

Lectures in Philosophy, Fudan University, September 2013

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1. What does it mean to say ‘God exists’? A Philosopher of Language looks at Religion.

Abstract: In the Christian context, many philosophical discussions about the value of Religion start with the question whether God exists. To the participants of such discussions it seems that *this* is the question that has to be answered first, and only when it is answered positively can any follow-up questions be meaningfully treated. In the negative case, no further inquiries are necessary; the whole topic appears to be illusory. (Cf. the popular book ‘The God Delusion’ by Richard Dawkins.)

The lecture will explore what happens when this procedure is reversed: The problem of God’s existence is placed at the end rather than at the beginning of a clarification process, that (following William James) starts with certain (possibly universal) human experiences. According to such a view, the linguistic articulation of such experiences is the second step, and only in the context of such articulations (in a third step) in some religions the talk about the ‘existence of God’ gets a clear meaning.

Dear Prof. Wang Fengcai, dear Prof. Zhang Qingxiong, dear members of the faculty, dear students; - ladies and gentlemen!

It is a great honor for me, and also a great pleasure to have been invited to Fudan University to deliver a series of five philosophical lectures to a distinguished audience. My contacts with the Philosophy Department of this university now reach back seventeen years (first visit: fall 1996), and more than once I have given regular seminars for small groups of students, with lively discussions. I do hope that some of this spirit of *learning by engaging in controversy* will also show up in these lectures. I am hoping this although the present context might be experienced by some of you as a bit more formal and although I know that this style of learning has not been as strong in your tradition as it has been in mine. All the same, I would like to encourage all of you, students and colleagues alike, to challenge what I am going to say by raising critical questions.

You might have seen on the announcement of this lecture series that each of the five lectures has a separate topic. So you might pick just one or two of them for you to listen, and disregard the others. They are designed in such a way that each should be comprehensible in isolation. On the other hand, there is a certain thematic overlap in the lectures, and what is briefly stated in one of them is sometimes treated in more detail in another one. So in order to get a full picture of what I would like to bring across to you, it might be advisable to try to hear them all, they do shed some light on each other, I hope. So for the students I recommend to hear them all.

Let me illustrate this by giving some comments on my five subjects. Today’s lecture is meant to show, on the one hand, that contemporary Philosophy still has something to say about the ‘great old topics’, like that of religion. But at the same time I will explain why I think that, from the 20th century onward, being attentive to language plays an important role in Philosophy. Accordingly, instead of directly asking ‘Does God exist?’ I have chosen the indirect formulation “What does it mean to say ‘God exists’”? I hope that I can make it clear to you why I did so; I hope to make you see the advantages or, in some cases, even the necessity of such a language-oriented procedure in Philosophy.

The unavoidability of turning to language when one is doing Philosophy is treated in more detail when in my *second* lecture I will discuss the later Wittgenstein and his contribution to a theory of meaning. I will claim with Wittgenstein, that speaking a language is a ‘soft skill’, in contradistinction to formal skills like operating a calculus. But many interpreters today think that Wittgenstein, for that reason, is and indeed has to be unsystematic. This I will try to refute. I might mention two more things about this second lecture. Since Wittgenstein is the philosopher that in the long run has influenced me most and since he was a very unusual person, I will have a few things to say about his background, and I will show a few pictures in this lecture, for example of the house he has designed for his sister. And secondly I might mention that the second lecture can be taken as a kind of summary of a forthcoming book of mine, which will appear not in German but in English. It is scheduled to be published next year by Wiley-Blackwell. (Projection)

In my *third* lecture I will introduce you to the father of the tradition of the strongest counter-position to Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning, i.e. to the basic ideas of the German logician Gottlob Frege whose writings Wittgenstein, by the way, very much admired. I will explain what is so fascinating and inspiring in his view and how it contributed to the development of ‘logical languages’. This will at the same time give me an opportunity to explain in more detail than in the second lecture how natural languages differ from the logical ones originating in the ideas of Frege.

My *fourth* lecture will return to the subject matter of religion, but will treat it in a more specialized way than today’s lecture does. It will take up a controversy I have with my German colleague Jürgen Habermas about how certain ‘content elements’ found in older forms of religion can be treated in such a way that modern rational thinking can cope with them. I will try to show that Habermas, somewhat surprisingly, is too close to a quite restricted understanding of what it is to argue about facts. Provocatively I could even say that he has a too positivistic understanding of language. I think that what I have to say today and in my next lecture about Wittgenstein will help to elucidate the points I am later trying to make against Habermas.

In my *fifth* lecture, finally, I will discuss another of the ‘great topics’ of Philosophy, the topic of experience. Especially I will be interested in the relation between our personal, common sense experience, on the one hand, and the more refined and controlled experiences produced by the sciences, on the other. These latter ones are known as scientific *experiments*. Certainly we should value the sciences and many (not all) of the technologies made possible by them. But still I think we should be aware of the irreplaceable value of our common sense experience and its role in helping to critically evaluate the purported results of the sciences. This will also show in today’s lecture, when I will discuss William James and his term ‘religious experience’. In this kind of criticism Philosophy is of great help, for example when neuroscience and its relation to our mental life are at stake. In this way, my last lecture is a statement concerning another great topic: The role Philosophy should play in our intellectual activities, especially in our universities. It is in this way a kind of summary of my first four lectures.

1. The ‘scientific’ and the philosophical approach to religion

After these general and introductory remarks I now turn to the subject chosen for today, to the Philosophy of Religion. As a title I have formulated: “What does it mean to say ‘God exists?’” and I have added as a subtitle “A philosopher of language looks at religion”. I would like you

to know right from the beginning that I am not speaking as a religious believer; I am not a member of any church or creed, especially (as Habermas seems to have acknowledged by now) I would not consider myself as a Buddhist. But I do speak with sympathy about my subject; like Habermas I am convinced that the great world religions have to teach us something important and that it is worthwhile for a philosopher to try to understand and evaluate these teachings. My approach is surely influenced by the fact that I grew up in a culture that was formed by the Christian religion, as my choice of the phrase 'God exists' as part of my title today testifies. But it is my aspiration to clear the ground for a philosophical view that can also accommodate a non-theistic religion like for example Buddhism. The results, to which such philosophical thinking will lead, might in the end not satisfy traditional Christian or Buddhist believers. But as for today, I can and will leave this question open, for (as I said) I am only clearing the ground for further work, I will not even come close to any specific religious doctrine. But it might still be worth mentioning that also other thinkers, like quite recently the US-American Philosopher Ronald Dworkin, have been thinking of a 'religion without God' even in the Christian context. And this might turn out to be a good beginning for efforts at intercultural communication about Religion.

As a starting point I think it is helpful to distinguish two approaches one can take in trying to answer the question whether God exists. The first can be called the 'scientific' or 'science-oriented' approach; it tries to meet the existence-question head on. The second is the philosophical approach. It is characteristic for this second approach that before trying to answer the existence question, it raises a question about linguistic meaning: What does it mean to say that God exists? It is characteristic of this approach that it denies the possibility to meaningfully answer the existence question before it's meaning has been clarified. So I myself will take some care now to discuss the meaning of existence claims.

What I have called the 'scientific approach' has a parallel in everyday life. Think of a police investigation; here the question can occur: Does a person with characteristics a, b, and c live in place P? The police investigators rightly presuppose that the meaning of the words 'person', 'place' etc. and also the meanings of the characterizing words ('black haired', 'scar on right arm', etc.) are well known. So in this case we know the *kind* of thing we are looking for and the *kind* of activities that are involved in searching. The only question is whether this particular person with particular characteristics can be found in this or that particular location, in order to be arrested. The same is true for scientific questions, so far as they are empirical: So we might ask: Does a supposed star or planet for which we believe to have indirect evidence by some 'signals' we receive from outer space, really exist? Some authors, like Richard Dawkins think that the question of the existence of God is of this kind, it is empirical in a sense exemplified by the (natural) sciences. Here is a quote from Dawkins' book 'The God Delusion': In his introduction he says that he wants to persuade the reader "...that 'the God Hypothesis' is a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analyzed as skeptically as any other." (p. 24)

My claim now is: If we understand the question in this way, we might gain an understanding of magic and witchcraft, but not of religion. With this remark I do not mean to rule out that in older forms of religion one might indeed find *elements* of magic and witchcraft. But I am sure that in the great world religions this is not the end of the story. Here I agree with Habermas that it is worthwhile to try to find out and to say as clearly as possible what it is that some of us intuitively perceive as valuable in them. (The controversy, if you allow me to anticipate this here, will then be about the means we have for 'extracting' these valuable elements from their strange and unreasonable (?) surroundings, and whether talking of 'elements' of

meaning, comparable to what Wittgenstein envisaged when he wrote the *Tractatus* makes sense in the case of Religion.)

I now turn to the second approach, the one I myself am endorsing. I have called it 'philosophical' and have said that it involves paying attention to language. To be more precise: It involves considering the meaning of words and phrases, and since for a long time in Philosophy these meanings have been called 'concepts', it is customary to speak of 'conceptual questions' here. So we have empirical or (in the more specific case) scientific questions on the one hand, and philosophical or conceptual questions (related to language) on the other. What then is a conceptual question; what is a 'philosophical' approach; and how does language get into the picture?

2. *The meaning of existence claims: An example from Mathematics; Psychologism and Formalism no helpful answers to the question about their nature*

I will discuss these questions with help of an example that has nothing to do with religion and does therefore not involve feelings or prejudices. This might seem to be a detour, but I am sure that in the end it will serve my purposes quite well *because* (unlike Religion) it does not involve positive or negative feelings. Here we can in a detached way ask ourselves how existence claims are to be understood.

So consider the question: Does a prime-number exist that is larger than five and smaller than nine? You will immediately see that the answer is 'yes; it is the number seven'. But it is not the point here to give the right answer, but to understand what we are doing when we ask and answer questions like this one. For example: Where would you want to place this question, on the empirical/scientific side or on the philosophical/conceptual side? I think it is quite obvious that this question about the existence of a prime number with certain characteristics is not an empirical question: A police search would not be able to find such an object; also, in the science departments of our universities there are no Mathematics-Labs, no special telescopes or other instruments for detecting mathematical objects. You yourself have been able to answer the question, I take it, without consulting empirical evidence. So mathematical objects (like in their own way, perhaps, religious objects) seem to be quite peculiar; in the Philosophy of Mathematics they have been called 'abstract objects'. Such objects cannot easily be banned from science (like witches and fairies can, and God) because without Mathematics there would be no Physics, for example. But it is not easy to explain how it is possible that we have knowledge about these abstract entities. This last question is a typical philosophical question. Indeed it is a specification of the first of Kant's famous four questions with the help of which he defines Philosophy: What can I know? And this question involves a reflection about language.

I would like to mention here two attempts to answer the question of how we should understand our talk about mathematical objects. The first one dates back to the Middle Ages. It says that abstract objects are 'in the mind'. Mental entities of their kind have been called 'concepts' and the position that sees their nature in this way accordingly was called 'conceptualism'. Today, after the rise of a new academic field of Psychology in the 19th century (Wilhelm Wundt, 1879) we can express this position by saying say that numbers are 'psychological entities', they are 'in the mind' or 'in the psyche' of the person speaking or thinking about them. In this way, the defenders of this position thought, these objects are saved from the fate of witches and fairies, i.e. we can go on accepting them as intellectually respectable entities, which is very important if we want to go on to practice science. But since

we cannot look into each other's minds it is clear that they cannot be investigated by the empirical methods known from Physics or Chemistry.

But this attempt to answer the questions is not without problems. One kind of criticism has been put under the general heading of 'Psychologism'. This expression signals a critical attitude to positions like Conceptualism. It expresses the claim that the criticized thinkers make the mistake of treating something as a *psychological* subject or entity that does not deserve this treatment, i.e. that in reality *is no* psychological entity. So for example some people have thought that the subject matter of Ethics (i.e., questions about how we should live, about what we should and should not do) is exclusively psychological, in the sense that it is about our attitudes and feelings only. People using the critical term 'Psychologism' think that there is something to Ethics that is *not* 'only psychological', and that this should not be lost by giving over the whole discussion of ethical matters to Psychology. So they see a non-admissible reduction in this position, namely, a reduction of something that is a subject matter in its own right to some specialized field of Psychology. And for a position that advocates this kind of reduction the critical label 'Psychologism' is used. What it designates does not only concern Ethics. Also in the Philosophy of Religion there have been positions that try to reduce Religion to Psychology, to religious feelings.

Before I come back to Religion, however, I would like to return to my mathematical example and see what can be learned from it about the meaning of existence claims. One of the prominent critics of Psychologism in Mathematics was Gottlob Frege, the German logician the basic ideas of whom I will discuss in my third lecture. Frege, by the way, was the man whose influence later made also Edmund Husserl to turn away from Psychologism. So what Frege opposed was the claim that numbers are 'in the mind'. His argument is as follows.

Every mind we know of is the mind of a particular, individual person. So when a group of mathematicians is talking about the number seven, for example, the question arises, which one of their minds is the one in which the given speaker locates the psychological entity he is talking about. It seems that it can only be his own mind, because his is the only one that he knows from direct experience. But how then can any one of the speakers know that *his* 'personal seven', the content of *his* mind, is similar to the respective 'personal seven' of any other one of his interlocutors? In which sense are all the mathematicians talking about the same number seven, if numbers are 'in the mind'? That we get into this kind of problem is a completely counter-intuitive consequence of the considered position of Psychologism. Any reasonable position in the Philosophy of Mathematics must be able to do justice to an outstanding and very special characteristic of mathematical knowledge, namely its extremely high degree of certainty and the fact that its results are socially shared and easily agreed upon. So Psychologism is no answer. We are still left with the questions: What are numbers, and how can we establish the existence of one of them, like that of a prime number between five and nine?

A more recent attempt to answer such questions was a position that is known under the title of *formalism*, to which the German Mathematician David Hilbert made important contributions. It is a radical position in so far as it answers the question about the content of Mathematical propositions by saying: There is no such content. It proposes to see Mathematics as a formal system of arbitrarily chosen rules for producing chains of symbols, not unlike some children's games in which chains of playing-pieces are put together under the rule that each new piece must match the last one that has been put down by one of the other players. One such game is known as 'Dominoes'. One can judge the *correctness* of a move (i.e. one can judge whether it

is in agreement with the rules), but if the formalists are right, it makes no sense to call a chain of symbols that has been produced in such a game true or false.

Strange as this position might seem at first glance, it does have its merits. It is a step in the right direction, I think, in so far as it speaks about a specific activity we humans can engage in, the activity of producing marks according to rules. I hesitate to say ‘symbols’ instead of ‘marks’, because the word ‘symbol’ implies meaning. And if formalism is right in radically denying meanings to the produced chains of marks, we cannot call them symbols. With a grain of salt we might also say that in a certain sense formalism is able to explain that there is so little controversy in Mathematics, a fact that Psychologism, as we have seen, cannot account for. When *we ourselves* have laid down the rules for producing chains of symbols and have done so in the public space, not in the privacy of our own minds, it is not surprising that it is easy to agree upon the correctness or incorrectness of a given chain, like in the mentioned game of Dominoes. No private psychological entities are involved; nothing is hidden.

But there are certain imperfections also in the position of formalism. My main complaint is that it does not have to say much about the *use* of the mathematical symbolism if it really denies it all content. So it tends to see the applicability of Mathematics in the Sciences (you might say: the astonishing fact that Mathematics ‘fits the world’) as something like a miracle. Therefore, I think, Mathematics should rather be seen not as concerned with meaningless symbols, but as a specialized department of our *language*. Now, insofar language by definition is something that is used, language has meaning; it has content. It is no purely formal affair. When we want to understand how this is possible, we have to turn to the particular *kind of use* we make of this particular sub-field of language. Here I am invoking one of Wittgenstein’s central claims: If you want to understand the meanings of (parts of) language, look at how they are used. So what is necessary to repair Formalism is to add this meaning-side (content-side) that it has, at the time of its invention, deliberately kicked out of consideration in order to avoid Psychologism. But one important point has to be added here: To introduce the side of meaning to a formalist approach does *not* necessarily involve finding entities of which the pieces of language under consideration are *names*. It is enough to understand how the words and phrases are used, and this means: are used in our practical life. This same claim I will later repeat in view of religious language: We should look for the *use* of words, not necessarily for entities that would be named by them.

Let me first explain this for my mathematical example. I had said that in order to understand and answer existence claims about certain entities we should first take a look at the use of the expressions with the help of which these claims are made. In the mathematical example this is the expression ‘the number seven’: It is characterized as a prime number between five and nine and it is said that this prime number does exist. So according to this procedure the first thing to do is to explain the use of the number words (or numerals), one, two, three, etc. This is achieved by explaining the activity of counting: One apple, two apples, etc.

At this early stage of language acquisition we can see that in the sentence ‘these are five apples’ the word ‘five’ does not have to stand for an entity in order to have a meaning. Its place in the practice of counting is all we need to understand its meaning. Like it is the case with ‘logical’ words like ‘and’ or ‘because’, the number words have meaning although there has been no entity assigned to them for which they would be names. In a few more steps we can learn to speak about the results of counting activities and about characteristics of these results, like their being odd or even. And eventually we can define the term ‘prime number’ and raise the question whether there is a prime number between five and nine.

Up to this point we have encountered no philosophical difficulties. And we can see that if we follow this approach, also the existence question does not bring such a difficulty: Given that we understand the activity of counting and the steps leading to a discussion of their results, we can easily detect that there indeed *is* a prime number between five and nine, namely, the number seven. But now we can see (and this is the important lesson to take from this example for a discussion of Religion), that the meaning of the word ‘exists’, (in the sentence: a prime number between five and seven *exists*) can only be grasped by someone who is familiar with the practice of counting. The practice must be presupposed if the existence claim is to be discussed in a meaningful way. Without considering the practice, the problem of existence cannot be understood correctly.

And there is a further lesson our mathematical example teaches us: It would be a grave mistake (I would say: a grave *philosophical* mistake) to think that existence claims in mathematics are of the same kind as existence claims in our common sense world or in the world of the empirical sciences. Therefore, also the *methods* of deciding about these claims being *justified* or not can be expected to be quite different in both cases. In a parallel way, I think, it is a great philosophical mistake when Richard Dawkins says that the question whether God exists is of the same kind as empirical questions in science. Even in the realm of what the sciences need to be practiced, mathematical and empirical existence claims form two quite different groups, it would not come as a surprise to find that in the field of Religion that is quite different from both Mathematics and Science existence claims form a group utterances that function in an again different way.

3. Lessons for the Philosophy of Religion

I now proceed to the application of the mathematical case to the field of Religion. Our problem again is the understanding of an existence claim (what does ‘God exists’ mean?), and we now have reasons to suppose that also in the field of Religion, understanding the meaning of the existence claim involves understanding the use of the expressions involved in a particular practice, a practice that is characteristic of Religion. Also we can expect that, what will count as showing the truth of the existence claim will depend on features of this kind of practice. So we are obliged to form some understanding of what such a practice is. Like in the mathematical case it would be naïve and probably a mistake to think that the criteria of common sense or those of the empirical sciences (or, for that matter, those of Mathematics) are the only ones to be considered.

Like the expression ‘seven’, also the expression ‘God’ can be expected to have a meaning that cannot be explained by pointing to a particular concrete object, observable by the senses, and then adding that the word ‘God’ is the name of this object. Even for proper names of persons or cities we must be aware that their meaning is not the same as the object (the person, the city) the word refers to. As Wittgenstein remarked, if a person dies, his or her name does not lose its meaning: We still use it, so it still has meaning. And many words quite obviously are not proper names at all; they are used to classify objects. And still other words (like the numerals I have discussed or the logical connectives) are neither names in the ordinary sense, nor do they classify objects. They have a wholly different *kind* of use, and when we want to discuss *their* meaning, it is this special kind of use we have to consider. So the meaningfulness of sentences that on the grammatical level are speaking of an object (an ‘object of discourse’) is not always founded on what we call ‘empirical evidence’ for the existence of some entity, like it is in the case of persons and cities. Sticking to this

grammatical level can deceive us about the kind of work that can lead to a philosophical clarification.

We should note at this point that also in the Philosophy of Religion, like in the Philosophy of Mathematics, the positions of Psychologism and Formalism have no convincing solutions to offer. Concerning Psychologism, it is easy to see that a religious person speaking ‘about God’ does not mean to speak about her feelings, her mental life. Surely she will confess that she has a mental life with feelings, etc. and that some of them have to do with her Religion. But she will also say that this mental life is inspired or ‘caused’ by something much greater than herself or her feelings. For example, she might claim to be affected by God, or claim that God spoke to her.

I might mention here that a parallel point can be made with respect to brain-events. Contrary to what is sometimes asserted today, a person speaking about God is not referring to a certain state of her brain. For one thing, most people (including neuroscientists) do not know enough about their brains to be able to say just what state of it they are referring to when they say, for example, that they believe in the Christian trinity. The same is true in the mathematical case: Not only are numbers no entities in the mind, but it would be no improvement to claim that they are in the brain instead of the mind. I know pretty well what the expression ‘the number seven’ means, but I could neither name a mental state nor a brain state that the expression ‘the number seven’ would refer to. I will come back to this topic in my last lecture.

The same negative point must be made with respect to Formalism: This very expression is tied to the Philosophy of Mathematics and Logic. But a position coming close to it can be formulated in the Philosophy of Religion. In this field, such a position would deny that religious articulations say something about the world, that they can in any sense be true or false. In this sense (like in Formalism in Mathematics) such a position would deny the content side of religious utterances, like the Formalists in Mathematics deny that mathematical strings of marks have content. So what would an analogy to mathematical formalism look like in the Philosophy of Religion?

The so called ‘Speech Act Theory’ of John Austin and John Searle has directed our attention to kinds of utterance with the help of which the speaker communicates something important but does not make any truth claims. So possibly religious utterances can be interpreted as belonging to this class: They might be useful (i.e. they might have a meaning), but it may be the case that they make no claims about the world. As an example for such an utterance in the area of non-religious discourse John Searle (in his book ‘Speech Acts’) discusses the act of promising. By giving a promise, a speaker puts himself under an obligation. He does not say what at present is the case; also he is not making a prediction. The predictive sentence ‘I will probably attend the meeting’ is not the same as ‘I promise to attend the meeting.’ Likewise one might propose to interpret religious utterances as not saying something true, but as fulfilling some other purpose. So if promising has the function to put the speaker under an obligation, in an analogous way religious utterances might serve the function to consolidate the community or to give comfort to the individuals engaged in these utterances.

But as in the mathematical case we have to ask: How much of the content side of religious utterances are we ready to sacrifice in our philosophical attempt to understand their meaning? Do we really want to get rid of *all* of their truth claims? I think that such a result is not desirable, and I also think that we are not forced to accept it. The road that I propose to take at this juncture is the one that has been paved by William James, in his important book with the title ‘The varieties of religious experience’. By making experience his central concern, James

brings in *content*, he brings in the question of truth and falsity. We have to be careful, however, to make sure that in following James we can avoid Psychologism, i.e. we have to make sure that our understanding of his approach will not reduce what he calls 'religious experience' to a number of 'mental events'. Since James was not only a philosopher but also a psychologist, we have to take special care here. Also, we will have to make sure that James, in speaking of 'experience', does not fall back on a 'science-oriented' or common-sense understanding of religious existence claims, as we have found it in the book by Richard Dawkins. And I might mention at this point that one advantage of following James is that Wittgenstein, whose understanding of religion will occupy us later, knew and treasured James' book.

4. William James and the grounding of Religion in experience

James' book grew out of his Gifford Lectures, and these stand under the general title of a 'Natural Religion'. In order to see the specific character of his approach it will be helpful to set it against the one chosen by David Hume in his 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion'. Hume's project was to inquire into the chances of a 'reasonable' religion in the sense that, firstly, all reference to special religious sources of knowledge (revelations like holy scriptures) should be excluded and secondly (and here he differs from the first steps taken by James) the appeal to reason is understood by him as an appeal to the methods of the sciences that began to flourish in his days. So in this sense Hume is a forerunner of Richard Dawkins, whom I have quoted in the beginning: He wanted to address the question whether God exists in a straightforward manner, as a question of the same kind as the questions asked in the sciences.

Hume takes as his starting point certain articles of faith (notably: that a benevolent god has created the world) and then proceeds to inquire whether they can be validated by a kind of experience that would be accepted by the sciences. The result is very meagre indeed. Hume sums it up in the words: "... the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence." (Hume, 1980: 227) You can see that from here it is not a very far way to go to arrive at Dawkins' assertion that talking about God is a symptom that the speaker suffers from a delusion. We can see here that Hume takes it for granted that the meanings of existence claims in Religion are analogous to those in Science. He does not stop to ask the philosophical question whether they indeed are.

James, on the other hand, does not begin with a religious statement and then asks for its empirical (scientific) justification, but he proceeds in the opposite order. He starts with a large and generously chosen number of reports about candidates for religious experiences, he brings them into some order and tries to give a general characterisation of their main traits. Only then does he proceed to investigate whether it is possible to develop on this basis a convincing concept of the realm of the 'religious'. So for James the question is: Can it be made plausible that in human life as we know it (i.e.: in our life, as we experience it) there are episodes that might be felt and understood as forming the occasions around which a realm of practices may crystallize and develop which we would have reason to call 'religious'? And as a later question we can then ask: Can we understand how in the light of such practices existence claims can be made? What can they mean, how can they be justified? I hope you can see the parallel to the mathematical case: It is in relation to a particular *practice* that existence claims have to be understood.

It is noteworthy that James himself once had an experience that he felt was religious (James, 1982: 160f.). It was on an occasion when he suddenly remembered being confronted in an

asylum with an epileptic patient, an “entirely idiotic” youth, “looking absolutely non-human”, when a sudden awareness struck him, that the self-assured attitude he had developed as a trait of character was without foundation. He was different from this poor creature, no question, but it was not by his own merit that he was, and it occurred to him that he could in no way make sure that this difference would remain stable, would be guaranteed. A panic fear took possession of him, and later he had the impression that only his spontaneous prayers had saved him from becoming insane. This experience was of major importance for his whole life; so when he gave his lectures, James felt that he knew what he was talking about.

His method is the following: From a huge bulk of reports of life-changing events of different kinds from very different people he derives general characteristics of a subgroup of his material that might meaningfully be described as religious in a sense that is not tied to a particular religion. As was customary at his time and for the members of his social background, he often uses Christian terminology or words that were commonly used in Christian contexts, like for example ‘god’, ‘godhead’, ‘godlike object’, but also terms like ‘the cosmos’, ‘the universe’, and ‘the invisible order’. But he makes it clear that he means to refrain from dogmatic claims and from an exclusively Christian terminology.

It is James’ aim to interpret the reports of his witnesses as far as possible in a ‘natural’ way. This term is understood by him to refer to common sense, not to the methods of the natural sciences. So James’ understanding of these reports rests on his (and his readers’) own experience. This insures that religious experience is not understood as something that occurred only in the old days. He makes it plausible that the kind of experience he is looking for does indeed exist and that in principle such an experience can happen to anybody, even though in his book he concentrates on the reports of what he calls ‘religious geniusses’. So the kind of experience he is discussing is not restricted to ‘special’ people and in this sense it is nothing esoteric. It normally has a decisively positive effect on the lives of the persons who do have such an experience.

In a second step, James tries to state the core characteristics of the specifically religious variant of these experiences and thereby makes a proposal as how to differentiate them from related forms and optional but not universal phenomena that might accompany them. This then is his phenomenological basis, the richness and liveliness of which, together with his systematisation, constitute the main value of his book for me. In a third step, finally, James steps back from his material and tries to formulate a philosophical interpretation of it. According to his original plans, this last part of the project was meant to have the same quantity, to cover roughly the same amount of pages, as his systematised collection of reports. In its actual form, however, it is much shorter. What he has to say in it, he calls his personal ‘over-belief’. He makes it clear that concerning this part of his investigations it is not his intention to convince his audience. So he explicitly allows different ‘over-beliefs’ to be formed by different readers on the basis of the same material. The phenomenological facts are indubitable for him, but on their basis a reader of James might with his explicit encouragement form his or her own ‘over-belief’. This invites the question, whether there are systematic reasons for the rather slim character of this part of the book, and more specifically, whether and in what sense it is possible to do without any ‘over-belief’ as far as it involves a belief in certain causally effective entities. My own interpretation tries to answer this last question in the affirmative: I propose an understanding of Religion that is clearly separated from science, especially, one that does not claim any (in the scientific sense) causal influence of transcendent entities upon the world as described by the sciences.

The most important traits of James' concept of a religious experience are the following:
Firstly: The experience is one that relates to the attitude the person undergoing it has to the whole of his or her life and the surrounding world. What is meant here is a whole as experienced (an 'experiential whole', one could say), not a spatial or temporal whole as a collection of entities in the sense at home in a scientific cosmology.

Secondly: This whole includes suffering and evil, like loss, pain, sickness, and death. A sober comprehension and a practically effective integration of these aspects of life into the attitude to the whole is the core of religious experience. The experience is always a positive turn in the way in which the aspect of suffering is perceived and accepted. Using a modern philosophical distinction one might say that the result of a religious experience in James' sense is an improvement in the province of *knowing how* (to live) rather than an addition to the stock of items of *knowing that* or of information.

Thirdly: A closer look at this turn reveals three steps: Its starting point is the experience of a total defencelessness against suffering and evil, often accompanied with a feeling that everything in one's life has lost its meaning. When this helplessness is admitted, the person concerned will (in the second step) give up the impulse to be in complete control of his or her life. And then the third step is a (subjectively surprising) experience: this giving up or 'letting go' does not result in catastrophe, in a kind of 'drowning'. On the contrary, the person concerned will experience being a part of an 'invisible order' and she will experience this not as a (moral) yoke, but as the 'highest good'.

For appreciating the *religious* character of the phenomenon it is important, that it is the giving up of one's own impulses that brings rescue, and that this is experienced as the feeling that there are processes at work which are outside one's own little conscious self. So the encounter is not the result of one's own practical activity or one's own thinking, rather it is something that 'befalls' one, which comes to the person as a surprise.

Such an encounter has a deep significance for the person concerned. It is experienced like a 'second birth', as a step from the unreal (naïve, deceitful) to the real life. In its highest form, its result is "a superior denomination of happiness, and a steadfastness of soul with which no other can compare." (James, 1982: 369)

Characteristically this kind of state is constituted by a loss of fear and solicitude and a belief that one's situation is agreeable at a deep level, regardless of what will happen. After this 'second birth' the world is seen in a positive light without having undergone any objective change. The suffering-aspects of life are neither denied, nor is the positive attitude a result of the fantasy that higher powers will by their special intervention keep unpleasant or painful events from the particular person concerned. And as a fourth trait of the concept of religious experience James mentions that in most cases the described change lasts; it brings a lasting mental equilibrium.

I would like to quote one articulation of such an experience from James' book. The linguistic expressions we find here often have the form 'it was as if', followed by the description of an episode, of an element in a story, that speaker and hearer are supposed to be able to share, i.e. that the hearer is supposed to understand. My example will show how freely and individually chosen phenomenological language can go hand in hand with established religious forms of expression. We read:

Suddenly there seemed to be a something sweeping into me and inflating my entire being – such a sensation as I had never experienced before. When this experience came, I seemed to be conducted around a large, capacious, well-lighted room. As I walked with my invisible conductor and looked around, a clear thought was coined in my mind, ‘They are not here, they are gone’. As soon as the thought was definitely formed in my mind, though no word was spoken, the Holy Spirit impressed me that I was surveying my own soul. Then for the first time in all my life, did I know that I was cleansed from all sin, and filled with the fullness of god. (James, 1982: 253)

We have to keep in mind that for James it is the change in attitude, and this means, the practical ability of the person concerned to come to terms with her life, that is at the centre of religious experience and that he does not call into question. This is what makes such religious experiences important. Only in a second step James turns to what he calls his ‘over-belief’, i.e. to what he thinks he can conclude from such experiences as a philosophically minded psychologist.

I think that one of the advantages of James’ method is that it invites and enables us to regard the traditional religious articulations primarily as expressions of the just discussed very special life-enhancing quality of this kind of experience. Theoretical aspects of traditional religious articulations (for example: cosmological claims) can then be interpreted as results of secondary interests, for example the interest in explaining phenomena in the world of nature, like the coming of day and night. Accordingly it would be the religious experience as described by James where one would look for the key for understanding religious articulations, not theoretical claims about matters like the origin of the universe. It is interesting to note that the older traditions of Buddhism explicitly attempt to dissuade us from trying to find out the answers to cosmological or metaphysical questions, because they are largely irrelevant for the character of our lives.

When I now turn to the philosophical interpretation of these experiences, I see two possibilities. The first, more traditional approach presupposes that the referring expressions of religious language (for example the words referring to divine beings like the Holy Spirit) are of the same kind as the meanings of other referring expressions, for example for persons, rivers or cities. This is what above I have called the ‘head on’ approach, in its two forms, the ‘common sense’ variant (police search) or the ‘scientific’ variant (does a distant star exist). Loosely speaking, this view can be expressed as: In principle we know what kind of things gods and spirits are, today we are just not sure whether they exist. So for this approach (as exemplified by Hume and Dawkins) the next questions to be posed would be: Do the relevant expressions indeed have a reference and if so, how would one go about to find out whether the pertinent sentences about the objects referred to are true or false?

But in my discussion of existence of a prime number between five and nine I have tried to show that this (‘scientific’, ‘matter of fact’) approach is not the only one available. We have seen in our ‘philosophical’ way of approaching the question, a way that takes a serious look at differences between *kinds* of meaning, that number words (and existence claims about numbers) have meanings without these words having a reference in any straightforward (‘concrete’, ‘common sense’) way as we know it from the names of persons, cities, or distant stars. From this we have concluded that we should look at the context of use also of religious utterances if we want to avoid the naivety of a person who denies the existence of prime numbers on the ground that he cannot see any.

As far as William James' 'over-belief' is concerned, he sticks to the traditional 'scientific' understanding of how to decide existence claims. But since his book leaves no doubt that the experiences he has collected and systematised are much more important to him than their philosophical interpretation, the reader of our days may at this point take a different route without hurting the *spirit* of James' project, as we shall see presently. Knowing the materialist and reductionist tendencies in the sciences of his day, however, James seems to fear that his colleagues would want to deny the reality and importance of the experiences he had described if he would not insist on the existence of some special entities referred to by the terms used to express them. These entities, he seems to have thought, must in some sense be as 'real' as the objects of science. Otherwise they would be in danger to be placed under the same category as dreams experienced in a fever, i.e. his position would be a form of Psychologism. This he certainly wants to avoid; he wants to secure the special importance he himself had felt of his own experience. And he seems to think that the only possible remedy against a devaluation of them is the claim that there exist transcendent entities, which either themselves are the objects of the pertinent experience (they are that what is experienced), or are what is causally responsible for the occurring of the experience. From the perspective we have won here on the basis of a discussion of existence claims concerning numbers, it is a pity that James did not think of the third possibility, namely that in religious contexts, like in mathematical ones, existence claims have a quite specific meaning.

So what he arrives at is a rather traditional picture that differentiates between three worlds, a world of material objects, a world of subjective psychological objects like impressions and feelings, and a transcendent or spiritual world of objects which are neither material nor psychological but that causes our religious experience. To say of something that it exists by itself, that it is independent of us (especially: that it is more 'real' than the 'merely psychological' objects of dreams and other 'mental events'), means to say (according to this position) that it belongs to a world outside our sensory and mental apparatus, and this in turn means, either to the material or to a transcendent, spiritual world. Admittedly, both of these worlds we are able to know only via our sensations, feelings, thoughts, etc. But what is *only* in the world of felt experience and does not point to something 'exterior' (i.e. to a member of either one of the other two worlds, the material or the transcendent), is taken to be 'only psychological', in the devaluating sense expressed by the term 'Psychologism'.

At this point I would like to remark that here it would have helped to make a difference between the experiential (the sphere of the full ordinary life, with real experience, not only hallucinations) and the empirical as the sphere of the science laboratory, and this means: of the material world. I will come back to this distinction in my last lecture, when I will talk about the different meanings of the word 'experience'. Without this distinction James is lost between either denying the importance of his findings or of trying to save them by binding them to independently existing transcendent entities, i.e. of gods like religions claim to know them. What is missing in James, then, is a more substantial reflection on language.

5. Wittgenstein, Religion, and Language

What then are the outlines of the alternative approach that I mean to propose here, based on the Philosophy of Language of the later Wittgenstein as well as on his own thoughts about religion? The basic move of my proposal is to move the question about God's existence from the beginning to the end of the discussion. This can be seen as deliberately choosing a *philosophical* perspective, in contradistinction to a *common sense* perspective as well as a *scientific* perspective. As I have mentioned, common sense as well as science tend to

presuppose that we know not perhaps the *object* we are looking for, but that we do know objects that are of the same *kind* as the object we are looking for. So for example, if you want to find out whether in a remote jungle there is a mosquito with eight legs, you are aware about the existence of *some* mosquitos. In this connection it would be a stupid (and not at all a philosophical) question to ask what the word 'mosquito' means and whether there exist any mosquitos in the first place, since in the common sense and the scientific contexts this is taken for granted. But a parallel question concerning *mathematical* objects *is* legitimate and is indeed a profound philosophical question: In a discussion about the existence of a prime number it is in order to ask questions like: what does it mean to talk about numbers and their existence? Do numbers exist like stars, cities or people? How do we know about them? What would count as a proof of their existence? Although a pragmatically minded *working* mathematician might answer 'this is Philosophy, I do not have time to think about such questions', these questions themselves are all the same meaningful and legitimate. One reason is that we are aware that our knowledge of 'abstract objects' like numbers must have an origin that is different from our knowledge of 'concrete things'. So it is legitimate to ask what origin they have, how the expressions we have for them might have originated, and how their kind of meaning can be explained. The same seems to be true for religious statements.

And my proposal for a way to answer these questions is to look how the words with the help of which the problematic existence questions are formulated are *used*. Wittgenstein's claim is that understanding their use is the same as understanding their meaning. And as I have indicated, we have to be aware that in order for a word to have a meaning it is not necessary that it stands for an object, or, to put it more carefully, to stand for an object of one of the kinds we know from common sense or from empirical science. I have to add this reservation because our considerations will in the end show that a more generous understanding of 'object' is advisable, as our speaking of 'mathematical objects' testifies. In a similar sense we might also speak about God as a person's 'object of worship'. The only thing we should *not* do as philosophers is to bypass the question how our talk about such objects has to be understood.

When I now turn to Wittgenstein's understanding of Religion, the first point to mention is that for him it would constitute a grave mistake to think that it puts forward hypotheses about the existence and the nature of 'transcendent objects' like gods. For Wittgenstein (and here his position differs sharply from views such as put forward by David Hume and Richard Dawkins) religions are not theories. Especially, they should not be seen as early and immature attempts of mankind to practice science. Such a view would imply that religious objects would be only a little different from but still of the same kind as other objects like trees and rocks. Instead, as we have seen, the very status of 'being an object' in a more than grammatical sense has to be called into question when we look at what religious expressions are taken to mean or to 'refer to'.

I think that Wittgenstein here is in harmony with the pragmatic spirit of the phenomenological part of James' book. His view is that an understanding of religion that treats it as a kind of theory would not do justice to the role of religious ideas in the lives (the practices) of the people having these ideas. In other words: Such a treatment would bypass what gives meaning to these expressions: their use. In characterizing this aspect and its difference from that of a scientific hypothesis Wittgenstein says about a believer that he would have (I quote) "...what you might call an unshakable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life." (Wittgenstein, 1966: 54) Unshakable beliefs, so we think after Karl Popper, are impossible in science. It follows that if such beliefs are typical for the religious realm, this realm cannot be understood as having to do with hypotheses in a sense we know from the sciences.

Much of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language of his later period (to which I will devote my next lecture) is captured in the following quotation. On occasion of a discussion of the mind-body problem and traditional paradoxes associated with it he writes:

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts – which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please.”
(Wittgenstein 1953: § 304)

In our context we can add to this list: thoughts about God or other transcendent powers or persons. His claim here is that we do not have one semantic relation, namely, a word standing for an object, and an admitted plurality of kinds of *objects*, but that there are many semantic relations which are of radically different kinds. This enables us to say: Gods are not peculiar objects, but the language-use involving 'talk of god' is a peculiar kind of use, differing deeply from language uses concerned with trees and cars. The weight of this difference in kind can be glimpsed from the difference between the uses of language in existence claims concerning 'concrete things' like people or cities, on the one hand, and concerning 'abstract things' like prime numbers. So in Religion we encounter a third kind of existence claims.

I think that the kind of solution found for the mathematical case can be transferred to the field of religion. The occurrence and the life changing importance of the experiences described by James suffice for giving a meaning to their articulations in religious languages. Hypotheses about the existence of transcendent entities are unnecessary. That does not mean, however, that cases of empty copying, of meaningless babble, of mere traditional talk unconnected to important aspects of life are impossible. Religious statements mean to say something true about the situation that we humans find ourselves in. It is the context, the use of language in the particular situation that allows us to distinguish meaningful from empty speech, it is not the question of whether there is an entity referred to. There are independent criteria for this distinction that are not in need of special entities.

Here it is important to avoid a misunderstanding of what is called a 'pragmatic approach to language'. Sometimes Wittgenstein compares words with tools in order to say that they have a function in our lives. But this comparison does not mean that when one speaks (as Wittgenstein does) of 'language games' the words concerned must always be interpreted to have a *technical* function. Not all linguistic functions can appropriately be described as technical functions. In the case of religious experience, language works in the context of encounters, of what befalls a person, similar to the case of words like 'pain'. James and Wittgenstein agree that words get their meaning through their role in practical contexts or episodes, but these need not be activities, they also include the more passive aspects of life.

It is also important to see that Wittgenstein's talk of 'language games' is not meant to suggest that language use is always playful. Accordingly, if we apply the concept of a language game to religion (which is, as we have been taught by James, concerned with a person's life as a whole, with all its suffering included), this does not mean not to take religion seriously. So again, if one wants to secure a deep significance for religious language and wants to avoid the impression that it consists of 'playing games', one is not forced to postulate special 'objects of reference'. My impression is that many theologians today would be ready to agree to this claim and would confirm that in their field 'reference' has always been a debated concept. The Christian God is no object or person like other objects and persons and 'talk about God' (theo-logia) has always been a problem that demanded extra considerations.

The situation can be compared to one mentioned by Wittgenstein on an occasion when he comments on the expression ‘to describe the state of my mind’. He thinks of a case of silently beckoning to someone and then (for some reason or other) having occasion to explain this act retrospectively, for example with words like ‘I did not want you to come, but him’.

Wittgenstein writes: “One can now say that the words ‘I wanted N. to come to me’ describe the state of my mind at that time; and again one may *not* say so.” (Wittgenstein 1953: § 662) So on the one hand it is legitimate to talk in the traditional way about a ‘state of mind’ as if it were (the state of) an object. Turning to religion, we can say that the Christian tradition (among others) has shown that it is possible to articulate the content of a religious experience in theistic terms, i.e. as if one would refer to a person. But when one thinks that God is a person like other persons (or, returning to Wittgenstein’s example, that the mind is like a physical object which has states, like the lung when it is fully inflated or less so, or that the mind really or ‘lastly’ is identical with the brain), then, I think, the other half of Wittgenstein’s comment has to be applied, namely “... one may *not* say so”. The reason is that these ways of expressing oneself invite and encourage illegitimate (i.e. meaningless) ways of carrying on. These can be even funny, as when someone would not only speak about the eyes of God that see everything, but would go on from there to speak about god’s eyebrows (Wittgenstein, 1966: 71). Or such a move can result in what one could call ‘esoteric language’ in a derogative sense, meaning a language that purports to speak about hidden entities that are like material entities or objects, but are at the same time hidden from the eyes of science. What is claimed here is instead that in the religious case ‘speaking about’ means something different from the case of ‘speaking about objects’, whether these are common material things or entities imagined to be similar but (in a way left unclear) also not similar to them.

In a fashion parallel to the quoted comments about a person’s ‘states of mind’ Wittgenstein treats pain. He insists that my toothache is not an object like my tooth. And then in his typical dialogical style he develops the following argument:

’But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?’ - Admit it? What greater difference could there be? - ’And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*.’ - Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either. ... We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here. (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 304)

Similarly, returning to William James and the topic of religious experience, one could say: When we compare a life that is felt as empty and meaningless (like James’ own life in his long period of crisis) to a life felt (despite the full acknowledgement of its suffering aspects) as enlightened and unified by the kind of experience he describes in his book, it is quite appropriate to exclaim as Wittgenstein did in the case of pain: ‘What greater difference could there be!’ But this does not force us to entertain an hypothesis about transcendent objects. This is so, I believe, because we can say with respect to religious language what Wittgenstein says about sensations like pain: What we are (grammatically) talking about “... is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either”. It is not a thing (not something), not an object in the sense of ordinary material objects. But still, the language concerned has deep experiential relevance; it has a practical relation to our whole lives, to our knowing how to live. But meaning, as we have seen in the simple case of numbers, does not always demand objects and entities talked about in a more than a merely grammatical sense.

If this point is overlooked, we easily get into empty quarrels that Wittgenstein describes in the following way: “The one party attack the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being.” (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 402) For my understanding quarrels about ‘the existence of God’ often have this character. Does He exist or not? Is the person who answers negatively arguing against a way of expression or against a substantial claim? It seems to me that the question to be treated first is: What would it mean to advance either claim? How do the relevant uses of language function? How would a difference show in our experience? Here we need the ‘experiential’ approach and nothing like experimental science could help us, as our glimpse at Hume’s futile attempt and Dawkins’ crude claims were meant to show. We can find that our life as we know it indeed has a religious dimension. Only after we have experienced this can we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different religious language games (Christian, Buddhist,...) to articulate this dimension. If we follow Wittgenstein at this point in that we are ready to accept a great variety of semantic relations, we can avoid unnecessary quarrels about ‘designated objects’. For example we can avoid ‘esoteric language’ if by this expression we mean a purported quasi scientific ‘reference’ to ‘ineffable objects’. Instead we can use a language of experiential articulation for which the problem of ‘reference to an object’ does not arise, at least not in the ordinary or scientific sense. With this understanding in place we no longer postulate dubious entities and this means we leave esotericism and spiritualism behind. There are no ineffable ghostlike entities about which there is a secret teaching, reserved for special people. There is only our common life with a lot of different activities and experiences in it, and a lot of different modes of articulation. One of these is what James called the realm of ‘religious experience’ and one of the possibilities to articulate these is by talking about a personal God.

The religious dimension of our lives, understood in this way, is no secret but it is open to the experience of everybody. Of course, for a person unaware of such experiences it is difficult to understand what people who are familiar with them are talking about. In this completely harmless sense the language of religious experience is a language for ‘insiders’. But so is the language of wine connoisseurs. This kind of ‘esotericism’ is no reason for philosophical complaint.

6. Summary: Existence, Truth, and the Human Condition

I will now put the pieces of my argument together in order to make visible the picture that they result in. My original question was: What does it mean to say ‘God exists’? I have mentioned that I am speaking here not as a believer but I am speaking as a philosopher who intuitively has a sympathetic attitude to religion and who for that reason tries to make sense of religious utterances. Whether the outcome will be in agreement with a specific religious doctrine does not concern me. On the contrary, I would be glad if my philosophical inquiry would enable me to see *different* doctrines of *different* religions as meaningful and possibly true. And one outcome could be that some of them, on a second look, do not contradict each other.

My starting point was the idea that the talk about *existence* in a sentence like ‘God exists’ might allow a reading that differs from both scientific and from ordinary common sense understandings of the existence of concrete things like stars or persons. To ask this question about the *meaning* of existence claims (in contradistinction to asking directly for evidence for

the existence of a mysterious kind of object) I have called the *philosophical* or *conceptual* approach, in contradistinction to an *empirical* or 'science-like' approach.

In order to develop a clearer idea of what might be involved in asking for the meaning of existence claims I have discussed the sentence 'there exists a prime number between five and seven'. This sentence is easily understood by all rational persons and it does not involve religious or ideological feelings or prejudices. Since prime numbers quite obviously are not empirical objects, one is forced to find a special answer as to the meaning of existence claims about them. I have then discussed two answers that to me seem wrong, namely Psychologism and Formalism. Psychologism claims that mathematical objects are something in the mind, but it cannot account for the public character of mathematical knowledge and its very special kind of certainty. Formalism, on the other hand, claims that mathematical statements have no content, that Mathematics is concerned with the production of strings of marks that are devoid of meaning. But if this were so, the applicability of Mathematics in Science (and in our everyday world) would be left unexplained. Some people indeed say that this is a kind of miracle. But such an answer is no explanation. From those sides of Formalism that seem convincing it emerged that we should see Mathematics as a special sub-part of *language*.

At this point I have brought in a point made by the later Wittgenstein: In order that linguistic expressions be meaningful it is not necessary to assign to them entities of which these expressions are *names*. Rather all we have to look for when we look for the meaning of an expression is its use in the human practice where it belongs. In the mathematical case this is a practice involving activities like counting, adding, multiplying, etc. This attention to particular types of use of linguistic expressions can also take care of the meaning of existence claims. We know how to decide about the truth of the sentence about the prime number. There is no riddle of existence left in the mathematical case.

From this we were able to form two expectations with regard to the Philosophy of Religion: (1) Psychologism and Formalism also here seem to be no convincing options. Psychologism is not because the religious person does not want to talk about his own mind, and Formalism (in the sense of a position that would give up the content side of religious language and would give up all truth claims) is no option, because the religious person *does* want to say something true, and she wants others to see its truth.

In a next step I have turned to William James and his concept of religious experience. I have distinguished James' 'phenomenology' on the one side, and what he himself has called his 'over-belief' on the other. I do endorse the first, but not the second, i.e. unlike James I do not want to postulate a realm of transcendent entities (over and above the material and the psychological realms). I think it is possible to give a philosophically more satisfying account of his phenomenological findings. The postulation of entities for me is too close to the science oriented approach. I can also say it is too close to those traditional positions that fail to acknowledge differences between kinds of existence.

So here is a summary of what I take to be the most important results we can take from James: Although he is a Psychologist (besides being a Philosopher) his position cannot be called Psychologism. The reason is that James is not talking about mental entities, not about individual things happening to one person's mind like a sensation of red or a pain in a particular tooth, occurring at a particular moment. Rather, his subject matter is the attitude a subject might have to her or his life as a whole. This includes the way in which the person manages to integrate facts like suffering and death.

What is meant by an attitude a person has to his life will show only in the way that the person concerned will lead her life as a whole. So what James is concerned with under the title of 'religious experience' are not single episodes of seeing strange lights or having warm feelings. Such things might happen, but they are not what James is really concerned about. According to my interpretation what interest him are the teachings and the practical resources that Religions have developed over long periods of time to enable their adherents to see the human condition as it really is and to enable them to cope with it. Religions are teachings about the human life and how we can live it in a meaningful or even enjoyable fashion. In so far as human life has a mental side, (in so far as man has a soul, a psyche), one can say that this question about a meaningful life has 'psychological aspects'. But this does not mean that Religion treats only 'psychological entities'. Again we can look at the mathematical example: Although every act of calculating (think for example of your nervousness during a Math exam) might be said to have psychological aspects, this does not mean to say that the subject matter of Mathematics is something psychological.

How then do truth claims and a claim like that of God's existence fit into this picture? The first point to make is that about the human condition true but also false statements can be made. Assertions underlying magical practices and ideologies might be taken in some cases as examples of false statements, also what we call 'giving false comfort' (like in denying the reality of death when we speak to children). When Karl Marx said that Religion is the 'opium of the people' he was claiming that the typical pronouncements of the Christian priests of his day were giving this 'false' kind of comfort, comparable to the drugs consumed by people who are unable to cope with their life. The drug lets them forget their problems, but the relief they offer is no solution of these problems, they will stay with them.

As to my title question "What does it mean to say 'God exists'?" my answer is the following: We have seen already that one way of describing the human condition is by way of saying something like: It is as if such and such were the case, for example: It is as if an all powerfull and loving being would care for me. Here we can make an important observation: A description of this sort can be adequate although the situation that the speaker wants to describe truthfully in fact is not the situation he is making use of in his comparison, and although the speaker knows this.

Think of the following example: A patient comes to his doctor and says 'it is as if a needle would stick in my back and hurt me'. When the doctor now as a respose would examine the patient's back, when he would tell him that there is no needle and then would proceed to present the bill and send the patient home, certainly the patient would not be content. His claim was not that there was a needle in his back, but that for him it felt *as if* there was such a needle. He will insist that he is right, regardless of whether the doctor will find a needle or not.

So I would like to propose that also religious stories should be read as attempts to give a *truthfull* account of the human situation. Some of them (like the Christian stories about God and his creating the world, for example) are using a theistic language for this purpose, some do not. If this interpretation is convincing, then one might say that the claim that God exists says in effect: The Christian stories about God describe the human situation as it really is. So it would be the use of these stories in the religious practices of the Christian tradition that would determine the meaning of the words contained by them and it would be the adequacy to life as it really is that would decide about the truth of the stories as well as the truth of the existence claims involved.

As a conclusion I would like to point out some consequences of this view:

1. Religions do make truth claims and existence claims.
2. Given that they speak about the human condition and in many cases do so by the way of comparison, these claims can be true in that they give a truthfull account of the human condition, although they might not even be intelligible (let alone true) in isolation, i.e. outside the context of describing and coping with the human condition.
3. It is a consequence of this view that different religious traditions that make different or even contradictory statements on the surface level might all the same be true descriptions on the level of their function: they all give adequate pictures of the human situation, but each of them uses pictures and comparisons of their own tradition.
4. Also, it is only an apparent, not a real disagreement about facts when not two Religions, but two intellectual traditions in one and the same culture are examined: Science and Religion. If the isolated sentence 'God exists' is examined by an astronomer in the same way as he would examine the sentence 'Alpha Centauri exists' and if he fails to find the object he is looking for, this failure only shows that his inquiry is staying on the surface of things, because it does not distinguish kinds of existence claims. It is as if he would be looking for prime numbers with help of telescope. I think this is the case of Dawkins.
5. So we find again that the philosophical question as to what a particular existence claim *means* has to be asked first. Only after the meaning (i.e. the use and its particular kinds of context) have been made clear, can ontological claims about what kinds of objects exist, be answered. It is for this reason that I did not directly ask: 'Does God exist?' but that I gave my question the form: 'What does it mean to say 'God exists''?
6. And I would like to add one last quite general remark: I think that the considerations brought forward in this lecture have shown that we have no reason to privilege one area of language use as being closer to 'reality' than another one. Stars and atoms are not 'more real' than numbers are. This means for Religion: For those who think that a particular Religion is the most adequate and comprehensive picture of their situation in this world, the 'ontological commitments' involved in an articulation of this picture are 'about realty' in a sense that is not less serious than anything that science can claim. But if a religious person wants to use this argument as a means to defend her faith, she should admit that the same kind of evaluation can be made by all other serious adherents of other religions. So the next steps in the philosophical argument must be the attempt to agree on the adequacy of the pictures drawn of the human situation in different religions.
But here we should see each other as sitting in the same boat: All Religions try to capture those aspects of life and death that really matter. And these aspects can only be treated by a language that is not restricted to Science.