

The 'University' debate¹

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? In a debate published in the journal *University* under the title 'Theology and falsification', Anthony Flew, Richard Hare and Basil Mitchell discussed the meaning of religious language. Before discussing their debate, we need to put in place a distinction between two families of theories about how religious language might get its meaning.

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'.)

FLEW'S CHALLENGE

Flew opened the debate with a story from John Wisdom's article 'Gods'. Two explorers come across a clearing in the jungle in which both flowers and weeds grow. One claims that the clearing is the work of a gardener; the other disagrees. They try to detect the gardener by various means - first keeping watch, then an electric fence, then dogs - but never discover him or her. At each stage, the 'believer', however, rejects the claim that their failure is evidence that the gardener doesn't exist, saying first that the gardener must be invisible, then intangible, then leaves no scent and makes no sound. The 'sceptic' finally asks how the claim that there is such a gardener differs from the claim that the gardener is imaginary or doesn't exist at all.

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, 159-64

Flew's point is that for a claim to be meaningful, for it to be asserting something, there must be something it is denying. In other words, there must be some way of establishing that it is false, something that leads us to withdraw the claim. If we know what the claim rules out, we can understand what the claim means. But if there is nothing it rules out, then the claim is not a genuine attempt to say something true. What would lead the believer to say that there is no gardener? If nothing would, then saying that there is a gardener doesn't say anything. Another example: the theory of evolution by natural selection rules out aliens coming to Earth and demonstrating that they had planted 'fossils' (which they had made) for us to find. If this happened, we would give up the theory of evolution.

If 'God exists' is a real claim, then there should be some possible experience that would lead us to accept that it is false. Something should be able to 'count against it', e.g. the existence of evil. If religious believers are not prepared to accept that anything could show that God doesn't exist, then saying 'God exists' states nothing at all. Flew objects that this is the case - many religious believers refuse to accept that anything could show that God doesn't exist. Instead, they keep qualifying what it means to think that 'God exists'. For example, they might argue that the existence of evil only shows that we don't understand God's plans. This deprives religious claims of meaning.

- P1. For a truth claim to be meaningful, there must be some possible state of affairs it denies or rules out.
- C1. To meaningfully assert a claim, someone must accept that it rules out some possible state of affairs.
- P2. The occurrence of a state of affairs that a claim rules out demonstrates that the claim is false.
- C2. To meaningfully assert a claim, someone must be willing to withdraw it if the state of affairs it rules out were to occur.
- P3. Religious believers refuse to specify which state of affairs would lead them to withdraw the claim that 'God exists'.
- C3. When religious believers say 'God exists', they do not rule out any state of affairs.
- C4. The claim that 'God exists', when made by religious believers, is meaningless.

MITCHELL'S RESPONSE

Mitchell accepts Flew's cognitivism and his argument that for an empirical claim to be meaningful, we must allow something to count against it (P1). But he disagrees with Flew's claim that an assertion is only meaningful if we are willing to withdraw it as false in light of certain experiences (C2).

Suppose there is a war in which someone's country has been occupied, and he joins the resistance movement. One day, this partisan meets a stranger who tells him that he is the leader of the resistance. The partisan is very impressed by the stranger and trusts him deeply. However, the stranger later acts in ambiguous ways, sometimes seeming to help the resistance and other times apparently helping the enemy. But the partisan, because he trusts the stranger, continues to

believe that the stranger is on the side of the resistance, and so must have some good reason for his ambiguous behaviour.

If the partisan refused to count the ambiguous actions of the stranger even as evidence against the claim that the stranger is on the side of the resistance, this would be irrational. Such a view would empty religious language of its meaning. But while recognising that there is evidence against his belief, the partisan is not rationally required to simply relinquish it. His trust sustains his belief in the stranger, and we cannot say, in the abstract, just how much evidence against his belief is needed before his belief becomes irrational and should be given up as false.

Likewise, religious language makes assertions, but these claims are not simply provisional hypotheses, to be discarded in the face of contrary experiences. They involve a certain commitment as well. A claim can be meaningful without us being able to say what experiences would lead us to relinquish it, as long as we recognise that experiences can count against it.

Flew accepts Mitchell's response. However, he argues, that the logical problem of evil is insoluble. We are unable to find any justification of evil that is compatible with an omniscient, omnipotent, supremely good God, and the only way out for religious believers is to qualify what they mean by God or his purpose for us.

We can now object, though, that this is now no longer an argument about whether religious claims are meaningful, but about whether they are either true or coherent.

HARE'S 'BLIKS'

Hare responds to Flew in a very different way. He rejects Flew's form of cognitivism. Religious beliefs are not like assertions that can be shown to be true or false. Instead, they are part of someone's attitude toward or view of the world (or some aspect of it), which Hare calls a 'blik'.

Hare gives a number of examples of blik. First, someone may be paranoid that university lecturers want to murder him. He doesn't count anything as evidence against this view (this is a normal feature of delusions). But the difference between his view and the view of the rest of us is meaningful, important and makes a difference to how we live. Another example is someone who trusts the properties of steel or the continued ability of a road to support cars v. someone who doesn't; or someone who thinks everything happens by chance v. someone who believes in laws of nature. A disagreement in blik can't be decided by empirical experience, and two people who disagree may not assert anything different about what to expect from experience. Yet the disagreement is meaningful. To hold that God exists is a blik, as is the view that God does not exist.

It is unclear whether Hare thinks blik - and so religious language - are cognitive or not. On the one hand, there is a truth of the matter (whatever one believes) whether university lecturers are trying to kill you or not or whether everything

happens by chance or not. So it seems blik can be true or false, which suggests that they are cognitive. On the other hand, because blik can't be falsified, Hare claims that they work more like attitudes or commitments than beliefs. This would suggest that they are non-cognitive. But notice that any empirical claim which would normally be held as a (cognitive) belief (about the motives of university lecturers, the properties of steel, the explanations of science) could be held as a (non-cognitive) blik. The difference is how the person thinks about it.

When someone holds a blik about some claim, while the rest of us just hold falsifiable beliefs, we tend to think that the person is irrational in some way. Does Hare's analysis entail that religious believers are irrational? If not, why not? Hare doesn't say. As Flew objects, Hare's theory that religious belief is a blik is very unorthodox and fails to make sense of what religious believers actually say. If religious claims aren't assertions, then a claim such as 'You ought to do it because it is God's will' becomes 'You ought to do it' (since 'it is God's will' is not an assertion, but the expression of a blik). But this is not what religious believers mean.