaking cures our urge to ask the aforementioned problematic questions and save us from the bumps 'that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language'[25], then this would show that Barth's conceptual clarification has enabled one to acquire a new way of thinking about God that has made the previous problems disappear.

In other words, the 'surface grammar' of the concept of the Trinity could lead one to believe that the triune God is to be conceived analogously to three distinct human consciousnesses (or persons[26]) (with its incumbent problems), when the 'depth grammar' is more fruitfully to be construed as operating along Barthian lines. So, on my Wittgensteinian interpretation of this notion, God's '*Seinsweisen*' are not to be reified into three different entities distinct from God, just as the two different ways of seeing the duck-rabbit figure that Wittgenstein discusses in the second part of Philosophical Investigations do not imply that the figure has two different natures corresponding to the two different ways of seeing it.



The duck-rabbit

25 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §119.

26 Whether it is a good idea to equate a person with an 'individual self-consciousness' is not a question I can pursue here. I'm merely trying to give an interpretation of what Barth is doing that is maximally consistent with what I believe Wittgenstein is up to (whether or not Barth or Wittgenstein would have accepted this interpretation).

That is to say, just as we do not learn to see the rabbit-aspect of the duck-rabbit figure by discovering any additional, purely visual features of the duck-rabbit, so we don't come to believe in the triune God by making new discoveries about God's nature (namely, that God is really three). For, noticing an 'aspect' – e. g., the rabbit-aspect in the duck-rabbit figure – is quite different from noticing an object's colour, for example. While I can draw the object with or without this colour, and by doing so, show you what I have seen, I cannot, in the same way, 'show' you the rabbit-aspect, without simply reproducing the same lines (i.e., drawing the same thing). Rather, if asked what I now see, I would explain by 'pointing to all sorts of pictures of rabbits, would perhaps have pointed to real rabbits, talked about their kind of life, or given an imitation of them.'[27].

In other words, one needs to go 'beyond' the figure itself in order to explain what one sees, as the rabbit-aspect is not a property of the lines on the page in the same way that the shape of the 'appendages' or the colour of the dot are distinct material properties of the object drawn. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein says that 'seeing as' is not part of perception.[28] Although in one sense, we 'see' the drawing in a different way when we see the rabbit-aspect light up – which is why we continue to use the word 'see' – in another sense we don't see anything different, because the arrangement of marks on the page hasn't changed. Consequently, what one is noticing is not an additional visual feature of the object, but rather 'an internal relation between it and other objects.'[29]

Learning to see internal relations between things, however, is not a matter of acquiring superior vision; it is much more akin to developing a new skill or conceptual capacity. This is why Wittgenstein says that 'only of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility would one say that he saw it now *this* way, now *that* way.'[30]. For instance, someone who had never seen any rabbits – either in real life, picture books, or on the internet – would not be able to see the duck-rabbit as a rabbit. Neither would

27 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophy of Psychology, §120. The *Philosophy of Psychology* is a fragment that was formerly part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

28 See L. Wittgenstein, Philosophy of Psychology, §137.

29 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophy of Psychology, §248.

30 L. Wittgenstein, Philosophy of Psychology, §222.

someone who had no experience with seeing two-dimensional pictures as representations of three-dimensional objects be able to see either the duck- or rabbit-aspect of the duck-rabbit figure. Instead, such a person would perhaps only be able to see what we see in an abstract drawing. Wittgenstein calls the inability to see 'something as something' 'aspect-blindness'.[31] This is not a matter of having defective perceptual organs, but more akin to a lack of imagination or the absence of what, in another context, we call a 'musical ear'[32].

If we apply these insights to the Barthian conception of the Trinity, the following picture emerges. Whereas before our conversion to Christianity (or before we developed, as Christians, a deeper understanding of the Trinity), we might have had some idea of what it means to speak of a belief in God, the notion that 'God is three persons' would have seemed foreign and opaque to us. We would have failed to find a use for this picture of God; failed to apply it in our (religious) lives.

As previously suggested, such a failure could have been compounded by the various intellectual problems that arise from standard ways of trying to understand the concept, which might have led one to dismiss it as a nonsensical notion. If, as a result of Barth's conceptual clarification, one now recognizes, however, that the grammar of a 'triune' God should not be conceived along ordinary ways of thinking about human persons, then the way is paved for a 'conceptual reorientation'[33] to occur. And such a conceptual reorientation, I submit, is like learning to see new aspects in things: Whereas before I could not see how God might appositely be describable as 'triune', I am now able to recognize that the same God can be seen under three different aspects (Father, Son and Holy Ghost) – can be conceived as exhibiting three different 'ways of being' – without this requiring any strange metaphysical contortions (tritheism or modalism). In this respect, I learn to see that there is an *internal* relation between the concept of God and the concept of the Trinity, not an external relation between three different entities that somehow need to be subsumed into a mereological sum.

31 See L. Wittgenstein, Philosophy of Psychology, §257.

32 For further discussion, see G. Schönbaumsfeld, 'Meaning-Dawning', 540–556, and G. Schönbaumsfeld, Wittgenstein on Religious Belief.

33 See C. Diamond, Wittgenstein on Religious Belief, 99–137.

4. Implications for Religious Language

The foregoing has important implications for how we should (or should not) understand religious language. In the conversation with Rhees mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein continues:

> In describing our picture of God we may speak of it as being made up of parts of a picture of a human being together with other things which have no resemblance to any part of a human being. You might start the description of a curve by taking drawings of familiar curves: a circle, an ellipse, a parabola, a hyperbola. Then describe it by saying: 'You see here it is part of a parabola, there then it is part of a circle, here it is a straight line which goes into part of a spiral, etc.' And the curve you described might then have an equation entirely unlike any of the familiar curves.[34]

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying in this passage is that the grammar of 'God' contains aspects of human grammar, such as talk of God 'hearing' and 'seeing', 'together with other things which have no resemblance to any part of a human being.' He then goes on to compare a description of this grammar to that of a very strange new curve, which also contains some familiar parts – e. g. parabola-parts, circular parts, parts of a spiral – while nevertheless having an equation which is 'entirely unlike any of the familiar curves'.

The main point of this analogy is to undermine an atomistic conception of meaning, according to which the meaning of a sentence is conceived as being nothing more than the sum-total of the meanings of the individual words comprising it (the sentence's 'atoms'). Such a conception implies that if I understand the individual words of which a sentence is composed, I will automatically also understand the sentence as a whole. Although Wittgenstein has no sympathy for this view in any domain of discourse, it is particularly disastrous for the attempt to understand the meaning of religious language. A passage from Nielsen illustrates the problem:

> It is not [...] that I think that God is an object among objects, but I do think...that he must – in some very unclear sense – be taken to be a particular existent among existents though, of course, 'the king' among existents, and a very special and mysterious existent, but not an object,

34 R. Rhees, On Religion, 403.

> not a kind of object, not just a categorical or classificatory notion, but not a non-particular either. Though he is said to be infinite, he is also said to be a person, and these two elements when put together seem at least to yield a glaringly incoherent notion. He cannot be an object – a spatio-temporal entity but he is also a he – a funny kind of he to be sure – who is also said to be a person – again a funny kind of person – who is taken to be a person without a body: a purely *spiritual* being. This makes him out to be a 'peculiar reality' indeed. He gets to be even more peculiar when we are told he is an *infinite* person as well. But now language has really gone on a holiday.[35]

These remarks exemplify how the similarities and differences between God-talk and descriptions of ordinary human beings can confound us. On the one hand, God is said to be a person, which appears to make him similar to a human being; on the other, he is described as 'infinite', and, hence, as radically different from a human person. Small wonder that Nielsen ends up concluding that what we have here is a glaringly incoherent notion.

The way out of this quandary consists in heeding Wittgenstein's warning that, despite containing some familiar parts (words), the 'equation' we are confronted with here is 'entirely unlike any of the familiar curves'. Consequently, we need to be wary of simply supposing, as does Nielsen, that there is nothing more to understanding the sentence 'God is an infinite person' than by combining the individual atoms, 'infinite' and 'person', into a peculiar complex. What is more, we can also not just assume – and this is a further mistake that Nielsen makes – that it is possible to inspect the words alone, in order to find out whether they make sense or not. For, this is to ignore Wittgenstein's important injunction that 'practice gives the words their sense': that we cannot find out what words and sentences mean without attending to the particular context of use in which these words have their life.

If we are, therefore, to have any hope of understanding what it means to call God infinite, we have to attend to the overall use to which this form of words is put in the religious practice as a whole. That is to say, we cannot just assume that because we know what 'person' and 'infinite' mean in non-religious contexts, we consequently know what it means to say these things about God – just as knowing what 'person' and 'three' mean in ordinary contexts will

35 K. Nielsen / D. Z. Phillips, Wittgensteinian Fideism, 123.

not automatically help one to understand what it means to speak of a 'triune' God (indeed, and as we just seen, it may mislead one into believing that the concept of the Trinity implies that three distinct entities are really one and the same).

As Wittgenstein already realized in the *Tractatus*, a *Satz* is more than the aggregation of its individual parts: 'Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus *(Zusammenhang)* of a proposition does a name have meaning.'[36]. In other words, the overall sense of the proposition contributes to the meaning of the individual parts (words). Consequently, sentence-meaning cannot be derived from a summation of the meanings of the individual parts (say, the meanings that a dictionary gives you). This implies that Nielsen is wrong to think that he should, straightforwardly, be able to understand God-talk, just because he is familiar with the individual words that the religious person uses to speak about God. For, as we have already seen in the previous section, the grammar of 'God' – despite sharing features with ordinary descriptions of human beings – is really quite different from that of a human person (even a super-powerful one).

We can now apply these insights to making sense of Wittgenstein's conversation with Rhees. At the beginning of the conversation quoted in the previous section, Wittgenstein says, '"Wherever you are, God always sees what you do." We know how this statement is used, and that is all right.' In other words, in respect of this particular way of talking about God, Wittgenstein seems to think that we would not get into confusion about the use of our words, perhaps because the phrase is so familiar to us and its meaning clearly metaphorical: It is not that God has strange sense-organs that are able to see all there is to be seen; rather, the phrase serves to remind one that God is always aware of what one is doing and judging one's actions (even if one manages to hide them from others).

The upshot of this is that it is only possible to develop an understanding of religious language-use, if one attends to the depth grammar of these expressions instead of being mesmerized by the superficial similarities between God-talk and discourse about ordinary, empirical things. That is to say, although 'in our picture of God there are eyes and ears', 'it makes no sense if you then try to fill in the picture and think of God as having teeth and eyelashes and

36 L. Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 3.3

stomach and tendons and toenails'. Consequently, we must be careful that the familiar we recognize does not blind us to the unfamiliar we have yet to make sense of. Otherwise, instead of realizing that we are confronted by 'an equation entirely unlike all familiar curves', we will rashly end up concluding that the grammar of God 'has holes in it', or indeed, that it is, in Nielsen's words, 'plain incoherent'. Both responses can be avoided, if we look at the depth grammar and recognize that the sense of religious discourse can only be understood if we don't just inspect the words alone, but learn more about the religious practices in which these concepts have their life. In short, the thought that the grammar of our language about God 'has holes in it' is compulsory only *if* we construe it as the grammar of statements about a human being – if, in other words, we turn the Christian conception of God into that of a gaseous vertebrate.

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