Malcolm: The Groundlessness of Religious Belief

Apr. 9, 2014
Overview

Review

Background

The thesis

Groundless beliefs

Religion
Can we believe something we cannot prove?

Should we believe some things we cannot prove?

Should we believe some things that we know are false?

Is it reasonable to believe something we cannot prove?

- Aquinas: yes, but *not anything*; we can still have signs that confirm our belief.
- Clifford: no. It is *morally* wrong for anyone, everywhere, to believe anything on insufficient evidence.
- Malcolm: yes, it is reasonable, and even necessary.
Norman Malcolm

1911–1990, American
Studied with Wittgenstein

**Language game**: Language is similar to a game as it implies rule following. When you know a language, you are part of a certain language-game; this means, you know the rules, and are willing to follow them.

E.g., academic language, everyday language, slang, etc.
The Thesis

Thesis:

Our lives are formed by groundless beliefs, and religion is just one of them. That they are groundless does not mean that we should not believe them.

A few things to note:

- “groundless” = fundamental; not pejorative
- Aquinas would disagree: for him, religion is not groundless in this sense, e.g., we can demonstrate God’s existence from more evident things
- Clifford would also disagree: according to him, we should not have any unjustified (groundless) beliefs
Even our best science is based on groundless beliefs: e.g., that nature acts uniformly (see Hume!)

Our everyday life is based on groundless beliefs: e.g., the continuity of physical objects

We never try to justify these, but if we did, we could not

This attitude is just part of the foundation of our thinking

These and similar beliefs are part of what we call a ‘system’: they provide the boundaries within which we ask questions, carry out investigations, experiments, etc.
A system can be viewed as a language-game: has certain rules.

The rules of a system are called the “framework propositions” of that system.

As we never question the rules of a language game (at least if we are willing to play the game), similarly, we never question the framework propositions of a system.

This does not mean that these are unjustified; the category of justification just does not apply there.

Example: we know how to calculate; when we have to add 5+7 at the grocery store, we do not stop to wonder about the axioms of basic algebra.
Against the Evidentialist

“Philosophical thinking is greatly influenced by this veneration of evidence... [which is] the general disease of thinking.” (p.118)

- According to the evidentialist, we must be justified in all of our beliefs (cf. Clifford!)
- But we need to recognize that we have to stop somewhere in the justification process
- Example of the traveler: how does he know what the signs mean? Perhaps by another sign that tells him? But how about that other sign? — We must stop questioning somewhere.
- The question of justification can only arise within a given language game; we never try to justify the game itself.
Religion as Groundless Belief

- Religion is a language-game itself, and so is, in that sense, groundless.
- There might be issues within the religion that can be questioned, but not religion itself, that is, not the framework propositions of religion.
- The framework proposition of religion is that “God exists”.
- Thus, the proposition “God exists” is not a usual true/false proposition; it is one that sets up a system. Therefore, if we are willing to play the rule of this game (i.e., religion), we should just take it for granted.
- Therefore, it is not true that for a religion to be intellectually respectable, we need to have a justification for it; it is a form of life (but so is science, which also does not need justification).
Some Questions

- Is religious belief different than other kinds of belief? Is it really a system?
- Is it true that we can never question / justify a whole system?
- Do we ever question rules that set up a game?