On p.15 of *Death and Immortality* Dewi Zephaniah Phillips states the following:

“If we say our language as such is inadequate to tell us anything about the world beyond the grave, the notion of inadequacy is being misused. Our language is not a poor alternative to other means of communication; it is what constitutes communication ... there can be inadequate use of language but that does not tell us that language itself is inadequate – that makes no sense”.

In this way Phillips signposts his perspective along what has been described as ‘the linguistic turn’ in philosophy, embodied in the Wittgensteinian maxim “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” (at *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.6).

Thus by way of background to a discussion of the book in hand we should at least introduce the Wittgensteinian framework of reference to which Phillips largely adheres in his analysis of the subject matter.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein rejects essentialism in understanding language and introduces the idea of meaning as use. When seeking to understand a linguistic practice ‘words’ are seen as analogous to tools and meaning is given by a word’s use in a given context.
Such contexts are what Wittgenstein described as **Language Games**, i.e., the pattern of activities and practices associated with some particular family of linguistic expressions. These games are **basic** – they are simply ‘**forms of life**’.

From this perspective we can clearly contrast a **scientific** language game with a **religious** language game – they do different things.

In this context one of the jobs of philosophy is to **elucidate** how what can be described as the ‘**depth grammar**’ of religious language differs from that of physical object language – even if on the surface they look similar. According to Wittgensteinians they both have a distinct and specific grammar of meaning which may not be **prima facie** apparent.

Wittgenstein critically saw religious forms of expression as ‘**non-referential**’ in character and based on faith. Scientific language games by contrast can be seen as referential in character and based on evidence.

Peter Winch has pointed out that religious ideas can in this sense best be understood by uncovering the **motivations and ideas** of people in religious practice. This is more like applying one’s knowledge of a language in order to understand a **conversation** rather than like applying of the laws of **mechanics** to understand the workings of a watch.

As DZ Phillip’s former tutor Rush Rhees says in **Without Answers**: “God exists’ is **not a statement of fact**. You might say it is not in the indicative mood. It is rather a confession – or expression – of faith”.

Phillips adds, “anything we can resolve experimentally is not a **religious** question”.

Similarly, religious ‘pictures’ do not depict ‘things’ in the way an ordinary picture does. Phillips points out that people who say that ‘God is in heaven’ would treat as trivial the question why astronauts had not yet caught a glimpse of him.

Similarly, when in **A Christmas Carol**, Dickens’s Scrooge looks down at his own grave, this **vision** enables him to re-orient his whole way of living – even though it is factually impossible for Scrooge to both be looking at his grave and be in it! Literal truth or **historicity** is not an appropriate yardstick of analysis here.
In the same manner according to Phillips religious visions such as ‘The last Judgment’ or ‘The Garden of Eden’ or ‘The Good Samaritan’ are “to do with living by them, drawing sustenance from them” and the like.

As such, a religious language game is not ‘flawed science’ supported by minimal evidence. It cannot be judged upon whether or not it mirrors reality. In the same respect it would make no sense to ask how successfully cricket refers to reality.

Likewise one game cannot be judged by the standards of another (as though poker was inferior to sprinting because it was slower). In other words it can be seen as illegitimate to attempt to evaluate religious matters by standards of procedures alien to religion.

From Wittgenstein’s perspective all we can say is: these games are played. We describe them. Wittgenstein famously remarked “Philosophy leaves everything as it is”.

Phillips points out however that although a Wittgensteinian analysis ‘leaves everything as it is’ in terms of the games that are played this does not mean leaving confusions inherent within these modes of expression where they are.

Thus in much of his work DZ Phillips used a Wittgensteinian approach to differentiate what he regarded as ‘deep’ religious practice from superstition by elucidating confusions and misconstruals in the grammar of religious expressions.

What Phillips saw as deep religious concepts could, he felt, in this way be rescued from superstitious interpretations back to their real home as expressed in the depth grammar of their legitimate linguistic practice.

Phillips exercises this therapeutic hermeneutical analysis on a number of what he takes to be widely misconstrued religious ideas including prayer, miracles, immortality and God. It is a perspicuous understanding of religious grammar which ultimately differentiates deep from shallow religious believers.

For instance what Phillips calls ‘genuine’ prayer is seen as a mechanism whereby believers bring to expression concerns lying deep within them rather than just another case of asking (an albeit all-powerful) someone for something. It has a psychological value akin to revealing your innermost secrets to a psychotherapist. Prayer should however be regarded as superstitious if it is construed
as causally efficacious. Phillips says “Prayer can thus be seen to transform from ‘don’t do that to me’ to ‘don’t let me become that’”.

Likewise the concept of ‘Miracle’ is uprooted from Hume’s definition of an event ‘violating the laws of nature’ to its more natural home as a passionate reaction to a beneficial event taken religiously. This can be seen in remarks such as “it’s a miracle the boy survived the accident!”

In Death and Immorality Phillips, like Wittgenstein and Rhees before him rejects the Cartesian notion of ‘substance dualism’ and the reification of the word ‘soul’. For Phillips a soul is not an object a man possesses (like a kidney) but rather refers to a man’s integrity or moral character. Just as Jesus said “what profiteth a man if he gain the entire world yet loseth his soul?”, similarly if it is said of someone ‘he would sell his soul for money’ this means that he has allowed himself to become materialistic.

Regarding immortality Phillips asserts that there is much “misunderstanding in the factual question: we just do not know what happens to someone after death. The question is rather: if it means anything to talk of life after death.” Once we let go of the confused idea of disembodied personal existence we must consider the logic of the terms ‘survival’ and its corollary ‘death’. If one understands these terms one is at a loss as to what it means to talk of surviving death.” Alternatively Phillips contends that when we act morally our actions take on an eternal timeless character: that of immortality.

If I have been a good man then my life can thus never be judged as futile even if I die impoverished and unknown. Genuine moral actions, informed neither by desire nor self-interest according to Phillips bear witness to “something eternal in man ... able to exist and to be grasped within every change”. Genuine moral actions thus represent “a turning away from the temporal to the eternal”.

Phillips says: “eternity is not an extension of this present life, but a mode of judging it. Eternity is not more life but this life seen under certain moral and religious modes of thought. This is precisely what seeing this life sub specie aeternitatis (under the aspect of eternity) would amount to” [a Latin phrase employed by both Spinoza in Ethics Part II, proposition 44, and Wittgenstein in Notebooks, p. 83 and Tractatus 6.45].
Living morally – and hence eternally – is the key to immortality. Phillips can thus say “vindication, victory, triumph etc are now understood in terms of immortality”.

Similarly ‘heaven’ for the deep believer is not some ‘alternative realm’ to which one is delivered as a reward for good behavior. Rather it is “to walk with god and do his bidding”; it is to live according to the principles of agape – and that is something to be achieved in this life. By contrast the desire for more life simply betrays a fundamental egocentricity.

To illustrate this Phillips gives the example of being confronted by two men “one of whom loves justice, kindness and generosity without the thought of what they bring, while the other thinks only of what they bring: do we not want to say different things about them?”

Similarly a common or surface understanding of the word ‘God’ is that it refers to some omnipotent, omniscient being who created the world and exists independently of human beings. Yet this is to confuse the grammar of ‘God’, for to say something exists it must make sense to say that it ceases to exist.

For Wittgensteinians like Phillips belief in God is not to be understood as belief in a God. Whereas belief in a God would be a theoretical belief in a fact, belief in God is more like an affective attitude.

Believing in God can thus be seen as analogous to ‘believing in a friend’ where belief amounts to trust.

As Phillips puts it: “in learning by contemplation...what forgiving, loving, thanking and so on mean in these contexts the believer is participating in the reality of God; this is what we mean by God’s reality.

Thus coming to see that there is a God is like seeing a new meaning in one’s life rather than adding an ‘additional being’. In the words of Wittgenstein religious beliefs are “rules of life ... dressed up in pictures” (Culture and Value, p. 34e).
Bibliography


