

ABUSING WITTGENSTEIN: THE MISUSE OF THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE GAMES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

MICHAEL W. NICHOLSON*

For the past two decades the concept of language games, developed by linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, has been appropriated more and more in theological discussions and proposals, particularly in the areas of hermeneutics and the nature of religious language. Although not in a revolutionary way, George Lindbeck certainly set a trend for the subsequent theological appropriation of Wittgenstein's philosophy.¹ Earlier, Anthony Thiselton helped pave the way for the use of Wittgenstein's philosophy in hermeneutics.² This appropriation centers on the concept of language games, an aspect of Wittgenstein's later work that captures his developed understanding of the nature and function of human language. With the proliferation of the use of the notion of language games and related Wittgensteinian concepts in theological and hermeneutical discussions it becomes important to pose several questions. The first is whether the various appropriations of the concept accurately reflect Wittgenstein's understanding of language games. Wittgenstein's propensity for obscurity, particularly in his later work, is well known, and close and careful analysis is essential to gain an accurate interpretation. A second salient question is whether Wittgenstein's philosophy, even when properly understood, is genuinely useful for evangelical theology. The answer hinges partially on how far he intended to extend his concept of language games from the metaphorical and analogical into the actual and ontological. Finally there is the question of whether the relativistic and solipsistic tendencies of Wittgenstein's later philosophy provide any solid basis for a critical hermeneutic. With a view to answering these questions, this essay will be divided into three parts: (1) a careful examination and interpretation of Wittgenstein's concept of language games, (2) an analysis and critique of the appropriation, implicitly or explicitly, of Wittgensteinian concepts in representative contemporary theological works,³ and (3) an assessment of the value of Wittgenstein's philosophy, particularly the concept of language games, for evangelical theology and hermeneutics.

* Michael Nicholson is adjunct professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280.

¹ G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

² A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

³ In addition to Lindbeck, *Nature*, and Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, cf. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

I. WITTGENSTEIN'S CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE GAMES

According to an anecdote told by Freeman Dyson to Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein conceived the analogy between games and language while watching a football game. As he observed the progress of the game, "the thought first struck him that in language we play *games* with *words*."⁴ The term "language-game" appears in *Blue and Brown Books* and is developed still further in *Philosophical Investigations*. The concept of language games is somewhat of a central organizing principle (if it can be said that there is one) in *Investigations*,⁵ clustering around itself Wittgenstein's notions of family resemblances in language, rules, forms of life, and meaning as "use."

1. *The nature and function of language games.* Wittgenstein writes that "language-games are . . . set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities."⁶ In this regard we could thus see Wittgenstein's concept of a language game as a heuristic analogy that enables us to describe certain features of actual language.⁷ By the analogical use of his language-game concept Wittgenstein intended to disclose, through descriptive examples, certain specific aspects of language. Perhaps foremost among these aspects is the notion that just as there is nothing common to all games, so there is nothing common to all language games and hence no common essence to all language.⁸ Instead between games, as between language games, there is a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail," which Wittgenstein characterizes as "family resemblances."⁹ The language-game analogy thus serves to point out both the "multiplicity and diversity of meaningful speech uses" and also that, despite the lack of a common essence, "language does have some unity and integration about it."¹⁰

Language games also indicate the relationship between language and rules.¹¹ Wittgenstein did not intend, by pointing to the use of rules in the playing of games, to say that the practice of language is essentially the strict observance of preexisting rules.¹² It is the similarity of the practice of language to the playing of games as a rule-guided activity that the concept of

⁴ N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London: Oxford University, 1967) 65.

⁵ Cf. E. Specht, *The Foundations of Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University) 40; L. Finch, *Wittgenstein—The Later Philosophy: An Exposition of the "Philosophical Investigations"* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities, 1977) 74.

⁶ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 130. Unless otherwise indicated references for *Investigations* refer to paragraph numbers, not page numbers.

⁷ Cf. Finch, *Wittgenstein* 73; D. M. High, *Language, Persons, and Belief: Studies in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations and Religious Uses of Language* (New York: Oxford University, 1967) 72–73; A. Kenny (*Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973) 162–163.

⁸ Cf. High, *Language* 70, 80, 92 ff.; Kenny, *Wittgenstein* 162–163; see Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 65–67.

⁹ *Ibid.* 66–67.

¹⁰ High, *Language* 70, 80.

¹¹ See especially Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 68, 81–86, 198–202, 206, 208.

¹² Cf. High, *Language* 82; cf. Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 68.

language games is meant to bring out.¹³ Different games and language games can be more or less rule-guided (and all still be considered games). Rules can be invented, altered, broken, and play different roles in both games and language.¹⁴ Moreover it is not the rule that establishes the practice of games or language but the practice or use that establishes the rule.¹⁵ Notwithstanding the amorphousness and lack of essential fixity of rules, a language can possess unity and order, just as a game does, through the consensus of shared human activity. By the use of language games Wittgenstein wanted to emphasize, as Ernst Specht notes, the “indissoluble connection of language with human action.”¹⁶ The practice of language is embedded in the larger context of human socio-cultural activity and derives its life from that larger context. As Dallas High puts it, the “analogy [of language games] calls to our attention the contextual environs upon which users depend for some regularity and order in ‘getting along’ or understanding what is being done with words, symbols, and sentences.”¹⁷ This understanding of language games is closely associated with Wittgenstein’s concept of a “form of life,” which will be discussed below.

While it is clear that Wittgenstein intended for language games to be invented and employed as conceptual investigative devices, he also speaks, as Henry Finch observes, “of language-games being played, of them being *there* and of our *noting* them.”¹⁸ In particular Finch concludes that the “repeated connecting of language-games with the way children learn language . . . establishes that language-games are not merely devices for describing language, but appear also in the actual practice of language.”¹⁹ It does seem that “natural” language games, according to Wittgenstein, do have an ontological (in some sense) rather than a purely conceptual status. As well as inventing numerous descriptive language games, Wittgenstein also lists many that can only be construed as “natural” human linguistic activities: (1) giving orders and obeying them; (2) describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements; (3) constructing an object from a description (a drawing); (4) reporting an event; (5) speculating about an event; (6) forming and testing a hypothesis; (7) presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams; (8) making up a story and reading it; (9) play-acting; (10) singing catches; (11) guessing riddles; (12) making a joke and telling it; (13) solving a problem in practical arithmetic; (14) translating from one language into another; (15) asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.²⁰ These language games can clearly be understood as what Specht has characterized as “individual partial language systems” that make up an “organic whole.”²¹

¹³ Cf. High, *Language* 82–83; J. V. Canfield, *Wittgenstein: Language and World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1981) 20.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 54, 68, 100.

¹⁵ See *ibid.* 198, 199, 202, 206; cf. Canfield, *Wittgenstein* 20.

¹⁶ Specht, *Foundations* 48; cf. Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 7, 23.

¹⁷ High, *Language* 70.

¹⁸ Finch, *Wittgenstein* 73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 70; see Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 6, 7, 27, 32.

²⁰ Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 23.

²¹ Specht, *Foundations* 42.

The above list also serves to point out the indistinct borders between language games. Where one ends and another begins is not necessarily clear, and Wittgenstein does not make it clear elsewhere. Furthermore he does not give any general definition of a language game. He selected “language-games” as a term for language uses precisely because “game” is a “blurred concept”²² whose range of applicability is particularly suited to gathering the wide variety of linguistic activities under a single expression.²³

In summing up this section on the nature and function of language games I need to ask whether there is a conflict between Wittgenstein’s understanding of language games as both analogical concepts and actual practices within human linguistic activity. Finch, for one, sees no contradiction in viewing language games as “objects of comparison” and as “‘Ur-phenomena’ which are there—like our life.” To validate this assumption Finch points to what he sees as Wittgenstein’s general view that “no gap occurs between ‘the way the world is’ and ‘the way we see it.’” In looking at language Wittgenstein does not dichotomize “between the phenomena and the way of seeing the phenomena.” Whatever order language games bring into the phenomena, “it is an order which is perceived as being there.”²⁴ This understanding of Wittgenstein seems legitimate and plausible, particularly in view of how he grounds language in the *Investigations* as opposed to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. It is the human, consensual practice of language, as described and embodied in language games, that provides the only grounding of language in the *Investigations*. What count as phenomena for Wittgenstein are precisely those things that are seen and accepted as phenomena via consensus in the context of human action and speech—that is, in the context of language games.

2. *Language games and forms of life.* Wittgenstein writes that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” The term “form of life” occurs only five times in the *Investigations*,²⁵ and nowhere does Wittgenstein try to define it. Nevertheless it is of fundamental importance to his understanding of language and is closely connected to the concept of language games.²⁶ According to Wittgenstein, “the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.”²⁷ “Form of life” is probably best understood as a socio-cultural term, and Finch’s explanation that forms of life are “units of meaningful action which are carried out together by members of a social group and which have a common meaning for the members of the group” seems sufficiently Wittgensteinian.²⁸ Wittgenstein implies that activities such

²² Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 71.

²³ Cf. Specht, *Foundations* 61.

²⁴ Finch, *Wittgenstein* 73.

²⁵ Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 19, 23, 174, 226, 241.

²⁶ Cf. Finch, *Wittgenstein* 89; High, *Language* 99; N. Malcolm, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations,” *Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind: Readings from Descartes to Strawson* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1970) 267.

²⁷ Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 23.

²⁸ Finch, *Wittgenstein* 90.

as shopping, building, fighting battles, calculating, and so on are forms of life.²⁹ Reasonable extrapolation would indicate that customs and activities such as institutional learning, banquets, dating, marriage, and various religious rites such as baptism could also be considered forms of life.

Precisely how forms of life and language games are interrelated is also not spelled out by Wittgenstein, but there is clearly no simple one-to-one correspondence—that is, there is not necessarily a particular and unique language game for shopping, one for marriage, and so forth. One form of life could incorporate several different language games, and one language game could occur in several different forms of life.³⁰ Moreover it is not possible, other than as a conceptual abstraction, to neatly extract a language game from the form of life in which it is embedded.

The notion of forms of life serves to indicate the irreducibly human context of language and language games. Language games always take place within some human form of life or, as Specht so aptly puts it, “the model of the language-games manifests the moment of linguistic activity and form of life.”³¹ It is within and because of forms of life that language and language games have sense or meaning. In fact there is no meaning in speech or language other than that derived from the consensus or agreement in forms of life.³² A form of life is, as it were, the final court of appeal in matters of judgment and interpretation. A form of life cannot be further grounded either empirically or metaphysically. It is “something that we just *do*, which has no further justification beyond itself.”³³ Wittgenstein writes that “what has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*,”³⁴ leading Harold Smart to conclude that “‘forms of life’ evidently plays the role, in Wittgenstein’s own language-game, of a metaphysical ultimate in terms of which the functioning of language is to be understood.”³⁵

3. *Conclusion.* In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein grounded language by connecting it to the world by means of simple signs (names) that corresponded to metaphysically simple objects. He rejected this notion in his later philosophy, and the view in *Investigations* is that there is simply no getting behind language to a “world-in-itself.” The world of objects is not separable from the world of language. Indeed language, to a certain extent, is “involved in the construction of objects.”³⁶ While the question of “reality existing in itself” is left somewhat open in Wittgenstein’s language-game model,³⁷ he believes that positing language games as “linguistic entities in which linguistic signs

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* 92.

³¹ Specht, *Foundations* 51.

³² See Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 241–242; cf. High, *Language* 101–102.

³³ Finch, *Wittgenstein* 95.

³⁴ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, p. 226.

³⁵ H. R. Smart, “Language Games,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1957) 232.

³⁶ Specht, *Foundations* 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

and objects are incorporated into the totality of the performance of human action”³⁸ provides a sufficient basis for meaning and for living.

II. A CRITIQUE OF THE APPROPRIATION OF WITTGENSTEIN’S PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE LINDBECK, ANTHONY THISELTON AND N. T. WRIGHT

This section is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis but rather a focused critique of specific linguistic aspects of the theological and hermeneutical proposals of Lindbeck, Thiselton and Wright. These scholars work implicitly, sometimes explicitly, from a Wittgensteinian framework, particularly with respect to the concept of language games. Their work is representative of a good deal of what is going on in theology today.

1. *George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model of doctrine.* Lindbeck’s desire to redefine the nature of theological doctrine stems from his many years of involvement in ecumenical dialogue. Concerned about the fractiousness of the Christian community, Lindbeck seeks to conceptualize doctrine in a way that promotes unity through neutrality—that is, he wants an understanding of doctrine that is capable of encompassing seemingly contradictory positions without necessitating any decision as to the status of the truth value of such positions. Lindbeck believes a cultural-linguistic model of doctrine will best accomplish this goal.³⁹ The “liberal” model of doctrine that Lindbeck wants to supersede he refers to as “experiential-expressive.” This conceptualization considers doctrines to be outward expressions of inner religious experience.⁴⁰ Lindbeck is equally concerned with distinguishing his own model from “old-fashioned propositional theories that liken a religion to a science or a philosophy.”⁴¹

Acknowledging influence from Wittgenstein, Lindbeck posits doctrine as a set of rules that have a regulative function in the Church and in the life of the Christian. He argues that doctrines do not make “first-order truth claims.” Rather, they “regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting others, but the logic of their communally authoritative use hinders or prevents them from specifying positively what is to be affirmed.”⁴² Overarching this understanding of doctrine is Lindbeck’s conviction that “a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.” He explicitly links this view of religion with Wittgenstein’s concept of language games: “Just as a language (or “language game,” to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) is correlated to a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition.” Following the linguistic school of thought that language determinatively shapes consciousness and the way in which we experience reality, Lindbeck argues that a

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Lindbeck, *Nature* 7–13, 32 ff.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 21, 31–32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 23. Lindbeck is willing to concede that propositionalism is not entirely moribund (p. 24).

⁴² *Ibid.* 18–19.

religion, as a set of interiorized cultural-linguistic skills, determines (or at least significantly shapes) and constitutes human religious experience.⁴³ In sum, and in effect, Lindbeck contends that to be a Christian is to play the “Christian game” according to the rules and, furthermore, that doctrines are the rules that determine what are and are not valid moves of “discourse, attitude, and action” in the game.⁴⁴

Lindbeck relies mostly on secondary sources for his theological appropriation of Wittgenstein and particularly on the work of Paul Holmer,⁴⁵ who likened theology to a “game with rules.”⁴⁶ Lindbeck connects this motif with the concept of language games (in addition to other linguistic concepts) and from this marriage develops his cultural-linguistic model of doctrine and religion. In this model a religion (and, by implication, doctrine as an encompassing religious practice) is a Wittgensteinian language game that Lindbeck interprets as being equivalent to a given language as a whole. Wittgenstein, however, never likened language as a whole, or even a realm of discourse (such as theology, philosophy, or science), to a game. Working from a theological context, Dallas High specifically criticizes just this sort of interpretation and appropriation of the concept of language games. He complains about “those who have smothered us with talk of ‘language-games’ attempting to sort out disciplines and forms of words as different games, e.g., ‘theology is a particular language-game’; ‘science is another one,’ etc. Nothing could be a more misleading use of Wittgenstein.”⁴⁷ Directly comparing a whole religion to a language game is, if anything, an even worse transgression of Wittgenstein’s intentions in using the concept.

Another problem with Lindbeck’s appropriation of the concept of language games occurs at the point of describing language games as rule-based activities. Lindbeck has argued that practicing a religion (in deed or in word) is a rule-guided (i.e. doctrine- and belief-guided) activity. This much, at least, is sufficiently Wittgensteinian. Lindbeck’s aberrant understanding of language games *vis-à-vis* rules appears in his seeing a language game/religion as essentially the following of interiorized skills, practices and rules. But Wittgenstein’s whole point with the language-game analogy was that there is no single essence to language, including and especially language as essentially the observance of preexisting rules. Moreover, while Lindbeck holds that the preexisting rules make religious experience possible and in effect establish how the game is to be played, Wittgenstein argues exactly the opposite point—namely, that it is not the rule that establishes the practice of games but the practice or use that establishes the rule. Lindbeck’s position that a religion determines religious experience as a language determines mental/psychological and cultural experience⁴⁸ is not Wittgensteinian. Instead it strongly

⁴³ Ibid. 33–37.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 24, 28.

⁴⁶ P. Holmer, “Wittgenstein and Theology,” *New Essays on Religious Language* (ed. D. M. High; New York: Oxford University, 1969) 32.

⁴⁷ High, *Language* 72 (cf. pp. 86–87).

⁴⁸ Lindbeck, *Nature* 36–37.

resembles the largely discredited linguistic determinism of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf.⁴⁹

Lindbeck is of course entitled to borrow, mix and redefine concepts as he sees fit. Eclecticism is not inherently sinful. But Lindbeck cannot have it both ways. If he wants to use Wittgenstein's philosophical stature to legitimate a cultural-linguistic model of doctrine and religion, then his analysis and appropriation of Wittgenstein needs to be rigorous and accurate. In *The Nature of Doctrine* there is no evidence that this is the case.

2. *Anthony Thiselton's Wittgensteinian hermeneutic.* Thiselton declares that "Wittgenstein's philosophy comes very close to being a 'universal hermeneutic,'"⁵⁰ and he has set out to develop a Biblical hermeneutic from a Wittgensteinian framework, a key member of which is the concept of language games.⁵¹ It is not possible in the context of a short paper to analyze in detail Thiselton's interpretation and appropriation of Wittgenstein. Nevertheless there are, I think, some distinct problems both with Thiselton's understanding of the concept of language games in the hermeneutical context and with his wholehearted endorsement of the "relevance of Wittgenstein's thought both to hermeneutical theory in general and to the interpretation of the New Testament."⁵²

The first criticism of Thiselton's understanding of language games is almost painfully obvious. It is clear that for Thiselton "language game" and "context" are virtually synonymous. In a crucial section of *The Two Horizons*, in which Thiselton applies his appropriation of Wittgenstein to the interpretation of several classes of grammatical utterances in the NT, it is literally possible in almost every case to remove the term "language game" and replace it with the word "context" without in the least altering the sense of what Thiselton is trying to say.⁵³ Thiselton himself makes the equation at one point where he speaks of the use of the term "faith" in a particular "context or language-game."⁵⁴ Moreover he insists that the form-critical concept "*Sitz im Leben* is a parallel to the concept of language-games."⁵⁵ Two observations are in order here. (1) In the way in which Thiselton uses it, the term and concept "language game" is superfluous. If either "context" or the more technical "*Sitz im Leben*" can be factored into "language game" with no remainder, there seems to be little point in using the latter term in a herme-

⁴⁹ For a brief summary of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis see D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987) 15. For critiques of linguistic determination see M. Black, *The Labyrinth of Language* (New York: Praeger, 1968) 71–75; S. Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: William Morrow, 1994) 58–67. Pinker argues pointedly that "there is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speaker's ways of thinking" (p. 58).

⁵⁰ A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 324.

⁵¹ Thiselton, *Two Horizons* 444.

⁵² *Ibid.* 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 407–422.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 422.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 396.

neutical context. (2) As should be clear from the previous analysis of the concept of language games, Wittgenstein's use and understanding of language games cannot be reduced to the simple concept of context. In addition, if the concept of *Sitz im Leben* has any parallel in Wittgenstein's philosophy, "forms of life" would seem to be a likelier candidate than "language games," and even here there would seem to be as much contrast as comparison.

A more serious criticism is that Thiselton fails, as many interpreters do, to recognize the extreme relativistic implications that are nascent in Wittgenstein's understanding of language games and in his related concept of "forms of life." Thiselton not only dismisses interpretations of the concept of language games that are "entirely pluralistic and relativistic"⁵⁶ but also seems to think that the use of the concept in hermeneutics can act as a hedge against the relativism of other positions. According to Thiselton, Wittgenstein firmly "*grounded* [language] . . . in the *stream* of human life."⁵⁷ I do not want to make too much of this mixed metaphor, but it does serve to point out the problem of placing hermeneutics on a Wittgensteinian foundation. While it is indeed the case that Wittgenstein totally situated language in what he considered the irreducible pluralism of human life and culture, this is precisely the problem in using his concept as a basis for theology or hermeneutical theory because of the inability of Wittgensteinian linguistics to rise above relativism. The relativistic implications of language games and forms of life will be explored further in the concluding section.

3. *N. T. Wright's cultural-linguistic model of Biblical authority.* Wright proposes, among other things, a cultural-linguistic reconceptualization of how the Bible is authoritative for the Church. He acknowledges some influence from Wittgenstein, but he does not explicitly refer to language games or call his model of Biblical authority a cultural-linguistic one. Nonetheless Wright's model does possess such strong affinities with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of doctrine, which we have seen is founded on Wittgensteinian concepts, that a general dependence on the concepts of language games and forms of life seems presupposed. I believe, in other words, that Wright's work here is evidence that Wittgenstein's philosophy has become generally diffused in academic theology to the point where it is now accepted almost unconsciously as the way things are.

Wright approvingly points to and borrows from Thiselton's Wittgenstein-based hermeneutics in Wright's own discussion of how Biblical texts refer to the "extra-linguistic world."⁵⁸ From the previous analysis of language games it is clear that the question of linguistic reference to an external real world is at best problematic in a Wittgensteinian framework, and it would seem that, by following Thiselton, Wright shares a second-generation complicity (albeit an unintentional one) in promoting some form of linguistic relativism.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 36 (cf. p. 444).

⁵⁷ Ibid. 443 (*italics mine*).

⁵⁸ Wright, *New Testament* 68.

Wright's other direct reference to Wittgenstein occurs in a discussion of meaning, where Wright states that "the meaning of a word (following Wittgenstein) I take to be its use in a context, or an implicit context; that is, its use or potential use in a sentence or potential sentence."⁵⁹ Wright is not at all "following Wittgenstein" closely enough here. First, while Wright cites *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*⁶⁰ to document his assertion, Wittgenstein, as we have seen, repudiated the stance and objectives of *Tractatus* in his later philosophy. Beyond that, while it is indeed the case that Wittgenstein wrote that "only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning," the entire thrust of *Tractatus* was to establish the case for language having meaning "via reference." A legitimate reading is that "only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have reference."⁶¹ The attempt to use Wittgenstein to validate a definition of meaning as "use" is usually based on *Investigations*, but even here Wittgenstein is generally misinterpreted. Nowhere in *Investigations* (or to my knowledge in any of his writings) does Wittgenstein assert that "use" is the essential and only definition of "meaning." What he does say, specifically, is that "for a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." Wittgenstein goes on to say immediately that "the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer"—indicating that even in his later philosophy Wittgenstein retained some residual sense of meaning as reference.⁶²

Returning to Wright's cultural-linguistic model of Biblical authority, the central importance of the category of narrative or story stands out clearly. He argues that in view of the fact that stories are a "key worldview indicator" and that "a good part of the New Testament consists of stories" it is therefore important "to consider how stories might carry, or be vehicles for, authority."⁶³ To that end Wright outlines a performative authority for Scripture in which the Bible is analogized to a four-act Shakespearean play whose script lacks the final fifth chapter. Just as the existing four-act script of the play would exercise a regulative authority over any attempt to improvise and perform a fifth act, so the Bible, as an authoritative story, exercises regulative authority over the present and continuing performance of Christians and the Church.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid. 115.

⁶⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1961) 3.3, 22. Unless otherwise indicated references are to sections, subsections and sentences, not page numbers.

⁶¹ Ibid. 3.3. The case against Wright's interpretation of *Tractatus* is even more complex than is touched upon here. For one thing, "name" for Wittgenstein in *Tractatus* is not synonymous with "word," as Wright implies. "Name" is simply the linguistic counterpart in Wittgenstein's logical atomism for the ontological (though not empirical) component "object." Wittgenstein does not define or give examples of either of these components of *Tractatus*, but he clearly does not follow common usage or understanding of the terms.

⁶² Wittgenstein, *Investigations* 43 (italics his).

⁶³ Wright, *New Testament* 140.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 140–142. Wright originally sketched out this model of Biblical authority in "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?", *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991) 7–32.

There are points about Wright's model that are commendable. Narrative is a significant category in Scripture, and it is important to understand how a story can exercise authority. There are also several significant problems, however, with what I have called Wright's cultural-linguistic model for authority. First is the fact that Scripture cannot be completely reduced, as Wright emphatically does, to the category of story. The Bible is more than simply "an ancient narrative text."⁶⁵ Concomitantly Wright reduces the complex nature of how the authority of Scripture operates to a simplistic regulative function. He in fact explicitly dismisses the operative concepts of "timeless truth," "witness to primary event," and "timeless function [as a call to decision]" as inappropriate ways to explain how the Bible is authoritative.⁶⁶ I would argue not only that each is appropriate but also that it is necessary to incorporate all these concepts of authority, including Wright's cultural-linguistic model, to fully comprehend the nature of Scriptural authority. Wright's model is necessary but it is not sufficient. And, in the way Wright proposes it, it is ultimately reductionistic and relativistic.

I believe that Wright's recourse to a regulative-performative Biblical authority represents the pervasive influence of the logic of language games. Lindbeck, whose Wittgensteinian framework we have already discussed, equally argues for the same type of regulative story authority for Scripture over theology and Christian behavior in general.⁶⁷ From the field of literary criticism he borrows the term "intratextuality" to characterize his understanding of how theological constructions and Christian performance are to be assessed. The term intratextuality refers to the way semiotic meaning is generated entirely within texts without any reference to extratextual circumstances or considerations. With respect to a religion or a theology Lindbeck uses the concept of intratextuality to describe the mode of explicating the "meaning a religion has for its adherents" that is peculiar to a cultural-linguistic model of doctrine.⁶⁸ Meaning, and textual authority, in this understanding are strictly internal affairs. The notion of intratextuality (if not the term) figures greatly in Wittgenstein's concept of language games, although whether Lindbeck was influenced directly by Wittgenstein's thought in this area is not certain.⁶⁹ Although Wright does not use the term, I think his model of Biblical authority can also be described as intratextual.

The concepts of intratextuality and language games reinforce the conceptualization of a religion or a body of doctrine as an insulated entity untouched by the influence of the extratextual world. It may be possible for any

⁶⁵ Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" 14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 11–13.

⁶⁷ See Lindbeck, *Nature* 118–121. The resemblances of Wright's proposal to Lindbeck's in certain aspects are so strong that I am surprised that Wright does not discuss Lindbeck, acknowledge any influence, or even include *The Nature of Doctrine* in his bibliography.

⁶⁸ Lindbeck, *Nature* 113–114.

⁶⁹ Formalism, new criticism, structuralism, deconstructionism, and Wittgensteinian linguistics all share in common the foundational assumption that there is nothing outside of "language" or "text" that determines (or even impinges upon) the meaning of a "text."

religion or theology to be intratextually faithful to its founding texts and intratextually meaningful to its adherents. Lindbeck explicitly accepts this possibility,⁷⁰ and Wright's model strongly implies it. There are parallels between the notion of intratextual meaning and the classical philosophical concept of truth as coherence, the idea that a test for the truth claims of any interpretive system is whether the system is internally unified or coherent. Neither intratextuality nor coherence is inherently a negative thing. The question is whether either is a sufficient test for truth or meaning. Traditionally the answer has been that correspondence to reality and the ability to comprehend the widest range of experience are also necessary tests. Along those same lines the question must be asked whether the authority of the Bible and the truth value of theological statements are also subject to all these tests. I would assert that they must be in order for Christianity to be credible and for the authority of the Bible to be fully appropriated.

III. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE VALUE OF WITTGENSTEIN'S CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE GAMES FOR THEOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS

Despite Thiselton's disclaimers, there is a great deal of consensus that Wittgenstein's views on language are relativistic. The only question is whether Wittgenstein is implicated in a moderate or extreme form of relativism.⁷¹ Beyond that there is the concern of whether the concepts of language games and forms of life, if taken in the directions indicated by Wittgenstein, inevitably or necessarily lead to an extreme relativism, even if Wittgenstein himself did not explicitly hold such a position. These questions are complicated by the notorious difficulty in interpreting him as evidenced by the ability of equally competent scholars to come to diametrically opposed conclusions. This fact in itself does not bode well for a positive assessment of Wittgenstein. In addition I will argue that even when they are understood in a sufficiently Wittgensteinian framework the concept of language games and the related notion of forms of life, as an encompassing view of human language and life, do inevitably entail a radical relativism.

To reiterate from the analysis above, the later Wittgenstein abandoned his logical atomistic attempt to ontologically ground language by directly connecting elemental names in elementary propositions in language to equally elemental objects that were combined in states of affairs. He gave up both the notion of a singular universal essence to language and also rejected any attempt at grounding language in a real world existing-in-itself apart from human linguistic interaction. Instead he situated language in the flux of human linguistic practice, which the concepts of language games and forms of life serve to explicate. For the most part the concept of meaning as use or practice within a language game, which is itself played within a form of life, replaces the concept of meaning as reference to external reality in Wittgen-

⁷⁰ Lindbeck, *Nature* 116.

⁷¹ See C. Barrett, *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 145–162. Barrett concludes that Wittgenstein is only guilty of a moderate relativism.

stein's system. There may indeed be family resemblances that enable some intersection and comparison between language games, but an external world or state of affairs is simply not available to objectively adjudicate between language games or forms of life. To cite Finch again, a form of life is "something that we just do, which has no further justification beyond itself."⁷²

As Roger Trigg points out, the impossibility of passing judgment on any form of life, no matter how bizarre, effectively reduces all religious truth claims and all ethical assertions to the common denominator of subjective commitment.⁷³ There is simply no objective reason for choosing one form of life or language game over another. The form is given, the game is played, with its own rules, on its own field. The claims, assertions and practices within a language game or form of life cannot be fully understood (let alone validated or falsified) from the context of another form of life, and there are no "meta-criteria" standing above all forms of life that can decide between them. Trigg asserts that "to dub something a 'form of life' is in effect to protect it from criticism,"⁷⁴ an outcome that would seem to be inimical to any serious hermeneutical theory and certainly not conducive to a universal hermeneutic. Even if the concepts of language games or forms of life cannot be legitimately extended from a genuinely Wittgensteinian framework to encompass an entire religion or sect (which both Trigg and Lindbeck suppose can be done), their relativistic implications are readily apparent.

In certain sections of *Investigations* it is clear that Wittgenstein does use language games as illustrations and heuristic analogies to describe certain features of actual language. Using games as a metaphor for the way in which we use language can serve to highlight and elucidate certain aspects of human linguisticity. In other places in *Investigations*, however, language games acquire an ontological status. As Finch points out, Wittgenstein speaks "of language-games being played, of them being *there* and of our *noting* them."⁷⁵ This tendency of Wittgenstein to see language games as the way things are, and the only way things are, seems opposed to a Biblical worldview and thus of dubious value for evangelical theology. Particularly in regard to the question of articulating a doctrine of divine revelation, Wittgenstein's insistence that there is simply no getting beyond human language games to a "world-in-itself" precludes any genuine understanding of a God who speaks through word and act to human beings. Furthermore, as far as Wittgenstein was concerned there is no meaning in speech or language other than that derived from the consensus or agreement in language games as they are played within forms of life. This understanding of meaning is insufficient in regard to the power of language to refer beyond itself, to the ability of human individuals and communities to be self-transcendent and self-critical, and to the human cultural and linguistic commonality that is within, and ultimately supersedes, human pluralism.

⁷² Finch, *Wittgenstein* 95.

⁷³ R. Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (London: Cambridge University, 1973) 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Finch, *Wittgenstein* 73.