

## WITTGENSTEINIAN FIDEISM AGAIN: A REPLY TO HUDSON

KAI NIELSEN

### I

W. D. HUDSON's criticism of some points in my 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' are challenging and deserve comment. I remain, however, unconvinced that they require any modification in my assessment of Wittgensteinian Fideism. I shall try to justify this conviction.

In 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' I was concerned to argue not that we cannot distinguish between first-order and second-order religious discourse but that we can have rational doubts about the coherence of first-order as well as second-order religious discourse and claims. That is to say, there is doubt not only about the intelligibility or coherence of 'God is pure actuality' but also about 'God is in Christ'. It is indeed true, as Hudson points out, that no matter how primitive he is, the religious sceptic's doubts are *about* religious discourse or about religious claims. But note—and this was the distinction I was stressing—they are not just about the proper *analysis* of these religious utterances but they are about the coherence of the putative claim we are making when we make such utterances. In saying 'There is a shark off the starboard bow' I am not in doubt about what I am saying in the sense that I know what counts for its truth or falsity. In that respect I have no doubt about my claim even though I may be quite unsure of the proper analysis of that utterance. Here I am simply repeating G. E. Moore's familiar point in his 'Defence of Common Sense'. But with religious discourse the situation is altered, for I know how to use 'God is my strength and my shield' and be utterly puzzled about its truth value or whether it makes any sense at all to utter it.

And here is the important contrast, for we do not have *such doubts* about 'There is a shark off the starboard bow'. In this way material-object talk and God-talk are very different. We have an additional and more basic perplexity about religious discourse that will not allow us to accept with complacency the Wittgensteinian claim that the first-order discourse is our given and, as a functional part of an on-going form of life, could not correctly be said to be incoherent. Thus Hudson is not speaking to the point I made in 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', though I do agree that the distinction he makes in the fifth paragraph of his 'On Two Points Against Wittgensteinian Fideism' is a valid distinction.

The sceptic's doubts are second-order doubts since they are doubts *about* the discourse, but—and this is the point I was concerned to make—they are doubts about the coherence of the very first-order discourse itself and not just about the proper *analysis* of the discourse. Moreover, they arise from within the discourse in the sense that men accustomed to worshipping and praying, men thoroughly trained in that form of life, often come to have doubts about the very coherence of their beliefs and the intelligibility of their utterances.

## PHILOSOPHY

### II

Some of Hudson's points in the second part of his essay seem to me well taken, but I fail to see how they are a refutation of what I argued for in my 'Wittgensteinian Fideism'. I argued there that it makes perfectly good sense to speak of the coherence or incoherence or rationality or irrationality of a form of life and that thus we could not, as both Winch and Phillips do, simply reject *a priori* all possibility of rational criticism of forms of life as such. I indeed believe that religious discourse, moral discourse, legal discourse and the like are all part of the same overall conceptual structure *in the sense that* they are not compartmentalized and that, when we engage in such discourses, we almost always discourse in some natural language such as English, Swedish, German and the like. And I also believe that these languages have distinctive syntactical and semantical structures. In this way the various forms of language, e.g. moral discourse and legal discourse, are part of the same overall conceptual structure. But I do not treat such an 'overall conceptual structure' as an 'all comprehending universe of discourse or form of life'. In fact I do not even understand what it means to talk of such a form of life. The very notion of 'a form of life' is obscure enough, but when we think of a set of social practices, 'form of life' gains some foothold, but an 'all-comprehending form of life' is so problematic that I do not know what to make of it and I would certainly not attempt to utilize such a putative conception in philosophical argumentation. And thus I do not think and did not assume, Hudson to the contrary notwithstanding, that 'rational' or 'real' have clear, precise meanings in what Hudson calls an 'overall form of life'.

However, I do not believe that such terms as 'rational' or 'real' are so context dependent that they have no criteria which cut across forms of life. The English words 'rational' and 'reasonable', as context dependent as they are, are not so contextual that in any form of life a man could properly be said to have a 'rational belief' if it were not an impartial belief and if, when a question was raised about the belief, he was not prepared, where it was practicable, to weigh the evidence or reasons pro and con for the claim in question before making a decision to act in a certain way or to continue to hold a certain belief. Note that given the use of 'rational' and 'action', rational action is only possible on the basis of genuine knowledge of the relevant facts and a rational belief is by definition a belief that is determined by the available evidence and not by will, authority or fiat. It is in Wittgenstein's sense a 'grammatical remark' to say that rational belief is determined objectively by the evidence or by reasons and not subjectively by the thinker.<sup>1</sup> I am not maintaining that this is all that is non-context dependent in the concepts of rationality and reasonableness; but I do say there is this much in common to the concepts of rationality and reasonableness in the various forms of life. Moreover, central religious claims such as 'Christ our saviour liveth' or 'God created all mankind' are putative factual claims and, as Hudson agrees, a factual claim in any form of life is a claim which is confirmable or infirmable in principle. Again we have criteria that cut across forms of life. It is indeed true that such criteria are hardly precise criteria; they have elements which are systematically ambiguous. But they need not be precise for there to be legitimate criticism of forms of life. Thus I do not accept Hudson's categorizations 'first general meaning' and 'second general meaning', for I do not see adequate grounds for the claim that the criteria for such terms of appraisal

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as 'rational' or 'real' are utterly context dependent. And note in this connection that his extended quotation from Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations* does not show what Hudson maintains it shows, namely that the meaning of 'rational' and 'reasonable' is complicated and varied.<sup>2</sup> Rather Wittgenstein is trying to maintain there—to my mind rather unconvincingly—that the concepts of being reasonable or unreasonable do not apply to religious beliefs.

It is indeed true that the utterance 'Religious belief is reasonable' is problematic: it is not, when such an utterance is made, at all evident what is being asserted or denied. But 'reasonable belief' has a sufficiently determinate meaning to be a belief which must sustain impartial scrutiny and it must be a belief for which reasons or evidence can be given such that the person holding the belief has adequate grounds for believing that his evidence or these reasons outweigh the evidence or reasons against adopting such a belief. Religious belief, I argued, comes off very badly when assessed in that way. But even if I am mistaken in maintaining that it does come off badly in that way, it remains the case that such questions can properly be raised—something that is denied by Wittgensteinian Fideists. Moreover, since 'reasonable belief' is not utterly form of life dependent, the persons asking this question need not have 'placed their remark' within the question-begging framework of a given form of life. Using some natural language and wondering about what it is reasonable to believe, such a person just asks whether religious beliefs are reasonable. And to ask this he need not be able to say what form of life he is operating in or reasoning in accordance with when he asks that question.

*New York University*

<sup>1</sup>C. K. Grant, *Belief and Action*, (Durham, England: 1960), pp. 13-15.

<sup>2</sup>I agree that they are complicated and varied, though, as I have tried to show, they have a common core as well. What I am maintaining here is that his lengthy quotation from Wittgenstein does not show this to be so nor was it intended by Wittgenstein to establish this point.

<sup>3</sup>I try to give some grounds for maintaining this against Wittgenstein in my *Quest For God*, forthcoming.