

“Response to Brian R. Clack”

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Brian Clack makes a number of criticisms of *Wittgenstein within the Philosophy of Religion* in his review for this journal. I would like to respond to two of these criticisms in order to address potential misunderstandings about what the book argues. I am grateful to the editor of this journal for the opportunity to respond in this fashion to the review.

The first criticism concerns a sentence of mine that mentions Oswald Spengler on the history of cultures. The sentence in question reads:

"Oswald Spengler, a thinker who influenced Wittgenstein's view of the history of cultures, espoused something of an evolutionary view of the history of cultures, and such a view was defended by thinkers now recognized as among the most influential theorists in the development of the academic study of religions (for example, Herbert Spencer, and E. B. Tylor)." (Carroll, 16, qtd. on Clack, 108).

Clack argues that in this sentence “[s]omething has gone badly wrong” because

“Spengler's conception of history as recurrent forms—as the drama of a number of rising and declining cultures—stands in radical opposition to the conception of one linear history embraced by Tylor and Frazer, and it is Wittgenstein's—albeit qualified—acceptance of Spengler that underlies some of his antipathy toward *The Golden*

Bough.” (Clack, 108)

I agree that something would have gone badly wrong if the sentence in question conveyed what I take it Clack is concerned that it might: a conflation of the views of Spengler, Tylor, and Frazer; however, stating that Spengler's view of the history of cultures “stands in radical opposition to the conception of one linear history embraced by Tylor and Frazer” is not incompatible with the claim that the views of all three may be described in terms of “evolution”. Not all appeals to “evolution” in describing cultural change over time are the same (i.e. postulate “one linear history”). I reject the view that use of the word “evolution” *must* entail one linear history; this may help illuminate another line from the book: “Not that evolution would insure greater sophistication or value (say, as teleological versions of the evolution of culture and religion would have it).” (Carroll, 16)

In writing that “Spengler...espoused something of an evolutionary view of the history of cultures,” I meant that there are a variety of possible views of the history of cultures that could be described as evolutionary (i.e. that employ the word “evolution” or its variants, or closely related ideas, in describing cultural change over time). Yet, the book does not provide support for my claim and I see now that a thorough genealogy of “evolution” (with respect to culture) is required to support what may otherwise appear to be a counter-intuitive claim about Spengler.

The second criticism is that the final chapter reflects “an enormous loss of confidence” in comparison with the aims of the book. Clack writes,

“There is much that could be said here that might be new— how Wittgenstein connects to Spengler, or to Freud and psychoanalysis—but instead we find here discussions of D. Z. Phillips’ ‘contemplative philosophy of religion’ and of the need for clarity and perspicuity in thinking about religious phenomena. None of that is

especially new.” (Clack, 108)

The aim of the final chapter of the book is to explore entailments of the “ethic of perspicuity” reading of Wittgenstein for the philosophy of religion (i.e. to explore ethical considerations in doing philosophy of religion). Clarity about religious phenomena, however important, is only one entailment of the ethic of perspicuity for the philosophy of religion, and I agree that calling for this is nothing new. In this regard, John Clayton's work, which I discuss in the chapter, is particularly relevant. Aside from (1) being perspicuous about religious phenomena, other entailments of the ethic of perspicuity for philosophy of religion include: (2) being scrupulous in considering received interpretations of figures or movements in the history of philosophy of religion (including the concepts that are used in forming those received interpretations, such as “fideism” or “religion/religious”); (3) being attentive to religions, in their diversities, as they are actually practiced; (4) being responsive to instances of confusion about religions one may encounter (e.g. in one's classroom, community, or scholarship); and (5) being aware of the situatedness of one's own philosophical activity (e.g. within a time, place, culture, language, community, institution, and so on).

The entailments identified in the final chapter are not just statements of what a perspicuous philosophy of religion could do; they are a distillation of *what has been performed* in the previous chapters of the book interpreting Wittgenstein and the history of Wittgenstein's reception within the philosophy of religion. On the basis of these entailments, I argue that Wittgenstein's ethic of perspicuity is well-suited to the circumstances that some philosophers of religion may find themselves facing today (including, in particular, the book's author): a crowded, religiously and secularly diverse world that students may otherwise have difficulty understanding and negotiating their ways through. In this regard, I would certainly agree in word, if not in spirit, with H. H. Price in saying that “clarity [about

religious phenomena] is not enough.” (Price, 1)

Clack is certainly right that the book would benefit from a greater variety of voices, and this is all the more true in connection with the topic of perspicuous representations (something to which scholarship on Freud, Spengler, and Wittgenstein’s writings on the two is relevant). I am thankful for Clack’s criticisms and provocations and hope that future research will make good on the remarks I present here.

References

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