



WITTGENSTEIN

A Religious Point of View?

NORMAN MALCOLM

edited with a response by Peter Winch

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PREFACE

This essay by Norman Malcolm was the last piece of philosophical work he was able to complete before his death in the summer of 1990. The word 'complete' needs qualification. He did indeed bring the essay so far that he was willing to have it published. Indeed, he attached so much importance to the subject that I think it is correct to say that he was anxious that it should be published. At the same time, he was still working at it as far as he was able, and thinking of improvements until shortly before he died.

The subject of the essay is a remark which Wittgenstein's friend Drury quotes him as having made to him: 'I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.'¹ Norman explains his own interest in this in terms of the difficulties it raised for his own understanding and interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy: something that certainly stood at the very centre of his intellectual life. I never discussed Norman's religious commitments directly with him; and the present essay, like virtually all his previous published work, contains no references to his own religious beliefs or doubts. But no one who knew him at all well could have been in any doubt that religious conceptions played a pivotal role in his thinking and feeling about his life. I think, moreover, that anyone who has read his philosophical writings with perception would not be surprised to hear this. I make this point here because I think, though it is speculation, that during the last year of his life, Norman was aware that his own end was probably not far off, and that he would naturally have approached this thought in religious terms. I think too that this would have given his interest in the subject of his essay an additional dimension as he tried to take stock of his own life and the roles in it of philosophy

and religion respectively. This may well have played a role in the urgency with which he tried to complete his task while he still could. But, as I said, this is speculative.

The manuscript was an awkward length from a publisher's point of view, being substantially shorter than the standard 'book'. For this reason I was asked to contribute a fairly lengthy introduction, an invitation that I accepted without hesitation, not only because of my own interest in the subject, but also in the context of the quite close friendship I was privileged to enjoy with Norman after his retirement from the Susan Linn Sage Chair of Philosophy at Cornell University and his subsequent settlement in London. This friendship was certainly much more than a merely 'professional' one, but vigorous and uninhibited philosophical discussion was a very central element in it. He was one of the very few people I have known with whom I felt that, when discussing philosophical questions, we were really addressing each other. This of course did not mean that we agreed about everything, or even about most things. On the contrary, I would say that we disagreed quite radically over many really fundamental issues. What it did mean was that each of us usually understood pretty well, and respected, what the other was saying; or that where we did not understand each other, we knew how to recognize and rectify the situation. (I think this will seem trivial only to those who have rather modest standards of what mutual understanding consists in.) A very important condition of such a relationship is of course that the parties should feel entitled, indeed obligated, to express their mutual *disagreements* as clearly and emphatically as possible.

When I came to think closely about Norman's manuscript, I found increasingly and not greatly to my surprise that my discussion of it would have to express some pretty sharp disagreements. I felt, and feel, no inhibitions about this, because of the nature of our friendship as I have sketched it. Indeed, I know that Norman would have been disgusted with anything less than an attempt at complete intellectual honesty in the discussion of his work. At the same time, it seemed to me quite inappropriate to use the format of an introduction for such a critical discussion—without first giving the poor man the chance to make his case! So I decided to split my contribution between this fairly personal explanatory preface and a discussion to *follow* Norman's essay, in which I could feel free to be as critical as I should find it necessary to be. This follows the form of one of Malcolm's own earlier publications, *Consciousness and Causality*, which he wrote in co-operation with David Armstrong.²

PREFACE

My only regret is that the format cannot be completed by the hard-hitting riposte to my comments that Norman would undoubtedly have provided had he still been alive.

No apology needs to be made for publishing the essay in its present form. It is a characteristic piece of work, written with the same sturdy elegance to which his readers are long accustomed, showing no signs of lack of vigour and, it goes without saying, exuding the same unaffected intellectual honesty which was always one of the main strengths of his writing. As I have already said, though, he was still developing and revising his thoughts and would certainly have gone on doing so for a long time had he lived. During the time that I knew him well the writings that he published were the outcome, not merely of such extensive revision, but also of intensive discussion and argument with friends and students, privately and in seminars. I imagine the same was also true of what he published earlier in his life. He had no opportunity for anything like this in the case of the present essay. Had he had such an opportunity I have no doubt that he would have seen weaknesses in some of the ways in which he put his points and would have strengthened them, though I doubt whether he would have fundamentally changed his opinions. I regret very much indeed that it was not possible for me to have had such discussions with him, not least because he would certainly have been able to show me many weaknesses in my own counter-arguments. I have had to do the best I could without this help.

Peter Winch

NOTES

- 1 Rush Rhees (ed.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 94.
- 2 David Armstrong and Norman Malcolm, *Consciousness and Causality*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1984.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Aspects</i>	Noam Chomsky, <i>Aspects of the Theory of Syntax</i>
<i>BB</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>The Blue and Brown Books</i>
<i>Engel</i>	Paul Engelmann, <i>Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir</i>
<i>LE</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A lecture on ethics'
<i>L&M</i>	Noam Chomsky, <i>Language and Mind</i>
<i>McG</i>	Brian McGuinness, <i>Wittgenstein: A Life</i>
<i>NB</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Notebooks 1914–16</i>
<i>NM</i>	Norman Malcolm, <i>Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir</i>
<i>OC</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>On Certainty</i>
<i>PI</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i>
<i>PG</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Grammar</i>
<i>R</i>	Rush Rhees (ed.), <i>Ludwig Wittgenstein, Personal Recollections</i>
<i>RFG</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough</i>
<i>RFM</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics</i>
<i>T</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i>
<i>VB</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Vermischte Bemerkungen</i>
<i>Z</i>	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Zettel</i>

INTRODUCTION

When Wittgenstein was working on the latter part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he said to his former student and close friend M.O'C. Drury: 'My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age; I have to swim so strongly against the tide.' In the same conversation he said: 'I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view' (*R*, p. 94).

For a long time I have been puzzled by this second remark. My understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical thought seemed to be threatened. For the 'problems' to which he was referring were not the problems of poverty, disease, unemployment, crime, brutality, racial prejudice, war. These problems oppress and bewilder mankind. Certainly they disturbed Wittgenstein. But he was not referring to them. The 'problems' he meant are *philosophical*: those very perplexities and confusions with which he grapples in the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein's remark made Drury wonder whether 'there are not dimensions in Wittgenstein's thought that are still largely being ignored', and whether he (Drury) himself understood that the problems studied in the *Investigations* 'are being seen from a religious point of view' (*ibid.*). I have the same doubt in regard to myself.

In this book I am going to present an interpretation of what it could mean to say that there is, *not* strictly a religious point of view, but something *analogous* to a religious point of view, in Wittgenstein's later philosophical thought. For Wittgenstein certainly did not bring religious ideas explicitly into his studies of troublesome concepts. Most students of Wittgenstein's work would be

bewildered by the suggestion that he saw those problems from a religious perspective. Yet his remark to Drury would seem to mean that at least Wittgenstein was aware of some point or points of analogy between his philosophical outlook and a religious one.

A possible clue may lie in the reiterated theme of his writings, that explanations, reasons, justifications, *come to an end*. This theme itself needs to be clarified. Does it mean that there are *no* explanations or justifications for anything? Or does it mean that there are— but only up to a certain point? If so, *what* is that point? Can it be described?

In religious thinking there *is* an end to explanation. To parents grieving over the death of a child, these words may be spoken: 'The Lord hath given; the Lord hath taken away. Blessed is the name of the Lord.' Not everyone will find consolation in those words. But persons of a strong religious inclination may find help there: or in the words, 'It is God's will'. This *can* quiet the cry from the heart— 'Why did it happen?' When the search for an explanation, a reason, a justification, is brought to an end in the acknowledgement that it was God's will—that is a religious response. There is a religious attitude which would regard as meaningless, or ignorant, or pre-sumptuous, any demand for *God's* reason or justification, or any attempt to explain why He willed, or permitted, this disaster to occur.

But even a devout man may, in his despair, murmur against God. Here the Book of Job is deeply significant. Job was 'a blameless and upright man' (Book of Job 1:1). He was wealthy and honoured. Then disaster struck. His great herds and flocks were destroyed; his many sons and daughters were killed when a violent wind demolished the house in which they were dining; finally Job's own flesh was invaded by loathsome sores.

Three of Job's friends came to comfort him. They tried to persuade Job that these evils had befallen him because of some sin he had committed. But Job insisted that his life had been blameless. He had cared for the poor and the fatherless; he had not spoken falsely; his heart had not been enticed by other women; he had never re-joiced at the ruin of an enemy; he had not departed from God's commandments.

Now Job is wretched. The people who once honoured him, regard him with contempt. He is repulsive even to his wife. God has 'broken him asunder' (*ibid.*, 16:12).

Yet Job continues to insist that he is 'a just and blameless man'. He would like to speak with God—to *argue* his case before Him. 'I will say to God, do not condemn me; let me know why thou dost

contend against me.’ ‘He will slay me; I have no hope; yet I will defend my ways to His face’ (ibid., 10:2).

Then God answered Job. He reminded Job of His mighty deeds. He said to Job: ‘Will you condemn me that you may be justified?’ (ibid., 40:8). ‘Who can stand before me? Who has given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine’ (ibid., 41:10–11).

Job was shaken. He said to God: ‘I know that thou canst do all things, and no purpose of thine can be thwarted.... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes’ (ibid., 42:2–6).

The Lord then turned His wrath against Job’s three friends: ‘for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has’ (ibid., 42:8).

What is the meaning of this myth? Why was God angry with the three friends? I think this was because they claimed that Job *must* have sinned in some way; *otherwise* God would not have overwhelmed him with calamities. God is rebuking them for their assumption that He must have some *reason* for what He does.

Why does God rebuke Job? I mean: what is He rebuking Job for? Not for sins in his life before evil befell him: but for Job’s wishing to ‘argue his case’ with God; for wanting to know *why* God has brought disaster on him; for wanting to justify himself before God.

The significance of this ancient biblical drama, as I understand it, is that it displays something of the sense of the *concept* of God—or rather, of *a* concept of God. It shows that the notion of there being a *reason* for His deeds has no application to God; nor the notion of there being a *justification* or an *explanation* for God’s actions. God stands in no need of justifying or of explaining His ways to mankind.

I will argue that there is an analogy between this conception of God, and Wittgenstein’s view of the human ‘language-games’ and ‘forms of life’.

It would be wrong to think that Wittgenstein was in general hostile to explanations. He was trained as an engineer in Germany. As a research student of aeronautics in Manchester, he experimented with kites, and he even designed and built an aircraft engine with reaction jets at the propeller tips. After his long service in the First World War