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Burley, M (2015) Approaches to philosophy of religion: Contemplating the world or trying to find our way home? *Religious Studies*, 51 (2). 221 - 239. ISSN 0034-4125

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000377>

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Approaches to philosophy of religion: contemplating the world or trying to find our way home?

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Abstract: What is the point of philosophy of religion? Is it to help us find the right path in life, with the philosopher as guide and mentor? Or is it, as D. Z. Phillips proposes, to contemplate ‘the world in all its variety’, deepening our understanding of multiple perspectives (both religious and non-religious) without trying to appropriate or reject any of them? Recognizing certain shortcomings of the former conception, this paper seeks to elucidate the latter and to engage with the critical reception of Phillips’ work by other Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers. Towards the end, with reference to Rush Rhees and Wittgenstein, I discuss how giving expression to ‘wonder at what is terrible’ illustrates the ethical demand of a contemplative approach, and in conclusion I offer some thoughts on how this approach could usefully be enriched and extended.

In a recent book, Mark Wynn, borrowing an image from William James’s essay ‘The Will to Believe’, invites us to consider ‘the condition of a person who is stranded on a mountainside in swirling mist’:

Suppose this person sees before them various paths, and suppose that the evidence does not determine whether any of the paths will lead down the mountain to safety. ... each of these paths has, from this person’s perspective, an equal claim to be the best route. Under these circumstances, James urges, it is rational to choose a path: to remain where you are, in a state of suspended judgement, would have the consequence of certain death. So it makes sound practical sense to choose one path or other, and to stick with it, in the hope that it will lead to safety. (Wynn (2013), 100–101)¹

Wynn, agreeing with James that the rational thing to do would be to plump for one or another path even in the absence of reliable indications of where it leads, then proceeds to develop his own pragmatic case for religious belief. I shall not be examining that particular argument, for my immediate concern is with the image of the solitary mountain-walker itself and with what it tells us about certain assumptions in philosophy of religion.

Prompting us to think of religious belief in individualistic terms, the image presents an isolated person with a decision to make. On this model, each of us must decide whether to commit to a particular path, either religious or non-religious; if it is a religious one, we must decide which religion to choose. Proponents of pragmatic arguments such as James and Wynn emphasize the epistemic constraints of the person's predicament: it is known that various options exist but the available evidence is sketchy, and hence pragmatic considerations come into play – considerations of which path would be most beneficial rather than simply which of them is true.

Although most contemporary philosophers of religion are not pragmatists, many implicitly accept the image of the lone wanderer. For the majority of such philosophers, this wanderer is an ideally rational person weighing up the evidence for and against belief, and the philosophical task is to identify the most rational path to take – whether to believe or not to believe. The form of belief that is normally in question is belief in God; or, as philosophers are prone to put it, belief about whether God exists.

This image of what philosophy of religion consists in is pervasive in the academy. Textbooks and syllabuses typically privilege a small range of conceptions of God, normally beginning with the 'God of classical theism' – whose characteristics are supposed to include transcendence, self-sufficiency, eternity, immutability, omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and so forth – and perhaps adducing one or more competing conceptions, some of which have been termed 'theistic personalism'.² Arguments are canvassed to show which conception of God is most coherent and whether such a conception is 'instantiated'.³ The implication is that if, on the balance of evidence or on a priori logical grounds, there are good reasons for believing there to be a God of the sort in question, then the belief is 'justified'. But if such reasons are lacking, then so is the 'justification'. This notion of justification is a somewhat abstract one. Although philosophers do sometimes consider whether their conception of God is of a God 'worthy of worship',⁴ it is rarely asked whether it is this God who is worshipped – whether it is in this God that anyone really has faith or to whom anyone speaks in prayer and adoration. Neither is it generally asked whether anyone ever came to faith by being convinced of the soundness of a philosophical argument for God's existence.⁵

So there is something paradoxical about how philosophy of religion is commonly pursued, especially in what is frequently called the 'analytic' tradition. On the one hand, the subject is supposed to place the philosopher in a stronger position to decide which path to take; primarily, whether to believe or not to believe, or to positively disbelieve, in God. Yet,

on the other hand, the tacitly assumed conception of God and of what it is to believe in God – let alone of what it is to hold a religious belief more generally – remains curiously distant from the religious lives of many believers. One outcome is that much philosophy of religion, while being unswervingly impressive in its logical rigour, fails to inspire the imaginations of many people, including many students, with a genuine interest in religion; it often tends instead to appear like an academic game, dealing with concepts and arguments that bear only a tenuous relationship to any of the variety of forms that religious life actually takes.⁶

There are, however, alternatives to this rather dislocated approach to the subject, whose virtues can be brought into relief by means of contrast with traditional methods of inquiry without our needing to reject the traditional methods wholesale. My purpose in this essay is to explore one such alternative in particular: an approach influenced by the work of Wittgenstein and most closely associated with the late D. Z. Phillips, who termed it a ‘contemplative conception of philosophy of religion’. Beginning by invoking again the image of the mountain walker, I shall ask what implications this image has for how the role of the philosopher of religion – and especially that of the teacher of philosophy of religion – is perceived. Then, in the main body of the paper, I shall examine Phillips’ alternative approach, considering some criticisms that have been made of it and the responses and clarifications that Phillips offers. Part of this discussion will touch on Phillips’ claim that contemplative philosophizing makes an ethical demand upon the philosopher – a demand to contemplate the world without letting one’s personal preferences get in the way. I illustrate what Phillips means with reference to some thoughts from Rush Rhees on the idea of wonder and on the strange phenomenon of ‘wonder at what is terrible’ in particular; I also connect these thoughts with Wittgenstein’s ruminations on the Beltane fire festivals described by James Frazer. This will lead me to a few concluding remarks on a direction in which a contemplative approach to philosophy of religion might usefully be extended.

The philosopher as guide?

Let us return then, briefly, to the image of the mountain walker. It depicts someone who wants to get somewhere, thereby embodying the thought that philosophy’s task is to enable us to get to where we want to go – from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge, or at least to secure good reasons for choosing one path rather than another. What are the implications of this image for the philosophy of religion and for how it is taught?

One implication could be that the philosopher is seen as a guide, who, having already found the path down from the mountain, now wants to share that knowledge with others. This

would amount to an advocatory approach, one which aims to steer readers and students in the direction of a particular religious or non-religious path. If the path being advocated is a religious one, we might call the approach ‘confessional’ or ‘apologetic’. In the context of teaching, it is likely that many philosophers do let their religious or non-religious perspective influence the emphasis that they give to different aspects of their subject matter. There exists, however, a commonly held view that academic teaching requires a high degree of ‘neutrality’ – an even-handed approach to the arguments. Thus the teacher, though indeed a guide, aspires to be an impartial one, assisting students to develop skills for discerning for themselves which is the right path to take. Or rather: which would be the right path if one were really considering whether to pursue a religious form of life rather than merely philosophizing about it in the seminar room.

Its aspiration to neutrality brings this approach into close proximity with what some have termed the ‘Liberal Rational’ view of education (McLaughlin (1995)). Yet, whereas the latter view tends to be averse to the making of pronouncements on the objective truth or falsity of particular religious beliefs, analytic philosophers of religion still predominantly see themselves as being in the business of determining truth-values: critically sifting the true or rationally justifiable beliefs and doctrines from the false or unjustifiable ones. In that sense, analytic philosophy of religion is committed to enabling its practitioners and students to get somewhere, or, as James Harris has put it, to ‘get to the bottom of things’ by means of ‘more sophisticated and more refined techniques of analysis’ (2002, 426). ‘[T]his presumption’, Harris continues, ‘is manifested in the belief that it is possible to make progress in moving toward some definite resolutions concerning disputes about religious beliefs.’ And, he adds, ‘It is perhaps this confidence in the ability of continued philosophical analysis to produce philosophically important results and to advance philosophical inquiry ... that will both characterize and guarantee the future of analytic philosophy of religion’ (ibid.).

A contemplative alternative

Ludwig Wittgenstein did not share the conception of philosophy that I have just outlined. Famously (or notoriously, depending on one’s perspective) he declares that the purpose of philosophy is not to explain or deduce anything but simply to describe what is already ‘open to view’ (2009, §126).⁷ ‘Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language,’ he writes, ‘so it can in the end only describe it. / For it cannot justify either. / It leaves everything as it is’ (§124). One might complain that Wittgenstein is here guilty of a kind of performative contradiction, since he is apparently characterizing

philosophy in a way that runs counter to what ‘philosophy’ is frequently taken to mean while at the same time insisting that philosophy must not interfere with actual language use. What interests me here, however, is the contrast with other conceptions of philosophy. Whether one supposes Wittgenstein to be telling us what philosophy is, or to be offering one possible conception of philosophy, the conception that he is offering is certainly not one according to which philosophy’s role is to ‘get to the bottom of things’; instead, it is one in which philosophy’s role is to observe, describe, clarify.⁸ Being clear about things might – incidentally – help one to make certain decisions in life; but that is not philosophy’s principal concern.

Wittgenstein also remarks in notebooks that what makes someone ‘into a philosopher’ is that he or she ‘is not a citizen of any community of ideas’ (1981, §455), and describes his ‘ideal’ as ‘a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them’ (1998, 4e). This image of the philosopher as a cool observer, dissociated from any particular community, may put us in mind again of the lone mountain walker. Is Wittgenstein himself not held captive by this individualistic picture?⁹ When we turn to D. Z. Phillips’ interpretation of Wittgenstein, this suspicion may become even more pronounced. Understanding philosophy in a Wittgensteinian key to be a contemplative activity, Phillips characterizes this approach as one whereby we ‘seek a perch above the fray’ in order to contemplate ‘the world from the vantage point which comes from philosophy’s disinterested concerns’ (2004, 55).

There is clearly a respect in which these images of the philosopher standing ‘above the fray’, inhabiting a cool ‘temple’, not being ‘a citizen of any community of ideas’ resemble that of the walker on the mountainside trying to discern through the mist which of several paths would be most efficacious to follow. But there are also differences. To quote Phillips more fully: ‘A contemplative conception of philosophy does seek a perch above the fray, but not one from which it arbitrates between our beliefs and convictions in the name of rationality. Neither is it a view from nowhere’ (ibid.). Thus, the crucial difference here is that, unlike the solitary wanderer, the contemplative philosopher is not trying to get anywhere. Not only is the philosopher not a citizen of any community of ideas – still less of any particular religious or anti-religious community – but, qua philosopher, she is not seeking to become a member of any community either.

This is why Phillips emphasizes that the real yet hardest task in philosophy is to go nowhere. In making this point, he refers among other things to the context of postgraduate teaching:

Who would want one's graduate students to know, not to mention the Board of Fellows or the College Council, that one was going nowhere?

And yet I have to tell you that for the thirty-eight years I have been teaching philosophy, that is exactly what I have been trying to do – to go nowhere. I say trying, because this is one of the most difficult things to do in philosophy – to go nowhere. (Phillips (1999), 158)

Why does Phillips here point to the problem of divulging this attitude to graduate students? He does not say exactly, but we can guess. One reason might be the obvious one that graduate students, or any serious students in philosophy, frequently come to philosophy because of an interest in 'the big questions', and these will include, perhaps paradigmatically, the purportedly big questions in philosophy of religion – concerning the nature and existence of God, the meaning of life, whether there is an afterlife, the problem of evil. Philosophy, they may suppose, is indeed in the business of getting to the bottom of these questions or at least of trying to do so. So if they learn that their tutor is not interested in getting to the bottom of them, and moreover does not even consider it philosophy's purpose to address such questions, then they might not think much of that tutor.

Another, related reason (though with a more mundanely pragmatic emphasis), is that the world of academic philosophy is highly competitive and becoming ever more so. 'Getting on' in the profession requires demonstrating that one is working on 'important' issues and making headway towards their resolution. These days, one has to show not merely that one is addressing important questions but also that one's answers are 'impacting' on people outside the academy. Again, if one's students discover that, actually, what one wishes to do is to 'go nowhere', 'leav[ing] everything as it is', merely describing and clarifying what is already 'open to view', they may conclude that one is not an appropriate mentor to look up to.

It has to be admitted that Wittgensteinian approaches to philosophy in general or to philosophy of religion in particular are not flavour of the month in the academy. As Gareth Moore lamented in an essay written shortly before his death in 2002, 'on the whole, most philosophy of religion goes on as if Wittgenstein never existed ... one sometimes gets the impression from non-Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion that what Wittgenstein and his followers have to say ... is simply irrelevant to their concerns' (2005, 210–211). This is no exaggeration on Moore's part. And when Phillips himself died in 2006, Wittgensteinian philosophy lost one of its most prolific votaries. Yet, as others have noted in other contexts, 'It is ... a convention of academic discourse that might is not right', and hence that the mere

weight of numbers in favour of a particular point of view is insufficient to show its rivals to be wrong (Barnes and Bloor (1982), 21).

When Phillips describes his aim as being ‘to go nowhere’, he is referring specifically to his aim as a philosopher. Philosophers are, of course, human beings too, and Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers are generally especially keen that we should not forget this obvious fact when doing philosophy.¹⁰ Yet Phillips is keen also to maintain a distinction between the ‘disinterested concerns’ of philosophy and the interested concerns that characterize other aspects of our lives. ‘What I have tried to do in my work in the philosophy of religion’, he writes,

is to show that a sensibility should be possible there which does justice to both belief and atheism. Both are rescued from what philosophy tries to make of them. We must distinguish between the meanings of religious and atheistic perspectives and the personal appropriation of those meanings. Conceptual clarification is wider than personal appropriation. Much of contemporary philosophy of religion wants to get somewhere – to show whether there is a God. The philosophical reflection that does not go there contents itself with showing what it means to believe in God or to deny His existence. This is what I mean by a contemplative conception of philosophy, one to which I was introduced by my teachers at Swansea: J. R. Jones, R. F. Holland, Peter Winch, and Rush Rhees. (Phillips (1999), 163)

It is noteworthy that Phillips here pays homage to his own teachers, placing himself within a pedagogical lineage. Phillips, too, had a strong effect on many students, both at Swansea and at Claremont Graduate University. A number of his graduate students have gone on to become philosophers in their own right, and so the lineage continues.¹¹ One could even say, mischievously, that a Wittgensteinian ‘community of ideas’ has evolved, of which there are many citizens. But, less mischievously, one should note that the lineage is really one of idiosyncrats rather than of doctrinaire conformists. As has often been pointed out, Wittgenstein bequeathed to posterity not a system but a collection of ways of looking at things and a potpourri of philosophical methods to be worked with and developed. This tends to militate against the establishment of a rigid Wittgensteinian orthodoxy.¹²

Phillips’ contemplative conception of philosophy is one way of inheriting Wittgenstein’s legacy, what he means by a ‘contemplative conception’ and by ‘going nowhere’ being an approach that seeks to elucidate particular perspectives on the world in an impartial manner.¹³ Whether one then comes to adopt one or other of the perspectives under investigation, or whether one already adheres to any of them, is beside the point as far as one’s work in

philosophy is concerned. ‘Conceptual clarification is wider than personal appropriation’ because, Phillips urges, it is possible to become clearer about a wider range of forms of language and forms of life than those that one might personally endorse or approve of.¹⁴ The point has pedagogical implications, for its corollary in the teaching context is an approach that seeks not to convince students of the truth or falsity of any positions, in an absolute sense, nor even to give students the ‘philosophical tools’ to find the truth for themselves. Rather, students are taught that it is not philosophy’s role to guide them in their own religious or non-religious lives but only to enable them to clarify what each perspective is saying.

In Phillips’ own work he has tried to bring out the internal coherence of different ethical systems (comparing and contrasting a Cossack warrior ethic of vengeance with Jewish and Christian ethics of forgiveness, for example¹⁵). He has also expressed admiration for the attempts of other philosophers to find significance in religious ceremonies that involve burning effigies or sacrificing animals or even human beings. It is in making space for these possibilities of sense within one’s own analysis that the ethical demand of doing philosophy contemplatively comes to the fore, and I shall return to this issue later. Before doing so, however, let us consider some criticisms that have been made of Phillips’ approach.

Phillips under friendly fire

A survey of all or even a small proportion of the criticisms that have been launched at Phillips from the philosophical enemies of Wittgensteinian approaches lies beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁶ In many instances those criticisms, having been based on misunderstandings of Wittgensteinian methods, merely beg questions against Phillips because they make assumptions about philosophy’s purpose that he would not accept.¹⁷ More profitable in the present context will be a consideration of some criticisms from philosophers who, though themselves influenced by Wittgenstein, have interpreted his methods differently from Phillips.

Two main types of criticisms are discernible. One type seeks not to question the ideal of a contemplative ‘perch above the fray’ but to question whether Phillips has gone far enough in that direction or whether, instead, he has slipped into a more dogmatic mode of philosophizing – a mode that differentiates ‘deep’ from ‘shallow’ forms of religion in accordance with what he can personally appropriate.¹⁸ The second type of criticism challenges the ideal of a perch above the fray itself, arguing that the distinction Phillips tries to draw between philosophical and personal matters is unviable, and that, as Wittgenstein himself opined, ‘Work on philosophy ... is really more work on oneself. On one’s own

conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)' (1998, 24e). According to this line of criticism, as long as one remains a human being with personal interests, one can never fully transcend the fray: one is always already positioned within a particular evaluative point of view, and hence the philosophical is merely a mode of the personal. I shall discuss each of these two types of criticism in turn. They both have implications that extend well beyond the immediate context of appraising Phillips' approach.

Phillips and superstition

An area of Phillips' work that has been especially prone to attack is his treatment of the concept of superstition. Brian Clack (1995), for example, picks Phillips up for trying to operate with a 'radically unworkable' distinction between superstition and religious belief. While Phillips had insisted that, contrary to religious beliefs, superstitions 'are, as a matter of fact, blunders, mistakes, regarding causal connections' that display a misguided trust in those putative causal connections (Phillips (1993b), 72, 74), Clack argues that such a distinction cannot be passed off as purely descriptive: owing to the unavoidably pejorative associations of the term 'superstition', its use by Phillips inevitably carries dismissive connotations (Clack (1995), 113).¹⁹

In reply, Phillips offers a number of defences and also some partial concessions. He concedes that he was wrong, in the essay to which Clack principally refers, to describe superstitions as 'blunders' and 'mistakes'. In fact, he maintains, they are 'confusions', a point that he has underscored in subsequent work (Phillips (1995), 123; cf. *idem* (1993a)). For Phillips, the important difference between a mistake and a confusion is that, while the former could have been right, there is nothing that could count as the latter's being right (or wrong) since it simply makes no sense. For example, trying to poison someone but failing because one chose the wrong potion is to make a mistake, whereas trying to harm someone but failing because one merely stuck pins in a picture of the intended victim is a confusion. In this latter case, 'What we have is not a false, but a meaningless belief, and yet people believe it' (Phillips (1993a), 108; (1995), 123).²⁰

Unsurprisingly, this response of Phillips' has not impressed those who object to his distinction between religious belief and superstition on the grounds that it is stipulative and prescriptive. Labelling superstitions as confusions rather than mistakes leaves the dichotomy between religious belief and superstition fully in place, and it is the presumed sharpness of the dichotomy that Phillips' critics are questioning. Clack points to the 'curious depth' and 'poetic nature' of much of what often gets called 'superstition' (1995, 114); and Terrence

Tilley and Peter Bloemendaal both cite examples of practices that exhibit elements of what, given Phillips' criteria, would have to be termed religion and superstition, thereby disrupting the distinction that Phillips wants to retain (Tilley (2000a), 347–349; Bloemendaal (2006), 407). A practice such as petitionary prayer, for instance, may be motivated by a wish for God to know one's desires and for the circumstances in which the desires have arisen to be 'met in God' (which would be a religious motivation on Phillips' account); yet at the same time there may be a more instrumental motivation in play, an expectation that the prayer will get something done (which Phillips would regard as confused and, hence, superstitious) (Bloemendaal (2006), 407; cf. Phillips (1993b), 73). If in practice motives and expectations are often mixed in ways such as this, then Phillips' assumption that what is superstitious is not religious and vice versa turns out to be 'a philosopher's inappropriate gloss on religious practice' as opposed to a contemplative reflection of it (Tilley (2000a), 349; see also 350–351).

Much more could be said on these matters. For my present purposes, however, the principal point to note is that these critics are not rejecting the conception of philosophy as disinterested and contemplative. On the contrary, they are evaluating Phillips' work in the light of that very conception and asserting that, in the case of his analysis of superstition, Phillips has not been disinterested enough.²¹ To the extent, then, that the criticisms are valid, they support rather than undermine the contemplative conception of philosophy of religion, enhancing our awareness of the temptations that can hinder such an approach. If Phillips has, on occasion, traded cool description for covert advocacy, this may be indicative of the difficulties associated with consistently occupying 'a perch above the fray', but it does not reveal as misguided the aspiration to attain that perch.

Questioning the contemplative ideal

An alternative line of criticism goes beyond the charge that Phillips has failed to live up to his own ideals, and seeks instead to question the very conception of philosophy that Phillips is calling 'contemplative'. James Conant, for example, demurs from Phillips over the relation between what is personal and what is philosophical in a Wittgensteinian approach. '[T]he line between "the personal" and "the philosophical"', he writes, 'cannot be as sharp, for Wittgenstein, as Phillips imagines it to be. ... the spirit of a person shows itself in the spirit of his philosophy, which in turn shows itself in the way he philosophizes' (2002, 89). Conant finds in Wittgenstein's work a 'moral imperative' that Phillips misses. For Conant, the 'imperative which informs Wittgenstein's writing (both early and late) should be

understood at least in part in the light of a demand upon the reader to examine his life with words' (1995, 280). He sees Wittgenstein as placing a demand upon us (as well as upon Wittgenstein himself) to heighten our 'vigilance' in order to avoid confusion in our use of words; and since, obviously, it is in our lives that we use words, the demand carries over into a 'vigilance ... directed towards how we live' (ibid.).

Although Conant's criticism is presented, in the first instance, as a claim that Phillips has misunderstood the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy, it might also be read as contending that it simply does not make sense to try to draw a sharp distinction between philosophical and personal matters. This is, in large part, how Stephen Mulhall characterizes the disagreement when he writes in defence of Conant. On Mulhall's view, Phillips' resistance to dissolving the distinction between the philosophical and the personal 'exemplifies a failure to recognize ... that philosophers are human beings too – that philosophy cannot arrogate to itself a perspective upon the human condition that is external to it' (2007, 26).

These interjections from Conant and Mulhall afford Phillips an opportunity to clarify certain aspects of his approach. Emphasizing that the distinction between the philosophical and the personal is context-dependent rather than absolute, he acknowledges that doing philosophy makes ethical demands upon us; it calls for 'a certain purity of attention to the world', which itself displays one's character (Phillips (2007), 38).²² Phillips also appreciates 'that there are internal relations between contemplative philosophy and a way of living' (39). Most notably, what Rush Rhees refers to as the 'purity and discipline' required for sustained philosophical attention are intertwined with the purity and discipline in one's life as a whole (Phillips, *ibid.*, citing Rhees (2001), 161). As Phillips sees it, the principal ethical demand of contemplative philosophizing is precisely that of remaining disinterested, of consistently prioritizing conceptual clarification over personal rejection or appropriation. While conceptual clarification does not preclude personal rejection or appropriation, these latter attitudes cannot, on Phillips' view, be considered part of the specifically philosophical task. This is the principal respect in which he wants to retain a sharp divide between the philosophical and the personal.

Drawing a contrast with what he sees as Stanley Cavell's advocacy of particular ethical, religious and political ideals in the name of philosophy, Phillips insists that a contemplative approach eschews such advocacy. Whereas Cavell, according to Phillips, is highly selective in the textual sources that he reflects upon, choosing only or primarily those that cohere with his ideological predilections, 'A contemplative conception of philosophy ... would wait on texts which ... challenge any already crystallized conception.' And at this point Phillips adds

that he repeatedly tells his students that ‘contemplative acknowledgement is wider than what we appropriate personally’ (2007, 34). The ethical demand of philosophical contemplation is thus also a pedagogical demand: to refrain from trying to steer the sympathies of one’s readers or students towards the ideological tendencies that one finds personally most appealing. Students are then free to privilege and appropriate whatever they like in their own lives, but such appropriation, it will be said, belongs outside the philosophy class.

Critics such as Clack will point out that Phillips does not in fact leave his ideological biases at home, and that his personal appropriations are all the more distasteful because of the gloss of neutrality with which he paints them. But, again, that in itself does not amount to a criticism of the method aspired to; it is merely an observation that the aspiration has not been fully met. It seems that Conant and Mulhall would argue that the aspiration cannot be met because it is ultimately incoherent: in doing philosophy, one cannot detach oneself from one’s ethical outlook, because the very impulse towards detachment is itself a manifestation of a particular ethical outlook.²³ Phillips, however, need not deny that the approach he champions manifests an ethical outlook. He could readily admit that aspects of this ethical outlook are reflected in what one chooses to describe – in what one considers to be important (though not necessarily true) – and in the kinds of descriptions one offers.²⁴ What he would add, although he might not put it in precisely these terms, is that the ethical demand upon the philosopher operates, as it were, at a higher level: it is the demand to actively seek out sources that challenge and unsettle one’s own personal principles and not to conflate one’s philosophical point of view with the points of view – ethical, religious, political, etc. – that one is investigating. There is nothing obviously incoherent about that.

A spiritual dimension?

Phillips, as we have seen, emphasizes the imperative to ‘do justice to’ the various perspectives or ‘world pictures’ that come under the gaze of philosophical contemplation, admitting that this imperative has itself an ethical character. I would add that its character is also spiritual, for it resounds with a spirit of self-renunciation, enjoining the philosopher to get out of the way in order to let the phenomena speak for themselves.²⁵ The spiritual dimension is evident when Phillips speaks of the ‘purity of attention to the world’ for which philosophical contemplation calls, and of ‘wonder at the world in all its variety’ being internal to the philosophical process (Phillips (2007), 38; (2001), 325). Thus, when Phillips contrasts contemplative philosophy with treating ‘philosophy as a spiritual exercise’ (2007, 41), he is somewhat mischaracterizing his own approach. The question is not so much

whether philosophy ought to be seen as contributing to a particular spiritual orientation, but to what kind of spiritual orientation philosophy ought to contribute.

But what does it mean to ‘do justice’ to a variety of perspectives, including – and especially – perspectives that are not one’s own,²⁶ and how does this relate to ‘wondering at the world’? How Phillips would respond to these questions comes out most clearly in an example that he cites from a paper by Rush Rhees, to which I shall now turn.

Wonder at what is terrible

In an essay published posthumously in 1994 Rush Rhees, reflecting upon the nature of philosophy, remarks that ‘Wonder is characteristic of philosophy ... as it is of the thinking of less corrupted peoples’ (Rhees (1994), 578).²⁷ By ‘less corrupted peoples’, he almost certainly means people belonging to what we might now call ‘traditional societies’ that have had relatively little contact with ‘modernity’. Such contrasts – between an allegedly corrupted modernity and ‘less corrupted peoples’ – are far from unproblematic. Yet the points that Rhees goes on to make are not without interest. He proceeds to offer examples of things that have been, or might be, wondered at: ‘Wonder at death’, for example, which must be differentiated from ‘trying to escape from death; wonder at (almost: reverence towards) madness’. And, further:

wonder that there should be the problems that there are, and that they should have the solutions that they do. ... Wonder at any natural scene that is beautiful. Wonder at the beauty of human actions and characters when it appears in them. And in the same way, wonder at what is terrible and what is evil. (We cannot say ‘wonder at what is mediocre’, and there may be something important in this.)

At that juncture, rather than continuing the list, Rhees pauses to elaborate the thought that wonder can be a response to what is terrible or evil. ‘Wonder – treating as important – what is terrible just because it is terrible’, he observes,

as primitive peoples may celebrate it in rites: the burning of human figures, perhaps of children, in effigy; treating what is terrible as a sacrament. If someone can think of these practices only as ‘morbid’ or as ‘perversions’ – or if he can think of them only as methods designed to ward off the terrible things they celebrate – this means he cannot imagine how people might wonder at terrible events because of what they are (as opposed to: wondering what neglect should have allowed them to happen, how they might be avoided, etc.). (ibid.)

As Phillips has noted in comments on this passage, Rhees need not be taken to be equating all the instances of wonder that he mentions. Yet light may be thrown ‘on the presence of wonder in philosophy’ by the variety of examples offered by Rhees; failure to see the point of those examples, Phillips adds, would to some extent mark a ‘failure to see any point in a contemplative conception of philosophy’ (Phillips (1999), 56).

Rhees’s ruminations on ‘wonder at what is terrible’ illustrate the ethical demand of a contemplative approach precisely by abstaining from moral appraisal. Ethical judgement is suspended in order to facilitate a more culturally sensitive understanding of the phenomena. Despite the concision of the remarks, they harbour signs of imaginative empathy – a willingness to enter into the form of life of the people under consideration. Rhees does this by seeking within himself a capacity to see how certain ritual acts could be expressions of wonder and reverence, thereby opening up the possibility of understanding them as sacraments as opposed to morbid perversions. Although this imaginative empathic dimension is present in Phillips’ own work too, its importance tends to be underplayed in his accounts of what contemplative philosophizing consists in. When it is employed, either by Rhees or by Phillips, a major source of inspiration for this approach are the remarks that Wittgenstein wrote in response to reading portions of James Frazer’s famous work of comparative anthropology, *The Golden Bough*.

In those remarks, elliptical and enigmatic though many of them are, Wittgenstein writes of the ‘deep and sinister’ quality of rites that, according to Frazer’s historical speculations, grew out of earlier forms that involved actual human sacrifice. This quality, Wittgenstein maintains, cannot be reduced to anything that we know about the history of a particular rite, for even if it turned out that the history was quite different, this would not dispel – or at any rate, would not necessarily dispel – the eerie feeling that we have in response to the rite (Wittgenstein (1993), esp. 147). Wittgenstein is especially fascinated by the Beltane fire festivals and by the practice of distributing slices of cake, among which is one slice that has been marked with charcoal or by some other means. In a description of the practice quoted by Frazer, the person who receives the marked slice is designated ‘the Beltane carline’ and is grabbed by some of those who are present; a pretence is then made of throwing the ‘carline’ into the fire until others perform a mock rescue (Frazer (1993), 618). Reflecting upon his response to learning of such practices, Wittgenstein likens it to ‘seeing a man speaking harshly to someone else over a trivial matter, and noticing from his tone of voice and facial expression that this man can on occasion be terrible’ (Wittgenstein (1993), 146).

Although what is going on in Wittgenstein's meditations on the Beltane rites is not easy to grasp, it appears to involve something close to the kind of imaginative empathy to which I alluded above. By contemplating the emotional quality of one's response to learning of certain ritual activities, one may come to recognize a significance in those activities that is dependent neither on their history nor on any assumptions concerning putative instrumental motivations that underlie them, such as that they are intended to bring something about or prevent something from happening ('to ward off the terrible things they celebrate', as Rhees puts it). Rather, the significance inheres in the rituals' evocation of the dark and terrible elements of life and of the contingencies that pertain to them – contingencies that can result in one's being thrown into a fire or being rescued therefrom. Those contingencies and vicissitudes, registered by the ritual, are cognized in the eeriness of one's response.

Contrary to certain over-simplified interpretations of Wittgenstein, his contention is not well characterized as an 'expressivist' or 'emotivist' theory of ritual, for that would imply that he is contending that ritual practices merely express emotions or other psychological impulses, such as wishes, desires, etc.²⁸ Wittgenstein is not proposing that the depth of the ritual consists in its expressing fear, uneasiness, eeriness or the like; rather, he is proposing that it is by recognizing that the ritual evokes such emotionally inflected responses in us that we come to see its significance, a significance that might better be described as a kind of truth than as a psychological state or feeling – the truth that, among other things, human life is in no way secure and that we are vulnerable to any number of potential disasters.

Considering 'possibilities of sense' such as these is part of what Phillips means by a 'hermeneutics of contemplation', which stands opposed to both a 'hermeneutics of recollection' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Deriving these latter two phrases from Paul Ricoeur, Phillips understands a hermeneutics of recollection to be an interpretive approach that offers an apologetic defence of the material it is explicating and a hermeneutics of suspicion to be one that explains, or explains away, the putatively religious character of the material, typically in psychologically or sociologically reductive terms (see Phillips (2001), esp. ch. 1).²⁹ A reductive interpretation of the Beltane fire festival, for instance, would be one that construes it in terms of historical inheritance and misguided beliefs – as a remnant of rites that used to involve human sacrifice and were performed on the confused assumption that immolating a human being would have a causal effect upon the fertility of the next harvest. Such an interpretation places a barrier between the interpreter and the people whose practice is being interpreted, for it implies a cognitive superiority on the part both of the interpreter and of the intellectual community to which the interpretation is being presented.

By contrast, the approach exhibited by Wittgenstein and Rhees, and endorsed by Phillips, invites us to enter into the religious lives of those who perform the practice, to feel the sense of wonder that the practice engenders, and thereby to see the sense within it – even if, when speaking for ourselves, we would have to admit to finding the practice deeply morally unsettling.³⁰

In this regard, I am suggesting, personal disinterest need not entail emotional disengagement, for it is precisely the capacity for imaginatively informed participation in the emotional lives of religious practitioners that enables the philosopher to appreciate and convey the meaning – the existential depth – of the practices under investigation. It is, to a large extent, in this that doing justice to alternative perspectives on the world consists.

Concluding remarks

In rounding off this discussion of a contemplative approach to philosophy of religion, we might first remind ourselves that despite the undoubted strengths of much contemporary philosophy of religion – strengths that include highly refined and technically intricate methods of logical argumentation – there are also evident weaknesses. For a start, although the number of religious traditions being covered in the literature is gradually increasing, the cultural reach remains severely constrained; even when Christianity is the focus, the conceptions of Christian belief that are typically employed are often unhelpfully abstract and lacking in conceptual complexity. These deficiencies can conspire to make work in philosophy of religion appear strangely remote from the ways in which religion manifests in the everyday lives of religious practitioners. Part of the problem, as I have presented it, is an underlying picture that holds the philosopher of religion captive: the picture of a solitary wanderer – like a figure from a painting by Caspar David Friedrich – gazing into a mist and trying to decide which of several paths to follow. When this picture is assumed as a model of our epistemic situation, we are offered a distortedly one-sided view. What gets lost sight of is the fact that religious beliefs and practices have their place within complex cultural contexts – social forms of life. While it is, of course, possible for individuals to lose their faith, find faith, or undergo conversion from one religion to another, these occurrences rarely, if ever, happen as a direct result of being convinced of the soundness of a philosophical argument.

Many philosophers are apt to retort that philosophy's business is, precisely, the critical evaluation of reasons and arguments: the sociologist and anthropologist can get on with describing the socio-cultural environments in which religions live and move and have their being (so to speak) while the philosopher determines whether the propositions assented to by

the adherents of those religions are true or justified. The contemplative style of philosophy championed by D. Z. Phillips begs to differ. While continuing to distinguish philosophy from sociology and anthropology, Phillips maintains that a proper understanding of religious concepts requires attention to the forms of life within which those concepts have the sense that they do. Examining those forms of life and describing how the concepts relate to one another is the primary philosophical task: taking one's time to deepen understanding rather than rushing to make a pronouncement on the truth or falsity of some given proposition. As we have seen, Phillips' approach has not gone uncriticized, and much of the criticism has come from other philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein. But, provided the 'perch above the fray' extolled by Phillips is seen as an ideal to aspire to rather than a position that one can straightforwardly occupy without considerable philosophical and, as Phillips stresses, ethical resolve, there is no reason to suppose the aspiration to be misguided.

I would add that a contemplative approach has the potential to overcome some of the pedagogical problems that impede contemporary philosophy of religion. Its emphasis on doing conceptual justice to a variety of perspectives makes it immediately conducive to cross-cultural modes of investigation. We see the potential for this in embryonic form in the reflections of Rush Rhees and Wittgenstein, and of Phillips himself, on the religious practices of cultures very different from those of modern-day western societies. This approach could be greatly enriched and expanded through developing mutual engagement between contemplative philosophy and the sorts of interpretive anthropology and 'thickly descriptive' ethnography typified by Clifford Geertz. Although it would require another paper to explore these possibilities further, it is worth noting in passing that Geertz himself was deeply influenced by Wittgenstein and also by Gilbert Ryle (from whom he borrowed the term 'thick description') (Geertz (1973); cf. Ryle (2009)). If philosophy of religion is to be rescued from its isolated wandering and opened up to the immense variety of forms that religious life takes, then looking in the direction of cultural anthropology is one approach that could hold enormous value.³¹

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Notes

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- ¹ The image originated in Stephen (1874), 353–354, which is quoted in James (1921), 30–31.
- ² See, e.g., Davies (2004), ch. 1. For a concise and historically informed overview of so-called classical theism and its critics, see Cooper (2006), 13–17.
- ³ Talk of a concept(ion) of God being ‘instantiated’ is especially prevalent in discussions of the ‘ontological argument’ (see, e.g., Gale (1991), ch. 6), but also occurs elsewhere (e.g., Carter (1990), 153–154).
- ⁴ See Swinburne (1993), ch. 15: ‘Holy and Worthy of Worship’.
- ⁵ Among the exceptions is C. Stephen Evans, who draws upon ideas from Kierkegaard in order to interrogate the relation between arguments for God’s existence on the one hand and faith on the other. See esp. Evans (1998), ch. 8; for recent critical discussion, see Lane (2010), 84–87.
- ⁶ This abstraction from life can be especially egregious in discussions of evil, where many contributors ‘really ignore the existential realities of the question of evil for an individual’s religious practice and address the question as a logical puzzle or game’, thereby doing ‘more to distort the issue than to help us address evil’ (Johnson (2003), 143).
- ⁷ See also Wittgenstein (2009), §109: ‘All explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place.’

⁸ ‘... the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear’ (Wittgenstein (2009), §133). ‘For me ... clarity, transparency, is an end in itself’ (Wittgenstein (1998), 9e).

⁹ Cf. Wittgenstein (2009), §115: ‘A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.’

¹⁰ ‘Wittgenstein’s later thought can be seen as working out the implications of his request, “let us be human” [Wittgenstein (1998), 36e]’ (Braver (2012), 232).

¹¹ Among several works that evidence Phillips’ influence on a subsequent generation of philosophical and theological thinkers is the volume edited by Dalferth and von Sass (2010).

¹² On this point, a remark from Kripke is apposite: ‘It should be borne in mind that *Philosophical Investigations* is not a systematic philosophical work where conclusions, once definitively established, need never be reargued. Rather the *Investigations* is written as a perpetual dialectic, where persisting worries, expressed by the voice of the imaginary interlocutor, are never definitively silenced’ (1982, 3).

¹³ Cf. Winch (2008), 95–96: ‘[P]hilosophy is concerned with elucidating and comparing the ways in which the world is made intelligible in different intellectual disciplines; ... this leads on to the elucidation and comparison of different forms of life.’

¹⁴ The distinction between clarification or elucidation on the one hand and approval or advocacy on the other is one that Phillips emphasized from early on in his career. See, e.g., Phillips (1970), 166: ‘I have distinguished throughout between an elucidation of religious beliefs and an advocacy of them.’

¹⁵ See Phillips (2006), ch. 15. I discuss this example of Phillips’ work in Burley (2012a).

¹⁶ Representative examples of such criticisms can be found in Mackie (1982), ch. 12; Swinburne (1993), 92–96; and in Nielsen’s contributions to Nielsen and Phillips (2005).

¹⁷ I have sought to show how certain criticisms of Phillips miss their target in, e.g., Burley (2012b), chs 4 and 5.

¹⁸ Instances of Phillips using evaluative terms of this sort occur in Phillips (1995), 240; (2001), 30; (2006), 127. He goes some way towards defending the use of such terms in Phillips (2003).

¹⁹ Other critics, too, accuse Phillips of merely stipulating that certain beliefs and practices are superstitious rather than religious, and of thereby ‘presuppos[ing] a normative conception of religion, which is impossible to reconcile with Phillips’ supposedly contemplative approach’ (Bloemendaal (2010), 235; see also Bloemendaal (2006), 410–411). For the specific charge of ‘stipulation’, see Tilley (2000a), esp. 347–349.

²⁰ Phillips continues: ‘None of this should surprise us, since we are by no means immune from these confusions ourselves. Although we are not ignorant of causal connections, nevertheless, our superstitions flourish alongside them.’

²¹ ‘Phillips’s response makes it clear that when it comes to his pet dichotomy of “religion” and “superstition,” Phillips is a philosopher who fails to practice what he preaches’ (Tilley (2000b), 365). ‘... Phillips does not always follow his own precepts’ (Bloemendaal (2010), 222). Similar criticisms are made in Moore (2005).

²² See also Phillips (2001, 39), where Phillips, speaking of giving ‘reminders of possibilities of religious sense’ that are often ignored, describes this as ‘an exercise in the kind of attention to the world which is central to the hermeneutics of contemplation.’

²³ Certain other philosophers – including, for example, many feminist philosophers – would go further, highlighting the importance of characteristics such as a person’s gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth in determining her or his epistemological ‘standpoint’. See, e.g., Anderson (2012); Harding (2002). Further consideration of the implications of ‘standpoint epistemology’ for a contemplative conception of philosophy, though extremely worthwhile, exceeds the scope of the present paper.

²⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this journal for prompting me to give additional thought to this point.

²⁵ In another place I put the point this way: ‘[T]he cultivation of this contemplative spirit is itself a religious reorientation to life, away from the self-promoting urge to construct elaborate systems of thought and towards the humble objective of understanding oneself and the world a little better while not forgetting to pause and “wonder at the world in all its variety”’ (Burley (2012b), 174–175).

²⁶ ‘For Wittgenstein, there is a fundamental vocational difference between a philosopher who is not a citizen of any community of ideas, and a philosopher whose use of philosophy subserves such a community The difference is shown in the kind of sensibility we find in Wittgenstein’s work, particularly in doing justice to perspectives which are not his own’ (Phillips (2004), 56).

²⁷ Since the ‘essay’ from which I am quoting was in fact redacted by Timothy Tessin from several of Rhees’s unpublished letters and typescripts, it is probably the case that Rhees is here thinking through these ideas for himself as much as he is expounding them for others.

²⁸ For expressivist readings of Wittgenstein, see, e.g., Cook (1983); Shields (1993), 103. For a more careful analysis, see Clack (1996).

²⁹ For Ricoeur’s original account of the distinction between ‘recollection’ and ‘suspicion’, see Ricoeur (1970), esp. bk 1, ch. 2.

³⁰ Cf. Phillips (2001), 57: ‘The aim of the hermeneutics of contemplation is ... not a matter of apologetics, but of contemplating possibilities of sense. Whether those possibilities are appropriated, personally, is another matter.’

³¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Institute of Education, University of London, 6 November 2013. I am grateful to Paul Standish for that invitation, and to members of the audience for their stimulating questions and discussion. Thanks are due also to Robin Le Poidevin and an anonymous referee for this journal for their helpfully constructive and critical comments on a previous draft.