

“Religious Language is meaningless.” Discuss.

Logical positivism was a philosophical theory that was brought about in the 1920s by members of the Vienna Circle. It was developed on the basis of traditional empirical thought and the progress of modern logic. Logical positivism limited knowledge to two categories. The first being Analytic Statements, for example, *“triangles have three sides”* - statements that are trivial but true by definition and practice, and therefore meaningful. These statements are non cognitive. This means that they give us no new information about reality. The second being Synthetic Statements, for example, *“all cows eat grass”* - statements that bring together factual nouns and predicates. These statements are cognitive. This means that they are knowledge filled. They can be proven with observation and theory and are therefore also meaningful. Another way of describing this theory is through the Verification Principle. There are strong and weak statements. Strong statements, such as *“Mary has red hair”* - to prove it, all one would have to do is look at Mary. It is a straightforward verification. Weak statements are harder to verify: *“Columbus discovered America”*. To verify this, one would have to look at historical documents and such like. However, according to logical positivists, because religious statements do not fit into either category (analytic or synthetic), they cannot be verified and are therefore meaningless.

Anthony Flew developed this and brought about the Principle of Falsification. He was a leading atheist in the 20th century. However, he recently turned to religion. Flew associated falsification with the claim that religious statements cannot be proven by empirical evidence. To explain this theory, he came up with a parable. *“In a garden, two men are arguing. There are beautiful flowers, however, there are also weeds. One man believed that there must have been a gardener to tend the flowers. The other man disagrees, as there are also weeds. The two men set up traps to try and prove or disprove the gardener’s existence.”* Flew’s conclusion of the parable is that the belief will not change his conviction. He stated that any religious belief or statement is meaningless because they have no evidence against them, and therefore they cannot be falsified. The believer will always believe (despite any empirical evidence against it or for it).

A number of philosophers and theologians attempted to show that Flew’s attack on religious language was not conclusive. The main argument being that the language of religion, although not verified by experience, is not falsified by experience either. Flew seems to have overlooked this. Most responses to logical positivism are developed by the theologians creating parables to back up their beliefs. However, personal beliefs and language shown in

these parables can only be meaningful if they are consistent with the facts about the world, if there is no logical contradiction in holding the belief and if some allowance is made for human trust. The responses to logical positivism have been split into three categories: Capitulation (giving into the challenge), Accommodation (accommodating the challenge but trying to find the evidence against it) and Repudiation.

The two theologians that fit into the category of Capitulation are R.M. Hare and R.B. Braithwaite. R.M. Hare agreed with Flew in that he also believed that religious language was non-cognitive because religious statements cannot be falsified. However, he disagreed that it was meaningless. He believed that we all have beliefs that we insist on holding in spite of contradicting evidence. He called these "*Blicks*". He created a parable to try to describe this. It consisted of "*a paranoid student who was certain that all his professors were out to murder him. To him, even when they were nice to him, he believed that they were being devious and hypocritical.*" This shows the unshakeable nature that religious believers hold. A "*Blick*" is meaningful even if it cannot be falsified. It affects a person's attitudes or emotions. However, this response to Flew's theory has also been criticized. Comparing religious belief to an irrational idea such as a lunatic believing that everyone is out to get him surely is not very flattering to religious believers.

R.B. Braithwaite believed that religious assertions, while non-cognitive, are meaningful because they indicate a way of life. A statement such as "*God is love*", to Braithwaite, expresses the intention to live a loving way of life. Stories from the Gospels can be understood as providing an incentive to do this. Therefore, parables from the Bible such as Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead, is to show to us that we should not give up hope. Braithwaite believes that empirical effects (intentions and actions) rule out any consideration of a spiritual basis for religious language.

There are three theologians whose criticisms fit into the category of Accommodation. The first of these theologians being John Wisdom - he makes his point in his original parable about a garden. The same argument as in Flew's parable occurs, however, Wisdom's parable is closer to illustrating religious beliefs and language. It shows that there is realistic evidence of a possible gardener as there are orderly plants. Richmond points out in his book "*Theology and Metaphysics*" that Wisdom's parable concludes that religion is something that is consistent with empirical evidence about the world. The nice flowers in the garden symbolised aspects of the world and it is this that supports the belief in a gardener, and therefore a God. Wisdom believed that religion is not an outlook, which has no regard for the facts.

Basil Mitchell, the second of these theologians, points out that religious belief is not amenable to falsification. However, they are still a realistic interpretation of reality that is based on observable data from the empirical world. He believed that religious beliefs are held on trust, falsible in principle, however, not in practice. This means that they are therefore meaningful. The parable that he wrote described *“a resistance fighter who met a stranger in an occupied country during a war. The stranger tells the soldier tells the fighter that he should trust him, even though at times it may seem as though he is helping the enemy. The fighter’s faith is frequently tested but he keeps telling himself that the ‘stranger knows best’.”* In conclusion, Mitchell stated that many things go against religious faith, but many things keep it alive. As a result, the believer continues to trust God because nothing can undermine this trust.

John Hick appeals to what he called *“eschatological verification”*. He also believed that religious people hold their beliefs on trust. He developed this by writing his parable: *“two people on a journey, one is convinced that it lead to the Celestial city, the other believes that it goes nowhere. Both have similar experiences on the journey. One sees these experiences as gifts from God, while the other sees them as just luck or misfortune. Only when the two people reach their destination will they know the truth”*. This parable asks the question as to how it could be verified that there are grounds for believing in a Celestial city (symbolizing an afterlife). This theory is a reasonable account of how religious language is based on truth and trust. However, it does not answer any logical questions like *“is there really an afterlife?”* One would have to die before knowing, and what is there isn’t one at all? No one would ever know.

Repudiation destroys logical positivism completely. For example, the statement “all statements must be analytic or synthetic, all others are meaningless” is not true by definition nor it is true by observation or experimentation. The statement is contradictory and if you put it into it’s own context, it is meaningless in itself. Although religious statements are impossible to verify, it is ridiculous to say that they are meaningless. For example, statements about love, one cannot verify the statement *“I love you”*, but that does not mean that it is meaningless.

In 1951, Ludwig Wittgenstein moved from seeing language as a mirror of the world to seeing it as an expression of life. He believed that language was about use. He said, *“The meaning of any statement is given in the way in which it is used.”*

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People used language in different ways and for different purposes: commanding, philosophising, investigating, theorising and story telling. The idea of language games came to Wittgenstein whilst watching a football match. He realized that there were different language games just as there are different ball games (for example: football and rugby).

A particular form of language reflected a form of life. We can apply this insight to the language game of life. Religious language could now claim to be meaningful within the religious form of life. He argued that language relates to a whole set of beliefs, practices and beliefs. Words can mean different things in different contexts. For example, it would be inappropriate for the statement “the Blood of Christ” to be seen from a scientific perspective.

Religious statements can be true to the people who believe in it, despite scientific and historic evidence. In a religious game, statements can be meaningful as long as one does not use them outside the game. One must “*follow the rules of the game*”. Wittgenstein makes a good point that a person would have to use or observe different games so to completely understand their languages.

Although Wittgenstein’s language games theory seems like a good one, many philosophers have criticised the theory. If people in different “games” talk to one another, how could they understand? For example, how could science talk to religion? An outside observer might understand the game more because the believer may have such an unshakeable faith that they would take no criticisms. However, the observer would be able to take a more objective perspective. Religious theologians have found Wittgenstein’s theory demeaning to religion because of the comparison with a “game” and therefore, would God be merely something within the game? For example, would God only exist to people within the religious game?

There have been some philosophers interested in religious language that have said that God can only be described in terms of what he is not. For example, “*God is not the clouds*”. This is called the Principle of Negation. Marmiondes was a notable believer of this principle. Aquinas says that God does not change and he is not limited. He also said that most people wanted to make positive statements about God, such as “*God is good and wise*”. The negation principle, however, has been criticized because knowing what something is not is all very well, but it does not tell us much about what it really is, and how do we go from statements about the everyday world to statements about God?

Aquinas rejected two ways of understanding language about God. The first being univocal, where there is a very direct association between the way words are used, for example in

talking about one's love for a partner. This love would not be appropriate for talking about God because it would make God too human. Human love is fickle and we fall out of love with one another. The second way is being equivocal. This is where the same word is used in two different situations and with totally different meanings, for example, a bar of chocolate and a bar at a pub. Therefore, all the words we use for God, such as love or superior, could mean absolutely nothing.

Aquinas believed that the answer lay in Analogy. Aquinas stated that the world was created by God and depends on him. Therefore, human love can be related to the love of God because he is the source of love. Saying that I am good and that God is good, there is an Analogy of Attribution. Because there is a direct connection between the two statements, God must have at least the minimum of whatever it takes to produce goodness in me. There is also an Analogy of Proportion, for example, there are different types of wisdom - Aristotle would have a different level of wisdom in comparison to David Beckham. They are proportionate. God is also wise, but on a greater scale than both Aristotle and David Beckham. Although Aquinas makes a good point in his Analogy of Proportion, as it is a logical approach and it helps us recognize that God is different to us, it still leaves us asking questions. For example: Where on the wisdom scale would God fit? Where would be appropriate for God? The theory also puts God on a pedestal and makes him hard to relate to him. How big is the scale?

It could be more helpful to think in terms of metaphor. Statements like "*God is my rock*" are meant to be taken metaphorically, not literally. However, this metaphor may be able to express a truth about the believer's dependence on God. However, there are some religious statements such as "*God is wise*" and "*God is alive*," that presumably are not meant to be taken metaphorically.

Another way of attempting to describe religious language is through the issues relating to "*Myth*". Myths express claims that cannot be conveyed in any other way. It frequently makes use of symbol, metaphor and imagery in a narrative context. Myths are not to be thought of as expressing information that is "*not true*", but instead conveying concepts that is otherworldly. "*Myth is a symbolic, approximate expression of truth which the human mind cannot perceive sharply and completely, but can only glimpse vaguely, and therefore cannot adequately or accurately express*" - Millar Burrows 1946. Mythological language is also used by the biblical writers to speak of an eschatological future and what will accompany it.

Myths are meant to demonstrate morals or meanings of why for example humans wear clothes or how the universe came about. The stories such as Adam and Eve or the Tower of

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Babel could all very well be true, however, as we have no proof of this, many theologians use these stories so to reveal the inner meanings of life. They should not be considered as the truth, but they usually have morals attached to them or explanations to express worldly questions.

Rudolph Bultmann 1884-1976 famously stated that we should not take stories from the Bible literally as they were relevant to the time two thousand years ago. He attempted to demythologize stories so that they would have more relevance in modern day times. He believed that there was the heart of the story and then there was the packaging around it, which reflected the believer's faith in God. For example, the story of the End of the World, Bultmann would have said that that represented individual human life coming to an end. However, mythological language is so deeply engrained in theological discussion that many philosophers believe that it may be impossible to dispense with it. The theory slightly undermines religion and one cannot help but ask, is Bultmann going too far?

Symbolism is another way of demonstrating religious language. A symbol is *"a pattern or an object which points to an invisible metaphysical reality and participates in it"* - Erika Dinkler-von Schubert 1960. Symbols point to the concept that they are expressing and share in some way in the meaning of that concept. Symbols could be pictorial, abstract, verbal or active. For example, the Christian cross immediately identifies for believers the death of Jesus, but it does more than simply point to it in a factual way. To a believer, the cross would signify salvation from sin, sacrifice, victory over death, God's love for the world, Christian hope of eternal life and the defeat of Satan.

Paul Tillich 1886-1965 used the example of a national flag as a symbol, which expresses nationalism, patriotism and national identity. It is more than just a sign, such as a traffic light or a road sign, which merely provides useful information. Symbols express the believer's emotions about what that symbol suggests. Symbols simply transcend facts and therefore should not be interpreted literally. This would lead only to misunderstanding. Symbols are subtle modes of communication, which belong to high-level discourse. Although they do not belong to religious language, they are of much value to discourse that deals with issues that are beyond the factual.

Symbols are a very useful way to communicate truths that go beyond the objective world. However, their interpretations can pose difficulties. For example, they can become the focus of worship and they can be so trivial that their original meanings can be lost.

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To conclude, believers would agree that it is difficult to talk about God. The meaning of the word “God” applies to a being beyond human understanding. Believers recognize that any discussion of God is limited, but they would argue that religious language does not have meaning or purpose. Although logical positivists and some other theologians have tried to argue that religious statements are meaningless, in my research for this essay, I have found that most of these arguments have more weaknesses than strengths. It is impossible to prove with empirical evidence that God exists, however, it is ridiculous to say that religious statements do not mean anything as they obviously mean so much to many people. It leaves us with more questions than answers.