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Is God an Aspect?

Abstract Neither logical deduction nor empirical induction is capable of mediating the dispute between religious disciples and non-disciples. The case is particularly acute when it comes to the divine Reality (God). Within Wittgenstein's theoretical framework, some scholars start from the perspective of language games, contending that this dispute is meaningless and should be abandoned, while others are not satisfied with such a settlement and extend Wittgenstein's aspect theory to religious issues, arguing that God is an aspect. The extension includes analogous and theoretical extensions. This article will show that even if these two extensions are successful, their interpretations with regard to the disputes between religious disciples and non-disciples are not convincing. Worse still, the extension from aspect theory to religious issues is by no means successful in proving that God is an aspect.

Keywords aspect, seeing-as, religious doubt, religious defense, religious reality, religious pluralism

1 Introduction

While common disputes may appeal to logical deduction or empirical induction for settlement, those between religious disciples and non-disciples lack corresponding resolutions. This is particularly the case when it comes to questions of the divine Reality of God. Neither perfect demonstration nor empirical testimony is adequate to persuade either of the opposing sides to give up their views. This unusual phenomenon needs to be explained. Some Wittgensteinians or Wittgensteinian pietists present a brief answer: The corresponding disputes have no meaning in that religion and secular customs (science), and even different religions, each belong to different language games with their own respective internal meaning criteria, and external criticisms simply misuse language and are thus illegitimate. Kai Nielson, D. Z. Philips, Richard Braithwaite,

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Peter Winch, Rush Rhees, and others support this view to a certain extent. Starting from the theory of language games, most of them seem to contend that religion has no bearing on reality. Through the interpretations of these Wittgensteinians, we find that the two parties get enmeshed in a dilemma: on the one hand is the claim that these disputes are pertinent to reality, being meaningful but insoluble, and will last forever; on the other hand is the claim that these disputes are unrelated to reality, are meaningless, and should be abandoned. Apparently, the followers of language game theory chose the latter.

There are some other Wittgensteinians who incline to choose the former. In their eyes, the claim that language game theory has freed religious disciples from ceaseless disputes is incorrect. In the first place, ceaseless disputes should not be abolished at all. It is very likely that they are proper and we should engage with them. In the second place, the followers of language game theory have paid too high a price, abolishing the relation between religion and reality along with the ceaseless disputes. While Verbin supports the first view, Hick prefers the second. To Verbin, like the doubts occurring inside religion, criticisms coming from outside of it are pertinent and consequently promote the emergence of religious defense. To Hick, whereas, religious beliefs “are substantially true references to the nature of reality,” religious practices will help the practitioner to renew or deepen “one’s relationship to the transcendental divine Reality” (Hick 1985a, p. 16). This is “the heart” of religious belief and practice (Hick 1985a, p. 16). Verbin aims to defend the legitimacy of religious doubt and defense (justifications or proofs), and Hick reveals the relation between religious belief and transcendental Reality. They both choose, spontaneously, the aspect theory (or seeing-as theory) of Wittgenstein’s late stage as their theoretical support.

This article will probe into these two interpreting paths¹ starting from aspect theory to see whether or not their re-interpretations are successful and whether or not, as has been claimed by the authors, they can solve some key problems and determine whether or not God, the divine Reality, is an aspect.

2 Aspect in Wittgenstein’s Text

Wittgenstein has made contentions regarding aspect in his early, middle and late stages.² His interpretations in early stage (Wittgenstein NB9.11.14; TLP5.5423

¹ Biletzki (2009) takes, in plain fashion, Verbin as the case when discussing about the train of thought which interprets religious problems by means of aspect theory; Verbin, on the other hand, drops a hint in a note (Verbin 2000, p. 21) that another interpretation with respect to the relation between aspect seeing and religious belief is given by Hick. This is the reason why this article mainly mentions these two persons.

² This article concerns his relevant observations in middle and late stages in that first, his early discussions are really too short and simple; second, scholars employ, in the main, the aspect theory in his middle and late stages to deal with problems of religious philosophy.

etc.) pertain to the problems brought about by the notion that “propositions are the truth-functions of elementary propositions.” Those in middle and late stages are connected with philosophy of psychology³. In the last stage of his life, he showed particular concern about this topic when he tried to settle the following paradox: When we look at some object, we can see it differently, although we also see that the object we are seeing itself remains unchanged. And the mostly cited example is his duck-rabbit (Wittgenstein PI, pp. 194–196, p. 199, pp. 205–207; RPP1,1114; RPP2,482,496; LW1, p. 458, p. 461, pp. 467–478, p. 481, p. 492, p. 517, p. 532, p. 703, p. 707, p. 777; LW2, p. 12, etc.). The picture does not vary, but you can see it as a duck or a rabbit, which are called the two aspects of the duck-rabbit. That you see one aspect before abruptly catching sight of another is called “‘dawning’ of an aspect,” and the change of perception is called “‘aspect-changing,’” and that you continue to see a rabbit or a duck after the change is called “‘continuous seeing’ of an aspect.” When no change occurs for someone, it is called “‘aspect blindness.’” Since (visual) aspect is forever connected with the expression of seeing-as, some scholars employ the term “‘seeing-as theory’” to refer to aspect theory.

Regarding aspect, Wittgenstein also cited many examples of other types, such as noticing the similarity of two faces, being conscious of the friendliness of some face, and discerning music from sounds (as these examples show, the more exact term for aspect seeing should be aspect perception). Nevertheless, he himself has in no way connected aspect, in immediate fashion, with religion. On this account, anyone who wants to deal with religious problems by way of aspect theory must set up, in advance, the correlation between this notion of aspect and religious issues.

3 Two Extending Paths of Aspect

Seen at abstract level, there are two paths to extend aspect theory from the topics discussed by Wittgenstein to religious issues. One is analogous extension: Since Wittgenstein’s topics are similar to those of religion, when aspect-seeing is seen in the former, it can emerge in the latter. The second is theoretical extension: This

³ Apparent polemics exist among scholars with regard to how to interpret the intention of Wittgenstein when he discusses about aspect. People usually make psychological-philosophical interpretations. E.g. Ayob holds that Wittgenstein’s relevant discussions to aspect are a sort of detection with regard to the scientific hypothesis of “isomorphism principle” put forward by Gestalt psychologist Köhler (Ayob 2009). Some make phenomenological interpretations, say, Park contends, “Basically, Wittgenstein’s aspect means the way an object appears to us” (Park 1998, p. 131). In this sense, an “aspect” is a “phenomenological object.” It is his contention that the Gestalt psychological-philosophical interpretation is misunderstanding. My demonstration takes a middle stance.

develops aspect seeing theoretically and enlarges its scope so as to encompass religious topics. As a matter of course, these two paths are by no means completely separated. Analogous extension needs to hint at some theoretical extension and theoretical extension also rests in the similarity of traits to be verified. We can see however that different scholars lay particular emphasis on different points. Verbin represents the first path whereas Hick is typical of the second one.⁴

3.1 Analogous Extension

Verbin endeavors to make clear that “certain kinds of religious beliefs which we view as central to a person having a living faith, such as the belief that God is revealed in a specific text or event, are a type of aspect seeing” (Verbin 2000, p.11). His demonstrative train of thought can be reconstructed as follows: (1) if the example of aspect seeing cited by Wittgenstein is justifiable, it is feasible to add “certain kinds of religious beliefs” into it and, (2) religious belief shares something in common with other types of aspect seeing.

(1) It is feasible to say that religious beliefs of some certain sort are aspect seeing.

Verbin chooses two of Wittgenstein’s examples for discussion: Seeing a duck in the duck-rabbit, and seeing a face as friendly. Seen superficially, a concrete individual is seen in the duck-rabbit image, which is immediate and simple. In the friendly face, what is seen is an abstract quality which is mediate and mysterious. Many people have difficulty understanding that in the latter example there is also aspect seeing, though they can easily accept the same condition in the former one.

The key step that Verbin takes is to equate these two examples. Actually, seeing a duck in the picture is not so simple and immediate as we have imagined, nor is it so mysterious and mediate to see friendliness in a face. The difference between simplicity and mystery comes from the misbelieving of ostensive definition: it is thought that when one points to the duck and says “duck,” one will instantly understand the meaning of the word “duck”; it is however impossible to point out friendliness in the smiling face. As a matter of fact, ostensive definition is nothing but a myth. In circumstances where there is no context given, it is highly probable that the learner “may take the ostensive definitions wrongly in both the case of ‘duck’ and in the case of ‘friendly’” (Verbin 2000, p. 12). For instance, he/she may see anything black and white as a

⁴ Hick’s most detailed treatises in this respect are in the article (1985a) he submitted to “The 8th International Wittgenstein Symposium.” More brief addresses can be found in (Hick 1989). As to earlier discussions, see also John Hick, *Belief and Knowledge* and *God and the Universe of Belief*. This article mainly centers at Hick (1985a).

duck. Whether we can see a duck or friendliness, we need to presuppose corresponding clear-cut cases of “seeing.” “Aspect seeing presupposes a conceptual framework” (Verbin 2000, p. 12), and immediate seeing does not exist. Since they both have presuppositions, it is far from saying they are immediate or mediate. Just as stated by Wittgenstein, both the immediate and the mediate are determined by the aim. Wittgenstein tells us that when one wants to describe this table vividly, “‘It was a small rickety table decorated in Moorish style, the sort that is used for smoker’s requisites’ is an immediate description” (Wittgenstein BB, p. 181).

Consequently, seeing a duck is on par with seeing friendliness. Beauty and friendliness may be the traits of one thing, just like its color and shape are also its traits. In the same line, when we see on a religious occasion that some object is of religious significance, like a passage of God’s words, the awareness is likewise natural and immediate. When we have accepted that it is a typical case of aspect seeing to see a duck in the duck-rabbit, we can also accept that seeing friendliness on a face is a similar experience of aspect seeing, and hence accept that some religious belief is aspect seeing.

(2) Religious belief shares some traits in common with other types of aspect seeing.

Verbin notices that Wittgenstein puts aspect seeing between seeing and thinking, and he sketches five traits of aspect seeing in accordance with Wittgenstein’s texts.

Like seeing, aspect seeing is characterized by spontaneity and temporality. Spontaneity means that aspect seeing is passively accepted like seeing: “(there is) no inferring, no weighing of evidence, no concluding involved, but a spontaneous relation to the aspect” (Verbin 2000, p. 14). When we see a photo of one of our relatives, we will not make deduction from the physical traits of the photo but feel the affection immediately, “smile at it, kiss it,” or call his/her name at one stroke (Verbin 2000, p. 14). Native language is transparent to us and we will understand it upon hearing it. “‘Seeing as’ is (also) an immediate way of understanding, without interpretation and inference,” “without effort” (Verbin 2000, p. 15). Temporality means that both seeing and aspect seeing merely last for a period of time. We see something, but when we divert our attention, we will not see it. We see an aspect, such as the similarity between two persons, but when we divert our attention, we will not see that. Thinking is a different case. Take what we think, know, and understand for example. Even when our attention is diverted, ceasing to think about it, that does not mean that we do not know or understand it any more.

Similar to thinking, aspect seeing is characterized by consciousness, cultivation, and being controlled. Consciousness means that when one sees an aspect, one will surely think of it and hence be conscious of it. It is just like how

when we think of a thing we will surely be conscious. A layman may see without noticing what he/she is seeing.⁵ Cultivation means that “unlike the case of seeing, in aspect seeing, custom, upbringing and education play a significant role,” and, “aspect seeing, therefore, presupposes a community of discourse in a way that seeing does not” (Verbin 2000, p. 17). Just like we must be accustomed to ducks so as to regard a picture as one of a duck rather than anything else, what is seen as by us is determined by the cultivation within the community. The trait of being controlled means that aspect seeing is controlled by will. Standing in front of the duck-rabbit, when we try to see it as a rabbit, maybe we will achieve this. Insofar as common seeing is concerned, if one sees nothing, one does not see what there actually is and the effort is useless.

Verbin points out that many religious beliefs have demonstrated these five traits. Disciples may see God in spontaneous, effortless fashion through some objects. Seeing the Bible, disciples will immediately associate it with God’s words without questioning. When their attention is diverted, e.g. the papers of the Bible catch fire, disciples will splash water on them, seeing them merely as common papers. Religious belief is also of the trait that is cultivated. Verbin generalizes by way of *reductio ad absurdum* proof that if religious belief is not of a trait of cultivation, “why do we not speak of babies and animals as having mystical experiences?” (Verbin 2000, p. 18). As to the trait of being controlled and consciousness of religious belief, it seems clear.

3.2 Theoretical Extension

Along the same lines, Hick has noticed that Wittgenstein’s discussions with regard to aspect-seeing or seeing-as in his late stages have “constructive implications for the philosophy of religion” (Hick 1985a, p. 17). Nevertheless, he does not focus on the similarity between seeing-as and the way by which religion sees the world. Rather, he extends seeing-as into experiencing-as before interpreting the particular way of experiencing in religion as one sort of experiencing-as. Since religious experience shares a common essence with seeing-as and experiencing-as, Wittgenstein’s arguments about seeing-as may be transferred to religious experience.

(1) Discover meaning: from seeing-as to experiencing-as.

According to Hick’s (1985a) interpretation, Wittgenstein differentiates two kinds of seeing. As in the case of a portrait, the first sort of seeing is seeing the physically appearing things on the paper; the second sort of seeing is seeing a face. The biggest difference between the two sorts of seeing is that the latter has

⁵ Dretske has once differentiated a sort of fundamental seeing shared by man and creatures with feeling, but it is lack of any active content of belief (Dretske 1969).

bearing on interpretative actions: “to interpret or to find meaning or significance in what is before us” (Hick 1985a, p. 18). When we are seeing something as an x , we are interpreting that which is seen by us as x . This x is the meaning of what is seen. In the former type of seeing, such interpretative actions are limited.

If seeing-as is the discovery of meaning, we have a reason to extend seeing-as into experiencing-as, “for the finding of meaning does not occur only through sight” (Hick 1985a, p. 19). When we perceive the surroundings, we employ our various senses like hearing, feeling, etc. When there is seeing-as, there is also hearing-as, feeling-as, etc. Due to the “simultaneity” of the employment of different organs, Hick suggests that comprehensive experiencing-as is substituted for single seeing-as so as to match up with “our ordinary multi-dimensional awareness of the world” (Hick 1985a, p. 19). When we experience that which is presented as something, this thing constitutes the meaning of the experience.

(2) The universality of meaning discovery: All experiencing is experiencing-as.

Hick is confronted with a tough problem: Since seeing is a sort of experiencing, to differentiate seeing and seeing-as, we cannot but differentiate experiencing and experiencing-as. Hick found that this difference “is however seldom actually exemplified” (Hick 1985a, p. 19). This is because “ordinary human experiencing is always experiencing-as, always a perceiving of that which is present to us as having a certain recognizable character, which I am calling its meaning or significance” (Hick 1985a, p. 19). On this account, Hick “holds that, apart perhaps from certain marginal cases, all human experiencing is experiencing-as” (Hick 1985a, p. 20). In another work, he says that the exceptions disappear and in straightforward fashion, “All conscious experiencing is experiencing-as” (Hick 1989, p. 12). All experiences are of interpretative elements and when we experiencing a thing as an x , we are interpreting it as an x .

(3) Meanings at the level of experiencing-as.

Hick further classifies interpretation into two levels (Hick 1985a, pp. 23–24): Second-order interpretation is “conscious theory-construction.” For instance, historians interpret data, while lawyers interpret the evidence. Experiencing-as is first-order interpretation, such as how we experience that which is presented to us as a house, a cow, etc. Compared with second-order interpretation, first-order interpretation has the three following traits. First, it is unconsciousness. Under normal circumstances, first-order interpretation is an unconscious and established process of the coordination between our surroundings and the conceptual system that constitutes our meaning world. Second, it is fundamental. All the second-order interpretations must presuppose first-order interpretations. Third, it has behavior relevancy. First-order interpretation is connected with behavioral dispositions, and experiencing a thing as an x , “is to be in a state to treat it as an x rather than a y or a z ” (Hick 1985a, p. 20).

Seen at the level of the object of interpretation, we make interpretations with

regard to particular things but also situations. The “purely physical” perception of individual things is shared by human and animals, but the perception as regards situations overcomes physical limits and is a personal trait. Different from a physical object, a situation is a “relational notion.” “A situation, for X” must suffice the following four conditions: (A) It “consists of a set of objects;” (B) These objects “are unified in X’s attention;” (C) These objects “have as a whole a practical dispositional meaning for X;” (D) This meaning “is more than the sum of the meaning of its constituent objects” (Hick 1985a, p. 20).

Here is an example: A car crash constitutes a situation which is composed of such objects as the street, witnesses, related cars, etc. These objects constitute a whole under the concern of the witnesses: Seeing this situation, witnesses will have behavioral dispositions like feeling sorry, being frightened, opting to call the police, and saving the injured, just to name a few. The behavioral dispositions are not brought about by each object in this situation. If some witness is of such behavioral dispositions, this indicates that he at the same time sees this situation as an ethical one and he will adopt ethical behaviors. If the witness prefers violent aesthetics, he may regard this situation as an aesthetic one, opting for aesthetic dispositions like appreciation, etc. We may thus hold that experiencing-as qua first-order interpretation embodies “cognitive choices and are thus acts of faith” (Hick 1985a, p. 25). With different choices, the same situation or individual thing may present different aspects. It is in this sense that we may call Hick’s experiencing-as theory an aspect theory.

(4) The religious experiencing of life qua experiencing-as.

Religious meaning can be both situational meaning and non-situational meaning. People may experience an individual as a divine being, such as the Egyptian Pharaoh. They may also experience places as those of divinity, such as divine mountains, saint cities, etc. Most importantly, people may experience some situation as one of divinity. In monotheistic religion, one of its characteristics is, “Any human situation may, in principle, be experienced as one in which one is living in the unseen presence of God” (Hick 1985a, p. 22). These situations are composed of some physical objects and form a whole under the concern of disciples who, in this integrity, opt for such actions as believing, worshiping and serving, etc. For instance, the Hebrew Scriptures describe a particular thread of history in religious terms: going out of Egypt, passing through Sinai Desert, being settled at Canaan, among others. All of these are considered as a covenant between God and his chosen people and political fluctuations are seen as encouragement for fidelity and punishment for infidelity. This is not theoretical second-order interpretation, not having a past historical event before adding a theological interpretative framework; rather, it is a first-order interpretation and via “the preaching of the prophets concerning the meaning of events that were currently taking place around them” (Hick 1985a, p. 23), the

predecessors have experienced corresponding events as the encouragement or punishment from the divine Reality. As a matter of course, like common interpretations, there are also intentional second-order interpretations in religious life, e.g. theologies and religious philosophies.

4 Is Aspect Theory Superior?

When the aforementioned procedures are successful, we can say that Wittgenstein's aspect theory has been extended into a religious topic: (some) religious belief belongs to aspect seeing (Verbin), and religious experience is experiencing-as (Hick). Next, we need to show the superiority of aspect theory to the theory of language games. To Verbin, this superiority manifests itself in its being able to interpret the (internal) religious doubt and (external) religious defense; to Hick, this superiority is embodied in its being able to preserve its relation to The Real (divine Reality) and avoid external criticisms (plurality). Nonetheless, after careful observation we will find that the logically identical interpretation, according to Verbin's theory, is that true religious doubt and religious defense do not exist at all. Meanwhile, Hick's theory also fails to offer solitary support for the reality of divine Being and the plurality of religious beliefs.

4.1 Aspect and Religious Doubt and Religious Defense

With regard to religious doubt, Verbin's interpretation is as follows: Since aspect has the trait of temporality, disciples' religious doubt will occur when they do not see objects and events from a religious standpoint. This is because the religious aspect at that time has disappeared. "This is perhaps similar to a man wondering whether his wife truly loves him" (Verbin 2000, p. 16). When his wife acts with obvious affection, like kissing him, his suspicion will disappear, whereas with the disappearance of the aspect of love, his suspicion will reoccur and he may wonder "whether the various things that he had seen as expressions of love were expression of love rather than of habit" (Verbin 2000, p. 16).

We do not think that this interpretation is reasonable. Like the aspect of love in regular people, God's aspect also has temporality. Still, as opposed to the common aspect of love, God's aspect is not finite. The disciple believes in God in that God's aspect has once been presented to him. The disciple's God is God who necessarily exists. According to the trait of consciousness contained by aspect, at least when God appears before the disciple, he believes that God necessarily exists. On the ground of Verbin's and Wittgenstein's differentiations between knowing and seeing (Verbin 2000, p. 16; Wittgenstein RPP2, pp. 50–51), knowing is a durative process, and even when the concentration is not put on

what is known any more, that which was known is still known. Consequently, even if God's aspect does not appear any longer, the disciple still knows that God necessarily exists. It is impossible that a necessary being does not exist. It can thus be seen that the disciple should be aware that even if God has never appeared before him, he still exists. In consequence, out of sanity, the disciple should not suspect God at any time. Even if the disciple's doubts about God had really once occurred, it is either that the disciple has never really seen the appearance of God's aspect or that the disciple is not of complete sanity. And the suspicion produced under incomplete sanity is a wrong one. If the disciple has never really seen the appearance of God's aspect, he may be a good follower but never a real disciple. A false disciple's doubts about God are not really a disciple's suspicion. On this account, the doubts about God are either that of a non-disciple or a mistake made by the disciple. The interpretation of the disciple's suspicion as a mistake has run counter to Verbin's primary intention: he needs to admit that the disciple's doubt is legitimate so as to be distinguished from pietists. Nonetheless, starting from his aspect theory, religious suspicion cannot but be canceled due to its being a mistake. Interpretations with respect to the doubts of a non-disciple, on the other hand, are relevant to religious defense. We may see in a similar way that aspect theory has something to say about religious defense.

Compared with interpretations pertinent to religious suspicion, Verbin's resolution of religious defense is a better case. His initial move is to describe, by way of the trait of aspect seeing between seeing and thinking, the contrary states of mind of the two parties in the religious dispute as the unsteadiness between two extremes. Each of the two parties can think-of, as well as see, the aspect they each respectively defend, so that they have the reason to believe, in firm fashion, that their defense exists in an actual way. Nevertheless, during the process of defense, each party can merely think-of, in lieu of seeing, the aspect of the other party. The result of this is that defense occurs in real way, but it is not successful. Neither perfect logical demonstration nor another's testimony is enough. "In both aesthetics and religion, one has to see for herself. Another person's testimony will not do" (Verbin 2000, p. 20). This suggests, simultaneously, that genuine defense should start from thinking toward seeing. This resembles, to a certain extent, the following situation: When someone fails to see the rabbit from the duck-rabbit, he who has seen the rabbit will have to mention it, make the other party think of it, and gesture on the picture, saying "look in this way!" so that the other party might see what he has seen. Since aspect has the trait of being-controlled, it is completely proper to present such a requirement during defense.

Nonetheless, there is great difference between disputes among common aspects and those between religious and non-religious aspects. Common disputes,

for instance about the duck-rabbit, do not focus on whether or not the duck or the rabbit exists but on whether the duck or the rabbit may appear in this picture. When one party (duck) guides the other (rabbit) to see the aspect that he has seen, there is the hope of success. This is because the present picture and the image one intends to see are known. What is needed is to set a correlation between the two known images. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein says, “What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects” (Wittgenstein PI, p. 212). We can suppose that if a duck has never appeared in the previous life experience of the person who sees the rabbit, we can say that the person who sees the duck is instructing the other to see the duck more than defending for the aspect that he has seen. Plainly, defense and instruction belong to different language games. In terms of disputes between religion and non-religion, the central topic is whether or not the divine Reality (God) exists, and whether or not he appears in the world. The non-disciple either has once seen God’s aspect (to him, God exists) or has never seen it (to him, God does not exist). If he has once seen it but he is not a disciple, that indicates that he had religious doubts and he will, after going through the discussions about religious doubt mentioned above, know that his doubts are incorrect, that he should become a disciple and should not doubt any more. Therefore, strictly speaking, according to aspect theory, the non-disciple has never seen God’s aspect. Along these lines, the religious defense made by the disciple before the non-disciple aims, in effect, to guide the non-disciple to see the similarity between the present world familiar to him and a totally strange thing. This is a task that cannot be accomplished. Imagine what the disciple could say to the non-disciple: “See this beautiful flower and think of God. Haven’t you seen that it is created by God?” To the non-disciple, “God” is nothing but a bunch of voices which have no bearing at all on creation. And this kind of discussion will merely enhance his confusion. Verbin himself also admits that to guide the non-disciple to convert to God, that which we can do is nothing but making guidance and waiting for “God’s Grace” (Verbin 2000, p. 21). In this sense, as the result, religious defense does not exist.

4.2 Aspect and the Reality and Plurality of the Religious Experiencing of Life

Hick interprets religious plurality as follows: Experiencing-as is free cognitive choice and the religious experience of life is a sort of experiencing-as, so the religious experience of life is also free cognitive choice. Facing the same world, when everyone is free, disciples have their choices and non-disciples have theirs. With different choices, the world shows a secular aspect to non-disciples and a religious aspect to disciples. Different aspects will also appear among different religions. Take Jesus as an example. His disciples experience him as Christ, but

there are also some who experience him as a heretical Rabbi, or even a common man. Hick further interprets this sort of plurality into the difference among the conceptual systems employed by experiencers: “The way in which we experience our environment depends upon the system of concepts that we use” (Hick 1985a, p. 26). Since one’s conceptual system is inherited in virtue of one’s language, different languages may contain different content because of their heritage, so “there is thus a relativity of forms of experience” which Hick calls relativity of “culture” (Hick 1985a, p. 26).

In Hick’s eyes, this relativity might be totally wrong. In the case of religion, “It could be that the religions are all experiencing erroneously, projecting different illusions upon the universe” (Hick 1985a, p. 26). It might also be totally correct: “They are each responding to an infinite divine reality which exceeds our human conceptualities and which is capable of being humanly thought and experienced in these fascinatingly divergent ways” (Hick 1985a, p. 26).

Merely seen from his interpretations as regards religious plurality, Hick is no more successful than the followers of language games. Sometimes, he himself also admits that in a certain sense, his theories are merely different from the theories of language games on wording and phrasing: “there is...a relativity of forms of experience to what Wittgenstein sometimes called language-games or, as I should prefer to say, cultures” (Hick 1985a, p. 26). Human history and culture have diversities which “form the lenses through which that Reality is variously perceived” (Hick 1985b, p. 94). What really differentiates him from followers of language games is his recourse to the ultimate Reality. He claims that on the one hand, “That which is religiously interpreted and experienced is in itself ambiguous—in this respect like a puzzle picture—in that it is also capable of being perceived non-religiously” (Hick 1985a, p. 24); on the other hand, “the true character of the universe does not force itself upon us, and we are left with an important element of freedom and responsibility in our response to it” (Hick 1985a, p. 25). It is not hard to see that The Real is itself ambiguous and does not force us to make choices, which is the ground for the establishment of religious pluralism. Nevertheless, to deduce from the ground of the thesis of plurality to the thesis of plurality, we need to assert the following. First, the different opinions between religion and the secular or those between different religions are not contrary to each other. This is because if they are contrary, according to the law of contradiction, there can only be one correct opinion between two contrary ones, which will dispel plurality. Second, we are definitely aware of some traits of The Real (say, ambiguity and non-forcefulness). The first condition plainly does not conform to the facts⁶. For instance, as is known to us, atheists and

⁶ Griffiths & Lewis (1983) hold this view to which Hick (1985b) makes particular response of which the supportive points are still cultural relativity and the infiniteness of divine Reality.

theists are contradictory on some points. The second condition is denied by Hick himself in that he has contended in more than one place that The Real is infinite and “beyond human picturing” (Hick 1985b, p. 94; Hick 1985a, p. 26). That is to say, we have no idea with which to judge whether or not we really know the divine Reality. On this ground, the so-called ambiguity and non-forcefulness are not definite knowledge pertinent to The Real. It can thus be seen that Hick has not yet succeeded in defending religious pluralism.

As a matter of fact, even if the aforementioned problems are ignored, we have also noticed that the success of defending pluralism demands a third premise: The religious mode of experience pertains to divine Reality or else the plurality advocated by Hick is nothing more than a matter of expediency brought about by cognitive difficulties. This concerns his defense for reality which, unfortunately, also fails.

It should be said that Hick (1985a) has really not spent that much description on Reality. We can nevertheless sort out, between his lines, his train of thought and can appeal to other literatures for proof. Seen from Hick’s interpretation of plurality, he lays particular emphasis on experiencing-as qua the “choosing” elements in “cognitive choice.” We may conjecture, in reasonable fashion, that if the emphasis were to be put on the “cognitive” element, the problem of reality of the religious experience of life might be settled. Anyhow, the religious experiencing of life must be a sort of cognition and when it is cognition, there must be some correct elements in it. If none of the religious traditions were related to The Real, or the ultimate Reality, a religious mode of experience would not be a religious mode, nor would religion be religion. On this account, in his later works, Hick draws the following conclusion after previous Kantian transcendental arguments: “the divine noumenon is a necessary postulate of the pluralistic religious life of humanity” (Hick 1989, p. 249).

Whether the religious experience of life is a sort of cognition may be confronted with questions. Many have considered religious experience as a sort of emotion. We can image that Hick may present the following defenses. The religious experience of life is a sort of experiencing-as which has presupposed experience. Since there is experience, there should be that which is experienced or else our experiences would become those of nought. In a Wittgensteinian sense, experience of nought is the nought of experiencing, i.e. without experience, which plainly runs counter to the facts. Therefore, if there is religious experiencing-as, there should be corresponding religious Reality which, in Hick’s later works, is affirmed as the reality approached by critical realism. “The realm of religious experience and belief is not *in to* human projection and illusion but constitutes a range of cognitive responses...to the presence of a transcendent reality or realities” (Hick 1989, p. 175).

To be sure, admitting that the religious mode of experience is a sort of

cognitive mode will lead to our admitting that there are real elements in the religious mode. This however will not necessarily make us believe that corresponding real elements are religious reality. According to Hick, like the ethical mode, the religious mode is a sort of cognitive mode of higher order. The ethical mode needs to presuppose the physical mode (Hick 1985a, p. 21; Hick 1989, p. 12), whereas the religious mode presupposes both the ethical and physical modes. Qua religious beings, we “continue to live in the world in terms of its physical and ethical meanings, but do so in new ways required by its religious meaning” (Hick 1989, p. 13; Hick 1985a, p. 24). Consequently, the real elements in the religious mode may exactly exist in the ethical or physical style it presupposes. That is to say, it is very possible that its real elements are nothing but ethical or physical reality. This possibility is, it happens, the theoretical ground on which religious issues are reduced to ethical or physical ones. Regarding this possibility, Hick fails to present persuasive reasons so as to exclude it.

To say the least, even if this possibility is excluded, as to the relation between the religious mode and divine Reality, Hick still has no method of choosing between them. For one thing, since all the experiencing is experiencing-as, and is of interpretations, he must claim that such substance cannot be recognized by human beings. For another, he has really set up such a substance. The problem here is whether or not he knows the substance set up by him? If he knows, the divine Reality would be known through the interpretations of the cultural tradition to which Hick belongs, and hence would not be the same divine Reality. Experiencing-as is by free cognitive choice, whereas divine Reality should not rely on our free choice, particularly when these traits totally come from our culture. The case might not be like this if any trait of our culture is also the trait of that divine Reality, but the problem would then be more severe: all of our recognition of culture would be that of the divine Reality, which will lead to the absurd condition that all the non-religious experiencing modes would be religious modes so there would be no non-disciple in the world. Nevertheless, if he did not know the substance, he would be setting up a thing unknown to him, but how can he make such a setup? Hick’s train of thought here resembles, in extreme fashion, Kant’s setting up of the thing-in-itself. After Kant, all the German classic philosophers gave up thing-in-itself in that this is a self-contradictory concept. The criticisms with regard to Kant’s thing-in-itself can be exactly put into use for criticizing Hick’s divine Reality.

5 Is the Extension of Aspect Successful?

As a matter of fact, it is not only that Verbin and Hick’s extensions fail to settle the problems they intend to, but that when we reflect on their train of thought in carrying out these extensions, we will find that the corresponding extensions are

by no means successful.

5.1 Verbin's Extensions

As we saw above, for Verbin there are two key steps in his extension. First, if we can accept Wittgenstein's example of aspect seeing, we can accept treating religious belief as aspect seeing. Second, there are important similarities between religious belief and aspect seeing. Nonetheless, severe problems exist in these two steps.

In the first step, to accomplish the transition from the duck-rabbit as the exemplary picture of aspect seeing to religious belief, he chooses the example of "seeing a face as friendly." He implicitly presupposes that the barrier in dealing with religious belief as aspect seeing must appear in "seeing a face as friendly." If he or Wittgenstein has cleared up this barrier emerging in the former condition, that in the latter condition will also be cleared up. According to him, the barrier therein is the myth of ostensive definition. To overcome these barriers, he points out that any aspect seeing should presuppose a conceptual framework, a corresponding clear case of "seeing" before people try to find accord with corresponding cases. He has noticed that the identity of physics is not the same as that of ethics. Calling a white object "black" is an error, but seeing a friendly face as one full of hostility is not that plainly erroneous. He attributes this difference to that of "degree" and "kind" (Verbin 2000, p.13). The alleged different kinds are in fact different contents: One is physics, the other ethics. He then extends this train of thought to religion, contending that while the degree and kind of clarity are different, corresponding clear cases must exist, which would result in people's perhaps seeing the appearance of God's aspect by means of clear cases and agreements among certain community members. Religious disciples however will find that this Verbin's notion is very hard to accept in that they intuitively feel that it is not that the agreements among disciples leads them to see the apparent aspect of God but that the aspect God shows contributes to the agreements among them. It seems that Verbin has reversed cause and effect. Worse still, religious belief lacks the clear cases in the aforementioned sense. To the secular person, religious cases have never appeared in their life; to religious disciples, clear cases of heresy have never appeared in their life. On this account, we have reason to hold that Verbin's alleged religious belief cannot be aspect seeing at all.

In the second step, Verbin fails to successfully list the five traits for religious belief to contain aspect seeing. Aspect seeing should contain these five traits at the same time whereas Verbin is employing different religious beliefs to correspond to different traits. In particular, he gets in trouble with regard to the traits of being controlled and cultivation. He fails to state that religious belief has

the trait of being controlled. Only when religious belief is determined to be aspect seeing and contains the latter's corresponding traits, can these traits be employed to interpret issues regarding religious beliefs. Nevertheless, he reverses the procedure by having these traits settle the issue of religious defense, so that religious belief has these traits. Circular logic is thus formed.

Difficulties as to cultivation again concern the demand that Verbin makes for the obvious or familiar cases. Since aspect seeing needs to get acquainted with relevant concepts or conceptual references, a community is needed. The nature of the so-called cultivation is nothing but the way that the community enables the experiencing people to obtain this acquaintance in advance. Nevertheless, by virtue of two thought experiments, Kellenberger demonstrates that (1) aspect seeing does not need the previous acquaintance of experiencing people, and (2) aspect seeing does not need a community. The first thought experiment (Kellenberger 2002, pp. 105–106) can be called “the picture of duck with three bills or rabbit with three ears.” We need only make simple revisions with respect to the duck-rabbit so as to form a new double picture, say, add an ear to the rabbit. Observers need not live in a world wherein ducks with three bills or rabbits with three ears exist so as to identify the corresponding animals. This demonstrates claim (1). The second thought experiment (Kellenberger 2002, pp. 106–107) can be called “New Abraham.” Suppose that all the existent disciples of Judaism, Christianity and Islam were dead, then, in accordance with the theories of Verbin, since the community has disappeared, “no-one in our imagined new world would be able to see any event as a miracle or as embodying God's presence” (Kellenberger 2002, p. 106). This is plainly unimaginable in that since God may open the eyes of the first Abraham, he is able to do so to the second Abraham. According to the above demonstration, however, God will lose this ability, which demonstrates claim (2). If (1) and (2) are demonstrated, religious belief will not require cultivation.

5.2 Hick's Extensions

Different from Verbin, Hick puts his hope on generalizing the traits of seeing-as into those of experiencing-as before indicating that since the religious experience of life is a sort of experiencing-as, it contains the traits of seeing-as. His generalization goes as follows. He first differentiates pure seeing from seeing-as so as to distill the interpretative trait of seeing-as. This interpretative trait is then conveyed to experiencing-as, and in virtue of excluding experience that is not experiencing-as, he draws the conclusion that all experience contains the interpretative trait. It is not hard for us to see that there is a paradox in the differentiating between pure seeing and seeing-as but simultaneously excluding, experiencing that is not experiencing-as. This paradox suggests his dilemma

between religious reality and plurality.

Leaving the aforementioned paradox, we find that Hick's difficulty also lies in the fact that Wittgenstein's text supports neither his differentiation nor his dispelling of the differentiation. To be sure, Wittgenstein differentiates the seeing of common objects from that of aspect, but the seeing of aspect nevertheless stands between seeing and thinking in lieu of being a subjective interpretation. In addition, Wittgenstein contends that not every seeing is seeing-as. While we may say that the duck-rabbit can be seen as a rabbit, we cannot say at the dinner table, that "Now, I am seeing this as a knife and fork." This is similar to how, "Now, it's a fork" or "It can be a fork too," in this parlance "would not be understood" (Wittgenstein PI, p. 195). On the dinner table, forks and knives are what they are, and have become a part of life. Since Hick misunderstands that Wittgenstein's differentiation is also his, when he dispels the differentiation, he cannot but respond to this difficulty. Wittgenstein has the following saying: "I may... have seen the duck-rabbit simply as a picture-rabbit from the first," as a result of which, "I should not have answered the question 'What do you see here?' by saying: 'Now I am seeing it as a picture-rabbit'" (Wittgenstein PI, p. 194). Nevertheless, another person, "could have said of me: 'He is seeing the figure as a picture-rabbit'" (Wittgenstein PI, p. 195). Hick has intelligently grasped this and argues that (Hick 1985a, p. 20) since Wittgenstein has admitted that when one cannot employ seeing-as, another may legitimately do so, so that under the actual condition of being unable to employ seeing-as we may imagine the condition of employing it and, by means of comparing it with the actual condition, contribute to the actual usage of seeing-as. For example, primitive men would not see forks and knives as what they are, so we may say, "They did not see them as forks and knives." In contrast, we may say, "We see them as forks and knives." In this line, every seeing can be interpreted as seeing-as.

Though it is a beautiful notion, it is of no avail. Seen logically, Wittgenstein's saying that we will not *see* forks and knives *as* what they are does is not contrary to Hick's saying that we may see forks and knives as what they are, unless the condition imagined by Hick is identical with that imagined by Wittgenstein, or Wittgenstein's condition is a necessary presupposition. These two conditions cannot be identical at all in that for Hick, the comparison with primitive men is added. It still arouses problems to treat it as necessary presupposition, for instance, why must we think of primitive men each time we have our meal? In effect, even if it does not bring about any problem, Wittgenstein's insistence on differentiating still cannot be repudiated. Saying, "Primitive men did not see them as forks and knives but we see so," is a totally different seeing-as from saying "We saw them as forks and knives just now." In Hick's sense, the seeing-as in the first saying is an intentional second-order interpretation and is given out of comparison. In the second saying, on the other hand, there is a

first-order interpretation made unconsciously. The second saying is the very seeing-as discussed by Hick. In Wittgenstein's sense, the seeing-as in the first saying is not aspect seeing. Only when one sees the duck-rabbit as a duck, and then notices, in abrupt fashion, a rabbit, is one's seeing an aspect seeing. If the duck-rabbit is seen as a duck all the time, even when one thinks simultaneously that others may see it as a rabbit, there is still not aspect seeing. Aspect seeing has the trait of conversion which is an actual action (seeing) rather than an imagined one (thinking). This sort of conversion needs to be experienced and just because one can accomplish this conversion does not mean that another can also make it. Consequently, when some can see a rabbit as well as a duck in the duck-rabbit, some others can only see a duck or a rabbit, hence aspect seeing is irrelevant for them. It can thus be seen that whether in Hick's sense or Wittgenstein's, Hick must rely on a disguised replacement of a concept so as to reduce each seeing to seeing-as. If Hick cannot reduce all seeing to seeing-as, he cannot make the reduction at the level of experiencing either. Since Hick's extension of the theory of aspect relies, in severe fashion, on this reduction, we have reason to contend that his extension is not successful.

6 Conclusion: God Is Not an Aspect

It seems that the dispute between religious disciples and non-disciples cannot be mediated successfully. To respond to this issue from the perspective of Wittgenstein, the mainstream way is to employ the theory of language games. Nonetheless, while language game theory can present religion with the means to avoid outside criticisms and hence avoid getting trapped in endless disputes, it is at the same time in the following danger: Religion loses relevance to The Real and actual disputes will be reproached as meaningless and hence lose interpretation. To deal with this situation, some scholars try to start from Wittgenstein's theories of aspect seeing or seeing-as in his middle or late stage to understand religion anew, and Verbin and Hick are two representatives of this tendency. Nonetheless, if what we have analyzed is correct, we know that first, their extensive interpretations with regard to aspect seeing won't work, and second, even if their extensive interpretations work, they cannot settle relevant problems.

As a matter of fact, putting aside the above analyses we will find, provided that we are familiar with Wittgenstein's relevant discussions about aspect seeing, that some traits of aspect do not correspond to those of the divine Reality in religion at all. For instance, the presentation of aspect is partial and it can only be presented in some partial phenomena.⁷ Comparatively, religious divine Reality is

⁷ Disputes exist here. Some scholars also contend that Wittgenstein's arguments of world picture in his *On Certainty* is related to aspect-seeing.

holistic and is presented in a whole situation. For another example, aspect is of the effect of replacement of the same order, namely that you cannot see a duck at the same time when you see a rabbit in the duck-rabbit, but you can see one of them. Insofar as God is concerned, there is not any aspect whatsoever of the same order with him. If God is an aspect, when he is not presented, he is merely absent but there is not any other aspect of the same order that can replace him. Maybe there may appear other aspects like Satan, but these aspects are not of the same order with God. Many people, including Hick, contend that as regards the world, secular understanding is the same as religious understanding⁸ and in this sense, nature and God presented qua the aspects of the world are of the same order. If this understanding is correct, it means that under the effect of replacement of the same order, the scientist who believes in God cannot see his scientific experiments as the display of the might of nature and simultaneously of God. In fact this conflict does not happen in general fashion. From this we can conclude that God is not an aspect, unless substantive modifications are made with regard to the understanding of aspect or God.

Other extensions pertaining to aspect theory also exist, such as Churchill's appealing to rule obedience and image ambiguity (Churchill 1998). Nevertheless, any extension must share the traits of both Verbin and Hick: There must be adequate similar points between aspect and religious belief, and more general theoretical premises must be set up implicitly or explicitly. In terms of similarity, we can say that God really has little in common with aspect. As extensions of theory, considering the double traits of seeing and thinking within aspect seeing, Hick's differentiation between experiencing (real factor) and experiencing-as (interpretative factor) is the most suitable choice. However both extensions fail. On this ground, we have adequate reasons to conclude that aspect theory is incapable of interpreting God, and God is not an aspect.

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⁸ When Hick intends, via his theory of plurality, to mediate between secular mode and religious one, he is in fact treating the appearance of the world at the level of these modes as the same order. Nevertheless, his interpretation as to the meaning of situation indicates, in plain fashion, that religious meaning should presuppose secular meaning, which means that either secular mode is more fundamental than religious one, or it is a part of the latter, in a word, they are not of the same order.

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