

# Religious Language.

## What is the debate?

The basic question behind the religious language debate is 'what can be said about God?' The religious language debate is not concerned with whether or not God exists, or what God is like or why there is evil in the world. It is solely concerned with working out whether or not religious language means anything. On the one side of the debate, you have the centuries old tradition of religious believers who believe that you can speak and write about God, because God is a reality. On the other side, are the Logical Positivists and those that they influenced who claim that statements about God have no meaning because they don't relate to anything that is real.

## Religious language is meaningless.

In the debate about religious language, it is important that broadly speaking, there are two types of language, **cognitive** and **non-cognitive**. Cognitive language conveys facts i.e. things that we can know or be cognisant of. Non-cognitive language, predictably, conveys information that is not factual; emotions, feelings and metaphysical claims.

'The Lord is faithful in all his words,

and gracious in all his deeds.

The Lord upholds all who are falling,

Badgers have black and white fur.

And raises up all who are bowed down.

Squirrels are agile.

The Lord is near to all who call upon him,

Coal and crude oil are black.

$2+2=4$

To all who call upon him in truth.

He fulfils the desire of all who fear him,

He also hears their cry and saves them.'

Above you have examples of two very different types of language. On the left hand side is an excerpt from the Psalms, which talks about God and what he is supposed to be like. On the right hand side are statements of fact about things in the world. These two types of language are important for understanding the problems raised by the religious language debate.

We need to begin by looking at exactly what cannot be said about God according to some philosophers.

### **The Logical Positivists.**

The Logical Positivists were a group of philosophers who were primarily concerned with the truth contained in statements we can make, or in other words, with what can be logically posited, or stated. The group began in Vienna, Austria in the 1920s and gathered around a philosopher called Moritz Schlick. The group was heavily influenced by a philosopher called Ludwig Wittgenstein and in turn, the group influenced many philosophers of religion. Those influenced by the Logical Positivists that you need to be aware of are **A J Ayer** and the **Verificationists** and **Antony Flew** and the **Falsificationists**.

### **Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Tractatus.**



One of the greatest influences upon the Logical Positivism was Ludwig Wittgenstein's **Tractatus**. In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein asserted that the only language with meaning was the language of science, language that referred to empirical reality, language that mirrored the world as sensed. As you will see, with the posthumous publication of **Philosophical Investigations** Wittgenstein changed his views slightly.

### **A J Ayer and verification.**

If we verify a statement, we check its truth against a body of evidence or facts. For example, if we claim that Roger killed Bill, we must verify or check that statement against forensic evidence (a bloodied knife) or witness accounts. It is from this idea that we get the '**verification principle**'.

- 'A statement which cannot be conclusively verified cannot be verified at all. It is simply devoid of any meaning.'

What does this mean? The verification principle demands that for a statement to have meaning, we must be able to check its claims against things that exist. For example, if we say 'it's raining outside' its easy to check or verify the claims of this statement by stepping outside and holding our hand out to check for rain. A statement like 'there is life after death' is less easy to verify.

The verificationists held that there were two types of statement that are meaningful:

1. **Analytic propositions:** these are statements that contain all the information within the statement that we need to verify it e.g. **red is a colour** or **2+2=4**.

2. **Synthetic propositions:** these are statements that can be confirmed through the use of the senses (i.e. by recourse to empirical data) e.g. **it's raining outside** or **that bridge has collapsed**.

As a result of this, verificationists hold that non cognitive, metaphysical statements (i.e. statements about things beyond reality such as God, heaven, angels) are completely meaningless (as are meaningless statements like 'square circles are green'), as we have no way of verifying whether or not these statements are meaningful. As A J Ayer puts it:



***'The term 'god' is a metaphysical term. And if 'god' is a metaphysical term, then it cannot even be probable that God exists. For to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.'***

Ayer does not just deny God's existence, he denies the **possibility** of God's existence altogether on the grounds that there is no way of empirically verifying his existence. Needless to say, Ayer would disagree with all of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, as none of them conclusively and empirically prove the existence of God.

There are two forms of the verification principle: strong and weak, which are as follows:

- **Strong:** this is the form mentioned above: that an assertion only has meaning if it can be verified according to empirical information. Anything else is meaningless.

- **Weak:** this form of the principle came to prominence later. It states that for an assertion to be true, one simply has to state what kind of evidence would verify its contents. This form was developed to allow historical facts to have meaning. For example, we know that Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, but we cannot see it happening and therefore verify it. The weak principle therefore simply requires that we state what kind of evidence would be enough to make a statement meaningful (e.g. eye-witness accounts of the residents of Krakow as the tanks rolled in).

**There are a number of problems with the verification principle.**

Firstly, Brian Davies has suggested that principle itself cannot be verified. He also argues that it seems ridiculous to first demand testing whether or not something possibly exists before considering whether

or not it actually exists.

Ayer eventually came to see that his test was useless. It was claimed that the verification principle could not be used directly to prove the statement 'an electron carries a negative charge' because the statement needs other statements to back it up. This seems ludicrous, as physics has demonstrated that electrons must have negative charges; therefore, the verification principle cannot be used to verify something we know to be true. Ayer then argued that a statement is factual, if it supports an observation and has other premises to back it up, but that cannot only be deduced from those other premises.

The problem with this definition is that it makes the following true:

**Statement:** God is in his heaven and all is well with the world;

**Observation:** my desk is brown.

**Premise 1:** If God is in his heaven and all is well with the world, then my desk is brown.

**Premise 2:** God is in heaven and all is well with the world.

**Conclusion:** therefore my desk is brown.

This chain of arguments is valid, and the statement 'God is in his heaven and all is well with the world' becomes factual based upon Ayer's argument of what makes a statement factual

You should see that as soon as Ayer accepted that a truth could be established in this way, his principle became useless, and any proposition can be thought of as factual using the method above.

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**Summary:** The verification principle could eventually be used to demonstrate that any statement could be shown to be factual using Ayer's definition of a factual statement. Ayer then rejected his own principle.

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### **Antony Flew and Falsification.**

Antony Flew produced a theory in the same vein as verification. Although it is subtly different, it can be said to complement verification and if you like, produce the other side of the argument.

Flew argues that when we say something is the case (e.g. badgers are black and white), not only are we stating that badgers are black and white, but we are also **denying** the opposite i.e. badgers are not **not** black and white. Flew believed that when you assert something, you are also asserting (whether you

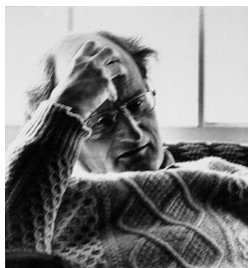
like it or not) that there are facts/evidence that may count against your assertion, therefore, there has to be some sense experience that would count against your claim; i.e. 'I have seen a badger that is only black.' As Flew puts it '**...if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either.**'

Brian Davies puts it like this in the context of God-talk:

**'Religious believers make claims. They say for instance, that there is a God who loves human beings. But apparently they are unwilling to allow anything to count against these claims. The claims seem unfalsifiable. Are they then, genuine claims? Flew does not dogmatically declare that they cannot be, but he evidently has his doubts. 'Sophisticated religious people', he says, 'tend to refuse to allow, not merely that anything actually does occur, but that anything conceivably could occur, which would count against their theological assertions and explanations.'**

What Flew is protesting about, is a tendency he observed amongst religious believers to shift the goalposts of statements about God. For example, one might start by saying '**God loves all humans**'. If one were to witness a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat, one would be right to use that as evidence to falsify the claim that God loves humans. Religious believers, Flew observed, would then retort '**...but God loves humans in an inscrutable way, a different way to the way we love.**' For Flew, this second statement has no meaning, because it doesn't allow for anything to falsify it. The famous example used to illustrate this point, is that of John Wisdom's gardener.

- For Flew, a statement is only meaningful if we accept that there is evidence that may falsify it. The statement is factual if it cannot be falsified using sense experience. The statement is meaningless if we refuse to allow it to be falsified.



**Some responses to verification and falsification.**

**R M Hare and 'blik's'.**

Obviously, if we take verification and falsification to their logical conclusion, we find ourselves precluded from saying almost anything about metaphysical matters and indeed God at all.

The philosopher RM Hare came up with a response to **falsification**, called the theory of 'blik's'. As did many other philosophers, Hare used a parable to illustrate his point.

**'A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, "You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?" But the lunatic replies "Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you." However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is the same.'**

Thus a 'blik' is a particular view about the world that may not be based upon reason or fact and that cannot be verified or falsified; it just is and we don't need to explain why we hold our 'blik'. Hare talked about trusting in the metal of a car; this 'blik' about the car meant that we would quite happily drive or be driven in a car, because we have the 'blik' that the metal is strong and that it is safe to drive at high speed in the car. Hare said that people either have the right or sane 'blik' or the wrong or insane 'blik'; the lunatic above has the wrong 'blik' about dons, whereas his friends have the right 'blik'.

Hare's theory has been criticised, notably by John Hick who provides two objections. First of all, Hick argues that religious beliefs or religious 'bliks' **are** based upon reason; people believe in God because they may have had a religious experience, or they feel the words of the Bible/Qur'an are true or a variety of other reasons. Secondly, he claims there is an inconsistency: Hare claims that there is a distinction between sane and insane bliks. However, he also claims that bliks are unverifiable and unfalsifiable. If we cannot either prove or disprove religious 'bliks', we cannot call them right or wrong, sane or insane either.



#### **Basil Mitchell.**

Mitchell disagreed with the theory of 'bliks' and suggested another way, using another parable. Mitchell claimed that religious belief and therefore religious language was based upon fact, although they are not straightforwardly verifiable or falsifiable. He used the idea of a resistance fighter to make his point (hence the picture of Guevara and Castro).

A member of the resistance movement is met one day by a man claiming to be the leader of the resistance movement. The fighter is suitably impressed and pledges his loyalty to the stranger. As time goes on, the fighter sees the 'leader' helping out the resistance, but at other times he is apparently helping out the enemy. The fighter nevertheless carries on in his belief that the stranger is in fact the leader of the resistance movement.

Mitchell's parable is different to Hare's, as Hare's lunatic a) has no reason for mistrusting dons and b) will allow nothing to count against his belief. Mitchell's

fighter however, is willing to admit that things count against his belief in the leader (a symbol of God) and b) grounds his belief in reason and fact: he trusts this man who claims to be leader and has examples of him fighting for the resistance.

Mitchell's point is that religious belief *is* based upon facts, but that belief cannot be verified/falsified in the simplistic way demanded by the logical positivists. Of course, the stranger in the story will be able to reveal his true allegiance after the war and explain his mysterious behaviour, in the same way that all the peculiar and problematic parts of religious belief will be revealed at the end of time according to traditional religious belief.



This is similar to John Hick's theory of **Eschatological Verification**. This states that at the end of time (eschaton, hence eschatological) all the parts of religious belief that require faith will be made clear by God: just because they cannot be verified now, they will be verified in the future. Hick is, in a way, using the weak verification principle in reverse.

### **Speaking meaningfully about God and religion.**

There are a number of philosophers and theologians who claim that it is possible to speak meaningfully about God. We'll start with St Thomas Aquinas and his theory of analogy.

### **The theory of analogy.**

An analogy is an attempt to explain the meaning of something which is difficult to understand in the light of a comparison with something else which is within our frame of reference. One of the most famous theological analogies is Paley's analogy of the watch, where he tries to explain the role of God as creator. We have no direct experience of God as a creator, but Paley claimed it is analogical to a watchmaker who designs an intricate timepiece for a purpose.



The most famous early proponent of speaking about God in analogical terms, was St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). It is important to note before we look at his theory, that Aquinas' theories start from confirmed religious belief and work backwards from that in justifying it. Most of you will be starting from the opposite point; unconfirmed attitudes and look to test whether or not religious theories are sufficient proof.

Aquinas was a religious man who believed in God. He assumed both that God existed and that God had created the universe: remember, there was no Big Bang theory or evolution to test the claims made by Genesis. Aquinas believed that religious belief was reasonable to hold, i.e. that one can use reason to assert God's existence.

Aquinas rejected **univocal** and **equivocal** language when talking about God. These are as follows:

**Univocal language:** This is where words are used to mean the same things in all the situations where they are used e.g. black board, black hat, black car. In each case, the word black is being used to refer to the colour black.

**Equivocal language:** This is where words are used to mean different things in different contexts e.g. 'gay' can be taken to mean 'jolly', 'homosexual' or more recently 'rubbish'. Problematically, once a word is used to mean a different thing, it is robbed of its original meaning because of the new application.

What do these two terms have to do with religious language or God-talk? Religious language often attempts to describe the attributes or qualities of God. This is difficult as God is generally not something we have direct experience of, whereas most of the things language refers to are things that we can experience e.g. love, rabbits, hair, walking. Thus when we say 'God is good' we need to know how we are using the word 'good' in that sentence. If we are speaking univocally, we are claiming that God is good in the same way humans are. Aquinas rejected this as he believed God to be perfect. Because of this, imperfect humans cannot be good in the same way that God is. Alternatively, if we are speaking equivocally, we mean that God is good in a totally different way to humans. Aquinas rejected this too. He argued that if we speak equivocally about God, we cannot profess to know anything about him as we are saying that the language we use to describe humans or the experienced world around us, does not apply to God.

Aquinas believed that there was a 'middle way', a way of talking meaningfully about God. This middle way, was analogy. Aquinas described three types of analogy: **analogy of attribution**, **analogy of proper proportion** and **analogy of improper proportion**.

**The analogy of attribution.**



Aquinas believed it was possible to work out the nature of God by examining his creation. Aquinas took it for granted that the world was created by God and for him, the link between creator and created order was clear.

In the analogy of attribution, Aquinas takes as his starting points the idea that God is the source of all things in the universe and that God is universally perfect. He then goes on to argue that all beings in the universe in some way imitate God according to their mode of existence:

**‘Thus, therefore, God is called *wise* not only insofar as He produces wisdom, but also because, insofar as we are wise, we imitate to some extent the power by which He makes us wise. On the other hand, God is not called a *stone*, even though He has made stones, because in the name *stone* there is understood a determinate mode of being according to which a stone is distinguished from God. But the stone imitates God as its cause in being and goodness.’**



Aquinas uses the example of a bull to illustrate this point. It is possible to determine the health of an animal by examining its urine. Aquinas said that if a bull's urine is healthy, then we can determine that the bull will be healthy. Obviously however, the health of the bull is more completely and perfectly within the bull itself and is only reflected in the urine produced by the bull. In the same way God is the source of qualities in the universe and God possesses these qualities first and most perfectly. This sets up an **order of reference**, meaning that these qualities apply to God first and foremost, then to other things secondarily and analogically. Because we are created in the image of God, it is possible to say that we have these attributes (wisdom, goodness etc) analogically: these qualities are attributed to us analogically, whilst God has them perfectly.

### **The analogy of proper proportion.**

John Hick has given a useful example to help to illustrate this idea:

**‘Consider the term ‘faithful’. A man or a woman can be faithful, and this shows in particular patterns of speech, behaviour and so on. We can also say that a dog is faithful. Clearly there is a great difference between the faithfulness of a man or woman and that of a dog, yet there is a recognisable similarity or analogy – otherwise, we would not think of the dog as faithful. Further, in the case of the analogy between the human beings and the dog true faithfulness is something we know in ourselves, and a dim and imperfect likeness of this in the dog is known by analogy.’**

The theory is not John Hick's, it was developed by Aquinas, but Hick's example helps to explain it. The basic idea is that we possess qualities like

those of God (goodness, wisdom, faithfulness etc) because we were created **in his image and likeness**, but because we are inferior to God, we possess those qualities in lesser **proportion** to God.

### **Strengths and weaknesses of analogy.**

So, analogy is one suggested way of being able to speak about God, but does it work?

Aquinas based his work upon a number of assumptions that came from his religious belief. Obviously, he believed that God was ultimately responsible for the creation of the earth (as shown in his 5 Ways) and he also believed that humans were created 'in the image and likeness of God' as is stated in Genesis. The idea that we were created has been refuted implicitly by Darwin and explicitly by Richard Dawkins. If one doesn't accept his assumptions, one doesn't have to accept the idea that we can work out what God is like by examining a creation that may or may not be his.

Another criticism, is that analogy picks some qualities, but not others i.e. the good qualities. The world also comprises evil, does God possess these qualities as well? This criticism would appear to have been refuted by Augustine, who argues that there is no such thing as evil, just a falling away from or **privation** of the good.

Also, analogy can tell us nothing new about God, as it is based upon things that are already in existence, it is rather like saying that we can work out everything about a car designer from the car that he has designed.

The bridge that Aquinas attempts to create between things known and unknown, is built of imaginary blocks. However, some scholars would argue that it is possible to speak of life on Mars meaningfully without having had empirical experience of it, also, eschatological verification can be suggested against this criticism.

Analogy does not stand up to verification, because the object one is trying to illustrate by use of analogy, cannot be empirically verified. Another criticism, is that of Richard Swinburne, who argues that we don't really need analogy at all. When we say 'God is good' and 'humans are good', we may be using 'good' to apply to different things, but we are using it to **mean** the same thing: i.e. we are using the word good **univocally**.

Obviously, the criticisms of people like AJ Ayer are difficult to reject and of course, an analogical statement referring to God is impossible to verify. However, analogy is incredibly valuable for people who are already in the religious language game, that is, people who already believe. It can help them to make sense of a concept that really is beyond human comprehension and would work as a great aid to faith. This was the perspective that Aquinas was working from.

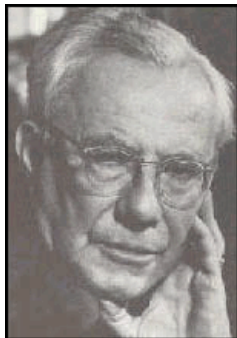


## Paul Tillich and language as symbol.



Paul Tillich was a theologian who believed that it is possible to speak meaningfully about metaphysical concepts and came up with the theory that religious language, because it is symbolic in nature, has a profound effect upon humans.

Paul Tillich starts by making a distinction between **signs** and **symbols**. Look at the pictures above. The top row are signs and the bottom row are symbols. Both sets of pictures point to something beyond themselves, i.e. they mean something else. But there is a crucial difference. Tillich said that signs do not **participate** in what they symbolise. This means that without knowing what the top row of signs mean, they would make no sense. Also, all these signs do is point to a statement such as 'you can now travel at the national speed limit' they have no other effect.



Symbols on the other hand are powerful and they actually take part in the power and meaning of what they symbolise. If you look at the cross in the second row, this is the symbol of Christianity. Not only does it stand as a marker for that religion, but it also makes a powerful statement. It immediately reminds Christians of the sacrifice they believe Jesus to have made on the cross for them, it also reminds them of their beliefs about God and his plan for the salvation of human beings. In this way, a symbol communicates much more powerfully with us. Tillich believed that religious language operates as a symbol.

Tillich outlined four main functions that symbols perform:

1. They point to something beyond themselves.
2. They participate in that to which they point.
3. Symbols open up levels of reality that otherwise are closed to us.

4. They also open up the levels and dimensions of the soul that correspond to those levels of reality.

Tillich argued that symbolic language operates in much the same way that a piece of music or a work of art or poetry might. They can have a deep and profound effect upon us that we can only explain in a limited way, and the explanation would only really be understood by someone else who has seen that same work of art. Also, symbols, like works of art, can open up new levels of reality for us and offer a new perspective on life.

### **Being-Itself.**

Tillich maintained that religious language is a symbolic way of pointing towards the ultimate reality, the vision of God which he called 'Being-Itself.' Being-Itself is that upon which everything else depends for its being and Tillich believed that we came to knowledge of this through symbols which direct us to it.

### **RB Braithwaite: Religious language as moral assertion.**

Braithwaite was concerned not with what religious statements are, but with how they are used. Braithwaite believed that religious statements are moral in content and intention and can therefore be verified, because they result in a change of behaviour. Religious statements are:

**'...declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life.'**

Correspondingly, moral assertions are described as follows:

**'It makes the primary use of a moral assertion that of expressing the intention of the asserter to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion.'**

Braithwaite argued that because religious statements such as 'God is the almighty father' result in action, they have meaning. He used the conversion of CS Lewis, who wrote the stories about Narnia, as an example of how becoming a Christian redirected the way he lived his life: it engendered a commitment to live an *agapeistic* life.

Braithwaite also argued that religious belief and hence religious moral assertions, are based upon a) a commitment to live a particular life as we have seen, and b) religious stories such as the life of Jesus, or the life of the Buddha. What is interesting about this, is that Braithwaite claims religious people do not have to rely upon these stories as being empirically verifiable, i.e. a Christian does not have to produce Jesus' certificate of death, they can just use these stories as an influence.

**'It is completely untrue, as a matter of psychological fact, to think that the only intellectual considerations which affect action are beliefs: it is**

***all the thoughts of a man that determine his behaviour; and these include his phantasies, imaginations, ideas of what he would wish to be and do, as well as the propositions which he believes to be true...***

So, for Braithwaite, religious assertions are meaningful because they result in particular action and a particular way of life that can be verified.

## **Ludwig Wittgenstein and Language Games**



So, we are back where we started, with Ludwig Wittgenstein. As we saw earlier, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* set the Logical Positivists off on their journey of requiring that a statement meets the criteria of the principle of verification.

Later on however, Wittgenstein wrote a book called *Philosophical Investigations* which was published posthumously. In this, he developed the theory of language games, which he arrived at (supposedly) after having attended a football match. Wittgenstein observed that just like games such as football and Rugby, language operates according to rules. Just as football players understand the offside trap and Rugby players understand rucks and mauls, so religious people understand the language of religion. Not only this, but Wittgenstein said that language has a meaning for the people in those particular language games (or contexts of use).



This theory has been very influential and fits into a philosophical movement that prefers something called the **coherence theory of truth**. The coherence theory of truth states that human knowledge is made up of a broad spread of statements about the world that can be imagined like a patchwork quilt. A statement is true if it fits in with other statements about the world i.e. it can be 'stitched in' to the patchwork quilt; a statement **coheres** with other statements. For example, if I claim that I have just flown from London to Edinburgh by flapping my arms, you would test the truth of that statement by trying to 'stitch it in' to other statements you know to be true about the world. People who follow the coherence theory are often called **pragmatists** and reject something called the **correspondence theory of truth**, which states that language is



only meaningful if it directly **corresponds** to facts about the world, that is, language should *mirror* life. Wittgenstein and the pragmatists that followed him, were more interested in ***how language was used*** as a way of judging its meaning, rather than looking at what it corresponds to or mirrors.