

Religious language: cognitive or non-cognitive?¹

What are we doing when we are talking about God? Are we stating truths, facts, how things are? Or is religious language meaningful in some other way, e.g. expressing an attitude or commitment toward the world, rather than trying to describe it? Is talk about God meaningful at all?

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN COGNITIVISM AND NON-COGNITIVISM

We can draw a distinction between two families of answer to the question of whether and how religious language is meaningful. Cognitivism claims that religious language expresses beliefs. Beliefs can be true or false, so religious claims that can be true or false. To believe that God exists is to believe that the sentence 'God exists' is true. Religious language aims to describe the world. Cognitivists do not have to claim that this is *all* that religious language does. But they argue that it is how religious language is meaningful.

Non-cognitivism claims that religious language does not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. And so religious claims do not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. They express an attitude toward the world, a way of understanding or relating to the world. (We may still want to talk of religious 'beliefs' but this is better understood as 'faith' or 'belief in God' than as 'belief that God exists'.)

DISCUSSION

Arguments concerning the existence of God typically assume that cognitivism is true. First, they assume that the statement 'God exists' is, in some sense, a statement of fact. If the arguments establish their conclusion, then 'God' refers to a being that exists, and 'God exists' is a belief that is objectively true. Second, they assume that the belief - or knowledge - that God exists is something that *could* be supported, or established, by reasoning. In other words, the existence of God can be deduced or inferred as the best explanation from premises that are more certain or plausible than God's existence. Third, they assume that God is a being that exists independently of (and prior to) human beings and religious beliefs. For example, to be the cause of the existence of the universe *in a literal sense*, God must exist independently of the universe.

However, these are not assumptions that all philosophers of religion - or all people who believe in God - accept. Non-cognitivists point out that people don't normally acquire religious beliefs by argument or testing evidence. Instead, they come to an understanding of the world that is expressed in values and a way of living. When

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 151-4

someone converts to a religion, what changes isn't so much intellectual beliefs, but their *will*, what they value and how they choose to live. This supports the claim that 'God exists' is not a statement of fact, but has meaning as an expression of a non-cognitive attitude or commitment. These attitudes - which include attitudes towards other people, nature, oneself and human history - present the world in a certain light and support commitments to act in certain ways and to mature as a spiritual being.

However, we can raise two important objections to non-cognitivist accounts of religious language. First, an important implication of these theories is that we can't criticise or support religious beliefs by using *evidence*. Religious beliefs cannot be criticised on the grounds that they are *not true* or highly *improbable*, because this presupposes that religious language makes factual claims, and it does not. So, for example, both design arguments and the problem of evil are irrelevant as attempts to prove or disprove the existence of God. 'God exists' is not a claim that is true or false, and so it cannot be shown to be true or false. This, we can object, cuts religious belief off from reason too severely.

A non-cognitivist can respond that, as part of human life, religious belief still needs to *make sense* of our experiences. The problem of evil could be relevant here. Not any set of attitudes and commitments makes sense in light of our experience. The difficulty now, however, is to know what it is for a non-cognitive attitude to 'make sense', given that it doesn't make any claims about what is true and what is not.

A second objection is that non-cognitivism conflicts with how many believers think of God and their faith. For example, it makes *what you believe* much less important, as if religious faith is only about how we live. Yet many religious believers who act in similar ways and hold similar values argue that there is something distinctive and important about the different beliefs they hold. Furthermore, within the history of any religion, there have been heated arguments about how to interpret a particular doctrine (e.g. in Christianity, the Incarnation), when it is very difficult to see how the different interpretations could make any impact on different ways of living. All this suggests that religious language is intended to be true, i.e. fact-stating, and not just expressive.

We can allow that non-cognitivists are right that religious language is expressive of people's emotions and attitudes. However, just because religious beliefs express attitudes, this does not show that they cannot *also* be cognitive. There is no reason to think that they cannot be *both*. After all, religious believers *do* think they are saying something factual when they say 'God exists'. But this fact has enormous significance to people's lives, and so our emotions and attitudes to the world respond to it and are expressed in our talk about it.