Comments on Paul Horwich’s ‘Wittgenstein on Religion’

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Paul Horwich developed an interesting interpretation of Wittgenstein’s view of religious belief based on his previous work on Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophy (Horwich 2012). Especially, Horwich provides an interesting conception of the norms of our practices, according to which different practices are governed by different norms for beliefs and assertions. He argues that some of those norms, including the norm of religious practices, are not evidential in their nature. Also, he provides a very interesting view of the role of religious beliefs with subtle distinctions on the ways of believing. In my opinion, Horwich’s paper is an important contribution to Wittgenstein scholarship by a world leading philosopher.

Today, I have five comments. Three of them are clarificatory. Two are a bit critical, but they are not so much objections as worries to the picture of religion Horwich provides.

First, I am not clear on the distinction between ‘the literal meaning of an expression-type’ and ‘intended communicative significance’(p.14). Horwich explains the distinction by saying ‘[the meaning of] a given sentence-type with a given literal meaning will vary with particular kind of context within which it occurs (p.4)’. So, it is conceived that the particular context of the use of a sentence takes one from the literal meaning of a sentence to its communicative significance. However, I am not clear how the process is conceived. Is it a process that takes one from one proposition to another? Or, is it conceived that the literal meaning of a sentence lacks a propositional content, and the context of utterance determines the proposition or what is said in that particular context (cf. Recanati 1989, Travis 1989, 2006)?

Second, I am also not clear about the distinction between ‘assent-believing’ and ‘instrumental-believing’ (pp.10-11). According to Horwich, a person who has an ‘assent-belief’ is disposed to say ‘yes’ to the sentence expressing the belief, while a person who has an instrumental belief uses the belief mentally as premises in theoretical and practical reasoning. Here, I am a bit puzzled because a person who *sincerely* says ‘yes’ to a belief would use it as her premise in reasoning. For example, if a person says ‘yes’ to the sentence ‘It is going to rain today’, she should reason on the belief. For example, she should bring her umbrella with her. If she behaves as if she does not believe that it is going to rain, we would judge she was inconsistent or her assent was insincere so that she didn’t really believe it. Therefore, a person who has an assent-belief thereby also has the corresponding instrumental belief, or so it seems to me.

Third, I am a bit unclear about ‘implicit-believing (p.11)’ as well. Horwich explains this notion by saying that a person has an implicit belief ‘when she lives as if she instrumentally accepts a sentence…but without in fact explicitly accepting the sentence and without reasoning with it (either overtly or internally) (p.11).’ He mentions Wittgenstein’s example of someone who has no disposition to say ‘There will be a Last Judgment’ but tends to see everything in terms of a reward or punishment. It seems to me that this allows us to say that someone who is outside the Christian tradition ‘implicitly believes’ the Last Judgement. So, for example, a person who explicitly has a faith in Buddhism can nevertheless be said to believe in the Last Judgement.[[1]](#footnote-1) Perhaps, this conception of ‘implicit-believing’ leads to a kind of religious pluralism, according to which various religious traditions aim at one common insight (cf. Hick 1985). This may be misunderstanding on my part of Horwich’s view of implicit-believing. But, if I am correct here, his view leads to an interesting, though highly controversial, view on the religious diversity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To clarify these three points is important because Horwich characterizes ‘the gulf (LC, p.53)’ between a Mary-like believer and a Peter-like believer by these different kinds of meaning and believing. To clarify these points makes us see how ‘fideistic’ Horwich’s Wittgenstein is.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Fourth, I am a bit worried that Horwich’s picture of religious belief focuses too much on its earthly benefit. He asserts that religious practices are not world-mapping practices and their norm is not evidential. Instead, according to Horwich, the function of religious practices is to soothe our inner torments.

[Wittgenstein’s] point, once again, is that the kind of religious belief and assertion that he recommends has a pair of functions: first, to provide illustrations and expressions of a way of life that’s constrained certain normative attitudes, and second, to be rescued from a profound sense of hopeless isolation, purposelessness, and insecurity. It can be an overwhelmingly natural way of responding to, and coping with, these inner torments. (p.18)

I think Horwich is correct in saying that religion is a natural way of responding to our inner torments. However, it may not be the only way. For, some other practice, say psychotherapy, might be a better candidate. The worry here is that if the function of religious practice is to rescue one from one’s inner torments, then we can assess its efficacy by seeing how well it fulfills the function. But, this is to see religion as a kind of psychotherapy. Maybe there is no problem here. However, I am a bit worried that this way of seeing the religion may discredit the value of religious beliefs.

Fifth, I am worried that Horwich emphasizes the distinction between religious practice and non-religious practice too much. He asserts religious practices have norm which is different from that of scientific practices. However, he says relatively little about how these different practices are related to each other. For example, imagine someone who has a Mary-like attitude towards Christianity but also engages in natural scientific practice. Thus, as a believer, she accepts Christian doctrine of God’s creation of the universe including human-beings. But, as a scientist, she accept evolutionary theory and the Big Bang. So, she can express her belief by saying ‘The God created the human-beings. And, nevertheless human-beings are the result of evolutionary process’. She, like many believers, may feel uncomfortable with her position. However, it seems that, according to Horwich’s picture, her scruple is just the result of philosophical confusion. When she says ‘The God created the human-beings. And, nevertheless human-beings are the result of evolutionary process’, the first sentence is an expression of a non-cognitive attitude, while the second one is a description of a fact. According to Horwich, these two sentences have different functions so that there is no tension here. But, here I am a bit worried that Horwich takes the scruple of a believer too lightly. I am not sure that this really is a problem, but I think it would be good if we know how he understands the ways the religious practices and non-religious practices are interconnected with each other.

References

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1. Though the conception of reward and punishment in Buddhism is very different from that of Christian tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Though John Hick’s religious pluralism is very metaphysical, committing to what he calls the Real, which Horwich surely would not accept. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whether Wittgenstein’s philosophy of religion is fideistic is a main focus of Wittgenstein scholarship since Kai Nielsen’s paper (Nielsen 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)