


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Wittgensteinian blasphemy: what it's like to be a heretic

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Abstract

In this article, I explore a Wittgensteinian approach to blasphemy. While philosophy of religion tends to have very little to say about blasphemy, we can note two key, typically unchallenged, assumptions about it. First, there is the Assertion from Anywhere Assumption: whether one can successfully blaspheme is entirely independent of one's religious views, commitments, or way of life. Second, there is the Act of Communication Assumption: blasphemy is essentially an act of assertion. I contend that a Wittgensteinian approach rejects both assumptions and, thus, reorients our conception of blasphemy. Take two characteristically Wittgensteinian claims. First, religious statements/beliefs have a different 'grammar' than empirical propositions. Second (and relatedly), holding religious beliefs necessarily connects with how one lives. Wittgensteinian blasphemy rejects the Assertion from Anywhere Assumption: to blaspheme, one must be in or have been in the religious framework one blasphemes. Being entirely outside of that context divests one's blasphemy from its proper content. Second, Wittgensteinian blasphemy rejects the Act of Communication Assumption: if religious belief is centrally a form of life, then blasphemy must be lived out as well. Wittgensteinian blasphemy is less about the utterances one makes and more about how one's life intersects (or fails to intersect) with religiosity.

Keywords: Blasphemy; Wittgenstein; religious language; religious belief; heresy

The title of this article might appear provocative. Am I claiming that Wittgensteinian thought is blasphemous? (If I were, would a Wittgensteinian view that as a condemnation or congratulation?) Although this may be true, this is not the meaning of the title. Instead, I wish to explore how a Wittgensteinian approach to religious language, belief, and discourse *might* understand blasphemy. The 'might' in the previous sentence needs underscoring: given that there's a wide variety of how Wittgenstein's thought should or could be used to reflect on religious language and belief – especially by self-identifying Wittgensteinians themselves – I don't claim to offer *the* correct way to think about blasphemy on a Wittgensteinian approach. Let me add another proviso: I'm not assuming that any Wittgensteinian approach is correct or even plausible. My aim is purely exploratory. Let me say why.

There's been relatively little talk of blasphemy in the philosophical literature.¹ This alone gives one, in my view, a good reason to think more about it. But, what little there is makes a couple of central assumptions about blasphemy. First, whatever it is, whatever its moral status may be, etc., it's assumed that blasphemy is, essentially, a

communicative – primarily linguistic – act. That is, the philosophers in question take for granted that paradigmatic acts of blasphemy are constituted by utterances or non-verbal acts or gestures which are meant to communicate some content. Second, it's assumed that one's location with respect to a religious tradition, faith, discourse, etc. is irrelevant to either the possibility of blaspheming or its nature. These seem to me to be assumptions one might want to investigate, and I think that, in the course of reflection on Wittgensteinian approaches to religious language, we can see how they may be rejected. Whether either assumption is correct, whether one *should* reject them, or whether a Wittgensteinian approach may give us a better understanding, are all interesting questions that I shall *not* pursue. Instead, I want simply to investigate these assumptions in light of what I think may be a different kind of approach to blasphemy, one inspired by Wittgensteinian work in philosophy of religion more broadly. One might, in Wittgensteinian-speak, call this article an exploration of the *grammar* of blasphemy.

One last proviso: I limit my even tentative conclusion about the contours and prospects of Wittgensteinian blasphemy to the Western theistic traditions in general, and perhaps even Christianity more specifically. Attempting to give an account of blasphemy *simpliciter* goes beyond the scope and space constraints of this article. The limitations implied by this proviso make the claims that follow less ambitious. But, given the provisos above, I don't think my article needs to be quite so ambitious as to aim for conclusions about blasphemy full stop. One might think of what follows as a sketch of or a prolegomenon to a fuller account of Wittgensteinian blasphemy *tout court*. It could well be that non-Western religious traditions fit the sketch herein, but they could radically diverge from it if one is working with a different grammar of blasphemy from the one with which the next section begins.

Blasphemy

First, let's look at what some philosophers tend to take for granted about blasphemy. This will give us a baseline on the philosophical understanding of the term so far. Let's take the (philosophical) *locus classicus* on blasphemy from Aquinas's analysis.

On the face of it, Aquinas offers a disjunctive account of blasphemy: it either attributes something false to God or rejects something true of God (*Summa Theologia* II.2.13.1). That is, one blasphemes (against God) when one affirms something false of God or denies something true of God.² Aquinas also notes that blasphemy may occur in two ways: purely in the intellect or in one's affections as well. The first sort of blasphemy remains only in the thought of the blasphemer and, thus, is called blasphemy of the heart (*blasphemia cordis*). In the second case, though, one's affections cause the 'inner' blasphemy to manifest in outward speech or blasphemy of the mouth (*blasphemia oris*).

It's helpful, at this point, to see Aquinas's account of blasphemy in light of other related terms. One commits *heresy* when one claims to be of the faith and yet does not assent to the true, legitimate dogmas, but rather some false doctrine (*ST* II.2.11.1). Similarly, one *apostatizes* when one remains in the faith but 'backslides' (*retrocessionem*) (*ST* II.2.12.1). One may 'backslide' from the vows one takes into a religious life. Or one may backslide in one's mind by rejecting God's commandments. In these cases, apostasy requires only a 'limited' backsliding: against one's religious order/life or against God's commandments in one's mind. A more extreme version or mode of apostasy is when one turns from God entirely (*apostasia perfidiae*). This is 'simple' or 'absolute' apostasy. One thing we must note right away: only those of or in the faith can apostatize or commit heresy, whereas blasphemy applies to *any* improper utterance about God, no matter one's relation to the faith. Crucially, for Aquinas, both heresy and apostasy – but *not* blasphemy – are species of unbelief. They are variants of a *believer's* improper endorsing/denying or

acting. At best, blasphemy in words (*blasphemia oris*) is set against the *confession* of the faith but not *belief*.

Thus, for Aquinas, one's location relative to the faith is necessary to commit heresy and apostasy, but it's unnecessary for blaspheming. It appears that blasphemy can occur from a non-religious context – one need not have any connection to any religious faith to blaspheme. All that's required, it seems, is that one make an utterance of the form, 'God is *F*' where *F* picks out something false about God.³ Call this the Assertion from Anywhere Assumption (AAA).

Also note that, on Aquinas's view, blasphemy has some necessary communicative function. Verbal blasphemy is some false utterance about God in words, but even blasphemy of the heart serves as some *internal communication* of some false statement about God to *one-self*. One can blaspheme to oneself in one's heart.⁴ On this approach, we see that blasphemy is essentially a communicative act – even if no literal words are uttered aloud. Call this the Act of Communication Assumption (ACA).⁵

Both the ACA and AAA seem to be taken for granted in the sparse philosophical discussion on blasphemy. Meghan Sullivan endorses the following principle: 'Blasphemy: Necessarily, it is a sin to make a false assertion about God' (Sullivan (2012), 160). Blasphemy, insofar as it is a 'false assertion about God', grants the ACA and, insofar as *any* such assertion is *necessarily* a sin, adopts AAA as well. Just to emphasize the ACA, Sullivan describes blasphemy and heresy as 'distinctively *linguistic sins*'; the former necessarily misuses a divine name and the latter rejects any 'canonical teaching of one's faith' (*ibid.*, 160). Heresy, but not blasphemy, requires asserting a falsehood about *one's own* faith. So, again, we see AAA taken for granted. Similarly, Roy W. Perret accounts for 'blasphemy as an illocutionary act involving a certain complex intention' (Perret (1987), 4). Sullivan and Perret use different approaches to language, Gareth Evans's account of reference and J. L. Austin's notion of an illocutionary act, respectively, but it's apparent that ACA underlies all of the linguistic differences they may accept.

Henk Vroom (2011) offers a broader conception of blasphemy. Beginning with the general notion of blasphemy as 'offending the gods or God' (*ibid.*, 76), Vroom relocates the target of offense. 'The point of blasphemy is not hatred but a rejection of the ideals with which persons identify and for which they live or strive completely' (*ibid.*, 90). Instead of offending 'any transcendent being', blasphemy is 'an insult to believers' (*ibid.*, 81). Instead of offending *God* (or the gods) or attacking some religious doctrine, Vroom's account has the *believer* and/or their *commitments* as the target of blasphemy. Vroom's model certainly shifts from the traditional notion of blasphemy as wronging God or the faith, but it doesn't give up the twin assumptions we've highlighted. Though one can certainly offend someone without any literal linguistic act, some kind of *communicative or assertoric* act is needed to convey the content to which the offended part reacts. And nothing in Vroom's believer-centric model of blasphemy requires that the offending party have any skin in the religious game, as it were. Thus, Vroom's non-traditional model of blasphemy still takes ACA and AAA for granted.

So, I propose that, details outside, we can see that (extant) philosophical accounts of blasphemy presuppose ACA and AAA. Call this the Standard Model (of blasphemy). However, I don't think one *need* to do so. And, as we'll briefly explore at the end of this article, rejecting them gives us a very different picture of blasphemy than on the Standard Model. As I'll argue in the final section, Wittgensteinian considerations give us the tools to reject it. However, before I can make good on that claim, we need to be clearer about how Wittgensteinians might approach religious language/belief.

Wittgensteinians on religious language and belief

As one might expect, there's nothing even approaching a consensus about what a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion, in general, or religious language, in particular, should look like. What this section aims to do is sketch *some* ways that *some* Wittgensteinians understand religious language so as to give us a basis to think about blasphemy in the next section. More exactly, I want to highlight two characteristically Wittgensteinian views about religious language – ones that I think will bear directly and interestingly on assuming the Standard Model.

The Big Negative Claim

One general characteristically Wittgensteinian commitment about religious language is what I'll call the Big Negative Claim. This claim asserts that there is an important gap, rift, or non-identity between the *kind* of statements we find in religious discourse and the *kind* of statements we see in non-religious discourse – most especially in language about the empirical, spatiotemporal world. Consider the following passages from key Wittgensteinians:

- 'God exists' is not a statement of fact. You might say also that it is not in the indicative mood. It is a confession – or expression – of faith. This is recognized in some way when people say that God's existence is 'necessary existence', as opposed to the 'contingency' of what exists as a matter of fact; and when they say that to doubt God's existence is a sin, as opposed to a mistake about the facts. (Rhees (2003), 132)
- Philosophers who say that praying to God makes sense only if it is presupposed that God exists seem to be offering the following account. There is the practice of talking to people and making requests of them and the rationality of this practice is not in question. Particular instantiations of the practices may be criticized on the ground, for example, that the person addressed does not exist, is in no position to hear what is said, or in no position to fulfil the request. Praying is a particular instantiation of this practice and can, therefore, be treated in a similar way . . . 'Making requests of *x*', that is, is not a function which retains the same sense whether 'God' or some name or description of a human being is substituted for '*x*'. (Winch (1977), 206–207)
- When God's existence is construed as a matter of fact, it is taken for granted that the concept of God is at home within the conceptual framework of the reality of the physical world. It is as if we said, 'We know where the assertion of God's existence belongs, we understand what kind of assertion it is, all we need do is determine its truth or falsity'. But to ask a question about the reality of God is to ask a question about a kind of reality, not about the reality of this or that, in much the same way as asking a question about the reality of physical objects is not to ask about the reality of this or that physical object. (Phillips (1963), 345)⁶

I take it that these help us get some kind of grasp on what I'm calling the Big Negative Claim. However, it's not clear what the *positive* takeaway from the Big Negative Claim should be – that is, we can easily see what the Wittgensteinian may *deny*, but it's far from clear what they *affirm*. Several possible candidates for views which can underpin or explain the understanding of religious language at the heart of the Big Negative Claim have been proposed.⁷ Since this article isn't about how to best understand either Wittgenstein or Wittgensteinians on religious language, I'm not going to give a rigorous defence of my reading of the Wittgensteinian Big Negative Claim. Instead, I'll describe the

view I prefer, cite a few key passages from major Wittgensteinians that seem to fit with it, and look at what this view has to say about religious language.

I propose that we can understand the Big Negative Claim as an endorsement or assumption of (what I'll call) conceptual relativism. According to conceptual relativism,⁸

the conceptual framework we use is not simply dictated to us by reality or experience; in adopting or constructing such frameworks there are different options which cannot be assessed as more or less rational from a neutral bird's eye view . . . Empirical statements are verified or falsified by the way things are, which is by and large independent of how we say they are. Their truth value is unaffected by our linguistic conventions. At the same time, what empirical statements we can meaningfully make in the first place depends on our concepts, and these in turn depend on our cognitive habits or linguistic conventions. (Glock (2007), 381)

Applying conceptual relativism to religious statements means that religious statements can be truth-apt (contra religious non-cognitivism) and true independently of our cultural or social commitments (contra alethic relativism). What's relative, then, is the proper *meaning, sense, or understanding* of a concept or term. On this view, 'God' doesn't have the same meaning in a religious context as it does in a non-religious context. (Also, the term *can/will* mean different things in different religious contexts as well.) Conceptual relativism easily explains the Big Negative Claim: religious statements differ fundamentally from empirical statements because, though they may use the same terms, the *meanings* involved mean different things in those statements, due to the different contexts which give them their sense. That is, their grammars fundamentally differ.

Conceptual relativism, to my mind, is the most natural way to understand the Big Negative Claim. We find this view frequently in Wittgensteinian thought about religious belief, language, and discourse. Consider a few examples:

- Our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use. The concepts we have settle for us the form of the experience we have of the world . . . there is no way of getting outside the concepts in terms of which we think of the world . . . The world is for us what is presented through those concepts. (Winch (1990), 15)
- [H]ow a term refers has to be understood in the light of its *actual* application with its surrounding context in the lives of its users . . . Notice that I am *not* saying the 'existence' of what is spoken of simply consists in the fact that people talk a certain way . . . the 'existence' of whatever it is amounts to is expressed (shows itself) in the way people apply the language they speak. (Winch (1977), 200; emphasis original)
- [T]he criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself. (Phillips (1963), 346; emphasis original)
- [Wittgenstein] wishes us to see rather, that logic – the *difference between sense and non-sense* – is learnt, when, through taking part in a social life, we come to speak a language. Logic is to be found not 'outside' language but only within the various language games themselves. This implies . . . that the sense of any language game cannot itself be questioned; for one could do so only on the assumption which Wittgenstein rejects, that logic does lie 'outside' it. (Phillips (1986), 20; emphasis added)
- [B]y all means say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. *But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place.* We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in this religious context, what speaking

of ‘reference’, ‘object’, ‘existence’, and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms. (Phillips (1995), 138; emphasis original)

In these rich comments, we see the relativity of meaning and sense to particular contexts. What a term means or what sense a concept has is determined by different conceptual frameworks.

If I’m right about the connection between the Big Negative Claim and conceptual relativism, we have a crucial implication for religious language. Utterances of a religious term (e.g. ‘God’) or a religious statement (e.g. ‘God is *F*’) can mean fundamentally different things when uttered by different people due to those terms or statements being embedded in different conceptual frameworks. For instance, when the Christian utters ‘God is providential’, this statement and its constitutive terms (‘God’, ‘providence’, and maybe even ‘is’) have *different senses* than when uttered by an ancient Stoic. Though it appears as if they are uttering the same statement, with the same concepts, we can’t take this for granted at all – the real work is trying to grasp how those concepts have their meaning *within their natural framework*. That is, we need to do the ‘grammatical’ work on their meaning, relative to their conceptual framework, before we can evaluate their statements for consistency, truth/falsehood, or even rationality.⁹ Since the same term may have different ‘homes’ in different contexts, we can’t easily assume that the same term has the same sense in any given utterance. The Big Negative Claim amounts to the claim that religious statements and non-religious statements have different characteristic grammars, where we can understand ‘grammar’ in light of conceptual frameworks and their differences in terms of conceptual relativism. Thus, we find Peter Winch:

To say that expressions are used in accordance with different grammars is to say, among other things, that the kind of consideration which would count for or against one use would not do so in the case of the other . . . Thus the grammar of the function ‘x loves his children’ is altered when ‘my brother’ or ‘God’ respectively are substituted for ‘x’. (Winch (1977), 210–211)

Religious belief, grammar, and ways of life

Another characteristically Wittgensteinian claim involves rejecting what D. Z. Phillips terms ‘realism’. On Phillips’s usage, [t]he realist admits that faith, believing, has consequences which constitute the commitments which make up living religiously, but he insists . . . that “The belief is distinct from the commitment which may follow it, and is the justification for it” (Phillips (1994), 33). Alternatively, the theological realist accepts that belief in God ‘is logically independent of any role it plays in the religious life’ (*ibid.*, 49). In other words, theological realism is the view that religious belief and religious actions, attitudes, etc. are both distinct and separable. It is one thing to have the belief ‘God exists’ (qua purely descriptive propositional attitude merely encoded into one’s mental states) and quite another to *act, feel*, etc. in ways that stem from and are necessarily connected to that belief.¹⁰ Phillips’s rejection of realism, thus, is to accept that belief in God is *dependent* on the role it plays in one’s life and/or that a religious belief is *indistinct* from its consequences in ‘living religiously’. Phillips refers to these consequences in a religious way of life as the ‘fruits’ of belief – so, we can understand Phillipsian non-realism as the view that religious belief and its fruits are neither separate nor distinct.¹¹ This, for Phillips, is part of the grammar of belief.

Something like Phillips’s non-realism is a persistent point of emphasis in much Wittgensteinian work on philosophy of religion. Again, consider a few telling passages:

- Would a belief that [God] exists, if it were completely non-affective, really be a belief that he exists? Would it be anything at all? What is the 'form of life' into which it would enter? What difference would it make whether anyone did or did not have this belief? So many philosophers who discuss these matters assume that the first and great question is to decide whether God exists: there will be time enough later to determine how one should regard him. I think, on the contrary, that a 'belief that God exists', if it was logically independent of any and all ways of regarding him, would be of no interest, not even to God. (Malcolm (1964), 107–108; emphasis added)
- To think in that religious way is to have a certain view of human life; I do not think there is any thought about 'the world' apart from that. But that way of thinking belongs with a way of speaking – not just with a vocabulary but to a way of using that vocabulary – and this was learned in what I am calling the 'theology'. (Rhees (2003), 126)
- [C]riteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life (Winch (1990), 100)
- [I]n order to understand the sense of these doctrines (their 'relation to reality') we need to understand their application. This application takes place in contexts such as those of prayer and worship within which language is used according to a certain grammar. (Winch (1977), 203)
- To no longer believe in God is not to disbelieve one thing among many of the same kind, but to see no sense in *anything* of that kind. What has become meaningless is not some feature of a form of life, but a form of life as such. (Phillips (1970b), 46; emphasis original)
- Wittgenstein is stressing the grammar of belief in this context. He is bringing out what 'recognition of a belief' amounts to here. It does not involve the weighing of evidence or reasoning to a conclusion. What it does involve is seeing how the *belief regulates a person's life*. (Phillips (1970b), 89; emphasis added)
- To imagine a ritual is to imagine it in a form of life. (Phillips (1986), 34)
- [R]eligious beliefs cannot be understood at all unless their relation to other forms of life is taken into account. (Phillips (1994), 69)
- [B]elief and non-belief do not seem to be opposite opinions within a common system of belief. Coming to believe seems to be a *change of direction*, rather than a change of opinion. (*ibid.*, 106; emphasis added)

Let's take some stock here. What non-realism implies, amongst other things, is that religious belief is connected with a religious form or way of life. One's religious beliefs *necessarily* inform and scaffold what one does, how one feels, one's worldview, etc.; in short, a significant segment of one's form of life as whole.¹²

This means that when one makes religious utterances, stemming from one's genuine religious commitments, we can't separate these from the rest of one's life. One must *live out* one's religious beliefs and, thus, one's religious claims. A religious utterance that has no manifestation in one's life implies a lack of actual belief and, thus, has no real sense or meaning to it.

Here, one might naturally ask for the Wittgensteinian non-realist to keep going. If non-realism consists only in the view that religious beliefs are necessarily bound up with a way of life, then it doesn't really say all that much. How exactly are ways of life and religious beliefs (utterances) connected – what aspects of a person's way of life bear on their religious beliefs? And is this non-realism something specific to religions – is there some special sort of relation between religious beliefs and ways of life, a relation not enjoyed by non-religious beliefs and living?¹³ While the questions are central to a fuller grasp of a

Wittgensteinian approach to religious belief, utterances, and ways of life, it's important to note that they cannot be addressed adequately here.

These questions get at the heart of the entire Wittgensteinian picture of how language, beliefs, communities, and forms of life connected to religiosity on the whole.¹⁴ To get specific answers about these connections and how they differ from religious to non-religious contexts would require a text on the whole of the Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy of religion. Such a text goes beyond the capacity of the current article in terms of both its scope and its aim. Instead, we'll have to take Wittgensteinian non-realism as more general and vaguer than we'd prefer if we are to do the work with it that this article requires.

These two central Wittgensteinian claims – conceptual relativism about different 'grammars' and the connection between religious beliefs and one's form of life – give us the tools to rethink blasphemy and, I shall argue, reject the Standard Model in the philosophical literature we discussed in the first section. Let's move to that task now.

Wittgensteinian blasphemy

In an early, classic work, Phillips quotes Camus: 'every blasphemy is, ultimately, a participation in holiness' (Phillips (1963), 350). This may seem puzzling: how can blasphemy participate in holiness? Doesn't blasphemy entail the rejection or denigration of holiness? How, then, can it 'participate' in it? And why would a *Wittgensteinian* endorse this claim, regardless? How could Phillips defend this puzzling claim? What grounds might be offered for it? I'll show, below, how Phillips can utilize the two main Wittgensteinian theses from the previous section to provide such grounds. Phillips's citation of Camus occurs in the context of discussing the religious rebel. Reflecting on rebellion in light of the Wittgensteinian commitments above can help us get our bearings.¹⁵

Let's lay out Phillips's whole passage about rebellion to get clearer on it, but also to help us transition to his mention of blasphemy.

[M]y thesis is as necessary in explaining unbelief as it is in explaining belief. It is because many have seen religion for what it is that they have thought it important to rebel against it. The rebel sees what religion is and rejects it. What can this 'seeing' be? Obviously, he does not see the point of religion as the believer does, since for the believer seeing the point of religion is believing. Nevertheless, the rebel has knelt in the church even if he has not prayed. He has taken the sacrament of Communion even if he has not communed. He knows the story from the inside, but it is not a story that captivates him. Nevertheless, he can see what religion is supposed to do and what it is supposed to be. At times we stand afar off saying, 'I wish I could be like that'. We are not like that, but we know what it must be like. The rebel stands on the threshold of religion seeing what it must be like, but saying, 'I do not want to be like that. I rebel against it all'. (Phillips (1963), 350)

One form that 'unbelief' takes is rebellion. Crucially, for Phillips, the rebel is not just *anyone* who rejects religious belief. Rather, they have to 'see' religion for what it is. Recall a key point from the earlier subsection on religious belief, grammar, and ways of life: for the Wittgensteinian, one has belief in God *only insofar* as that belief lives out in one's life. One can't believe in God without that belief informing the whole of one's way of life, worldview, or what have you. Phillips's point about the rebel merely applies this to *unbelief*. Or, really, when we talk of the rebel we mean *dis-belief* – belief set *against* religion – rather than mere *lack of belief*. If the rebel genuinely disbelieves, then they must live out their disbelief. Following the same Wittgensteinian line that religious belief must occur within a way of life, if the rebel's disbelief fails to manifest in their way of life, then

they will not *really* disbelieve. Here, we see how Phillips can use the second thesis about religious belief and its affective/practical role in one's way of life can be applied to religious dis-belief. This will set up our claims about the rebel insofar as the rebel might be taken as a paradigmatic example of a dis-believer.

Also, recall how the Wittgensteinian endorses the Big Negative Claim: the sense of religious statements is different from those of non-religious statements and have their 'home' in different conceptual frameworks. This is why the rebel must have 'knelt', taken Communion, and so on. The rebel must be or have been *inside* the faith against which they rebel. This seems puzzling: why must all rebellion stem from one who's been 'inside'? But note: if the rebel was never inside of the faith that they reject, then how could their rebellion *mean* what it's supposed to mean? How could it have the *sense* it is meant? The rebel must get the *grammar* right for the rebellion to make (the right) *sense*. To reject *the faith*, the rebel must have the right concept to refuse. Otherwise, the rebel won't reject *the faith* but, instead, some alternative, non-genuine version. One may utter the right words, but the Wittgensteinian would say that, to have the *sense* that the rebel intends, they must be able to speak the language of the faith they reject. One must grasp the faith *from the inside* to grasp the sense of the religion that the rebel rejects. At this point, we see the role that the Big Negative Claim can play in supporting Phillips's puzzling claim about the rebel. Without grasping the religious framework 'from the inside', the rebel's rebellion is idle and, in a way, meaningless. To get the grammar of their rebellion 'right', the rebel must have some kind of 'insider' view of the religious 'story' against which they rebel.

So, not just anyone can rebel: the rebel must have been in the inside of the faith for their words to have the right sense and the rebel's life must reflect their rebellion. At the very least, they must know what it's like to be inside the faith they attempt to blaspheme. Otherwise, their rebellion isn't really *rebellion*, but they are playing at rebelling. Just as Phillips (1970b, 97) distinguishes between 'genuine' and 'sham worship', where the former but not the latter engages one's way of life, there will be 'genuine' and 'sham' rebellion. It may be 'impossible to distinguish' between them, given that the utterances can be identical, but what makes rebellion 'genuine' is its place in one's life and the framework in which one's rebellious utterances have their 'home'.

Accordingly, use of the central Wittgensteinian theses from the previous section can offer grounds for Phillips's initially baffling claim that the rebel, somehow, participates in 'holiness'. If genuine rebellion is to have the proper sense or meaning, the rebel must have the appropriate inside grasp of the religious tradition that serves as the target of their rebellion. But such a grasp requires a grasp of the way of life that's meant to be denied or rejected. Even if the rebel isn't holy, they must have an insider perspective of the holiness against which they rebel.

Thinking about 'genuine' rebellion in these ways, I suggest, helps us grasp how one might think of Wittgensteinian blasphemy. In the first section, we discussed two central assumptions which constitute the Standard Model of blasphemy. One of these, AAA, states that one can blaspheme no matter one's position with respect to the faith in question. All it takes to blaspheme is to utter something like 'God is *F*' where God is *not F* (or 'God is *not F*' where God is *F*). Yet our discussion of the religious rebel, as informed by Wittgensteinian reflections on conceptual relativity, can resist this assumption. The blasphemer who has never been 'inside' the faith, like the 'sham' rebel, cannot *mean* what they intend by their allegedly blasphemous utterance. What we have, in this case, is *sham blasphemy*. It looks indistinguishable from 'genuine' blasphemy, but it must fail in its task. The blasphemer fails to grasp the grammar of their intended religious target and, as such, the blasphemy is genuinely senseless. For their blasphemy to have the meaning it must, qua blasphemy, their concepts must have the right meaning *as informed by the*

conceptual framework they mean to offend, deny, or disrespect. The believer may utter ‘God is *F*’ and the blasphemer assert ‘God is *not F*’. Unless they both mean the same thing by ‘God’ and ‘*F*’ (and maybe ‘is’), then they will talk past one another. The blasphemer won’t disrespect the God of that believer whom they mean to disparage. For their concepts to have the same sense, which is necessary for the blasphemer to attack *this* religious belief, they must have some root in the same conceptual framework. Thus, the blasphemer must be in or have been in that framework in order for their disrespect to attach to *it*. To modify a phrase of Phillips’s (1970a, 79), the sham blasphemer who tries to offend a religious picture is not contradicting the believer. Contra AAA, it matters where one is or has been located, vis-à-vis the faith, for ‘genuine’ versus ‘sham’ blasphemy.

The blasphemer, then, is a convert. They must come from the faith which they deny. Yet, why move from the thesis that one must be ‘inside’ a faith to the claim that one must be a *convert*? Consider how Phillips construes how one leaves a faith:

In what way can religious pictures lose their hold on people’s lives? . . . A religious picture loses its hold on a person’s life because a rival picture wins his allegiance. The picture of the Last Judgement may lose its hold on a person because he has been won over by a rival secular picture. The other picture is a rival, not because it shows that the original picture is a mistake, but because if it is operative in a person’s life, the very character of its claims excludes the religious picture. (Phillips (1970a), 73–74)

But how does this give us a claim about a convert? Again, a passage from Phillips can help us.

[C]onsider what might happen when someone gives an account of religious beliefs in such circumstances, that is, when his attention has been won by a rival picture or when the picture has never been anything other than an empty convention in his life. In each case, in one sense, the person remains familiar with the religious belief, but in another sense, the belief is meaningless for him. (*ibid.*, 74)

Since moving from a religious way of life to a non-religious one is a conversion – literally a *conversio*, a turning around of the whole self – the blasphemer will have gone from a religious way of life to one where that ‘belief is meaningless’ for them. ‘To reject religion, or to come to God, is . . . to reject or embrace a whole way of looking at things. That is why we have a word like conversion to characterise coming to believe. The convert turns around, comes to things from a new direction’ (Phillips (1988), 80). The blasphemer is one who has turned around, turned *from* the religious picture which had previously captivated them. Genuine blasphemy, on the Wittgensteinian model, requires a certain location of the blasphemer, relative to the religion they reject. Given the two central Wittgensteinian theses of the previous section in conjunction with Phillips’s claims about how one comes to leave a religious faith or way of life (= that picture’s losing its hold on one), we can see what kinds of grounds Phillips might adduce in support of the thesis that ‘genuine’ blasphemy comes from the convert – that is, the genuine rebel.

From this point, two perhaps surprising implications follow. First, if the blasphemer (somehow) remains in the faith, then they are the heretic. Recall that the heretic, at least on Aquinas’s view, is one who, *from inside the faith*, fails to assent to some true dogma (or assents to a false one). Thus, it’s hard to see how the ‘inner’ blasphemer will differ from the heretic. Second, if the blasphemer has left the faith (if the religious picture has no grasp on them), then they will be the apostate – specifically the perfidious apostate. Recall that the perfidious apostate is one who has turned from God (the faith) entirely. Hence, the ‘external’ blasphemer – in the richer, Wittgensteinian sense we

sketched above – will just *be* the perfidious apostate. The lines among the blasphemer, heretic, and apostate, according to the picture we're exploring, are much blurrier – and maybe even non-existent in certain places – than we see with the Standard Model.

The other central assumption, ACA, maintains that the aim of blasphemy is assertion – namely, that blasphemy is *constitutively* a communicative act. However, as we see with rebellion, blasphemy – if it is to be genuine – cannot *consist* in a mere utterance. Blasphemies may involve utterances, no one denies this, but as with any belief, it must connect with one's whole way of life. One's blaspheming, thus, cannot be separated from *living blasphemously*, just as religious belief cannot be separate from religious living. Thus Wittgensteinian blasphemy rejects ACA: even if blasphemy does assert, it's more than just mere assertion – the blasphemous assertion doesn't *constitute* blasphemy or blaspheming. To grasp fully the grammar of that which one blasphemes, one must see how it informs one's life. In Aquinas's terms, *blasphemia cordis* always underlies *blasphemia oris*, and the former is necessary to give the latter its sense.

What 'living blasphemously' means, naturally, will depend on that which one blasphemes. The blasphemer to some version of Christianity will be fundamentally different from the blasphemer of a Wiccan tradition, Theravada Buddhism, or what have you. For the sake of space and a clearer connection with the work of the Wittgensteinians discussed here, let's focus on the blasphemer of Christianity. Phillips often distils much of the grammar of Christian love as self-renunciation.¹⁶ Taking Phillips's own terms, then, gives us a model of blasphemy – namely, disrespect of or rebellion against Christian love and self-renunciation – as a thorough-going self-centredness. Blasphemy goes beyond uttering something inconsistent with a loving God; it's *living out* self-love, set *against* love of God and others. Living blasphemously is living pridefully.¹⁷ The blasphemer is the fool who says *in their heart* that there is no God – but note that what one says in one's heart will work itself out in the rest of one's life.

This implication might suggest a worry to the Wittgensteinian model of blasphemy here.¹⁸ If blasphemy is living, say, pridefully, then aren't we all blasphemers at some point? No one is free from sin, after all (excepting, perhaps, some extraordinary persons to whom some religious traditions are committed), so does our sometimes-prideful living entail that we all blaspheme? I have two thoughts about this question. First, if we all intermittently blaspheme, is that so counterintuitive or problematic? Would such an implication make Wittgensteinian blasphemy something to reject on its account? A positive answer to this isn't quite so obvious to me. Second, one might distinguish between *acts* of blasphemy and *being* a blasphemer – namely, living a blasphemous *way of life*. On the former, one commits isolated instances of blasphemy without being blasphemous *on the whole*. However, if one's way of life is prideful, then one *is* blasphemous (rather than simply doing blasphemous things). We can separate blasphemy as a thing one (on occasion) *does* from a way that one *is*. With this distinction in hand, it will probably turn out that, though we might all blaspheme at some point or other, not all people are *blasphemers*.

One might even go further: perhaps overt assertion isn't even *necessary* for blaspheming. If one's life *constitutes* an inappropriate worship of one's own excellence, then one lives out blasphemy even if one never utters anything. It may be possible to live out one's *blasphemia cordis* while never actually committing a *blasphemia oris*.

Notice another shift from the Standard Model. On it, whether *S* blasphemes by uttering 'God is *F*' supervenes on the facts about God's (non-)being *F*. So long as God is not *F*, *S* blasphemes. Whether *S* is in any epistemic position to grasp that God is or isn't *F* has no bearing on the facts about *S*'s putative blasphemous utterance. This might seem odd: suppose that Pastafarianism is true and that God is, in fact, a large, flying spaghetti monster, despite (supposing) that there is no epistemic support for this fact. Then any non-Pastafarian

(e.g. Christian, Wiccan, Buddhist, Stoic, etc.) will *by supposition* necessarily blaspheme in all their religious utterances. On the model sketched here, though, the shift is from blasphemy qua utterance of some false proposition to blasphemy qua living falsely with respect to a faith. This underscores Phillips's realism: faith is less about one's attitude towards a true proposition and more about *being true* to a religious tradition. Now, does this mean that there's no fact of the matter about whether a person blasphemes in the Wittgensteinian way, or whether all blasphemy is simply relative to a religious tradition's conception of what a religiously appropriate way of life must be like? The account offered can stay neutral on this question, and for good reason: the question at issue depends on much broader and larger questions about the truth of a given religious tradition. Such questions get into much-debated topics concerning Wittgenstein(ianism) and (epistemic or alethic) relativism.¹⁹ While this issue is pressing for accounts wanting to address the epistemic (or otherwise normatively-laden) questions about the *propriety* of blasphemy, my topic concerns, instead, what blasphemy is like. What conditions, if any, are relevant to the *truth* of any allegations of blasphemy, while certainly interesting, are beyond the scope of my aims here.

This last possibility opens up a radically different picture of the blasphemer than on the Standard Model. One can blaspheme by one's life: one's actions, one's attitudes, etc. even if one ostensibly professes religious 'belief'. We know that the Wittgensteinian won't count this 'inauthentic' belief as genuine belief, but our results are more extreme. What's open to us now is a blasphemer who never *says* anything other than correct dogma and who may *appear* as devout as one likes, in certain contexts at least. One may publicly kneel to the cross and blaspheme its very meaning with the rest of one's being. This, on the view we've explored, counts just as much – if not more – as blasphemous as someone simply uttering a statement contradicting some given religious dogma. This sort of blasphemy, though, is invisible to the Standard Model.

Wittgensteinian blasphemy radically disrupts a traditional conception of the blasphemer – at least, if we start with the common(sense?) assumptions in the first section. Given AAA and ACA, namely the Standard Model, the paradigmatic blasphemer is anyone who utters a religious falsehood. However, a different view of the blasphemer emerges from thinking of blasphemy in light of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion: genuine blasphemy comes from the person who's lived in the faith, understands it on its own terms, and lives out their rejection of it. We find, here, a very different picture of blasphemy than in the traditional conception. Rather, it upends the model: the Wittgensteinian picture is one that presents the Standard Model's grammar as confused. Does this mean that the Wittgensteinian model of blasphemy is, relative to the Standard Model, blasphemous *itself*? Perhaps, then, my provocative title says more that it might originally have meant.

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Notes

1. See Sullivan (2012); Perret (1987); Hoffman (1983, 1989); Fisher and Ramsay (2000) and Vroom (2011) for the sparse philosophical literature on blasphemy.
2. We can expand this account, *mutatis mutandis*, by replacing 'God' with any given religious object of worship or devotion. No such substitution, I submit, will change the substance of the analysis.
3. Or, alternatively, one utter 'God is *not F*' where *F* true of God.

4. One calls to mind the fool of the *Psalms* who says *in his heart* that there's no God.
5. Note that ACA entails AAA – if blasphemy is essential a communicative act of the form 'God is F', then the faith/belief of the assertor will not bear on their ability to utter some proposition of that form.
6. There are many places where Phillips appears to be making or at least underscoring the same Big Negative Claim, such as Phillips (1965), 22–23, 60; *Idem* (1970a), 71; *Idem* (1970b), 102; *Idem* (1988), 118; *Idem* (1994), 2; *Idem* (1995), 136.
7. Some (e.g. McGraw (2007), 263; Scott (2010), 508–509) have argued that religious statements are non-cognitivist – i.e. they are not truth-apt and, at bottom, have an expressivist, emotivist, prescriptivist, etc. function. On this view, religious statements don't even attempt to describe *anything*; rather, they merely express one's attitude, manifest one's emotions, prescribe some kind of action (or attitude), predict some plan of action, or what have you. While some Wittgensteinians explicitly defend this view (e.g. Tilghman (1998)), explicit comments by other Wittgensteinians rule this out as the dominant reading (see, e.g. Phillips (1976), ch. 9; *Idem* (1994), ch. 4; *Idem* (1995), 138). Some (e.g. Scott (2000), 183) have read the Big Negative Claim as a commitment to alethic relativism – namely, that statements in different kinds of discourse or conceptual frameworks have different, possibly incompatible, truth-makers. Again, while some Wittgensteinians *sound* as if they endorse alethic relativism (e.g. Phillips (1965), 22; *Idem* (1970a), 71), there other passages which, taken at face value, clearly reject alethic relativism (e.g. Phillips (1994), 8; *Idem* (1995), 138). I'll assume that neither religious non-cognitivism nor alethic relativism provide the most plausible ways to understand the Big Negative Claim.
8. Some (e.g. Baghramian and Carter (2021)) use 'conceptual relativism' very differently. On their usage, but not mine, conceptual relativism denotes a 'form of relativism where ontology, or what exists, rather than ethical and epistemic norms, is relativized to conceptual schemes, scientific paradigms, or categorical frameworks'. I intend the phrase to pick out a relativism *about our concepts* rather than *what exists*, so it's critical to keep these different meanings both distinct and separate.
9. 'There is a genuine place for reasoning for or against various religious doctrines from *a posteriori* grounds. Of course, this kind of justification can take place only within the framework of belief in God' (Malcolm (1964), 109).
10. Thus defined, it's easy to confuse Phillips's usage of realism for other ways that the term is often used. On these other usages, theological realism denotes the view that Divine Reality exists and has whatever features it does independently of human language, thought, or conception, of it. These are very clearly distinct usages of 'realism': the latter is a metaphysical thesis, and the former is a thesis about the nature of religious belief vis-à-vis the rest of one's life as a whole. Phillips could well put his claim as a *grammatical* point about belief rather than a piece of metaphysics.
11. For more on the theoretical underpinning by which Phillips connects belief with its 'fruits' see Burley (2008).
12. Note that, for the expressivist non-cognitivist about religious language, there is no distinction between the belief and the way of life – they are (in some way) identical.
13. I thank an anonymous referee for raising these questions and pushing me to address them more specifically.
14. Take, for instance, Phillips's (1965) landmark work on prayer. For an entire manuscript, Phillips wrestles with the grammar of praying or 'talking to God'. A few points here can show us how difficult and lengthy a task addressing these questions in their specificity is. First, there is the scope of the examination in question:

Difficult those it undoubtedly is, the task facing us is precisely that of trying to reveal the grammar of religious beliefs in relation to the human phenomena out of which they grow . . . one can go far in saying what God *cannot* be if any sense is to be made of religion at all, but to say what *is* meant by belief in God, one must take account of what God means to religious believers . . . [w]e must ask what worshipping an eternal God means in the way of life in which it has its life. (Phillips (1965), 85; emphases original)

To answer questions about the grammar of belief in God is to look at an entire way of life. Second, we must look beyond just an individual's form of life.

[I]f one wants to understand what prayer is, one must refer to the religious community from which prayer derives its intelligibility . . . [T]o ask whether a man is talking to God or not is to ask whether he is praying or not. This is a *religious* question which would be decided by referring to the criteria of prayer operative in the religious community. (It is important here to remember my earlier warning against identifying 'religious community' with any specific religious community.) (*ibid.*, 36–37)

Grasping the grammar of praying, then, requires examining the criteria from a religious community. But note that Phillips's rejection of privileging any community means that we need to look at a range of such communities to see what each of them take to be involved in 'talking to God'. This is what I mean by emphasizing the scope of approaching such questions. Finally, note Phillips's commitment to the diversity of possible answers to questions about the connections among beliefs, practices, forms of life, and communities regarding the grammar of praying: '[i]f one asks why men pray, or what prayer satisfies, it would be foolish to look for *the* answer to these

questions . . . One only has to compare accounts of religious experience to appreciate how diverse they are, and how different are the conceptions of God which underlie them' (*ibid.*, 7; emphasis original). The specificity of the grammar of prayer lies in a diverse, concrete individual form of life, embedded further in a larger community. This, I suggest, is why the specific answers to questions about the relations that hold among religious beliefs, ways of life, utterances, etc. go beyond what this article can attempt to accomplish.

15. Phillips talks of rebellion in several places: (1965, 28), (1976, 7), and (1994, 8, 19).

16. See Phillips (1970a), 52–55.

17. Here I rely on and refer to Augustine's (2002) account of pride as 'the love of one's own excellence' (*De Genesis ad litteram* XIV: 14.18).

18. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

19. For an overview of the debate concerning Wittgenstein's alleged relativism; see Coliva (2010). For an influential defense of Wittgenstein as a relativist, see Boghossian (2006). Coliva's work as well as prominent articles by Williams (2007) and Pritchard (2011) defend non-relativist interpretations of Wittgenstein.

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