

11-22-2010

## Beyond Fun and Games: Radical Misunderstanding and The Structure of Knowledge in Empirical and Religious Controversy

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### Recommended Citation

Campanella, Sean (2010) "Beyond Fun and Games: Radical Misunderstanding and The Structure of Knowledge in Empirical and Religious Controversy," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol7/iss1/4>

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Sean Campanella

"Beyond Fun and Games:

Radical Misunderstanding and The Structure of Knowledge  
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"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but onto us which are saved, it is the power of God."--St. Paul (I Corinthians 1:18)

People misunderstand each other all the time, for a number of reasons. This is not always cause for concern, as often miscommunication is due to a superficial breakdown (for example, "pen pals" with horrible handwriting or conversants at a rock concert) with better conditions readily available. At other times, people simply don't speak the same language. Again, this is not alarming, for the people involved need only go about learning each other's language, or perhaps a common language. There are instances, however, when people, using shared "words" and a shared medium, fail to understand one another. This was a great concern to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who made it his life's work to unravel the muddles and confusions that are imbedded in the structure of language itself. While he may not have been completely successful, he did make a great splash in the philosophy of language, and it is on the waves of his thought that this essay shall discuss a particular kind of misunderstanding, namely that of the theist and the atheist, or more generally, that of "religious talk" and "empirical talk." This discussion will seek to establish that misunderstandings arising between religious and empirical talk are of a *radical* sort, quite different from the kinds of miscommunication that occur every day.<sup>1</sup> In support of this reflection on understanding, Wittgenstein's notions of the "language game" and the structure of knowledge will be examined.

**Language Games and Resolvable Misunderstanding**

For Wittgenstein, a language game is much like a regular game that people play (e.g., chess, baseball, etc.); it has "playing pieces" ("words") and rules to follow. Just as the number and variety of games is immense and seemingly infinite, so are language games equally numerous and various. "Words" can simply be spoken words, or they can be written symbols, numerical codes, hand motions, and so on. The rules that form the language game can be many and complex, or quite few and simple. Clearly, Wittgenstein defines "language game" in a very broad way:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language,  
I am saying that these phenomena [language games] have no one

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<sup>1</sup> Other forms of radical misunderstanding are not denied and may be referred to in places, though religious and empirical dialogue will remain the focus of this discourse.

thing in common which makes us use the same word for all--but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways (*Philosophical Investigations* [PI] #65; parentheses added, emphasis not added).

From his discussion of language games, Wittgenstein wanted to establish that there is no single correct way of *using* language.<sup>2</sup> He sought to dispel the idea that there was an "essence" to language:

When we believe that we must find that order, must find the ideal, in our actual language, we become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called 'propositions', 'words', 'signs'. The proposition and the word that logic deals with are supposed to be something pure and clear-cut. And we rack our brains over the nature of the *real* sign.... We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers (PI #105-106; emphasis not added).

The common reaction to a misunderstanding is that one party is not utilizing the tools of language properly, as if there was an ideal way to do it. Wittgenstein showed that when communication breaks down, it isn't *always* because one party is using language incorrectly (though this does happen); rather, sometimes two different language games are being employed.

Consider, for example, a typical laboratory setting in which a scientist and an apprentice are involved in genetic research. As the scientist peers down into a petri dish, he asks the apprentice, "What do you get when you cross a heterozygous allele for red eyes in strain 32-B *drosophila* with a homozygous recessive allele for white eyes?" If the apprentice scratches her head, thinks very hard for a moment, and says finally, "Hmm... the answer isn't coming to me," perhaps the scientist's response would be to say, "I'm not quizzing you; look it up for me." The apprentice misunderstands the scientist, not because she doesn't use the language correctly, but because the two are playing different language games.

Language games are played, and hence misunderstandings occur, in a religious context as well, the shape and flavor of the conversation being no different from that in a scientific context. Instead of a scientist and an apprentice, imagine an abbot and a novice. They have long discussions concerning the epistles of St. Paul and the nature of righteousness. The abbot quizzes the novice, gives him orders, makes jokes; usually the novice understands, once in a while he doesn't. The dialogue between the two is not, in and of itself, of a special kind (i.e., there is no "linguistic magic" going on). The words, propositions, and symbols used are common to the language employed by the

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein was concerned with refuting the position, taken in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that words are simply names for objects (see PI #27).

scientist and the apprentice.<sup>3</sup> Only in direct juxtaposition to one another (or perhaps, when "superimposed" upon one another) do religious talk and empirical talk appear to function differently.<sup>4</sup>

For Wittgenstein, the kinds of miscommunication that can take place between people are as diverse as the language games in which they occur, and in any given interaction, there are more or less "regular" ways to mistake meaning. Taking the previous example of the scientist and the apprentice, the misunderstanding arises because the scientist is playing the "order-obey" game and the apprentice is playing the "quiz--answer" game. These two games are not remarkably different from one another, in that they are both forms of conversation that typically occur between scientists and apprentices. Other, less ordinary kinds of misunderstanding can be imagined. For instance, the scientist asks, "What do you get when you cross...", etc.; perhaps the apprentice replies, "Oh, I've heard that one before" or even, "*I love that song.*" Assuming that the scientist is still playing the "order-obey" game, the apprentice again misunderstands, though in a more unusual way. Of course, what is taken as "ordinary" or "irregular" is dependent upon the overall context in which the dialogue takes place. In the examples above, if the scientist was particularly goofy or prone to singing songs while doing research, then the apprentice's mistake might not seem so odd.<sup>5</sup>

### Structure of Knowledge

Clearly, there are many ways in which understanding can elude those who use language. Nonetheless, an important feature of all the examples offered thus far is that the misunderstanding they present is resolvable. It is possible that the scientist tells the apprentice that this is no time for jokes, or whatever. Understanding can quickly be set back on track again, because the scientist and the apprentice share so much language. They both know the meaning of all the terms involved in their "genetics" language ("allele," "*Drosophila*," etc.), the general principles of science, and ordinary language. By falling back on this shared pool of knowledge, the two can carve a more effective path to mutual understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> There do exist game-specific terms (e.g., "32-B *Drosophila*," "righteousness," etc.), though there is nothing inherent in a term which excludes the possibility of its use in other games.

<sup>4</sup> In other words, if one observes religious language at work, and then observes empirical language at work, one will not notice any radical differences; however, when one observes them at work with one another, the differences emerge.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, even in the most obvious cases there is never absolute certainty as to whether the person in question understands what is being said. This is because it is never possible to tell what is going on in another person's head. One simply accepts reasonable certainty based on the actions he/she performs.

In other words, the scientist and the apprentice share a "frame of reference"; their epistemologies are structured in very similar ways. When asked questions, they will respond in like fashion, using the same kind of reasoning to justify their answers. Thus, it could be said that the scientist and the apprentice are members of a *language community*.

How these communities come about was of some interest to Wittgenstein. He observed that from the earliest days of childhood, people are *trained* to use the language, in the same way they are trained to recognize certain sounds, ride bicycles, and play games. During this stage of development, the child does not demand explanations and proofs with the introduction of every new word or proposition. Most propositions are accepted as true, without the consideration of doubt. This is because, in general, the possibility of doubt is excluded from the process of learning. "We teach a child 'that is your hand,' not 'that is perhaps (or 'probably') your hand.' That is how a child learns the innumerable language-games that are concerned with a hand" (*On Certainty* [OC], #374). Wittgenstein considers the absurdity of this kind of doubt with an example:

A pupil and a teacher. The pupil will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc.... The teacher would feel that this was only holding them up, that this way the pupil would only get stuck and make no progress.--And he would be right. It would be as if someone were looking for some object in a room; he opens a drawer and doesn't see it there; then he closes it again, waits, and opens it once more to see if perhaps it isn't there now, and keeps on like that (OC #310 and 315; emphasis not added).

In other words, if a person were to carry on this way, he/she would not be able to function properly at all; he/she would doubt at all the wrong times. Of the pupil, Wittgenstein asks, "For how can a child immediately doubt what it is taught? That could only mean that he was incapable of learning certain language games" (OC #283).

At the heart of the matter, our knowledge is structured around certain unshakable beliefs. Though these beliefs may have the form of an empirical proposition (e.g., the uniformity of nature, the righteousness of God, etc.), they aren't based on evidence. Of this Wittgenstein says:

How does someone judge which is his right hand and which his left hand? How do I know that my judgment will agree with someone else's? How do I know that this colour is blue? If I don't trust *myself* here, why should I trust anyone else's judgment? Is there a why? Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is part of judging (OC #150; emphasis not added).

Unshakable beliefs are accepted as true as the *means of* acquiring the language, learning about the world, and dealing with experiences.<sup>6</sup> They are the source (or watershed) of all language and knowledge. This is one's "frame of reference." To question one's unshakable beliefs is nonsensical. It makes no sense, for instance, for one to doubt whether one has two arms, or whether the earth existed 100 years ago. These items are beyond falsification. "That is to say," notes Wittgenstein, "the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are (as it were) like hinges on which those turn." He wants to show the skeptic that if he doubts *this* (the existence of his arms) then there is *nothing* he shouldn't doubt; everything becomes vulnerable.

### Radical Misunderstanding

This brings us to a second, more profound kind of misunderstanding. When two people bring entirely different "frames of reference" to bear on a topic, communication can break down. Take, for example, a seemingly simple matter: the existence of the earth. Jim claims that the earth does not exist. Jane responds to this seemingly outrageous statement by providing Jim with many reasons as to why the earth exists (e.g., astronauts have seen it from the moon, it's what we stand on, etc.). In other words, Jane treats Jim as if he had made some sort of blunder in reasoning; she believes that, given more evidence, Jim will be convinced. Now, if Jim responds accordingly, perhaps slapping his forehead and saying, "What was I thinking?", it would be fair to conclude that Jim had been temporarily confused or demented (i.e., he had made a *mistake*).<sup>7</sup> That he can now understand Jane shows that they share the same frame of reference after all. On the other hand, if Jim was truly puzzled (or insulted, or whatever) by Jane's insistence that the earth does in fact exist, Wittgenstein would label this as a more radical kind of misunderstanding, the kind that occurs when two "frames of reference" fail to mesh. Jane's pleas make no sense to Jim because he doesn't accept reasons in this case. No matter what sort of evidence Jane offers, if Jim truly believes that the earth does not exist, then he will not accept (or even understand) any of it. The way he thinks about the existence of the earth is radically different from the way that Jane does.

As an example, Wittgenstein offers the following:

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted here that these beliefs are not explicitly learned. Rather, they are implicit to the form of learning taking place. Thus Wittgenstein says, "I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility" (*OC* #152; emphasis not added).

<sup>7</sup> This kind of blunder may be too big to be an ordinary mistake. However, for the purposes of this argument, it will be accepted as possible.

Suppose there is a feast on Mid-Summer Common. A lot of people stand in a ring. Suppose this is done every year and then everyone says he has seen one of his dead relatives on the other side of the ring. In this case, we could ask everyone in the ring, 'Who did you hold by the hand?' Nevertheless, we'd all say that on that day we see our dead relatives. You could in this case say: 'I had an extraordinary experience. I had the experience of seeing my dead cousin.' Would we say you are saying this on insufficient evidence? Under certain circumstances I would say this, under other circumstances I wouldn't. Where what is said sounds a bit absurd I would say: 'Yes, in this case insufficient evidence.' If altogether absurd, then I wouldn't (*Lectures and Conversations [LC]*, 60).

What Wittgenstein is getting at is the difference between radical misunderstanding and ordinary misunderstanding. If what is said sounds a bit absurd, it is probably because it is a mistake that is recognizable as such from within one's own "frame of reference." Thus, Jane could feasibly explain to Jim why he had made an error, using Jim's system of knowledge (as well as her own). If what is said sounds *altogether* absurd, it is most likely because the entire "frame of reference" seems foolish (unreasonable). What is being objected to is not a particular blunder, but a shift in world-view.

### Religion and Radical Misunderstanding

Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish theologian, spoke of "the paradox of faith." Faith is paradoxical because it defies all reason. For a non-believer, the issue of faith is an outright contradiction. Kierkegaard writes, "the absurd [the 'movement' of faith] does not belong to the differences that lie within the proper domain of the understanding. It is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen" (Kierkegaard, 46; parentheses added, emphasis not added). It is not merely that the existence of God is unlikely, or unprovable, but that it is *impossible*. For Kierkegaard, having faith meant realizing that God (and all It implies) is impossible, and *then* believing anyway. He called it having faith "by virtue of the absurd." To have faith is absurd, in light of what is known of the infinite and the impossible. It is ludicrous to believe that the infinite can be the finite, and the impossible the possible. Yet this is exactly what faith provides, "by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible" (Kierkegaard, 46). This meaning can not be expressed in terms of the rational. It is simply unrecognizable.

Wittgenstein also confronts the topic of the radical difference between religious language and empirical language. He notes, "Anyone who reads the Epistles will find it said: not only that it [faith] is not reasonable, but that it is folly. Not only is it not reasonable, but it doesn't pretend to be" (*LC*, 58; parentheses added). At its core, religious language is religious only when it rejects empirical language as the means of ultimate justification. There can be no compromise here. Wittgenstein introduces the issue of compromise between "science talk" and "empirical talk" by referring to "Father O'Hara," "one of those people who make it [faith] a question of science" (*LC*, 57;

parentheses added). People of this disposition exist even today; they make faith an argument (e.g., argument from design, etc.). They claim that the preponderance of evidence points towards an intelligent creator of the world. Wittgenstein wants to show that what may seem to be real compromise between reason and faith is really a subjecting of one to the other: "What seems to me ludicrous about O'Hara is his making it [faith] appear *reasonable*" (LC, 58; parentheses added, emphasis not added). In other words, a theologian can give empirical reasons for having faith. However, to the extent that he does so, the theologian is "doing science" and not *believing*. Wittgenstein continues:

I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition. But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons (LC, 59).<sup>8</sup>

The discussion above serves to illuminate the kind of misunderstanding that goes on between the scientist and the theologian.<sup>9</sup> The scientist brings her frame of reference, based on observation, inductive reasoning, and principles of verification to the discussion, and the theologian brings his, based on a system of ahistorical beliefs, value considerations, and so on. Of course, the scientist may at times grapple with religious issues (and vice versa), but at the point of "ultimate justification," he/she will believe differently than the theologian.<sup>10</sup> To the question, "Do you believe in the existence of God?", the scientist answers "no" and the theologian answers "yes." Do they contradict each other? Wittgenstein doesn't think so. The systems of knowledge that led them to answer the way they do can not be said to be contradictory; they are radically different modes of thinking and conceptualization. When it comes to reason and religious belief,

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<sup>8</sup> What Wittgenstein is driving at in the third sentence of this quotation is that to rebut O'Hara on the basis of insufficient evidence is to implicitly give him credit for thinking empirically. Obviously, Wittgenstein doesn't want to give him that credit. For Wittgenstein, O'Hara is doing something far worse than making a scientific error (i.e., he isn't living in accord with the structure of his knowledge, and to some extent, profanes the office of the priesthood).

<sup>9</sup> The difference that I wish to explore is between the scientist who reasons without religious faith at some point and the theologian who believes without reason at some point (i.e., I am not denying the fact that scientists believe things and theologians use reason).

<sup>10</sup> At the "bedrock" of justification, the scientist must believe too. What is of interest is the fact that the scientist and the theologian believe differently, for no "apparent" reason.

there is no meshing, no overlap, and thus no resolving misunderstandings that go beyond the ordinary type. At these unique points of conversation, the theologian and the scientist have nothing meaningful to say to each other.

What makes these interactions so strange is that it seems as if the scientist and the theologian are sharing language. The words and propositions used are common to both of them. However, the structures of their language revolve around different axes, and thus the appearance of language (as communication) is an illusion. Wittgenstein says, "If language is to be means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (as queer as this may sound) in judgments" (PI #242). In other words, without a shared idea, there can be no communication. Mutually agreed upon items make up the avenues of understanding in all language games. In the case of science and religion, there are no highways between the two. What seems to be a meaningful connection between science and religion is really just an extended version of one or the other.

In conclusion, misunderstandings arising between religious and empirical talk are of a *radical* sort, quite different from the kinds of miscommunication that occur within language games. This is not to say, however, that theologians can't do or talk science, or that scientists can't believe in or talk about God without immediately involving themselves in contradictions. Instead, Wittgenstein merely wants to say that language as a whole is more complex and various than it often appears to be. His aim is to dispel the illusions of ordinary understanding that arise between religion and science and the philosophical confusions that accompany them.

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