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WARMING UP THE COOL PLACE: KIERKEGAARD, WITTGENSTEIN AND D.Z. PHILLIPS

Anthony Rudd

This paper is a critical examination of D.Z. Phillips' supposedly Wittgensteinian "contemplative" conception of philosophy, as he applies it to religious issues, and in particular to his discussions of Kierkegaard. I argue that this conception embodies an commitment to an ideal of neutrality which rests on an unacceptable account of philosophy as aiming for a "view from nowhere"; that Phillips fails to appreciate the full significance of Kierkegaard's way of doing philosophical work; and that Kierkegaard has a valuable account to offer of how philosophy can have a normative significance, even after the demise of the foundationalist ambition to stand outside all language games.

There has been a good deal of discussion recently of the relation between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. D.Z. Phillips has argued that they are both anti-metaphysical thinkers, who reject the foundationalist project of finding a validating basis for our practices which is external to those practices. Both of them, according to Phillips, have an alternative conception of philosophy as conceptual clarification, an unravelling of confusions which are generated by failing to distinguish one practice/language-game/form of life with another. However, Phillips also advocates - and in this he claims, rightly or wrongly, to be following Wittgenstein - a further conception of the role of philosophy, one that he calls "contemplative", and which he does not think is present in Kierkegaard. In this paper, I want to argue that this conception of philosophy (whether or not it is really Wittgenstein's) is not tenable; that Phillips fails to appreciate the full significance of Kierkegaard's way of doing philosophical work; and that Kierkegaard has a valuable account to offer of how philosophy can have a normative significance, even after the demise of the foundationalist ambition to stand outside all language games.

I

Phillips begins his book, *Philosophy's Cool Place*¹ by telling a story which, in one form or another, is by now a familiar one. Once upon a time, it was thought that philosophy - metaphysics - was able to provide us with a direct insight into the nature of Reality as it is in itself. On the basis of this insight, philosophy could then critically appraise all the other forms of discourse and practice that we engage in - all the varieties of science, religion,



morality, politics and so forth - and decide which were legitimate by seeing which ones really addressed or reflected the nature of Reality itself. But now we have (or many of us have) lost confidence in this picture. Philosophy has no direct insight into the Real which enables it to play a critical and foundational role for the rest of human culture. This raises the question: what, if anything, can the role of philosophy be after the demise of foundationalism? Phillips' answer is, firstly, that philosophy has the task of unravelling conceptual confusions which arise when the "grammar" of one language-game is misconstrued by analogy with that of another. But beyond this, he urges philosophy to adopt a "contemplative" stance, one that is rooted in a fundamental wonder that there is such a thing as discourse at all, that the language-games we play should even be possible.

This is supposed to avoid the errors of traditional foundationalism, while also avoiding the neo-pragmatism or ironism recommended by Rorty. For Rorty, once we have rejected the pretensions of traditional metaphysics, we are simply left with the particular language games, and no absolute perspective from which they could be either validated or criticised. But Rorty takes it that conceptions such as "truth" or "reality" are themselves metaphysical ones; the demise of foundationalism doesn't just mean that we should abandon the attempt to get an absolute perspective on the language-games, but that we should abandon the idea that the language games themselves aim to get at the truth, that they aim to disclose reality to us. (Unless these formulae themselves are reinterpreted in a very blandly pragmatic sense.) So science, morality, religion etc are just ways of coping; they don't aim at truth in any more exalted sense than that. Phillips rejects this conception¹, pointing out quite rightly that Rorty himself remains a kind of foundationalist; rather than accepting our language-games for what they are, he reinterprets them in the light of his general philosophical outlook (neo-pragmatism), and by so doing drains them of any claims that they make to embody truth or goodness. In this way he makes them compatible with a blandly tolerant attitude, but in so doing fails to respect their specificity. Rorty's stance is not really neutral; he imposes his own anti-realist outlook on the practices he describes.

Phillips, by contrast, purportedly following Wittgenstein (this is not the place to enquire into whether or not he has Wittgenstein right) recognises that there are practices, language-games or what have you, that do make strong claims about what is true or good or right, and that the making of these claims is essential to the practices themselves. However, he does not think that it is any business of philosophy to adjudicate between conflicting beliefs. From its "cool place" it contemplates the various language-games without making normative judgments about them, though it still recognises their right to make such judgments about one another. This does not, Phillips argues, mean that philosophers "cannot be critical of any religious practice"; there are occasions on which "philosophical reflection reveals confusion *in* religious practices."² If practices themselves are confused, then a perspicuous description of them will reveal that confusion. But one can only demonstrate such confusion by reference to other (unconfused) practices, which means that we cannot coherently suppose all our practices to be confused.³ Philosophy cannot pass judgement on practices

from a standpoint external to them. It notes the differences, it unravels the conceptual confusions that arise when one language-game is construed in terms appropriate to another, and beyond that it engages in the (slightly mysterious) practice of wondering at the possibility of there being discourse at all. (This concern for conditions of possibility might suggest a Kantian transcendental inquiry into the necessary preconditions of language-games, but it is clear that Phillips has nothing like this in mind.)

In what follows, I want to contrast this conception of philosophy's role with Kierkegaard's philosophical practice. I will argue, firstly, that, in criticising certain important claims that are made by Kierkegaard, Phillips abandons his own "official" conception of philosophy and becomes open to a form of the same objection that he himself brought against Rorty. Secondly, I will argue that Kierkegaard shows us how, without reverting to foundationalism, philosophy can play a critical, as opposed to a merely contemplative role, that it can be used to assess, rather than simply to describe certain language-games.

II

Phillips' demand for philosophical neutrality is apparently intended to let the various language-games be themselves. But it still continues, if in a rather enfeebled and shadowy form, the foundationalist tradition. Phillips demands that the philosopher, qua philosopher, abstain from any judgements as to the rightness or wrongness of particular language-games, but he does not deny that the philosopher qua participant in some particular language-game has the right to make judgements about the goodness of one practice compared to another. So a Catholic may, qua Catholic, denounce Satanism as evil. But if the Catholic is also a philosopher, then speaking philosophically s/he can only note that Catholics say and do these things, Satanists say and do those ones, that they do not appreciate one another...and then engage in contemplative wonder at the existence of these varied forms of discourse. This amounts to asking the person who has strong commitments of any kind to become a split personality when s/he becomes a philosopher.⁴

The assumption underlying this ideal of neutrality is that I can rise above my commitments - even those which are most fundamental to me as a person, those which go to constitute my sense of identity. As a philosopher, I can stand above the conflicts which engage my passions as a participant, and simply contemplate them. The old metaphysical ambition to step outside our own skins, to enjoy the view from nowhere, is thus continued in Phillips' work. It is an enfeebled version of the traditional ambition, because, for Phillips, although the philosopher can stand outside all of the particular language-games, that perspective makes available no standards by which to criticise or evaluate anything s/he sees from that vantage point. There is a point of view external to our particular practices which we can adopt, but it is not a normative one. It seems, nonetheless, that this claim would still be exposed to many of the criticisms that have been brought against the "view from nowhere" conception. In particular, Kierkegaard would have seen it as dangerously "demoralising" to suppose that we

could set our deepest, identity-conferring commitments to one side while engaging in philosophical contemplation.⁵ However, although Phillips' "official" position is a neutral one, he himself seems unable to resist giving philosophy a more critical role. Not only is he committed to something like a "view from nowhere", it also turns out that he claims the right, from that perspective, to criticise and revise our particular language-games.

In a discussion of Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*, Phillips objects to Kierkegaard's claim that those who do not will the Good are necessarily double-minded. Kierkegaard says that even those who are apparently committed whole-heartedly to evil or selfish aims still harbour an ineradicable longing for the Good, and thus remain internally divided. Phillips comments that "This seems to be sheer stipulation on Kierkegaard's part"⁶ and he goes on to point out that there are people who seem to have no longing for the Good at all, who are entirely happy in their depraved ways. Phillips' overall thesis is that, although Kierkegaard gives many persuasive examples and diagnoses of inner division in *Purity of Heart*, he is mistaken to claim that it is a universal condition for those who do not sincerely will the Good; this claim is an illicit generalisation which fails to be sensitive to the existence of counter-examples.

I think this criticism misses the point of what Kierkegaard is doing. He does not make his claims on the basis of empirical investigations. He does not present evidence to show that he has investigated a large sample of depraved characters, and found none who escape a longing for the Good. Nor does he claim that the depraved would always admit, even to themselves, that it is the Good they are longing for. When he asserts that "[j]ust as a person, despite all his defiance, does not have the power to tear himself away completely from the good...he also does not even have the power to will it completely"⁷, this is, in an important sense, an a priori claim. It is fundamental to Kierkegaard's religious convictions (and surely to mainstream Christianity in general) that we are created with an inclination to the Good, and that in turning against the Good we are turning against our own natures. In *Purity of Heart*, Kierkegaard is writing, not as an empirical psychologist, but as a religiously committed individual, presenting an "upbuilding discourse" for the edification of other such individuals. The assumption that there is in us, however much we may want to deny it, a longing for the Good is a basic assumption which goes to constitute the kind of language-game that Kierkegaard is playing here. By denying - on essentially empiricist grounds - that Kierkegaard is entitled to such an assumption, Phillips is doing precisely what he is supposed not to be doing by his own lights - dismissing a language-game that is in fact played, because it does not conform to his philosophical presuppositions.

Can Phillips be defended against this criticism? By his own standards, he is entitled to criticise a religious practice or belief only if the description of it shows it to be confused by reference to other practices. Jamie Ferreira, building on Phillips' work, has developed a clearer account of how this might work - of how a descriptive philosophy can have a normative force - than I can find in Phillips' own writings. She points out that for Wittgenstein "[d]escription is not simply empirical generalisation" but an attempt to give a perspicuous account of "the norms generated in prac-

tice."⁸ So description isn't just a random cataloguing of facts; rather "Wittgenstein sees himself to be describing the common structure informing religious aspirations."⁹ If a descriptive philosophy could make clear the nature of the basic norms characterising a religious form of life, then it could also make clear the confusions of a purported believer whose words or actions contradicted "a norm to which all religious believers hold."¹⁰ In this way philosophy could have a critical, normative role without having to impose its own standards on practices from the outside.

Ferreira's account has its problems. The claim that there is a "common structure" of norms that all religious believers would hold to might seem to involve a dubious essentialism. In fact Ferreira insists that "[t]his common structure is not a matter of essence, but rather a grasp of a family resemblance commonality..."¹¹ But it seems highly unlikely that the sort of "a posteriori" investigation that Ferreira has in mind could come up with a set of norms "to which *all* religious believers hold". A "family resemblance" account will typically be one that finds lots of criss-crossing similarities and differences, but no essential features that all family members share.¹² One might reply that we needn't be so ambitious – we might perhaps succeed in finding norms that a smaller but still substantial group share – perhaps all Catholics. And so a Catholic who could be shown to be, without recognising the fact, departing from those norms, would be revealed as confused. The real issue, then, turns out to be self-contradiction. It would not by itself have any normative significance to point out that someone's beliefs differed from those of some other (or even most other) believers – unless the first person had a commitment to accepting what the others believed.¹³ Philosophy's critical function, then, is to point out contradictions between the norms believers implicitly accept and either the things they explicitly say, or the beliefs that are implicit in other things that they do. However, such contradictions, once realised, could be resolved in either of two ways – by rejecting the norms or by rejecting the beliefs that conflict with them. Philosophy is only concerned with the fact that there is a contradiction – it has, on Ferreira's account, nothing to say about how to resolve it. So only a very minimal normativity is involved – no more than one can get out of the law of non-contradiction.

Can Ferreira's account be used to defend Phillips' critique of Kierkegaard?¹⁴ To do so, one would have to show that Kierkegaard's statements about our longing for the Good stood in contradiction to the implicit norms of the (religious? Christian? Protestant? Pietist?) form of life which he himself accepted. But, of course, Phillips shows no such thing. His objection to Kierkegaard's claims is not that they conflict with the "deep grammar" of religious existence, but that they conflict with a collection of empirical data about the conscious psychological states of deprived people. (And as it is part of Kierkegaard's claim that such people suffer from self-deception, it is begging the question to think that he can be refuted by simply citing their testimony.) As for the norms that are central to the kind of Christianity to which Kierkegaard adhered, and which it *would* embarrass him to come into conflict with; as I suggested above, his claims seem to be very much in harmony with them. Kierkegaard is in fact attempting to spell out explicitly what is implicit in a way of life that seeks to treat all

people – even the most depraved – as children of God, capable, however corrupted by sin, of turning back to Him. So Kierkegaard is doing what Ferreira thinks a philosopher should – making explicit the norms implicit in a form of life. But Kierkegaard is doing so from *within* that form, and having done so, he is using those norms to give an account of aspects of human life outside the religious sphere. And this account is not an “empirical generalisation”, but a perspicuous representation of modes of human activity and self-deception – perspicuous, of course, from the standpoint of the religious form of life in which he shares.

Phillips certainly appears to be criticising and rejecting, on philosophical grounds, a crucial thesis that Kierkegaard is asserting on first-order religious grounds. For Phillips, philosophical descriptions can have a critical force if they make perspicuous confusions that actually exist in the religious discourse. But we haven't yet seen any good reasons to think that Kierkegaard is confused in this way. And the only other way in which Phillips' criticism could be justified on his own terms would be if he could show that the thesis he is criticising was not in fact a first-order religious one (confused or otherwise), but a philosophical doctrine which Kierkegaard was superimposing on his religious discourse. If Kierkegaard was illicitly moving from legitimate religious exhortation into confused philosophy, then he would be opening himself to proper philosophical criticism. But in order to make out this case,¹⁵ Phillips would have to make the - highly implausible - claim that one can neatly sort out what is “philosophy” and what is “religion” in a work like *Purity of Heart*.¹⁶ And it would, of course, be philosophy that would be doing the sorting out. So the philosopher, once again, would stand in judgment over the particular language-games, insisting on the right to tell them what they may legitimately say or not say, and rejecting those elements of them that s/he finds philosophically disreputable. Kierkegaard's claim about the double-mindedness of those who fail to fully will the Good is a basic part of his religious outlook; for the philosophical overseers to reject it on the ground that it is really an illicit piece of philosophising would radically alter the nature of the language-games that religious people would be allowed by them to play.

III

In this section I want to consider another attempt by a would-be Wittgensteinian philosopher to show that claims like those that Phillips objects to in *Purity of Heart* are indeed confused; and to show this without abandoning a stance of philosophical neutrality. Michael Weston, following James Conant and Stephen Mulhall, has argued for an interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Postscript* which sees it as a parody, one that sets up philosophical arguments which are in contradiction to the “grammatical” reminders that he thinks are contained in the earlier part of the work.¹⁷ Those reminders have to do with the essentially first-personal nature of thinking about the meaning of life. Weston thinks that Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*, having presented these reminders, is then set up by Kierkegaard to develop an argument that we can only find meaning in our lives “through a relation to the eternal”¹⁸ and

that means that we must move from the aesthetic, to the ethical, to the religious and finally to the Christian way of life in order to fully establish such a relation. Weston then objects, in very much Phillips' manner:

How can we say that [an aesthete] 'really' desired a meaning for her life as a whole which is contradicted by what, when she reflects on her life, she is content with?...[W]hat Climacus is proposing is that we know *a priori* that any such life is self-deceived. That is to objectify the notion of the meaning of life. It is to forget...that there is no general question of the meaning of life to which there could be a general answer.¹⁹

Unlike Phillips, Weston does not take himself to be criticising Kierkegaard here; he assumes that this is precisely the point that Kierkegaard is intending us to see by showing us Climacus' blundering. (But the fact that Climacus' assumptions here are clearly identical with those expressed by Kierkegaard under his own name in *Purity of Heart* seems by itself to be a fairly decisive argument – not that others are lacking – for rejecting this interpretation.) So on Weston's view, there is a contradiction between Climacus' insistence that questions about the meaning of life have to be investigated from a first-personal perspective, and his equally passionate insistence that there is something universal about the answer to such questions; that for everyone it applies, that we can only ultimately find meaning by relating to "the eternal." So Climacus – and any believers who suppose that they have a universally valid answer to the question of the meaning of life – have mistaken the grammar of their own language-game, are contravening (other) norms that they implicitly accept.

Weston's claim that there is a contradiction here seems to me to be reveal a serious misunderstanding of Climacus' (and Kierkegaard's) insistence on the first personal character of existential thinking. Climacus (and Kierkegaard) certainly insist that I have to discover for myself that *my* life can only become meaningful through a relation to God; but for Kierkegaard (as well as for Climacus) it is axiomatic that there is a universal human nature, that we were all created on the same terms.²⁰ But if so, then it is true for anyone that his or her life can only become ultimately meaningful through a relation to God – though what this will mean for each individual's life remains a matter for that individual to discover. Augustine exclaimed to God that "you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you."²¹ As the *Confessions* amply demonstrates, it took deeply first-personal experience to bring Augustine to that conclusion, but the conclusion is about the relation of humanity in general to God.²² In finding a contradiction here, Weston is confusing an epistemological claim that a universal truth can only be apprehended through one's subjectivity, with a metaphysical (or "grammatical") claim that there is no universal truth in existential matters.

But in any case, even if there was a contradiction here, why should it be resolved, as Weston demands, by rejecting the belief in universal validity rather than the insistence on the first-personal stance? Is it because the latter is more deeply embedded in religious practice? I think it would be very

hard to show, just from a neutral, descriptive survey of practices, that that actually is the case. Or is it because some mysterious insight into “grammar” reveals that one belief is connected to the Platonic essence of “the notion of the meaning of life” while the other is not? Weston would scarcely want to say that. But he does make, from what is supposed to be a neutral philosophical position, highly controversial claims about what that notion involves. (That there can’t be a general question of the meaning of life is a claim supposedly derived from insight into *the* notion of the meaning of life, which itself looks suspiciously general.) Such claims cannot plausibly be derived from a purely descriptive survey of practices. However he does it, Weston is apparently insisting on the right to decide, *ex cathedra*, what is properly religious and what isn’t. Once again, we see an apparently humble conception of philosophy turning out to conceal a remarkably ambitious, not to say imperialistic vision of the role of philosophy vis a vis the rest of culture.

IV

So it is not only Phillips who falls into confusions about neutrality while trying to interpret Kierkegaard. But it is also not only in criticising Kierkegaard that Phillips contravenes his own proclaimed neutrality. Elsewhere too he claims the right to reject, on philosophical grounds, views that are central to religious forms of life. The most striking example is his treatment of the concepts of immortality and eternal life. He argues, on philosophical grounds, that we cannot take these beliefs literally. To suppose that I will continue to exist as a self-conscious subject after my physical demise – whether as a disembodied soul or as a resurrected body – is, according to Phillips, philosophically incoherent.²³ But, as a simple matter of empirical fact, such beliefs do play a large part in most if not all religious traditions. Once again, Phillips is claiming the right, on the basis of a supposed superior philosophical knowledge, to dismiss beliefs that are central to the religious lives of many people. There is no Wittgensteinian modesty here, no refusal to advance positive philosophical doctrines; Phillips seems quite clear that philosophy is able to prove that people are psycho-physical unities, and not potentially immortal souls temporarily inhabiting bodies. But that rejected belief is not just a bit of remote philosophical theorizing; it is central to various religious traditions and to the deepest hopes and fears of their adherents.

It is significant, though, that Phillips considers the belief in personal immortality is not just philosophically confused, but also irreligious, in that it represents a selfish concern for personal survival, rather than a properly religious concern for the transcendence of such selfishness. And he doesn’t simply reject all talk of eternal life. In *Death and Immortality* he interprets it as referring to an attitude which we may adopt to our lives here and now, one in which we see them under “the aspect of eternity.”²⁴ In more recent work his position seems less straightforward, and indeed he explicitly criticises some “attitudinal” accounts.²⁵ But he continues to repudiate any idea of a “temporal immortality” and to insist that the only genuinely religious outlook is one which has abandoned any concern for personal survival.

Now Phillips does not try to claim, as a descriptive psychologist or sociologist, that religious believers do in fact just mean what he thinks they ought to mean when they talk of eternal life; such a claim would be quite obviously false as an empirical observation.²⁶ What he is saying, rather, is that the beliefs of some religious people are not really religious at all, but rather superstitious – where superstitions are self-serving fantasies which may be demonstrably false on philosophical, or perhaps on scientific grounds.²⁷ And other people may be genuinely religious, but still fall into confusions when they try to articulate the understanding that they are nonetheless able to manifest in their lives.²⁸

Now Phillips is quite entitled to argue, as a participant in a religious form of life, for an interpretation of traditional language about immortality along non-realist, attitudinal lines.²⁹ This would be a controversial claim made within a religious context. But he also apparently wants to claim, as a philosopher and not just as a believer, that this interpretation is the only genuinely religious one; and this claim is presented as a “neutral” philosophical insight into the “grammar” of religious belief. But here again we see Phillips, as the philosopher surveying forms of life from the height of his cool place, claiming the right to decide what is “really” religious, and what is merely superstitious. By contrast, Miguel de Unamuno places the longing for a thoroughly “literal” immortality at the heart of what religion is: “The longing for the immortality of the soul, for the permanence in some form or another of our personal and individual consciousness, is as much of the essence of religion as the longing that there might be a God. The one does not exist apart from the other, the reason being that fundamentally they are one and the same thing.”³⁰ Who is right? The answer, surely, is that the question can only be asked within a religious context, where it becomes the question, “What should I believe?” (Unamuno is well aware of this; his is an explicitly existential philosophising, which makes no claim to neutrality.) But to ask outside any such context, from a neutral “cool place”, whether the belief in personal immortality is really religious or superstitious, is a futile exercise. Where, asks Unamuno, “does religion end and superstition begin, or perhaps rather shall we say, at what point does superstition merge into religion? What is the criterion by which we discriminate between them?”³¹ There is no philosophical answer to this question, because there is no “essence” (definable by “grammar” or otherwise) of “religion” (or even e.g. of Christianity) which is accessible to a neutral investigation. To describe a belief or practice as “superstitious” is to repudiate it, to take a stand against it, and it is therefore at least implicitly to affirm one’s own commitments. It is not a piece of neutral conceptual elucidation.

Phillips however, has attempted to meet Unamuno’s challenge by providing neutrally applicable criteria for distinguishing between religion and superstition. Superstitions, he claims, are “blunders, mistakes, regarding causal connections of a kind.”³² Later he amended this claim: superstitions are not just blunders but confusions, where a confusion is a (causal) belief that couldn’t possibly have been true. He gives the example of someone who tries to injure an enemy by sticking pins in a picture of the person. It isn’t that this might have worked but in fact doesn’t – rather “[w]e have not the slightest idea of what it could mean to say that sticking pins in the

picture could harm someone else."³³ He later adds that "the superstitious character of a practice will show itself in the character of the expectations which surround it and in the tension between these and our common understanding of causality."³⁴ So a boxer who crosses himself before a match is superstitious if he thinks it will protect him from injury; he may be religious if he does so as a way of dedicating his performance to God.³⁵

It seems then that for Phillips a belief is superstitious if it expects God or supernatural agencies to bring about any physical changes in the world; religious if it is concerned with the attitude we adopt to the world. This understanding is characteristic of a certain kind of modern religious thought, which responds to the rise of science by abandoning belief in the miraculous, leaving science to explain why anything happens, and interpreting religion as having to do purely with an inward transformation of our attitude towards the world.³⁶ That this understanding of religion should be widespread in modernity is not surprising, but Phillips is taking a view characteristic of one kind of (modern, liberal) religion and making it the defining (universal, ahistorical) essence of religion (as distinguished from superstition) in general. A purely descriptive account, by contrast, would note that the distinction between "religion" and "superstition" has been made in many different ways in different religious traditions and that these distinctions do not simply coincide with one another, or with the one that Phillips makes between the physical-causal and the spiritual-attitudinal.

Of course one could make Phillips' distinction, and one could as a matter of stipulation say that the elements distinguished are to be called "religion" and "superstition". But would this distinction, if made philosophically, from "the cool place" and so without endorsing the correctness of any particular religious beliefs, have any normative force? Phillips thinks that a neutral description can show superstitious beliefs to be confused. If we continue to follow Ferreira's account of how this works, the confusion would be some sort of contradiction between such beliefs and others that the superstitious person is also committed to. These could be religious beliefs (in Phillips' high-minded quasi-Stoic sense, where they are sharply distinguished from any attempt to gain personal benefits) and/or scientific or common sense beliefs about causality. But we need to ask whether there really are contradictions here. A "superstitious" belief in causal factors beyond those recognised by science needn't contradict anything that science does recognise, though it would contradict a scientific philosophical claim that science can explain everything. And while there may be a tension between high-minded "religious" concerns for transcending selfish desires, and "superstitious" desires for practical benefits, it isn't clear that there is any formal contradiction between them. Why shouldn't the boxer cross himself for both protection and dedication? And, furthermore, even if there were contradictions, we again need to ask how philosophy (on Phillips' view of it) can tell us how to resolve such contradictions. If my superstitious beliefs do contradict my religious or my scientific beliefs, why shouldn't I resolve the contradiction by rejecting the latter rather than the former? A purely descriptive philosophy cannot assert the correctness of the norms implicit in any practice/form of life; but this means that it cannot have any normative force that goes beyond the mere demand for logical consistency.

This is not to say that we should not distinguish between religion and superstition, or even that we should not do so along the lines Phillips suggests; but we should recognise that such a distinction is not a neutral one. Wittgenstein says "Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from fear and is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting."³⁷ But I see no reason why we should have to take that as a philosophical remark in Phillips' sense of "philosophical". It is an expression (significantly, written as a private note, not as part of a philosophical work) of Wittgenstein's own normative commitments.

So Phillips' discussions of immortality seem to go against his proclaimed neutrality in two ways. Firstly, by arguing that the non-realist interpretation of immortality is the only one that the established results of enquiry in the philosophy of mind leave open to religious believers, Phillips takes philosophy to be advancing definite theses, which then constrain the possibilities open to other forms of discourse.³⁸ And secondly, he argues, as a philosopher and not simply as a believer, that his interpretation of concepts such as "eternal life" is the only genuinely religious one. By doing so, he makes it look as though the constraints imposed by a sound philosophy of mind don't in fact take anything away from what is genuinely religious. But these (allegedly neutral, philosophical) claims about what is really religious could only make sense if the philosopher had, in some quasi-Platonic way, an access to essences which enabled him or her to make authoritative judgments about what is and is not, truly religious. And such an access could not be provided by the purely descriptive philosophy that Phillips endorses.

V

It seems then that would-be Wittgensteinian philosophers find it hard to maintain their own "official" attitude of neutrality, departing from it by making judgments about particular language games from a position which is purportedly external to them all. Kierkegaard, I want to suggest, has an altogether clearer sense of what philosophy can and cannot do. He allows that philosophising can be critical, that it can have a normative edge; but he denies that it can exercise that normative function from an external standpoint.

Kierkegaard is concerned with different "spheres of existence" or "stages of life" - aesthetic, ethical and religious (as well as various intermediate stages and sub-divisions.)³⁹ But how can we decide what is the best way to live? Kierkegaard rejects the metaphysical project which would aim to validate or invalidate these ways of life by seeing whether they were based on an accurate apprehension of Reality as it shows itself to the neutral, purely objective gaze of the philosopher (e.g. by seeing whether one could prove the existence of "objective" moral standards, or of God). So he attacks the confusions of "pure thought" - the attempt to stand outside any particular sphere of existence, in order to judge them all from some neutral ground.⁴⁰ And he is also, as Phillips notes, concerned to clear up conceptual confusions which arise from failing to distinguish clearly between the spheres. (e.g. confusing a religious acceptance of the authority of an apostle

with aesthetic admiration for the achievements of a genius.⁴¹) However, Kierkegaard does attempt to do something more than this philosophically; he tries to show us how we can make normative judgments as to the relative value of the different spheres of existence. How, though, can he do this if there is no neutral perspective from which the various ways of life can be compared with Reality in itself?

The lack of such an external perspective means that such normative judgments must be made from within one or other sphere. Hence Kierkegaard's judgments about the different stages of life are made from within the religious, and ultimately the Christian sphere. This might seem to raise problems of incommensurability. A Christian may condemn aestheticism from Christian premises, but this will cut no ice with the aesthete. This is why Kierkegaard resorts to indirect communication. That one cannot adopt a universal standpoint, does not mean that one is hermetically sealed into a single outlook; hence Kierkegaard's creation of pseudonymous authors to express and explore from within the various stages of life. In doing this, Kierkegaard is trying to clarify what it means to live aesthetically or ethically, or religiously and to note the differences between these ways of life. By a good description one can, for instance, make clear to muddled aesthetes that they are not really Christians. Phillips thinks that this is philosophically legitimate; but for him philosophy cannot go beyond this to show aesthetes that they ought not to be aesthetes. One practice may criticise another, but philosophy can only note that there are these conflicts; it cannot say that any substantive view is better than another. (Though Phillips would accept that it is religiously legitimate for the Christian to condemn aestheticism, or to preach to the aesthete.)

But Kierkegaard isn't just (qua philosopher) noticing differences, nor is he just (qua religious author) preaching to the aesthete in terms that are incommensurable with the aesthete's own. He is philosophising on the basis of his own ethico-religious convictions, but in a way that is meant to address those who do not share those convictions. The point is to show the aesthete that aestheticism is unsatisfactory, and to show that from the inside. How, though, can this be possible, if the different stages of life disagree precisely about what constitutes a good reason?⁴² Kierkegaard's reply is that rational argument between the different spheres is possible, not because there is any neutral point of view from which they can all be compared, but because all the stages (except perhaps lower forms of aestheticism) have a common concern - they are all parts of a wider existential language game. That is, they all share a concern with how a human being should live. This shared concern enables one to develop a critique of one stage from another, by showing that it does not enable the self to live a full and satisfactory life, even though that common concern does not exist as another sphere distinct from all the particular ones.

Kierkegaard believes, as I have noted above, that there is a common human nature which demands a certain way of life from us; we are all aware of it, but are inclined to repress that knowledge. It is this belief that is the basic presupposition of his account of the stages of life. Those living at the aesthetic, at the merely ethical, or indeed the merely religious (religiousness A) level are involved in repressing that self-knowledge; there-

fore they suffer from the frustration and internal division that he diagnoses in *Purity of Heart*. The diagnosis can only be made plausible to those who do not start by sharing Kierkegaard's assumptions, by providing phenomenologies of the different ways of life which aim to show them as involving existential aporias and crises which cannot be resolved in their own terms. These problems can be experienced within the "lower" spheres, but they can only be understood in terms derived from the "higher" ones. Hence the rationality of the move, for instance, from the aesthetic to the ethical; the latter offers the possibility of articulating the sense of dissatisfaction which can be experienced while attempting to live a purely aesthetic life, but which cannot adequately be understood in terms of the categories which the aesthetic has available (boredom, bad luck etc.)⁴³

But there is an obvious objection to this account - for the account of the self on which Kierkegaard relies is a part of his wider ethico-religious view of the world. The different spheres may all share a common concern for the well-being of the Self, but they give very different accounts of it. So how can Kierkegaard presuppose his view of the Self while addressing those who do not share it? The simple answer is, because he thinks it's true. Kierkegaard argues from within existence. And that means that he does not aspire to Phillips' impossible neutrality. For him the appropriate place to consider ethical and religious conflicts is from the position within those conflicts that one thinks is the true one. The criterion he relies on for making judgments of relative worth between existential stances is the nature of the Self. But his account of that criterion is itself not a neutral one - an aesthete, a non-religious ethicist and a non-Christian religious believer will give different accounts of the nature of the Self. But this does not mean that there can be no rational debate between the different spheres. It does mean that the debate will take the form of a hermeneutic exercise, rather than a foundationalist attempt to show that the superiority of one way of life can be demonstrated from a point that is external to all of them. Instead, the participant in sphere X will try to show those who live in other spheres that it is in terms of a sphere X understanding of human life that they can make most sense of their own lives; in particular someone in sphere Y would have to be shown that sphere X has the resources to adequately understand the problems of which s/he may be more or less consciously aware in sphere Y, and offer a plausible alternative. Further, one might attempt to show that those who adhere to a sphere Y understanding do so precisely in order to hide from themselves the (perhaps challenging or disturbing) truths that are understood in sphere X. This hermeneutics of suspicion is of course central to Marx's, Freud's and Nietzsche's criticisms of religious and (some) ethical beliefs. But it is also a crucial part of Kierkegaard's critique of non-religious outlooks.⁴⁴

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are attempts to develop this hermeneutical argument; he is successful to the extent that e.g. an aesthete can recognise him or herself in Kierkegaard's fictional exemplars of the aesthetic life and, in so doing, be brought to recognise the shortcomings of that way of life. Alternatively, an aesthete may be motivated to respond by setting out a rival vision of the aesthetic,⁴⁵ and perhaps to present fictional or pseudonymous ethico-religious characters, with the aim of bringing ethical

and religious believers to see themselves in a different light. The question being disputed here is whether the conflicts and differences between the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious are themselves best understood in aesthetic, ethical or religious terms. This debate certainly cannot be settled by appealing to a neutral point situated beyond it, but it does not follow from that that it cannot be a rational debate (unless one takes a *very* narrow Enlightenment/foundationalist view of what reason is). Nor does it follow that such a debate would have to be considered a non-philosophical one (unless one stipulates a similarly narrow definition of what philosophy is). And finally, contra Phillips, I can also see no reason to suppose that philosophy could find a way to adequately describe and thus contemplate, such a conflict in terms which were neutral as between the conflicting parties.⁴⁶

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NOTES

1. See *Philosophy's Cool Place* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1999), Ch 4

2. Phillips, 'Religion in Wittgenstein's Mirror' in his *Wittgenstein and Religion* (Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1993) 245.

3. Ibid 238-41, 245. This claim has some analogy to Davidson's argument that we cannot suppose that the whole set of our beliefs might be false. See D. Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' in his *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984)

4. This criticism is akin to that sometimes raised against Rawls - that it is not reasonable to ask those with strong moral or religious commitments to simply lay them aside, in order to adopt his "original position." To do so, according to the critics, is to treat such deep commitments as though they were on a level with merely self-interested attitudes and prejudices which we can properly be asked to discount.

5. See e.g. Johannes Climacus' polemic against the ideal of detached objectivity - a polemic which I take to express Kierkegaard's own view. (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Section II, Ch 1.)

6. D.Z. Phillips, 'Self-Deception and Freedom in Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*' in *Kierkegaard and Freedom* (ed J. Giles, Palgrave, 2000) 163.

7. S. Kierkegaard, 'An Occasional Discourse: On the Occasion of a Confession, Purity of Heart is to Will one Thing', in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (ed and trans H. and E. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1993) 33.

8. M.J. Ferreira, 'Normativity and Reference in a Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion', *Faith and Philosophy* (18.4, 2001) 449.

9. Ibid, 454

10. Ibid, 451

11. Ibid, 454

12. cf L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans E. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1958) # 66 ff

13. As Ferreira herself says, if one simply described a clash between majority and minority beliefs, that could not by itself function as a criticism of the minority view. For that we would need to "ask why one norm is better than the other." (Ferreira, op cit, 451) and that is not a purely descriptive task.

14. I'm not suggesting that Ferreira would want to do so herself. In the discussion which followed Phillips' presentation of his paper on *Purity of Heart* (to a conference at Cambridge in 1998) Ferreira was among his more vigorous critics.

15. Not that he shows any awareness that he needs to, that there is a problem here.

16. Again, to do so, would seem to require a highly questionable appeal to essences. It should be noted that there is an interesting tension in Wittgenstein's own work between his concern to distinguish between different language-games, and his suspicion of essentialism. While Wittgenstein is very aware of the confusions that can arise through failing to distinguish different language-games, he nowhere suggests that they are hermetically sealed from one another; such a suggestion would go against the anti-essentialism that is also central to his thinking. Many of Wittgenstein's disciples, it seems, have tended to emphasise the stress on differences to the exclusion of the insistence on the flexibility of language and the concomitant refusal to draw strict divisions. But by doing so they relax the tension that makes Wittgenstein's own work so impressive.

17. See M. Weston, 'Evading the Issue: The Strategy of Kierkegaard's *Postscript*' (*Philosophical Investigations*, 22.1, 1999) and 'Kant and Kierkegaard on the Possibility of Metaphysics; a Reply to Prof. Evans' in D.Z. Phillips and T. Tessin (eds) *Kant and Kierkegaard on Religion* (Macmillan, Basingstoke/St Martin Press, New York, 2000) The interpretative line that Weston follows is developed in detail in J. Conant, 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense' in T. Cohen, P. Guyer and H. Putnam (eds) *Pursuits of Reason* (Texas Tech University Press, Lubbock TX, 1993) and 'Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for their work as Authors' in T. Tessin and M. von der Ruhr (eds) *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1995) and in S. Mulhall, *Faith and Reason* (Duckworth, London, 1994). This interpretation, though undeniably ingenious, is deeply flawed. See my 'On Straight and Crooked Readings; Why the *Postscript* does not Self-Destruct' and J. Lippitt 'On Authority and Revocation' both in P. Houe, G. Marino and S. Roussel (eds) *Anthropology and Authority: Essays on Soren Kierkegaard* (Editions Rodolphi, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 2000); also Lippitt's *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Macmillan, Basingstoke/St Martin Press, New York, 2000) Ch 4.

18. Weston, 'Kant and Kierkegaard...', 34.

19. *Ibid*, 35

20. *The Sickness Unto Death* becomes unintelligible without that assumption. Maybe Weston would want to provide an ironically deconstructive reading of that work too, but the prospects for such a reading are hardly good.

21. St. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans H. Chadwick, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991) 3.

22. Of course, there are believers who take a more pluralistic approach than Augustine, who say that they follow a spiritual path which works for them, but which they do not claim to have an intrinsic or objective superiority over other paths that others follow. But even the more pluralistic believers do still make *some* general normative claims about the meaning of life. (For instance; that one cannot find a valid meaning in life by following Hitler or David Koresh or by devoting oneself to the abuse of children; or that love is better than hate.)

23. See his *Death and Immortality* (Macmillan, London and Basingstoke, 1970) Ch 1 and 'The Dislocated Soul and Immortality' in his *Recovering Religious Concepts* (Macmillan, Basingstoke and London/St Martin's Press,

New York, 2000)

24. See *Death and Immortality* Ch 3.

25. 'The Radiance of a False Eternity' in *Recovering Religious Concepts*, 182-4

26. An interesting contrast to Phillips' critique of Kierkegaard, where he does try to refute a religious claim by appealing to empirical evidence about what people would say they believed.

27. Phillips also allows for a further category – of beliefs that are genuinely religious, rather than superstitious, but which are nonetheless "low" or "shabby". But he insists that the distinction between "high" and "low" religious beliefs has to be a personal one, unlike the supposedly objective distinction between religion and superstition. See 'Religion in Wittgenstein's Mirror', 247-50.

28. See 'The Dislocated Soul...', 155-6.

29. Though I am not myself convinced by either his philosophical claim about the incoherence of 'literal' belief in immortality, nor by his religious claim about its undesirability.

30. Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans J. Crawford Fritch (Dover Pubs, New York, 1954) 221

31. *Ibid*, 217

32. Phillips, 'Religious Beliefs and Language-Games' in his *Wittgenstein and Religion* (op cit) 72

33. Phillips, 'Primitive Reactions and the Reactions of Primitives' in *Wittgenstein and Religion* 108. I can't see that Phillips is doing anything more here than dogmatically asserting something that is on the face of it, patently false. Nothing is easier to imagine than that sticking pins in a picture or doll causes pain to the person represented. Maybe we can't explain the mechanisms underlying such causality; but can we (as Hume would ask) understand the mechanisms underlying any causal connection?

34. Phillips, 'On Giving Practice its Due – a Reply', *Religious Studies* (31.1, 1995) 123

35. 'Religious Beliefs and Language Games', 72,3. Phillips' later introduction of the distinction between blunder and confusion would not, I think, lead him to repudiate this example as an illustration of the superstition/religion distinction.

36. Though of course it has some pre-modern precedents – notably Stoicism, which Phillips' account of genuine religion strikingly resembles.

37. L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans P. Winch (Blackwell, Oxford, 1980) 72

38. Thus going against Wittgenstein's dictums: "Philosophy...leaves everything as it is" and "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them." *Philosophical Investigations* #s 124, 128.

39. It has been suggested to me by an anonymous referee for this journal that a contemporary appropriation of Kierkegaard's thinking would need to recognise a number of other perspectives besides the ones Kierkegaard concerns himself with – e.g. Nietzschean Genealogy and Theravada Buddhism. I think that a good case can in fact be made for including such examples as these within Kierkegaard's taxonomy (Genealogy as a form of aestheticism, Theravada Buddhism as a version of Religiousness A. (And it would be a fascinating question whether forms of Mahayana Buddhism could be seen as relating to the Theravada in something like the way Kierkegaard sees Religiousness B relating to A.)) But nothing in my argument depends on the claim that Kierkegaard's taxonomy is complete; his account of how debate is possible between rival perspectives does not depend on the claim that he has identified all the possible participants to such debates.

40. He does not however, adopt the radical perspectivism (sometimes) advocated by Nietzsche, which would repudiate the idea that there is an independent reality on which the different perspectives are all perspectives. In the *Postscript* (which I take, contra Weston and Conant, to represent Kierkegaard's own epistemological opinions) he claims that "Existence is itself a system – for God; but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit." (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans H. and E. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1992, 118.) Reality as seen by God thus serves for Kierkegaard much the same role as the thing-in-itself does for Kant – it prevents the collapse from an epistemological skepticism about the intrinsic nature of independently existing things into an ontological idealism which would deny their reality. I am grateful to Noel Adams for pressing me to clarify this point.

42. See 'On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle' in *Without Authority* (ed and trans H. and E. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1994)

42. See A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Duckworth, London, 1981) 39

43. There is some irony in the fact that Kierkegaard's account of the rationality of movement between the stages has some marked similarity to MacIntyre's own account (in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Duckworth, London, 1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Duckworth, London, 1990)) of how there can be rational debate between rival traditions. I comment on the similarities, and also on the significant remaining differences, in my paper 'Reason in Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre' in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, eds J. Davenport and A. Rudd (Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 2001) This volume contains essays not only replying in various ways to MacIntyre's charge that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist, but also exploring possibilities for positive dialogue between Kierkegaard's thought and MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelean virtue ethics.

44. Merold Westphal has suggested to me that on my view, all philosophy is hermeneutics of suspicion. I think this would be putting it too strongly; the hermeneutical task is not all suspicious, and I do think there are other – transcendental – tasks for a post-foundationalist philosophy to perform. But this isn't the place to enlarge on this claim.

45. For example, I think a case can be made for seeing Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a conscious and deliberate reply to Kierkegaard in defence of the aesthetic.

46. Versions of this paper were presented at *Kierkegaard: Between Ethics and Religion*, a conference organised by the Soren Kierkegaard Society (UK) at Leeds University, July 5th-8th 2001, and to a meeting of the Kierkegaard Society (USA) at the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, April 26th, 2002. I am grateful for the discussion on both occasions; for the valuable comments of two anonymous reviewers for this journal; and for the very helpful comments of my friend and former colleague, John Lippitt.