Reading Wittgenstein (on Belief) with Tillich (on Doubt): Possibilities and Limitations

In this paper I examine possibilities and limitations of interpreting Wittgenstein’s understanding of religious belief with the help of Paul Tillich’s notion of dynamic faith. It has been claimed that Tillich’s method in theology is incompatible with Wittgenstein’s anti-metaphysical stance to religion in general (D.Z. Phillips). While this may be the case in relation to some aspects of Wittgenstein’s approach and Tillich’s approach respectively, I will argue that, on the question of the nature of religious belief, Tillich’s notion of existential doubt as a positive and constantly present (if not always actualized) aspect of faith can provide a theoretically fruitful counterbalance to Wittgenstein’s strong emphasis of religious faith as unquestioning certainty. The collaboration is possible because the later Wittgenstein, contrary to an influential interpretation (recently, G. Shoenbaumsfeld, M. Kober), does in fact leave some room for doubt as a live possibility in genuine religious believing, and doesn’t deny certain kinds of felt experience important role in religious language- and belief-formation (contra Lindbeck). Finally, however, I will explain why this “collaboration” between a Wittgensteinian and a Tillichian understanding of religious belief-cum-doubt cannot be stretched too far. The reason is the following: Tillich’s understanding (in Systematic Theology I) of the way in which religious/existential beliefs can be “tested” – i.e. the way in which his affirmation of the possibility of experiential verification of belief in God is conceptually framed – remains irreconcilably at odds with Wittgenstein’s rejection of any genuine “verification” of religious beliefs. For, despite some openness to the role of doubt in religious believing, any kind of verification can only be inextricably tied together with the “evidence-giving game” for Wittgenstein which holds only for “ordinary” and not for “extraordinary” (religious) beliefs. Finally, I will compare this interpretation of Wittgenstein through Tillich with a similar, liberal-theological reading of Wittgenstein by Klaus von Stosch, presenting both notable parallels and some differences between his interpretation and mine.

Gorazd Andrejč is a Junior Research Fellow at Woolf Institute, Cambridge. His current project examines the ways in which Wittgenstein's philosophy has been used to interpret the phenomena of interfaith disagreement.