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# “An Equation Entirely Unlike Any of the Familiar Curves”: Wittgenstein on the Grammar of “God,” the Trinity, and the Meaning of Religious Language

## 1 Introduction

Although there is little overt discussion of religious themes in Wittgenstein’s magnum opus, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy has significant implications for understanding religious belief and language. A fuller picture emerges, if what is said in the latter work is supplemented by additional material gleaned from Wittgenstein’s various Cambridge lectures, his conversations with Rush Rhees, and the collection of remarks known as *Culture and Value* (CV henceforth). This material shows not only that religious questions were of the first importance to Wittgenstein, it also reveals that he grappled with these questions in a manner reminiscent of his general approach to philosophical problems. That is to say, in both philosophy and religion, Wittgenstein eschews metaphysical theorizing in favour of gaining clarity through the method of a grammatical investigation of our concepts.

In this essay, I will start by giving a general overview of some relevant themes from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy before moving on to an in-depth examination of what a grammatical investigation of the concept of “God” involves, and what problems it enables us to dissolve. I will then move on to a consideration of what implications Wittgenstein’s conception has for an understanding of the meaning of religious language. By way of concluding, I briefly consider and respond to a common objection.

## 2 Themes from Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy

Wittgenstein dedicated his life to the pursuit of clarity – both within philosophy itself as well as in respect of himself. The following remark from *Philosophical Investigations* (PI henceforth) serves to bring this out: “We don’t want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear” (PI §133).

It is one of the most distinctive features of Wittgenstein's later philosophy that he believes that it is impossible to *solve* philosophical problems, as these are spawned by conceptual confusion and illusion. Rather, these problems can only be *dissolved* by putting together what we have always known, but have somehow lost sight of. In other words, philosophy is not a body of knowledge for Wittgenstein, consisting of a set of metaphysical truths, but rather the *activity* of logical (grammatical/conceptual) clarification or elucidation<sup>1</sup>. As Wittgenstein says: "A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'" (PI §122).

The particular form our language takes can mislead us. The most basic misconception that Wittgenstein identifies in this respect – one that gives rise to a whole host of philosophical difficulties and misbegotten theories – is the temptation to think that "where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit* (*Geist*)" (PI §36). In other words, because our language is full of substantives, and we naively assume that the meaning of a word is the object it refers to – Wittgenstein calls this the "Augustinian" picture of language, as it is by no means peculiar only to philosophy – if we are unable actually to find such an object in the world, we take it that there must be a "supernatural" object or spirit that the word can refer to instead. Arguably, this was behind Plato's theory of the Forms – the "Form of the Good" or of "Beauty" can never be found in the myriad different objects we apply the words "good" or "beautiful" to, but only in a metaphysical realm of "Forms" populated by the abstract objects that are allegedly the referents of these unadulterated essences. Similarly, mathematicians (including philosophers of mathematics) think that since number words cannot refer to empirical objects in the world, they must refer instead to abstract objects. Contemporary metaphysicians, on the other hand, believe that propositions, properties and "truth-makers" are abstract objects to be investigated and theorized about. Last, but not least, philosophers of religion, theologians and ordinary religious people think that the word "God" is the name of a supernatural object or entity.

The arguments in favour of these assumptions are often surprisingly thin, but we do not notice this, because it seems to us that things *must* be the way the Augustinian picture suggests. That is to say, we are primarily taken in by the fact that words like "beauty," "proposition," "one," "God," appear to operate in

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<sup>1</sup> This was a view that Wittgenstein already held in the *Tractatus* and that he never changed his mind on, despite his later conception of philosophy being in many respects very different from his earlier one. In this essay, I will mainly confine myself to discussing Wittgenstein's later philosophy and its implications for the understanding of religious belief.

exactly the same way as more ordinary words whose referents we can straightforwardly point to: “cat,” “table,” “chair.” From this we go on to draw the conclusion that in the former case, too, there must be objects these words stand for, it’s just that they are not empirically locatable. In other words, we are taken in by the “surface grammar” of our words – how our words appear to function linguistically in a sentence – even though this may not be a good guide to what is really going on. Wittgenstein explains:

In the use of words, one might distinguish “surface grammar” from “depth grammar.” What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the sentence structure, the part of its use – one might say – that can be taken in by the ear. – And now compare the depth grammar, say of the verb “to mean,” with what its surface grammar would lead us to presume. No wonder one finds it difficult to know one’s way about (PI §664).

The surface grammar of the verb “to mean” suggests that it’s the name of a mental process going on in the hidden medium of “the mind” (another substantive we mistake for the name of an entity), whereas Wittgenstein’s investigation shows that its depth grammar is actually quite different. Rather than referring to a hidden process, “to mean” is much more similar to “to be able to do something”: A competent language-user can mean “X” rather than “Y,” not because something special goes on in their mind (or brain), but because they are generally able to apply the words “X” and “Y” with facility. Whether a speaker meant “X” or “Y” can, therefore, be determined, not by looking into the speaker’s mind, but by ascertaining whether the speaker has mastered a particular technique, what the speaker goes on to say and do, what consequences the speaker would be prepared (or not prepared) to draw etc.

So, when Wittgenstein says, at PI §122, that our grammar is deficient in surveyability, what he means is that the “depth grammar” is still unclear to us. All we see is the surface grammar, the mere syntactical structure of the word or sentence – “the use that can be taken in by the ear” – not the actual use, what early Wittgenstein would have called the “logical syntax” of the sign: the rules for the correct use of the word, which can be hidden underneath the word’s apparent use (the “surface grammar”) in the way that the real form of a body may be obscured by a person’s clothes.

Attending to the “depth grammar,” however, requires a willingness to look beyond the surface; to refuse to be taken in by superficial linguistic appearances that may lead one astray. This is difficult, as the surface appearance may be attractive and tempt us to want to continue to view the problem in the accustomed manner. For this reason, Wittgenstein thinks that the struggle for clarity requires both an intellectual effort, as well as an engagement of the will. We need the in-

tellectual acumen to see through the deceptive appearances, but also require the will-power to resist the spell that language casts: “A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language only seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (PI §115).

The Augustinian picture seems natural and intuitive, as it reduces the diversity of the actual function of words to an easily graspable common denominator: “the words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names” (PI §1). Wittgenstein himself was tempted by something like such a view in his early work, the *Tractatus*. Later Wittgenstein realizes, however, that language is not as uniform as the Augustinian picture would have us believe. There are many different kinds of words and they do not all function as names: “Someone who describes the learning of language in this way [by ostensive definition] is, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘bread’, and of people’s names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself” (PI §1). Naturally, the remaining kinds of word do *not* take care of themselves, which is why philosophers need to invent abstract entities in order to explain how these words can function like names at all.

Rather than trying to press the diversity of the functions of words into a uniform mould that distorts them, however, Wittgenstein suggests that we would do better to abandon our preconceived idea that the essence of language consists in naming. For this would enable us to see that the role that a word plays in language is complex and cannot be reduced to a “one size fits all.” “Think just of exclamations,” Wittgenstein says, “with their completely different functions. Water! Away! Ow! Help! Splendid! No! Are you still inclined to call these words ‘names of objects?’”(PI §27).

Whether a word functions as the name of an object – and Wittgenstein does not deny that some words are names<sup>2</sup> – is not something that can be settled independently of attending to the context in which the word is used. It is the overall role the word plays in the language-game or linguistic practice that tells us what kind of word it is and what it does. This is why Wittgenstein says: “For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word ‘meaning’ – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (PI §43). Just as the significance of the different chess pieces can be explained by describing the moves these pieces can make in the game of chess, so

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<sup>2</sup> Neither does he deny that (some) words refer to objects. What he does deny is that the meaning is something independent of the word that can be reified (either an empirical or an abstract object).

the significance of a word can be explained by looking at how the word is employed in a particular language-game. This is not to advance a new theory of meaning – hence the warning that Wittgenstein’s suggestion is not meant to apply across the board – but to give us the tools to free ourselves from enslavement to the Augustinian picture that made us believe that there is only one way that things can be.

### 3 The Grammar of “God”

Let us now apply the lessons learnt in the previous section to an understanding of religious belief. In PI themselves there is only one (famous) remark about theology: “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is (Theology as grammar.)” (PI §372).

Wittgenstein believes that one of the main confusions that arise in philosophy (and elsewhere) is to mistake a grammatical (logical) feature of a concept for an empirical one and to end up predicating of the thing what lies in the mode of representation (PI §104). The comparison with theology and the concept of “God” serves to make this perspicuous (which is perhaps why theology is the first thing that occurs to Wittgenstein in this regard). A passage from the recently published lectures from the early 1930’s throws more light on what Wittgenstein might have in mind here: “Now (a) suppose ‘god’ means something like a human being; then ‘he has 2 arms’ & ‘he has 4 arms’ are not grammatical propositions but (b) suppose someone says: You can’t talk of god having arms, this is grammatical.”<sup>3</sup>

If we think the word “God” is the name of something very akin to a human being, then saying that this god has two or four arms would not be different from offering a straightforward empirical description of something, e.g. “this animal has two legs” or “this animal has four legs.” Here we are describing something contingent that could be otherwise, had the world been different in some way. But if we say something like: “It makes no sense to speak of God having arms,” then we are making a grammatical remark that shows that it is part of the concept of God that we can’t attribute certain physical features to him – it’s not that God is an entity who just happens not to have these characteristics.

The essential features of our concepts are specified by the grammar of the concept. To give a non-theological example, to say that “one is a number” is not to attribute some predicate (that of numberhood) to an abstract object, but to tell us

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<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Lectures. Cambridge 1930–33*, ed. David Stern/Brian Rogers/Gabriel Citron, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 321.

how the word “one” functions in our language – namely, as a number-word. To say that “red is a colour” is similarly to say something about the grammar of “red,” not to give a description of an esoteric object. To think otherwise, is precisely to predicate of the thing what lies in the mode of representation: to believe one is tracing the thing’s nature when in fact you are giving a rule for the correct use of a word (i.e. something grammatical).

Many philosophical and theological problems arise if one doesn’t heed this distinction. In an illuminating conversation with Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein says:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Unpacking Wittgenstein’s line of reasoning, this passage seems to contain the following dialectical progression:

- (1) If you try to talk about God as you would about a human being, you are likely to speak nonsense (ask nonsensical questions etc.).
- (2) In talking about God, we nevertheless use images or parts of images derived from ordinary talk about human beings (e.g. “Wherever you are, God always sees what you do”).
- (3) These similarities may obscure the grammatical differences between “God-talk” and ordinary “human being” language.

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<sup>4</sup> Rhees, Rush, “On Religion: Notes on Four Conversations with Wittgenstein,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 18, no. 4 (2001), 403.

- (4) If so, (3) may either lead us back to (1) and the conclusion that the “grammar of our language about God has holes in it,” or we come to realize that the similarities notwithstanding, we actually have “an equation entirely unlike any of the familiar curves.”

In what follows, I will try to elucidate what (1)–(4) imply and how Wittgenstein’s contention that, in respect to our picture of God, we have “an equation entirely unlike any of the familiar curves” can be understood.

Let’s start with the question: Why would one speak nonsense if one were to talk about God as one would about a human being? Primarily, Wittgenstein seems to think, because one would end up saying all sorts of ridiculous and blasphemous things. The clearly ridiculous things would be asking questions such as, “Does God have toenails? Does God have a stomach?” Such questions sound ridiculous (and blasphemous), because they betray a category mistake: God is not a “gaseous vertebrate”<sup>5</sup> with invisible stomach and toenails.

Furthermore, such an anthropomorphic conception of God (God as invisible super-human) would raise a whole host of other issues. That is to say, if human grammar were the right grammar for “God,” it would make sense to ask the following further questions: “Where does God live? Is it possible to find his home? Is God bored?” etcetera. On such a conception, the monotheistic God would not differ very much from the Greek Gods who live on Mount Olympus and get into the kind of scrapes human beings would also easily get into.

Now one might think that, apart from the militant atheists, who believe that people engage in religious practices out of sheer stupidity, there are not many Christian theologians or religious believers who would be happy to ascribe such a crude grammar to the word “God.” But such an appearance would be deceptive, as quite often, an anthropomorphic conception of God comes dressed in metaphysical garb, which can make the crudeness harder to spot. For example, the God of analytic theism is conceived as an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good “person without a body” – where a “person without a body” is usually regarded in Cartesian manner as a purely “mental substance”<sup>6</sup>. Here the idea is that human beings have both a mind and a body – where, if you are a Cartesian (or neo-Cartesian), these words refer to distinct substances (or entities). Hence, if God is like a person, but lacks a body, he comes out, on this view, as being a super-

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase is Ernst Häckel’s and mentioned by Wittgenstein in the *Cambridge Lectures*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Swinburne, Richard, “Philosophical Theism,” in: D. Z. Phillips/Timothy Tessin (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*, 1–20, New York: Palgrave, 2001; Swinburne, Richard, *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

in the sentence is “internal” to this specific arrangement of words<sup>22</sup>. Applying this distinction to the passage from Nielsen, we can, therefore, say that Nielsen is missing the internal dimension of understanding when it comes to God-talk. Nielsen possesses an “external” understanding, in the sense that he knows what the relevant words mean in other contexts, and could, to this extent, offer some kind of paraphrase of “God is infinite,” but he fails to see that these words might have a use that is not primarily informational or descriptive.

The fact that Nielsen fails to see this, is connected to his assumption that the whole sentence is no more than the sum of its parts. For an internal understanding that consists in recognizing how this particular form of words cannot be replaced by another which says the same, is antithetical to a conception that presupposes that sentence-meaning can be found through a process of “aggregation.” So, to return to Wittgenstein’s curve analogy, as long as one remains at the level of external understanding, all that one will see is that this strange curve seems to be a hodgepodge of incoherently put together parts: part parabola, part spiral and so forth. If, however, one recognizes that this curve has an equation quite different from all the familiar curves, then, instead of prioritizing what one believes are the familiar parts and attempting to aggregate them into a recalcitrant whole, one will start by focussing on the whole, in order to see how it (the whole) transforms the significance of its parts. This means not focussing on the whole in isolation – as it were in a vacuum – but in the context of the entire practice in which this whole plays a role.

In other words, it is not possible to explain the meaning of religious language merely by attempting to paraphrase it; by trying to distil out its informational content, as it were. For this, to use Cottingham’s picturesque expression, is to employ a “fruit-juicer” method: to require “the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what [one] take[s] to be the irrelevant pulpy mush of context.”<sup>23</sup> And such a procedure, as Cottingham notes, does not give you the essence of a fruit, but only a not very palatable drink plus a pulpy mess.

We can now apply these insights to making sense of Wittgenstein’s conversation with Rhees. At the beginning of the conversation quoted in the previous section, Wittgenstein says, “‘Wherever you are, God always sees what you do.’ We know how this statement is used, and that is all right.” In other words, in respect

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<sup>22</sup> This terminology is Ridley’s. Ridley, Aaron, *The Philosophy of Music: Theme and Variation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 32–33. I first made use of this distinction in Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres*, 182–183.

<sup>23</sup> Cottingham, John, “Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy,” in: Hans-Johann Glock/John Hyman (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 209.

to this particular way of talking about God, Wittgenstein seems to think that we would not get into confusion about the use of our words, perhaps because the phrase is so familiar to us and its meaning clearly metaphorical: It is not that God has strange sense-organs that are able to see all there is to be seen; rather, the phrase serves to remind one that God is always aware of what one is doing and judging one's actions (even if one manages to hide them from others). Or, to use another religious expression, God is omnipresent.

In respect to the latter phrase, however, Wittgenstein's confidence would potentially already be misplaced, for here one could easily imagine how surface grammar could trick us – namely, if we were to model the grammar of “omnipresent” on what it would be like for a human to be omnipresent; that is to say, simultaneously in all places at once. Naturally, if one construed the grammar thus, and hence offered a paraphrase of the sentence along these lines, then the statement would immediately strike one as incoherent and absurd, since it is necessarily impossible for an entity to be everywhere at the same time.

Arguably, Nielsen is making the same mistake, as he also appears to be modeling the grammar of God as “infinite person” on human grammar. God, on Nielsen's construction, is a type of *entity* that is describable as “infinite” – without limits; endless or everlasting – an idea that is, indeed, hard to make sense of if we think of something “bounded,” such as a human person<sup>24</sup>. Had Nielsen proceeded more holistically, however, he might have realized that use of the word “infinite” seems precisely to signal that we cannot be speaking of something that one would ordinarily call an “entity” at all. This is why Wittgenstein says, “the way you use the word ‘God’ does not show *whom* you mean – but, rather, what you mean” (CV 58/50). And this is not a profession of atheism on Wittgenstein's part, but a grammatical remark that is supposed to alert us to the fact that the grammar of “God” does not function like the grammar of an entity or “person” in the ordinary sense.

The upshot of this is that it is only possible to develop an internal understanding of religious language-use, if one attends to the depth grammar of these expressions instead of being mesmerized by superficial similarities between God-talk and discourse about ordinary, empirical things. That is to say, although “in our picture of God there are eyes and ears,” “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.”

In other words, when we speak of the “eye” of God or of God “hearing” our prayers, we are using these words in a different sense than in ordinary discourse where what we mean by “eye” is a physical sense-organ and by “hearing” we

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24 It's not much easier to make sense of the notion if we think, instead, of an abstract object.

refer to a certain auditory process. Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein makes clear in PPF when talking about calling particular days of the week “fat” and “lean,” it is precisely because the words have the ordinary meanings that they do, that we now want to employ them in this new way:

Given the two concepts “fat” and “lean”, would you be inclined to say that Wednesday was fat and Tuesday lean, or the other way round? (I am strongly inclined towards the former.) Now have “fat” and “lean” some different meaning here from their usual one? – They have a different use. – So ought I really to have used different words? Certainly not. – I want to use *these* words (with their familiar meanings) *here* (PPF §274).

Asked “what do you really mean here by ‘fat’ and ‘lean’?”, I could only explain the meanings in the usual way. I could *not* point them out by using Tuesday and Wednesday as examples (PPF §275).

Here one might speak of a “primary” and “secondary” meaning of a word. Only someone for whom the word has the former meaning uses it in the latter (PPF §276).

Something very interesting is going on in these passages. Despite Wittgenstein often being (erroneously) labelled a use-theorist of meaning, he is here saying that although “fat” and “lean” have a different *use* when applied to days of the week, he is hesitating to say that they have a different meaning. What is more, he emphasizes that he could only explain what “lean” and “fat” mean in this context in the ordinary way, which seems to imply that it is not possible to learn the new use merely by knowing what the words mean in ordinary contexts. Nevertheless, the new use is parasitic on the old use: only someone for whom the words have the old use, will be inclined to use the words in this novel way.

So, is what Wittgenstein calls “secondary sense” something like metaphorical meaning? Wittgenstein says “no”: “If I say, ‘For me the vowel *e* is yellow’, I do not mean ‘yellow’ in a metaphorical meaning – for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the concept of yellow” (PIPF §278). Now, while one could challenge the thought that it is always necessary for something’s being a metaphor that whatever it is that the metaphor is saying could also be expressed in another way, one can take Wittgenstein’s point that what is essential to secondary sense is that I want to employ *these* words in *these* positions (compare PI §531). One cannot easily replace these words with something else.

It seems natural to connect the employment of words in a secondary sense with what Diamond calls a “conceptual reorientation.” Such a reorientation occurs in situations where I am moved to employ old concepts in novel ways. Diamond gives the example of suddenly finding it apt to call George Eliot “beautiful” in despite of the fact that according to conventional criteria of beauty, Eliot is not a beautiful woman:

She [George Eliot], that magnificently ugly woman, gives a totally transformed meaning to “beauty”. Beauty itself becomes something entirely new for one, as one comes to see (to one’s own amazement, perhaps) a powerful beauty residing in this woman (. . .). In such a case, she is not judged by a norm available through the concept of beauty; she shows the concept up, she moves one to use the words “beauty” and “beautiful” almost as new words, or as renewed words. She gives one a new vocabulary, a new way of taking the world in in one’s words and of speaking about it to others.<sup>25</sup>

In this example, Diamond seems to be suggesting, George Eliot herself provides a new criterion for employment of the concept “beauty,” rather than being judged by a norm made available through prior use of the concept. And something similar may happen in a religious context, when someone experiences a conversion and expresses this experience with the form of words: “God is infinite” or “God is omnipresent” (or “God is three”).

Of course, there may be people who are unable to see how one could extend the concept of beauty to George Eliot, just as there are people who cannot see what it could mean to speak of God’s infinitude or trinity. Not all potentially available secondary uses of concepts are equally available to everyone; just as certain aspects of the world can be perceived by some that others are blind to.

Fortunately, it is possible to work on oneself, in order to make new forms of seeing and understanding possible. This is why Wittgenstein says: “In religion it must be the case that corresponding to every level of devoutness there is a form of expression that has no sense at a lower level. For those still at the lower level this doctrine, which means something at the higher level, is null & void; it *can* only be understood *wrongly*, & so these words are *not* valid for such a person” (CV 37/32). In other words, the same form of expression can do different work for different people. What sense someone can make of an expression will, therefore, depend on the relative level of spiritual development of the person concerned. For instance, someone who thinks that Job’s words, “the Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord” is a cheap attempt at trying to justify the malevolent arbitrariness of the deity, is at a lower level of religious understanding than someone who sees it as an expression of one’s trusting acceptance of God’s sovereignty. Similarly, someone who believes that “God is three” is an incoherent metaphysical claim about a mereological entity, possesses less religious insight than someone who recognizes that it is an expression that shows that, for the Christian believer, “God Father,” “Son” and “Holy Ghost” are three different ways of referring to the same God.

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25 Diamond, “Wittgenstein on Religious Belief,” 125.

None of this is peculiar to the religious domain. In aesthetics, ethics and philosophy – in addition to music and other artistic endeavours – it is similarly true that one’s understanding grows in proportion to how much one is able to develop certain relevant capacities: one’s musicality, sensitivity, attention to detail, open-mindedness, altruism and so on. Why should it be any different in religion and the expectation be that whatever immediately meets the eye (or ear) must be sufficient to know what is meant? As we have already seen, the surface appearance may be extremely deceptive and embroil us in all sorts of confusions, if we are not vigilant.

Consequently, we must be careful that the familiar we recognize does not blind us to the unfamiliar we have yet to make sense of. Otherwise, instead of realizing that we are confronted by “an equation entirely unlike all familiar curves,” we will rashly end up concluding that the grammar of God “has holes in it,” or indeed, that it is, in Nielsen’s words, “plain incoherent.” Both responses can be avoided, if we look at the depth grammar and recognize that much religious discourse employs words in a secondary sense – a sense that can only be understood if we don’t just inspect the words alone, but learn more about the religious practices in which these concepts have their life.

## 5 Conclusion: Just an Attitude?

By way of concluding, I will briefly address an objection<sup>26</sup> that might be looming at this point in the discussion. An apparently hard-nosed reader might want to say something like this: “If you are right that much religious language-use employs words in a secondary sense, is this not tantamount to saying that they are really used only to express an attitude?”<sup>27</sup> After all, Wittgenstein himself said the following:

It appears to me as though a religious belief could only be (something like) passionately committing oneself to a system of reference [of coordinates]<sup>28</sup> [*Bezugssystem/Koordinaten*]

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<sup>26</sup> I have dealt with this objection extensively in other work (see, in particular, Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres* and Schönbaumsfeld, *Wittgenstein on Religious Belief*).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Glock, Hans-Johann, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995 and Hyman, John, “The Gospel According to Wittgenstein,” in: Mark Addis/Robert Arrington (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, 1–11, London: Routledge, 2001, for proponents of such an interpretation of Wittgenstein.

<sup>28</sup> The 1998 edition has “system of coordinates,” with “system of reference” as an alternative; the 1977 edition has “system of coordinates.”

system]. Hence, although it's belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of judging [beurteilen] life. Passionately taking up *this* conception<sup>29</sup> [Auffassung] (CV 73/64).

Read the wrong way, this could make it sound like Wittgenstein is saying that Christianity requires commitment to a “doctrineless”<sup>30</sup> form of life, where all that matters is that you live a certain way, rather than that you hold certain kinds of belief.

Quite apart from all the other things wrong with such a reading of Wittgenstein, it should already be apparent from the discussion in previous sections that there can be no such thing as “grammar-free” doctrine for Wittgenstein. What the Christian doctrine amounts to – and, hence, what is involved in believing it – can, therefore, not be determined in a context-free manner by looking at the words alone. Consequently, Wittgenstein is not saying, in this passage or elsewhere, that the doctrine is irrelevant – or should be thrown out (he is not Don Cupitt<sup>31</sup> in disguise!) – rather, he is in the business of trying to elucidate precisely what the grammar of various credal points could amount to.

It is also worth emphasizing that in the passage cited above, Wittgenstein is not saying that religious belief is not *belief* (Glaube). Rather, he is saying that *although* it's belief, it's *also* a way of living. The original German makes this more evident than the not terribly good English translation that seems to oppose “belief” and “way of living” to each other, whereas the German reads: “Also obgleich es *Glaube* ist, doch eine Art des Lebens;” which carries the implication that religious belief is *both* belief *and* way of life.

That Wittgenstein should think that religious belief is simultaneously both of these things should, of course, not surprise us, given that he believes that “practice gives the words their sense.” Since Wittgenstein rejects the “fruit juicer” method of specifying the content of religious statements, it is impossible to factorize religious beliefs into two kinds of component: the putative “informational” content and the expression of a “doctrine-free” “emotional attitude”<sup>32</sup>. For as we have seen in this essay, such a conception would be at odds with Wittgenstein's entire philosophy of language – it is not just due to the fact that Wittgenstein happens to hold an idiosyncratic view about the nature of religious belief.

Neither does the use of words in a secondary sense have anything to do with the expression of an attitude (as opposed, say, to a “cognitive” belief). If I say that

<sup>29</sup> Winch has “interpretation,” which does not strike me as a good translation of “Auffassung” in this context.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Nielsen in: Nielsen/Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Cupitt, Don, *The Sea of Faith*, London: SCM Press, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> For more on this, see Schönbaumsfeld, Genia, “Wittgenstein and the ‘Factorization Model’ of Religious Belief,” *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 1 (2014), 93–110.

the vowel “e” is yellow or that the beginning of Wagner’s “Lohengrin overture” is blue, I am not expressing an “attitude” to the letter or the music – I am reporting how things strike me. Similarly, when the religious believer says that “God is omnipresent,” he is not expressing an attitude, but reporting his faith. This faith may, of course, engender various attitudes, such as an attitude of submission towards God, but the faith itself is not “just” an attitude, if that means that it is a kind of “content-free” feeling (which is usually what people who make this objection mean).

Consequently, Wittgenstein would happily endorse Kierkegaard’s Climacus’s remark that:

I cannot help it that our age has reversed the relation and changed Christianity into a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and being a Christian into something negligible. To say that Christianity is empty of content because it is not a doctrine is only chicanery. When a believer exists in faith, his existence has enormous content, but not in the sense of a yield in paragraphs.<sup>33</sup>

Here Climacus is not opposing “doctrine” to “belief,” but to “philosophical theory” – i.e., to a set of speculative claims about the behaviour of metaphysical entities. In other words, while Christianity is not a doctrine in this latter sense, this does not imply that it is, therefore, “empty of content.” But neither is it possible to specify what Christianity’s content consists in independently of making reference to the Christian form of life, in which this “doctrine” is at work. To think otherwise, is just to return to the “fruit juicer” method.

So, contrary to what many commentators think<sup>34</sup>, religious concepts and expressions are not, for Wittgenstein, the cognitively empty means to some practical end (say, leading a certain kind of life). Rather, the words and concepts used are as important as anything else. Wittgenstein’s point is only that we cannot reach a mature understanding of what these concepts involve independently of looking at the role they play in a religious believer’s life. For this role will provide us with the clues to uncover the depth grammar of religious concepts. If we ignore this grammar, on the other hand, we will remain stuck at the level of surface grammar and never get beyond thinking that religion is a hodgepodge of absurd meta-

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<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 380.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g. Clack, Brian, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999; Hyman, *The Gospel According to Wittgenstein*; Gordon, Graham, *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; McCutcheon, Felicity, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, London: Ashgate, 2001; Schröder, Severin, “The Tightrope Walker,” *Ratio* 20, no. 4 (2007), 442–464.

Daniel H. Weiss

# Wittgenstein and the Rabbinic Grammar of God's Name

## 1 Introduction

In this essay, we will examine the “grammar of God’s name” in the context of rabbinic Judaism. When we look at the treatment of God’s name in classical rabbinic literature, we see a pattern in which (drawing upon biblical descriptions) God has a specific proper name, and yet human beings (currently) are not in a position to utter that name. So, while there is no uttering God’s proper name, various practices are retained (in both writing and speech) that emphasize that God does have a name.

In the first three sections of this essay, we will draw out various theological and grammatical dynamics of this understanding and use of God’s name, without yet commenting on the ways in which these dynamics could appear conceptually controversial from a certain point of view. Following this, however, we will look at reasons why some might view (and have viewed) the idea of God having a name as an inherently problematic notion. Specifically, there exists a longstanding stream of philosophical and theological tradition in which the idea of God as “most high” and as “the creator of all, and not a created being” goes along with God being nameless or “beyond names.” In such a framework, the idea of a god who has a name would necessarily imply that such a god cannot be the creator of all. A god that has a name is not an inherent problem if you don’t also claim that god to be creator – but it is a problem if you want to claim that a named god is also the creator. Hence, there is a philosophical-theological tendency (which can be discerned in certain Christian and Jewish traditions) to say that God must be beyond names. In other words, it seems that it is necessary for God not to have a name in order to preserve certain “desirable” things that you want to maintain about God.

From this perspective, the rabbinic (and biblical) presentation can seem “confused” or “still stuck in an older or primitive conception” or “not yet arrived at a full understanding.” It may be reaching toward the “higher” notion of God’s transcendence, but has not yet fully left behind the “lower” understanding, as evidenced by its retention of the idea of God having a name. This perspective is not able to view the rabbinic preservation of both elements together as a knowing and sophisticated position, and might instead say: “What would be the point of preserving the idea of God’s name? If they elsewhere do assert their recognition of

God's transcendent status as creator, why do they not simply embrace namelessness fully?"

However, drawing both upon Wittgenstein's notions of grammar and grammatical illusions and upon modern Jewish religious-philosophical thought, we will see that the rabbinic pattern can be cast not as a "limited understanding" or "backwards conception," but as linked to a robust but *different* conception. By contrast, the attitude that insists that the creator God *cannot* have a name may be shaped by "illusions" similar to those Wittgenstein diagnoses in certain modes of "doing philosophy." In particular, we will draw upon Wittgenstein's criticism of the tendency to think that if a concept retains unclear aspects when one reflects on it theoretically, there must be something problematic about the concept itself. Against this, Wittgenstein affirms that various concepts can rightly be treated as fully legitimate and valuable even if one is unable to arrive at a fully clear and consistent theoretical account of them, and that one ought not to treat these types of clarity and consistency as a universally required criterion for our concepts. In light of this, the rabbinic pattern and practice can instead serve to illuminate rich theological understandings of prayer and interpersonal relation to God that would not be discernible if one insists on forcing the data into certain preconceived metaphysical frameworks.

## 2 Biblical Dynamics of God's Name

Before we examine a range of classical rabbinic statements and practices that relate to God's name, it is worthwhile to contextualize these discussions by first clarifying some biblical precedents. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the God who created the world and is described as relating to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, etc., is repeatedly referred to via the word "YHVH." Furthermore, in multiple places, this term "YHVH" is explicitly asserted to be God's "name." For example, in Ex. 3:13, Moses encounters God in the burning bush, and says to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name [*mah shemo*]?' what shall I say to them?" In Ex. 3:15, God tells Moses: "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: YHVH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This is My name forever [*zeh shemi le'olam*], this is My appellation for all eternity." Likewise, in Ex. 6:2–3, God says to Moses, "I am YHVH: I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make my name YHVH [*shemi YHVH*] known to them." In God's subsequent self-presentation in the Ten Commandments, God says, "I, YHVH, am your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt." (Ex. 20:2).

And, to take one more example, in Is. 42:8, God announces, “I am YHVH, that is My name [*hu shem*]; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to graven images.”

Elsewhere in the biblical text, there appears to be encouragement to engage with God in relation to his specific name, e.g., Ps. 30:4, “Sing praises to YHVH, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name;” or Ps. 34:3, “O magnify YHVH with me, and let us exalt his name together.” Thus, from a straightforward reading of the biblical text, it would appear that the God who created the world has a specific name, and that the Israelites address God in prayer and worship through this specific name.

Furthermore, across the various texts of the Hebrew Bible there does not seem to be any attempt to claim that God is “nameless” or “has no name” or “is beyond names.” However, there are various places that point to indications that there can be proper or improper ways of using God’s name. Thus, Ex. 20:7 (and Deut. 5:11) states, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of YHVH your God, for YHVH will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.” Lev. 22:32 states, “You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel: I, YHVH, am the one who sanctifies you.” In addition to avoiding improper use of God’s name, the Israelites are also told to avoid calling upon the names of any other god: “Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the name of other gods; do not let it be heard on your lips” (Ex. 23:13).

Finally, one additional theme in the Hebrew Bible in relation to God’s name is the idea that God’s name is associated particularly with a specific location, namely, the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus, 1 Kings 9:3 recounts God’s statement to Solomon, after Solomon finishes building the Temple: “YHVH said to him, ‘I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you made before me; I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.’” This location-specific element will be significant when considering the rabbinic treatment of God’s name.

### 3 Dynamics of God’s Name in Classical Rabbinic Literature

The texts of classical rabbinic literature (edited between the third and sixth centuries CE) are shaped, on the one hand, by a sustained engagement with the biblical texts, and, on the other hand, by efforts to interpret and apply these biblical texts in their own time and context, a context in which the Temple in Jerusalem

was no longer in existence, having been destroyed in the first century CE during the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.

The classical rabbinic texts retain the basic biblical idea that God has a specific name. However, they also attest to a notion, not explicitly thematized in the biblical texts, of a “substitute” term (*kinui*) that is pronounced in various contexts instead of God’s actual name. Thus, Mishnah Sotah 7:6 states:

How is the priestly blessing [pronounced]? In the province [i.e., outside of the Temple] it is said as three blessings, but in the Temple as one blessing. In the Temple the name is uttered as it is written [*kikhtavo*], but in the province in its substituted name [*ve-khinuyvo*].

In this presentation, when the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:23–27) was said in the Temple, the three times the term “YHVH” appears in those verses, the name was pronounced “as it is written” in the Torah scroll, in other words, with the consonants Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey. However, outside of the Temple, that same term was pronounced “with its substitute [*kinui*]”: it was uttered as *Adonai* (my Lord), rather than “as it is written” in the written Torah scroll.

In this presentation of a distinction between how God’s name was uttered “in the Temple” and “outside of the Temple,” the Mishnah nonetheless portrays a world in which the uttering of God’s specific name is something one might potentially encounter – if one happens to find oneself in the Temple, that is. However, since the rabbinic texts were redacted long after the Temple’s destruction, the stipulation that God’s specific name is legitimately pronounced only in the Temple entails that, by the time of the Mishnah’s redaction, there was *no* existing space in which God’s name could be legitimately pronounced “as it is written,” and thus in *all* existing spaces, God’s name is to be pronounced with its substitute of “*Adonai*/my Lord.”

The rabbinic opposition to pronouncing God’s actual name is underscored in Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1, in a discussion of the small number of categories of people who do *not* have a “share in the world to come.” Here, Abba Shaul states that “one who pronounces the name with its letters” is included under this sharply negative theological judgment. Here, the negative judgment is applied not to “one who pronounces the name with its letters outside of the Temple,” but simply to “one who pronounces the name with its letters,” implying a rabbinic understanding that the current state of existence is one in which pronouncing God’s name as it is written can *only* be an inappropriate action.

Notably, this practice of non-pronunciation as “YHVH” and substitute pronunciation as *Adonai* nevertheless takes place in a context in which Jews would be *encountering* God’s name as “YHVH” on regular basis: namely, when they encounter God’s name in the written text of the Torah scroll: even though it is not *pronounced* as it is written, the visual encounter with God’s name serves to un-

derscore the idea that God does *have* a specific name. This in turn may generate a certain tension for people between their visual-textual experience and their oral-auditory experience and practice.

Such a tension is thematized by the following commentary found in the Babylonian Talmud (hereafter BT), Pesahim 50a:

[The verse states: “On that day YHVH will be one] and His name one” (Zech. 14:9).] What is the meaning of ‘one’ here? Does that mean his name is not now one? Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said: The world to come is not like this world: in this world, God’s name is written with Yud-Hey [i.e., YHVH] but is read [aloud] with Alef-Dalet [i.e., *Adonai*]. But in the world to come, it will all be one: it will be read [aloud] with Yud-Hey and written with Yud-Hey.

Here, the text emphasizes a duality (in the present world) between the way God’s name is written in the Torah scroll and the way God’s name is read aloud. Thus, currently, God’s name is not “one.” However, the text also emphasizes that in the messianic-eschatological future, things will be different, and God’s name will be read aloud in the same way as it is written. Thus, God’s actual name was previously pronounced in the past (in the Temple), and will be pronounced in the future, even though it is not pronounced in the present.

Importantly, the non-pronunciation of God’s actual name in the present appears to correspond to the fact that, according to classical rabbinic understandings, God’s “direct divine presence” (the *shekhinah*) was removed from the earth following the destruction of the Temple, having previously been locationally centered in the holy of holies in the Temple itself. While God is still “present with Israel” in a weaker sense, as well as “present with” humanity more broadly and with all of creation, the stronger sense of the presence of the *shekhinah* is understood as currently absent (*silluq ha-shekhinah*), and will not return until the messianic future.<sup>1</sup> In the rabbinic portrayal, therefore, the pronunciation of God’s name appears to correlate with times and places in which God’s presence is directly present in the stronger sense.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Cf. BT Yoma 39a–b, in which the explicit use of God’s name even in the Temple ceased following the death of Simeon the Righteous (ca. 3rd century BCE), a shift that also corresponded to the ceasing of regularly-occurring miracles in the Temple, indicating a lessening of God’s direct divine presence.

2 For a recent study of the name of God in rabbinic thought, see Ben-Sasson, Hillel, *Understanding YHWH: The Name of God in Biblical, Rabbinic, and Medieval Jewish Thought*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

## 4 The Grammar of God's Name

Having presented a range of data from rabbinic texts, we can now comment on initial aspects of the “grammar” of God's name.<sup>3</sup> One pronounces God's actual name in certain physical locations, but in other locations, one uses the substitute *Adonai*. Likewise, one pronounces God's actual name in certain time periods, but in others one uses *Adonai*. Thus, there is no place-neutral or atemporal use of God's name – it is specifically place- and time-dependent.

We can compare this “grammar” to the everyday grammar that distinguishes between the use of the second-person and the third-person: if I am speaking directly *to* a certain person, I use the second person (you), but if I am speaking *about* that same person to someone else, I use the third person (he or she). Thus, it would be “grammatically wrong,” when talking directly to a certain person about that person's height, to say to them, “She are tall;” instead, I would say, “You are tall.” Likewise, when talking about that person to someone else, one wouldn't say, “You is tall,” but rather “She is tall.”

This comparison is also useful for highlighting the correlation of “direct presence” in the use of God's actual name *versus* the use of *Adonai*: just as one typically uses the second-person when a person is present before you, and you are speaking directly to that person, but one uses the third person when that person is not present, so likewise one uses God's actual name in a place and time when God's *shekhinah* is “directly present,” and one uses the substitute *Adonai* in a place/time when God's direct presence (in that stronger sense) is not present.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, one could potentially conceive of the typical everyday grammatical practice as: the terms

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the comparisons and analogies in this section are not intended to “make sense of” or resolve the potentially problematic aspects of the rabbinic concept, but simply to illuminate additional aspects of the observed conceptual patterns. Addressing “problematic” aspects will follow in the subsequent sections.

<sup>4</sup> As with the potentially problematic aspects of the idea of God having a name, so too the classical rabbinic treatment of God's presence as more directly present in certain times or places than in other times and places could appear to some (including various subsequent Jewish thinkers) as philosophically or conceptually problematic, and as seeming to engage in a problematic type of anthropomorphism. For various relevant treatments of the “problem” of rabbinic anthropomorphism, see, e.g., Lorberbaum, Yair, *In God's Image: Myth, Theology, and Law in Classical Judaism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 13–45; Kadushin, Max, *The Rabbinic Mind*, Binghamton: Global Publications, 2001 [1972], 273–287; Rosenzweig, Franz, “A Note on Anthropomorphisms: in Response to the Encyclopedia Judaica's Article” [1928], in his *God, Man and the World: Lectures and Essays*, ed. and trans. Barbara Galli, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998, 135–145.; Wettstein, Howard, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012; Stern, David, “*Imitatio Hominis*: Anthropomorphism and the Character(s) of God in Rabbinic Literature,” *Prooftexts* 12, no. 2 (1992), 151–174.

“he” or “she” constitute a “substitute” for times/places when the other person is not present, and therefore one cannot use that person’s “actual” pronoun of “you.”

One other potential grammatical analogy from everyday language could be the formal *versus* informal/intimate/familiar forms of the second person singular, such as *vous* and *tu* in French or *Sie* and *Du* in German. “Sie” and “Du” are *both* terms that can be used as second-person address, with the difference typically depending on the specific social and personal relation between the speaker and the addressee. In some ways, this could be more analogous to the rabbinic grammar of God’s name, insofar as “YHVH” and *Adonai* would *both* be used in second-person address (whereas in the previous analogy, “he/she” versus “you” are not both terms used in direct address). And, the use of “YHVH” in the context of direct divine presence could appear to have some parallels with the “intimate/familiar” use of *Du* or *tu*. However, there can also be disanalogies: the rabbinic presentation is that “YHVH” was previously used, but is not used currently, so that there has been an overall shift away from “YHVH” to *Adonai* (even though, according to the rabbis, *Adonai* would have been used in most contexts even at the time when the Temple was standing). By contrast, with *Du/Sie* or *tu/vous*, a relation would more typically begin with *Sie/vous* and *later* move to *Du/tu*, but a relation would not typically shift from *Du/tu* to *Sie/vous*. However, even though these analogies (second vs third person, or *du* vs *Sie*) are not perfect, they are nevertheless helpful in aiding us to reflect in a “grammatical” mode about the rabbinic presentation of the “proper” use of God’s name.

In addition, we can remark on the “strange” practical situation of a “grammatical rule” that is never put into practice in one’s own experience. Because the Temple has been destroyed, the rabbinic texts are situated in a time and context in which there is *no* appropriate situation in which a person might speak or hear God’s actual name. Instead, in this context, in situations of addressing God in prayer or reading God’s name from the Torah scroll, one will *always* speak or hear it spoken as *Adonai* and *never* speak it or hear it spoken “as it is written.” A context in which one *sometimes* hears one name used for God and *sometimes* hears a substitute is thus significantly different, in experiential terms, from a context in which one *never* hears God’s “actual” name and *always* hears a substitute – even if one also ‘knows’ that in principle or in theory God has an actual name that is different from what one has always heard. Would this be analogous to the idea that there is in theory a “fourth person” form of speaking, but that in practice one only encounters situations in which the first, second or third person forms are appropriate? Or to the idea that there is an additional form of “you-address” beyond *Sie* and *Du*, but that no one today ever finds themselves in a situation in which it would be appropriate to use it?

To be sure, the idea of “a ‘grammatical form’ that people know about but simply never encounter an appropriate situation to use” may in some ways sound

needs to be aware of the dangers and to make sure to actively combat them, but if one does so, one need not distance oneself from understanding God as a person. Given the connection, as we have seen, between “God as a person” and “God as having a name,” Cohen’s judgment would seem to apply to the latter as well: there may be a potential danger connected to the idea of God having a name, but this too is a danger that can be avoided by taking additional active steps to reemphasize God’s status as creator, so that one likewise need not reject and can continue to uphold the idea of God having a name.

## 7 Wittgenstein’s Clarifying Reflections

While Cohen’s analysis points us to a potential means for addressing the problem of God’s name, the specter of inconsistency still hovers over the issue. For this reason, we can now turn explicitly to Wittgenstein, whose broader reflections on the way words and language function, particularly in his *Philosophical Investigations*, can help us to see that the theological insistence that the creator of all cannot have a name shares important assumptions in common with many of the philosophical tendencies that Wittgenstein criticizes.

Consider the following paragraphs where Wittgenstein’s imaginary interlocutor raises concerns in relation to issues of indefiniteness, vagueness, and blurriness:

- a) Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don’t say: “There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! (*Philosophical Investigations* [hereafter *PI*] 66).
- b) One might say that the concept ‘game’ is a concept with blurred edges. – “But is a blurred concept a concept at all?” – Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (*PI* 71)

In *PI* 66, the imaginary interlocutor asserts that there “must” be something in common across the different activities we call “games.” This insistence of “must,” of unavoidable necessity, stems from a set assumption about how words function: namely, that there must be a “least common denominator” linking all instances of a given concept in order for the instances to properly be instances of that one

An analogy can be drawn to the maintenance of plants. It is the case that growing live plants requires a certain amount of care, such as regular watering and weeding. In this context, if one neglects that maintenance, there is a chance that the plants will wither and die. Thus, a certain element of tension is structurally part of maintaining live plants: one must remain consciously attuned to ways in which one's efforts could "go wrong." Some people could therefore conclude: in order to avoid the chance of the plants withering and dying, let us just switch to plastic plants, which don't require that type of active maintenance. Likewise, one can choose between understandings of God that don't need any "watering" but which are lacking in various otherwise desirable qualities – or, you can make use of concepts that can sometimes require some care or correction, but can provide for richer forms of communal life and relation to God. And, as Wittgenstein shows, just as people who are accustomed and habituated to how the term "game" is used can do so without difficulty, so too it turns out that the idea of God as creator and as having a name can be readily upheld in practice without undermining either of those two commitments.

These reflections can provide a fuller understanding of Wittgenstein's otherwise-brief remark in which he states, "Luther said that theology is the grammar of the word 'God.' I interpret this to mean that an investigation of the word would be a grammatical one." What does it mean to investigate the word "God" in a "grammatical" way, and how would this approach be different from other approaches to "doing theology"? A grammatical approach to the word "God" would appear to involve a "look and see" orientation: within a given cultural-communal context, is God treated as having a name, and is God also treated as the creator of all? Are these two elements both employed without generating practical difficulties? If so, then theological reflection in a grammatical mode could then say: apparently, in this tradition, God is properly understood in relation to both of these elements. There may be certain things that *are* treated in this tradition as incompatible with God as creator of all, but apparently having a name is not one of those things. The assertion of God as creator of all may place certain constraints on *how one understands* the fact that God has a name, but it is apparently not seen as incompatible with that fact in itself.

This approach to theology stands in contrast to an approach more linked to the "think" orientation that Wittgenstein opposes in saying "Don't think, but look!" The less "grammatical" approach would be more inclined to say something like: "We can see by logical deduction that having a name is something that inherently marks a being as created rather than as the creator. Thus, I don't care if in this or that cultural context people say that God has a name while also claiming that God is the creator of all. This only shows that those people are conceptually confused and have not progressed to the recognition that God, as creator, *must* be

nameless. Furthermore, I'm also not so concerned about whether the idea of God having a name causes practical problems in relation to upholding God as creator; maybe it does or maybe it doesn't, but we must reject the idea of God as having a name since the two elements are simply logically incompatible. The conceptual conjunction of the two just doesn't 'make sense,' logically speaking." In this mode, a key task of theology is sorting through the existing ways of talking and "smoothing out" the apparent logical inconsistencies and ambiguities in order to arrive at a properly "distinct picture" of how to understand God.

By contrast, the grammatical approach holds open the possibility that certain understandings of God may contain theoretical ambiguities that one should not seek to "fully clarify," since in some cases, the equivalent of an "indistinct picture" might be "exactly what we need," e.g., in enabling us to uphold God's distinction from created beings while also enabling personal relation to God as a "you." Thus, while various types of conceptual ambiguity or tension could potentially be problematic and call for a means of overcoming them, at least some elements of conceptual tension may be *desirable* in various cases in order to properly preserve, convey, and reinforce certain ideas. Thus, the seemingly "strange" rabbinic "grammar of the God's name" can point not to a deficient or insufficiently thought-out understanding, but to a fully robust understanding of a *different concept* that differs in important ways from a "nameless God" and which need not be forced into a different framework on the grounds of "logical necessity" or "theoretical consistency."<sup>35</sup>

In a grammatical approach to theology, one would judge certain ideas to be problematic by looking and seeing whether certain things that you're saying are in actual fact and practice causing problems in relation to other things you'd want to uphold. In other words, if, in a given communal context and a given time and place, talking about God as having a name *did* have a strong tendency to lead people to relate to God as a created being, then this would be grounds for saying that there is a *problematic* conflict between these two elements.<sup>36</sup> But, this would be a question to be checked empirically, and not simply assessed on the basis of whether someone *could theoretically* draw problematic conclusions from the idea

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35 Cf. Heschel, "The God of Israel and Christian Renewal," 271: "[The God of Israel] means God with whom Israel is vitally, intimately involved, and involvement transcending the realm of thinking, not reducible to human consistency, and one which does not simplify itself in order to accommodate common sense."

36 Again, the question of whether there is a problematic or objectionable conflict between two elements is not the same as the question of whether one can discern a conceptual tension between two elements. The latter could be the case without the former being the case, and this may in fact be the case with many of our everyday concepts, even if this internal tension is more readily apparent in the case of some concepts than of others.

of God having a name. If a concept can't be "maintained" without creating grave problems, then that does properly make it a problem in a stronger sense – but if one can pass down and transmit the concept without it leading to problematic understandings, then it should not be treated as deficient or in need of correction.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, if we consider the classical rabbinic approaches to God's name alongside Justin Martyr's approach, we can see that while both of them reflect on and interpret the text of the Hebrew Bible, they appear to incline toward different modes of "theologizing." The classical rabbinic texts (as well as the texts of the New Testament, as argued by Soulen) seem not to be bothered by the idea that God has a name, and they do not seem to feel compelled to eliminate the biblical text's apparent naming of God when they present their own theological understanding. This appears more in keeping with a "grammatical" approach to theologizing. By contrast, Justin seems more concerned to insist that the creator of all – by force of logic – cannot have a name, such that all the *apparent* namings of God in the biblical text, when properly understood, are in fact "not names, but appellations derived from His good deeds and functions." His approach, in this regard, seems more like the non-grammatical mode of theologizing that feels more compelled to eliminate apparent logical inconsistencies in the manner we have described above. While one need not create an absolute dichotomy between Justin's approach and that of the rabbis, it does seem clear that Justin's approach is at least *more* shaped by this type of desire to eliminate logical-theoretical ambiguity from his understanding of God.<sup>38</sup>

This assessment gains further reinforcement when we consider Justin's approach to God's communication with human beings. As emphasized by Heschel,

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<sup>37</sup> In discussing "theology as the grammar of the word 'God,'" Wittgenstein further notes: "What is ridiculous or blasphemous also shows the grammar of the word" (*Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932–1935*, ed. Alice Ambrose, Blackwell: Oxford, 1979, 32). These judgments, though, may differ between different communities: what one community finds ridiculous or blasphemous may be judged as unproblematic by another community, and thus would not stand in need of correction in the latter theological framework.

<sup>38</sup> Just as Justin may be further away from the "grammatical" approach than the New Testament is, so likewise some subsequent Jewish thinkers – e.g., Maimonides – may be further away from the "grammatical" approach than the classical rabbinic texts are. See Weiss, Daniel H. "The God of the Intellect and the God of Lived Religion(s): Reflections on Maimonides, Wittgenstein and Burrell," in: Gorazd Andrejč/Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), *Interpreting Interreligious Relations with Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies*, Brill: Boston, 2019, 174–193. Note, however, that Maimonides, while reshaping many aspects of God to fit with certain philosophical positions similar to Justin's, still does retain the idea of the Tetragrammaton as God's proper name! See Fagenblat, Michael, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 123–130.

the notion of God having a name is closely linked to understanding God and human individuals as standing in a direct, intimate, and interpersonal mode of relation and communication with one another. If these two elements are connected, and if Justin expresses concern about the notion of the creator of all having a name, then we might expect him also to express similar concerns about direct communication between the transcendent creator of all and earthly human beings. Thus, Justin asserts that “the senseless Jews” think that the one who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush in Exodus was “the Father and Creator of the universe.”<sup>39</sup> However, by holding this opinion, the Jews show themselves to be in error, and stand under the rebuking judgment of Isaiah 1:3, where the prophet declares, “Israel doth not know Me, my people have not understood Me.”<sup>40</sup> Justin states those with a proper understanding would recognize that it was not the Father who spoke to Moses out of the burning Bush, but rather the Son, who “is sent forth” by the Father to declare whatever is revealed.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he states more generally about the biblical books, that “wherever God says, (. . .) ‘The Lord spoke to Moses,’” the text is referring specifically to the Son as the speaker and not the Father.<sup>42</sup> What is notable about Justin’s approach is not that he happens to interpret the text as referring to the Son and not the Father; the notable aspect is his *reason* that he gives for interpreting the text in this way: describing “the ineffable Father and Lord of All,” Justin asserts that “He is not moved or confined to a spot in the whole world, for He existed before the world was made. How, then, could He talk with any one (. . .)?”<sup>43</sup> It is God’s transcendent, uncreated, and unmovable nature that marks the idea of the Father speaking to Moses, or to any human being, as a fundamental impossibility and misunderstanding of God; hence, all the biblical texts that might seem to imply otherwise must be reinterpreted as referring to the Son. Anyone who thinks otherwise – and he indicates that “the Jews” do think that “the Father and Creator of the Universe” did speak to Moses – show themselves to be “senseless.” In this, Justin displays an orientation similar to his theologizing about the impossibility of creator of all having a name.

By contrast, the classical rabbinic texts do not seem to have a problem with the idea that the creator of all spoke to Moses, without the need for an intermediary or mediator, similarly to the way they do not seem to have a problem with the idea that the creator of all has a name. They do not view such direct interpersonal com-

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39 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 63.

40 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 63.

41 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 63; see also Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 59–60.

42 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 127.

43 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 127.

munication as undermining God's distinction from creation and status as creator.<sup>44</sup> And, while they do not see human beings today as receiving the type of prophetic communication that Moses received from God, the fact that such communication is compatible with God's status serves to undergird their sense that human beings today can relate to the creator of all directly in prayer.<sup>45</sup> For Justin, on the other hand, it appears that such unmediated relation to the Father does not make sense; hence he states that the member of the worshipping community that presides over the Eucharist "gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost"<sup>46</sup> and that "We bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost."<sup>47</sup> There is an internal consistency in Justin's insistence that one conveys praise, glory and blessing to the (nameless) Father not directly, but through the (name-having) Son.<sup>48</sup> This particular form of consistency, however, seems to be something that the rabbinic texts do not

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44 As noted above in fn 12, their stance need not be seen as the result of philosophical naïveté, as though they were simply blissfully ignorant of the type of concerns raised by Justin and by others influenced by a similar metaphysical framework. Rather, the cultural context of the classical rabbis would likely have made them well-aware of such objections, so that their continued emphasis on direct human relation to the "creator of all" should be seen as a conscious and deliberate choice. On rabbinic engagement with their broader cultural context, see, e.g., Lieberman, Saul, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" in: Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies*, 123–141, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963; Hidary, Richard, *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud and Midrash*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

45 In this regard, they may be drawing upon biblical texts such as Ex. 33:11 ("The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend," as well as on texts that extend this direct relating to the entire Israelite community (e.g., Deut. 5:4: "The LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire").

46 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 65.

47 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67.

48 It may be that Justin's assigning of name-having to the Son rather than the Father may not satisfactorily resolve the philosophical problem of "God having a name," particularly for later Christian theologians who, in a subsequent Nicene Christian theological context, seek to assign "fully equal divinity" to the Son as well as the Father. That is to say, Justin himself held a conception in which "the logos was not eternal in the later Nicene sense" (Barnard, Leslie William, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1966, 90). As such, within Justin's own framework, assigning a name to the non-eternal Son/logos may be less problematic; however, those who do want to say that the Son is "eternal in the later Nicene sense" may find that the idea of the Son having a name raises problems similar to those raised by the idea of the Father having a name.

By contrast, one can view the rabbinic texts as "grasping the nettle" of the seeming problem by simply saying that the creator of all also has a name. In this regard, as discussed above in relation to Soulen's analysis (see fns 6, 10–11 above), many texts in the New Testament may be more similar to the rabbinic approach in their affirmation of God having a name.

see as necessary in their account of relation to God, and thus affirm that human beings can relate directly to the (name-having) creator of all.

Finally, we can reflect on the way in which the rabbinic approach, which appears to more closely align with Wittgenstein's "grammatical" approach to theologizing, can also be understood as displaying a sensitivity to the unresolved tension and ambiguity linked to the idea that the creator of all has a name. The rabbinic approach, while wanting to retain the idea of God's name for reasons already discussed, may also sense that the act of everyday human beings (apart from the high priest in the special setting of the Temple) addressing God by God's name could indeed impinge upon God's sovereignty and transcendent authority as an act of *lèse-majesté*: not that it is *logically* impossible to address God by name, but that it is *ethically* and *religiously* inappropriate to do so. Thus, by saying that God has a name (as written in the scriptural text), but that we (currently) address God in prayer with the special substitute-name of *Adonai*, the rabbinic approach enables direct and intimate address to God in prayer as a "you" with a name, while keeping in place a form of restraint that enacts an attitude of piety and respect.<sup>49</sup> Seen from this perspective, those who discern a tension in the idea of the creator of all having a name are not completely incorrect, but they are led to an unhelpful elimination of God's name when they *logicize* this tension instead of *ethicizing* it. Moreover, the rabbinic approach, which aligns more with the latter, deals with the tension not by seeking to eliminate it but rather by preserving and respecting it. In this way, it can function as a core element of a form of religious life that works in practice to preserve both the intimacy and personal relation linked to the idea of God having a name *alongside* the respect and transcendence appropriate to God as creator of all.<sup>50</sup>

## 8 Conclusion

The different stances displayed by classical rabbinic literature and Justin Martyr are not merely a thing of the past, as there are many theologically-engaged people today who would still view the idea of God having a specific name as inherently problematic, and would be more inclined to judge Justin's approach to be a bet-

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<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the rabbinic affirmation that legitimate pronunciation of God's name took place in the past and will take place again in the messianic future helps keep the "you"-aspects of God's name more salient, even in a time when there is currently no legitimate context for pronouncing God's name. That is, God not only has a name in theory, but also in human practice, even if that practice is not legitimately available in the current era.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Max Kadushin's analysis of rabbinic prayer as "normal mysticism" in his *Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism*, Binghamton: Global Publications, 2001 [1963], 163–198.

ter one, and to view the rabbinic preservation of God's name as a backwards vestige that ought rightly to be overcome. But, aided by Wittgenstein, we have seen that this stance may stem from a failure to assess whether the idea is necessarily problematic or objectionable when considered in practice, and may be more shaped by the illusory "must" that he sees as afflicting various philosophical problems.

Such illusions can lead some to reject or condemn things that they might otherwise acknowledge as having value and benefit. Many of those who reject the idea of God's name might say, "Yes, I agree that perhaps the idea of God having a name *could* augment the personal-relational quality of religious life and worship – sadly, however, it is simply something we must forgo if we want to preserve the idea of God as creator." By contrast, Wittgenstein's analysis helps us to see that such a conclusion is not in fact necessary. If one truly thinks that one's religious life would be improved by understanding God as nameless, then one is at liberty to do so, but one should not do so out of an assumption that this *must* be the case in order for God to remain distinct from created beings.

Viewed in this light, the rabbinic texts need no longer come across as "philosophically unsophisticated" but may instead reflect an implicit "grammatical" orientation to theologizing that is more akin to Wittgenstein's recognition that *not all things* that some philosophical approaches *claim* as "grave problems" ought appropriately to be treated as such. Based on this type of critical reassessment, further engagement with the rabbinic texts can function as a useful tool for identifying problems that affect various types of theologizing today, both in relation to the particular issue of God's name, and in relation to a wider range of theological "problems," not only in the context of Jewish tradition but also in the related theological frameworks of Christian and Islamic tradition. As Wittgenstein's concern that "A picture held us captive" (*PI* 115) appears to apply to theological as well as philosophical reflection, his recommendation of "grammatical" investigations can therefore helpfully aid in freeing us from that captivity and releasing us from unnecessary burdens and anxieties in relation to the word "God."<sup>51</sup>

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51 I thank Genia Schönbaumsfeld, Farid Suleiman, and Mira Sievers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

Farid Suleiman

# The Grammar of “God” – Muslim Perspectives

## 1 Introduction

The so-called “Dream Argument” by René Descartes (d. 1650), as most students of Western philosophy know, calls into question the reality of everything that we take for granted, including the existence of our bodies.<sup>1</sup> What is less known is that Descartes’ source of inspiration for this argument might have been the famous Muslim theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/504), who argued in a quite similar way that all what we perceive as real may in fact be nothing else but dream appearances.<sup>2</sup> In his work *al-Munqidh min aḍ-ḍalāl* (The Deliverer from Error), he writes:<sup>3</sup>

Do you not see ( . . . ) how, when you are asleep, you believe things and imagine circumstances, holding them to be stable and enduring, and, so long as you are in that dream-condition, have no doubts about them? And is it not the case that when you awake you know that all you have imagined and believed is unfounded and ineffectual? Why then are you confident that all your waking beliefs, whether from sense or intellect, are genuine? They are true in respect of your present state; but it is possible that a state will come upon you whose relation to your waking consciousness is analogous to the relation of the latter to dreaming. In comparison with this state your waking consciousness would be like dreaming!

The argument seems so attractive because it relates to ordinary experiences that many can identify with. If we could be (and really are) wrong in some cases,

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1 Descartes, René, *Oeuvres De Descartes. Nouvelle Présentation*, ed. Charles Adam/Paul Tannery, 11 vols, Paris: J. Vrin, 1982–91, 7; 19.

2 The striking similarity between al-Ghazālī’s and Descartes’ “dream argument” has led to a debate on whether the former actually influenced the latter. For a summary see López-Farjeat, Luis Xavier, “al-Ghazālī on Knowledge (ilm) and Certainty (yaqīn) in al-Munqidh min aḍ-ḍalāl and al-Qiṣṭās al-Mustaqīm,” in: Georges Tamer (ed.), *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of Al-Ghazālī. Papers Collected on His 900<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, vol. 1, 229–252, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015, 232, fn. 8. López-Farjeat writes that while there is no evidence that Descartes had direct access to the relevant work of al-Ghazālī, there are plausible other ways of how Descartes could have come to know about its content. See also Rudolph, Ulrich (ed.), *Philosophie in der islamischen Welt: 11. und 12. Jahrhundert: Zentrale und östliche Gebiete*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2021, 294; 334.

3 Watt, William M., *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953, 24.

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**Acknowledgements:** I wish to express my gratitude to Genia Schönbaumsfeld, Daniel Weiss and Mira Sievers for their valuable input on a previous draft of this essay.

couldn't we be wrong in all cases? The solution to this problem, or better, the antidote to this confusion, lies in the reflection of the fact that any human practice, including the act of doubting, becomes meaningful only against the background of a larger web of practices, in which it is embedded. Any utterance of doubt, in order to be meaningful, must be brought forward within a context that itself is exempted from doubt. Or, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it: "The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty."<sup>4</sup> Hence, there is no such thing as "being wrong in all cases." To counter al-Ghazālī's (and Descartes') thought experiment then, one could ask: Is al-Ghazālī's belief that he has put forward the claim "all my waking beliefs could in reality be imagined, unfounded and ineffectual" real, meaningful, and truth-apt, then that belief cannot be imagined, and turn out to be unfounded and ineffectual; hence, his claim is refuted. On the other hand, in case his belief is imagined, and turns out to be unfounded and ineffectual, then he has not made a claim that we could engage with in the first place. Al-Ghazālī, insofar as he is the subject of the act of claiming, inhabits a real world, in which it is possible to meaningfully speak and claim something; and from there, he looks at his other self that – insofar as it is the object of his claim – may be no more than a dream fantasy.<sup>5</sup>

The article at hand is not about radical scepticism and its futility.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the reason I brought up the dream argument is that it stems from the same sources that have fuelled a multitude of confusions about the nature and role of religious language and practice that have long pervaded and still do pervade analytic philosophy of religion. The growing discomfort with the way theology is done in analytic traditions has led to a call for "religion without metaphysics" or an abandonment of the "God of the philosophers" in favour of the "God of Abraham." To this end, the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein has become a significant source of inspiration. This is not because the subject of religion looms large in his writings, which it does not, but because his radical critique of mainstream philosophy and his alternative can easily be extended to the field of religion. In fact, his way of doing philosophy does itself have a religious outlook, which may explain in part his quite enigmatic

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4 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe/G.H. von Wright, transl. D. Paul/G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997 [1<sup>st</sup> amended edition], §115.

5 This split of personality occurs, of course, to everyone who considers the dream argument meaningful, even if he or she does not assent to it. Thus, the argument should be considered meaningless.

6 For the dream argument in particular, see Stroll, Avrum, "Wittgenstein and the Dream Hypothesis," *Philosophia* 37, no. 4 (2009), 681–690. For a broader treatment of the incoherence of radical scepticism, see Schönbaumsfeld, Genia, *The Illusion of Doubt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

statement that he made to his friend Maurice Drury: “I am not a religious man, but I can’t help see every problem from a religious point of view.”<sup>7</sup> And, when Wittgenstein told his friend that his religious thought is not Greek, but a “hundred percent Hebraic,”<sup>8</sup> we can see him expressing a similar discomfort with the “God of the philosophers” that plagues a growing number of people in the study of religion. The article dovetails with this development and assumes that the opposites between the “God of the philosophers” and the “God of Abraham” – seen as labels for different approaches to religion – runs deep throughout the Islamic tradition.

The purpose of this study is threefold: First, I will elaborate on what is meant by the approach labelled as “God of the philosophers” and point to some of the confusions in religion that come along with it, especially with regard to the question of what it means that God is good. Secondly, I will outline the character of a Theology as Grammar, and then, thirdly, apply it to that particular question. The article will end with some final remarks. No pretence is made that this article represents a comprehensive treatment of the issues described; rather it should be understood as a preliminary investigation that will hopefully be followed by more profound monograph-length studies.

## 2 What are (Some of) the Problems?

In what follows, I will confine myself to two problem areas that are interconnected: First, I will discuss the development of the modern concept of “religion” and how this concept fortifies a problematic analytic philosophical approach to religion. Then, I will address several characteristics of how the word ‘God’ is understood within this approach and show that they are predicated on a confused understanding of religious language and practice.

### 2.1 The Modern Conception of Religion

There is a general agreement among researchers of religion that the genealogy of the modern notion of religion is closely tied to circumstances specific to (Western) European history and that the notion is therefore inappropriate and ill-suited to

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<sup>7</sup> For further elaborations on this statement, see Fronda, Earl S. B., *Wittgenstein’s (Misunderstood) Religious Thought*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010, 5ff.

<sup>8</sup> Drury, Maurice, “Conversations with Wittgenstein,” in: Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 97–171, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, 161.

both non-European traditions as well as pre-modern European Christianity. The Arabic term that is, at least since the end of the seventeenth century, most often translated as religion is *dīn*.<sup>9</sup> Its relative proximity to the modern European concept of religion has been noted several times.<sup>10</sup> While also the modern notion is not unified in itself, rather, it is understood with different accentuations depending on the context, one can safely establish four dominant usages of the word “religion”:

a) *Religion as a generic singular*: To use “religion” as a generic singular (*Kollektivsingular*) is problematic for several reasons. It invites one to believe that there is some permanent and unchanging essence that is shared by anything that falls under the term. Every statement, however, that begins with “Religion is . . .” either constitutes a hollow generality or is simply wrong. Furthermore, what are held to be universal features of religion are framed in terms of a historically contingent version of (Protestant) Christianity that serves as point of reference for defining and categorizing non-Christian religious traditions.<sup>11</sup> Christianity is, in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s words, the “religion of the religions,”<sup>12</sup> the most complete manifestation of the concept of religion of which all other forms are deficient approximations and therefore

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9 For an historical overview over how the word *dīn* has been rendered in Latin translations of the Qur’an, see Gleis, Reinhold/Stefan Reichmuth, “Religion Between Last Judgement, Law and Faith: Koranic *Dīn* and Its Rendering in Latin Translations of the Koran,” *Religion* 42, no. 2 (2012), 247–271.

10 See Smith, Wilfred C., *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991, chapter „The Special Case of Islam;“ and more recently Abbasi, Rushain, “Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on *Dīn*,” *Studia Islamica* 116, no. 1 (2021), 1–106.

11 See Asad, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 42; Alatas, Syed F., *Religion and Concept Formation: Transcending Eurocentrism*, London/New York: Routledge, 2016; Schulze, Reinhard, *Der Koran und die Genealogie des Islam*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2015, 161ff.; Ahmed, Shahab, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016, esp. 184–189.

A recently published volume on Protestant notions of religion in Germany between the years of 1830 and 1914 illustrates very well that though there is no and has never been a unified concept of religion in Protestant Christianity, one can nevertheless identify certain recurring elements that – in the course of Western colonialism – has shaped and still shapes dominant globalized views on religion; see Pfeleiderer, Georg/Harald Matern, (eds.), *Die Religion der Bürger: Der Religionsbegriff in der Protestantischen Theologie vom Vormärz bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021.

12 Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *Über die Religion*, Berlin: Reimer, 4<sup>th</sup> 1831, 297. See also Dierken, Jörg, “Transcendental Theories of Religion: Then and Now,” in: Brent W. Sockness/Wilhelm Gräb (eds.), *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology: A Transatlantic Dialogue*, 151–164, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010, 159, and Pannenberg, Wolfhart, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley, London: Continuum International Publishing, 2004, 129–130.

rightfully object to Christian mission. Islam had an exceptional position due to its relatively close relationship to Christianity, as Ernst Troeltsch, another influential Protestant thinker, saw it. According to him, this would make evangelization of the Muslim lands hopeless, unless its ground is prepared through “weapons and colonization.”<sup>13</sup> The devastating effects of a globalized hegemonic European modernity is visible up until today. From among them is the uprooting of Islamic tradition from its indigenous epistemic and conceptual heritage, which led to a (self-)alienation of the colonized from their past.<sup>14</sup>

In view of the problematic history of the word “religion” as a collective term but also because of its analytic inadequacy, some researchers have advocated for its complete abandonment in the field of Religious Studies or argued to treat “religion” as a family resemblance term.<sup>15</sup>

b) *Religion as a reified object*: The term “religion” as a reified concept suggests that there are several different religions,<sup>16</sup> each one of which can be objectified and put in comparison to the respective others. In the context of the development of an Enlightened natural religion of reason, but also in the context of European colonialism, this made it possible to adjudicate the truth-value of their respective doctrinal content from a supposedly neutral sphere of rationality, and it also gave rise to the construction of the so-called “World Religions.”<sup>17</sup> This seems parallel to speaking of religion as a delimited domain that can be contrasted with other fields of human life that have been located outside the circle of religion, such as science and the

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13 Troeltsch, Ernst, “Die Mission in der modernen Welt,” in: Ernst Troeltsch (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften, Zweiter Band: Zur Religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie Und Ethik*, 779–804, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1913 (repr. from *Christliche Welt*, 1906), 801. See also Schulze, *Der Koran und die Genealogie des Islam*, 506.

14 This can be seen among both Islamist and Modernist reformers; see, for example, Bauer, Thomas, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2021; Hallaq, Wael B., *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; and Dabashi, Hamid, *Brown Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto, 2011.

15 See for example Andrejč, Gorazd/Daniel Weiss (eds.), *Interpreting Interreligious Relations with Wittgenstein*, Boston: Brill, 2019, index s.v. “family resemblance;” and the concluding chapter in Abbasi, “Islam and the Invention of Religion;” Ahmed argues, though, in my opinion, not convincingly, against this approach, see Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 240–243.

16 Peter Harrison even considers the emergence of a generic conception as a precondition for the possibility to speak about religions in the plural, see Harrison, Peter, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 101.

17 See Harrison, *Territories*, 102ff.; Masuzawa, Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions: or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007; and Schlieter, Jens, *Was ist Religion? Texte von Cicero bis Luhmann*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010, 13.

secular. Alleged neutral modes of secular reasoning denote the frame of reference, in which a comparison between these domains and the domain of religion takes place (e.g. “Religion and Politics,” “Religion and Science,” “Religion and Morality,” and so on).

c) *Religion as an inward experience or sentiment*: A momentous shift happened in the European context when religion was no longer considered primarily a mode of worshipping God (*modus colendi Deum*) and a subordinate virtue of the cardinal virtue “justice,” but as an inward experience or sentiment.<sup>18</sup> This inward experience was considered to be of universal character, and the core of revealed religion that otherwise is shaped by historical contingency. Immanuel Kant, for example, equated this core with pure Natural Religion (*Vernunftreligion*) in his work “Religion within the limits of mere reason,” while Friedrich Schleiermacher identified it with the “sense and taste of the Infinite.”<sup>19</sup>

d) *Religion as a Set of Propositions (Doctrines) that Aims at Explaining the World and at Inducing Certain Inward and Outward Behaviour (Intentions, Moral Behaviour, Observance of Rituals and Commandments)*:

There is a close connection between the personalization of belief in Protestant thought and the conceptualization of religion as a set of propositions.<sup>20</sup> The latter can already be observed in the seventeenth century, in which “for a number of influential English Protestant thinkers (. . .), faith and belief were to be reduced to a cognitive act rather than a relational virtue. What made faith valid was the inherent rationality of the propositions toward which it was directed.”<sup>21</sup> A century later, many Christian apologists as well as their foes, such as David Hume, while being radically antagonistic on many issues, nevertheless agree on the view that religion can effectively be reduced to a set of coherent propositions, while faith is nothing else than assent to their truth.<sup>22</sup> This notion of religion has been dominant ever since. However, it meets increasing opposition. By way of example, this is what Hent de Vries, professor of Religious Studies, writes on the issue:

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18 See the summary of Ernst Feil’s four volume study that traces the meaning of religion from early Christianity to 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe: Feil, Ernst, *Religio: Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Grundbegriffs im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007, 879.

19 Feil, Ernst, “‘Religio’ and ‘Religion’ in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: The Contrasting Views of Wolff and Edelmann,” in: Jan Platvoet/Arie L. Molendijk (eds.), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, 125–148, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999, esp. 142.

20 See Warner, Michael, “Is Liberalism a Religion?” in: Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, 610–617, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 612.

21 Harrison, *Territories*, 107.

22 Baird, Robert, “How Religion Became Scientific,” in: Arie L. Molendijk/Peter Pels (eds.), *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, 205–231, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 1998, 218.

So much is clear: beyond the modern definition of the concept, which has so often, and all too hastily, identified “religion” with a “set of beliefs” – in any case, with a mental state or series of states of consciousness, whose content and mode could be described by propositions that map ideas onto the world (albeit an ideal or mythically past and future one) – an altogether different sense or set of senses of the term ought to be envisioned.<sup>23</sup>

The idea that religion is first and foremost a set of propositions suggests believing that the meaning and truth of these propositions could be ascertained independently from religious practice. In this case, religious practice amounts to a likely, though not necessary consequence of holding a certain set of religious propositions true. This is equally problematic, as we will see later, since the idea of meaning and truth of propositions (be they religious or not) as something that is logically independent from human practices is a confused one.

Although there is no necessary relationship between these four dominant understandings of the modern concept of religion, they are historically intertwined. “Religion” is fully domesticated within the modern secular project’s normative conceptual terrain that defines the modern ordering of reality and rationality – not least by generating a set of binaries such as “*belief* and *knowledge*, *reason* and *imagination*, *history* and *fiction*, *symbol* and *allegory*, *natural* and *supernatural*, [and] *sacred* and *profane*.”<sup>24</sup> A critical reflection from an outside perspective of modern life has become very difficult, as, to speak with Charles Hirschkind, the “secular is the water we swim in.”<sup>25</sup> This may explain in part why many friends and foes of religion have unthinkingly embraced the secular notion that the most proximate place to truth and the highest forms of rationality manifest in the language and methods of natural (or empirical) sciences. They only differ on where to place religion in this epistemic framework. The foes consider religion to be either a primitive form of natural sciences (e.g. Auguste Comte’s Law of the Three Stages), or a theoretical explanation of the world that has been at war with science ever since,<sup>26</sup> or a bunch of unfalsifiable and, therefore, meaningless propositions.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand,

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23 Vries, Hent de, “Introduction: Why Still ‘Religion?’” in: Hent de Vries (ed.), *Religion. Beyond a Concept*, 1–98, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 5.

24 Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, quote from p. 23 (emphasis in the original).

25 Hirschkind, Charles, “Is There a Secular Body?” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011), 634.

26 Suleiman, Farid, “Ist Islamische Theologie eine Wissenschaft?” in: Abbas Poya/Farid Suleiman/Benjamin Weineck (eds.), *Bildungskulturen im Islam: Islamische Theologie Lehren und Lernen*, 43–72, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022, 46–53 (for further literature, see there, fn. 16).

27 Exemplified in Antony Flew’s paper “Theology and Falsification” (1950) of only three and a half pages length that stirred much debate; reprinted in Flew, Antony, “Theology and Falsification,” in: Antony Flew/Alasdair MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, 96–99, London: SCM Press, 1963 [1955]. I will get back to this paper below.

friends of religion have argued that the truth of (a particular) religion can be assessed in a way very similar to the methods of science. The outcome is a certain type of philosophical theism that is, as Ingolf Dalferth rightly put it, a “rational artificial product of modern natural religion” (*rationales Kunstprodukt neuzeitlicher Vernunftreligion*).<sup>28</sup> Even though the heyday of this kind of theism might have been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – when one of its most famous representatives, William Paley, published his widely received work “Natural Theology” in 1802, and others, such as the quite unconventional figure Charles Voysey (d. 1912) pushed Natural Theology to further extremes – theism remains a vital force with significant influence, especially in the field of analytic philosophy of religion. Vivid examples of different sorts of philosophical theism can be seen in theologians such as Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne. The latter, for example, uses Bayes’s theorem to measure the truth probability of what he calls theological hypotheses such as “God exists” or “Jesus was resurrected from the dead.” According to Swinburne, the former is more likely to be true than untrue (>50%) while the latter can be established with a probability of 97%.<sup>29</sup>

It is this view of religion as a set of scientific hypotheses that aims at providing a theoretical explanatory model of God, world, and history that a growing number of theologians of different affiliation, including the author of the article at hand, consider to be a philosophical confusion and grave misapprehension of what revealed religion (in this case, Islam) is about. The modern notion of religion has become so dominant and globalized that one has to reflect upon it regardless of what religious tradition one wants to study, in order to avoid painting a distorted picture of that tradition. Furthermore, although the modern notion of religion constitutes a radical break from those that came before, there are remarkable similarities to be found in Muslim tradition (maybe with the exception of point (c) above). See, for example, what the famous 12<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī has to say about how to recognize true religion (*ad-dīn al-ḥaqq*):

There is no way of discerning true religion except by theoretical investigation (*nazar*). Theoretical investigation does not mean anything else than the structuring of premises in order to derive conclusions. If premises as such would always be inferential, then they would all be in need of further (more basic) premises, which amounts to either circular reasoning or

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<sup>28</sup> Dalferth, Ingolf U., *Die Wirklichkeit des Möglichen: Hermeneutische Religionsphilosophie*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 257.

<sup>29</sup> See Swinburne, Richard, *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, and Swinburne, Richard, “The Probability of the Resurrection,” in: Andrew Dole/Andrew Chignell (eds.), *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion*, 117–130, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

### 3.2.2 A Non-Confused Understanding of God’s Goodness

Let us begin by imagining two people sitting in a desert, gazing up at a star-filled sky during a clear night. Both are deeply moved by this overwhelming experience, but in totally different ways. The first person is awestruck by the beauty and the harmony manifested in the sky, seeing in each and every luminous dot above a sign that points to the majesty and glory of its creator. A profound feeling of love and veneration seeps into every fibre of that person’s being; a feeling that he seeks to exhibit, knowing that words cannot express the praise that this creator deserves. He falls on his knees in the sand, prostrates himself and addresses his creator from the bottom of his heart by saying “Glory and praise be to *Allah*, as many times as the number of his creatures and creation, as much as pleases Him, as heavy in the scale as His throne, and as infinite as the ink required to record his words.”<sup>64</sup>

The other person is no less touched by the dazzling starry sky, but as I said, in a totally different way. He is struck by the vastness of the dark sky with its countless shining lights in a manner that induces in him a deep and profound feeling of the arbitrariness, randomness and purposelessness of existence as a whole. He feels somehow humbled by the fact that he, like anything else, is no more than an insignificant product of blind forces, acting in accordance with immutable and aimless natural laws. At the same time, he finds himself helplessly exposed to these blind forces – an insight that comes along with a profound feeling of anxiety. In addition to that, a deep sense of freedom arises in him, insofar as he realizes that no other than he himself bears the burden to define what it means to be a human being.

Surely, the two described reactions upon contemplating the starry night sky are by no means exhaustive. What is more important, however, is the fact that the difference of reactions is located on a different level than a disagreement about, for example, how far away from earth a particular object in the starry sky is. The difference between the two levels is not one of degree, but of kind. The following, interrelated points will illustrate this claim:

First, we have a deep feeling that even if all possible questions of science are settled unanimously, the existential questions of life have still not been touched at all.<sup>65</sup> This in contrast to questions like that regarding the distance between planet earth and other objects in space.

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<sup>64</sup> A common prayer found in the Islamic tradition; see, for example, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, narration nr. 7088.

<sup>65</sup> As noted by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. C. K. Ogden, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014 [1922], 6.52.

Secondly, and that dovetails with the first point, let's imagine two people talking about the distance between the sun and the earth. The one says that it is about 150 million kilometres, to which the other responds that this may very well be true. We would conclude that the two opinions expressed are quite close to each other. If they, however, discuss in the same way the question of whether there is a God who created us all, we would, in contrast, infer that there is an enormous gulf between these two persons.<sup>66</sup>

Thirdly, let us look at how the Qur'an speaks about the rejection of the many signs (*ayāt*) that God has put into creation and revelation, of which each one points to different elements that undergird an Islamic way of life, and that find its most concise expression in the phrase *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (there is nothing worthy of worship except *Allah*).<sup>67</sup> Those who reject these signs are repeatedly described as being covered in darkness, deaf, dumb and blind, having hearts that are affected by disease or even sealed by God, and God has led them astray. The signs in creation and revelation are recognizable only for those, as the Qur'an teaches us, who, for example, "do believe (*yu'minūn*)," "are certain (*yūqinūn*)," "understand (*ya'qilūn*)," "take heed (*yadhakkarūn*)," "are God-fearing (*yattaqūn*)," "know (*ya'lamūn*)," and "are steadfast and thankful (*ṣabbār shakūr*)."<sup>68</sup> There, we see a profound connection between religious knowledge and ethics; not knowing God and, hence, being ignorant of His signs is, as opposed to not knowing the distance between sun and earth, an ethical failure, not a mere cognitive incapacity.<sup>69</sup>

All three points indicate that neither *īmān* nor *kufr* is contingent upon knowledge of certain "facts" in the world, and in that sense, they are also not to be equated with rival theories about the world.<sup>70</sup> The believer and the unbeliever may inhabit the same "world of facts," and they may agree on the same scientific theories that try to explain this world, nevertheless, the former lives in a world of creation and the latter in one governed by blind nature. In that sense, *īmān* and *kufr* are better understood as different ways of seeing and living one's life. *īmān*, then, encompasses several regulative pictures such as God, creation, revelation, afterlife, responsibility, that find meaningful application in the life of the believer.

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66 The same thought with different examples can be found in Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, Oxford: Blackwell, 1977, 53.

67 Commonly translated as "There is no god except *Allah*" and boiled down to an affirmation of the existence of a particular being called *Allah*. This reading is alien to the context of revelation and must be seen in light of later philosophical discourses. It impoverishes, and I would add, misconstrues the actual meaning of that Quranic phrase.

68 Q 6:99, 2:118, 2:164, 6:126, 10:6, 6:97, 14:5.

69 By this, I do not intend to say that knowing the distance between sun and earth is not likewise embedded in human practice, such as, for example, the practice of mathematics.

70 This is not to say that facts are, in contrast, objectively accessible in a positivist sense.

In order to investigate the meaning of each picture one has to look at how they are applied within the life of the believer. Also, the pictures might increase in intensity, but it also might very well happen that they fade. Some of the possible means in order to restore their force consist of reading the Qur'an, praying, fasting, or doing other types of good deeds, visiting graves in order to remember death, pondering the miraculous nature of creation, but also going through certain experiences in life such as illnesses or other types of suffering. All this presupposes that the pictures have not faded away completely, or, in other words, that the pictures still find at least some application in life. Recognizing the signs of God in creation and revelation, then, is itself a manifestation of *īmān*, fear of God, and of thankfulness and patience as the above cited verses indicate. The unbeliever may agree with the believer on each and every scientific theory regarding the world, but again, the latter sees the divine names manifested everywhere, while for the former, nothing of this kind finds any meaningful application in life. And in case it starts to do so, it is not because the unbeliever double-checked the facts, but because the whole way of looking at them has changed. Transition from belief to unbelief or vice versa, then, is of such a profound and radical nature that it is rightfully described as conversion.

The Qur'an is a repository of all the relevant religious pictures that account for Islamic belief or *īmān*. The Qur'an teaches us the meaning of these pictures by showing us how they are embedded and applied in the life of the prophets. It is here where we find the meaning of these pictures, and the more we grasp it (which entails living by it), the more our lives approximate to that of the prophets. Hence, understanding the Qur'anic descriptions of God does not manifest in some theoretical knowledge about a certain type of being, but in an Islamic way of life. It is then no surprise to see that the Qur'anic descriptions all fit two characteristics: They are directly related to creation and they find meaningful application in worship (in a broad sense of worship that can be equated with an Islamic way of life). For example, God is the creator, while we are created; God is first and last, while we all are ephemeral; God is mighty and knowing, while we are weak and ignorant; God is the Provider and Guide, while we are in need of provision and guidance; God is forgiving and merciful, while we are sinful and in need of mercy; and so on. The Qur'an provides a normative framework of how to relate meaningfully between creator and creation in religious practice. Having internalized these rules, either consciously or unconsciously, and applying them correctly in practice makes one a competent participant of the Islamic (or Prophetic) way of life. In other words, the Qur'an is like a textbook of religious grammar, it pro-

vides the believer with regulative pictures and examples of prophets who are masters when it comes to the application of these pictures in life.<sup>71</sup>

Contrast this with philosophical descriptions that turn God into an object of theoretical study, such as God being pure existence, free of substance and accidents, eternal, non-spatial, non-temporal, and so on. By this, the philosophers transfer the picture “God” from its original home in prophetic practice to the practice of dispassionate scientific or theoretical investigation. If the approach of a “Theology as Grammar” is correct, much of the intellectual tradition of *falsafa* and *kalām* turns out to be based on a gross misunderstanding of the character of religious language. For example, all the ontological problems about God – so prominent in Muslim theology – that were inferred from the fact that the Qur’ān describes God as speaking, would then not constitute deep and complicated issues that only the scholarly elite has insight into.<sup>72</sup> Rather, it would be more aptly compared to the response of a little child who has not yet learned the correct use of the word “consciousness,” and therefore says, after hearing that one of his relatives lost consciousness, that he will set out on a search for it.<sup>73</sup>

After this quite lengthy, but necessary introduction, we finally get to the question of how a “Theology as Grammar” would look at a sentence such as “God is good.” For that purpose, we look at two other sentences, namely, “All human beings are sinners” and “My neighbour is a criminal.” I will use the grammar of “sinner” and “criminal” to highlight the differences between the respective grammar of the word “good” as understood by a “Theology as Grammar” and a philosophical theology. Even though both words (i.e., sinner and criminal) share in the notion of delinquency, I believe that the difference between their grammars are more obvious than the differences between the grammars of the word “good” applied as attrib-

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71 As the positivist understanding of “facts” is untenable, so is the view that the Qur’ān is meaningful in and through itself. Rather, reading and interpreting the Quran are practices that shape and are shaped by the larger web of practices, in which they are embedded.

72 Against the background of Aristotelian ontology and the assumed rational principle that anything that is subject to change is temporal (see fn. 41 above), the question arose how God can meaningfully be described as having addressed time-bound human beings (such as the prophets Moses, Jesus and Muhammad) with a human language (such as Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic). Over the course of the centuries, Muslim theologians worked out different theories of remarkable sophistication to solve the problem.

73 Or, in the words of Wittgenstein: “When we do philosophy, we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the way in which civilized people talk, put a false interpretation on it, and then draw the oddest conclusions from this.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §194. However harsh this remark may sound, one has to bear in mind that Wittgenstein intentionally picks up a dominant self-conception of philosophy, which sharply distinguishes between the intellectual elite and the ignorant masses, and then turns it against philosophy itself.

utes to God and ar-Rāzī’s neighbour. Seeing these differences will help to clarify an adequate understanding of the different roles of the word “good.”

As has become clear, philosophical theology treats the statement “God is good” like a proposition such as “My neighbour is a criminal.” The truth value of both statements is contingent upon certain “facts” in the world. It is nothing that I can initially know, rather I have to check the facts and as long as I haven’t, there is no rational basis to conclude them as either true or false. In contrast, a “Theology as Grammar” would affirm the above with regard to the statement “My neighbour is a criminal.” For example, if someone says “My neighbour is a criminal,” it would make sense to respond with, for example, “No, he isn’t, he’s an innocent law-abiding citizen” or “What makes you so sure, have you seen him breaking the law?” and so on. Any analogous conversation with regard to the statement “God is good” would, in contrast, hardly be meaningful. This needs further clarification. Let us look at the sentence “All human beings are sinners,” a statement that is attributed to the prophet Muhammad.<sup>74</sup> This statement is not to be understood as the outcome of an empirical study on whether there has been a single human being who completely abided by God’s commandments. Rather, being a sinner and, hence, being in constant need of God’s forgiveness is not contingent upon certain behaviour. It is a deep and profound attitude that runs through every fibre of the believer’s being; or in other words, it is a regulative picture that finds its application in an Islamic way of life, and is not contingent on certain events that happen in that life. Our worship of God is deficient, neither do our words express the praise He deserves nor do we remember Him sufficiently in our lives. That we do not give full right to God’s glory in our worship is, however, a core element in the Muslim’s relationship with God; it is not a question of finding more adequate words to praise God or to increase the activity of remembering God. It is nonsense to say that, for example, if you use these words or if you remember God a billion times (or any other number) in your life, then you have given due rights to the glory of God in your worship. This is further supported by a narration, according to which the prophet Muhammad has taught his disciples that none, not even he or any other prophet, will enter paradise by his or her deeds alone, but only by God’s mercy. Again, this should not be understood in the sense that it is theoretically possible to acquire enough good deeds to fully deserve paradise, but it just so happens that human beings are unable to acquire them. Rather, it means that we human beings are inherently sinful and perma-

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74 The full saying reads: “All human beings are sinners. And the best of the sinners are those that permanently seek God’s forgiveness.” See Tirmidhī, Abū ‘Īsā, at-, *Sunan at-Tirmidhī*, Vaduz: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 2000, hadith nr. 2687. Also in the Qur’ān, the prophets repeatedly pray for God’s forgiveness and mercy.

nently in need of God's forgiveness, regardless of our behaviour. Hence, to say that one is not in need of God's forgiveness would itself be a blameworthy and sinful statement even in the highly unlikely event that one has never gone against any of God's commandments. Saying such a thing would indicate that one has not yet grasped the profound nature of the relationship between the creator and the human being that is at the heart of Islamic ethics. In contrast, claims such as "My neighbour is a criminal" have indeed to be checked against contingent facts in our world in order to determine their truth value. In that sense, this statement describes something that happens in one's life. Statements such as "God is good," then, are more similar in grammar to statements such as "All human beings are sinners" than to statements such as "My neighbour is a criminal;" the former are not about contingent facts that the believer comes across after checking the state of the world, rather they express a regulative picture that is part of a larger web of pictures pertaining to an Islamic way of life. In that sense, God is not, like the neighbour, in the believer's life, rather the believer's life is in God.

## 4 Final Remarks

I want to end my paper with three remarks. The first one reiterates points that have been already mentioned, but are of central importance for adequately understanding the character of a "Theology as Grammar." The other two concern follow-up questions that I have not raised; not because they are less significant, but for reasons of space.

One has to keep in mind that regulative pictures are not to be understood as being logically prior to practice in the sense that the picture in itself contains its meaning. Rather, in order to know what the picture means, one has to look at how it is used, or to use another term, to investigate its grammar. This is not something specific to religious language, but is likewise true in ordinary speech about cats, dogs, tables and chairs. For the Muslim believer, the Qur'an is the most important textbook of religious grammar, teaching him or her how to use words like "God" and His many names in an Islamically meaningful way. That does not mean that one consciously acquires all the rules of correct application, rather it is comparable to a child's learning the language of his or her parents, which also happens without learning concrete syntactical or grammatical rules. When Wittgenstein says in the *Blue Book* that "we don't use language according to strict rules – it hasn't been taught us by means of strict rules, either,"<sup>75</sup> he

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<sup>75</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 25.

wants to dispel the idea that grammar is some sort of fixed algorithm that we mechanically apply when we speak. Hence, any general remark about the uses of a word – or what Wittgenstein calls “grammatical remarks” – neither expresses a (metaphysical) necessity, nor an autonomous calculus, and not even a theoretical insight about language and meaning. Also, they are no less context-dependent than any other type of remark would be. Hence, a “Theology as Grammar” is applied in concrete cases, for example, where we are trapped by the similarities of grammars and overlook the much more profound differences between them. In such a case, we treat as the same what should, in fact, be treated differently. We then may derive philosophical or theological problems that are discussed for centuries in the hope that someday we will find the right answer. This is where a “Theology as Grammar” has to step in, reminding us of the differences of the grammars at work. The desired outcome of that is to see that the problems actually cannot be solved, but only dissolved, because they are based on confusions about language. In that sense, “Theology as Grammar” is, as I said above, like a therapy that finds application in specific situations.

Secondly, a Wittgensteinian approach to Theology is at risk of being faced with different charges, especially that of anti-realism, fideism and relativism. The scope of the paper did not allow to discuss these charges, nevertheless I deem it inappropriate to end this article without at least saying a few words on the topic. Wittgenstein’s thought does not call for adapting and reshaping some elements of the framework within which dominant forms of philosophy and theology operate, rather it demands a paradigm shift that necessitates the breaking down of the framework as a whole. Binaries such as anti-realism, fideism, relativism and their respective counterparts such as metaphysical foundationalism are outcomes of this framework, or, to use a phrasing by Hilary Putnam, “manifestations of the same disease.”<sup>76</sup> A disease that Wittgenstein wanted to treat with his philosophy of language. It is regretful, though comprehensible that many interpretations of Wittgenstein dismiss the radical outlook of his thought and try to domesticate it within the dominant environment of philosophy. It is, then, no big surprise that charges against Wittgenstein such as the ones listed above are repeated over and over again in much of the secondary literature.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Putnam, Hilary, *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, 177.

<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, there are many who try to correct this distorted picture of Wittgenstein. I will suffice with the following selection: Taylor, Charles, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in: Charles Taylor (ed.), *Philosophical Arguments*, 1–19, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1995, and Phillips, D. Z., “Wittgensteinianism: Logic, Reality, and God,” in: William J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, 447–471, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Thirdly, my Wittgensteinian approach to understanding of the Islamic sources – the Qurʾān and the Prophetic tradition – raises the question of how much Wittgenstein is contained in the Islamic tradition. I would say that there is much to find if one does not fathom the Islamic tradition, as is commonly done, through lenses tinted by notions of religion prevalent in modernity and the God of the philosophers – both of which I have problematized above. Especially interesting in this regard is the prominent Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), to whom I have dedicated much of my research in the past years.<sup>78</sup> The similarity of his thought to that of Wittgenstein has been repeatedly noted in the literature (though most of the time only in passing). Ibn Taymiyya has not only put forward a profound critique of philosophical and theological thought that boiled down Islam to questions of ontology, but also worked out an alternative vision of it that has ethics at its core.<sup>79</sup> Admittedly, some of his own views were to a considerable extent affected by the very philosophical discourse he criticised, however, through my reading of Wittgenstein I came to understand more fully how deep-rooted the rejection of the God of the philosophers is in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought. This definitely deserves to be explored more fully, and I have noticed with delight that no less an authority on the topic of religion than Talal Asad, himself a reader of Wittgenstein for many decades, has come to somewhat similar conclusions.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Suleiman, *Ibn Taymiyya und die Attribute Gottes*. An English translation of this book recently appeared at Brill: Suleiman, Farid, *Ibn Taymiyya and the Attributes of God*, trans. Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2024.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Hoover, Jon, *Ibn Taymiyya*, London: Oneworld, 2019, 42ff.

<sup>80</sup> See Asad, Talal, “Thinking About Religion Through Wittgenstein,” *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (2020), 403–442.

Farid Suleiman, Daniel H. Weiss, Genia Schönbaumsfeld

## Epilogue

The epilogue consists of three parts, written by the authors of the three chapters, discussing the contributions of the other two authors from their own perspective.

### Part One

Farid Suleiman

My fellow authors have focused on issues that seemed peculiar to their respective religious tradition. The idea of God having a name, discussed by Daniel Weiss, is not a totally unfamiliar one in the Islamic tradition, according to which God has not only one but many names. Yet, there are significant differences. Among the many controversies around God's names in the Islamic tradition, such as on the question of whether God could rightfully be named "the Creator" *before* He created anything, there is, to the best of my knowledge, none that comes close to the specific issue that Daniel Weiss addressed in his article. Even more obvious is the case with the issue of the Trinity. Since the Qur'an rejects the concept in its entirety, the Muslim tradition did not have to cope with the problems discussed by Genia Schönbaumsfeld. Even though there are many good reasons to engage with other religious traditions, one might have the suspicion here that the discussions within the Jewish and Christian traditions are of little relevance to Islamic theology in this case, due to the peculiarity of the topics. Such a conclusion would, however, be short-sighted and superficial.

While it is important to take the peculiarities of the intellectual traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam into account, they must not be allowed to obscure the structural similarities that exist between these traditions. These similarities partly arise from the fact that all three traditions have been under the influence of Greek thought, but also shaped each other over the centuries. Furthermore, with regard to more recent times, the rise and spreading of secularism and the new modes of knowledge production that came along with it challenged all three traditions in similar ways. From among these structural similarities is the recurrent manifestation of the struggle between "the God of the Philosophers" and "the God of Abraham" in the history of the three traditions. A more comprehensive description, inspired by Wittgenstein, that would allow to include other intellectual traditions as well, in fact, all human thought, is to say that this struggle is

about resisting the temptation to surrender to the all-levelling power of language instead of surrendering *to life*.<sup>1</sup>

There are plenty of examples in the Islamic tradition, I would argue, that prove that victory in this struggle is achievable. Regrettably, those inside and outside the Islamic tradition who have been less successful in this struggle have tried to domesticate such approaches to make them fit their preconceived notions of rationality. Alternatively, in cases where this seemed not viable, they have readily dismissed them as irrational, crude, naïve, fideistic, or the like. There are analogous developments in the Jewish and Christian tradition, and by exploring them, I hope to gain a more profound comprehension of the disputes within the Islamic tradition and to find inspiration for resolving them. Wittgenstein proves particularly helpful in explicating the sources and characteristics of this above-mentioned struggle. Conversely, religious, or more generally, non-philosophical traditions can provide us with valuable insights into Wittgenstein's ideas or enable us to refine and expand upon them as necessary. This is unsurprising, given that Wittgenstein himself described his thinking as Hebraic and juxtaposed it against the Greek tradition. Moreover, it is worth noting that non-philosophical traditions, such as that of Native Americans, did in fact have an impact on Wittgenstein's thought, albeit indirectly, by way of American pragmatism.<sup>2</sup>

Comparative studies on the intellectual history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are numerous. However, they often focus on thinkers or philosophical systems that have been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy – Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas and Ibn Sinā – are some examples of thinkers who are frequently drawn upon in research. This might be motivated by, among others, the hope that the common Greek philosophical background of their thought results to achieving greater comparability. Yet, comparative studies of traditions within these three religions that are not inclined to philosophical approaches or even reject them, are just as important. Future studies must definitely avoid examining the theological views expressed in these traditions from a theoretical perspective that allows for drawing all possible conclusions from them. Rather, it is important to look at what conclusions the followers of these traditions themselves drew and how these were reflected in practice (such as in prayers or other kinds of wor-

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1 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *The Big Typescript. TS 213*, ed. and trans. by C. Grant Luckhardt/Maximilian A. E. Aue, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 521–522.

2 The connecting line can be traced, for example, through William James, who was influenced by Native American thought; see Pratt, Scott, *Native Pragmatism. Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. James' "Varieties of Religious Experience" was a book that Wittgenstein held in high esteem and strongly urged others to read; see Monk, Ray, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, London: Penguin Books, 1990, 478.

ship). This means that the respective views must not be considered in isolation but in their embedding in the larger network of related views and practices. Or, in short: They must be considered in how they are embedded in life. In his essay, Daniel Weiss impressively demonstrated, using the example of the rabbinic understanding of what it means that God has a name, why this is so important and how a theoretical approach gives rise to grave misconceptions.

These insights also apply to interreligious dialogue. Here, Muslim theology must engage in self-critical reflection on whether it allows itself to sufficiently enter into the thoughts and life world of the Other in order to get a deeper grasp of their theological positions. For example, Muslim theology often assumes that the doctrine of the Trinity necessarily leads to polytheism. However, instead of postulating such necessities, it would be more adequate to examine what conclusions Christians have drawn from this doctrine and how the doctrine is embedded in Christian practice. This is, because the meaning of the doctrine cannot be understood in isolation from this practice. Genia Schönbaumsfeld shows in her contribution that it is precisely polytheism that must be avoided from a Christian perspective. Similarly, just as the name of God in Jewish thought stands in tension with anthropomorphism, the doctrine of the Trinity may stand in tension with polytheism. But there is no logical necessity between them. This does not imply that the doctrine of the Trinity becomes acceptable from a Muslim perspective. Rather, it leads to a deeper understanding of the Other and reveals commonalities in places where they were not previously suspected. It is equally possible that differences emerge that were not previously in focus. Ultimately, this leads not only to a more nuanced understanding of the Other, but also of oneself.

## Part Two

Daniel H. Weiss

Genia Schönbaumsfeld's insightful essay draws our attention to ways in which various people (especially some philosophers or some theologians) can be led astray by the outward similarity of different terms and can fail to attend to ways in which the underlying "depth grammar" of those terms do *not* all operate in the same ways. Aided by Wittgenstein's efforts to draw attention to such differences, we can be in a better position to note the ways that terms are actually used in concrete practices, which can in turn help us avoid drawing unwarranted conclusions in our understanding of terms such as "God."

Schönbaumsfeld notes that our use of various terms such as "beauty", "proposition," "one," or "God" have a surface similarity to our use of terms such as

“cat,” “table,” or “chair.” Due to this, there can be a tendency to treat the former as operating similarly to the latter, treating them all as “substantives,” and simply positing that the former differ from the latter in being “invisible objects” rather than visible ones. This move can then lead to problematic inferences; in the case of “God,” it can lead some to conclude that “if God is like a person but lacks a body,” then God should be treated as a type of “mental substance.” This leads Schönbaumsfeld to criticize certain thinkers’ understanding of God as functionally treating God as a “gaseous vertebrate”. By contrast, by breaking free of the assumption that all terms must correspond to substantives in the same basic way, one need not be led to such ways of working with or analyzing the term “God.”

Schönbaumsfeld then engages with a range of interesting comments of Wittgenstein’s concerning God and anthropomorphic-sounding language. In particular, she highlights Wittgenstein’s remark: “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.” Schönbaumsfeld argues that asking whether God has a stomach or toenails is a category mistake, and that one can avoid such questions if one recognizes that one doesn’t need to treat our use of the term “God” in the same way as we treat ordinary human beings, about whom we could indeed ask about their different types of bodily organs. In particular, she emphasizes that we should pay attention to the ways in which certain ways of talking about God relate to our actual religious practices; the fact that questions about God’s stomach or toenails wouldn’t have direct relevance to those practices can be an indication that such questions are an instance of language “going on holiday”, raising theoretical questions that are detached from actual practice, and are therefore not amenable to being either affirmed or denied.

One interesting path of further exploration in relation to Schönbaumsfeld’s analysis of substantives and anthropomorphism, however, is whether certain “anthropomorphic” elements may have a more concrete grounding in practices than other elements do. When Wittgenstein says that it doesn’t make sense to talk about God’s stomach or toenails, he does *not* say that it doesn’t make sense to talk about God’s eyes or ears, and in fact, he seems to affirm such elements as part of “our picture of God.” This latter affirmation is tied to the fact that people do engage in the practices of praying to God and in the practices of exhorting people to act justly and rightly, since God can see what we do. Schönbaumsfeld suggests that saying that God sees our actions or hears our prayers does not mean that “God has strange sense-organs,” but simply “serves to remind one that God is always aware of what one is doing.” However, this may be eliminating the apparent “anthropomorphisms” more than Wittgenstein seemed to do. Wittgenstein ap-

pears to say not merely that God is aware of our actions or our prayers, but that our “picture of God” actually has “eyes” and “ears,” even though we should not then extrapolate from this picture and draw conclusions about eyebrows, toenails, etc. As Wittgenstein says, “We know how this statement is used, and that is all right.” Thus, while we should not treat the term “God” in the exact same way as we treat statements about human beings, we do not have to treat it in a qualitatively different way either: rather, if we “know how this statement is used,” we can properly uphold both the differences and the similarities, even if this does not result in an account that can be analyzed with full theoretical consistency. Wittgenstein seems fine with a situation in which our picture of God could seem, from a certain perspective, to “have holes in it,” and does not think that one needs to eliminate the holes in an attempt to make our treatment of the term “God” wholly identical with our treatment of words used in relation to human beings, or to make it wholly differentiated from our treatment of words used in relation to human beings. While this seems generally in keeping with Schönbaumsfeld’s analysis, it may lead to a somewhat different direction in relation to certain aspects of anthropomorphism and grammar.

Farid Suleiman’s engagement with the idea of the grammar of “God” makes use of the contrast between the “God of the philosophers” and the “God of Abraham.” He suggests that this contrast, initially formulated by Pascal, can also be useful in applying Wittgenstein’s criticisms of language-use to matters of religious language in particular. By understanding “God of the philosophers” and “God of Abraham” as labels for two broad approaches to religion, he enables us to trace the presence of these two attitudes within various streams of historical and contemporary religious thought. He argues that the “God of the philosophers” approach projects certain metaphysical assumptions and presuppositions onto its analysis of existing religious texts, terminology, and ways of speaking. This results in generating certain types of “theological problems” that were not part of the earlier framework of the texts and traditions. If the interpreters do not recognize that they are importing external presuppositions, they can be led to treat the dilemmas as native to the earlier texts themselves. Suleiman views Wittgenstein’s grammatical analysis as useful for helping us to become aware of those unnoticed metaphysical projections and assumptions. Once we recognize that those particular metaphysical assumptions are contingent and not necessary, we can be in a better position to engage with existing religious texts and traditions about God without getting tangled up in the artificially generated theological problems.

Thus, looking at the examples of “God’s existence” and “God’s goodness,” he shows the ways in which, particularly following the growth of *falsafa* and *kalām* discourses, various readers within the Islamic tradition have interpreted the Qur’an in light of assumptions that the true goal of understanding God entails the production of a theoretical account in accord with logical and necessary principles

of speculative thought. In relation to the question of “God’s existence,” for instance, this can lead interpreters to assert that the Qur’ān is concerned with those who affirm or who doubt God’s existence. However, Suleiman shows that this may be a projection of the “God of the philosophers” onto the Qur’ān, and that the conceptual framework of the Qur’ān itself may not be concerned with such questions – not due to fideism or naiveté, but because such questions of God’s existence arise specifically from particular metaphysical assumptions which are part of only some cultural-intellectual traditions, and are not a universal or necessary element of human reflection and reasoning. Importantly, he also shows that various interpreters in the Islamic tradition did *not* engage in that same level of projecting such assumptions on to the Qur’ān, giving the example of aṭ-Ṭabarī’s commentary on Qur’ān 52:35–36. The fact that some interpreters engage in the importation of such metaphysical assumptions while others do not, highlights the fact that two broad attitudes to religion and religious language can be discerned within the broader Islamic tradition, and that one can trace the history of the relative prominence of each of them in different times and thinkers, as well as the tensions or struggles between the two orientations.

Moreover, by his focus on the details of the Islamic tradition in particular, Suleiman’s analysis provides us with the tools to apply similar analysis to other historical traditions, such as traditions of rabbinic-Jewish theological reflection, or traditions of Christian theological reflection. In the case of all three traditions, it may be true that the scriptural texts of the Bible and the Qur’ān operate in a framework with metaphysical assumptions that differ from the “God of the philosophers,” and that one can trace the degrees to which subsequent interpreters do or do not import certain metaphysical assumptions that shape their engagement with scriptural language and formulations. Indeed, while Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* does not focus on religious language per se, it is notable that the opening pages of that book focus on what he calls an “Augustinian” approach to language – this itself can prompt us to investigate the ways in which Augustine’s own approach to understanding of scriptural texts did or did not do so via an “Augustinian” understanding of language!

In addition to Islamic, Christian, and Jewish theological traditions, Suleiman’s analysis and framework could also be fruitfully applied to the “Western philosophical tradition” itself, as an historical tradition in which various Islamic, Christian, and Jewish writers and thinkers participated. Could it be that there are some thinkers in this tradition who operate with the metaphysical assumptions of the “God of the philosophers” to a lesser degree than do others? After all, Pascal himself was a “philosopher,” yet challenged the ways in which various thinkers had gone too far in the direction of the “God of the philosophers.” This points to a potential ambiguity in Suleiman’s analysis in relation to the term “philosophy.” In

some places, he seems to equate “philosophy” with “the God of the philosophers.” For instance, he writes, “The Qur’ān is not a philosophical book, nor does it share the metaphysical presuppositions upon which the traditions of *falsafa* and *kalām* rest.” I would agree with the second half of the sentence, but the first half is more questionable. It is certainly the case that the Qur’ān or the Bible is not a “philosophical” book *in a certain sense of “philosophical”* – however, a key point of Wittgenstein’s is that the orientation linked to what Suleiman calls the “God of the philosophers” is not the only way of “doing philosophy.” That is to say, Wittgenstein also views his own approach as “doing philosophy,” even though it sharply diverges from many of the assumptions of the ways of doing philosophy that were dominant in his own time. Thus, it may be that the approaches that Suleiman calls the “God of Abraham” and the “God of the philosophers” can both be considered different ways of “doing philosophy,” and that one should not inherently cede the term “philosophy” only to existing dominant ways of doing so, even if those dominant ways would also like to claim the term only for themselves. Elsewhere in his essay, Suleiman writes, “Philosophy and theology are, in [their] dominant forms, concerned with problems that would not have arisen in the first place if the differences of grammars would have been carefully considered.” This formulation seems to take “philosophy” as potentially having forms other than the currently dominant ones. If so, it is possible that the Qur’ān or the Bible could also be seen as having a closer relation to “philosophical” thinking, when the latter is understood in a way more akin to Wittgenstein’s own counter-hegemonic approach to the term. Suleiman’s framework and analysis could thus be very helpful in future exploration of such possibilities.

## Part Three

Genia Schönbaumsfeld

In his essay on the rabbinic grammar of God’s name, Weiss makes a good case for claiming that while the thought that God has a name may be problematic in some respects, it does not automatically follow that such a conception needs to be perceived as “backwards” or as standing in tension with the idea of God as creator. Weiss draws on some well-known Wittgensteinian concepts, such as “family resemblance” and the famous dictum, “don’t think, but look,” in order to substantiate this conclusion. He argues that, when applied to the subject-matter at hand, these notions imply that Wittgenstein would reject as essentialistic and illusory the contention that there must be something inherently wrong with the idea of a God who has a name – as if it were a matter of logic that such a conception would

reduce God to the level of created beings. To clarify, it is not that Weiss is claiming that such a thing could not be the case – that people could not draw such a conclusion – but rather that it would be premature to believe that it *must* be the case.

According to Weiss, it is primarily an empirical, not a logical or conceptual, question whether people draw the wrong conclusions from the use of a concept. At this level of generality, one might agree: It is not an a priori issue whether people in fact get led astray by a concept. Nevertheless, a concept's surface grammar may make this so exceedingly likely as to come close. As Wittgenstein tells us throughout *Philosophical Investigations* (most famously at PI §109) as well as elsewhere, the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language is nigh on ubiquitous:

We keep hearing the remark that philosophy really does not progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. Those who say this however don't understand why it is so. It is because our language has remained the same & keeps seducing us into asking the same questions. As long as there is still a verb "to be" that looks as though it functions in the same way as "to eat" and "to drink", as long as we still have the adjectives "identical," "true", "false," "possible", as long as we continue to talk of a river of time & an expanse of space, etc., etc., people will keep stumbling over the same [puzzling] difficulties & star[e] at something that no explanation seems capable of clearing up. (CV 22; translation emended)

In short, philosophy has no end, because bewitchment by language has no end. We must constantly fight against our *Trieb* (drive) to misunderstand (PI §109); our tendency to get entangled in our own rules (PI §125). Of course, the antidote to this is not to eradicate the problematic concepts, as this would neither be possible, nor desirable, but a heightened vigilance regarding the conclusions that someone would want to draw from their use. For example, we should ask ourselves whether the idea of God's having a name, or the word "God" itself being a proper name (as some philosophers of religion and theologians contend), would push us towards drawing the conclusion (as is very widespread in analytic theology) that God is a particular; an entity, that one can, in some sense, "pick out" and address (as one uses a name to pick out and address another human). If so, this would, together with the notion that God is also invisible, motivate endorsement of the "gaseous vertebrate" conception – the view that God is a bodiless superperson (cf. Swinburne), or "the king among existents" (Nielsen). That such moves would not be seen as innocent by Wittgenstein is revealed in this forceful remark

to Drury: “If I thought of God as another being like myself, outside myself, only infinitely more powerful, then I would regard it as my duty to defy him”.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, if, as a believer, one is already alert to the dangers of subscribing to the “gaseous vertebrate” conception, then the notion that God has a name will, perhaps, not tempt one down this path. But the perceived tension with the idea of a transcendent God may nevertheless worry one – it may make one puzzle over the question of how such a God can have a name like a Greek god (of which there were many). In other words, the notion could actively reinforce a problematic, anthropomorphic way of thinking about God, especially in those already prone to adopting such a view.

In this respect, I am also not sure that Heschel’s distinction between a name and a notion is terribly helpful. Someone who has a “notion” of God – i.e., for example, has some understanding of the concept – need not thereby also believe in God. To have a concept and to believe the concept is instantiated are two entirely different things (otherwise the ontological argument would be valid). But this distinction is a purely logical one that tells us nothing about the nature of God or about whether it is appropriate for God to have a name.

What is more, use of the word “Father”, or, indeed “*Adonai*”, seems entirely sufficient to make an “interpersonal” relationship possible; the idea that God also has a proper name – especially one that can virtually never be used – appears not to add to the “I – thou” relation. If anything, in my view, it detracts from it. For the use of relational terms, such as “Father”, put the emphasis on the relationship the believer has to God (e.g. on the believer’s seeing herself as a “child” of God), rather than on the idea that the believer is praying to a particular individual who (perhaps) needs to be distinguished from other individuals. In this respect, it is not surprising that this notion first arose in a context where polytheistic religions dominated the scene.

Suleiman, in his ambitious contribution, takes on the “God of the Philosophers” – a conception of God as a metaphysical being, and of religious belief as essentially assent to propositions about such a being – a picture that he sees as exerting a nefarious influence on attempts to understand what is going on in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious traditions (although his focus is on the latter). Suleiman sees “theology as grammar” as a therapeutic programme designed to free us from such misconceptions.

Overall, I’m very much in sympathy with Suleiman’s project and there are many commonalities with my own conception. I think that Suleiman is right, for example, that the grammar of “God is good” is quite different from the grammar

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<sup>3</sup> Drury, Maurice O’Connor, “Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein,” in: Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 108.

of “my neighbour is good”, as in the latter case one could base one’s judgement on one’s previous interaction with one’s neighbour and his conduct towards one, whereas no empirical interaction with God is possible. I also agree that “God is good” can helpfully be compared to “all human beings are sinners”, as the latter is similarly not based on an empirical generalisation, but serves as a grammatical remark and thus plays the role, as Suleiman puts it, of a “regulative picture”. In other words, it is part of the grammar of “worship,” for instance, that it is in principle impossible to worship enough. There could never be a state of affairs, even in respect of the most perfect worshipper, where God has been praised enough.

Although Suleiman does not spell this out, I presume that he would want to apply a similar line of thought to “God is good” – God is good, not because of any particular action God performs, but in principle. This might imply that it is itself sinful to criticize God on moral grounds (as, for example, Job attempted to do) or to try and exculpate God in the manner of theodacists (as I have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup>). In this respect, it would be interesting to hear more about whether Suleiman’s conception implies that it makes no sense to regard God as a member of our moral community, and, if so, what consequences this has. For example, would we have to conclude that God cannot be characterized as “good” or “bad” in the ordinary human sense *at all*? But if that is indeed the case, how, exactly, should we understand the grammar of “good” in this “divine” context, and why are we nevertheless wanting to employ the same word (as in ordinary human contexts)? Such an investigation would also constitute a potential further area of collaboration where a fruitful Wittgensteinian inter-religious dialogue could be had. For the notion that God is not subject to human standards seems to be another common thread that runs through Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious thought.

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<sup>4</sup> See Schönbaumsfeld, Genia, “On the Very Idea of a Theodicy,” in: Mikel Burley (ed.), *Wittgenstein, Religion and Ethics: New Perspectives from Philosophy and Theology*, 93–112, London: Bloomsbury, 2018.