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WITTGENSTEINIAN FIDEISM

KAI NIELSEN

I

WITTGENSTEIN did not write on the philosophy of religion.¹ But certain strands of his later thought readily lend themselves to what I call Wittgensteinian Fideism. There is no text that I can turn to for an extended statement of this position, but certain remarks made by Winch, Hughes, Malcolm, Geach, Cavell, Cameron and Coburn can either serve as partial statements of this position, or can be easily used in service of such a statement.² Some of their contentions will serve as targets for my argumentation, for as much as I admire Wittgenstein, it seems to me that the fideistic conclusions drawn by these philosophers from his thought are often absurd. This leads me back to an inspection of their arguments and the premisses in these arguments.

These philosophers call attention to the linguistic regularities concerning 'God' that Ziff notes, but beyond anything Ziff claims they stress that religious concepts can only be understood if we have

¹This now turns out to be inaccurate. Since this was first written, the following book has been announced: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*.

²The scattered but central sources here are as follows: Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: 1958); 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. I (October, 1964), pp. 307-325; G. E. Hughes, 'Martin's Religious Belief', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40 (August, 1962), pp. 211-19; Norman Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review* (1960); 'Is it a Religious Belief That "God Exists"?'; *Faith and the Philosophers*, John Hick (ed.) (New York: 1964); Peter Geach, 'Nominalism', *Sophia*, vol. III No. 2 (1964); Stanley Cavell, 'Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy', *Daedalus*, vol. 93 (Summer, 1964); J. M. Cameron, *The Night Battle* (Baltimore: 1962); 'What Is a Christian?' *The New York Review of Books*, vol. VI (May 26 1966); Robert Coburn, 'A Neglected Use of Theological Language', *Mind*, vol. LXXII (July, 1963).

an insider's grasp of the form of life of which they are an integral part.¹ As Malcolm puts it, the very genesis of the concept of God grows out of a certain 'storm in the soul'. Only within a certain form of life could we have the idea of an 'unbearably heavy conscience' from which arises the Judeo-Christian concept of God and of a 'forgiveness that is beyond all measure'. If, as Malcolm maintains, one does not have a grasp of that form of life from 'the inside not just from the outside' and, if as an insider, one does not have 'at least some inclination to *partake* in that religious form of life', the very concept of God will seem 'an arbitrary and absurd construction'. There cannot be a deep understanding of the concept of God without 'an understanding of the phenomena of human life that gave rise to it.'²

Certainly much of what Malcolm says here is unquestionably true. Anthropologists for years have stressed, and rightly, that one cannot gain a deep understanding of the distinctive features of a tribe's culture without a participant's understanding of the way of life of that culture. Concepts cannot be adequately understood apart from a grasp of their function in the stream of life. If a man has no experience of religion, has never learned God-talk where the 'engine isn't idling', he will not have a deep understanding of religion. But having such an understanding of religion is perfectly compatible with asserting, as did the Swedish philosopher Axel Hägerström, that the concept of God is 'nothing but a creation of our own confused thought' growing out of our need to escape 'from the anxiety and wearisomeness of life'.³ And this comes from a philosopher who, as C. D. Broad's biographical remarks make evident, was once thoroughly immersed in the religious stream of life.

Malcolm's above contention is only one of the Wittgensteinian claims that I shall examine. The following cluster of dark sayings have, when they are accepted, a tendency to generate what I call Wittgensteinian fideism:

1. The forms of language are the forms of life.
2. What is *given* are the forms of life.
3. Ordinary language is all right as it is.
4. A philosopher's task is not to evaluate or criticise language or the forms of life, but to describe them where necessary and

¹Paul Ziff, 'About God' in *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York: 1961).

²Norman Malcolm, 'Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *The Philosophical Review* (1960).

³Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion* (London: 1964), p. 216.

- to the extent necessary to break philosophical perplexity concerning their operation.
5. The different modes of discourse which are distinctive forms of life all have a logic of their own.
 6. Forms of life taken as a whole are not amenable to criticism; each mode of discourse is in order as it is, for each has its own criteria and each sets its own norms of intelligibility, reality and rationality.
 7. These general, dispute-engendering concepts, i.e. intelligibility, reality and rationality are systematically ambiguous; their exact meaning can only be determined in the context of a determinate way of life.
 8. There is no Archimedean point in terms of which a philosopher (or for that matter anyone else) can relevantly criticise whole modes of discourse or, what comes to the same thing, ways of life, for each mode of discourse has its own specific criteria of rationality/irrationality, intelligibility/unintelligibility, and reality/unreality.¹

A Wittgensteinian Fideist who accepted such contentions could readily argue that religion is a unique and very ancient form of life with its own distinctive criteria. It can only be understood or criticised, and then only in a piecemeal way, from within this mode by someone who has a participant's understanding of this mode of discourse. To argue, as I do and as C. B. Martin has, that the very first-order discourse of this form of life is incoherent or irrational can be nothing but a confusion, for it is this very form of life, this very form of discourse itself, that sets its own criteria of coherence, intelligibility or rationality. Philosophy cannot relevantly criticise religion; it can only display for us the workings, the style of functioning, of religious discourse.

I agree with such Wittgensteinians that to understand religious discourse one must have a participant's understanding of it. However, this certainly does not entail that one is actually a participant, that one *accepts* or *believes* in the religion in question. But I do *not* agree that the first-order discourse of religion is in order as it is, and I do not agree that philosophy cannot relevantly criticise religions or forms of life. I shall examine these issues by examining some Wittgensteinian defences of the above approach to religion.

Let me remark at the outset that I am not sure to what extent Wittgenstein himself would have accepted a Wittgensteinian Fideism. But Wittgenstein's work has been taken in that way and it is thought in many quarters that such an approach will give us a

¹I do not necessarily lay all these aperçu at Wittgenstein's door, but all of them can clearly be found in one or another of his disciples.

deep grasp of religion and will expose the shallowness of scepticism. For this reason I shall carefully examine the view I call Wittgensteinian Fideism. But do not forget, what I indeed hope would be true, that Wittgenstein might well wish to say of Wittgensteinians what Freud said of Freudians. I shall start with G. E. Hughes who presents the most direct confrontation with my view.

II

In his discussion of C. B. Martin's *Religious Belief*, Hughes has defended in an incisive way the claim that, as a whole, rock-bottom, religious utterances or propositions are in order as they are.¹ He does not claim that they are *all* in order but only that generally speaking they are.

He starts by asking what are our criteria for conceptual confusion when we claim that *en bloc* first-order religious propositions are in conceptual disarray. He remarks, 'I should guess that it is possible to show any category of statements or expressions to be conceptually confused if one is allowed to insist that they must conform to the logic of some other category or categories of statements or expressions if they are to be said to make sense'.² Certainly, Max Black and a host of others have made it evident that if we try to treat inductive reasonings as if they were deductive ones, we would make nonsense of them. Similarly, if we try to construe moral statements as if they were empirical statements, and moral reasoning as if it were scientific reasoning, we would make nonsense out of morality. We have learned to treat these concepts and modes of reasoning as being *sui generis*; inductive reasonings and moral reasoning have, in the sense Ryle uses 'logic', a logic of their own. Our job as philosophers is to come to understand and display that logic, not to distort it by trying to reduce it to the logic of some other preferred type of discourse or to try to interpret it in terms of some ideal language like that found in *Principia Mathematica*. We should, Hughes argues, in doing the philosophy of religion adopt 'an alternative programme for meta-theology . . . that . . . consists in allowing the actual use of religious terms and statements to determine their logic, rather than trying to force an alien logic upon them'.¹ Hughes remarks that if we adopt this programme rather than the one Martin adopts (a programme similar to the one I have adopted) our philosophical arguments

¹G. E. Hughes, 'Martin's *Religious Belief*', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40 (August, 1962), pp. 211-19.

²*Ibid.*, p. 214.

³*Ibid.*

about religion can be seen in a quite different light. Arguments which show how religious statements generate contradictions when they are construed on the model of other types of statements 'can now be construed as showing some of the peculiarities of their own logic'.¹

Hughes illustrates his argument with an example from Chapter Four of Martin's *Religious Belief*. Martin argues there (pp. 40-1) that 'God' may be used in either of two ways: as a proper name referring to a particular being (a name such as 'Charles' or 'Sven') or as a descriptive term. Martin tries to show that using it in both ways at once leads to a contradiction. Hughes then remarks that Martin 'makes out a massive and powerful case for this contradictoriness provided that the alternatives are as he states them'.² That is to say, Martin's remarks are well taken about 'proper names and descriptive phrases as applied to particular things'.³ But these acute remarks are all beside the point, Hughes contends, for God is not thought of as a 'particular thing' within orthodox Jewish and Christian thought. The 'patterns of what makes sense and what does not, in the case of names and descriptions of particular things, does not fit the pattern of usage of the word "God" on the lips of believers'.⁴ It is about as sensible to speak of God as a particular being, as it is to speak of the number 18 or perfect moral virtue as a particular being. Moreover, it is worth remembering in this context that one piece of meta-theology which has won wide acceptance among the orthodox is that 'God' is not a substance-word (Aquinas in the formal mode).

On my approach and on Martin's approach 'the fact that the pattern of usage of a term such as "God" does not accord with that of other non-theological terms with which it is taken to be analogous, is made a basis for the charge that the use of the term is logically incoherent'.⁵ But on Hughes' programme—a good programme for a Wittgensteinian fideist—the 'same non-accordance is regarded as showing that the terms are not as analogous as they have at first appeared, and the actual usage of religious terms within religious language is taken as normative for the logical type and the kind of meaning they have'.⁶ Hughes goes on to remark that 'which of these programmes is preferable is perhaps the most important question for meta-theology (even, *mutatis mutandis*, for all meta-theorising)'.⁷

¹*Ibid.*

²*Ibid.*, pp. 214-5.

³*Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

Hughes defends his crucial Wittgensteinian methodological preference on the grounds that religious language is a long-established *fait accompli*, and something which does a job which no other segment of language can do. It is because of this that he is tempted to think that religious statements are in order just as they are, i.e. in their own kind of order and, as a whole, in a coherent order.¹ This is a significant claim the ramifications of which I will later consider in detail, but for now I will content myself with a brief sociological remark. We should counterpose against the fact that religious language is a *fait accompli* another fact, namely, that at all times and at all places, even among the most primitive tribes, there have been sceptics and scoffers, people who though perfectly familiar with the religious language game played in their culture would not play the religious language game, not because they could not, but because, even though they were perfectly familiar with it. even though they had an insiders' understanding of it, they found it incoherent. But our first-order operations with what some *philosophers* call 'material object talk' and our actual operation with arithmetic are not in this state of controversy. (Meta-mathematics may be in a shambles, but not arithmetic or algebra.) But in this respect religion is very different. There are people who can play the language game, even people who *want* very much to go on playing the language game of religion, but they morally and intellectually speaking cannot continue this activity because their intellects, not their natural sympathies, make assent to Jewish or Christian doctrine impossible. Moreover their doubts are often much older than their acquaintance with theology or philosophy and they were only reinforced by their acquaintance with these disciplines. There are people—and among the educated a continually growing number of people—who find, or at least think they find, the religious language game they have been taught as children either falderal or at best, in Santayana's celebrated phrase, 'moral poetry'. This seems to me to count heavily, though *surely* not decisively, against thinking that at rock-bottom such talk must have a coherent order.

Hughes' other consideration, i.e. that religious language does a job which no other segment of language can do, is more troubling. The truth of this very claim could be challenged, but this is not the tack I now want to take. Rather I want simply to point out that in a culture like ours, religious discourse is coming to fail to do its distinctive tasks because many people do not find it coherent. Perhaps they are profoundly deceived; perhaps it is after all a perfectly coherent mode of discourse, but, given their beliefs, to point out to them that such a language game is played is not enough. They

¹*Ibid.*, pp. 215-6.

perfectly well know how to use this discourse; they know that it is an ancient and venerated part of their culture; they know that it has a distinctive role in their culture. Knowing so well how to play the language game, their very perplexity is over the apparent incoherence of just this familiar discourse. It is not that they are like Moore, who was puzzled by what Bradley and other philosophers said about time but was not puzzled about time himself. (He could be puzzled about the correct analysis of 'time' without being puzzled about time.) But, characteristically at any rate, they are puzzled first and primarily about the very first-order God-talk itself and only secondarily about the theologian's or philosopher's chatter about this chatter. Moreover, if one looks over the range of practices that have counted as religions (if one looks at Confucianism and Theravada Buddhism for example) one finds functioning in cultures, and very ancient cultures at that, religions that in terms of our religions (not just in terms of our theologies) are atheistic or agnostic. Given this, it is perfectly possible that certain *Ersatz* religions, e.g. Spinoza's, Fromm's and perhaps even Comte's 'atheistical Catholicism', could, given certain cultural conditions, become religions. But given these facts and these possibilities, the fact—if it is a fact—that religious language does a job no other segment of language can do, does little to show that Christian or Islamic or Jewish first-order God-talk or God-talk at all is in a coherent order just as it is.

Hughes could reply that the part of religious talk that is in order just as it is, is what is really alive in religion; it is that which is essential to religion, constitutive of True Religion, i.e. that which is shared by all these religions and by *Ersatz* religions as well. But if this reply is made we are likely to end up (1) with a very unWittgensteinian essentialist bogeyman, and (2) with treating religion or True Religion as little more than 'morality touched with emotion', i.e. Santayana's 'moral poetry'. Given that the Christian Creed as well as the Christian code is crucial to Christianity, as understood by the orthodox, such a conclusion would be most unwelcome, and would, in effect, be a capitulation to the meta-theologian who claimed that Christian discourse, as it stands, is incoherent and not a vindication of the meta-theological claim that the bulk of Christian language is perfectly in place if only metaphysicians and theologians would not tinker with it.

I do not want to claim that anything I have said so far settles anything. So far, I have only tried to show that there is something to be settled and that we cannot take this short Wittgensteinian way with the concepts of religion. The central considerations here are (1) is the first-order God-talk of Judaism, Christianity or Islam actually, for the most part, anyway, in order as it is, or is it in some

way fundamentally incoherent, and (2) how could we decide this issue? These issues need a careful conceptual investigation.

III

These issues come up in an unsettling and probing way in the writings of Peter Winch. He does not directly attack the problem of the intelligibility of God-talk. Rather, Winch, in examining what it is to understand concepts radically different from our own, brings to the fore considerations which are central to an understanding and appraisal of Wittgensteinian Fideism.¹

In trying to understand what it is to understand a primitive society, Winch examines the Azande conception of magic and subjects Evans-Pritchard's methodological remarks concerning it to a careful critical scrutiny. Evans-Pritchard indeed insists that in order to understand the Azande conceptions, we must understand them in terms of how they are taken by the Azande themselves and in terms of their own social structure, i.e. forms of life. But he ceases to make common cause with Wittgenstein and Winch when he argues that nonetheless the Azande are plainly labouring under an illusion. There is no magic and there are no witches. We know that we, with our scientific culture, are right about these matters and the Azande are wrong. Our scientific account of these matters is in accord with objective reality while the Azande magical beliefs are not.

This certainly seems like a scarcely disputable bit of common sense, but Winch is not satisfied with such an answer. While trying to avoid what he calls a Protagorean relativism 'with all the paradoxes that involves', Winch still maintains that, though Evans-Pritchard is right in stressing that 'we should not lose sight of the fact that men's ideas and beliefs must be checkable by reference to something independent—some reality', he is 'wrong, and crucially wrong, in his attempt to characterise the scientific in terms of that which is in accord with objective reality'.² Evans-Pritchard is mistaken in thinking that, while the Azande have a different conception of reality from ours, our scientific conception agrees with what reality actually is like while theirs does not.³

Winch, moving from counter-assertion to argument, contends that 'the check of the independently real is not peculiar to science'.⁴ It is a mistake to think, as Evans-Pritchard and Pareto do, that scientific

¹The central essay here is his 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. I (October, 1964), pp. 307-325. But see also Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: 1958).

²Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. I (October, 1964), p. 308.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

discourse provides us with 'a paradigm against which to measure the intellectual respectability of other modes of discourse'.¹ At this point in his argumentation Winch uses an example from religious discourse to drive home his point. God, when he speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, takes Job to task for having lost sight of the reality of God. Winch remarks that we would badly misunderstand that passage if we thought that Job had made some kind of theoretical mistake, which he might have corrected by further observation and experiment. Yet, Winch argues, God's reality is independent of human whim or of what any man cares to think about it.

It is here that Winch makes a very revealing remark—a remark that could readily be used to put a Wittgensteinian Fideism into orbit. What God's reality amounts to, Winch says, 'can only be seen from the religious tradition in which the concept of God is used'.² Such a religious context is very unlike a scientific context in which we can speak of theoretical entities. Yet only within the religious use of language does 'the conception of God's reality have its place'.² As the concept of what is real or what is unreal *vis-à-vis* magic is only given within and only intelligible within the Azande form of life in which the Azande magical practices are embedded, so the concept of God's reality is only given within and only intelligible within the religious form of life in which such a conception of God is embedded. In both cases there is an ongoing form of life that guarantees intelligibility and reality to the concepts in question. God and Azande magic are not *simply* my ideas or Jewish or Azande ideas. Here we have baldly stated a major motif in Wittgensteinian Fideism.

'What is real?' or 'What is reality?', like 'What is there?', do not have a clear sense. When asked in a completely general way they are meaningless. We can only raise the problem of the reality of something within a form of life. There is no completely extralinguistic or context-independent conception of reality in accordance with which we might judge forms of life.

Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language has. Further, both the distinction between the real and the unreal and the concept of agreement with reality themselves belong to our language.⁴ Yet these distinctions, though surely not the words used to make them, would, Winch argues, have to be a part of any language. Without such distinctions we could not have a system of communi-

¹*Ibid.*

²*Ibid.*, p. 309.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

cation and thus we could not have a language. But how exactly the distinction between the real and the unreal is to be drawn is determined by the actual linguistic usage of some *particular* language. Evans-Pritchard and the man who would reject the whole mode of God-talk as unintelligible or incoherent are both unwittingly saying something that does not make sense, for their own conceptions of reality are *not* determined by the actual usage of 'reality' and they are mistakenly assuming that their very specialised use of 'reality' is something they can use as a yardstick with which to appraise any and every form of life. But they have given us no reasons for adopting this procedure or making this assumption.

If we have been brought up in a certain tradition and understand scientific discourse, we can, while working in that discourse, ask whether a certain scientific hypothesis agrees with reality. We can, given an understanding of science, test this claim; but when Evans-Pritchard makes the putative statement that 'Criteria applied in scientific experimentation constitute a true link between our ideas and an independent reality', he has *not* asserted a scientific hypothesis or even made an empirical statement. His putative assertion is not open to confirmation or disconfirmation; and if 'true link' and 'independent reality' are explained by reference to the scientific universe of discourse, we would beg the question of whether scientific experimentation, rather than magic or religion, constitutes a true link between our ideas and an independent reality. There seems to be no established use of discourse by means of which the expressions 'true link' and 'independent reality' in Evans-Pritchard's assertion can be explained. At any rate—and to put Winch's contention in a minimal way—Evans-Pritchard does not give these expressions a use or show us that they have a use. Thus when we try to say that the idea of God makes no true link with an independent reality we are using 'true link' and 'independent reality' in a meaningless or at least a wholly indeterminate way.

This argument is reinforced by a further claim made by Winch in his *The Idea of a Social Science*. There Winch sets forth a central plank in any Wittgensteinian Fideism. Logic, as a formal theory of order, must, given that it is an interpreted logic (an interpreted calculus), systematically display the forms of order found in the modes of social life. What can and cannot be said, what follows from what, is dictated by the norms of intelligibility embedded in the modes of social life. These finally determine the criteria of logical appraisal. Since this is so, 'one cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such'.¹ Science is one such mode and religion another; 'each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself'. Within science or

¹Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, p. 100.

religion an action can be logical or illogical. It would, for example, be illogical for a scientist working in a certain area to refuse to take cognisance of the results of a properly conducted experiment; and it would also be illogical for a man who believed in God to try to pit his strength against God. But it makes no sense at all to assert that science or religion is logical or illogical, any more than it would make sense to speak of music as either well-coloured or ill-coloured or of stones as either married or divorced.

Winch's view here has rightly been taken to involve a claim to conceptual self-sufficiency for all of the forms of life. It has also been thought that it involves a kind of compartmentalisation of the modes of discourse or forms of life. Winch is indeed saying that we cannot criticise science or ethics by criteria appropriate to religion, and vice-versa. Like Hughes, Winch is claiming that each mode of discourse must be understood in its own terms and that relevant criticism of that mode of discourse cannot be made from outside of that discourse, but can take place only from within it, when some specific difficulty actually arises in science or in religion.

There is much here that is very perceptive, but there is much that needs close scrutiny as well. Let me assume here what in reality is quite open to question, namely, that Winch is correct about the Azande. That is, let me assume that given the radically different conceptual structure embedded in their language, and given the role magic and witchcraft play in their lives, we can have no good grounds for saying, as Evans-Pritchard does, that our concept of reality is the correct one and theirs is not. But even making this very questionable assumption, it does not at all follow that in our tribe religion and science are related as Azande magic is related to our scientific beliefs. There is no 'religious language' or 'scientific language'. There is rather the international notation of mathematics and logic; and English, French, German and the like. In short, 'religious discourse' and 'scientific discourse' are part of the same overall conceptual structure. Moreover, in that conceptual structure there is a large amount of discourse, which is neither religious nor scientific, that is constantly being utilised by both the religious man and the scientist when they make religious or scientific claims. In short, they share a number of key categories. This situation differs from the Azande situation in a very significant sense, for in the former situation, we do not have in the same literal sense two *different* conceptual structures exemplifying two different ways of life. C. P. Snow to the contrary notwithstanding, we do not have two cultures here but only one.

Sometimes it is indeed tempting to think there really are two cultures. When I read a certain kind of religious literature—as in a

recent reading of Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*—I have the *feeling* that I belong to another tribe: that what she can understand and take as certain I have no understanding of at all, beyond a Ziffian sense of her linguistic regularities. Leslie Fiedler tells us that Miss Weil 'speaks of the problems of belief in the vocabulary of the unbeliever', but that is not how I read her.¹ I find her unabashedly talking about religious matters in a way that I find nearly as incredible as some of the things the Azande say. She blithely accepts what I find unintelligible. Yet this initial impression is in a way misleading, for, as I read on, I discover that she is sensitive to *some* of the conceptual perplexities that perplex me. I find her saying 'There is a God. There is no God. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion. I am quite sure there is no God, in the sense that I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word. . . .' When I ponder this, I realise that as much as we might differ, we are in the same universe of discourse. Miss Weil is not, after all, to me like the Azande with his witchcraft substance. We both learned 'the language' of Christian belief; only I think it is illusion-producing while she thinks that certain crucial segments of it are our stammering way of talking about ultimate reality. A very deep gulf separates us; we are not even like Settembrini and Naphta. But all the same, there remains a sense in which we do understand each other and in which we share a massive background of beliefs and assumptions. Given that, it is not so apparent that we do *not* have common grounds for arguing about which concepts of reality are correct or mistaken here.

Winch, as we have seen, argues against Pareto's and Evans-Pritchard's claim that scientific concepts alone can characterise objective reality. He is correct in his claim that their claim is an incoherent one. 'Scientific concepts alone make a true link with objective reality' is neither analytic nor empirical. No use has been given to 'true link' or 'objective reality'. When a plain man looks at a harvest moon and says that it is orange, or says that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, or that his vineyard posts are solid, he is not making scientific statements, but he is not making *subjective* statements either. His statements can be perfectly objective; they can be about how things are, and they can be objectively testable (publically verifiable) without being scientific or without conflicting with science. But when it is claimed—as presumably people who seriously utter certain religious propositions claim—that the *facts* asserted by these religious propositions are such and such, their

¹Leslie Fiedler, 'Introduction' to Simone Weil's *Waiting For God* (New York: 1951), pp. 3-4.

claims must be open to some possible confirmation or disconfirmation: their claims must be publically testable. As Austin puts it, they are making some assertion or trying to make some assertion about how things-are-in-the-world. But a claim like 'God created the heavens and the earth', when 'God' is used non-anthropomorphically, is not testable. That is to say, it is a claim that purports to assert a fact, yet it is devoid of truth-value. People who use such religious talk—partake of such a form of life—cannot determine how, even in principle, they would establish or disestablish such religious claims, but they still believe that they are factual assertions: that is to say that they have truth-values. It is a fact that there is a God; it is a fact that He created the world; it is a fact that He protects me and the like. Yet, how could we say what it would be like for God to create the world, if it is impossible in principle to say what would have to transpire for it to be false that God created the world? Or to put this verificationist point in a weaker and more adequate way, if we cannot even say what *in principle* would count as *evidence* against the putative statement that God created the world, then 'God created the world' is devoid of factual content.

This verificationist argument can, perhaps, be successfully rebutted, but it is far less vulnerable than the claim that only scientific ideas correspond with reality. That is to say, given the concept of objective reality that plain men, including plain religious men, utilise in everyday life, a statement asserts a fact, actually has factual content, only if it is confirmable or disconfirmable in principle. To count as a factual statement, it must assert a certain determinate reality (a pleonasm); that is, its descriptive content includes one set of empirically determinable conditions and excludes others.¹ People who argue for this would, or at least should, claim that these last remarks are what Wittgenstein called grammatical remarks, i.e. they hold in virtue of the linguistic conventions governing the crucial terms in question. But key religious utterances, though they purport to be factual statements, do not succeed in making what actually counts as a genuine factual statement. That is, as Strawson puts it, they are not actually part of that type of discourse we call a fact-stating type of discourse. Thus they lack the kind of coherence they must have to make genuinely factual claims.

I shall not here, though I have elsewhere, assess such a controversial claim.² Here I want only to note that even if it turns out to

¹That 'determinate reality' is a pleonasm has been argued in a powerful way by Axel Hägerström in his *Philosophy and Religion* (London: 1964). It is surely to be hoped that the rest of Hägerström's writings in Swedish will soon be made available to non-Swedish readers.

²Kai Nielsen, 'On Speaking of God', *Theoria*, vol. XXVIII (1962, Part 2); 'Religion and Commitment', *Problems of Religious Knowledge and Language*; W. T.

be mistaken, it is a far more powerful counter-thrust against Winchian claims to the conceptual self-sufficiency and the coherence of God-talk, than is the simplistic claim that only scientific ideas are in accord with objective reality. Such a verificationist claim—a claim utilised by Ayer and Flew—stands here as an unmet challenge to Wittgensteinian Fideism.

IV

Someone who wanted to use Winch to defend a Wittgensteinian Fideism might reply that a key religious claim like 'God created the heavens and the earth' does indeed have something to do with understanding the world. We could not have a deep understanding of our world if we did not understand *that*, but it must be realised that the understanding in question is not the narrowly factual or empirical one I have just been talking about. Supernatural facts are a *sui generis* kind of fact. They are not, as Austin would put it, 'a special kind of something in the world'; and they cannot be modelled on the garden variety concept of a fact. My argument, my critic might say, only shows that such religious statements are not factual in the way commonsensical, scientific and empirical statements are factual. It does not show religious statements are incoherent or pseudo-factual. Moreover, it in effect confirms the Wittgensteinian claim that religious discourse is one kind of discourse with its own distinctive logic while science and common sense are forms of life that constitute other quite distinct modes of discourse with their own unique criteria.

My reply is that the phrase 'logic of discourse' is a dangerous metaphor and that these discourses are not in actual life nearly so compartmentalised as the above argument would have it. The man perplexed about God is not like the man perplexed by Azande beliefs in witchcraft substance. He is not an outsider who does not know the form of life but an insider who does. So God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. So how did he do it? Nobody, or at least nobody who matters, believes any more in a sky God up there, who might have done it in a very loud voice. But what did happen? How are we to understand 'God spoke to Job'? Maybe it was all Job's tortured imagination? Yet how do we even understand what it is that he was supposed to have imagined? And how are we to understand 'I am who am'? A man may be puzzled about the

Blackstone and R. H. Ayers (eds.), forthcoming; 'Eschatological Verification', *Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. IX (1963); 'God and Verification Again', *Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. XI (1965); 'On Fixing the Reference Range of "God"', *Religious Studies* (October, 1966).

nature of time, but when his alarm clock rings at 5.30 a.m. and a little later the weather comes on over the radio at 6.00 and his clock shows 6.00 too, he does not, unless he is excessively neurotic, doubt what time it is. He is painfully aware what time it is. But perfectly sane men in a tribe where God-talk is an established practice, part of an ancient and venerated form of life, can and do come to wonder to whom or to what they are praying, or what is being talked about when it is said that 'God spoke to Job'. God is a person, but we can't identify Him; God acts in the world but has no body. Words here are put together in a strange way. What could it possibly mean to speak of 'action' or 'a person' here? These terms cut across activities; they are at home in religious and non-religious contexts. It is also true that some logical rules (the laws of contradiction, excluded middle and the like) most certainly seem to cut across forms of life. The forms of life are not as compartmentalised as Winch seems to imply, and as a Wittgensteinian Fideism requires. Insiders can and do come to doubt the very coherence of this religious mode of life and its first-order talk.

They indeed do, it will be replied, but in doing that they are philosophically confused. Careful attention to the concept of reality, and to the systematic ambiguity of norms of intelligibility, will show why. It is just here, it will be claimed, that Wittgenstein's insights are most enlightening. This takes us to what I regard as the heart of the matter, and here we need to consider some very fundamental arguments of Winch's.

Winch makes one central point which seems to me unassailable: to understand religious conceptions we need a religious tradition; without a participant's understanding of that form of life, there can be no understanding of religion. To understand it we must learn the rules of conceptual propriety distinctive of that form of life. Without a knowledge by *wont* of the norms of conceptual propriety associated with God-talk, we can have no grasp of the concept of God, and thus, without such knowledge by *wont*, there can be no quest for God or even a rejection of God. If 'we are to speak of difficulties and incoherencies appearing and being detected in the way certain practices have hitherto been carried on in a society, surely this can only be understood in connection with problems arising in the carrying on of the activity'.¹

Surely we must start here. There could not even be a *problem* about God if we could not. But to start at this point is one thing, to end there is another. The need to start from 'inside' need not preclude the recognition of clefts, inconsistencies, and elements of

¹Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. I (October, 1964), p. 319.

incoherence in the very practice (form of life). Once magic and belief in fairies were ongoing practices in our stream of life. By now, by people working from the inside, the entire practice, the entire 'form of life', has come to be rejected as incoherent.

We have seen, however, that Winch, after the fashion of a Wittgenstein Fideist, argues that we cannot intelligibly assert the incoherence, illogicality, irrationality or unintelligibility of a form of life itself. The forms of life, he argues, have a conceptual self-sufficiency; operating with them, we can say that something does or does not make sense, is logical or illogical, e.g. that was an illogical chess move. But we cannot say of the whole activity itself that it is illogical, irrational, unintelligible or incoherent, e.g. chess is illogical.

The tide of metaphysics is running high here. Our everyday discourse, which is so important for a Wittgensteinian, will not support such a Winchian claim. 'An ongoing but irrational form of life' most certainly does *not appear* to be a contradiction. 'Foot-binding was for a long time an established institution but it was really cruel and irrational' may be false but it is not nonsense. 'Primogeniture had a definite rationale' and 'Magical practices are essential for the Azande' are not grammatical remarks, but this means that their denials are significant and this means that we can make judgements about the rationality of forms-of-life. Similarly, we can say, without *conceptual* impropriety, that gambling is illogical. We might even say that French is illogical because of its haphazard use of gender, or that the irregularities of English grammar make it illogical. All of these statements may be false, they may even be absurdly false, but they certainly do not appear to be self-contradictory or senseless. It is not at all evident that language has gone on a holiday here. But to establish his thesis Winch must show that, appearances notwithstanding, they are all either senseless or metaphorical.

It can be replied: how do you deal (1) with Winch's specific argument that 'the criteria of logic . . . arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life as such'¹ and (2) his further contention that 'formal requirements tell us nothing about what in particular is to count as consistency, just as the rules of the propositional calculus limit, but do not themselves determine what are to be proper values of p, q, etc.'² I cannot consistently assert p and not-p, but what range of values the variable p takes is not uniquely determined by purely formal considerations. If I know that to say x is a bachelor entails x is not-married, I know,

¹Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, pp. 100-1.

²Peter Winch, 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. I (October, 1964), p. 319.

by purely formal considerations, that I cannot assert *x* is a married bachelor. But what counts as 'a bachelor' or 'a married man' can only be determined by reference to the actual usage embedded in the form of life of which they are a part.

Unless we are prepared to accept the compartmentalisation thesis, dear to Wittgensteinian Fideists, the acceptance of the above claim about logic need not commit one to the paradoxical thesis that modes of social life cannot be appraised as logical or illogical, rational or irrational. Religion, morality and science may indeed each have 'criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself'. This means that the criteria of application for 'God', 'Divine Person', 'perfect good', and the like is set by the first-order religious discourse itself. However, it also remains true that (1) discourse concerning God goes on in Swedish, German, English, French and the like, and (2) that there is no separate religious language. Given these two facts and given the overall universe of discourse of which religious discourse is a part, it may still be found that religious discourse, like discourse about fairies, is incoherent, e.g. 'God is three and one', 'God is a person that one *encounters* in prayer but God is utterly *transcendent*'. Seemingly contradictory statements may indeed turn out not to be contradictory. When fully stated and understood, in terms of their distinctive contextual use, what *appears* to be contradictory or paradoxical may be seen to be straightforward and non-contradictory. Religious discourse is not something isolated, sufficient unto itself; 'sacred discourse' shares categories with, utilises the concepts of, and contains the syntactical structure of, 'profane discourse'. Where there is what at least appears to be a contradiction, or where words are put together in a way fluent speakers *cannot* understand, a case must be made out for the contention that the contradiction is *only apparent*. What appears to be unintelligible, must be shown to have a use in the discourse or it must be given a use. That is to say, the words must be given an employment or shown to have an employment so that fluent speakers can grasp what is being said.

Many key religious statements at least appear to be contradictory or incoherent. That a *case* needs to be made out and perhaps even can be made out to show that they are not really contradictory or incoherent, shows that such a question can be raised about religious discourse. Given this fact and given the centrality of some of these religious statements, it becomes apparent that Winch's argument does not succeed in establishing that it is impossible to appraise whole ways of life as rational or irrational, intelligible or unintelligible. Furthermore, that we can ask questions about 'God is three and one' and 'A *transcendent* God is *encountered* in prayer' that involve

appealing to criteria from the discourse as a whole and not just from religious talk, indicates that Winch's argument does not show that we can compartmentalise religious talk. In short, the Winchian arguments that we have examined do not show that we cannot raise questions about the rationality of a form of life or that religious discourse is so *sui-generis* that its criteria of intelligibility are contained within itself.

We are not yet at the bottom of the barrel. The question 'What is real?' has no determinate sense. What is real and what is unreal is a very context-dependent notion. What in a specific context counts as 'real' or 'reality' as in 'a real trout', 'a real champion', 'an unreal distinction', 'the realities of the economic situation', 'a sense of reality', 'the reality of death' or 'the reality of God', can only be determined with reference to the particular matter we are talking about. We have no antecedent understanding of reality such that we could determine whether language agreed with reality, whether a specific language agreed with reality or whether a given form of discourse agreed with reality. With the exception of the *very last bit*, I agree with Winch about such matters, but alas it is this very last bit that is essential for a Wittgensteinian Fideism.

However, with this last Wittgensteinian claim, there are very real difficulties similar to ones we have already discussed. 'Reality' may be systematically ambiguous, but what constitutes evidence, or tests for the truth or reliability of specific claims, is not completely idiosyncratic to the context or activity we are talking about. Activities are not that insulated. As I have already remarked, once there was an ongoing form of life in which fairies and witches were taken to be real entities, but gradually, as we reflected on the criteria we actually use for determining whether various entities, including persons, are or are not part of the spatio-temporal world of experience, we came to give up believing in fairies and witches. That a language-game was played, that a form of life existed, did not preclude our asking about the coherence of the concepts involved and about the reality of what they conceptualised.

Without a participant's understanding of God-talk, we could not raise the question of the reality of God, but with it, this is perfectly possible and perfectly intelligible.

Indeed we sometimes judge the reality of one thing in terms of something utterly inappropriate, e.g. moral distinctions are unreal because moral utterances do not make factual assertions. Here we do commit a howler. But, as my above examples show, this need not always be the case. 'Johnson ought to be impeached' can be seen, by an examination of the relevant forms of life, not to describe a certain happening. It is not a bit of fact-stating discourse asserting

some actual occurrence, but rather it tells us to make something occur. 'Witches are out on Hallowe'en' is a putative factual statement. It supposedly does assert that a certain identifiable state-of-affairs obtains. It supposedly is like saying 'The Klan is out on Hallowe'en'. But the factual intelligibility of the former is not evident, for it is not clear what counts as a witch. To say that 'witch' refers to a unique kind of reality only intelligible within a distinctive form of life is an incredible piece of evasion. To reason in such a manner is to show that one is committed to a certain metaphysical theory, come what may. But, if one wants to be realistic and non-evasive, one will surely say that it gradually became apparent, *vis-à-vis* forms of life in which talk of witches was embedded, that in light of the meanings of 'fact' and 'evidence' in the overall discourse of which witch-talk was a part, that witch-talk was incoherent. Though there was a form of life in which the existence of witches was asserted, such a way of life is and was irrational. And even if for some baroque reason I am mistaken in saying that it is or was irrational to believe in witches, the fact that such a question can be intelligently raised about one form of life plainly demonstrates that Winch's *a priori* arguments against such an appraisal of a form of life as a whole will not wash.

Perhaps God-talk is not as incoherent and irrational as witch-talk; perhaps there is an intelligible concept of the reality of God, and perhaps there is a God, but the fact that there is a form of life in which God-talk is embedded does not preclude our asking these questions or our giving, quite intelligibly, though perhaps mistakenly, the same negative answer we gave to witch-talk.

New York University