

BOOK REVIEWS

Wittgenstein, Religion and Ethics: New Perspectives from Philosophy and Theology, edited by Mikel Burley. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. xvi + 266. \$114.00 (hardcover).

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Had Wittgenstein left philosophy for good following the 1921 publication of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he would not have significantly influenced the development of ethical or religious thought. The *Tractatus* famously holds that “Propositions can express nothing that is higher” (6.42), whether concerning values or God. Naturally, then, many philosophers working in its wake discarded ethical and religious statements as mere nonsense (and were bewildered, as Frank Ramsey quipped in a related context, by Wittgenstein’s regarding them as “important nonsense!”). Of course, Wittgenstein returned to philosophy in the late 1920s, and his later work did shape subsequent ethical and religious thinking—less through his occasional lectures or manuscripts explicitly treating those topics than through its general treatment of language, which abandons the austere Tractarian “picture theory” of the proposition in favor of emphasizing language’s multifarious character, practical functions, and foundation in our social and animal nature.

These motifs have fueled influential, if diametrically opposed, accounts of ethical and religious discourse. Philosophers will naturally think of their metaethical import: Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations and purely descriptive metaphilosophy have been taken (e.g., by John McDowell and Sabina Lovibond) to yield a naturalism-adjacent moral realism (or, anyway, “anti-anti-realism”), while his refusal to regard similarity of surface grammar as indicative of similar function has been read (e.g., by Simon Blackburn) as congenial toward quasi-realism. Surprisingly, Wittgenstein’s bearing on metaethics receives no serious attention in this volume, which is quite imbalanced between its two titular topic areas: of the eleven essays here, just three give ethical issues center-stage, while the rest focus on religious topics (or, occasionally, give the two areas equal billing). But analogous questions to these arise in those contributions



concerned with the proper Wittgensteinian account of religious language: realist, non-cognitivist, or some middle way to be developed. In what follows we summarize and evaluate most of the contributions to the volume, concluding with an evaluation of the volume as a whole. (We omit Chon Tejedor's interpretation of "ethical religiousness" in Wittgenstein's early writings and John Milbank's critique of Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical philosophy of mathematics, for want of the competences required to evaluate them critically.)

First, we consider the essays dealing with religious language in general. Michael Scott's well-written contribution could fruitfully have opened the volume: it clearly explains many substantive and interpretive issues that arise—often more opaquely—in other essays. Scott frames Wittgenstein as contesting *the face value theory*, on which religious utterances with the surface grammar of assertions (a) really are assertions, (b) express belief in their contents, and (c) are true just if they correctly represent correlative facts. After surveying challenges by other thinkers to each of these claims, Scott notes points at which Wittgenstein himself clearly rejects the face value theory. Scott intimates that he finds it unclear just which alternative to the face value theory Wittgenstein endorsed: expressivism about religious language could accommodate many of his claims, but so, too, would the views that religious language is used for distinctive practical purposes, or that it is apt only for a minimalist kind of truth. But some Wittgensteinian contentions Scott cites—e.g., that a religious doctrine "simply isn't a theory," but is closer to "a sigh, or a cry" (159); or that religious belief isn't "in the slightest influence[d]" by evidential considerations (157)—seem strongly to motivate an expressivist reading. Scott reasonably concludes that Wittgenstein does not adequately rebut the face value theory, since the existential significance of religious language could be accounted for by religious statements' distinctiveness not in depth grammar, but merely in subject matter.

Mikel Burley's essay contends that Wittgenstein's interpretation of religious language is neither perniciously fideistic nor naturalistic in any atheistic sense. Regarding fideism, he argues that Wittgenstein does accept the benign *non-interference principle*, on which "religions are not amenable to philosophical criticism," but rejects the pernicious *incomprehensibility principle*, on which "religions cannot be understood by anyone other than active practitioners" (53). The rationale for the non-interference principle is simply that, since "philosophy 'leaves everything as it is', then *a fortiori* . . . it leaves religion as it is" (57). But if, as Burley suggests, the non-interference principle entails that we must always understand religious rituals as mere practices, and never as involving a (potentially mistaken) understanding of things, then it totally insulates religious phenomena from theoretical reasoning—the very idea, it would seem, that rendered fideism objectionable in the first place. Burley considers this worry explicitly in turning to Wittgenstein's naturalistic idea that religious rituals are continuous with instinctive behaviors. His reply seems to be that this carries reductionistic or atheistic implications only if these instinctive

behaviors and their objects are merely natural or devoid of transcendence, and that we should reject this premise. But this position faces a dilemma: if the states of mind these behaviors manifest are cognitively thin enough to fit Wittgenstein's claim that rituals are grounded in instinct *rather than* theory, then it is unclear how the fact that our religious statements arise out of them could render them cognitive rather than merely expressive.

Next, we take up the essays dealing with specific theological claims. Of these, Genia Schönbaumsfeld's is certainly the clearest, but this renders its shortcomings plain. For Schönbaumsfeld, theodicy necessarily—but incoherently—anthropomorphizes God. It presupposes divine omnipotence, which she deems incoherent (since lack of constraint vitiates agency), and anyway clearly false (since God cannot do many logically possible things: e.g., actions requiring embodiment). Further, it treats God as a member of our moral community, which overlooks God's transformation of our "ordinary moral vision" (100) and, worse, leaves God with "dirty hands" in allowing atrocities, even to produce good thereby (102f.). Her alternative is to reject any theoretical justification of evil as "itself evil" (105), to regard the problem of evil instead as existential and, in answer, to follow Wittgenstein in renouncing desire—and, further, Kierkegaard in "a joyful acceptance of existence" (107). Schönbaumsfeld's negative arguments are too many and far too quick to be adequate. Indeed, they manifest more problematic anthropomorphizations than the theodicy's view, as when she suggests that conceiving of God as a person requires treating God's inabilities to "have sexual intercourse [or to] ride a bicycle" as limitations (98) and treating God's goodness as conditional on whether God allows evils "with or without a second thought" (101). Moreover, her proposed practical stance toward evil has a better claim to moral repugnance than the theodicy's: if it is objectionable to avert our gaze from the Holocaust to its eschatological redemption, how much more so, keeping our gaze resolutely fixed on the Holocaust, to *joyfully accept* the sphere of existence in which it figures! *Pace* Schönbaumsfeld, this is quite unlike Kierkegaardian faith, which can rejoice in the presence of evil only through its confidence (against the evidence) that God will miraculously restore what was destroyed. If it is impermissible even to hope for such restoration of our atrocity-marred world, the morally serious attitude is not joyful acceptance, but a full-throated condemnation of it.

Perhaps Rowan Williams's wide-ranging and difficult essay is best understood as advancing two main arguments. First, he agrees with the early Wittgenstein that religious beliefs, like ethical statements, do not describe facts in the world. But he argues that Wittgenstein's later reflections on aesthetics allow for an account of belief in God or Christ's resurrection as forming a whole "system of reference" that affects all factual claims and demands response in the form of a transformed life. Initiation into aesthetic practices illuminates how religious believers enter such a system and learn to follow its moves from religious narrative to imperative. At times Williams seems to recognize that religious practices and attitudes

often depend for their justification on metaphysical or historical theses, but is frustratingly ambivalent and vague about this. Second, Williams argues that Chalcedonian Christology exhibits a concern for the “grammar” of God-talk comparable to Wittgenstein’s (and Kierkegaard’s). If Christ is fully human, then the divine indwelling in Christ does not “interrupt” his human action. This implies that finite and infinite activity are non-competitive and that God is not a “rival fact” in the world. That, in turn, demands the above account of belief in God. What puzzles us here is that Chalcedon holds that the union of Christ’s divinity and humanity is not causal but hypostatic. It is unclear, then, how this union could have immediate implications for the nature of divine causality generally.

The essays by Wayne Proudfoot and Stephen Mulhall concern Mulhall’s account of theological language in *The Great Riddle* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Mulhall’s account defies easy summarization, but is helpfully framed by Proudfoot as linking the Grammatical Thomists’ “recognition that language directed toward the transcendent Christian God necessarily outstrips the limits of sense” (114) with Wittgensteinian ideas concerning nonsense. Surprisingly, Mulhall appropriates Cora Diamond’s “resolute reading” of the *Tractatus*, on which evaluative and religious statements do not show higher insights or realities but are simply unintelligible. He employs two Wittgensteinian motifs to explain how theological language can possess “significance . . . [precisely] by virtue of [its] nonsensicality” (130). First, Wittgenstein holds that absolute value-judgments are nonsensical, but nevertheless continuous with our ordinary uses of evaluative concepts. They gain their significance, seemingly, through a determinate negation of sense: “we can see [expressions’] lack of sense in this [absolute] evaluative context as a denial or deconstruction of the sense they make in other evaluative contexts” (131). Second, Wittgenstein compares mathematical conjectures without proofs to *riddles*. We only grasp the conditions a riddle’s solution must meet to solve it when we recognize the solution itself. Mulhall follows Diamond in regarding Anselm’s description of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” as such a riddle—and indeed, as a *great riddle*, one requiring “a determination of meaning which must come not from us but from whatever it turns out to apply to” (134).

Proudfoot argues that these two motifs pull in different directions. While Mulhall requires an account of theological expressions as discontinuous with established meaningful uses yet still significant for us, the first motif suggests an account of them as significant but continuous with established use, and the second suggests an account of them as discontinuous but lacking intrinsic significance. He thinks Mulhall right to emphasize (following Stanley Cavell) that throughout our ordinary language, we project terms into new contexts that preserve aspects of their prior significance while discarding others; what counts as a successful projection cannot in the nature of the case be decided in advance. Importantly, however, if (e.g.) “good” has its home use in the great riddle “God is good,” then it lies finally beyond any significance provided by our natural projective trajectory

for “good” rooted in its ordinary uses: “of [‘good’s] primary meaning, its application to God, we know only that it is always inadequate” (122). With Proudfoot, we fail to see how language-use that ultimately transcends our projective trajectories could carry *any* significance for us. (Disappointingly for the reader, Mulhall does not attempt to answer Proudfoot’s objection in his essay. Instead, after explicating his account, he considers its relation to Williams’s position in *The Edge of Words* [Bloomsbury, 2014]. The comparison is interesting but exceeds our scope here.)

Finally, we turn to the essays dealing with ethical matters. Gabriel Citron’s essay draws on Wittgenstein’s “Koder Diaries” to formulate an existential problem he calls the “problem of life.” The basic tolerability of our lives depends on numerous background conditions that are so fundamental we tend not to notice them unless we are unlucky enough to experience their absence. These conditions are fragile—it is easy for them not to obtain. If we notice their fragility, it is “not unreasonable” to respond with severe anxiety. Therefore, we are vulnerable to being miserable due either to the absence of these conditions or to anxiety about their fragility. There is a tension within Citron’s formulation of this problem. If we don’t tend to notice the fragility of conditions that make life tolerable, then the problem of life likely will not affect many people. Citron fleetingly mentions that Wittgenstein thought honest people *should* struggle with problems like this (33). But this struggle threatens to make us miserable, and misery, like severe depression, may hamper both our well-being and our ability successfully to fulfill our many responsibilities. This consideration suggests that we are practically permitted, perhaps even required, to avoid dwelling on the fragility of life’s tolerability. Citron might reply with some plausibility that we would be better off if we could somehow directly face the problem of life and yet go on. But here he offers only very sketchy guidance about how this could be achieved.

Duncan Richter’s essay commends a Wittgenstein-inspired ethics of communication that prizes clarity as an intrinsic value. Clearly distinguishing concepts treats one’s audience as rational agents capable of assessing one’s claims; it also avoids a “reductionism” that obscures the world’s richness. Clarity is a form of “respect,” both for audiences and for the differences among concepts and among their referents. Richter raises concerns about “motivated linguistic innovators” who seek to expand the usage of a term to effect beneficial changes in people’s attitudes and actions rather than to provide an accurate analysis of the concept employed. He worries that such innovation blurs distinctions and works by manipulation rather than rational persuasion, but he fails to attend to relevant counterexamples. Activists’ expansion of the term “rape” to include date rape may have blurred some distinctions, but it illuminated the salient moral similarities between various cases *and* improved the concept of rape by clarifying that it is lack of consent rather than physical violence that makes rape *qua* rape horrendous. This innovation is both reality-responsive and rationally justifiable. Richter briefly acknowledges

that conceptual extension may reveal more than it obscures (225). Still, because he does not examine such cases in detail, his analysis of objectionable linguistic expansions remains imprecise.

Sophie Grace Chappell's essay defending the doctrine of double effect (DDE) is a highlight of the volume. She uses Wittgenstein-inspired arguments to argue that intentions, like mental states generally, are essentially public. An agent's intentions are linked to what action-types are ascribable to her given her behavior, chosen means, and circumstances. This ascribability is, in turn, determined by convention in a way analogous to how the meanings of speech acts depend on convention. Thus we uncover the morally significant difference between familiar cases like Surgeon and Trolley: any interpreter competent with our conventions would ascribe a killing intention to the organ-harvesting surgeon, but not to the trolley-turner. Chappell's arguments are too rich to do justice to here. For instance, she provocatively argues that internalism about intention would collapse the DDE into consequentialism and that while the DDE is helpful for addressing some moral conundrums, it is not the relevant casuistic device in many of the cases to which it has been applied. Her account falters in its Wittgensteinian reliance on convention, which is vulnerable to the consequentialist rebuttal that folk psychological conventions are often incoherent and require radical revision. When considering particular examples, moreover, Chappell appeals to *reasons* rather than directly to conventions to explain why we take a certain result to be (un)intended. It is these reasons, we suggest, that ultimately decide between "conventional" understandings of actions/intentions and their consequentialist rivals.

Considered as a whole, the volume is uneven, as is typical of essay collections. Further, its ideal audience also is not obvious. Philosophers may find some of the general treatments of Wittgenstein on religious language useful (including for students) and will find some of the ethical contributions thought-provoking, but likely will be unengaged by the theological essays. Theologians and religious ethicists are likeliest to be interested in all the topics treated, but may well find the theological contributions the most stylistically difficult—and rather disappointing in substance.

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Philosophy of religion has traditionally been dominated by work in metaphysics and epistemology. The relationship between theistic belief and

