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Robert Vinten (ed.) *Wittgenstein and the Cognitive Science of Religion: Interpreting Human Nature and the Mind*

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The aim of this volume is to bring the cognitive science of religion (CSR) into constructive and critical dialogue with Wittgensteinian philosophy. The coherence of the volume is assisted by the fact that most of the chapters started life as papers delivered at workshops at the Universidade Nova in Lisbon in 2020 or 2021, at which other contributors to the volume were present. Eight of the eleven chapters fit this description. Of the remaining three, two were commissioned for the volume and the third originated as a paper presented at a conference in Seville, Spain, in 2019. The eleven chapters are preceded by an introduction in which the editor lays out the purpose of the volume and summarizes each chapter in turn.

The originality of the volume resides in its bringing together of two areas of academic study that seldom engage with each other directly. CSR practitioners tend to look for inspiration to closely related areas of science, such as neuroscience, cognitive science more broadly, and evolutionary psychology; if they turn to philosophy at all, it is more likely to be to strands of the philosophy of mind that are themselves more scientifically oriented than to the kind of philosophy exemplified or influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was himself wary of treating science as a model for philosophy. Meanwhile, philosophers of religion with Wittgensteinian leanings, if they devote any attention to CSR whatsoever, are liable to be critical of it or of certain assumptions with which it often operates – assumptions about, for example, the nature of 'the mind' and its relation to (or supposed identity with) the brain. Indeed, some Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers would be sceptical that we can usefully talk about 'the mind' at all, rather than about the many diverse though overlapping ways in which terms such as 'mind', 'minded', 'mental', and so on, function in human discourse.

The volume succeeds in exhibiting genuine dialogue between some of its contributors. Notably, Chapter 2 responds directly to Chapter 1, and Chapter 4 responds directly to Chapter 3. In Chapter 1, Roger Trigg distinguishes between two approaches to the study of religion. On the one hand is an approach that views religion as a 'social construction' (22), lacking any grounding in 'objective reality' (19). Trigg associates this view with Wittgenstein. On the other hand is an approach that views religion as a product of naturalistic processes, whether neurological or evolutionary or a mixture of the two. Trigg associates this view with much that goes by the name of CSR. He styles it as reductive and

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scientistic, whereas the problem that he sees with Wittgenstein's approach is that, by rooting religion in social life while accentuating the plurality of forms that social life takes, it leads to cultural or conceptual relativism. Trigg advocates a 'middle course' between the two approaches that avoids the pitfalls of both relativism and naturalistic reductionism (22).

Florian Franken Figueiredo, in Chapter 2, concurs with Trigg that a middle course is desirable, but maintains that, *pace* Trigg's interpretation, Wittgenstein's own approach already supplies such a middle course. Where Trigg has gone wrong is in assuming, first, that language and reality are separated by a gap, which requires some theory to be bridged, and second, that Wittgenstein proposes a theory of meaning-as-use to bridge the gap. But, Figueiredo insists, Wittgenstein would deny that there is any such gap: 'The use of language is always use *in reality*' (28, original emphasis). To this observation, it might be added that, from a Wittgensteinian point of view, Trigg's talk of 'objective reality' remains empty unless a concrete context is offered in which this term has a role: terms gain their sense through the use that they have in interpersonal linguistic contexts. Trigg takes it for granted that 'objective reality' has a readily available metaphysical sense, but this is something of which Wittgenstein would be suspicious (e.g., *Philosophical Investigations* [PI] §116).

Robert Vinten, in Chapter 3, invokes Wittgenstein's remark that 'only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious' (PI §281, quoted by Vinten, 43). If we accept Wittgenstein's point, then the procedure, typical of CSR practitioners such as Pascal Boyer, of attributing perception, inference, and other psychological capacities to brains or parts of brains will appear 'grammatically abnormal' (45). In a later chapter (Chapter 9), Mark Addis raises the further complaint against Boyer that, by claiming that the brain's purported inferences are unconscious, he has rendered his theory untestable and unfalsifiable – and thus more scientistic than scientific (155).

Hans Van Eyghen, in Chapter 4, helpfully summarizes key Wittgenstein-inspired arguments from Max Bennett and Peter Hacker, and from Vinten in the preceding chapter, before proceeding to defend CSR's attribution of perception and inference to brains. He contends that if these latter capacities are definable in terms of 'their respective functions', it becomes conceptually licit to attribute them to brains or indeed to what Boyer calls the 'inference systems' of brains (63). In support of his argument, Van Eyghen appeals to people's 'intuitions' about definitions (64), but there are in fact Wittgenstein-influenced resources upon which he could usefully have drawn. The kind of linguistic or conceptual policing pursued by Bennett and Hacker is not the only way of inheriting Wittgenstein's philosophical methods. Alternative approaches include that of Stanley Cavell, for example, who observes how words can be 'projected' into new contexts of use (Cavell S (1979) *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 180–190). In light of this view, the question becomes not whether 'perceives' and 'infers' can be projected into novel contexts – for they surely can – but whether talk about the brain and neurological activities is among those contexts. Vinten's invocation of PI §281 (quoted above) is a suitable starting point, but it hardly resolves the latter question. By challenging Vinten on this point, Van Eyghen is not necessarily being anti-Wittgensteinian.

Chapter 5, by Christopher Hoyt, levels further criticisms at Boyer, accusing him of remaining too much in the mould of Sir James Frazer despite his claims to have gone beyond him. Crucially, Boyer fails to see how certain religious practices and turns of phrase may be understood in ways that do not end up characterizing them as products of confused inferences. For example, as Hoyt affirms, to say of the deceased at his funeral, 'He would have liked it this way' is perfectly intelligible without our needing to ascribe to the speaker the confused (unconscious) thought that the dead person is indeed dead but also capable of

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making judgements (Hoyt, 76; cf. Boyer P (2001) *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books), 223). If we had suspected, after reading Van Eyghen's defence in Chapter 4, that Boyer's theories are salvageable, Hoyt prompts us to think again. Although Boyer displays imaginative flair when conjuring up systems that are supposed to be hidden away within the brain, his ability to empathetically imagine himself into the richly textured perspectives of religious practitioners is less developed. As an antidote, Hoyt recommends the kind of thick anthropological description that, by being attentive to religious and cultural specificities, enables us to see the world from alternative points of view.

In Chapter 6, Olympia Panagiotidou tells us about her research into the experiences of initiates into religious cults of Graeco-Roman antiquity. For a theoretical framework, she turned to neurocognitive theories such as Armin Geertz's 'bio-cultural theory of religion' (104). Although Panagiotidou alludes to 'some points of intersection between Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking and neurocognitive research' (100), the relevance of Wittgenstein to her investigation of the religious cults is not explained.

In Chapter 7, Thomas Carroll returns us to the contrast between the reductive tendencies of CSR, on the one hand, and Wittgenstein's resistance to reducing religion to anything that is explicable in purely biological or evolutionary terms, on the other. Carroll does this by examining different ways of understanding the notion of naturalism in the study of religion. Wittgenstein manifests a 'naturalistic sensibility' or 'naturalistic spirit' by situating religious activities among the everyday natural phenomena of human life (117); yet Wittgenstein's capacious conception of the natural avoids insinuating that the natural is somehow more fundamental than the cultural or that, by admitting that religious impulses are natural, we must be committing ourselves to the view that they result from misfiring cognitive processes. Carroll, who himself shows a keen historical sensibility in his work, discerns affinities between the Wittgensteinian willingness not to try to tidy up what is ragged and complex, and the aspirations of scholars and historians of religion to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of religion and the historical contingencies of how the concept of religion has evolved. In support of the 'ragged complexity' view of religion, Carroll describes how the lives and experiences of students in his philosophy of religion course at the Chinese University of Hong Kong problematize distinctions such as those between piety and atheism: in everyday practice, many people participate in ostensibly religious activities without aligning themselves with any given religion.

Chapter 8, by Guy Axtell, highlights differences among CSR researchers, notably between those who emphasize the cognitive or intellectual origins of religion and those who emphasize the emotional or experiential origins. (I am reminded of the theologian George Lindbeck's distinction between 'cultural-linguistic' and 'experiential-expressive' conceptions of religion; see Lindbeck GA (1984) *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), esp. Ch. 2.) Axtell proposes that Wittgenstein, along with earlier figures such as Gotthold Lessing, Søren Kierkegaard, and William James, has more in common with the second of these positions than with the first, yet also that 'he [Wittgenstein] and both branches of CSR are concerned with tensions between natural thoughts and unnatural oughts' (126). This 'natural' versus 'unnatural' distinction is related to the contention from some CSR theorists that religious ways of thinking and behaving come more naturally to human beings than do scientific ways. Over the course of Axtell's chapter, however, the principal focus becomes an exposition and analysis of Wittgenstein's 'Lectures on Religious Belief' (c. 1938), and what started as a potentially interesting comparison with the two branches of CSR drops away.

Mark Addis, in Chapter 9, argues for a move away from individualist explanatory approaches, which prioritize the cognitive propensities of individuals (or the brains of

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individuals) as the locus of religious ideas and norms, and towards the explanatory prioritization of culture. The need for such a move becomes obvious when religion is viewed in a more holistic manner that encompasses its collective ritual dimension as opposed to the narrower fixation on beliefs (assumed to be private) that is typical of CSR. The latter fixation involves 'an implicit commitment to the concept of private mental representations' (154–155), which is susceptible to the critique presented in Wittgenstein's famous demolition of the very idea of a private language. Adapting a well-known slogan from Hilary Putnam, the gist of Addis's argument (and indeed of several other of the arguments in this volume) might be summed up by asserting that *religion just ain't in the head* (cf. Putnam H (1975) 'The meaning of "meaning"', in Gunderson K (ed.) *Language, Mind, and Knowledge: Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 144).

Rita Anne McNamara's chapter, Chapter 10, promises a multireligious, cross-cultural investigation that brings out the extent to which 'our abilities to perceive and conceive of the mind are heavily influenced by the cultural settings we inhabit' (174). Overviews of certain Indian philosophical conceptions of mind and selfhood are provided (namely, those of Advaita Vedānta, early Buddhism, and Sāṃkhya-Yoga), which go some way towards illustrating the plurality of Indian viewpoints. This is followed by sections outlining animism among small-scale Indigenous peoples and the idea of some such peoples, as reported by anthropologists, that 'inner mental states' are opaque to anyone other than the person whose states they are (172). McNamara contrasts this 'opacity' view with the 'Western model of mind', wherein it is commonplace not only to attribute mental states to others but to regard such states as relatively reliable predictors of behaviour (173). This observation on McNamara's part is surprising in view of the way in which she earlier characterizes 'the Western folk model of mind' in Cartesian terms, as involving the assumption that others' minds and thoughts are hidden from us and can, at best, be inferred *from* people's behaviour (164–165). Such broad-brushed generalizations about 'Western' (and indeed 'non-Western') 'models' is a weakness of the chapter, and, given the nature of this volume, so is the absence of any mention of Wittgenstein.

Finally, the prize for the longest (and least pellucid) chapter title goes to Inês Hipólito and Casper Hesp for their co-authored Chapter 11, 'On Religious Practices as Multi-scale Active Inference: Certainties Emerging from Recurrent Interactions Within and Across Individuals and Groups'. Echoing the need for attention to cultural factors accentuated in several of the other chapters, Hipólito and Hesp argue against a 'reductive cognitivism' and for the view that 'religions emerge from a recursive relationship between individual and collective dynamics that cannot be reduced to the individual level of description' (181). (Religion, it turns out, is a collective cultural phenomenon! Who knew?) Along the way, these two authors make extensive reference to works by Wittgenstein, including the rule-following remarks in *Philosophical Investigations*. They draw connections between these latter remarks and the notion that many of our most basic beliefs or commitments are embodied in action and rooted in the 'facts of living' (Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* I, §630, quoted by Hipólito and Hesp, 185); as they put it, 'it is in our acting that we do our believing' (185). All of this is very much in tune with moves to prioritize practice – or to recognize the 'intimate intermingling of belief and praxis' (Cottingham J (2015) *How to Believe* (London: Bloomsbury), 66) – in certain areas of contemporary philosophy of religion.

The volume as a whole usefully discloses what CSR has to learn from Wittgenstein – most notably, a cautiousness about locating the origins of religious beliefs and inclinations in unconscious and essentially imperceptible cognitive systems within the brain. Wittgenstein's emphasis on the embeddedness of our beliefs and actions in sociocultural 'forms of life' (which are no less natural for being social and cultural) is a helpful reminder

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in this regard. Although a few chapters do sing the praises of CSR, it is less clear what Wittgensteinian philosophy has to gain from this branch of cognitive science (or from any branch of cognitive science, for that matter). It is noticeable that most of the chapters operate at a high level of methodological abstraction. For a book that purports to be concerned with the study of religion, it contains few fleshed-out analyses of actual religious beliefs or practices. If looking for other flaws, I might mention the awkward and inconsistent referencing system adopted throughout the volume. In most instances, citations appear in author-date form at the end of each chapter; if one wants the full reference, one has to then thumb through the bibliography at the back of the book. Instead of using the conventional abbreviations for Wittgenstein's works within the text, these, too, appear in the notes at the end of chapters, and some chapters cite the year of publication instead of using the conventional abbreviation. None of this makes for a reader-friendly citation style.

Even so, the volume undoubtedly showcases important areas of methodological engagement, disagreement, and potential complementarity between Wittgensteinian and cognitive scientific approaches. It inaugurates conversations that could be developed in future work, perhaps with application to more thoroughly worked out examples of religious practices and ways of being. The editor and contributors are to be congratulated on putting together a volume with the capacity to stimulate further methodological debate in the philosophical and scientific study of religion.

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