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Self-Deception, Prayer, and the Empirical Study of Religion

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In order to determine the origin of something, you must first, implicitly or explicitly, determine what properly belongs to the phenomenon under study. The question about origins is consequently not only an empirical one, but also in part a conceptual one. For example, and connecting to the more general question about the relation between superstition and religion, if it is possible to show that superstitious views historically have preceded religious beliefs and that the gradual vanishing of the former temporally coincides with the gradual emergence of the latter, the question about the exact relation between them still remains. Have the superstitious views *evolved* into religious beliefs? In that case, the conceptual continuity between them is presupposed. Or have the superstitious views been *replaced* by religious beliefs? In that case, the conceptual opposition of them is presupposed. Which of these two alternatives (or some third one) is the correct one cannot be decided by empirical studies alone. What is decisive for the answering of this conceptual question is the understanding of religious believers themselves of what belongs and does not belong to religious belief. It is the origin of this self-understanding we want to describe, and if we replace this understanding by an understanding of our own the only result is a description of the origin of something other than we claim to describe the origin of. As regards this self-understanding, the distinction between correct and mistaken hence makes no sense: it is what the study starts out from, not something the correctness of which is to be verified or refuted.

In other words, the self-understanding of the practitioners is decisive as regards the identification of the practice and hence the starting point for any empirical study of its origin. This is the main point of Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. He writes:

Suppose that an observer, *O*, is offering the above explanation for *N*'s having voted Labour [that *N* has voted Labour because he believes that that is the best way to preserve industrial peace]: then it should be noted that the force of *O*'s explanation rests on the fact that the concepts which appear in it must be grasped not merely by *O* and his hearers, but also *by N himself*. *N* must have some idea of what it is to "preserve industrial peace" and of a connection between this and the kind of government which he expects to be in power if Labour is elected.¹

In order for it to be possible for someone to act for some specific reason, that reason must be a possible reason for her, that is, the reason must be understood as a possible reason by her. As Winch points out, this does not mean that the observer must accept the reason *N* gives for his action, only that whatever *O* claims is the real reason for *N*'s action must be something understood by *N* himself.

But a similar thing also goes for "voting Labour" in the first place. In order for it to be possible to say that this is an action on *N*'s part, in contrast to a happening he unwittingly brings about,² the description of the action must be graspable by *N*. Winch explains this in terms of so-called "judgments of identity": when using a concept, I implicitly make a judgment of identity, that is, I count something as, in certain respects, similar to and different from other things. As to the example of "voting Labour": some things count as "voting Labour," some other things as, for example, "voting Tory," some things count as "voting," some other things as, for example, "posting a letter." Consequently, if *N* does not grasp the difference between voting Labour and doing other things, voting Labour cannot be said to be a thing he does, in contrast to something he unwittingly brings about. Or as Richard Moran says, "A person whose conceptual universe of the emotions is limited to the two possibilities of feeling good and feeling not-so-good will certainly fail to be subject to

¹ WINCH 1990, 46.

² This distinction is closely related to the scholastic distinction between *actus humani* and *actus hominis*. See AQUINAS 1888–1906, I^a-II^{ae} q. 1 a. 1 co.

(and not just fail to *notice*) the range of responses possible for some other person with the emotional vocabulary of Henry James.”³ However, what is decisive here is not the vocabulary, but the distinctions she makes; it is not possible to make someone feel disparaged if the distinction between being disparaged and not being disparaged is one she does not make, but you can certainly make that distinction without understanding the *word* “disparage.” This hence goes for actions, emotions, thoughts, and the like, and the contrast is obvious. Moran: “someone who cannot distinguish a heart murmur from heartburn could nonetheless unambiguously have either the one condition or the other.”⁴

To make this clearer, consider another example: greeting someone by waving one’s hand.⁵ People may certainly be in the dark about how long this form of greeting has existed, but they cannot, generally speaking, be mistaken about the fact that waving is a way of saying “hello,” as if a wave in fact meant something completely different than this, as if the gestures by which we greet each other were in fact the wrong ones, or as if there were in fact no such thing as greeting someone, as if we had in fact never greeted each other. Generally speaking, I said, for we should not be dogmatic and claim that someone who imitates such a gesture without understanding its meaning thereby could never be said to have greeted anybody. But generally speaking we cannot be said to be mistaken about this, which means that we are not right about it either: the distinction between being correct and being mistaken is out of place here, for our understanding of the meaning of this gesture is not an understanding of an object external to this understanding but constitutes it as a gesture of greeting. Consequently, a study with the pretensions of being purely empirical would not be able to distinguish, except as a question of different degrees of statistical regularity, between a wave and a change in hormone levels – they would be related to meeting another person in the same way. But if we want to understand the difference between these, it is vital to pay attention to the difference between, on the one hand, what is seen as an answer to the meeting, and what consequently cannot be distinct from the self-understandings of the persons in question, and, on the other

³ MORAN 2001, 40–41.

⁴ MORAN 2001, 41.

⁵ The example is inspired by a conversation with Olli Lagerspetz.

hand, what is merely causally correlated with such a meeting and hence externally related to the self-understandings of the persons in question. That greetings can be made non-spontaneously and by routine, thus not fully intentionally, does not change this but only draws our attention to how that self-understanding must be understood: the question about how understanding is ascribed to someone⁶ is a complex one and need not be, and is not always, answered only in terms of what the person in question tells us, and the self-understanding should consequently not be understood as explicit thoughts accompanying the gesture.

To sum up: In order to determine the origin of something, you must first, implicitly or explicitly, determine what properly belongs to the phenomenon under study. The question about origins is consequently not only an empirical one, but also in part a conceptual one. What is decisive for the answering of this conceptual question is the understanding of religious believers themselves of what belongs and does not belong to religious belief. It is the origin of this self-understanding we want to describe, and if we replace this understanding by an understanding of our own that only results in our describing the origin of something other than we claim to describe the origin of.

But things are not at all as simple as I have presented them. This is evident already in one of the examples I have discussed: greetings. Waving one's hand as a way of saying "hello" is uncomplicated, but what about salutes? As a way of showing respect, it is just as complicated as the concept of respect, and can be described as about keeping the proper distance to others, not too close and friendly, not too distant and hostile.⁷ It is not the balancing act as such that is problematic, but how to understand the first of the two alleged dangers: why is friendliness a problem? The answer to this question, or, alternatively, the answers to the questions such an answer would give rise to, are not such that it can be taken for granted that one can be open about them with oneself. It cannot be taken for granted, for the fear of closeness or for what closeness would bring about is a typical example of the sort of things you do not fully admit even to yourself. In other words, self-deception here becomes an important topic. The contrast is not, as above, between cases to which self-understanding is

⁶ Cf. WITTGENSTEIN 2009, §§ 143–171.

⁷ For a discussion of respect, see STRANDBERG 2015, 111–112.

internal and cases to which it is external, but between cases in which the self-understanding is clear and cases in which it is constitutively divided.

How is this division to be understood? Mind someone whom you have heard bragging of his humility. For you to be able to describe what he is doing in these terms, there is a great deal you must take him to understand. In order to understand whether he has succeeded in what he tries to do – obtaining the admiration of others – he must understand what that which he seeks to obtain is (admiration), what that is which the admiration he seeks concerns (humility), and that he seeks to obtain it. It is certainly possible that he does not consider himself humble, but in that case he does not try to obtain the admiration of others for *his* humility. But if he tries to obtain the admiration of others for his humility and consequently considers himself humble, the conflict in his self-understanding is exceptionally evident, and the person you are thinking about therefore doubtless struck you as particularly comical. The conflict in his self-understanding is however not a simple contradiction which can be settled by abandoning one of the two poles, no matter which. For he can stop bragging of his humility, which then might very well be genuine, but not abandon the belief that he is humble and still try to obtain the admiration of others for his humility. Other examples of self-deception differ from this one in many ways, but the conflict will still not be a simple contradiction. For the remorse that becoming aware of one's self-deception involves means that the previous understanding is not seen as innocent, consequently means that the previous understanding is seen as in some sense involving genuine insights, certainly in very different ways in different cases, insights that were distorted, ignored, or the like. In other words, someone who becomes aware of her self-deception thereby obtains a deeper understanding than the one she had previously, but not an understanding that is completely unrelated to the self-deceptive understanding. And this means that the conflict cannot be solved in whatever direction, but that the good understanding accentuates and takes as a starting point those germs of genuine insight that were already there.⁸

That the possibility of self-deception is a central issue, and that it is of obvious relevance to understanding religious belief, is seen already in

⁸ For more about this, see STRANDBERG 2015, ch. 3.

Winch's central example in *The Idea of a Social Science*, an issue he does not discuss, however, or even pay attention to. Winch writes, and this is supposed to point out the fact I mentioned above, that if we want to understand an action, we must pay heed to the judgments of identity internal to it:

Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (*Luke*, 18, 9). Was the Pharisee who said "God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are" doing the same kind of thing as the Publican who prayed "God be merciful unto me a sinner"? To answer this one would have to start by considering what is involved in the idea of prayer; and that is a *religious* question. In other words, the appropriate criteria for deciding whether the actions of these two men were of the same kind or not belong to religion itself.⁹

This is at best ambiguous, at worst a way of confusing the issue. Talking about "criteria" makes it sound as if it is possible to imagine different sets of criteria, one stating that the actions are of the same kind, another one that they are not, and that we now have to determine which set of criteria is appropriate in this religious context. Understood in that way, the distinctive difficulty would however be put out of sight, but perhaps Winch could be understood as intimating that there is such a difficulty, even though he says nothing about it, when he says that the question is a religious question: the religious question would then concern what I am religiously able to see as criteria, not what the criteria tells me should be counted as similar and dissimilar. This religious question is a live question *in* religion, calling for deepening and, above all, for questioning oneself and one's self-understanding, and for that very reason the concept of criteria is more confusing than helpful, I believe. Picturing myself as the Pharisee in the parable Winch refers to, I would not see the prayer of the Publican as simply different than mine, but as one disclosing the self-deception in my prayer and in my understanding of it. And if this were not the case, the point of the parable would not be intelligible at all.

As I said, in order to determine the origin of something, you must first, implicitly or explicitly, determine what properly belongs to the phenomenon under study, and what is decisive for the answering of this

⁹ WINCH 1990, 87.

conceptual question is the understanding of religious believers themselves of what belongs and does not belong to religious belief. The problem, we have now come to see, is that this self-understanding – and thereby actions, emotions, thoughts, and the like – carry the possibility of being internally divided and non-homogeneous. It is certainly non-homogeneous in the trivial sense that even within one and the same religious tradition believers may differ considerably when it comes to what role religious belief has in their life. This trivial observation does not create any crucial problems, for it only undermines general accounts of the nature and origin of religious belief and could consequently be met by restricting the investigations to particular cases. The crucial problems arise due to the possibility of inner divisions in the individual believer: to the extent that religious belief is related, closely or distantly, to questions we have problems with, to that extent religious belief will be involved in self-deception. To that extent the self-understanding is consequently non-homogeneous and constituted, in ways that remain to be investigated, by those tensions. (And the self-understanding could then after all be said to be mistaken, not because it does not correspond to an external object, but because the self-understanding is as such self-deceptive.)

To the extent that religious belief is related to questions we have problems with, I said. But it is clear that religious belief is typically, though not exclusively, about such questions, about life, about one's relations to others, about how to understand oneself. And this means that the problem I have described will be the most pressing precisely in the case of religious belief. Note that the problem is not that the study of what, say, prayer has been does not settle the question about what it should be, but that the study of what someone who is praying is doing is beset with difficulties even in the single case, and even as concerns her own understanding of what she is doing, an understanding which, as I said, must be the starting point for any study of actions, emotions, thoughts, and the like. As regards the relation between what prayer has been and what it should be, the self-understanding of the one praying has, to the extent that the self-understanding is deceptive, a dynamics which makes it impossible to isolate those two questions from each other: when hearing the prayer of the Publican, the Pharisee might come to realize what his own prayer amounts to. Or, phrased somewhat differently: it is in the light of his deeper understanding of what prayer should be that he comes to see

what his former life of prayer has been, a deeper understanding which was not simply absent before, however, in which case the process of coming to a deeper understanding would not be a painful process but only the correction of a mistake.

That this problem is the most pressing precisely in the case of religious belief does not necessarily mean that there is some constitutional problem as regards religious belief in contrast to, say, atheism. The believer might in fact be in a more favorable position than the others, for however, say, sentimental, narrow-minded, or complacent her religious belief may be, the religious tradition and community to which she belongs might offer possibilities of deepening her understanding of the belief, with or without her knowing of such possibilities beforehand, by making the self-deception visible and the above vices thus seen for what they are. In fact, the parable Winch refers to points to such possibilities in three respects, first in the fictive relation of the Pharisee and the Publican, second in the relation, as presented by Luke, of Jesus and those Jesus talks to, third in one of the uses this text is put to in the Christian church.

Any reaction to religious belief, in general or to some specific form, be it in the shape of assent, rejection or indifference, is clear-sighted to the extent that the understanding of religious belief it expresses is clear-sighted. In the end, the question thus concerns what a clear-sighted and whole-hearted life would be, and one way of coming to an answer to that question is by isolating the poles in a specific instance of self-deception and see which of them could stand on its own. For example, after meeting with the Publican the Pharisee might say that relating to God in a generally grateful way is a comportment that can stand on its own, whereas his former object of gratitude – "that I am not as other men are" – is both dependent on that gratitude (for it is among other things his gratitude that he is grateful for) and something that distorts it (in being an expression of pride) and which he therefore cannot be open about, not even with himself, as he can about the gratitude. Much more could be said about this and a richer analysis would contain more concepts than the few I just used, but as an example of how such an analysis could look like my sketch hopefully suffices.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a different and more extensive example, see STRANDBERG 2016.

Consequently, in order to study what it means to, say, pray, it is necessary to go beneath the surface of the empirical instances in order to detect the tensions at work. Describing these tensions is not primarily an empirical affair. As I pointed out above, when hearing the prayer of the Publican, the Pharisee might come to realize what his own prayer amounts to, that is, in the light of this deeper understanding of what prayer should be he comes to see what his former life of prayer has been. In other words, to the extent that possibilities of this kind exist, what it means to pray is partly constituted by its possibility of being transformed into something the believer would see, were it to become actual, as a purer and more truthful form of the same thing, a form which the present prayer is a distortion of and for that very reason not without relation to.

Describing these tensions is hence not possible in isolation from working on those existential and moral issues involved in these tensions. How some specific religious act or thought is to be described, even if it is not your own, is therefore bound up with your own possible difficulties with those issues it is about.

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