

A Critical Assessment of Wittgenstein's View on Religion: An Islamic Perspective

Mohsen Javadi , Qom / Iran

Wittgenstein's views on religious language have been taken by many of his commentators as a form of non-cognitivism. According to this view "religious statements are regarded as exhortations to lead a certain sort of life, or as prescriptions on how to lead one's life, or as expressing certain kinds of sentiments or attitudes, such as encouragement to lead a moral life." (Runzo 1993, 157) John Hick recognizes the idea of "language game" that belongs to the later philosophy of Wittgenstein as the root of this non-cognitive interpretation that was developed by D.Z. Phillips and others. (Hick 1990, 96) Hick also appeals to this non-cognitive character of religious language to conclude that Wittgenstein held a non-realistic interpretation of religion. Hick identifies non-cognitivism about religious discourse with a non-realist interpretation of religion, defining non-realism as a position that interprets "religious language, not as referring to a transcendent reality... but as expressing our emotions or our basic moral insights and intentions or as referring to our moral and spiritual ideals." (Hick 1990, 7)

Wittgenstein denies the analogy between religious language and other assertive languages such as the language of science. He wants to show that the proper function of religious language is not assertion about reality, but some sort of performance. Religious language is not suitable for informing one another about a specific kind of reality; it has a passionate tone that is appropriate for talking of love and submission. Wittgenstein's emphasis on this important role of religious language leads Phillips and others to take him as a non-cognitivist. I will conclude that although there are some points that support this interpretation, on the whole, it lacks plausibility. Concerning to the non-realistic interpretation of Wittgenstein, I will appeal to some of his remarks on God and religion in general, which are acceptable only in the context of believing in the real God. In addition to these remarks, I will argue that believing in a real God is what gives importance and vivacity to religious language. So, I think that Hick, Phillips and others, even if they have some right to take Wittgenstein as a non-cognitivist, should not take him as a non-realist about religion. He doesn't deny the reality of God but only our ability to assert some things of Him within the language game of religion. Indeed, we become familiar with the reality of God not as a result of playing a religious language game, but prior to this, through an existential or even a rational awareness. Religious language comes to express our love and commitment to a known God in a passionate tone of voice and this is possible only *after* our familiarity with Him.

We will explore this further in two sections on non-cognitive uses of language and religious realism.

1. Wittgenstein and Non-cognitive Language of Religion

One of the important bases of the non-cognitivist view is the appeal to the practical character of religion. Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes that religion only wants us to do something, but does not justify it, because this is impossible for religion. He says:

Religion says: *Do this!* – *Think like that* – but it cannot justify this and once it tries to, it becomes repellent; because for every reason it offers there is a valid counter reason. It is more convincing to say: "Think like this! However strangely it may strike you" or "Won't you do this? – However repugnant you find it." (Wittgenstein 1980, 29)

Using the terms of Wittgenstein, we can say that religious discourse is a practical language-game and doesn't refer to something beyond it.

In Islamic literature the importance of practices in religion is recognized, and the varieties of commands and prohibitions of Islam shows makes this evident.

But Muslim scholars affirm that religious discourse also has some important non-reducible descriptive statements. Here, I will not reply to Phillips and others who accept that religion apparently contains truth-claim statements but reduce them to other performative statements. Rather I want to demonstrate that even if religious discourse were lacking in assertive statements, we would still be forced to interpret some commands as pointing beyond religious discourse to make the whole of this discourse possible. Indeed we cannot end the problem only by appealing to the verbal characteristics of religious discourse.

According to Muslim scholars commands or prohibitions presuppose the authority of their source. So God can command us to act in such and such a way but he cannot command us to accept his authority, for to do so would be circular. Religious commands and prohibitions found in religious discourse have accordingly been divided into two parts: authoritative (*molavi*) and guiding (*irshadi*). They treat the many commands of religion to the effect of: "Believe in God," or, "Submit yourself to Me," as guiding us to the judgments of reason. These statements are used to refer to claims that have a prior endorsement through reason, and if we did not have these reasoned claims, we would lose the validity of religious discourse in its entirety. Khwajah Nasir al-Tusi (d. 1274) in a famous remark said, "The negation of reason's obligation to accept God's authority would lead to a denial of the whole of religion." (al- Tusi 1986,303).

In summary, not only does religious discourse actually have many assertive statements, but also some of its commands or prohibitions are disguised assertive statements.

But we can construct a *second reason* for non-cognitivism to the effect that religious statements cannot be justified. It seems that Wittgenstein wants to say that religious beliefs principally cannot be justified, or to use Malcolm's phrase, they are groundless. But this cannot prove the non-cognitive character of religious discourse.

Indeed, some fideists, such as Kierkegaard, have the same belief without denying the cognitive character of religious discourse. Unjustifiability by itself does not commit us to non-cognitivism, unless it is conjoined to a strange thesis to the effect that everything that cannot be justified is meaningless. This is the needed premise that is needed for non-cognitivism. But in his remark Wittgenstein only emphasizes the validity of religion even though we have no reason to accept it. Indeed his remark indicates that he accepts that we can reason about religious beliefs, although whatever reasons we adduce for them will be defeated by valid counter reasons. How could this be possible if there were no truth-claims in religious discourse? If Phillips's non-cognitive interpretation of Wittgenstein were correct, no bringing of reasons and counter-reasons would be possible.

The *third reason* for non-cognitivism is constructed on the basis of an analysis of religious belief. Believing in the afterlife, for example, is not just assent to the proposition that some important event will occur at the end of one's life. This is not religious belief and does not belong to first-order religious discourse. Religious language expresses our commitment to a form of life not predicated on the occurrence of some event. Wittgenstein affirms that someone who believes in a last judgment does not use expressions like "such and such will happen" to make a prediction, but rather to express a commitment to a "form of life" for example one in which people feel constantly admonished by God's approval or disapproval. Indeed, if he were making a prediction, it would not count as a religious belief. (Glock 1996,321)

While I agree with Wittgenstein that religious beliefs have a major difference from other scientific or ordinary beliefs; they express our commitment to some special form of life. But contrary to him, I think that expressing our commitment does not rule out the assertion of some fact. Indeed considering some fact as glorious may motivate our commitment to it. We see many verses in our Noble Book that describe the details of the sequences of the events in the afterlife to stimulate our motivation to commit us to a religious life. If I have no knowledge of this fact, or like Don Cupitt deny the reality of it, then how can I commit myself to this form of life and why? It may be said that the process of committing is not a deliberative reasoned decision; it is rather the result of unconsciousness training that we obtain from our culture. But my question is not answered, because as soon as I come to think that there is no God and no afterlife, the motivation for accepting these sentences is lost. These sentences are similar to metaphors that work only in the context of the claim they make about reality. For example, when we say that the lion of our country is coming, the force of this metaphor depends on our claim that somehow, he really is a lion. As soon as we withdraw the claim, the metaphor ceases to work. The force of religious belief is not in its verbal form, but in its pointing to some important facts that are very essential for human kind. Whether or not what is claimed by religion is true as realistically interpreted, in order for religious belief to have the hold on us that it does, the claim that it describes reality must be assumed. If we lose our knowledge of God, we cannot really pray and we will have many doubts about living a religious life. I think that what may be said in this regard is that we cannot know God or other religious facts thoroughly, but we do have some restricted knowledge of Him and the extent of this knowledge determines the vivacity of our commitment to religious life. According to a verse of the Qur'an the extent of the fear of God directly depends on the extent of our

knowledge of him: "*Verily, those of God's servants who fear Him are only those who know.*" (35:28).

I think that what Wittgenstein means to deny is the restriction of the importance of religious belief to mere prediction and description without paying attention to its commitment function. We can agree with Phillips in taking religious discourse as incommensurable with other forms of discourse, but deny that the only possibility for this incommensurability is to reject any assertive character inherent to this language game. It is by virtue of being multifunctional that religious discourse constitutes an exceptional language game. Things and objects have different relations to humanity; so, speaking of them gives rise to different connotations, and speaking of a real God is able to evoke our feelings and commit us to that reality. Religious utterances will not lose their objective character because of having another emotional function. We may accept that the language of religion or morality is the language of commitment or submission, but this by itself does not rule out their cognitive reference. We can offer another interpretation for the difference between the religious language game and the scientific language game. Indeed, religious language itself has different parts, but even those parts that are descriptive of the glory of God or the afterlife have a strange emotional function. In religious texts, God not only speak us as emotional persons, but also as a rational. The neglect of the role of emotion in the religion that is characteristic of the metaphysical literature does not allow us to ignore the important role of reason in our non-metaphysical literature. We must avoid this mistake not by committing another mistake, but by recognition of the importance of emotion, action and knowing in the religious form of life.

2. Wittgenstein and Religious Realism

There is no doubt that the central idea of the religions is believing in a real God, and this is represented in religious discourse, but Phillips and others try to interpret that in a non-cognitive fashion. Here we only concentrate on one of Wittgenstein's remarks about God to show that his view is more akin to realism than non-realism. He says: "What do I know about God and the purpose of life. I know that this world exists. The meaning does not lie in it but outside it. That life is the world. The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God". (Wittgenstein 1979,73)

Reading Wittgenstein, I suddenly encountered this sentence that reminded me of a couplet by the famous Iranian poet Mawlavi, known in the West as Rumi:

Shaykh of Religion said, "The meaning is Allah."

The sea of meanings is the Lord of the worlds.

All the tiers of earth and heaven

Are as straws in that flowing sea.

(Mawlavi, I, 3338-9)

By the "Shaykh of Religion," Mawlavi means his teacher, Shams, who told him that the only real meaning of every thing is God. Shams divided meanings to two types: the meaning of words and the meaning of the existence. It is evident that God is not the linguistic meaning of the words "world" and "life", but is the existential meaning of the world and of our lives. Shams taught that while the forms of existence are varied, their meaning is one.

Ibn Arabi (d.1240) makes a similar remark: "All the world is like a single word that has a meaning, and that meaning is God." (Ibn Arabi 1911, ch.338)

In the light of the long tradition generated by such remarks, we can put Wittgenstein's point in this way; he accepts that not only the religious language game but all language games (the world) are pointing to something we can call God. We must take his remark in the context of a realistic and even mystical tradition, even if we cannot regard him as a real mystic, in the sense given through the religious traditions of mysticism themselves. So even if we accept that Wittgenstein is a non-cognitivist with regard to religious language, we must accept that he believed that the meaning of the whole of this language and also of other languages only is God, and if He is not real, the whole of the games become empty.

References

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