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# ON RELIGION: NOTES ON FOUR CONVERSATIONS WITH WITTGENSTEIN

Rush Rhees  
(edited by D.Z Phillips)

In the brief notes on four conversations between Wittgenstein and Rush Rhees, they discuss the nature of moral problems and the notion of "the right ethics"; the relations between religion and morality, and law and grace; theology as an investigation of God's properties, and the criteria for "the same God"; a comparison of the grammars of "human being" and "God". An additional note by Rhees discusses how Wittgenstein's question, "Are eyebrows going to be talked of in connexion with the eye of God?" should be read.

Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett was published by Blackwell in 1966. Shortly after its publication, Rush Rhees told Father Barrett that had he realised that the volume was going to be such a slim one, he could have given him far more material on belief. Writing to him on 27 June 1977, however, he qualifies this remark with respect to specifically religious belief: 'I probably thought that I had more than in fact I have. I have one or two which are too ragged and scrappy to do anything with.' He adds: 'As I read them now they do not seem to me satisfactory: not likely to help another reader to understand.' Part of Rhees' reasons for saying this is that the remarks cannot be understood in isolation from Wittgenstein's wider concerns. He ends his letter by saying: 'I have wondered whether the new edition should have footnotes where you can refer to some parallel or relevant passage in Wittgenstein's published works: a passage which might, for instance, throw light on something which is obscure in the notes taken in the lectures – I do not like the look of the *pages* in the present edition. The notes on the lectures about religious belief, especially, give the impression of a jumble. "Make a nice page? Yes, but expensive." Oh well. – But I still suggest the footnotes.'

In the light of these comments, why publish these four brief conversations? First, much has been done since 1977 to link philosophy of religion with Wittgenstein's wider concerns in philosophical logic. Indeed, it is important to realise that, in discussing religion, Wittgenstein is still pursuing questions in logic, questions concerning language and reality. This may give some reason to think that the conversations Rhees recorded may be of help to some readers. Further, the fourth conversation, with Rhees' additional comments, throws light on the much quoted remark, 'Are eye-



brows going to be talked of in connexion with the eye of God?' (*Lectures*, p.71). (Ed.)

### CONVERSATION ONE

(4 July 1942)<sup>1</sup>

Was Brutus's action noble, or particularly vile? Killing his friend. What would he have had to feel in order that you should say that killing his friend was noble? The point is that in all likelihood you would not know what to say at all.

Take the problem of a man who has come to the conclusion that he must either leave his wife, or abandon his work of cancer research. Such a man's attitude will vary at different times.

Suppose I am his friend, and I say to him, 'Look, you've taken this girl out of her home; and now, by God, you've got to stick to her.' This would be called taking up an ethical attitude. He may reply, 'But what of suffering humanity? how can I abandon my research?' In saying this it may be that he is making it easy for himself. He wants to carry on that work anyway. And he may be inclined to view the effect on his wife relatively easily: 'It probably won't be fatal for her. She'll get over it, probably marry again,' and so on. On the other hand, it may not be this way; it may be that he has a deep love for her. And yet he may think that if he were to give up his work he would be no husband for her. That is his life, and if he gives up that he will drag her down. Here we may say that we have all the materials of a tragedy; and we could only say, 'Well, God help you'.

Whatever he finally does, the way things turn out may affect his attitude. He may say, 'Well, thank God I left her; it was better all around'; or 'Thank God I stuck to her'. Or he may not be able to say 'thank God' at all, but just the opposite.

I want to say that this is the solution of an ethical problem.

Or rather: it is so with regard to the man who does not have an ethics. If he has, say, the Christian ethics, then we (he) may say it is absolutely clear, he has got to stick to her come what may. And then his problem is different. It is: how to make the best of the situation; what he should do to be a decent husband in these greatly altered circumstances, etc. The question 'Should I leave her or not?' is not a problem here.

Someone might ask whether the solution of Christian ethics to the first question is the *right* one. I want to say that this question does not make sense. The man who asks it might say, 'Suppose I view his problem with a different ethics – say the Nietzschean – and I say "Now it is not clear that he must stick with her. On the contrary, etc." Surely one of the two answers must be the right one. It must be possible to decide which is right and which is wrong.' But we do not know what this decision would be like – how it would be determined, what sort of criteria would be used, and so on.

Compare: Saying that it must be possible to decide which of two different standards of accuracy is the right one. We do not even know what a person who asks this question is after.

If someone whom I think to be deeper than I am says, 'Surely it must be

possible to decide which is right', I would say, 'Well, all right, go ahead; good luck to you. I have no idea at all what sort of thing this will be, but good luck.'

One common source of difficulties in philosophy is that we have certain ideas about *metrics*. We can say that one thing is greater than another. And then we feel that it must always make sense to ask regarding any two things which are compared in that field whether the one is greater than (or equal to or inferior to) the other. Whereas this need not be so in the least. (Beethoven is greater than Schumann. But is Beethoven greater than Bach?) Similarly, we may suppose that if something is greater than another, then it must make sense to speak of something as twice as great as something else. Here we are clinging to ideas about metrics which *are* applicable in particular fields.

Kierkegaard's problem: 'Has a man a right to let himself be put to death for the truth?' For me this is not even a problem. I don't know how such a man would have to feel, what state of mind he would be in, etc. This reaches a point at which the whole problem wavers and ceases to be a problem at all. Like asking which of two sticks is the longer when they are seen through the wavering air of a hot pavement. 'But surely one of them *must* be longer.' How are we to understand this? (Consider two reflexions on the surface of the water where waves are coming in rapidly and all the time.)

Even 'Recht ist das, was uns gefällt' is a kind of ethics. It is helpful in silencing objections to a certain attitude. And it should be considered along with other ethical judgements and discussions – in the anthropological study of ethical discussions which we may have to conduct.

## DISCUSSION TWO

(25 December 1944. Notes written on the day following the conversation.)

Religion and morality. 'If there is anything of any value at all in religion, then it is morality.' Could you imagine someone saying this? Suppose you were faced with a heap of miscellaneous materials; and you say 'if there is anything of any value among all these, then it is .....'.

Whether being religious is compatible with being immoral.

Two attitudes:

- (a) 'You can believe in God and yet be damned.'
- (b) 'If you believe in God, then you cannot be damned.'

If you can be religious and yet be immoral; and if at the same time you can be moral without being religious, - then religion would seem to be almost a decoration.

St. Paul to the Romans: No man can be completely moral. The plodding morality won't save me, because I am both flesh and spirit: it is impossible to fulfil the law completely. The only way of salvation is to become a new man through belief. Then although I still don't fulfil the law, I may be forgiven if I repent. (This is the point of speaking of the 'grace' which comes from God. The point being that I don't fulfil the law.

If I did I could claim as a right, and there would be no question of grace.)

Misunderstandings in theology. Tolstoi.

Discussing what properties God has. – How we know we are talking about the same thing.

View discussion in theology as discussions of the right way to worship God.

### DISCUSSION THREE

(Uncompleted notes on a discussion in 1944 or 1945)

Misunderstandings in Theology. Discussing what properties God has.

We may discuss the properties of an oak desk. That when it is long in a damp room the drawers don't open easily. We may investigate to see whether it has that property or not, etc. Here there is no doubt of what we are talking about.

We have all learned to talk about God in definite ways – we have learned a particular use of the word 'God'. That he walked in the Garden, that he is a person, that he is in Heaven, and so on. As children we learn a particular – primitive – theology.

If we were to ask: how do we know that we are talking about the same thing, how do we know that we mean the same thing by 'God' – the criteria would lie in this use of the word you have learned.

If we learn, or are given, a different theology – this might of course be put by saying that we now have different views regarding God's properties. And so it might be suggested that we were wrong before. But might it not also be said that we learn to use the word 'God' in a different way? What is the criterion for saying that we are now talking about the same thing? It is not like the case where we are talking about this book or about this desk and can explain what we are talking about – explain that it is the same thing – by pointing to it.

Similarly with the case where we take two different tribes: Suppose we say 'They believe that God has different properties than we say he has'. Maybe they say that he is a person or that he is not a person.

### DISCUSSION FOUR

(8 April 1945)

The queer features of Milton's theology (in *Paradise Lost*) and of the way in which God is portrayed as talking to Adam and Eve. The queer notion of making the Fall a subject of poetry and of art – unless perhaps the Fall be treated in a pagan fashion. No religious treatment of sin can be a subject for poetry. (The description of Eve in the Garden before the temptation occurs is not a Christian portrayal of the Fall.)

The way God talks to Adam and Eve afterwards.

You can't make God *human* without making nonsense of the whole of religion.

If you view God as a human being, then his actions become humanly incomprehensible. And so we have no problem of evil, etc. A character in

a drama or in a novel must be humanly comprehensible. But if any human being were to do certain of the things God does, then he wouldn't do others. You can't say that God is good, as you would say this of a human being, because he allows this and that evil, and so on. On the other hand you can't say that he is wicked or malevolent, because of this or that good. No human motives of any kind could account for God's doing what he does. God has made the crocodile.

This would apply to one's judgement of a story like Bunyan's also. It would seem at first sight queer to speak of God as the kind and loving guide on the way, when God has also created the way and all its trials. And it must be queer if you look on God as a human being and on his motives as human motives.

Our statements about God have a different grammar from our statements about human beings. And if you try to talk about God as you would talk about a human being, you are likely to come to talk nonsense, to ask nonsensical questions and so on.

In talking about God we often use images or parts of images that apply to human beings. This is so when we say: 'Wherever you are, God always sees what you do.' We know how this statement is used, and that is all right. So we may speak also of God's hearing our prayers. You might say then that in our picture of God there are eyes and ears. But it makes no sense if you then try to fill in the picture and think of God as having teeth and eyelashes and stomach and tendons and toenails.

So we might say that our picture of God is like a picture of a human being with holes in it. Which means that the grammar of our language about God has holes in it if you look at it as the grammar of statements about a human being.

In describing our picture of God we may speak of it as being made up of parts of a picture of a human being together with other things which have no resemblance to any part of a human being. You might start the description of a curve by taking drawings of familiar curves: a circle, an ellipse, a parabola, a hyperbola. Then describe it by saying: 'You see here it is part of a parabola, there then it is part of a circle, here it is a straight line which goes into part of a spiral, etc.' And the curve you described might then have an equation entirely unlike any of the familiar curves.

This has a certain importance when you try to understand what is meant by speaking of God's causality. If you speak of God's causality there is a certain connexion or resemblance between this and speaking of physical causality. But not the sort of resemblance or connexion there is between a railway train and a cart, but rather the sort of connexion or resemblance there is between a railway train and a railway accident.

You land in nonsense for instance if you start talking about God as using certain means or instruments to bring something about or to achieve a certain end.

Suppose things happened on a screen as they do in a cinema. We can imagine that all this should happen on the screen without any of the apparatus of film and projector. We might then talk of various 'beings' on the screen, and of their movements etc. We might give a name to one of these beings, call it 'Henry', say. But you couldn't then speak of Henry's

employing means to do anything or to bring about anything that happens on the screen. There are analogies between the description of these events and a description of physical events, but that particular way of speaking makes no sense here. (Henry's blowing doesn't cause the smoke to move: there is no such means by which that is effected.)

You may paint a picture of a chair. You can't sit on the painted chair. But a painted man may sit on the chair, in a sense. The painted smoke doesn't rise from the painted pipe, though it is above the pipe; similarly with the smoke 'coming from' the mouth of the painted man. (The man's blowing is not the means which drives the smoke where it is.)

In all this there is no actual case of means to an end, or instruments to a result. But there is something which looks like means to an end.

So with God's causality. We could say that in certain circumstances or from certain angles this looks like means effecting a result. But it is that just as little as anything in the picture is a means to anything else in the picture.

*In the letter to Father Barrett, Rush Rhees relates part of the fourth discussion to the remark on p.71 of Wittgenstein's 'Lectures': 'Are eyebrows going to be talked of in connexion with the eye of God?' In a review of a book on Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Anscombe had said that the remark was obviously a joke and that the author had missed it. Rhees says that his note of the conversation shows that Anscombe herself had misunderstood. What follows is from Rhees' letter. (Ed.)*

[I]n the conversation with me ... Wittgenstein said (I was pretty close to recording his words when I wrote the note, I think):

'In talking about God we often use images or parts of images that apply to human beings. This is so when we say, "Wherever you are, God always sees what you do." We know how this statement is used, and that is all right. So we may speak also of God's hearing our prayers. You might say then that in our picture of God there are eyes and ears. (The use or connexion in which I say God sees what I do, or that God hears my prayers – it is to *this* we must look if we are to see the sense of: "in our picture of God there are eyes and ears". R.R.) But it makes no sense if you then try to fill in the picture and think of God as having teeth and eyelashes and stomach and tendons and toenails.'

I.e. I should *not* know of any remark I might naturally make, in thinking of my relation to God, which would give sense to 'in my picture of God there are eyelashes and toenails'. - This is not a joke, and it is not an unimportant by-path in a discussion of phrases like 'what we say about God' or 'the properties we ascribe to God', or when we speak of God as 'acting'.

'So we might say that our picture of God is like (n.b., '*is like*', not '*is*') a picture of a human being with holes in it. Which means that the grammar of our language about God has holes in it IF YOU LOOK AT IT AS BEING THE GRAMMAR OF STATEMENTS ABOUT A HUMAN BEING.'

Elizabeth Anscombe would certainly object to much in this, and I am not taking issue with her on *that*. I am saying *only* that I think she misinterpret-

ed the question 'Are eyebrows ... etc.' on page 71 of your volume. And I would add that if we have nothing but what is given on that page 71 about the sentence 'God's eye sees everything' – it is hardly possible to get an inkling of what Wittgenstein *did* mean. *Unless* I had heard Wittgenstein speak as he did in the conversation I have recorded (I did not hear the lectures), I should probably accept her dismissal of it as a joke; although it is hard to see what the point of the joke in this place would be.

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#### NOTES

1. Rhees included parts of this conversation in his, 'Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics', *Philosophical Review*, January 1965, reprinted in *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1970, and in *Moral Questions*, Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press 1999.