Religious language

Issues of religious language relate to topics across the whole philosophy specification, so it is worth considering their wider application

1 Cognitive, realist language

Cognitive language makes factual assertions that can be proved true or false, or are treated as if they can be proved true or false — for example, God exists, God loves us, God will execute a final judgement.

As Anthony Flew argued in 'Theology and Falsification' these are not: 'crypto-commands, expressions of wishes, disguised ejaculations, concealed ethics, or anything else but assertions.'

When religious believers use language of this kind, they use it with the assumption that claims about God can be made and understood in the same way, or at least to some extent in the same way, as other factual claims — for example, 'cows exist', 'grass is green', 'I will get my exam results in August'. This presents problems for those who maintain that God cannot be spoken of in factual terms, since the usual parameters within which we make factual claims do not apply — there are no means of empirically measuring the existence or nature of God, or of establishing in advance whether there will be a final judgement, since there is no previous experience to which we can refer.

2 Non-cognitive, anti-realist language

Non-cognitive language makes claims or observations that are to be interpreted in some other way, as symbols, metaphors, ethical commands, or other non-literal modes of expression.

It is language that serves a function other than expressing factually, objectively true claims, since they cannot be verified or falsified and are not intended to be treated as if they can.

Many uses of religious language clearly fall into this category, as it is rich in imagery and symbolism, but problems still arise when we consider whether religious language is nothing more than non-cognitive, or if there is another layer to its use of metaphor, myth or symbols.

For example, although the cross certainly serves as a symbol within the Christian faith, it is usually understood to be more than a symbol — it expresses the full reality of Jesus' death on the cross as well as offering a visual representation of it. However, does it contain any 'real' truth in the sense that it provides any verifiable indication that Jesus' death on the cross was more significant than the death of the criminals crucified alongside him?

3 Why is religious language a problem?

Religious language poses a philosophical problem because of its unique status — it consists of making claims about the unknown, unseen and wholly other, while remaining limited by language which is also used to speak of the physical, known and here and now world.

This poses significant problems of meaning and meaninglessness. Does this matter? In general, we might say that it does, because when a religious believer uses religious language they are usually intending to express something which is of importance to them and if it is deemed meaningless then it does no credit to their faith or to the effect that language may have on others.

4 The problems of verification

In the 1920s and 1930s a philosophical school known as the **Logical Positivists** ruthlessly limited the range of language which could be deemed meaningful, claiming that only if verifiable by sense data, or if analytically true, could an assertion be said to have meaningful content. Hence a sentence could be false but meaningful — for example, 'Ostriches are green' — since although this is not true, the means of verifying the claim are immediately clear.

On the other hand the claim 'God loves us as a father loves his children' was not meaningful, since it could not be verified, and so it was impossible to even consider whether or not it was true.

It was not only religious language which was open to the charge of meaninglessness, but for the believer, it is a particularly poignant challenge, since they are reduced to accepting that their claims can have no factual content.

5 Falsification: death by a thousand qualifications

Some years after the verification debate raged, the falsification debate posed an alternative: a statement was meaningful if the speaker could say what would count against it.

In his book *Faith and Knowledge* (1998, Palgrave Macmillan), John Hick expresses it thus: 'In order to say something which may possibly be true, we must say something which may possibly be false.' This claim was just as challenging as the verification principle since for most religious believers, little does count against their faith. This is why they believe, because they have resolved to their satisfaction the problems which tend to prevent non-believers from believing — e.g. the problem of evil.

R. M. Hare called these **'bliks'** — ways of looking at the world which cannot be falsified, but which are not meaningless because they affect the way the believer lives, seeing the world as a place in which God can be experienced rather than a place which is Godless.

Basil Mitchell supported the believer's case further, suggesting that the lack of falsification was rooted in the personal relationship the believer had with God, but that nevertheless, religious believers must 'face the full force of the conflict'.

9 Critiques of religious belief

Critiques of religious belief and arguments for the non-existence of God challenge religious believers about their use of language. However, they are not necessarily exempt from criticism themselves.

Consider one or more arguments or critiques in the light of these questions:
- How do they view the religious language game?
- Do they make verifiable/falsifiable claims of their own? For example, are Freud's claims about the primal horde, the Oedipus complex and the hysterical nature of religious belief any more verifiable than the claims made by religious believers?

Examine these claims made by Freud:
- 'The unconscious is **the** major force behind all human behaviour.'
- 'Religion is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.'
- 'The face that smiled at us in the cradle, now magnified to infinity, smiles down upon us from heaven.'
  — Do they make use of anti-realist language?
  — Do they attempt to place non-cognitive religious language within a cognitive framework?
  — Are they playing a language game of their own?

10 A final claim

Finally, examine this claim made by R. A. Sharpe in his book *The Moral Case Against Religious Belief* (1997, SCM) and consider whether you think it is a valid assessment of religious language.

When we are told that the good life involves loving God, we use the idea of love in a new context where it ceases to have the sense it usually has. The initial reaction of the believer may well be that when she talks about loving God she knows what she means; she knows what her religious experience is and what she says, even if obscure, will not be meaningless. But things are not quite that easy. The problem is that we are tempted to think that what we say has a meaning which is given by what we intend to say… So, the idea continues, when we talk of God and of the Christian experience of God or of God's forgiveness, naturally we are foiled time and time again by the limitations of our language. It then becomes a matter of shipping in words like 'father', 'shepherd', and 'love', which become slightly adjusted in their new context. It is not the case that there is nothing to be sensibly communicated; the fault lies not in us, but in our language.

8 Life after death

Several problems are raised in any talk of life after death — for example, it is clearly unverifiable this side of death, so is it therefore meaningless or contradictory? Can the notion of life after death have any significance to the non-believer, or does it deal in linguistic nonsense? For example, the phrase 'life after death' could be thought to be expressing a logical impossibility — we are either alive or dead, we cannot be both. Think of these questions in relation to the language of life after death:
- Is it cognitive or non-cognitive? Realist or anti-realist?
- Is it verifiable in principle?
- Is it falsifiable? What would count against it?
- Is it a blik?
- Is it part of a language game? Does it cohere to other beliefs the speaker holds? Are there other beliefs that support belief in life after death or help to make it meaningful to the speaker?

Wittgenstein exposed the problems of talking about things associated with the end times:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: 'I believe in a Last Judgment' and I said: 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly', you would say that there was an enormous gulf between us. If he said: 'There is a German aeroplane overhead' and I said: 'Possibly, I'm not so sure', you'd say we were fairly near… Suppose someone is ill and he says: 'This is a punishment' and I say: 'If I'm ill, I don't think of punishment at all.' If you say: 'Don't you believe the opposite?' — you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have a different picture.

Cited in Mitchell, B. (ed.) (1971) *The Philosophy of Religion*, OUP

In other words, talk about life after death is talk about the picture we have of the world, and if we don't share that picture with the speaker or listener, we can't expect them to understand.

7 Relating religious language to religious belief

Matters of religious language therefore need to be examined within their context and areas of interest and concern to religious belief. You would convince an examiner of your skills and knowledge of the topic by being able to cross-refer religious language to other issues on the specification.

6 Language games: Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein originally claimed that things that were beyond expression should not be spoken of, but later came to believe that language reflects forms of life — their significance is in their use, not their meaning, and so their context is the key to understanding it.

This way of thinking of religious language allows for different types of language — cognitive and non-cognitive — to be used meaningfully within a religious language game. Because people who use them and those who hear them know the meaning within their context, they are meaningful and significant. If some words can also be used in other contexts, then as long as the speaker or hearer is clear about which context is appropriate and when, no misunderstanding will take place.

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