

## ARGUING ABOUT THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGION

KAI NIELSEN\*

If we argue against Wittgensteinian Fideists such as Malcolm, Hughes, Holmer, Phillips and Winch by arguing about the rational and pragmatic point of an activity such as religion, are we not in effect assuming unrealistically that there are formal criteria of pragmatics *uberhaupt*, principles of a general sort which it is philosophy's business to establish? But a Wittgensteinian would rightly question such 'pragmatics *uberhaupt*' and point out that to understand what morality, science or religion is, entails understanding their divergence and diverse rationale. The real force of their procedures is: 1) to ensure that there will be as little *Weltanschauung* in philosophy as possible, and 2) to point to the fact that after we have a perspicuous representation of religious discourse, criticism of religion is gratuitous in all but the case of the 'knight of faith', and there the relevant criticisms are all existential and not in Wittgensteinian term 'philosophical.'

Surely there is a sense in which we want as little *Weltanschauung* in philosophical analysis as possible, but why cannot philosophy legitimately be concerned to articulate and defend a general outlook concerning man and his place in nature — an outlook which consciously incorporates certain values and has as one of its aims the alteration of human life? This is indeed a *Weltanschauung* or an ideology, but what of that, since no adequate grounds have been given for believing that such an activity is impossible, irrational or undesirable? Historically speaking, philosophers have been engaged in this task and they have served as critics of other *Weltanschau-*

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\* University of Calgary, Canada.

ungen.' What good grounds are there for changing this form of life we call philosophy? Indeed, let us not forget that philosophy certainly includes — and essentially includes — analysis and descriptive metaphysics (systematic analysis) as well. But it is a mistake to think it must limit itself to that. The mistake involved in saying it is not the task of philosophy to articulate or criticize **Weltanschauungen** is comparable to the mistake involved in asserting that philosophers should do meta-ethics only, never normative ethics. What is valuable in the slogan, to do moral philosophy properly is to do meta-ethics and only meta-ethics, is: 1) the stress on elucidation as the first step, and often, in a given bit of philosophizing, the only necessary step; and 2) an implicit warning not to confuse these activities. Indeed, it is sometimes true that after an elucidation has been carried out, nothing more needs to be done; but this is not invariably true and, at the very least, there remains a wide range of normative arguments of which only some are 'existential.'

To regard this critical normative inquiry as an essential element in philosophy does not at all involve an intention to search for formal criteria of pragmatics **uberhaupt**. I suspect such a notion is scarcely intelligible, but whether intelligible or not, it is hardly at issue when, in reading James and Mill, Freud and Jung, Marx and Pascal, we trace out their conflicting and challenging arguments about the utility of religion. In the light of the enduring human interests, needs and the capacities of the human animal, is religion something that man, no matter what his condition, no matter what his society, needs and should have? Pascal and Jung, on the one hand, and Marx and Feuerbach, on the other, come down on different sides of this issue, but, with the possible exception of Jung, they all understood religion very well. What they questioned was its value — the rational point of continuing

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<sup>1</sup> In a significant but neglected discussion of this topic Berlin, Murdoch and Hampshire have defended the view I have taken here about philosophy and **Weltanschauung** and Quinton has opposed it. See A. Quinton, S. Hampshire, I. Murdoch and I. Berlin, "Philosophy and Beliefs," *The Twentieth Century*, Vol. CLVII (1955), pp. 495-521. Sidney Hook has ably defended the inclusion of such **Weltanschauung** concerns in the opening sections of his "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life," in *Moderns of Tragedy*, ed. by Lionel Abel (Greenwich, Conn.: 1967) and the application of such argumentation is carried off brilliantly by Alasdair MacIntyre in "Breaking the Chains of Reason," in *Out of Apathy*, ed. by E. P. Thompson (London: Stephens, 1960). I have tried to say some further general things about this in my "For Impurity in Philosophy," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, forthcoming.

to have such a human activity.<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that we should be concerned with the 'pragmatics of religion' and indeed in a philosophical way.

Understanding admits of degrees and of kinds and there is a sense, as Winch and Phillips have shown, in which we could not understand religion unless we understood something of what it involves, as a participant would, anymore than we could understand bridge without such a participant's understanding of bridge. But, as one might intelligibly assert that bridge is a stupid, pointless game, so one might intelligibly, though perhaps falsely, make harsh judgments about the value and point of religion in human life. The critique of religion made by Marx and Engels may be utterly unjustified, but it is for the most part at least perfectly intelligible.

I do not, of course, object to 'forms of life' being an open-textured term and I do not think that language is calculus-like or should be treated as if it were. I doubt very much if any light will ever come from the formalizers about any non-logical, non-meta-mathematical philosophical perplexity. It seems to me utterly mistaken to argue as Geach does in his **God and the Soul** that until we have worked out a formal logic of causal propositions we are in no position to say anything decisive about the validity of Aquinas' arguments for the existence of God.<sup>3</sup> We do not need a formal logic of causal propositions to get **valid** arguments in this domain. Surely there are many ways of stating the arguments, **assuming the premisses are intelligible**, in which they are valid. We can, for example, simply say:

(Major premiss) If there is a contingent being, there is a necessary being.

(Minor premiss) But there is a contingent being.

(Conclusion) Therefore, there is a necessary being.

The problem is not in forming valid arguments but **sound** or at least **reliable** arguments, namely valid arguments whose

<sup>2</sup> For examples of analytic philosophers treating such problems, note Kurt Baier's **The Meaning of Life** (Canberra, Australia: 1957) and P. H. Nowell-Smith's "Religion and Morality," in **The Encyclopedia of Philosophy**, Vol. 7, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967) pp. 150-58. I have attempted to do something of this myself in my **Ethics Without God** (London: Pemberton Publishing Co. Ltd., 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Geach, **God and the Soul** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1969), p. 77.

premisses can be known to be true or reasonably believed to be true. And the central problem there, **vis-a-vis** such theological God-talk, is about the intelligibility or coherence of the premisses. That is to say, it is entirely unclear whether they say anything which even could be true. But this problem of intelligibility cannot be solved formally.

As Paul Ziff has convincingly argued in his **Semantical Analysis**, we must first work out in non-formal terms what is meant by the relevant utterances. Only when we are tolerably clear about that is there any point to proceeding to formalization. Geach is getting the formal cart before the conceptual and empirical horses. Wittgenstein in his latter philosophical activity exposed such errors. (The crucial difference between Wittgenstein and Ziff is not over their attitude toward formalism, but in their manner of linguistic analysis.) This Wittgensteinian recognition of the pointlessness of formalism in such domains I do not for a moment dispute. Moreover, it seems to me correct to cut, as Wittgenstein does, the artificial barrier between words and **Lebenswelt** by stressing, even with the obscurity of "forms of life," that the forms of language are the forms of life. But it has not been shown, what is at least **prima facie** implausible, that philosophy cannot relevantly criticize the forms of life, but can only perspicuously display them. Indeed philosophers should first understand religion, and this involves understanding the workings of religious discourse. But they should appraise the truth claims or putative truth-claims of religion as well.