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## CAN THEOLOGICAL REALISM BE REFUTED?

In a number of recent articles D. Z. Phillips has presented an exposition and defence of his views on theological realism,<sup>1</sup> views which are based on his reading of Wittgenstein. Eschewing the label ‘anti-realist’ so often applied to his philosophy, Phillips claims that realists and anti-realists alike have ‘failed to appreciate how radical a challenge Wittgenstein makes to our philosophical assumptions’ (SL 22). Far from supporting non-realism above realism, Phillips – following Wittgenstein – wishes to upset the realist/non-realist debate by showing that the two theories offer equally confused accounts of belief and language, and specifically religious belief and language. If this claim could be substantiated it would, of course, be an extremely significant conclusion, and it is unfortunate that Phillips vacillates in his expression of it. Realism and non-realism are variously described as ‘empty’, ‘idle talk’ or like opposing ‘battle cries’ (RB 35), but despite being vacuous they are ‘not intelligible alternatives’ (RB 34) and ‘equally confused’ (RB 34). Furthermore, realism is ‘not coherently expressible’ (RB 45) and involves an ‘incoherent supposition’ (SL 23) and at least some forms of it can be ‘refuted’ (RR 194). In addition to their vacuity, unintelligibility and incoherence, both theories are also said to be guilty of a misguided reductionism (RB 47), and realists are charged with being ‘foundationalists’ who espouse a theory that ‘cannot take seriously the central religious conviction that God is at work in people’s lives’ (RB 47).

In this paper we will evaluate the arguments Phillips advances for rejecting realism and non-realism, and consider the sort of problems they might pose for realists. Phillips opposes the positions the realist and non-realist take on two crucial issues: first, whether religious practices and life are grounded in the belief that God is real, second, whether God may be considered to be an object. These are the two principal questions that occupy Phillips in his work on realism; it is in connection with the former that he puts forward his

<sup>1</sup> The main articles are ‘On Really Believing’ (RB), in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 33–55; ‘Searle on Language-Games and Religion’, *ibid.* pp. 22–32 (SL); ‘How Real Is Realism? A Response to Paul Badham’ (RR), in *Is God Real?* ed. J. Runzo (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 193–198; ‘Great Expectations: Philosophy, Ontology and Religion’ (GE), *ibid.* pp. 203–207; ‘Where are the Gods Now?’ (WG), in *Relativism and Religion*, ed. Charles M. Lewis (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 1–15; ‘Philosophers Clothes’ (PC), *ibid.* pp. 135–153. Other references are to *Wittgenstein and Religion* (WR) *ibid.*

‘refutation’ of realism. We aim to assess his arguments for their philosophical cogency and value.

#### I. BELIEF AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Theological realism is the theory that there is a transcendent divine reality, the principal object of religious belief and language, the existence of which is not contingent upon (or, positively, is independent of<sup>2</sup>) our thoughts, actions and attitudes. Theological non-realists maintain that meaningful religious faith and language are possible without there being any such independently existing entity. Phillips considers not these two theories as such but what he takes to be opposing corollary theories concerning the nature of belief. On the one hand, ‘according to realist theories, we first believe in the reality of various states of affairs, and then, as a result, act and behave in the characteristic ways we do’ (SL 23); non-realists claim, in contrast, that believing in the reality of such and such a state of affairs is not essential to (religious) belief. Phillips takes this disagreement between realists and non-realists to rest on a distinction between belief on the one hand and the consequent actions and behaviour of the believer, or the *fruits of belief*, on the other. The realist accuses the non-realist of reductionism by virtue of ‘conflating “believing” with the fruits of believing’ (RB 36), whereas the non-realist regards the realist’s introduction – prior to the fruits of belief – of a belief in an independently existing entity, as entirely redundant. Phillips proposes an argument which, he believes, demonstrates that this distinction is confused.<sup>3</sup>

The realist argues that the same distinction can be made with respect to all our beliefs. On the one hand we believe certain things are true, and on the other hand we commit ourselves and act accordingly. But what is involved in believing something to be true? The realist can give no intelligible answer to this question. His failure is due to his exclusion of the mode of projection within which the relation of belief to its object has its sense. So when the theological realist seeks to divorce the meaning of believing from our actions and practices, he effects a divorce between belief and practice which would render *any* kind of believing unintelligible (RB 40).

Phillips’ argument seems to be as follows: the theological realist detaches religious belief from the commitments and actions which make up the religious life; religious practices, the realist claims, are the consequence of (and are justified by) religious belief. This requires it to be possible for a person to form a belief prior to the fruits of that belief being exhibited. But religious belief only *makes sense* within the context of a religious life. Thus

<sup>2</sup> Some writers qualify ‘independent’, pointing out that the mind structures our experiences in accordance with human concepts, or that the concepts ‘God’ and ‘real’ are products of our culture and psychology.

<sup>3</sup> Since only the realist wishes to maintain the distinction between belief and fruits of belief, Phillips’ argument might be seen as playing into the anti-realist’s hands. But Phillips intends to argue against the cogency of the distinction between belief and fruits of belief, and thereby indirectly argues against the anti-realist who takes the realist’s position on this matter to be intelligible but false.

there cannot be a meaningful initial religious belief, as the realist claims, preceding the religious life. Put differently, for a belief to be intelligible a ‘mode of projection’ from the belief to the object of the belief is required. The mode of projection in question is shown by the role the belief plays in the life of the believer, i.e. the practices that the realist claims are the consequence of belief, or the fruits of belief. Thus by separating belief from the fruits of belief, the realist excludes the evidence by which one can determine what a belief *means*.

Phillips’ contention, therefore, is not that the realist is mistaken in thinking that the truth of belief in God turns on whether there is a God, as the non-realist claims; rather, the realist fails to (and cannot) give an account of what belief in God – what ‘There is a God’ – means:

religious language does not determine the truth of the proposition ‘God exists’. What *that* depends on is there being a God. What religious language determines is *the sense* of the proposition. By placing religious belief outside all religious practices, realists like Penelhum, Trigg and Badham can give no indication of that sense (RR 197).<sup>4</sup>

Phillips adds to this that realists assume that the mode of projection from a religious belief to its object is the same as the one which holds between observation statements and the states of affairs they report. He thinks that this is a mistake for independent reasons that we will examine in Section V. But it may seem puzzling that Phillips should need to give these reasons, because if the stated argument is successful, the assumption that there are similar modes of projection in operation in both religious and empirical language should be anyway unavailable to the realist, since, as Phillips claims, the distinction that the realist makes between belief and the fruits of belief obviates any attempt to account for the meaning of religious belief. It can be seen, however, that even on the most generous reading of Phillips’ argument, he does not show that the realist cannot give *any* account of the meaning of ‘God exists’. Rather, by making belief in God prior to the believer’s engagement in religious practices, the realist must give an account of the meaning of religious belief that is independent of religious practices. There is no a priori reason why the realist should not be able to do this in terms of, for example, scientific practices, i.e. the belief that God exists can be understood as a type of scientific hypothesis. Thus Phillips needs to show that the realist could not treat the belief that there is a God in this way. Before examining his attempts to do this we will consider, in sections II–IV, whether Phillips shows that the realist cannot give a religious explanation of the initial belief in God. But, first of all, has Phillips correctly explicated the realist’s theory of belief?

<sup>4</sup> This is, in one respect, a rather disingenuous way of putting the matter, since Phillips takes religious language to determine what it means for ‘God exists’ to be true. Thus Phillips is conceding nothing in saying that the truth of the proposition ‘God exists’ depends on there being a God, which he takes to be the trivial claim that ‘God exists’ is not true simply by being asserted or believed (RR 197).

A rather serious omission in Phillips' argument against the realist's theory of belief is an account of the relationship between the doctrine of theological realism and what he claims to be the realist's account of belief. Phillips seems to take this relationship to be one of entailment.<sup>5</sup> But is the realist obliged even to uphold a distinction between belief and the 'fruits' of belief?<sup>6</sup> And second – a question that will be explored at greater length in the following section – must this distinction involve a total separation of belief and its associated behaviour, as Phillips suggests, or could the realist instead adopt a more 'moderate' position? For instance, could the realist claim that while some forms of religious behaviour are required to give a belief its sense, other elements of religious life are brought about and justified by belief?<sup>7</sup>

Of the three realists whose views Phillips considers – Penelhum, Trigg and Badham – Trigg is most forthcoming in his support for some distinction between belief and certain consequent forms of behaviour: 'The belief is distinct from the commitments which may follow it, and is the justification for it' (RR 195).<sup>8</sup> But it is not clear that Trigg would make any belief distinct from and prior to *all* the behaviour associated with it. If Trigg does intend a thoroughgoing distinction between belief and behaviour, this is clearly not a theory to which one must accede by virtue of adopting theological realism. Indeed, it seems that the realist is not even committed to maintain the moderate version of the distinction. One can maintain that there is a transcendent divine reality, not contingent on human thought or action, which is the principal object of religious belief, without requiring that belief in the divine reality precede any religious behaviour. Nor, to take a different formulation of realism,<sup>9</sup> is the realist who maintains that certain classes of statement (such as religious statements) have truth value independently of whether or not we can – even in principle – determine their truth or falsity, committed to the theory of belief that Phillips attacks. In this case a more modest claim about belief is available to the realist, i.e. that the truth of a belief is independent of the possibility of our knowing that it is true.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> At least, this seems to be the case in RB; only in GE (p. 204) does he give any indication that a realist could dissent from this theory of belief.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips also seems to think that realism implies a theory about the nature of hoping: 'the realist divorces "believing" and "hoping" from the situation in human life in which [it has its] sense' (RB 37).

<sup>7</sup> Phillips does not consider this moderate position, but only the possibility of religious beliefs making sense with a context of application that lacks all 'the characteristic commitments of the religious life' (RB p. 49), which he calls 'minimal beliefs'. But he takes this to amount to giving religious belief a non-religious context of application, which he believes to be a mistake (cf. Section V).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (CUP, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Dummett 'Realism' in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Phillips would also reject this as confused since he asserts: 'I cannot say there is a chair in the next room, yet have nothing to do with the familiar ways in which we check this fact... if I said "There is a chair in the next room," while ignoring the familiar ways of checking, *I would not be making an assertion at all. I would not be saying anything.*' (RR 197). It is interesting that Phillips should assert this link between the sense of a proposition and the method of its (empirical) verification; unfortunately, he does not expand on this point or offer an argument in its favour. It does, however, lend support to the charge that Phillips is operating with a covert positivism (cf. J. Incandela 'The Appropriation of Wittgenstein's Work by Philosophers of Religion', *Religious Studies*, xxi (1985), pp. 457–474).

Notably, one could uphold the account of belief that Phillips finds objectionable and not be a committed realist. That is, one could maintain that belief in a divine reality is prior to and justifies consequent religious behaviour, but allow that the belief may be mistaken, and that non-realists could have been right all along. Phillips seems, therefore, to have all too readily taken two distinct and separable theses that Trigg – and perhaps other realists – happen to hold (i.e. realism and an independent theory of belief), to constitute a single theory encompassing reality, truth and belief to which the realist is committed. This is not to deny that many realists may be inclined to take a distinction between belief and fruits of belief as an important part of a realist account of belief. If Phillips has a conclusive argument against such a distinction, that is of philosophical interest; it will not, however, constitute a refutation of realism.

In the following two sections we will evaluate the two main premises that underpin Phillips' 'refutation' of realism, restricting the term 'realist' to cover those who maintain some distinction between belief and the behaviour associated with belief, in addition to the essential principles of realism. We will not be taking issue with the validity of Phillips' argument. Given the following premises

- (1) the sense of a belief is shown by the role it plays in the believer's life (i.e. the activities, commitments, practices, etc. that 'surround' the belief (RB 42)),

and

- (2) the activities, commitments, practices, etc. that give a belief its sense are among the activities, etc. that the realist claims are the 'fruits of belief',

the objection then arises that the realist makes as a contingent consequence of an agent's belief the very forms of behaviour that must be in place for the belief that the agent holds to have meaning. We will argue, however, that Phillips claims too much in his remarks on the relationship between belief and behaviour (remarks which also suffer from a further misunderstanding of the realist's position), and that he fails to appreciate the importance of establishing the second premise altogether. This latter failure is particularly problematic. To demonstrate that the realist is unable to give any account of the religious meaning of a belief, Phillips must show that *all* the so-called fruits of belief form part of the religious practices that give the belief its sense. In addition to these arguments, we will outline a distinction between belief and its fruits – the moderate form of the distinction suggested above – that should be amenable to the realist and which also entirely evades Phillips' objections.

## II. THE FIRST PREMISE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELIEF AND BEHAVIOUR

Phillips' remarks on the relationship between belief and behaviour aim to show not only that the sense of a belief is shown by the role it plays in a believer's life (premise 1), but also to defend a dispositional account of the nature of belief of a sort akin to that proposed by Ryle. Phillips does not offer a reductionist analysis of belief in terms of just dispositions and behaviour, but a neobehaviourist position, which makes reference to an agent's behaviour the essential part of any satisfactory account of an agent's belief. To this end, Phillips offers some arguments against those theories of belief which take it to consist in a mental event (henceforth 'mentalist' accounts), and gives several examples, quoted at length from Wittgenstein, to show that the essence of belief is found in action rather than in what the believer thinks or feels. It is unclear whether Phillips takes Wittgenstein himself to be offering a neobehaviourist account of belief;<sup>11</sup> Phillips certainly puts it forward as a significant objection to realism. But since the truth of the neobehaviourist theory of belief is anyway inessential to his argument against the distinction between belief and the fruits of belief (in that he could allow for a central role for mental events in belief), why does Phillips defend it? It seems that Phillips is pressing on the realist a *second* independent theory, namely, a mentalistic account of belief. Now, if realists really were committed to mentalistic accounts of belief, the surprising upshot would be that realism is inconsistent with behaviourism. But, as Hick has pointed out, 'there is absolutely no reason why a religious realist should not regard believing as largely dispositional'.<sup>12</sup>

Although a mentalistic account of belief does not follow from realism, it could be suggested by the distinction between belief and fruits of belief, *if* that distinction is understood in a particularly rigorous way. For if one were to suppose that a believer can form an intelligible belief that is independent of *all* of the behaviour and dispositions associated with it, it seems that that belief could only consist in a mental event.<sup>13</sup> This takes us some distance from realism, but it does suggest some point to Phillips' criticisms of mentalistic accounts of belief. If (a) a neobehaviourist account of belief were to be established, and (b) one upheld a distinction between belief and fruits of belief, and (c) one thought the 'fruits of belief' included all actions and

<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein seems to have a rather more measured view: 'In certain circumstances, admittedly, meaning and not meaning, believing, intending etc. is characterized by what does or does not go on in the speaker's soul' (*Eine Philosophische Bemerkungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 225).

<sup>12</sup> 'Believing – and Having True Beliefs', in Runzo, *op. cit.* note 1, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips does not make it clear whether he includes dispositions as well as behaviour in the 'fruits of belief', which leaves a potential loophole in his argument: one could maintain a distinction between belief and the fruits of belief, and account for the belief in terms of the believer's dispositions to act in certain ways.

dispositions associated with the belief, then one would be in difficulty explaining what belief could consist in. This seems to be the logic behind the following argument of Phillips:

‘I believe’ is not a report or description of a mental state. It is doing something, making an assertion. But, according to Trigg, Penelhum and Badham the essence of ‘believing’ cannot be found in action, in doing anything, since, according to them, action is itself based on something called ‘belief’. But, once again, what does this conception of belief amount to? Is it not entirely vacuous? (RR 196, cf. RB 36)<sup>14</sup>

But even if a neobehaviourist analysis of belief is accepted, this argument is mistaken. For it is one thing to claim, along with Badham, Penelhum and Trigg, that beliefs give rise to (and justify) certain actions, such as believing in God and then, say, going to church; it is quite another thing to claim that beliefs can be formed prior to *all* the actions associated with them. It seems that Phillips has failed to distinguish two different accounts of belief:

- (a) belief is a mental state as a result of which one makes certain commitments or responses,
- (b) belief consists in certain dispositions and forms of behaviour (and no doubt also mental states) as a result of which we develop certain *other* dispositions and forms of behaviour (i.e. the fruits of belief).

If Phillips is to have an effective argument against (b), then premise 2, that even these ‘other’ dispositions and forms of behaviour give a belief its sense, needs to be established. But before addressing whether Phillips establishes premise 2, how successful is he in defending the first premise, that the sense of a belief is shown by the role it plays in the believer’s life?

Phillips’ arguments, all adapted from examples from Wittgenstein, are most convincing when illustrating the difficulties in ascribing beliefs to agents who are incapable of acting, or who fail to act, in appropriate ways. For example, we may say that a dog believes his master is at the door, but we do not say that he believes that his master will be there the day after tomorrow, and Phillips plausibly suggests that this is due to the fact that the dog does not exhibit any of the activities and responses that could show that the dog possesses this belief (RB 42). Phillips also gives Wittgenstein’s example of an observer automatically and dispassionately reporting observations (e.g. ‘the enemy is approaching’) without in any way acting upon them. Phillips claims that this case illustrates ‘a severe dislocation between a man’s words and his beliefs’ (RB 41), and we cannot say that the observer believes the things that he is saying. Such cases indicate the importance of a person’s behaviour in determining what that person believes.

Phillips’ argument proves less convincing when he draws generalisations

<sup>14</sup> It is not clear how Phillips squares this with his assertion, later in the same paper, that according to Penelhum and Trigg ‘the essence of belief ... is said to be devoid of certainty, being a matter of acting as if there was a God, or acting on the assumption that one is not mistaken about this’ (RB 55).

from a number of particular cases of belief. He compares the beliefs that Goldbach's conjecture can be proved, that the world will end in  $10^{10}$  years, and that one is about to be consumed by flames. He claims that each of these beliefs has a different 'character', by which he means that in each case the belief bears a different relationship to its object. He also claims that this relationship is shown only by the context of application of each belief, i.e. the actions in which the believer engages and their circumstances. Thus the meaning of these beliefs is shown, respectively, by the way in which one would go about searching for a proof for the conjecture; the sort of claims one would make for the statement that the world will end in  $10^{10}$  years (e.g. one would present such and such evidence for it, rather than, say, making preparations); reacting with terror and fighting to avoid the flames. Phillips goes on to state 'The differences in the character of these beliefs is shown by the practices of which they are a part. The practices cannot be cut off from beliefs in the way suggested by the realist's account of "believing"' (RB 41). But having only outlined three examples of belief, this conclusion seems rather premature. Phillips does not, for instance, show why one could not argue that the differences in these beliefs does not lie in their 'character', but in their different contents. For example, the reason nobody panics about the world ending in  $10^{10}$  years, whereas one would act violently to avoid the flames, is that the end of the world is in the far distant future and beyond one's power to change, whilst believing that one is on the point of being consumed by flames one faces an imminent event that one can try to prevent. A second problem with Phillips' examples is the degree of confidence he places in the evidence of a believer's actions alone being sufficient to show the meaning of what is believed, when it is often an inadequate basis for judging *what* is believed. Believing that one is about to be consumed by flames, one might be expected to do anything to avoid them. But equally, one might do nothing if one were, say, incapacitated by fear; one might even approach such an end fearlessly, if one also believed it to be one's fate. Conversely, most forms of behaviour are consistent with the believer's possessing a number of different beliefs. This is not to deny that belief and behaviour are associated, but indicates that Phillips needs to do more to show that the meaning of a belief is invariably shown by the practices in which the believer engages.

One general response to the preceding arguments is that one can allow that an agent's actions provide the evidence upon which we attribute beliefs to that agent, without accepting that, independently of that agent's actions or capacity for performing actions, attribution of meaningful beliefs to that agent is confused (or even mistaken). Why should the realist admit the latter claim? To state the matter differently, it seems undeniable that we often appeal to a person's behaviour to determine what that person believes, and what the beliefs consist in, and Phillips' argument reinforces this fact. But



this is not enough to show that reference to x's behaviour is sufficient for – or even a component of – every attribution of a meaningful belief to x. It is not enough, in short, to establish premise (1). Phillips could deflate this response by offering a reductionist account of belief as consisting in only certain forms of behaviour; but since Phillips concedes that the expression of a belief sometimes involves reference to a mental state (RB p. 36), this is presumably not a theory he wishes to put forward. However, there is a second option. As we noted earlier (note 9), Phillips does seem to advocate a variety of positivism which declares a statement to be vacuous if its truth cannot be verified by publicly observable evidence, and it is possible that he would wish to apply this against the realist's argument. Thus, the attribution of a belief to an agent independently of the agent's behaviour must be vacuous, because its truth is independent of publicly observable evidence. Phillips offers no defence of the positivistic premise that this conclusion relies upon. He does, however, assert the strongest version of this conclusion.

There is, Phillips claims, an 'internal relation' between a belief and the behaviour associated with it (RB 46). An internal relation between A and B is usually taken to mean that there are, among the properties which are essential to A, relational properties which essentially involve a reference to B. Phillips' point seems to be that a belief is not conceivable without the 'endeavours it informs'. This is a wholly implausible position. Having a particular belief does not prescribe any particular form of behaviour, because people who act in different ways may nevertheless be judged as having the same belief. More to the point, it is not the case that an agent's possession of a belief is inconceivable without some relevant form of action on the part of the believer, since a believer may be disposed to act in certain ways but never do so because the appropriate occasions never arise. Or an agent may form a belief but never act on it as a result of being, for example, completely paralysed. It may be that certain beliefs, under certain circumstances, are internally related to certain dispositions or forms of behaviour (we will give an example in the next section); this, however, falls far short of a general internal relation between beliefs and the practices of which they form a part.

### III. THE SECOND PREMISE: THE CONTEXT OF BELIEF AND THE FRUITS OF BELIEF

For the second assumption Phillips simply fails to offer a satisfactory justification. While Phillips often asserts that what it means for a person to believe such and such is shown by the responses, the 'surroundings' of the belief, and the practices in which that person engages (cf. RB 40–42), this is not sufficient to establish that the practices, etc., in question are the *same* as those held by the realist to be the fruits of belief. For example, Phillips argues:

We do not first determine who Jesus is and subsequently decide to respond in certain ways. Rather, it is only in the context of our responses that the acknowledgement or denial of who he is makes sense. It may be said, more generally, that we do not first recognise God and subsequently decide to respond in certain ways ... It is only in the context of our responses that sense can be made of the reality of God. Our responses show the character of the God we worship; it may be said that they reveal his spirit (WG 12).<sup>15</sup>

The realist, however, can concede without contradiction that among a believer's responses are those that can, under certain circumstances, sometimes be a telling indication of the meaning of the belief held. The realist could also allow that under certain circumstances there are reactions – confessions of faith, for instance – that can have a *critical* role, whereby to exhibit a certain pattern of response in the appropriate circumstances simply *is* to believe a certain thing, and to fail to exhibit those responses, or to exhibit different responses, is to disbelieve it.<sup>16</sup> The realist may nevertheless argue that in most cases only a small number of simple dispositions are sufficient to give a belief meaning, and that beyond these there is a degree of freedom in the practices and activities in which the believer may (justifiably) participate in the expression of the belief, these being the fruits of belief. What Phillips needs to show is that the collection of responses and dispositions that are required to give belief in God its sense incorporate the collection of responses and dispositions that result from believing in God.

What are the responses that are required to give belief in God its meaning? At one point Phillips claims that essential to belief in God (the 'paradigm of religious belief') is a confession, the idea that this belief is a virtue (and disbelief is a sin), the idea that belief is capable of growth, and that 'the growth is said to be the increasing presence of God in one's life' (RB 51). The 'paradigmatic' status of these elements of religious belief could be disputed, but even if they are all allowed, there remains an enormous variety of other thoughts, beliefs and practices that might legitimately be characterised as the fruits of belief in God, i.e. the contingent and justified consequences of adopting the belief. It is the fact that if we have adopted the same belief we may as a result act in a variety of different ways, that gives the realist a basis for the distinction between belief and its fruits. Phillips could nevertheless argue that the realist puts the distinction between belief and the fruits of belief in the *wrong place* by showing that actions counted as the fruits of belief are in fact 'internally' related to the belief. For example, if a confession of faith can, under certain circumstances, constitute an integral part of one's belief in God, then it does not stand as a justifiable consequence of the belief. Such a strategy might serve as a reminder of the distortions that

<sup>15</sup> It does not strictly follow from this that God's reality is contingent upon our responses, but only that what it means for God to be real (and for it to be true that God is real) is contingent on our responses.

<sup>16</sup> This can certainly be disputed: what if events conspired to prevent the believer from confessing, but the believer nevertheless has a disposition to confess?

can result from too facile an identification of coming to faith with assenting to the truth of a proposition. However, it would not yield the promised conclusion that realism is vacuous or unintelligible.

#### IV. A DIFFERENT FORMULATION

Phillips presents a significantly different statement of his argument against realism in the course of his criticisms of an observation made by Roger Trigg about the concept 'red'. It is unclear to what extent Phillips sees this as a different argument to the one we have been considering; its logic is certainly different, although its conclusions are the same. Trigg argues that 'there is no contradiction in supposing that none of the things by means of which we were taught "red" are red any more (because they have all been repainted some other colour)' (RB 38). Trigg's thought that red objects could change colour seems to be intended as a caution against too closely connecting the meaning of the concept 'red' (or any colour concept) with its possible applications or occasions upon which its meaning is taught or explained. The implication of Trigg's remark is that even if characteristically red objects (such as pillar boxes or – more topical in Britain – telephone booths) changed to another colour, it would not follow that the concept 'red' became senseless, only that we would be deprived of certain means of teaching and applying it. Phillips interprets Trigg's comment as part of an attempt 'to separate our beliefs and concepts from our practices' (RB 38), but goes on to attribute to Trigg the remarkable opinion that those who oppose his – Trigg's – realist account 'are committed to saying that if some object is believed to be red, that object cannot change its colour' (RB 39). This claim, as Phillips points out, is clearly absurd, and he asserts that it is perfectly sensible to claim that an object has changed colour, or that its colour has faded, etc., because along with learning to identify objects as having a particular colour, we learn to distinguish when they change colour, lose colour, have their colour renewed, etc. Trigg's mistake, Phillips claims, is to think that one can meaningfully believe that an object is a certain colour independently of all these practices. Phillips then offers the following argument:

unless we agreed in our colour reactions, we would not know what it means to entertain beliefs about colours changing, fading or being renewed. But our reactions are what we do. They are not the consequences of our beliefs. Without agreement in reactions there would be nothing to have beliefs about (RB 39).

This argument is structurally different from the one stated in Section I. The earlier argument proposed that the religious commitments and actions (the 'fruits of belief') that the realist takes to be the justified consequence of adopting a belief in God, in fact supply the context of application which must be in place to give the belief its sense. Phillips now argues that *agreement*

in the colour *reactions* that the realist thinks follow from having colour beliefs are in fact a prerequisite of possessing the colour *concepts* that constitute such beliefs. Does this offer a more successful line of objection to realism?

As with theological realism, it is unclear that the position to which Phillips objects is crucial to the realist's account of colour, i.e. what position a realist about colour need take with regard to beliefs about colour. That said, Phillips apparently intends an analogy between colour beliefs and colour reactions on the one hand and religious beliefs and fruits of belief on the other, and we will pursue his argument on this basis. Clearly, a great deal of work is being done in this argument by the term 'colour reactions', which Phillips unfortunately leaves undefined. Presumably the colour reactions underpinning colour concepts do not include responses such as judging that such and such a colour is faded, for this would have the dubious consequence that it makes no sense for us to entertain beliefs about differences in the colours of objects without there being agreement in our judgements about the purity or the saturation of the chromatic qualities of objects. There seems no difficulty in imagining a person trained to distinguish colours but unable to distinguish these other qualities.

Another possibility as to the meaning of 'colour reactions' is suggested by the following remark

we cannot separate the conceptual distinctions involved in the language-games we play with colours and pains from the ways in which we react and respond since the concepts are themselves rooted in these common reactions and responses, by these practices. Without the common practices, there would be no concepts concerning colours or pains (WR 86).

Phillips is here criticising Mounce for separating language games and practices, and his objection seems to be the same as that given against Trigg for the – presumably related – sin of separating concepts and practices. This suggests that by 'colour reactions' Phillips means the primitive reactions that we exhibit prior to the development of colour concepts, and in which colour concepts are rooted. By 'rooted' we take Phillips to mean that colour language has its origin in our primitive tendency to make certain distinctions between objects, which it codifies; the capacity to make such distinctions is an anthropological fact, without which we would be unable to apply colour concepts (at least as they are currently used).<sup>17</sup> Phillips' argument against realism now seems to run as follows: the characteristic reactions associated with a belief are not (as the realist might claim) the consequences of adopting the belief but are among the shared reactions that one must exhibit in order

<sup>17</sup> Examples of primitive reactions given by Phillips include jumping with fright, calling colours light or dark, calling sounds loud or quiet, crying out with pain, expressing concern at the pain of others (cf. 'Primitive Reactions and the Reactions of Primitives' in WR 113). These second and third examples seem to be misstated, because if crying out with pain is a primitive reaction primary to the linguistic activity of *calling* what one feels 'pain', so *calling* colours light or dark should be secondary to the primitive forms of behaviour exhibited when faced with light or with dark colours, and similarly for loud or quiet sounds.

to use those concepts, and thereby make the conceptual distinctions, that are necessary for having the belief.

Unfortunately, this argument cannot be successful, even if we allow the theory that colour concepts are rooted in primitive reactions. The reason is that Phillips needs to show that the reactions in which we agree prior to colour language are the same as the reactions that (the 'realist' claims) result from our having colour beliefs. But the distinctions that we make between colours cannot be simply identified with the primitive reactions we exhibited prior to developing colour concepts. It is only with the development of colour language that the primitive reactions become what we call identifying a colour, distinguishing a colour, etc. By calling them 'colour reactions' Phillips intimates that colour language is somehow implicit in these primitive reactions, but which of our primitive reactions are 'colour reactions' can only be judged in the light of the colour language that happens to develop. Colour languages significantly different from our own can be learnt and used by people with ordinary visual perceptual capabilities (and in other cultures, are learnt and used), and different colour languages presumably draw on different primitive reactions, while different primitive reactions may give rise to different colour concepts. For example, our colour language is not rooted in just the same primitive reactions as a colour language in which each colour term refers to (as far as we can tell) one of a large number of different shades of the same colour. Thus Phillips' revised argument also falls through on this second interpretation of 'colour reactions', because he has not shown that the reactions one exhibits upon adopting a colour belief are presupposed in developing that belief in the form of primitive reactions that are required to have the colour concepts that constitute that belief.

#### V. IS GOD AN OBJECT?

The question of whether God is an object, or whether 'God' designates something, is a significant point of disagreement between the realist and non-realist, and has an important bearing on Phillips' argument against what he takes to be the realist's concept of belief. As was explained in Section I, if Phillips' argument is that the realist fails to provide a religious context for belief in God, he needs to show that the realist cannot supply religious belief with another context of application, such as the one occupied by beliefs about matters of fact. Thus Phillips contends that 'God' does not name or refer to anything, and that it is confused to think that God is an object.

God's reality is not one of a kind; He is not a being among beings. The word 'God' is not the name of a thing. Thus, the reality of God cannot be assessed by a common measure which also applies to things other than God (WR 62).

This, in fact, has been a position Phillips has defended since his earliest writings on the philosophy of religion. From the outset, Phillips has also

insisted that this position is distinct from that proposed by the non-realist. He wishes to argue not that God's reality is not a fact, but that it is a non-factual matter, i.e. he is not denying that God is real, but that God's reality is not a matter of what facts obtain.

To say that *x* is a fact is to say something about the grammar of *x*; it is to indicate what would and would not be sensible to say or do in connection with it. To say that the concept of divine reality does not share the grammar is to reject the possibility of talking about God in the way in which one talks about matters of fact (WR p. 2).

Thus the non-realist, in denying that 'God' refers to an objectively existing divine reality, suffers from the same misapprehension about the grammar of 'God' as do realists, which is that the term 'God' functions in a way analogous to names or to terms referring to physical objects such as 'planet', 'mountain', etc. The issue, therefore, about which Phillips takes realists and non-realists to be confused is not whether God is real, but what talk about the reality of God means.

However, a recent change in Phillips' expression of his position has somewhat complicated the issue. He no longer objects to calling God an object or 'God' a referring expression, provided that the meaning of this claim is clarified:

by all means say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. *But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place.* We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in this religious context, what speaking of 'reference', 'object', 'existence', and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms. (PC 138)

How, therefore, does Phillips disagree with the realist? Not, surely, on whether God is a *physical* object (though Phillips does sometimes put it like this), since the realist need not subscribe to the view that God is a physical object (i.e. the realist need not be a materialist). Phillips' point seems to be that the sense in which God is an object cannot be understood in a way that is *analogous* to the sense in which something is a physical object. Thus, Phillips wishes to argue that there are profound disanalogies between the two senses, and that the grammar of physical object language cannot be stretched in such a way as to make sense of religious reality.<sup>18</sup> Put differently, Phillips' point seems to be that one cannot, by qualifying, explaining or extending the forms of expression one uses with regard to physical objects, reach an appropriate form of expression for talking about God.

The reason most frequently cited by Phillips for saying that talk about God is disanalogous to talk about physical objects is that the methods that

<sup>18</sup> This assumes, of course, that the realist believes that any non-physical reality can be understood on an analogy with physical reality. This, in fact, is a 'philosophical prejudice' from which, Phillips thinks, most philosophers suffer (WR 63).

would be used to find out whether two people are referring to the same object are different to those that would be used to determine whether they are speaking of the same god. Specifically, unlike any physical object, God is not identified by being *pointed to* or *presented*.<sup>19</sup>

In a dispute over whether two people are discussing the same person there are ways of removing the doubt, but the identity of a god is not like the identity of a human being. To say that one worships the same God as someone else is not to point to the same object or to be confronted with it (WR 3; cf. RB 42–3; WG 5).

As Phillips realises, this observation is unlikely to impress the realist. The realist can simply claim that the fact that we cannot point to or present God does not prove that ‘God’ does not designate something, but is due to the peculiar properties of God. God, unlike other objects (such as physical ones), is transcendent, and one cannot point to or present something that is transcendent. Phillips’ response to this account of God’s unavailability is that it is confused, because it is an attempt to explain away what is an evident grammatical difference between our talk about God and talk about physical objects (p. 5). This seems to be a crucial part of Phillips’ argument, that God’s unavailability is a grammatical fact about the concept ‘God’ rather than a fact about God, and it is disappointing that he does not supply an adequate notion of ‘grammar’ for us to determine the issue in either way. How do we find out whether a statement is grammatical or factual? What aspects of a term’s grammar enter into a decision about the sense in which that term designates? Nor does he explain what he means by ‘grammar’ in sufficient detail to show what would be entailed by our conceding that ‘God cannot be pointed to’ is a grammatical statement. Is this a profound or superficial grammatical difference? Aside from these questions, there are also considerations that tell in favour of a realist/non-realist way of looking at God’s reality.

First, although God cannot be directly observed or pointed to, it is generally held by religious believers that God brought about certain events. It is by reference to such events that two people could determine whether they are talking about the same god. Specifically, it is held by Christians that the Christ-event was God’s crucial act of self-disclosure. Christian belief, in fact, seems to present a particular difficulty for Phillips’ argument, since the Christian who believes that Jesus is God, or is part of the divine reality, believes that he was presented and that it is (or was at one time) possible to point to him.<sup>20</sup> Second, it is highly debatable that it is a criterion for x being a physical object *or something analogous to a physical object* that x can be pointed

<sup>19</sup> Since Phillips does not clarify the relationship between something being presented and being pointed to (must one, for example, be presented with something in order to point to it?) we will treat these as two distinct criteria for physical objects that distinguish them from God.

<sup>20</sup> Particularly notable are those stories of the appearance of the risen Jesus to Thomas, and various large groups of people, where it is clear that an important part of these stories is the overwhelming evidence for his having been resurrected.

to, or that  $x$  can be presented. Sub-atomic particles, for instance, cannot be pointed to – indeed, under certain circumstances they lack a position – and can only be presented indirectly by their effects on other objects. Presumably Phillips would say that sub-atomic particles are not physical objects, but not wishing to advocate non-realism, he would not deny that they are objects. Rather, Phillips' position would have to be that because sub-atomic particles cannot be picked out ostensively, their reality is not the same as the reality of mountains, books, people, etc. But, for the same reason, the reality of sub-atomic particles is analogous to the reality of God, and since the former may be conceived in a way that is analogous to the reality of ordinary physical objects (though it is debatable whether they should be so conceived), this must weaken Phillips' argument that the 'grammatical' difference he has identified is sufficient to establish a profound disanalogy between talk about physical objects and God.

Phillips pursues his argument against the realist's understanding of God by comparing depictions of God with depictions of physical objects. He takes two examples from Wittgenstein: a representation of a tropical plant, and Michelangelo's 'God Created Adam'. In the case of the picture of the plant, it is understood and used on the basis of its likeness to the plant it represents: 'Believing that a particular picture is in fact a picture of the plant has its sense from the technique in which likeness and comparison play a central role' (RB 43). But we could not say that the depiction of God in Michelangelo's picture bears a likeness to God, and to proceed as if Michelangelo had accurately captured God's appearance would be to entirely misuse the picture and misunderstand its meaning. Phillips goes on: 'To say that God is in the picture, is not to say that it is a picture of God. To believe in the truth of such a picture is to adopt what it says as one's norm of truth. To say God is in the picture is a confession of faith' (RB 44).

Phillips places the crucial difference between the picture of the plant and 'God Created Adam' in the fact that in the latter case the meaning of the picture is not explained by reference to what the picture depicts. Phillips takes this to be a 'grammatical' fact about the picture. This fact, Phillips contends, is misunderstood by the realist either as meaning that we could have shown what the picture represents if we were in a position to do so, or as a consequence of God being transcendent:

The realist does not appreciate that when Wittgenstein says we were not shown that which the picture pictured, he is not referring to an omission which ought to be rectified. He is not referring to an omission at all. Rather, he is remarking on the *kind* of picture he is talking about, namely, one which does not have its sense in a context of application in which the important criterion is the likeness of the picture to what it pictures (RB 44).

Phillips' argument is largely analogous to the preceding one, and similar objections apply. Notably, it is perfectly reasonable to claim that a depiction



of Jesus bears some similarity to what Jesus actually looked like. In the present argument, however, the possibility of constructing a drawing which can be related to its object by techniques ‘in which likeness and comparison play a central role’ is an even less plausible criterion for something being a physical object, than that a physical object must be something to which one can point or which can be presented.<sup>21</sup> A physical object can be so small, or have such a brief existence, or undergo such rapid changes, or be so chaotic or diffuse, that it would be impossible for us to construct an accurate depiction of it, as we can of a tropical plant. Also, despite Phillips’ intimation to the contrary, the realist is perfectly capable of recognising that pictures and representations should be interpreted according to different criteria depending on their context and method of construction. Realists can understand the differences between maps and landscape paintings, can appreciate impressionist art, and get no more of a fright than anybody else from looking in a distorting mirror. If the case is otherwise, it is not by virtue of having adopted the standard theories of realism described earlier. Thus Phillips’ claim that there is nothing corresponding to ‘God’ in ‘God Created Adam’ according to the criteria of likeness and similarity (RB 44) is something the realist can readily concede.

This does not, of course, reconcile Phillips and the realist. Phillips’ argument is that the picture ‘God Created Adam’ should not be treated like a depiction of something at all. His criticism of the realist is for regarding the absence of what is depicted in ‘God Created Adam’ as ‘an omission that ought to be rectified’; he also proposes – seemingly quite arbitrarily – a confessional interpretation of someone’s claim that ‘God is in the picture’. It is notable, however, that this is not a position adopted by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein restricts his observations to the different ways in which we use pictures of God in contrast to, for example, pictures of other biblical subjects.

It is clear that the role of pictures of Biblical subjects and the role of the picture of God creating Adam are totally different ones. You might ask the question ‘Did Michelangelo think that Noah in the ark looked like this, and that God created Adam looked like this?’ He wouldn’t have said that God or Adam looked as they look in the picture.<sup>22</sup>

Wittgenstein’s objective, unlike Phillips’, appears to be merely to point out aspects of our use of pictures of God. We do not, for example, take the appearance of God or Adam (and notably Wittgenstein includes Adam) to be based on the artist’s judgement of what they might actually look like. This, however, is not something that the realist either need or would wish to deny: the reality that the picture presents is not found in the appearance of the figures. But it does not follow from this that there is not something real

<sup>21</sup> Phillips’ argument is also misdirected as an objection to the claim that God is an object, in that the theological realist could maintain a non-realist interpretation of religious pictures.

<sup>22</sup> *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 63.

presented in the picture that is to be found elsewhere, such as in the relationship depicted between God and ourselves.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

We have argued that Phillips does not supply a refutation of realism, and does not provide sufficient reason to doubt either the cogency of the arguments or the genuineness and importance of the problems that lie at the heart of the on-going disagreements between theological realists and non-realists. We have found that where Phillips' arguments are effective, they challenge theories which are independent of theological realism, and even these theories – such as the distinction between belief and the fruits of belief – can be modified to avoid his objections. Phillips often attributes his arguments and conclusions to Wittgenstein, but it is striking that while Wittgenstein states his opposition to empiricism and argues against theories of language put forward by empiricists (such as Russell), references to realism are extremely rare. Phillips quotes two of them, in which Wittgenstein contrasts realist and idealist theories about the external world, but Phillips does not quote a third, which is arguably more instructive: 'Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing'.<sup>23</sup> It is a thing that awaits adequate treatment by Wittgensteinians in the philosophy of religion.

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<sup>23</sup> *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 325.