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RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

IN WITTENSTEIN AND KAFKA

> You do not believe because you do not follow me.
> (Jesus, in Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief.*)

In what follows I would like to interpret one of Kafka's most intriguing pieces ("On Similes," written around 1922/23, but never published during the author's lifetime), and at the same time point out what seems to me a striking similarity between the ways in which Kafka and the early Wittgenstein thought about religious language. My interest in this paper is confined to investigating how Kafka and Wittgenstein approached the problem of religious statements *qua* "similes," although what is known about both authors points to further significant parallels in their thinking.

Here is Kafka's piece:

ON SIMILES

Many complain that the words of the wise are always only similes, but unusable in everyday life—and that is the only one we have. When the wise man says: "Go beyond," then he does not mean that one should go to the other side, which one could certainly do if the result of going would

be worth it—but he means some legendary beyond, something we do not know, which he himself could not determine any more specifically, and which therefore is of no help to us here. All these similes really want to say only that what cannot be grasped cannot be grasped, and that we knew already. But what we labor on every day are other things.

To this someone said: "Why do you resist? If you would follow the similes you would have become similes yourself, and thus already be free of your daily drudgery."

Someone else said: "I bet this is a simile too."

The first said: "You win."

The second said: "But unfortunately only in the simile."

The first said: "No, in reality; in the simile you lose."[1]

The interpretation of the piece has to start with the elucidation of what people complain about when they complain about the words of the wise. The nature of the complaint seems to be exactly the same as that implied in Wittgenstein's criticism of religious language. Wittgenstein, in his "Lecture on Ethics" (1929/30), makes the following remarks on religious (and ethical) language:

Now, I want to impress on you that a certain characteristic misuse of our language runs through *all* ethical and religious expressions. All these expressions *seem*, prima facie, to be just *similes*... For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win, etc., etc... Thus in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for *something*. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense.[2]

[1] "Von den Gleichnissen" in: Franz Kafka, *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, ed. Paul Raabe (Frankfurt a.M., Fischer Verlag, 1969), p. 359. (My translation. The piece has also been translated as "On Parables.")

[2] *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), pp. 9-10.

What is at issue here is the possibility or impossibility of understanding those statements in religious texts which seem to be descriptions of a transcendent world. Wittgenstein maintains in the above passage that nobody can either believe or refuse to believe a religious text, because it is in principle impossible to understand what it says. Religious language seems to inform us about something in an indirect metaphorical way, but upon closer investigation it turns out that it cannot say anything at all. Wittegenstein's reasons for maintaining this can be laid out as follows.

The expressions of religious language seem to be similes, i.e., indirect descriptions of things, because there are obvious difficulties with understanding them in a direct, literal sense. For example, if God "sees" everything, he obviously cannot do the same things human beings are doing when they see, for seeing in this sense involves, among other things, a body, and a body cannot very well be attributed to God. Similarly, there are difficulties with understanding God's actions, God's emotional dispositions, or God's mind. Any of these aspects of His personality seem to be intelligible only in connection with earthly beings, and there are several good reasons why one should hesitate to conceive of God as such a being. The whole notion of God as a human-like being of super-human powers whose grace people try to win, etc., seems to be hopelessly inadequate when scrutinized more closely, and thus it seems to be necessary to abandon the idea that religious language describes transcendent matters in any direct way. The only way out of the above difficulties seems to be to declare the expressions of religious language similes, i.e., indirect descriptions of something which cannot be described directly.[3] Unfortunately for religious lan-

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[3] It is possible that Wittgenstein was influenced in this by certain remarks in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* with which Wittgenstein was familiar. Schopenhauer repeatedly expressed the idea that religious statements convey truth allegorically: "A religion... has only the obligation to be true *sensu allegorico*, since it is destined for the innumerable multitude who, being incapable of investigating and thinking, would never grasp the profoundest and most difficult truths *sensu proprio*. Before the people truth cannot appear naked " (Trans. by E.F.J. Payne, vol. II, p. 166). In this passage Schopenhauer assumes, to be sure, that religious language conveys something indirectly which can also be conveyed directly. Sometimes, however, he seems to conceive of religious language as something entirely without sense: "A symptom of this

guage, however, there are considerable difficulties with this way out as well.

If the expressions of religious language were similes, they would have to stand in the same relation to the transcendent matters they supposedly describe as, e.g., certain anthropomorphic expressions used for the description of machines to the machines they describe. It is possible to describe the security device of a building as if it were a super-human person. One could say such things as "It is behaving very well tonight," or, on account of its electronic eyes, "It sees everybody entering and leaving the building." One can also say that it "admits" or "refuses entrance" to visitors, depending on whether the latter insert proper ID cards into the appropriate slots. The regulating computer of the mechanism can be said to be "startled" when fed with unforseen data. It is clear that in this and similar cases expressions like "seeing," "behaving," "being startled," etc. are not used in a literal sense, but rather metaphorically. A building's security mechanism does not really see, etc., but rather functions in a way which in certain respects is similar to what human beings do when they see, etc. Thus, such expressions as "seeing" can be considered similes when they are used outside the sphere of human activities in connection with which they are developed and normally applied.

What is important here for Wittgenstein's contention is the fact that these metaphorical expressions can be replaced by literal descriptions of what is actually happening in the above mechanism. Instead of saying that it "sees" people entering and leaving one can describe the functioning of photosensitive cells, of impulses transmitted through wires to the regulating computer, etc. In short, one can describe the functioning of the installation by using either anthropomorphic or technical terms, and whenever there are questions about the former, one can have recourse to the latter. It is the possibility of such recourse to non-metaphorical language which Wittgenstein finds lacking in the case of religious language. Thus, while it is clear that God does not see in the way human beings do, it is not clear

allegorical nature of religions is the mysteries, to be found perhaps in every religion, that is, *certain dogmas that cannot even be distinctly conceived*, much less literally true" (ibid. My italics.)

what God does do when he "sees." In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes: "To understand a proposition is to know what is the case if it is true."[4] But we do not know what is said to be the case when it is said that "God sees." It follows that we do not understand a text which says that "God sees everything." It also follows that we cannot understand whatever else is said about God's activities, dispositions, and plans. Once scrutinized in the above analytical manner, all religious texts seem to be without meaning. A text such as the following, to give one example, seems utterly unintelligible:

> And I saw a great white throne and the one seated on it. From behind Him the earth and the heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. But another scroll was opened; it is the scroll of life, and the dead were judged out of those things written in the scrolls according to their deeds. And the sea gave up those dead in it, and death and Hades give up those dead in them, and they were judged individually according to their deeds. And death and Hades were hurled into the lake of fire. This means the second death, the lake of fire. Furthermore, whoever was not found written in the book of life was hurled into the lake of fire.[5]

It is the inevitable failure to translate the statements used in this vision of the Last Judgment (or in any other religious text) into direct descriptions of transcendent events which leads Wittgenstein to the conclusion that the expressions used in religious language are "mere nonsense." And it is this failure which provokes the complaints about the words of the wise mentioned at the beginning of Kafka's "On Similes."

Those who complain about the words of the wise complain about their unintelligibility. When the wise man says: "Go beyond," then clearly he does not mean this in any literal sense—as if he had said: "Go to the other side of this river," or: "Go to another part of the world," or even: "Go beyond your individual, material interests." To "go beyond" in the

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[4] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, new English translation by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinnes (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 4.024.
[5] Revelation to John, 20:11-14.

sense suggested by the wise seems to refer to a realm which lies beyond everything that can be described in language—and thus it does not seem to mean anything at all. The difficulties concerning the determination of the "legendary beyond" are obviously the same as those arising in connection with the description of anything transcendent: the expressions used in pointing to the transcendent seem to be used like expressions used to point to some area of the world, yet it seems clear that the transcendent cannot be anything like an area of the world. (If the transcendent were not radically different from the world one would not know where to draw the line betwen the world and what lies beyond.) Consequently, the words of the wise do not seem to convey anything, they seem to be "useless."

The whole line of thought implied in Wittgenstein's philosophy and alluded to in the first part of Kafka's "On Similes" is challenged by the remark of the first speaker in Kafka's piece. The first speaker's reply to the foregoing complaints is: "why do you resist? If you would follow the similes you would become similes yourself, and thus already be free of your daily drudgery." What this speaker is suggesting, in other words, is to ignore the above difficulties and to *follow* the words of the wise and the visions these words conjure up. That is, the point of the words of the wise is not to describe a transcendent world, but rather to encourage acting or living in a certain way. One can, after all, very well live in such a way *as if* one will be held accountable for one's actions, no matter whether a transcendent world with quasi-authorities and quasi-events is intelligible or not. The point of the words of the wise is *practical* in this sense, not *theoretical*. (It is the sceptic's attention that is caught by the mysteries of the "legendary beyond;" the follower of the words of the wise is concerned with acting here and now.) By living and acting in a certain way the follower of the words of the wise will encourage others to do likewise, that is he will "become a simile himself" by being an example to be emulated by others.

The second speaker, not seeing the (practical) point of the words of the wise, i.e., still thinking that the words of the wise are an attempted metaphorical description of a transcendent world, responds by saying that the first speaker's advice, namely to *follow* the words of the wise, must be a simile itself—which

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is confirmed by the first speaker. What the second speaker has in mind is the idea that the first speaker's advice is of the same sort as the words of the wise; more specifically, that it is as problematic as what the wise men say. For if it is true that the words of the wise are unintelligible, then it seems clear that to speak of following these words is unintelligible, too. (If the notion of a future Judgment is unintelligible, than it seems irrational to prepare oneself for such an event.) To underline his sceptical opinion about the words of the wise the second speaker continues the dialogue by modifying his first characterization of the first speaker's remark. He maintains that he was right in calling that remark a simile "only in the simile," i.e., only from the standpoint of someone who thinks the words of the wise really have a metaphorical meaning. (He assumes that that is what the first speaker and the followers of the words of the wise believe.) For sceptics like the second speaker himself, however, as well as for all who complain about the words of the wise, his first characterization must be invalid, since the idea of a metaphorical meaning of the words of the wise turned out to be an illusion.

At this point the first speaker states that the second speaker was mistaken all along, and mistaken in a much more fundamental way than the second speaker himself ever suspected he could be. Throughout the dialogue the second speaker took it for granted that the difference at issue was the difference between believing that the words of the wise are metaphorical descriptions of transcendent matters on the one hand, and believing that they are "mere nonsense" on the other. The first speaker's final remark reveals that the real difference at issue is between construing the words of the wise as descriptions of transcendent matters at all, whether as successful descriptions or failing ones, and taking them as expressions of a different nature all together. According to the first speaker, as has been indicated earlier, the words of the wise are neither successful nor failing descriptions of a transcendent world, but statements whose significance is entirely practical. To elucidate how these words can be practical without being intelligible descriptions of transcendent matters it will be helpful to compare them with the statues and images of God found in places of worship. It would obviously be wrong-headed to look at such statues and images as attempts to

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picture God,[6] as attempted portraits, as it were, whose likeness could be tested at a future date by an act of eschatological verification. The function of such statues and images is rather to remind, exhort, or awe people who participate in a certain way of life. Similarly, such things as John's vision of the Last Judgement are not scenarios or a panorama of future transcendent happenings, but expressions of how people engaged in a certain way of life conceive of themselves, reminders of the limits of life on earth, etc. The first speaker's final remark, in short, is a criticism of the position of the second speaker and of all those who complian about the unintelligibility of the words of the wise. The first speaker points out by his final remark that all those who find the words of the wise unintelligible expect something from these words which by their nature they cannot give. Those who look at the words of the wise as possible descriptions of a transcendent world commit, according to the first speaker, a category mistake, and the course of the dialogue in Kafka's piece shows that nothing further said by the wise will succeed in making the original words more understandable, unless the above misconception is overcome, and people see what *kind* of words the words of the wise are. Recognition of the category mistake involved in the dialogue of the piece could be called the point of Kafka's "On Similes."

One way of summarizing the view of religious language suggested by Kafka's piece is by saying that religious practice, a religious way of life, is not based on descriptions of a transcendent world, but that a certain way of life is the basis of, or at least as primordial as, certain visions of "another world." Such visions, in other words, are not prior to and necessary for religious practice, but they accompany such practice, or even result from it. This is what Wittgenstein implies in the following remark reported by Waismann:

> Is talking essential for religion? I can easily imagine a religion in which there are no doctrines, in which, therefore, no talking occurs. Obviously, the essence of religion cannot have anything to do with the fact that talking occurs, or rather: if talking occurs, then this is itself part of the

[6] Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. by Cyril Barrett (Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1966), p. 63.

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> religious act, and not a theory. And it does not matter, therefore, whether such words are true, false, or nonsensical.

This accords well with other statements made by Wittgenstein. That a religious or a magical belief is not the foundation of a religious or magical way of life, that such beliefs rather accompany such practices, is a constant theme in Wittgenstein's "Notes on Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*"[8] The idea of the primacy of practice in religion is further linked with Wittgenstein's thought by the fact that Wittgenstein read the Gospels in Tolstoy's version, and that he credited that version with having contributed substantially to saving his life.[9] One of the things which distinguishes Tolstoy's version of the Gospels as well as his comments on them is his insistence on practice as opposed to theological speculation. In *A Confession* Tolstoy writes, e.g.:

> No arguments could convince me of the truth of their faith. Only deeds which showed that they saw a meaning in life making what was so dreadful to me—poverty, sickness, and death—not dreadful to them, could convince me.[10]

It hardly needs mentioning that these words could have in essence been written by Wittgenstein himself. Finally, it might be worthwhile to point out that the primacy of practice is a theme that prevails throughout most of Wittgenstein's philosophical reflections. It found its most notorious expression in Wittgenstein's recommendation to look for the "meaning" of a word not in the form of some entity, but as a use. An area in which the primacy of practice appears most striking, however, is the philosophy of logic and mathematics, and here the primacy of practice seems to be as scandalizing as in religion. According

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[7] Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, ed. B.F. Mc Guinness (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), p. 117. (My translation).
[8] *Synthese, An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* 17 (1967), pp. 233-45.
[9] Letter to Ludwig von Ficker, July 24, 1915, in: Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Briefe an Ludwig von Ficker*, ed. Georg Hentik von Wright and Walter Methlagl (Salzburg, Otto Müller Verlag, 1969), p. 28.
[10] Leo Tolstoy: *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief, and What I Believe*, trans. with an Introduction by A. Maude (London, Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 55.

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to a common understanding the "necessity" which we encounter in logical inferences and mathematical calculations is "absolute," i.e., if one admits that all dogs are mortal, and if one admits that Phido is a dog, then one cannot possibly deny that Phido is mortal. The conclusion follows absolutely according to the "Laws of Thought." Now, most philosophers feel compelled to think about the "Laws of Thought" as something inviolable, as Laws which exist independently of what people actually think and do. Wittgenstein, by contrast, argues throughout his *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*,[11] that the "Laws of Thought" simply reflect what people actually do, that there is no validity of these laws over and above human practice. What I want to suggest here is that Wittgenstein (in this respect like Kafka) confronted most theologians in the same way in which he confronted most of the philosophers of logic and mathematics: that he denied that anything could be made sense of without considering what people actually do.

[11] Ed. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1967), I, 4; I, 10; I, 12; *et al.*