*In memory of D.Z. Phillips (1934–2006)*

# D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion

## Questions and Responses

*Edited by*

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ASHGATE

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
D.Z. Phillips' contemplative philosophy of religion : questions and responses 1. Phillips, D. Z. (Dewi Zephaniah) 2. Religion – Philosophy
I. Phillips, D. Z. (Dewi Zephaniah) II. Sanders, Andy F.
210

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
D.Z. Phillips' contemplative philosophy of religion : questions and responses / edited by Andy F Sanders.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-7546-6285-3 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Religion–Philosophy. 2. Phillips, D. Z. (Dewi Zephaniah) I. Sanders, Andy F.

BL51.D22 2007
210.92–dc22

2007007964

ISBN 978 0 7546 6285 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd. Bodmin, Cornwall.

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Chapter I

# Wittgenstein's Temple: Three Styles of Philosophical Architecture

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## Introduction

In his book, *Philosophy's Cool Place*,[1] D.Z. Phillips attempts to characterize his own Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy by distinguishing it from two other ways in which Wittgenstein's writings have been received amongst those similarly inclined to do philosophical work in the light of their example. This strategy of self-description conveys the impression that Phillip's contemplative conception of the subject is a kind of Aristotelian mean: it locates itself between one variety of Wittgensteinianism that exhibits a certain deficiency or lack (failing to appreciate one of the deepest dimensions of Wittgenstein's interest in language), and another variety that exhibits a certain excess (reading a dimension of significance into Wittgenstein's philosophizing that simply is not there).

In Phillips' view, the contemplative Wittgenstein is not only, as it were, the true Wittgenstein – or at least the reading of Wittgenstein that is true to his most profound moments of self-understanding; it is also a conception of philosophizing after Wittgenstein that returns the subject to one of its perennial, and certainly to one of its originating, concerns. Indeed, in a manner strangely reminiscent of the early Heidegger's self-presentations, Phillip's contemplative Wittgenstein appears to represent a kink in the history of the subject, but one that in fact returns it to the defining moment of its emergence from a pre-Socratic horizon. On Phillips' account, Wittgenstein and Plato's Socrates must be understood as conversation partners, as not only having something important to say to one another about reality, discourse and philosophy, but as sharing a sense of wonder at the very possibility of intercourse about these, or indeed any other, topics – at the possibility of discourse as such.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that this is not the conception of Wittgenstein or of philosophy, that most of Phillips' readers would have been inclined to attribute to him before the publication of *Philosophy's Cool Place*. At the very least, it seems clear that Phillips' intensive and extensive labours on the Rush

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1 *Philosophy's Cool Place*, Ithaca, NY, and New York: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Rhees *Nachlass* have deeply influenced his present understanding of his own work, and I hope that one consequence of my discussion of this matter will be to underline and clarify the nature of this influence. But my primary concern is to understand in more depth and detail exactly what Phillips thinks is at stake in his discrimination of his contemplative conception of philosophy from its deficient cousin (what lack is he making good, and why?), and exactly why he thinks that, having remedied this lack, he can continue to discriminate his own position from its transgressive cousin (what excess is he thereby avoiding, and why?). To put the matter in the terms provided by the epigraph to Phillips' book: when Wittgenstein tells us that 'My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them', exactly what temperature does he think is appropriate to any properly philosophical contemplation of these passions?

## 1. Catching a Chill: Repressing Philosophy's Passion?

Phillips believes that there is a common way of reading the later Wittgenstein that omits a fundamental dimension of his concern with philosophical problems and their dissolution. In effect, this deficient or cold conception amounts to conceiving of Wittgenstein's later philosophical method in the terms provided by his early, Tractarian specification of what he called 'the strictly correct method in philosophy' – that of saying only what can be said, and demonstrating to those who fail to respect this condition on speech that they have failed to give meaning to some portion of their putative utterance. Expressed in more familiar terminology, the picture is that specifically philosophical or metaphysical utterances amount to violations of grammar, instances of language idling or going on holiday – cases in which words have been unmoored from the contexts of their ordinary use; and the task of the philosopher is to identify these violations or instances of emptiness in speech, and to return the words thus abused to their home in our everyday life with language.

This picture can be linked without much difficulty, sometimes via other familiar remarks of Wittgenstein, with a number of more or less objectionable conclusions. For example, if metaphysics exiles us from the ordinary, and is to be overcome by returning to the ordinary, then the metaphysical and the ordinary must surely stand in simple opposition to one another. This means not only that the realm of the ordinary must be conceived of as absolutely pure, as free of metaphysical confusion or bewitchment; it also means that the realm of the metaphysical must be conceived of as utterly impure, as the manifestation of confusion pure and simple. Hence the philosophical tradition as a whole appears to be utterly valueless. More precisely, the only positive value of philosophy as Wittgenstein understands it is in fact negative; it resides in its ability to cure those diseases of thought with which other philosophers and philosophies infect us.

One might well wonder: why not simply avoid catching the disease in the first place? Here, of course, one must recall that Wittgenstein himself traces the source of our metaphysical bewitchments to language itself, to our captivation by the pictures embedded in our life with words, and hence concludes that infection by philosophical confusion is no more to be avoided than is life with language.



However, this concession offers little succour to those who might wish to think of philosophical impulses as having any human significance; for metaphysics remains, even on this modified picture, exclusively the settled cultural expression of confusion, illusion and emptiness. We may not be able to avoid the impulse to set up camp within its precincts; but our intellectual health depends upon mastering the impulse to remain there in each instance in which it finds expression or, more precisely, upon coming to see that there is no 'there' in which to remain, no space suitable for human habitation.

What concerns Phillips more immediately, however, is another conclusion that might be drawn from this deficient conception of philosophical endeavour. For Wittgenstein precedes his remark about returning words from metaphysical emptiness to everyday use with the following advice: 'When philosophers use a word... one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used this way in the language–game which is its original home?'[2] This might naturally be read as suggesting that everyday language is essentially a collection or agglomeration of language-games. At the very least, it is the kind of remark that has led many commentators to assume that the key to Wittgenstein's conception of language is his famous analogy between uses of words and games. Indeed, the pervasiveness of this analogy, perhaps when taken together with the equally famous characterization of 'game' and 'language' as family resemblance concepts, has led even very sympathetic commentators to suspect that Wittgenstein thinks of language as a family of language-games.

According to Phillips, if one were to allow such a picture of language to guide one's philosophical practice, then one will no more expect to find a common thread linking the various specific language-games to which one must return our words than one will expect to find one linking the various things we call 'games'. In effect, since philosophical confusions arise when words are removed from their home language-game, perhaps most typically when one language-game is confused with another, one should not expect the dissolution of those confusions to involve the Wittgensteinian philosopher in anything more than the task of perspicuously representing the structure of the relevant games, and the grammatical differences between them. Since there is no reason to think that language manifests any kind of unity, the philosopher can have no responsibility to identify or characterize that unity. Putting the matter more strongly: even to raise the question whether language as such might exhibit a unity of some kind is to fail to appreciate that 'language-game' and 'language' are family resemblance concepts. It is to share in the assumption of the interlocutor in *Philosophical Investigations* §65, whose confusion the very idea of family resemblance is designed in the first instance to reveal – the assumption that language has an essence. It is, in short, to engage in metaphysical thinking.

Phillips plainly, and rightly, thinks that many philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein operate in accordance with just such a conception of philosophy. Peter Winch – at least the Winch of *The Idea of a Social Science*,[3] with its emphasis upon rules and its declaration that what counts as real is always internal to a practice

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, p.116.

3 Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge, 1990.

– might plausibly be held to fit the bill; and Phillips has acknowledged elsewhere that his own early work in the philosophy of religion was prone to a similar set of emphases.[4] But his ever-deeper conviction that such a conception of Wittgensteinian philosophy is ineluctably impoverished is Phillips' most explicit, and fateful, debt to Rush Rhees.

For Rhees devotes his famous article 'Wittgenstein's Builders' to elaborating the suspicion that Wittgenstein himself is tempted by this conception of language, and hence of philosophy, and to articulating an alternative (in Rhees's view, no less Wittgensteinian) conception of both; and these are matters that are further developed and contextualized in the posthumous publication *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*,[5] edited by Phillips himself, and published in 1997. In essence, Rhees sympathizes with Wittgenstein's critical motive for developing this picture of language as a family – his desire to contest the view that language has the coherence or systematicity of a calculus or a formal system. However, he believes that it is itself likely to encourage another, equally profound misapprehension, and thereby to betray Wittgenstein's own deepest insights into the nature of language and speech – insights encapsulated in his remark that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.

For example, Rhees believes that it is the analogy between language and games that leads Wittgenstein to suggest that a primitive language-game such as that of the builders in *Philosophical Investigations* §2 might be the whole language of a tribe – a suggestion Rhees regards as unintelligible. For a language is something one speaks; and if the builders are to speak to one another, and to understand what is said, they must be able not only to give and receive orders, but to comprehend and discuss the place or point of any specific order in the broader activity of building, and the purpose or significance of building in the broader context of a recognizably human life. Wittgenstein's builders cannot exchange words with one another about their building project, or about building in general, or about its relation to other non-building activities in their lives. They have nothing to say to one another, about building or anything else, because their building activities are not taking place in the context of a life that they are living together, and in which their various activities (and their capacity to converse about those activities) interlock intelligibly with one another. For Rhees, in the absence of such a context, they emit only signals and reactions to signals.

The image of a conversation, of intercourse or dialogue, is here doing work at two inter-related levels. Most straightforwardly, it is meant to suggest that linguistic interaction cannot be properly pictured on analogy with making moves in a game. Moves in a game, Rhees claims, are determined by the rules of the game, and have no significance outside it; whereas knowing how to say something (to say something worth saying, something worth another's hearing) is not a matter of mastering rules, and does involve being responsive to the significance of matters outside the conversation itself (both the topic of the conversation, and the relation of that

4 See, for example, 'Religious Beliefs and Language Games'.

5 Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, ed. D.Z. Phillips, 2nd ... Blackwell, 2005.



conversation to other modes of human discourse about other topics). On another level, Rhees means us to picture the various different forms or aspects of human discourse and practice as relating to one another in the way that various contributions to a conversation relate to one another. In other words, the unity of language is the unity of a dialogue; the various modes of human discourse about things interlock intelligibly with one another, and the sense that each makes is both constituted by and constitutes the sense of these interconnections. In short, for Rhees language makes sense insofar as living makes sense; the generality or unity of language is the generality or unity of a form of life.

On Phillips' view, in refusing to acknowledge the intelligibility of any attempt to characterize the unity or generality of language, proponents of the deficient version of Wittgensteinian philosophy are in fact occluding a precondition of their own, more restricted, enterprise. For the business of clarifying the grammar of a specific language-game, and of its differences from other language-games, can be carried out only on the assumption that parties to the enterprise already speak the language concerned. In fact, a version of this thought is plainly central to Wittgenstein's opening discussions of language and games (*Philosophical Investigations* §31):

> I am explaining chess to someone; and I begin by pointing to a chessman and saying: 'This is the king; it can move like this... and so on'. In this case we shall say: the words 'This is the King'... are a definition only if the player already knows what a piece in a game is. That is, if he has already played other games, or has watched other people playing 'and understood' – *and similar things*...
>
> We may say: only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name.

As this quotation suggests, there is an aspect of the analogy between language and games that works for, rather than against, the thought that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life (and that might accordingly raise suspicions about Rhees' imputation to Wittgenstein of the impoverished conception of language and philosophy that he sees as inherent in this very analogy).[6] For the guidance it offers us here is that, just as knowing how to play a specific game presupposes a grasp of what it is to play games, so knowing how to do something specific with words presupposes a more general or basic awareness of what it is to do things with words – in short, of what it is to speak. Hence, the possibility of engaging in grammatical clarifications of specific philosophical confusions about words makes manifest the very unity or generality of speech that its proponents overlook or deny. In Phillips' favoured terms, the possibility of discourse about discourse makes manifest the unity of discourse, and hence makes the task of attempting properly to characterize that unity unavoidable.

As this vocabulary is partly intended to suggest, such a way of conceiving philosophy's fundamental business aligns one dimension of Wittgenstein's work with that of Plato. Phillips traces back to the pre-Socratic the thought that philosophy's

6 For a more detailed defence of Wittgenstein against Rhees's charges, see sections 15–18 of Part I of my *Inheritance and Originality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

distinctive concern is with reality in general: its aim is not to account for the existence of one state of affairs or mode of reality rather than another, but to show how it is possible for anything to be real. The difficulty with any answer that might be given to such a question is, however, obvious; if Thales tells us that all things are water, we will naturally ask what account is to be given of the water? More generally, it will always be possible to ask, of any putative measure of the real, what account is to be given of the measure.

One response to this would be to accept the irreducible plurality of our measures of reality – to declare that whilst there might be particular measures of this or that kind of reality, there is no measure of all things. Any attempt to favour one of those measures as *the* measure amounts simply to subliming that measure – to giving it a wholly spurious authority over its peers. Such a perspective (common, in Phillips' view, to Protagoras, J.L. Austin and the deficient version of Wittgensteinian philosophizing) amounts to the denial that philosophy has any legitimate positive subject matter; it must content itself with the purely negative task of exposing the pretensions of a metaphysics that has no genuine subject matter.

On Phillips' account, Plato saw the difficulties to which this conception of philosophy was a response, but refused to respond in a like manner. For first, he saw, in the acceptance of a mere plurality of measures of reality, the impending threat of a general scepticism about the human capacity to claim genuine knowledge of the real. For example, when the sophists saw that there was and could be no such thing as 'reality' (as the pre-Socratic had understood it) into which philosophy might inquire, they concluded that the idea of our being capable of attaining knowledge – justified true beliefs about the world – was empty, and argued that we must evaluate our opinions about reality purely in terms of their effectiveness. Plato showed us how Socrates could demolish such sophistry, by showing that their supposedly self-sufficient art of rhetoric was in fact parasitic on the claims to knowledge and truth embodied in the various existing human modes of inquiry and creation. But he also portrayed Socrates as accepting that we must be content as philosophers with the various differing conceptions of reality that each such human art embodies; and here Plato dissents from his teacher. For on his view, this leaves us with a view of our modes of discourse as something essentially arbitrary. On Socrates' conception of the matter, the particular arts we have are just the ones we happen to have; they have no external grounding and no internal or necessary relation to one another, and hence the various conceptions of reality internal to each art need not stand in any intelligible relation to each other, and need make no authoritative claim upon our allegiance.

Plato is not prepared to accept this fundamental lack of intelligibility in our ways of making sense of the world. According to Phillips, Plato claims that human arts and activities stand in a dialogic relation to each other, and that each has its logos; in other words, each gives us something substantial to comprehend, and the substance of each art stands in intelligible relations to the substance of the others. However, Plato is also strongly tempted to account for this mode of unity in our discourse by positing an essentially unified reality to which our discourse is responsive; and here he verges upon an error that he is elsewhere committed to avoiding (the inter-related ... of measuring the measure, and of subliming one measure).



What Phillips sees in Rhees, and in Wittgenstein's moments of deepest insight, is an attempt to recover and reformulate Plato's image of the dialogue without succumbing to his intermittent temptation to hypostatize Reality. Indeed, one might say that for Rhees's Wittgenstein, all that can be milked out of the idea of reality as such, Reality as essentially one, is the proposition that our modes of discourse are dialogically inter-related, and hence can themselves be the object of intelligible discourse. The only thing that can show that there is any genuine reality in the different ways in which we talk to each other is our being able to give some account of how those different modes of discourse are themselves in dialogue with one another. It is to this task that Phillips' contemplative conception of philosophy is essentially devoted.

Even if we are convinced by these claims, however, it is important to note that there are grounds for doubting Phillips' repeated assertion that, in taking on this task, the contemplative philosopher is moving into an area in which the resources of the deficient conception of philosophy are of no relevance whatever. For, recall, the mark of the deficient conception is its restriction to the task of noting grammatical differences, of distinguishing one language-game from another; and Phillips gives us the following reason for thinking that such an approach can have precisely nothing to say when one's interest is in the possibility of discourse as such (*Philosophy's Cool Place* p.48–49):

> If one is confused about the use of a concept and if someone then attempts to clear up that confusion, *it will be assumed that one already speaks the language*...There is no question of marking off language as such, or speaking, from anything else. That is why this fundamental question cannot be answered by means of providing perspicuous representations, for what would it mean to speak of the whole language as confused or to give a perspicuous representation of the whole of language to clear up the confusion?

I do not wish to deny that Wittgenstein is sensitive to the anxiety that Phillips expresses here; in section 120 of the *Investigations*, he puts it as follows:

> When I talk about language (words, sentences etc.) I must speak the language of everyday... In giving explanations, I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shows that I can adduce only exterior facts about language... [T]hen how can these explanations satisfy us?' But he answers his own question immediately: 'Well, your very questions were framed in this language; they had to be expressed in this language if there was anything to ask!'

The relevance of this exchange to Phillips' argument is as follows. From the point of view of the purportedly deficient conception of philosophy, Phillips' question about the possibility of discourse is, in effect, a question about the concepts of 'language', 'speaking' and 'saying something'. If clarity is to be attained about the concept of language, we do not have to give a perspicuous representation of the whole of language; we simply have to give a perspicuous representation of the ways in which we use the word 'language'. In so doing, we will, of course, be presupposing our ability to speak, to use words to say something; but there is nothing paradoxical or self-defeating about this – any more than there is in the thought that orthography can

study the word 'orthography' along with any others (see *Philosophical Investigations* §121). After all, the very same presupposition informs the raising of the question in the first place: even to ask 'How is discourse possible?' is to assume one's mastery of discourse. But if everyday language is, for all this, an adequate medium in which to frame the question of the possibility of discourse – if the everyday words 'discourse', 'language', 'speaking' signify the phenomena in which we are interested – why is it not an adequate medium in which to answer it, and specifically by clarifying the grammar of those everyday words? In fact, what else are Rhees and Phillips doing when they discuss the dialogic relations between language-games and linguistic practices than engaging in perspicuous representations of aspects of the grammar of 'language' that are otherwise hidden from us by their very familiarity?

In short, whilst Phillips may have succeeded in identifying a dimension of Wittgenstein's interest in language that relates it to a perennial preoccupation of the Western philosophical tradition since Plato, he does not appear to have succeeded in showing that its further exploration must involve going essentially beyond the familiar Wittgensteinian business of perspicuously representing the grammar of everyday words.

## 2. Overheating: Unphilosophical Passions?

Where Phillips thinks of the deficient interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy as condemned by its impoverished conception of method to failing to appreciate an essential dimension of Wittgenstein's interest in language, he thinks of his own contemplative interpretation as avoiding an error or confusion that is embraced by those who offer what he thinks of as an excessive or transgressive interpretation. The latter amounts to an over-extension of philosophy's rightful authority; as Phillips expresses it: 'It is easy to think that philosophy can do more than show that language is not prior to dialogue between people, that it can show what dialogue *should* be' (*Philosophy's Cool Place* p.52). Phillips' picture is that the transgressive conception of Wittgensteinian philosophy goes beyond the perfectly legitimate thought that philosophy must attend not only to the differences between distinct uses of language but also to the ways in which our linguistic practices hang together. For whilst this thought licenses the conclusion that philosophy is responsive to, and indeed is obliged to cultivate, its own distinctive sense of contemplative wonder at the dialogical unity of language – a wonder at the fact that people do speak to one another, that their words and ways of living are capable of being genuinely responsive both to the words and ways of living of others, and to reality – it forbids the thought that the philosopher can or should look to provide foundations for that unity, or to intervene in the progress of the dialogue that constitutes it.

The problem is not that such interventions are not possible, or not perfectly legitimate in themselves; it is rather that they can have no distinctively philosophical authority behind them. On Phillips' conception of the matter, our life with language makes sense insofar as the various modes of discourse that make it up are dialogically unified; hence, in that life, we can avail ourselves of a number of perspectives or stances from which we might wish to say something worth saying



to other speakers. We might speak as practitioners of a specific art or activity – for example, history, mathematics, science; or from the perspective of a mode of discourse which articulates a certain way of making sense of our lives as a whole, perhaps by articulating a certain way of seeing other specific modes of discourse as hanging together with one another – for example, from within a specific religious, political or ethical tradition. But a distinctively philosophical perspective on our life with language must not be confused with any of these possible ways of speaking. For its concern is to explore the very possibility of there being such ways of speaking – to investigate and clarify the conditions for discourse; and the task of thus engaging in discourse about discourse is completely distinct from that of making a substantive contribution to such discourse. To wonder at the fact that such contributions can be made is not to make one more contribution; it is rather to lay stress on the multiplicity of ways in which it is possible to do so. Hence, while the contemplative conception of philosophy can arrogate to itself a certain kind of passionate, wondering interest in the dialogical unity of language, and thereby at least purport to distinguish itself from what it sees as the essentially dispassionate conception of philosophy as a matter of providing perspicuous representations of grammatical difference, it must not run that distinctively philosophical passion together with the passionate interest that every human being has in finding some way of inhabiting, making sense of and hence participating in that unifying dialogue.

In effect, then, Phillips is here attempting to stress that his contemplative conception of philosophy maintains a certain kind of neutrality, despite its rejection of the deficient conception's understanding of what grounds that neutrality. Another, perhaps more familiar, way of articulating the issue would be to say that Phillips is anxious that the realm of the philosophical should continue to be sharply distinguishable from that of the personal. We must continue to distinguish the business of clarifying a particular grammar or form of life from endorsing it; we must remember that philosophical problems and puzzles concerning how it is possible for us to find sense in living are distinct from the problems and puzzles generated by the desire or need to find a way of making sense of life that we can accept or even respect; and we must acknowledge that the difficulties of doing philosophy are intrinsic to philosophy itself, and hence essentially separable from the difficulties of living one's life in a humanly satisfying way.

It is not my concern to question Phillips' claim that at least some ways of failing to respect these distinctions would be philosophically damaging; there is certainly an important truth registered in Wittgenstein's claim that a philosopher should not be a citizen of any community of ideas – that that, indeed, is what makes him a philosopher. I am, however, less convinced by Phillips' attempts to argue that Stanley Cavell and James Conant are Wittgensteinians who exhibit a culpable version of this failing; so I propose to examine in more detail some of Phillips' reasons for asserting that they do.

I shall begin by focusing on two claims made by Conant as part of a comparative discussion of the philosophical methods of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, to which Phillips takes great exception. The first emerges from Conant's account of the business of clarifying grammatical differences between religious terms, in despite of our tendency to overlook those differences:

> [F]ailure of attention to how we speak cannot be separated from a failure to attend to the various ways in which we act... [S]ince it is the heart of Wittgenstein's teaching... that these words draw their meaning from the way in which they figure in our lives, the task of struggling to avoid such confusions cannot be separated from a form of vigilance which is directed towards how we live.[7]

Phillips first responds by pointing out that conceptual clarification has no necessary connection with any specific change in the direction of one's life. Since, however, he goes on immediately to acknowledge that Conant does not suggest that there is such a connection (in fact, Conant emphasizes that, for example, someone who is helped by Wittgensteinian [or even Kierkegaardian] philosophy to become unconfused about what it means to become a Christian may or may not go on to become one), this point cuts little ice. Neither, as far as I can see, does Phillips' subsequent charge that Conant neglects to discuss the case of someone who remains a Christian throughout their passage from philosophical confusion to clarity on this issue. Phillips tells us that such 'neglected cases show the important *independent* source of philosophical confusion' (*Philosophy's Cool Place* p.44); but it is hard to see how.

To begin with, it is unclear how someone who really was confused about what it means to become (and hence to be) a Christian could be said to have been living the life of a Christian before the advent of the relevant philosophical clarification; she may well have been going to church and giving to charity, but that is hardly enough to merit the description. Perhaps Phillips rather has in mind someone who is living a genuinely Christian life, one in which Christian religious concepts have their full and mutually implicating place, but who is inclined to reflect on her life in a philosophically confused manner (say, by responding positively to a philosopher who asks her whether her God is a kind of entity). But is not an alteration in one's way of reflecting upon one's own life an alteration in one's life? After all, engaging in philosophical reflection is not something one does outside or apart from one's life. It is a (perhaps momentary and infrequent) part of one's life; and a religious life that includes confused modes of self-understanding is significantly different from one that does not. Furthermore, what shows that such forms of self-reflection are an expression of confusion, if not the life that the reflecting person leads outside the contexts of such reflection? In other words, it is precisely vigilant attention to how such a person lives her life that can show her the way to avoid such confusions – which is exactly the claim Conant is making.

Elsewhere, Phillips makes another attempt to clarify what he means by independently philosophical sources or kinds of confusion, when he responds to a second claim Conant makes – one in which he aligns the difficulties involved in engaging in Wittgensteinian grammatical investigations with the difficulties of self-knowledge in life. Here, Conant is referring to such familiar remarks of Wittgenstein's as: 'Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself', 'You cannot write anything about yourself that is more truthful than you yourself are', and

7 James Conant, 'On Putting Two and Two Together', in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, eds. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, London: Macmillan, 1995, p.280. In fact, Phillips misquotes this passage, thus making it incomprehensible; but no part of his ensuing critical discussion turns upon this inaccuracy.



'Working in philosophy is really more like working on oneself'. Phillips' response is brusque (*Philosophy's Cool Place* p.46):

> Wittgenstein is referring to difficulties in *doing philosophy*, difficulties in giving the problems the kind of attention philosophy asks of us. And this is missed if one equates the difficulties with *personal* difficulties. The analogy between working on philosophical problems and working on moral problems come from the fact that, in both cases, a resistance of will has to be overcome. In philosophy, we resist having to give up certain ways of thinking. But the hold these ways of thinking have is not personal, nor is the source of their temptation. They are ways of thinking to which *anyone* can be susceptible, because their power is in the language that we speak.

This is a strange argument. Phillips seems to think that if a problem is one to which any human being is susceptible, it cannot be a personal problem; but by parity of reasoning, since the tendency towards sinful acts is one shared by all human beings, committing a sin is not a personal problem. Furthermore, there is a certain ambiguity in Phillips' implicit attribution to Conant of the wish to *equate* philosophical and personal difficulties. What Conant in fact asserts is not an equation but a connection or alignment; Conant's thought is that the philosophical difficulties are a species of personal difficulty, one kind of way in which an individual might confront the difficulties of achieving self-knowledge in her life. There are, of course, other ways in which we might encounter such difficulties, ways which are not distinctively philosophical in character; but that does not make the ones which *are* philosophical any less personal – and of course, it does not make that species of personal difficulty any less philosophical. Once again, then, Phillips does not succeed in giving us any reason to accept his suspiciously absolute, subliming dichotomy between the philosophical and the personal; he simply presupposes it.

Perhaps, however, I am making things rather too easy for Conant (and Cavell) by focusing on philosophical clarifications of specifically religious concepts; perhaps, as Phillips also claims, this amounts to restricting ourselves to a one-sided diet of examples. Could we think of the business of clarifying the concepts of science or logic as equally dependent upon 'a vigilance directed towards how we live', or as generating difficulties that might be deemed personal as well as philosophical? Here, everything turns upon the way in which Conant and Cavell understand Wittgenstein's general characterization of philosophical confusions. Central to this understanding is the thought that, under philosophical pressure, otherwise competent speakers are driven to emptiness, to utterances that are not false or imprecise but rather nonsensical, unmoored from the contexts in which they might mean something in particular or hovering between various possibilities of making sense without ever alighting upon one in particular. Some Wittgensteinian philosophers think of such utterances as violations of grammar; Cavell calls them ways of repudiating criteria. And the question that interests him is: what human need does the satisfaction of that general impulse serve? What is it about criteria or grammar as such (rather than, say, specifically religious or psychological or scientific criteria) that sometimes compels otherwise competent speakers to refuse them?

Cavell's answer to this question has many facets; but one is this: since, on Wittgenstein's conception of the matter, criteria constitute the limits or conditions of

the human capacity to know, think or speak about the world and the various things that are in it, they are in effect that without which human claims to knowledge of reality would not be possible.

Nevertheless, it is fatally easy to interpret limits as limitations, to experience conditions as constraints. And this temptation can maintain (or, at least, endlessly renew) itself even after it is pointed out that it would only make sense to think of the conditions of human knowledge as limitations if we could conceive of another cognitive perspective upon the world that did not require them, when in reality the absence of the concepts or categories in terms of which we individuate objects would not clear the way for unmediated knowledge of reality but rather remove the possibility of anything that might count as knowledge. Hence, Cavell interprets the repudiation of criteria as an inability or refusal to acknowledge the fact that human knowledge – the knowledge available to finite creatures, subjective agents in an objective world – is necessarily conditioned; and he perceives Wittgensteinian philosophizing as an attempt to overcome that repudiation, to acknowledge our finitude. But, he reminds us, nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as limitations and to repudiate the human condition of conditionedness or finitude in the name of the unconditioned, the transcendent, the inhuman.

If I were to recharacterize the desire to deny the human as the desire to be God, then it should be evident that this Wittgensteinian understanding of the philosophical impulse is internally related not only to certain 'Continental' interpretations of philosophy and of human beings (such as those of Heidegger and Sartre), but also to a broad, familiar and deeply influential range of religious and ethical – say, spiritual – interpretations of the human condition. But to recognize and acknowledge such analogies and alignments is not to equate these various philosophical and spiritual traditions or modes of discourse; one can detect family resemblances between distinct phenomena without conflating or collapsing them into each other. Indeed, Cavell's conception of the matter is rather that his understanding of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy makes possible the recognition of certain literary, cultural, ethical, religious and psychoanalytical traditions as other to that philosophy – that is, as requiring acknowledgement as much for their differences from, as for their resemblances to, a distinctively philosophical perspective. When, for example, Cavell claims that what is taken up in philosophy as skepticism is taken up in (certain forms of) literature as tragedy, the very terms of this suggested alignment simultaneously incorporate an acknowledgement of the distinctive resources and presumptions that literature and philosophy can bring to bear on their common inheritance. Such claims and suggestions no more threaten to repress an awareness of philosophy's distinctive contribution to our culture than they presage a collapse of the distinction between the philosophical and the personal.

The depth of Phillips' resistance to this purportedly transgressive conception of philosophy becomes even harder to comprehend if we note just how easily the basic articulations of that conception can be given expression in the terms constitutive of his own, Rhees-inspired, contemplative reading of Wittgenstein. To begin with, in Cavell's conception of Wittgenstein's philosophy, the fundamental issue is the repudiation of criteria and the overcoming of that repudiation; Cavell calls this the



issue of skepticism, and characterizes it as a matter of finding a way properly to acknowledge the capacity of our words to reach out to, to make contact with, an independent reality. But this fundamental anxiety about language is exactly the problem that Phillips sees at the heart of debates between the pre-Socratics, the sophists and Plato, and that he finds Rhees taking up again under the label 'the possibility of discourse': how is one to account for our capacity to word the world, for the ways we talk being genuinely responsive to the real? Furthermore, as we have seen, Phillips takes Rhees' idea of comparing language to conversation or dialogue to open up a fruitful way of answering this question; he suggests that it is only insofar as the various ways in which we discourse about things have the unity of a dialogue that we can avoid splintering and relativizing our conception of the real to that of specific language-games or practices. But of course, when Conant and Cavell identify analogies and alignments (as well as disanalogies and misalignments) between philosophical, psychoanalytic, literary, ethical and religious traditions, and go on to explore the ways in which participants in those traditions might fruitfully converse with one another, what better way is there to describe their achievement than as one of making manifest the fact that our various modes of discourse are not an arbitrary assemblage but rather possess an essentially dialogical unity? Against this background, one might say that, far from transgressing the limits of the contemplative conception, the Cavell–Conant conception is in fact a working out of its implications. Hence, by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of their philosophical practice, Phillips is prohibiting an elaborate and sophisticated working out of the very model of discourse of which he and Rhees have provided only the barest sketch in their own writings.

However, even if he does acknowledge this much degree of congruence between Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein and his own, Phillips may continue to feel that something fundamental continues to separate them. For whilst it might be consistent with the contemplative conception of philosophy to attend to, and perhaps even to highlight, the various ways in which our modes of discourse relate dialogically to one another, we transgress that conception as soon as we move – as philosophers – to participate in the conversations that these dialogic relations exemplify and make possible. In other words, Cavell's transgression consists in his refusal to respect the absolutely critical distinction between engaging in discourse and contemplating the possibility of discourse; for Phillips, this transgression amounts to the obliteration of philosophy's distinctive claims on our attention and interest, the misuse of the specific cultural authority philosophy acquires precisely from its willingness to hold back from the conversations of mankind.

I wonder, however, just how easy it can be, from the perspective of Phillips' own, Rhees-inspired account of those conversations and their preconditions, to draw the very distinction upon which he places so much weight. For in the terms of that account, as Phillips elaborates it through his introductory discussion of Socrates, philosophy is to be characterized as discourse about (the possibility of) discourse; but then, of course, it follows that philosophy is itself a mode of discourse. To be sure, it has its own distinctive subject matter or at least its own distinctive kind of interest in any given subject matter; but then, exactly the same can be said of any other mode of discourse that has its place in our life with language. And if philosophy must

itself be seen as one of the various ways in which we talk about things, it must stand in dialogical relations with other modes of discourse. In other words, philosophy cannot simply think of itself as standing outside the dialogical unity of discourse that is its distinctive subject matter; it must simultaneously recognize that what it has to say about that subject matter is itself a contribution to a dialogue. After all, if it were not such a contribution, how would it hang together with the other dimensions of our life with language – how could it have a non-accidental or contingent, an intelligible, relation to the rest of our form of life?

What Cavell and Conant recognize is that other modes of discourse have something to say about matters in which philosophy has a rightful interest: matters such as our capacity to lose (and re-find) faith in our ability to word the world, to lose (and recover) touch with our natural responsiveness to the humanity of others, to lose (and restore) our orientation in the business of living. What grounds could we conceivably have for saying, in advance of dialogue with the relevant traditions, that the discoveries and claims of Freudian psychoanalysis, Romanticism and Christianity could have no bearing on our distinctively philosophical interests in such matters?

To put matters slightly differently: it is an inevitable part of philosophy's interest in the possibility of discourse that it be interested in the possibility of discourse about the possibility of discourse. In short, philosophy must attend to the conditions of its own possibility. Hence, a dialogue about how philosophical discourse is best to be pursued is an inevitable part of philosophical discourse; and that internal dialogue can uncover presuppositions governing any particular conception of philosophical discourse that will themselves stake out the ground for an external dialogue with non-philosophical modes of discourse. Even a conception of philosophy such as the contemplative one, which rightly prides itself on a certain kind of neutrality, may find that it can only account for that claim to neutrality by invoking conceptions of language, human beings and reality that are themselves far from neutral – that are, at the very least, legitimate topics for conversation. It is to the furtherance of that kind of conversation – one which involves philosophers in dialogue with nonphilosophers, but for reasons that are entirely internal to, and hence respectful of the distinctive character of, philosophy – that the work of Conant and Cavell is directed.

It seems to me that Phillips' resistance to developing his contemplative conception of philosophy in the directions adumbrated by Conant and Cavell's purported transgressions exemplifies a failure to recognize the pertinence of Kierkegaard's repeated and pointed reminder that philosophers are human beings too – that philosophy cannot arrogate to itself a perspective upon the human condition that is external to it. Those who discourse about the possibility of discourse are engaging in discourse, hence inevitably occupying a position within the broader web of human discourse that is at once distinctive and intelligibly, dialogically related to other such positions. If that were not the case, if philosophical discourse were not so related to nonphilosophical modes of discourse, then according to Phillips' own understanding of our life with language, the very possibility of making sense of our capacity to word the world is threatened, and so thereby is the possibility of our making sense of our existence as such. Hence it cannot be the case that a proper acknowledgement of philosophy's distinctive interests and authority involves a refusal to acknowledge its participation in broader cultural intercourse. This does not amount to a conflation of the philosophical and the personal; it merely reminds us that philosophical discourse is at once part of human life with language, and part of individual human beings' attempts to make sense of their own modes of inhabiting that distinctive form of life.



## Conclusion

The result of this analysis of Phillips' most recent and most detailed attempt to characterize his contemplative conception of philosophizing after Wittgenstein is that is far less easily distinguishable from its two purportedly erroneous competitors than he appears to think. It remains unclear why his (and Rhees's) attempts to give an account of the possibility of discourse should not be thought of as contributions to the task of perspicuously representing the grammar of 'language', 'speech' and 'saying something'; and the purportedly transgressive conception of philosophy represented by the work of Conant and Cavell appears in fact to be a further elaboration of Phillips' own view that it is philosophy's distinctive business to discourse on the possibility of discourse. Perhaps, then, in the task of building Wittgenstein's temple, Phillips is not as much opposed by his fellow Wittgensteinians as he seems to believe. Perhaps, in reality, the philosophical site on which such a setting for the passions is to be erected also provides a setting for a genuinely productive dialogue about the possibility of discourse about the possibility of discourse – in short, for a fruitful conversation about philosophy between Wittgenstein's builders.