

# PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

## HUME'S FORK

David Hume divides knowledge into two classes: 'relations of ideas' (i.e. tautologies) and 'matters of fact' (i.e. empirical statements). His book concludes (on p.165) with the following paragraph:

"When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity of number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

## LOGICAL POSITIVISM

Hume's Fork was updated by modern logical positivists (such as A.J.Ayer, Antony Flew and Gilbert Ryle) who proposed the *Verification Principle*. This claims that **sentences are only meaningful if they are tautologies** (which are true because of the definitions of the terms involved, e.g. *a square has four sides, six is bigger than four*), **or if they are in some way empirically verifiable** (i.e. connected with actual experience, e.g. *Harold lost at Hastings, electrons are both particles and waves*). Any other statements will be meaningless, because their truth is not decided by either definitions or evidence. According to Ayer, this makes discussion about religion and morality meaningless. Religious statements like *God is love* are not false, they are incapable of being either true or false.

## SIX IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Area	Term	Meaning	Example	Problems
Epistemology	<b>a priori</b>	Knowable before experience, through thought alone	<i>five is bigger than four</i>	Can anything be known without experience? (e.g. maths). Could you know something about the world a priori?
	<b>a posteriori</b>	Empirical; known through experience	<i>there's a stone in my shoe</i>	Could someone (e.g. God) know everything a priori?
Metaphysics	<b>necessary</b>	has to be true (in all possible worlds)	<i>triangles have three sides</i>	Is it possible that <u>all</u> truths are necessary, even empirical ones?
	<b>contingent</b>	capable of being either true or false	<i>cars have four wheels</i>	Or is it possible that there is no such thing as a necessary truth?
Language	<b>analytic</b>	tautologies; statements concerned only with meanings of words	<i>air is a gas</i>	It may be arbitrary which terms are definitions, and which are claims about the world.
	<b>synthetic</b>	statements concerned with information about the world	<i>air contains oxygen</i>	We might reorganise a language so that the analytic truth became synthetic, and vice versa.

Hume and the Logical Positivists believe that these terms fall strictly into two groups: a) a priori-necessary-analytic, and b) a posteriori-contingent-synthetic. This means that if something is necessarily true, this is because it is true by definition, and can be known by thinking about it. If a statement is about the real world, then it could be false, and you need experience to know it. (This would immediately rule out the Ontological Argument for God). These empiricists claim that *a priori synthetic truths* are impossible, whereas rationalists like Kant think you can know things about the world just by thinking about them (e.g. maths).

## APPLICATION TO RELIGION

Statements are only meaningful (it is claimed) if they are true by definition, or if they are empirical. So which group do statements about religion fall into? If they are only true by definition, then outsiders can ignore them because religion is just an arbitrary game like chess. If they are empirically verifiable, then sceptical philosophers can demand to see some relevant evidence. Flew's Gardener Parable (p.225) is a demand for evidence. If none can be offered, then the claim is meaningless (not 'false').

## DEFENCES OF RELIGION

The most basic defence is to deny empiricism (consider the views of Plato, Anselm, Descartes and Kant). Logical Positivism can be attacked. Its main problems are 1) the Verification Principle can't be stated clearly - it is either so precise that it eliminates sensible conversation, or so vague that it allows religious language; 2) the Verification Principle must itself be either a tautology or empirically verifiable; 3) a sentence like *God is love* can be proved meaningful by connecting it very vaguely and remotely with some empirical observation.

## BRAITHWAITE'S DEFENCE

Braithwaite (following the later Wittgenstein) claims that language is meaningful, not if it passes the Verification Principle, but if it has an appropriate *use* in actual life. The main use of religious language is to express the *intentions* of believers. In Braithwaite's view this is primarily a *moral* intention. Because a sentence like *God is love* is part of a way of life in which the speaker is committing themselves to live by love, the sentence is meaningful.

## HICK'S DEFENCE ('ESCHATOLOGICAL VERIFICATION')

Hick's defence is that religious language is a commitment to something which will happen in the future, and so it cannot be verified now (e.g. decimals of  $\Pi$  not yet discovered). He tells the parable of the Celestial City (p.26). He discusses problems with knowing in an afterlife whether religion has indeed been verified, but clearly it could be. Suppose, for example, that we confronted God, and were overwhelmed by his love? Such faith in the future may be open to other objections ('why believe this?'), but the claim seems at least to be *meaningful* (just like Aristotle's problem about the truth today of 'there will be a sea fight tomorrow'), because Hick has shown that there is some (future) evidence which is relevant.

**Minimum reading:** *The Existence of God* (ed. J.Hick) pp. 217-220, 225-27, 239-41, 258-60