

Ethical and Religious Language

Michael Lacewing

1. Introduction

There is this obvious connection between religion and morality: all religions have moral codes. In fact, the moral code of a religion is central to it, forming the basis for much of its teaching and practice. It might even be true that morality started in religion.

However, 'religious language', as the phrase is used in the A level syllabus, refers primarily to talk about God and religious experience. So what are the philosophical similarities and differences between talk about God and talk about moral values? There are certainly some theories of religious language that don't apply to ethical language, such as the *via negativa*, Aquinas' idea of analogical language, and recent theologians' views on symbolic language.

The most important area of overlap, which will we look at, concerns questions about the meaningfulness and truth of moral and religious statements. We won't try to solve any problems here, just to note the similar claims philosophers have made about both.

2. Verificationism

The verification principle, defended by A J Ayer among others, claims that, in order to be meaningful, a statement must either be analytic (true or false in virtue of the definition of the words) or empirically verifiable (shown by experience to be true). Because statements about God and statements about values are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable, Ayer claimed, they are not meaningful – they don't *say* anything about how the world is.

The verification principle has since been rejected by philosophers as an inadequate account of what it is for a statement to have meaning. We can note two objections in passing: 1) it renders universal statements, such as 'All swans are white' meaningless – because although you could prove this false, no experience will prove it true (there might always be a swan out there somewhere which isn't white); 2) the principle itself is neither analytic, nor can it be shown to be true by experience – it is, by its own account, meaningless. But if it is meaningless, it does not actually state anything (let alone anything true) about meaning.

However, verificationism opens up a question: are statements about God and values meaningful, and if so, how? It seems clear that not all language consists of making statements about how the world is. Are religious and ethical language like statements of science, or do they serve some other human purpose? One problem with thinking that they make statements about the world is that these statements refer to things (God, values) that we cannot see or experience via the senses. Should we think that moral and mystical 'intuition' is a type of experience of a supernatural or metaphysical world? Or are they not experiences of the world at all?

3. Expressivism

Ayer developed a positive theory of moral language, called ‘emotivism’, but not of religious language. But we can extend his ideas on moral language to religious language as well. The general view about both, we will call ‘expressivism’, because it claims that religious and moral language *express* something, rather than state something. They express personal commitment – to a way of life and a system of values.

On any theory of moral and religious language, an important part of what these kinds of language do is to motivate us. If I say ‘God is love’, I take love to be an extremely important guiding principle for my life; and I recommend that you do the same (for ‘God’ is not something private to me). If I say ‘abortion is wrong’, I mean myself and you to act in a certain way – not to have an abortion, or to encourage other people to do so. Both talk of God and talk of ethics motivate us to behave in certain ways.

But how could language which motivates us be a description of the world? To any fact (“The sun is 90 million miles away”, “Peaches are larger than apricots”, “God is love”, “Murder is wrong”), I can just say “so what?”. It seems that, to be motivated, I need to *care*. Moral and religious language aren’t descriptions of the world, claims expressivism; they are expressions of what I care about, of how I live.

4. Relativism

Actually, that last sentence is too ‘individual’, too *subjective*. Moral and religious language – like all forms of language – are used by groups of individuals, by *societies* and *communities*. They are therefore better understood as what communities care about, how communities arrange themselves, how people in communities understand living together. But, of course, there are lots of different communities, whether you look at religion or at ethics. If moral and religious language simply reflect the way of life of communities, then it makes no sense to talk of *the* right set of values or beliefs, independent of any particular community. Religion and ethics become *relative* to communities.

On the surface, it looks as though there have been quite different responses to this idea in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion. In moral philosophy, people have pointed out that relativism undermines the idea of critical, rational debate. When we make moral judgments, we tend to (be able to) provide *reasons* for what we think. And these reasons can be scrutinized and discussed. Philosophers who object to relativism claim that there is a way in which people can rationally discuss moral judgments with each other, whether or not they are from the same community. In philosophy of religion, the response to relativism has been to say that “there are many ways to know God”. Theories and parables abound about how our knowledge of God is partial, how we only know what we do through the lens of our frail humanity and our individual cultures.

But these apparent differences conceal a deeper similarity. Religious thinkers are very concerned to emphasise the strong similarities in different religious *ethical* claims, even if the claims about God differ. This would make sense, if expressivism is true – for then the central purpose of religious language is to provide guidance in life. Apparent acceptance of religious relativism looks to be founded on a rejection of moral relativism.