

Ludwig Wittgenstein in Rowan Williams's Theological Account of Language

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I

The nature and use of language is important to Rowan Williams's theology and central in Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy. Williams declares that Wittgenstein has had considerable influence on his thinking.¹ Yet, a mere glance at the philosophy of language shows considerable uncertainty and debate as to what it is and how it functions. We begin this article with an overview of Wittgenstein's ideas on language. We will then see how Williams's encounter with Wittgenstein is reflected in his 2014 Gifford Lectures and book, *The Edge of Words*.² The lectures and book are limited to natural theology; this article goes on to look at how Williams finds language also to be at work in the Christian story.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's doctrines rely on his idea that there are limits to language imposed by its structure. He sought ways to avoid saying what cannot be said and to identify the structure and limits of what *can* be said; the nature of language dictates what you can and cannot do with it. In his later thought, Wittgenstein concluded that our language determines our view of reality, because we see things through it. This negates any theory that tries to base a pattern of thought or a linguistic practice on some independent foundation in reality.

¹ "Wittgenstein, I suppose, is one of the biggest influences on my thinking over the years. ... But almost equally important is Merleau-Ponty, the *Phenomenology of Perception*. ... Wittgenstein in terms of embedding language in practice, and Merleau-Ponty in terms of showing you the richness of simple acts of perception." (Rowan Williams, 'It's intelligence all the way down' [Interview]. Theos Think Tank (20 October 2014). <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2014/10/20/its-intelligence-all-the-way-down>). In the same interview, Williams recalls that reading Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as a third-year undergraduate made him think, "Wow, now I see some things."

² Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). References to this book are usually in the form (*EW* 104), etc.

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921) is the pivotal work of the early Wittgenstein. In its preface, he defines its scope as “the problems of philosophy”, which he considers to exist because “the logic of our language is misunderstood.” The book may be summed up, he says, in its final statement: “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.” The expression of thought has limits, which can be set only in language, and “what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be non-sense.” Although Wittgenstein professed to having “fallen a long way short of what is possible”, he claimed the truth of what he wrote in *Tractatus* to be “unassailable and definitive,” believing himself “to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems.”³

In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein sees the world as consisting of “facts, not of things” (*TLP* 1). A fact is “the existence of states of affairs” each of which is a “combination of objects (things)” (*TLP* 2, 2.01). Objects combine with one another according to their properties. The totality of states of affairs, actual and possible, makes up the whole of reality. The world is precisely those states of affairs that do exist. We picture facts to ourselves, each picture being a model of reality (*TLP* 2.1, 2.12) and itself a fact correlated with the structure it pictures. To tell whether a picture is true or false, we must compare it with reality (*TLP* 2.223). “The logical picture of the facts is a thought” (*TLP* 3) and propositions give expression to thoughts in ways that can be perceived (*TLP* 3.1). A thought is a proposition with a sense and the totality of propositions is a language (*TLP* 4, 4.001). Every proposition is either true or false; this enables the composition of increasingly more complex propositions (*TLP* 5). Relying on a single general form of the proposition (*TLP* 6), Wittgenstein asserts that all meaningful propositions are of equal value. Finally, he affirms that “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence” (*TLP* 7). This conclusion will come into play in discussion of Williams’s reflections on language and silence.

Wittgenstein’s philosophical system in *Tractatus* has a purpose—to find the limits of world, thought and language and distinguish between sense and nonsense. Only factual states of affairs that can be pictured can be represented by meaningful propositions. This leaves a great number of statements as having no sense, including the statements of logic itself, which do not represent states of affairs. Logical propositions define the limits of language and thought and thereby the limits of the world. Yet, they do not picture anything and do not, therefore, have sense—they are senseless (*sinnlos*). The

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), Preface, pp. 3-4. Further references to this work will be in the form (*TLP* 2.1), etc.

characteristic of being senseless similarly applies to mathematics and to the forms themselves of the pictures that we derive from facts. Since only what is “in” the world can be described, anything “higher” is excluded, including metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics: “most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical” (*TLP* 4.003); they are literally sense-less. That said, Wittgenstein allows things to exist outside the bounds of sense by distinguishing between *saying* and *showing*. What cannot be formulated in sayable (sensible) propositions can only be shown. The metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic propositions of purported philosophy belong in the later category—which Wittgenstein finally describes as “things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical” (*TLP* 6.522, translators’ emphasis). Finally, in addition to senseless propositions, Wittgenstein identifies another category of statements without sense—the nonsensical (*unsinnig*). Some nonsensical propositions are blatantly so; others are shown to be so only by analysis.

Wittgenstein characterises philosophy not as theory or doctrine but as an activity—the clarification of thoughts and critique of language. He came to reject dogmatic philosophy, including much of his own *Tractatus*. Traditional philosophical theories of meaning required something exterior to a proposition to endow it with sense. As early as 1933, Wittgenstein was challenging this, for “if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*.”⁴ Contrary to the dominant tradition, he also argued that language had been misrepresented as a vehicle for the communication of language-independent thoughts. Speaking is not translation of wordless thoughts into language, and understanding is not interpretation—the transformation of dead signs into living thoughts. The limits of thought are determined by the limits to its expression. The possession of a language not only expands the intellect, but also extends the will. It is not thought that breathes life into a language, but its use in the stream of human life.

In *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953)⁵ Wittgenstein radically criticised traditional philosophy, including what he had thought of as its culmination in *Tractatus*. He now held that philosophers ought neither to theorise nor to explain (*PI* 126) and insisted that philosophical theories are products of the imagination that blind us to the actual complexities of language.⁶ We must

⁴ The Blue Book, 4, in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), emphasis original.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953). Quotations in this article are from the 3rd (2001) edition.

⁶ David Pears, *Wittgenstein* (n.p.: Fontana/Collins, 1971), p. 16.

avoid generalisations and theorizing about language and concentrate on *facts* about language, finding satisfaction in the nuances of the particular.⁷ Wittgenstein now rejected the assumption that the meaning of a word is the thing for which it stands, that being a misuse of the word “meaning”. It was wrong to suppose that words are connected with reality by semantic links. Not all words require sharp definition, vagueness is not always a defect, and there is no absolute standard of exactness. The terms “simple” and “complex”, which are relative, had been misused. Many concepts are united only by family resemblance. Wittgenstein found his maxim that all propositions share a general form to have been misguided, for there are many different logical kinds of description. Nor is it the role of the proposition to describe a state of affairs. It was a confusion to think that truth consists in correspondence between proposition and fact.

The central thought of *Tractatus*, that any form of representation is answerable to reality, Wittgenstein now found to be misconceived; he changed from meaning as representation to an examination of *use*. “For a *large* class of cases . . . the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (*PI* 43, emphasis original). Concepts are not correct or incorrect, only more or less *useful*. Understanding is an ability, the mastery of an expression’s use, the explanation of its meaning, and effective response. When investigating the meaning of a word, one must look to see its diverse uses (*PI* 11). The use of a word or proposition, moreover, is not employed to build theory. Wittgenstein urges us to “look and see” the meanings of words and to regard particular cases, not generalizations, even though this brings about a mass of untidy detail (*PI* 66).

To address the changing multiplicity of such uses within activities, Wittgenstein introduces the concept of a “language-game” (*PI* 7). He does not define it, but gives examples (*PI* 23).⁸ Language-games are part of broader contexts, which Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” They indicate the rule-governed character of language—not a strict set of rules for each and every language-game, but rather a conventional usage, for we cannot find “what is common to all these activities and what makes them into language or parts of language” (*PI* 65). Wittgenstein rejects general explanations and definitions, pointing instead to “family resemblance” as a better analogy for the connection between particular uses of the same word. Rather than seeking a core meaning of a word, common to all its uses, we should take into account “a complicated network of similarities overlapping

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸ The examples include: reporting an event, speculating about an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, making up a story, reading it, play-acting, singing catches, guessing riddles, making a joke, translating, asking, and thanking.

and criss-crossing" (PI 66). Thus rules for the use of words determine their meaning but are not answerable to reality.

In what has been called "the private-language argument", Wittgenstein also says that for an utterance to be meaningful it must in principle be testable against public standards and criteria of correctness. A private language, in which words "are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations" is not a genuine, meaningful, rule-governed language, for no one else can understand it (PI 243). The signs in language function only when the correctness of their use can be judged. "So the use of [a] word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands" (PI 261).

Theologians, including Rowan Williams, have employed the concept of "grammar" in ways similar to that set out by Wittgenstein. Grammar is taken to be the rules of correct syntactic and semantic usage, but with Wittgenstein it becomes the wider network of rules that determine what is accepted as making sense, and what isn't. "Essence is expressed in grammar" (PI 371, Wittgenstein's emphasis). "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)" (PI 373). The "rules" of grammar are not pre-ordained *dicta* of correct usage; rather, they express the norms for *meaningful* language. Such grammar is not abstract, but located within the ordinary activities in which language-games occur: "Here the term "language-game" is used to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form" (PI 23, Wittgenstein's emphases). Forms of life, not abstract principles, enable language to function. In Wittgenstein's terms, "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as it may sound) in judgments" (PI 242). This is "not agreement in opinions, but in form of life" (PI 241). "Forms of life" can be understood as changing and contingent, dependent on culture, context, history, etc. "The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (PI 206).

II

In *The Edge of Words*, Williams begins with a clear statement of his central question for his lectures: "Does the way we talk as human beings tell us anything about God? . . . Perhaps the very way we speak and think can be heard as raising a question about the kind of universe this is and thus about where and how language about God comes in" (EW ix). Although Williams states plainly that he is not attempting "to offer that unlikely product, a new and knockdown 'argument for the existence of God'," he is engaged in natural theology, "seeking

to place our talk about God in the context of what we think we are doing when we communicate at all" (*EW* xiii). He asks whether talking about God "is not a marginal eccentricity in human language but something congruent with the more familiar and less noticed oddities of how we speak" (*EW* x). The study of language can be a species of natural theology, even though language about God is also the stuff of theology grounded in revelation. Williams defends the idea of natural theology, but urges rethinking of the way it is done.⁹

For Williams, natural theology suggests not only the place of our language about God but also of our language about ourselves: "What we say about the processes of language . . . is a way into constructing an anthropology as well as a theology, a picture of the human" (*EW* 183). This means that that the best account of what it is to be human "is deeply implicated in concerns about the sacred—about what is not yet said, what is not sayable, what precedes our understanding and both confirms and challenges specific acts of understanding" (*EW* 184). Further, Williams concludes that "what the various languages of revelation propose or imply is that our most fully aware and deliberate and freely accepted silences, when the speaker's agenda is most manifestly suspended, are moments where truthfulness is most evident . . . [W]e can say also that this is where the sacred appears." For the Christian, this appearing is in Christ, especially as "ultimate revelation silenced and immobilized" in the *kenosis* of the Cross. "Spelling this out", Williams says, "is what theology does" (*EW* 194).

Williams mentions Wittgenstein only occasionally in *EW*, yet we see a profound Wittgensteinian background in much of the book. *EW* could be described as *prolegomena* to theology, for it proposes natural theology as a practice leading to thinking about God and seeks a starting point for theologizing through attention to the way language works. "Don't think, but look!" Wittgenstein urged. That is, observe the specifics of a situation, rather than generalising in the abstract. We will then, he said, "see a complicated network of similarities" (*PI* 66). Having thus obtained a "map" "illustrating the dependent or contingent character of all we experience," we may be challenged to decide whether the things we have observed fit with "the limits of the discourse we have been using" (*EW* 18). This practice of observation is Williams's proposal for natural theology. It is his method in *EW*.

Williams argues convincingly that speech, although a physical process, is not produced deterministically, and is not essentially a description of reality. Our use of language involves the active

⁹ Catherine Pickstock suggests that what Williams offers in *The Edge of Words* is "something more like a metaphysics." — C. J. C. Pickstock, "Matter and Mattering: The Metaphysics of Rowan Williams," *Modern Theology* 31 (2015), pp. 599-617, at 599.

human imagination, re-shaping both our world and us—as we find in Wittgenstein. “If all we have to discuss in the construction of a theology or moral philosophy of language is the function of manifesting what is the case,” Williams says, “we miss a range of difficult but essential themes . . .” (*EW* 50). Freedom in language, for example, adds and admits intelligence. “We are oriented to picking up and decoding intelligible messages.” In religious discourse, the “notion of an unbounded creative intelligence” (*EW* 64) brings us to theology. “Taking seriously the freedom of language . . . begins to point us to [a] characterising of actuality itself” (*EW* 65).

Partly from Wittgenstein, Williams argues that language is always unfinished (*EW* 66–94). We speak in the hope of recognition, understanding the things we talk about only by comparison with our own conscious systems of recognition and connection. To understand means to know how to “go on” in a conversation. Using Wittgenstein’s example of a person counting a series of numbers and another then realising how to continue it (*PI* 151), Williams says that “if understanding is knowing how to ‘go on’, how to follow what has been said or done with an intelligible next move, linguistic activity is always going to be something that moves in time.” Rarely is something we say autonomous, complete in itself. Whatever we say encounters the symbols of our surrounds and the speech of others. “What we say cannot be understood except as an event that requires further speaking, ‘following’” (*EW* 69).

Language creates meaning, which has social and ethical implications, for meaning is shared, public, and practical. “The unfinishedness of language, the fact of never having said the last word and of seeking to continue a practice, will not allow us easily to settle down with an account of language that treats it as a purely self-generated thing.” (*EW* 92). These shared and unfinished qualities of language demand that we acknowledge our dependence on each other, trusting what we can understand, incomplete though it may be. Only as community do we simultaneously create and use language. (Recall Wittgenstein’s refutation of the very idea of “private-language”.) A life-giving trust in one another shows our finiteness, limited just as our language is limited. Williams affirms that it also leads us towards acceptance of mystery and silence, which “gives us some purchase on what we might mean by the ‘sacred’” (*EW* 92–3). Faith would seem to benefit from “finished” stories, but Williams says the opposite is often true. “What we have been exploring,” he says, “are the implications of knowing that I am finite” (*EW* 87).

Williams gives a chapter of *EW* to a discussion of “excessive speech”—what happens when we stretch the use of words to “push habitual or conventional speech out of shape” in metaphor, for example, and especially in poetry (*EW* 150). Religious ritual is a familiar context for stretched and bent language; we can become

so well acquainted with it that we hardly notice the horror brought to mind by images of eating flesh and drinking blood. It makes no *literal* sense to describe God as a rock, bread, living water, fire, or other such. Wittgenstein would categorise such usage as nonsensical in the particular way that he uses that idea. Williams's concept of excessive speech helps us see what the later Wittgenstein was getting at in settling on *use* as the source of a word's meaning. If it is *useful* to speak of consuming the body and blood of Christ, then such language is meaningful, even as it is extreme in the sense that Williams uses. The language becomes *useful* as it is *enacted*, whether in discourse or otherwise.

Even excessive speech finds limits and comes to an end. In the final talk of his Gifford lectures, Williams pondered "where silence happens" (*EW* 156ff.). Again we recall the importance Wittgenstein gave to what had *not* been said, and that for him some things can be shown but not said. Similarly, for Williams, "The non-determinate character of our speech means that there is always a possibility of silence . . . the unfinished character of language means that we are always aware of what has not yet been said." This awareness may "manifest literally in silence, or may simply be a perennial quotation mark" (*EW* 168).

Wittgenstein's maxim—that only so much can be said, after which sensible language ends in silence—is contested by Theodor Adorno, who found it to be "of an indescribable spiritual vulgarity inasmuch as it ignores the whole point of philosophy."¹⁰ Adorno believed that it is "precisely the paradox" of philosophy that it "aims to say the unsayable, to express by means of concepts that which cannot be expressed by means of concepts."¹¹ In *Negative Dialectics*, he claims that the "true interest of philosophy" lies "in what is non-conceptual."¹² In an explicit rejoinder, Adorno declares that the task of philosophy is to try, "against Wittgenstein to say what cannot be said. The simple contradiction of this demand is the contradiction of philosophy itself; it qualifies philosophy as dialectic, before it gets entangled only in its own contradictions. The task of philosophical self-reflection consists in unravelling this paradox."¹³ In his theology, Williams is not trying to say the unsayable, as Adorno would wish and Wittgenstein would not. Rather, he seeks the meaning of

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), pp. 55-56, translation by Bill Vallicella at http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/03/adorno-on-wittgensteins-indescribable-vulgarity.html. Accessed 19 May 2015.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also John Gordon Finlayson, "On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno's Singular Apophaticism," *Harvard Theological Review* 105 (2012), pp. 1-32.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, (New York: Continuum, 2005), 6:20. (First published in German in 1966.)

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6:21.

what is not being said and what cannot be said. He looks for God's speech and human speech in the silence, relying on theology and faith to take him beyond the limits of philosophy. Yet, Williams understands that when the struggle for speech is at the edge of words, silence begins, a "Resurrection silence," as Diarmaid MacCulloch has called it.¹⁴

Does *The Edge of Words* succeed as natural theology? Not, perhaps, in the conventional sense of winning an argument. Williams acknowledges that "The preparatory exercises for theology which these chapters sketch may not compel anyone to a theological sequel" (*EW* 185). He turns natural theology into a *practice*, which in *EW* is worked out as an examination of "a succession of features of our human language . . . looking and listening for the elements in our ordinary practice—specifically our practice as speakers—that become extraordinary and strange the more we examine them" (*EW* 19). This "poses most clearly for us the question of whether we can think with adequate imaginative reach about language without some reference to the sacred" (*EW* 170).

What Williams seeks to do in *EW* is to "'hold' for a moment" an idea of the energising and disturbing limits of our language, and to think about our intelligence being oriented to the unknown. If we perceive language as he proposes, Williams says, we may better understand our humanity by believing that the "revealed sacred" acts freely in similar ways to ourselves (*EW* 185). Williams discerns a sacredness in the ineffable character of speech and communication and finds that the way we speak may show us something of the sacred. In *EW*, however, he does not offer an account of language in theology as such or of what theology in turn might tell us about language. Those topics were beyond his project for the Gifford lectures. We must look elsewhere in Williams's work to find his *theological* account of language and whether that, too, draws on Wittgenstein.

III

Williams has written little about Wittgenstein. Yet when he is thinking about language, Wittgenstein may often be discerned in the background. We can also find something of Wittgenstein in Williams's working practice. Much of theology is constructed in words, in language, and we have noted Wittgenstein's belief that the meaning of words is worked out in the context of forms of life. Thus, as

¹⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 239, reflecting on Donald MacKinnon, 'Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme,' in *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 1979), pp. 136-7.

Benjamin Myers observes, Williams learned from Wittgenstein that theology is “not really about ideas but about life.”¹⁵ Biographer, Rupert Shortt, says that by his mid-twenties, Williams was “starting to insist with growing emphasis that Christianity is a way of life—of loving, suffering, working, giving and receiving in relation to God and our fellow creatures.”¹⁶

A crucial aspect of the later Wittgenstein's philosophy of language has been termed its “sociality”.¹⁷ That is, the meanings and uses of language are worked out as we struggle and learn to communicate: “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form” (*PI* 23, Wittgenstein's emphasis). The “common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (*PI* 206). Applied a little more broadly, this makes theology itself, as language about God, into an *activity*, a shared form of life. The sharing of theology as action has been crucial in Williams's perception of it. As Myers puts it: “Theology, in his view, is not a private table for one but a rowdy banquet of those who gather, famished and thirsty, around Christ.”¹⁸

Shortt adjudges that, alongside Samuel Beckett, Wittgenstein was critical to the youthful Williams in discerning that religious truth is often clouded but must nevertheless be pursued with unfailing commitment. “More than almost any other British theologian of his age, [Williams] made it his business to investigate the ways in which secular thought might also lead to the threshold of a religious understanding, and for this task his principal guide was the later Wittgenstein.”¹⁹ Williams came to see an affinity between the structure of thinking (including theology), the nature of language, and the structure of reality—an affinity demanding love and imagination.²⁰ This realisation is at the core of Williams's theology of language.

Williams has written of the poetic and imaginative character of religious language.²¹ Poets help us see things in new ways, but can do this only if they are immersed in a deeply understood existing language and able to stretch it, testing what it can allow us to say. Our habitual language both enables and limits our lives. The poet travels to “the borders of language to confirm our suspicions that the world is not to be *merely* accepted, but accepted and transformed; to teach us

¹⁵ Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), p. 35.

¹⁶ Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: A Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 97.

¹⁷ Myers, *Christ the Stranger* . . . , pp. 13ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹⁹ Shortt, *Rowan's Rule* . . . , 98-99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Poetic and religious imagination,’ *Theology* 80 (1977), pp. 178-187.

how to praise the elusive possibility of God.”²² Paradoxically, before poetic language can authentically fulfil its role of re-creation, “there must be an entirely committed immersion in the world, a watching and listening in silence; but the deeper this immersion becomes, the less is it possible to translate the world into new words, new images.”²³

Humans are linguistic creatures; we discriminate objects and circumstances from each other and perceive them to have meanings. We can work with them only when they are taken up in our language and become meaningful. Acquisition of language enables us to think, experiment and explore, to discover new meanings and possibilities. Williams says that our world is continually being “brought . . . into meaningfulness”; we learn language that enables us to interact with the world in new and changing ways.²⁴ The more that our stories are seen as fresh statements (new metaphors?) in a common tongue, the more our tradition is alive—and therefore incomplete. Continuity is a concern, of which Williams is aware. He says that “the idea of ‘orthodoxy’ is what evolves as the common life gropes for a sense of the criteria for continuity . . . the ‘grammar’ by which we can discern that even divergent utterances are being made in one and the same language.”²⁵

We use our bodies to speak and write; our language is incarnational, as Williams affirms in *the Edge of Words*. In a 2008 lecture on “Religious Faith and Human Rights”, Williams proposed that “the inviolability of the body itself is where we should start in thinking about rights.”²⁶ The body is essential for human communication—communication that is language. The body is “the organ of the soul’s meaning; it is the medium in which the conscious subject communicates, and there is no communication without it.”²⁷ As a means of communication, one’s body “cannot be simply instrumental to another’s will or purpose.”²⁸ “The dignity accorded to the human other is . . . simply a recognition that what they have to say . . . could in certain circumstances be the gift of God. . . . Not silencing the other or forcing their communication into your own

²² Ibid., p. 186, Williams’s emphasis.

²³ Ibid., p. 181.

²⁴ Mike Highton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams*. (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 75-77, including quotation from Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology: Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 198.

²⁵ Rowan Williams, quoted in Highton, *Difficult Gospel* . . . , p. 79.

²⁶ Rowan Williams, *Religious Faith and Human Rights: Lecture for the London School of Economics and Political Science’s Forum on Religion*, in its Programme for the Study of Religion and Non-Religion (1 May 2008), p. 4. http://www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/pdf/20080501_RowanWilliams.pdf.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

agenda is part of remaining open to the communication of God.”²⁹ Wittgensteinian ideas of language here contribute to Williams’s proposal of a theological foundation for human rights.

We have seen that, for Wittgenstein, the limits of thought are determined by the limits to its expression, the available language. Possession of language expands one’s ability to act. Its use in human “forms of life” breathes life and force into language. Williams sometimes writes of the Christian gospel and Christ-centred language as though they were essentially identical—or, at least, inseparable. “Christian believers make the bold claim that no other language than that which speaks of the crucified and his resurrection can speak comprehensively of what it is to be ‘saved’, to be whole as a human being before God.”³⁰ In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein mentions the idea of “theology as grammar” (*PI* 373). The “rules” of a grammar express the norms for *meaningful* language. Thus understood, Williams is saying quite simply that the meaning of the salvation we identify with Jesus is found his cross and resurrection—but it comes to *us* through speech, as language. “The resurrection of Jesus, in being a restoration of the world’s wholeness, is equally a restoration of language . . . a vision capable of being articulated in word and image, communicated, debated and extended.”³¹ The commitment to language is an act of faith and humility for, although we may fail, we hope that by God’s grace that our communication of the faith may survive the “perils of words.”³² The act of faith that is Christian speech continually moves between clarity and inarticulateness, for a god who can be fully articulated is no longer God. As we near God, “at each stage the silence and the loss and emptiness become deeper and more painful, so at each stage the recovered language is both more spare and more richly charged.”³³

In an essay on Gillian Rose, Williams criticises what he sees as a post-realist axiom that language cannot have any “matter” but itself.³⁴ Such language has no “grammar” in the wider Wittgensteinian sense, for it lacks rules that test its meaningfulness. Employing a Wittgensteinian perspective, Williams says that discourse demands work to create and test language that can be recognised by others as similar to their own, containing actions that can be talked about in the exchanges and negotiations that make up a shared pattern of

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

³⁰ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*. Revised end ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), p. 65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65-6.

³² Williams, *Resurrection . . .*, p. 66, quoting Williams, ‘Poetic and religious imagination,’ p. 182.

³³ Williams, *Resurrection . . .*, p. 66.

³⁴ Rowan Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose,’ *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), p. 3.

language—things that can be criticised and defended, understood or misunderstood.³⁵

In one of his few pieces specifically on Wittgenstein, Williams makes a *crie de coeur* for the redemption of language: “How can we not have a certain longing for ‘uncovering’, for a language that will show us what is *really* happening?”³⁶ Yet a longing for unifying discourse tempts us to overlook the awkward particulars of what is actually *there*, easily leading to untruth. Language that speaks of God and humanity can never be definitive and tidy. Rather than describing our participation in the Easter events through faith or belief, for example, Williams talks of the challenge of new language and new shared speech. The problems of talking about the resurrection of Jesus are the problems of describing “where one stands and who one is” in the light of the resurrection. The challenge of speaking about the resurrection, “presents only the problems present in all Christian language, the problems of speaking about God and the human together.”³⁷

Each time we write or speak, it could be done differently. In Wittgenstein’s phrase, we “go on”, with our conversation, looking for more useful language. Williams says that “Human doing and making has a ‘conversational’ dimension in its calling forth unceasing response and reflection in the form of further doing.”³⁸ Human speech is never complete.

When we say that something is true or adequate, what are we claiming? Increasingly . . . philosophical discourse has rendered such a claim problematic, and in connection with language about God it is especially difficult . . . Wittgensteinian caution (about imagining that language can capture essences and fix meanings once and for all) . . . prompt[s] us to rethink reference in general, and theological reference in particular.³⁹

The “Wittgensteinian caution” of which he writes is for Williams both an idea and long-established, deeply held practice. It is both a great strength in Williams and a frustration that he rarely makes a final, definitive, statement. We noted above the “sociality” inherent in Wittgenstein’s concept of language, which has supported Williams in his approach to theology as an activity and shared form of life. Ben Myers says that “The priority of life over ideas: that is what gripped

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Rowan Williams, ‘The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer,’ in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, edited by Mike Higton (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 195.

³⁷ Williams, *Resurrection* . . . , pp. 111-2.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 198.

³⁹ Rowan Williams, ‘To Speak Truly About God,’ *The Marginalia Review of Books* (27 May 2014) <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/speak-truly-god/>.

Williams' imagination as a young Welsh reader of Wittgenstein. This habit of mind has left a lasting impression on Williams' thought: decades later, it continues to orient his thinking about Christ, the church, and society."⁴⁰ Consequently, Williams has been praised and criticised for allowing and fostering debate sometimes past the point when most would prefer resolution and decision—especially in church affairs. At least publicly, Williams would much prefer vagueness to error. Perhaps this manner of working is also an implicit acquiescence in Wittgenstein's insistence that messiness and vagueness in language are inherently unavoidable. As Archbishop, Williams struggled to encourage the Anglican churches to live together despite disagreement and indecisiveness.

To understand the meanings of words, the later Wittgenstein urges us to observe the details. Again, this is reflected to an extent in Williams's manner of working. He is an acute and painstaking observer and scholar, willing to examine details closely and to spend himself in detailed study. Williams is well able to make strong, encouraging and definite statements about Christian faith and has done so often. Yet he wrestles with the meaning of words, searching for ways to say more while not attempting to say things about God that cannot be known. Williams allows there to be limits to what we can say about God; if that leaves things about God unsaid, so be it.

Yet Williams finds it valuable to push some speech about God to its limits. Thus, for example, he has observed that although, for many, "blasphemy is the cardinal case of saying the unsayable [it] isn't always about attacking or rejecting faith itself." "Blasphemy resists the conspiracy of silence about the agonising difficulties of belief, resists the stifling of a real and honest response to an unjust world. . . . It may even be a gateway into a larger and more durable commitment."⁴¹ Faith may sometimes be found by pushing speech to its extremes.

Williams is very aware, also, that the character of a particular language dictates what can and can't be done with it: "Finding words to respond to the Word made flesh is and always has been one of the most demanding things human beings can do. Don't believe for a moment that religious language is easier or vaguer than the rest of our language. It's more like the exact opposite."⁴² Words such as those of the great creeds and the *Book of Common Prayer* took labour and

⁴⁰ Myers, *Christ the Stranger* . . . , p. 15.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, 'Why religion needs blasphemy,' *New Statesman*, 27 May 2015. Excerpts at <http://www.newstatesman.com/2015/05/weeks-magazine-neil-gaiman-and-amanda-palmer-guest-edit-saying-unsayable>.

⁴² Rowan Williams, *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 92-3.

sacrifice to create. They are deeply embedded in our worship and not readily discarded. Nor should they be, Williams affirms.

Speaking of the “puzzles and uncertainties, or even just boredom” that we experience in the language of traditional doctrinal forms, Williams says that if we revise our language to eliminate every problem, we also remove the things that most challenge us by their very strangeness. No room is left for depth. Yet, if we ignore gaps between ourselves and others in understanding and assumption, we make Christian language and doctrine once again a tool of power and self-defence. It is important to recall and use words and images that unite believers, people whose identities are renewed in Jesus. The very purpose of a doctrinal statement is “to place us in a certain kind of relationship to truth, such that we can be changed by it.”⁴³ Williams is using a Wittgensteinian approach by saying in effect that the test of the meaningfulness of a doctrinal statement is its *usefulness*—not in making us more comfortable or in affirming positions of power, but in bringing us to the truth.⁴⁴ But this does not eliminate mystery. Theology seeks the understanding and knowledge of God—*fides quaerens intellectum*. It is thus an essential pursuit of the ultimately impossible. “When God breaks in,” Williams writes, “I am nearer than before to some sort of truthfulness, and I am plunged into confusion.”⁴⁵

Williams identifies with Wittgenstein's work as a struggle against the bewitchment of the intellect. “Wittgenstein believed most emphatically in the possibility of deception and self-deception and he . . . was aware of living in a culture saturated with fundamental untruthfulness.”⁴⁶ The ruthlessly self-critical Williams is not one to practice philosophically foolish theology. He presses into the silence, seeking to discern and to show God's self-communication in word *and* silence. Wittgenstein contributes much to the philosophical beginnings of his journey, but Williams's creativeness as a theologian has long surpassed his being influenced by another thinker in a simple way.

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⁴³ Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, ‘A Ray of Darkness,’ in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 101.

⁴⁶ Williams, ‘The Suspicion of Suspicion . . .,’ 195.