

THE COHERENCE OF WITTGENSTEINIAN FIDEISM

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I

Stuart C. Brown argues that Wittgensteinian Fideism is internally incoherent.¹ It is, he claims, a philosophical view about religion which is committed to two propositions both of which cannot with consistency be jointly held. On the one hand, as fideists, the Wittgensteinians are committed to the view that there is no common standard of reference by which the issues between belief and unbelief could be rationally adjudicated: the respective beliefs, in fine, are incommensurable. (Brown calls this the **incommensurability-thesis**.) Yet, on the other hand, fideists also believe that there are criteria of truth and falsity in religion. (I shall call this the **truth-thesis**.) Brown's claim is that the **truth-thesis** and the **incommensurability-thesis** are both integral to Wittgensteinian Fideism, but that they are incompatible and thus Wittgensteinian Fideism is internally incoherent.

Brown and I are one in believing that Wittgensteinian Fideism rests on a mistake, and we both agree that D. Z. Phillips is a paradigm case of a Wittgensteinian Fideist, but I am far from confident that Brown has been able to establish that such a fideism collapses because of purely internal difficulties.

(D) and (E) below are the statements of the **truth-thesis** and the **incommensurability-thesis** respectively. Brown's argument — to state it more fully — is that they both cannot be consistently held when taken in conjunction with (A), (B) and (C) below, and that (A), (B) and (C) are undeniable.

My trouble begins with not being able to see why (B) is undeniable, and thus I do not see that it is true that the Wittgensteinian Fideist must reject either (D) or (E) because (1), (A), (B) and (C) are undeniable, and (2) because of

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the way (A), (B) and (C) are related to (D) and (E). Brown's list is as follows:

- (A) Any belief fundamental to any religious tradition conflicts with one or more 'infidel' beliefs, i.e. with beliefs which qualify a man as an unbeliever in relation to that tradition.
- (B) If there are criteria which determine certain beliefs as true, then those beliefs, together with any to which someone who holds them is thereby committed, are commensurable with any conflicting beliefs.
- (C) There can only be criteria of truth and falsity to be found within a religious tradition if some fundamental beliefs of that tradition are true.
- (D) There are criteria of truth and falsity to be found within any given religious tradition.
- (E) No religious belief is commensurable with any infidel belief.²

II

Brown claims that (B) is undeniable. This seems to me thoroughly questionable when one keeps in mind how Phillips (Brown's paradigm Wittgensteinian Fideist) construes 'religious belief' and 'truth' and 'falsity' in religion.

(B), we may recall, is the proposition that "if there are criteria which determine certain beliefs as true, then those beliefs, together with any to which someone who holds them is thereby committed, are commensurable with any conflicting beliefs". That is to say, if I believe that it has been below zero for ten days in a row, then I am also committed to believing that the water is frozen in the pail that has been sitting on my front lawn those ten days past, and I treat as commensurable with that last belief the false belief that there are two life goldfish swimming around in a pail of water sitting on my front lawn. If there are criteria which determine the truth of *p*, then

¹ Stuart C. Brown, "Fideism, Truth and Commensurability", presented at the Forty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, San Francisco, March 23, 1972.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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we have grounds for believing q to be true, if being committed to p also commits us to q , and we also have grounds for believing that any belief in r which conflicts with q is false. But to so conflict with q , r must be measurable (assessable) by the same standard as q and so be commensurable with q .

“To deny this one would need to maintain that the reasons which show q to be true have no bearing on the truth or falsity of r .”³ But then, if we made such a denial, we would be reduced to the absurd view of being committed to maintaining that q and r , while remaining conflicting beliefs, could both be true.

After setting out this argument, Brown then rightly points out that Phillips does not defend such an eccentric view of ‘true’, where ‘true’ becomes an ellipsis for ‘true only for some particular group’, and thus, like ‘large’ and ‘small’, a relative term. For Phillips, as for most of the rest of us, “if something is true it is true **sans phrase**”.

From these considerations, Brown concludes that given that ‘true’ is employed in its normal way, (B) appears at least to be analytic, and if (B) is analytic or even in some other way undeniably true, and if (A) and (C) are also undeniable (as Brown argues they are), then we cannot consistently and simultaneously hold the two indispensable claims of Wittgensteinian Fideism, namely (D) and (E).

When one turns back to a consideration of what Phillips is actually arguing, Brown’s argument appears less decisive than it may have seemed at first sight. For while Phillips does **not** give a relativistic reading of ‘true’, he does give a distinctive reading for religious beliefs of ‘true’ and ‘belief’ (in the latter he follows Wittgenstein). Given these readings, I shall argue, (B) will be neither analytic nor undeniable. What Phillips does (and here he also follows Wittgenstein) is to deny, given the employment of ‘true’ in them, that the normal relations holding between matter-of-fact propositions hold for those distinctive situations where we cross types between religious propositions and purely matter-of-fact propositions.

An illustration used by Phillips will translate this into the concrete and bring out what he intends. Suppose p is the religious proposition expressing the religious belief ‘God is in heaven’. Someone who did not understand religious beliefs,

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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i.e. didn't know how to play that language-game, or at least didn't understand that particular religious belief, would quite understandably conclude that this committed such a religious believer to the absurd proposition q , 'Some astronauts might catch a glimpse of him'. (This is parallel to 'It has been below zero for ten days' and 'The water in the pail in my front yard must be frozen'.) And if the believer were really so committed, this in turn would allow it to be the case that q' ('Some astronauts saw God') or r ('They did not see God') are both candidates for true or false religious propositions. On such a view, they are all (p , q , q' and r) taken to be commensurable.

Contrary to this, it is Phillips' contention — and it seems to me an entirely reasonable contention — that it shows an utter misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about to think that q , q' or r could be possible utterances in that mode of discourse.⁴ In that mode of discourse no question or their truth or falsity could even arise except perhaps in a claim that q and q' are necessarily false. But plainly they are not at all commensurable with p . Yet p — 'God is in heaven' — is a proper religious utterance in such a mode of discourse, and q , q' and r are indeed infidel beliefs which show that someone who seriously employs them, where the engine is not idling, is not a Christian believer or even any kind of religious believer with even a tolerably close family resemblance to a Christian believer. That is to say, they illustrate the sort of considerations that would lead one, as the Wittgensteinian Fideists do, to assert (E).

An examination of that case also brings to the fore the need to disambiguate (B). There are many people with little or no understanding of religion who would try to construe p literally and who take q , q' and r to be commensurable with p . They take q to be something which a believer who accepted p is committed to if certain factual conditions obtain. But it is just such propositions as q and q' which Phillips would maintain, and I believe rightly, are such that no Christian believer, who had any tolerably adequate religious understanding, would entertain even as possible religious claims.

Anyone who held such an infidel belief would show himself to be an unbeliever, but not in the way a man would who asserted 'There is no God; there is no heaven, the world is full of pointless, purposeless evil'. These beliefs also

⁴ D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.

qualify as infidel beliefs, but they are infidel beliefs which do not necessarily show a lack of understanding of religious beliefs, though they do categorically reject core Christian beliefs. By contrast, q , q' and r show a lack of understanding of religious belief. They are conflicting beliefs but they are clearly not commensurable beliefs. They are beliefs, Phillips argues, which belong to a different language-game. The truth of 'God is in heaven' and the truth of any claim about what astronauts might see or fail to see is not settled in the same way. This is basic for Wittgensteinian Fideists and indeed for Wittgenstein himself, though it is not clear that Wittgenstein would speak of either the truth or falsity of religious beliefs. However, it is clear that both Wittgenstein and Phillips do not think that q , q' and r are confirmable or disconfirmable by reference to such empirical propositions or even commensurable with them. Yet q , q' and r would ordinarily be thought to be infidel beliefs which conflict with Christian beliefs, though here it is the whole class of beliefs which are conflicting. That is to say, a man who asserts (attempts to assert) either 'The astronauts found heaven and saw God', or 'The astronauts failed to find heaven or God', shows in his very assertion (attempted assertion) that he is an unbeliever, though an unbeliever not because he rejects a religious belief he understands, but an unbeliever by way of not even understanding the religious belief in question. But these beliefs are conflicting with religious beliefs in the quite plain sense that one could not hold them and be a believer. But this shows clearly that (B), far from being analytic, is in fact false, for here we have incommensurable infidel beliefs which conflict with religious beliefs which follow from religious beliefs which hold in virtue of the very criteria for 'true Christian belief'. (I am assuming for the sake of this discussion what Brown also assumes, namely that there are criteria for true religious beliefs.)

Brown might try to defend the analyticity or at least the undeniable truth of (B) by claiming that q , q' and r in my above example do not, after all, really conflict with religious beliefs. They do not conflict, he might argue, because they are not even in the same mode of discourse and show no understanding of the relevant religious beliefs or of what it is to believe in God. Since this is so, they cannot really conflict with religious beliefs and thus I have not produced a genuine counter-instance to (B).

This betrays the ambiguity of 'conflicts' in (B) and it is this that prompted my remark that (B) needs dis-

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ambiguating. If, on the one hand, in (B) 'conflicting belief' is just an infidel belief which a believer could not hold and remain a religious believer, then I have produced a counter-instance to (B) and Brown's claim is false. If, on the other hand, 'conflicting beliefs' in (B) means an infidel belief on the same **logical level** as a religious belief, then (B) is trivially (that is truistically) true. But I see no good grounds for so pre-empting 'conflicting beliefs', given the fact that much unbelief rests on claims about the incoherence and not on the falsity of fundamental non-anthropomorphic Christian beliefs.

However, even such denials, e.g. 'There is neither God nor heaven', need not in all linguistic environments be construed as conflicting commensurable beliefs, for someone who made such a statement might not be asserting it because he believed that it was false that there is a heaven or that God exists, but because he thought that either or both of those notions were incoherent. His 'There is neither God nor heaven' has the import of saying that he rejects such notions because he believes them to be incoherent. Thus 'There is neither God nor heaven', on such a quite natural reading, is also both non-commensurable and conflicting with very key religious beliefs. If Brown replies that on such a construction 'There is neither God nor heaven' is no longer a conflicting belief, then this shows that he is salvaging his position by stipulative re-definition.

III

Brown goes wrong because he fails to keep in mind just how Phillips construes 'religious belief' and 'true'. Consider such Christian utterances as 'God is our saviour', 'We shall meet after death', 'God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth', or 'God is in heaven'. They should not be construed, Phillips avers, again following Wittgenstein, as either statements of fact or expressions of attitude.⁵ Rather we should construe them as verbal pictures which govern the lives of Christian believers. As Phillips puts it (attributing this conception to Wittgenstein), "these pictures are unshakeable beliefs in the sense that they form the framework within which those who live by them assess themselves and the events that befall them."⁶ In believing that we shall meet after death, the believer need not at all believe in some incoherent

⁵ D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 204-222.

⁶ D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 68.

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conception of some putative future state of affairs in which people, as disembodied agents, will survive the death of their bodies. Rather to be immortal is to be in one's own life in God and to be free of the snares and temptations of mortal life.⁷ And to have such a belief is to be governed by a certain picture; it is not to accept as probably true or even to try to make sense of some would-be factual claim that a certain very problematical future event will occur. A believer, in living in accordance with a Christian picture of eternal life, could come to agree with Flew and Penelhum that it makes no sense to speak of surviving bodily death. He need not be trying to think of his own funeral and at the same time trying to think of himself as witnessing his own funeral. Rather in thinking of his own death and in thinking of meeting those he cares for after death, he can be thinking of his life as a whole and attaching a certain very strong value to friendship and personal relationships.

It is tempting to say that this in effect shows that such pictures are not expressive of anything that is or even could be literally true. But however tempting this is, it is still, Phillips argues, mistaken, for 'We shall meet after death' on such a construction could only be figuratively true, if we could at least in principle indicate something of what it would be like for it to be literally true. Yet this we cannot do, for we have "no original context of literal truth which the religious pictures can distort or deviate from."⁸ But then we can hardly talk about its being figuratively true either.

Rather what we must come to see is that 'We shall meet after death' is an "embodiment of a reflection on, or vision of, the meaning of life and death".⁹ It very well could be "an expression of belief that people should act towards each other, not according to the status and prestige that people have acquired or failed to acquire, during the course of their lives, but as children of God, in the equality which death will reveal."¹⁰

Religious beliefs, including a belief in eternal life, are not opinions or conjectures about what is the case, or predictions about what will happen, or retrodictions about what has happened. Rather, these fundamental religious beliefs are visions in terms of which much of the believer's life is

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

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lived. They are not assessed or even assessable, Phillips claims, by an appeal to evidence; rather these beliefs provide pictures one lives in accordance with, draws sustenance from, and judges and assess one's life and one's environment by.

It is in the light of this conception of religious belief that we should understand Phillips' conception of religious truth — a conception in which 'religious truth' and 'truly religious' come close at least to being equisignificant.¹¹ After talking about belief and religious pictures, Phillips goes on to remark:

It is of the utmost philosophical importance to recognize that for the believers these pictures constitute truths, truths which form the essence of life's meaning for them. To ask someone whether he thinks these beliefs are true is to ask him whether he can live by them . . .¹²

But here 'true belief' surely undergoes a sea change. Asking about them is very different from asking whether it is true that the continued existence of the Atlantic salmon is threatened. But since 'belief' is very distinctive in 'religious belief' and since religious propositions are not statements of fact, 'truth' in this domain must also be construed differently. When we see how differently, we will look on the conflict between sceptics and believers in a new way. Phillips stresses that while it makes sense to ask what is truly religious, it makes no sense to ask whether religion is true or false or whether religious utterances make true or false statements, if in doing that one invokes some conception of confirmation or disconfirmation or some conception of an external test.

If we look to the natural environment of 'God is truth' or 'To love God is to know the truth', we will come to see, Phillips contends, that they "are not a class of second-best statements, hypotheses awaiting confirmation . . ."; rather they are "a body of truths", i.e. principles, to live by, which have played an important part and continue to play an important part in man's efforts to regulate and make sense of his tangled life.

In asking whether in the domain of religion as such we have truth or whether in the domain of Christianity we have such truth, we are not asking, Phillips argues, something of

¹¹ D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, pp. 150-153.

¹² D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, p. 71.

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the type we would be asking if we asked whether the ship leaving Halifax is bound for London or whether the Atlantic rift is pushing the Continents apart. Rather, we are using 'truth' in a way much closer to the way we would be using it if we were to assert that there is a lot of truth in the claim that it is better to give than to receive. To dispute about the truth here is very unlike arguing about whether a prediction will come true or arguing over whether what a factual statement alleges to obtain really does obtain, e.g. 'There are storks in Iceland'. Rather it is to argue over an ethical matter, to wit, over the worth of generosity. A man who says that he has come to see the truth in the maxim that it is better to give than to receive is giving us to understand that he will strive after generosity, and try to orient and regulate his life in accordance with that maxim. A similar thing obtains for anyone who assents to 'Christ is the truth, the life and the way' or 'God is truth'. He is not taking a world-historical stance but is announcing and affirming how he will strive to live. 'Truth', as 'belief', has a very different use here than it has in scientific and factual domains.

Such an account of 'truth' and 'belief' is of crucial importance for Wittgensteinian Fideists and the core of it, if not Phillips' particular detail, has both attracted and repelled many people who think seriously about religion.¹⁴ There is something here which is important and has, I am convinced, 'a ring of truth about it'; yet, I am also convinced, it should be looked on with a very jaundiced eye. This fideistic account indeed has been and should be attacked frontally.¹⁵ But to try to undermine it by exhibiting internal inconsistencies in a skeletal formulation of it which ignores how it gives flesh to the **commensurability thesis** through its elucidation of the nature of truth and belief in religion is almost certain to fail, primarily by only deftly refuting a strawman.

¹³ D. Z. Phillips, **Faith and Philosophical Enquiry**, p. 159.

¹⁴ See here the interesting review discussion of **Faith and Philosophical Enquiry**, by S. C. Thakur in the **Australasian Journal of Philosophy**, Vol. 49, No. 3, (December, 1971), pp. 324-329; and the essays by Tziporah Kasachkoff, "Talk About God's Existence", **Philosophical Studies**, (The National University of Ireland), Vol. XIX, (1970), pp. 181-192; and Paul Edwards, "A Critical Examination of 'Subjective Christianity' ", **Question 4**, pp. 93-110.

¹⁵ I have tried to do this in various ways in my "Wittgensteinian Fideism", **Philosophy**, Vol. XLII, No. 161, (July, 1967), "Language and the Concept of God", **Question 2**, (January, 1969), "God and the Forms of Life", **Indian Review of Philosophy**, Vol. I, No. 1, (January, 1972), **Contemporary Critiques of Religion**, (London: Macmillan, 1971), Chapter 5, and in my **Scepticism**, (London: Macmillan, 1972), Chapter 2.