

## The Religious Language Game

( These notes provide a summary for students of the main points raised in a lecture on this topic given in December 05.)

Wittgenstein was hugely influential – twice. Firstly, in *Tractatus*, he encouraged Logical Positivism, and then later, in *Philosophical Investigations*, his whole view of how we use and understand language changed. Unlike Logical Positivism, which had a very narrow view of meaning, his later work spoke of ‘language games’ and language as a ‘form of life’.

### We need to start with the earlier philosophy:

In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), he argued that the function of language was to picture the world. Therefore every statement needed to correspond to some information about the world itself. This was the view taken up by the Logical Positivists (and made popular by A J Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic*). Their ‘Verification Principle’ argued that the meaning of a statement was its method of verification. **A statement is thus only meaningful if it could (at least in theory) be proved true or false by evidence.**

This created particular problems for religious language and for ethics – because their statements could not always be related to experienced facts. If a religious person says: ‘I have just witnessed a miracle.’ or ‘I believe in God’ the truth is not simply established by looking at evidence.

### Some reactions to this:

Verification and falsification is about **literal** description. This is totally different from myth, or literature, or poetry. A creation myth, for example, will try to show the value and purpose in creation, and the place that humankind has within it. It is NOT science, and should not follow scientific criteria of truth. It explores deeper levels of human experience.

**Cognitive** language conveys factual information. **Non-cognitive** language may convey emotion, give an order, express hopes and fears - but it does not depend on external facts. Much religious language is non-cognitive.

Religious language is concerned with myths and symbols. Advertisers are always looking for the way a product can become a symbol – it says something about the person who buys it, wears it, drives it. You look at the TV advert and ask yourself – ‘Is this the sort of person I want to be?’ You are being fed a ‘myth’ – not in the sense that it is unreal, but in the sense of a story that is composed of symbols, that suggest a deeper meaning. Non-literal meanings are so much more interesting than literal ones!

### Wittgenstein’s new view of language: ‘Don’t think; look!’

If you want to understand something, it is not enough to understand the meaning of words and the way they logically fit together. Rather, it is important to look at how

those words are used. Look at what that claim means for people. **Meaning is given by use.**

### **Language is a ‘form of life.’**

For example, a builder may call out ‘beam’ or ‘more bricks’ or the like. Someone understands what is wanted when he or she hears that word. That language is a kind of activity. You shout ‘bricks’ because you want some, not to give a description. The same thing happens when small children learn language – it is an activity, they learn what to do with words.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein says:

‘Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language, it can in the end only describe it.’

‘Philosophy leaves everything as it is.’

### **The Language Game**

**Games operate via rules and structures; without these they make no sense.** Men kicking a ball around on a piece of grass; football. The rules of football are not found in nature; it is an artificial construction. With agreement, the rules could be changed. The scoring of a goal has no absolute or objective meaning. But football is the focus of real emotions, rivalries, loyalties. Football may be ‘unreal,’ in the sense of being an arbitrary construction, but its impact on people’s lives is real enough. If I do not know the rules of your game, I do not know whether what you say makes sense.

A language game could be...

- Telling a story or joke
- Giving an order
- Making a promise
- Daubing a wall with a political slogan

All these are ‘forms of life’; they are activities. The words only make sense when you understand the nature and purpose of that activity. That is the essence of Wittgenstein’s ‘form of life’ and ‘language game’ theory. The rules for the use of language are neither right nor wrong: they are merely useful for each particular application. You can’t say that the joke is ‘wrong’ – it’s simply a joke, and it either works or it doesn’t.

### **Implication for religious language**

As a ‘language game’ religious language is understood in terms of the part that it plays in people’s lives, rather than referring to an external reality. The meaning of religious terms is shown by the way in which they are used.

The validity of religious language is therefore given by the community that uses it; you cannot separate beliefs from the religious community that espouses them.

Therefore religious language may not be literally true (does not refer to the external world) but it is justified by the way it helps us to understand ourselves and relate to

others who use the same game. It expresses attitudes and personal intuitions about the world and the place of humankind within it.

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