

The Philosophical Investigations as a Christian Text

Christian Faith and Wittgenstein's Rule-following

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Abstract

Wittgenstein has been considered one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century while being one of its most popular mystics. Considering the staunch secularization of philosophy during the Enlightenment, such combination is rarely seen in philosophers of more recent times. The farthest explication of the relationship between Wittgenstein's philosophy and his mysticism has not went as far as making a Christian nature explicit. This can be read as analytic philosophy's identification as an heir to the Enlightenment. There has been much ink spilled in the mystical aspects of his philosophy. Although there are hints of his Christian leanings, patent parallelisms have yet to be drawn properly. Exploring Christian faith and rule-following, this paper asserts that the former is how the latter is characterized in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Faith and rule-following both provide a way of seeing and are sufficient for action.

1. Introduction

The question of meaning in life has intentionally been left out in the analytic literature. But recent years have seen the demise of this tendency of analytic philosophy. Part of those to be blamed for this tendency is Ludwig Wittgenstein and the unfortunate positivistic interpretation of his earlier work.¹ As one of the greatest minds of the 20th century, his pronouncement of the nonsensicality of the question meant its exclusion in succeeding discourses.

But such tendency has changed in recent years. For the past twenty or thirty years, the analytic literature has seen a surge in the number of philosophers taking up the question.² Analytic philosophers have also began taking up metaphysical questions—a field largely discredited by early analytic philosophy.

The discussion of religion per se in the analytic literature has also been rare, if not absent. This is not the tendency at all especially during the Middle Ages. It was when a lot (if not all) philosophers were religious, coming from the

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¹ Metz (2013) pp. 21-22.

² Metz (2013) p. 1.

Christian, Jewish, and Moslem sorts.³ The Enlightenment, however, managed to wipe out such close connection between religion and philosophy. As anti-clerical sentiment grew during that time, so did anti-religious sentiments.⁴ I do not mean to say that there are no discussions on the philosophy of religion (for indeed there are plenty). This dropping out consists of a more secular approach to religiosity. But as analytic philosophy has changed in recent years, it is conceivable that religious discourse can again come back into the philosophical scene.

As heirs to the Enlightenment, analytic philosophy missed out a lot of Christian tendencies in Wittgenstein's oeuvre. Indeed, his Christian tendencies have manifested in his personal life. But whether there are Christian themes in his works is seldom talked about.

In this paper, I will draw out one Christian aspect of his later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*. I will be drawing a parallel between faith and the discussion on rule-following in the *Investigations*, asserting that the latter is how Christianity understands the former. It seems that how rules are followed sheds light into how faith is conceived by Christianity.

I do not wish to assert that Wittgenstein in his person is Christian and that his religious leaning is the reason why there is a Christian theme in the *Investigations*. These two assertions could be the topic of an altogether different project. What I intend to assert is the Christianity of the *Investigations* as a text, highlighting the similarity between Christian faith and rule-following.

2. Christian Faith

The relationship between faith and reason has always been the subject of a plethora of debates ever since Christianity and philosophy met. But in this paper, I will be focusing my discussion on faith itself, and not on the usual discussion of its relationship with reason. To avoid controversy on the Christianity of the "faith" to be discussed in this paper, I have chosen to cite the Magisterium⁵ of the Catholic Church. This only means that the principal sources of this section's discussion will be from the teachings sanctioned by the Church herself. This

³ See Copleston (1994).

⁴ See Gay (1969).

⁵ This is defined by the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the teaching authority of the Church, (890).

does not mean to discredit philosophical discussions of it like Kierkegaard's. It may be admitted that these non-canonical discussions are helpful.

Observing that the two terms are almost interchangeable in the Bible, Benedict XVI conflates *faith* with *hope*.⁶ Drawing from Paul's letter to the Romans, the title of the Pope's encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, suggests such conflation. It comes from a larger biblical phrase, "*Spe salvi facti sumus*," or "In hope we are saved."⁷ As it seems impossible to be saved without faith, with this conflation, it now seems impossible to be saved without hope. It follows that Christian faith is hope.

In another letter, Paul talks about how before Christ, there was no hope.⁸ Hence, Christians believe that it is only after Christ that they started to hope. It is through an encounter with the divine that an individual gains hope, thereby gaining faith. Benedict XVI talks about faith as letting the faithful "share in Jesus' vision."⁹ Faith, therefore, *provides* a way of seeing.

This encounter gives the Christian the evidence that she needs for things that she believes in. The Letter to the Hebrews gives this very notion: "Faith is the *hypostasis* of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen."¹⁰ *Hypostasis* here, is believed to be the central word of the verse by many exegetes today. It is translated in Latin as *substantia*.¹¹ This points to how faith makes present things that have yet to be present. It is the substance of these soon-to-be-present things. Hence, with faith, things hoped for are just as real as things that are in front of one's eyes.

Taken this way, faith seems to be an epistemological device. But Benedict XVI points out that faith is not purely informative but performative. It is not a function of the mind to gain faith in Christ but the function of the whole individual:

That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted

⁶ Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, p. 7.

⁷ The New American Bible Rom 8:24; hereafter cited as NAB.

⁸ NAB Eph 2:12.

⁹ Benedict XVI (2007) "On the Meaning of Faith," p. 213.

¹⁰ NAB Heb 11:1, Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, p. 16.

¹¹ Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, pp. 16-17.

the gift of a new life.¹²

Here, faith does not give the Christian a theoretical knowledge but a practical one. This distinction goes back to Aristotle, in his distinction between the moral and intellectual virtues.¹³ In a way, faith comes close to giving us *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.

Gustavo Gutierrez points out that action, for Christians, is not a product of theological reflection of their faith. Action comes directly from faith and it is only afterwards that theology can come into play.¹⁴ For instance, no one had to tell the martyrs to die before they deny their faith in Christ. A thorough theological background is not necessary to become a martyr. The mere presence of faith is enough to lead one to act in a certain way. Faith, therefore, is a sufficient condition for action.

In this brief section, I have characterized faith in two ways:

- (1) Faith provides a way of seeing
- (2) Faith is a sufficient condition for action.

I propose that both of these characteristics are present in the discussion of rule-following in the Investigations. Moreover, (2) is a consequence of (1). Because of being able to see in a certain way, one is led to act in a certain way as well.

3. Rule-following

3.1. Providing a way of seeing

The Tractarian pronouncement that the “limits of my language are the limits of my world”¹⁵ still rings true, in a certain sense, in the Investigations. His discussion of color-terms, for instance, reduces the redness of red to a function of language. When asked how he knew that something is red, he simply replied that he learned English.¹⁶ This should not be read as an endorsement of a

¹² Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, p. 9.

¹³ See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (1962).

¹⁴ Gutierrez (1996) p. 24.

¹⁵ *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.6

¹⁶ *Philosophical Investigations* 381; hereafter cited as PI.

relativism of sorts. This only means that when we see something as X, it is a rule that gives us the term to refer to X as X.

In this sense, rules provide a way of seeing as much as faith does. One only sees a red rose as red because English calls it such. This is also why a dog can be said to be afraid of being beaten by his master while we cannot say that the dog is afraid of being beaten by his master *tomorrow*.¹⁷ The rules that dogs follow in their dog-game do not allow for a concept of tomorrow. Because of these rules, therefore, a dog sees his master's beating in a certain way. This way excludes the possibility of expecting it to happen tomorrow.

In the same vein, Christ's dying on the cross can either be seen as salvific or mundane. It is because of faith that it can be seen as the former, otherwise it would just be the mundane death of an ambitious son of a carpenter.

3.1.1. Rules and aspect perception

The previous section certainly recalls Wittgenstein's notion of aspect perception. A brief caesura on aspect perception is therefore in order.

The discussion of aspect perception was included in what was traditionally known as Part II of the Investigations. The most recent edition, however, no longer distinguishes between the two parts of the Investigations. The editors thought that the addition of Part II was an unqualified, arbitrary decision by Anscombe and Rhees.¹⁸ The Investigations that is being talked about in this paper, therefore, only refers to what was traditionally known as Part I.

But for the sake of clarity of concepts, I think that there is still a need to discuss aspect perception in relation to the overall project of this paper. This section will clarify the relationship among the concepts of aspect perception, rules, and faith.

Frona succinctly describes how aspect perception works:

However it may be, it takes an attitude to see-as. Transposing this theme to a much grander scale one would have thus: what one recognizes in a phenomenon or cluster of phenomena is a function of one's attitude. And a difference in attitude between two subjects observing the same

¹⁷ PI 493, 650.

¹⁸ Hacker and Schulte (2009) pp. xxi-xxiii.

phenomenon makes two distinct recognitions of it.¹⁹

It is because of a certain attitude that one is led to see certain aspects.²⁰ Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit example, for instance, illustrates how a certain attitude could predispose one to see it solely as a duck, or solely as a rabbit.²¹ Here, the same duck-rabbit datum is being perceived but the recognitions differ. No recognition can be argued for as the correct one.

It is therefore clear that to see a certain aspect is not a well-thought out decision.²² The seeing of an aspect just suddenly *dawns* on one. This dawning then enables one to see the aspect continuously thereafter.²³

Aspect perception is clearly provided for by rules. These rules dictate how one will see a certain datum. The difference in rules adopted only means difference in attitude. And difference in attitude means difference in recognition.

The rules governing an attitude, *dawns* on one in a phenomenon called an *aspect dawning*. The *gaining* of faith, therefore, is an aspect dawning. What dawns on one is a form of seeing-as governed by certain rules. And because faith has been gained, one can now see things in the light of faith.

This relationship among aspect perception, rules, and faith is best illustrated by the story of the conversion of Paul. On his way to Damascus to prosecute Christians, "a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him."²⁴ This light blinded him and it is only after being baptized by Ananias that his sight was restored.²⁵

Paul's experience in Damascus saw a dramatic aspect-dawning. It is because of that experience that he began to gain faith. This newly dawned faith has provided him with rules governing his new *way of seeing* things, exemplified by the restoration of his sight. It is now in accordance with these rules that he "began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues."²⁶ It led him to action.

¹⁹ Fronda (2010) p. 102.

²⁰ Philosophy of Psychology I—A Fragment 193; hereafter cited as PPF.

²¹ PPF 118.

²² PI 601-603; PPF 191-192.

²³ Fronda (2010) pp. 105-107.

²⁴ NAB Acts 9:3.

²⁵ NAB Acts 9:18.

²⁶ NAB Acts 9:20.

3.2. Sufficient for action

Faith conceived as sufficient for action is laconically clarified by Wittgenstein's discussion on rules. In this way, Christian faith is very much similar to how Wittgenstein conceived of rule-following.

Following a rule for Wittgenstein is not an intellectual activity. He claims that learning a language is mastering a technique.²⁷ Following linguistic rules is therefore a skill. The best way to illustrate this is through a comparison with swimming. One does not learn how to swim by pure intellection of all the guidelines on how to swim. One learns how to swim through engaging with the activity of swimming itself.²⁸ The same is true in rule-following. If one only thinks that she follows a rule, she does not really.²⁹

Rule-following, therefore, is inherently *performative*, as much as faith is. It is not constituted in thinking about all the applications of a rule in advance as if it were an algorithm.³⁰ Wittgenstein compares this misconception of rule-following to a machine. As a machine has algorithms which it follows, so do human beings. A rule can be likened to a machine's algorithms. But, says Wittgenstein, this analogy does not take into account the possibility of the machine breaking down. The algorithm would not be able to salvage the machine in its application of the rule.³¹ Rule-following, therefore, is not constituted by an algorithm.

This is precisely why rule-following is not a mental activity but an act. As one constantly applies a rule the same way, there seems to be a decision in every application of the rule.³² This conception of rule-following goes into the grain of Wittgenstein's battle cry in the Investigations: "Don't think but look!"³³

Wittgenstein, however, says elsewhere, "Theology as grammar."³⁴ This pronouncement is very obscure as it does not explicitly use the copula. This immediately follows a brief assertion that "grammar tells what kind of object anything is," in the same section. Other scholars take this to consider theology

²⁷ PI 199.

²⁸ Baker & Hacker (2009) p. 118.

²⁹ PI 202.

³⁰ PI 197.

³¹ PI 193.

³² PI 186.

³³ PI 66.

³⁴ PI 373.

and all god-talk as purely grammatical.³⁵ This is a strong assertion. But what I would like to point out is only the connection of this section with how Gutierrez places theology with faith.

It is grammar that specifies the essence of the object³⁶ and theology is grammar. Object, therefore, comes first before grammar can specify its essence. This is very much like how faith-led action comes first before theology can characterize it. Theology here, plays the same role as grammar, as pointed out by Gutierrez.³⁷

4. Conclusion

This paper was able to assert that Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following in the Investigations is how Christianity understands faith: (1) it provides a way of seeing, and (2) it is a sufficient condition for action. Because of drawing up this connection, a correlation between Wittgenstein's religious convictions and his philosophy is, at most, hinted at.

Wittgenstein was quoted saying that he was "strongly affected by [Nietzsche's] hostility against Christianity."³⁸ Alain Badiou, however, does not read this as a confession of the Christian faith. Such remark, as Badiou reads it, is a confession of an eternal, unspeakable sense of the world which is not necessarily Christian.³⁹ Elsewhere, Wittgenstein is quoted saying that he cannot help but see things in a religious point of view.⁴⁰

Badiou may or may not be correct. But whether this religiosity is indeed Christian is an altogether different question. Whatever the correct interpretation of these remarks may be, they are enough to prove his religiosity.

Wittgenstein is known to be very keen on the tiniest details of his drafts of the Investigations. Therefore, the patent parallelisms drawn in this paper should not be seen as coincidental. This opens up an avenue for tracing more Christian themes in the Philosophical Investigations, the question of Wittgenstein's own religious convictions, and the relationship between the two.

³⁵ See Fronda (2010).

³⁶ PI 371.

³⁷ Gutierrez (1996).

³⁸ McGuinness (1988), p. 225 as quoted by Badiou (2011), p. 74.

³⁹ Badiou (2011), p. 83-85.

⁴⁰ Drury (1996), p. 76 as quoted by Fronda (2010), p. 5.

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