Religious Language
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Univocal language

Many people start from the assumption that talk about God is univocal. To use a word univocally is to use it with the same meaning. Yet we say God is love, not just God is loving. A univocal word yields a contradiction (i.e. nonsense) when affirmed and denied of the same thing. Yet many theologians have wanted to say God is loving, but not in the way we know it. All applications of terms to people implicitly involve finitude. The meaning of the term as applied to God involves negating features of its meaning as it applies to human beings.

The difficulty of thinking that religious language is univocal is doing justice to the transcendence of God while avoiding self-contradiction. So perhaps when we talk of God, we don't mean what we say in exactly the same way as we would if we were to say something similar of a person.

Aquinas: meaning by analogy

Aquinas agrees that we can know *something* of God, and express this in language. But the words we use can't be literally applied to God. We must extend the meaning of the terms, relying on their ordinary use, at least at first, for their intelligibility. Talk of God relies on analogy.

Analogy of attribution

This form of analogy applies a word to something it doesn't literally describe by virtue of its connection with the thing it does literally describe. So organisms are healthy, but we can speak of healthy food, meaning food that helps keep us healthy. To say God is love, then, is to say that God is the cause or ground of all love; similarly with other words.

It faces a number of serious problems. Here is one: is the sentence 'God is the cause of all love' literally true or only by analogy? Is God literally a cause, or is talk of divine causation analogical with talk of more everyday causation? If God is literally a cause, then at least some religious language is univocal. If God is not literally, but analogically, a cause, then we have explained the idea of analogy by using an analogy! So have we yet really understood what it means to say 'God is love'?

Analogy of proportion

This form of analogy points out how we use the same term appropriately in different contexts – a dog can be loyal and a person can be loyal, but loyalty for dogs and people involves something different. So to say that a human father loves his children and God loves his children is to say that the human father loves in the way and sense appropriate to human fathers and God loves in the way and sense appropriate to God.

An important challenge here is that we don't have any independent conception of God, so we have no further idea about what the *appropriate* sense of 'love' is, applied to God. From 'person', 'human loyalty' and 'dog', I can understand 'dog loyalty'. But if I didn't know what a dog was, I couldn't! So if I don't already have some idea of God, I can't really understand God's love by analogy with human love.

Ayer's verificationism
In *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer argues that talk of God is literally meaningless. The principle of verification claims that that all true meaningful statements are either analytic (true in virtue of the meanings of the terms used) or empirically verifiable (can be shown by experience to be true or to be probably true). These are the only two ways of establishing the truth (and hence the falsity) of a statement. Any statement that cannot be shown to be true or false in these ways is meaningless.

'God exists' is just such a statement, claims Ayer. Despite the best attempts of the ontological argument (!), we cannot prove 'God exists' from *a priori* premises using deduction alone. So the only resort is empirical verification. To note, as a first consequence, this means that if the statement is to be meaningful, it must be an *empirical hypothesis*, and as such cannot be certain, but only more or less probable. There are a number of issues that arise as to what types of experience might confirm or disconfirm whether God exists (see below). But Ayer takes a different tack to suggest that 'God exists' is not an empirical hypothesis, and so is meaningless. What experience could establish or disprove God's existence? What empirical consequences flow from saying that God exists? An empirical hypothesis must make a difference to our knowledge. But this isn't true of 'God exists'. It rules nothing empirical in and it rules nothing out. If talk of God, then, is not talk of something that makes a difference to experience, then it is meaningless.

<u>Attacking the verification principle</u>
However, we can ask, what is the status of the principle itself? It does not appear to be analytically true; it is difficult to know how it could be verified empirically (since it is a criterion of meaning, we cannot go around looking for sentences we already believe meaningful or meaningless and then seeing whether they accord with the principle). So if it were true, it would be meaningless – it cannot be both true and meaningless, so it's not true. If it's false, that's no better!

<u>Holding on to the empirical</u>
There are a number of responses that accept Ayer's contention that religious language is or must be empirical if meaningful. Some attempt to reformulate the argument that religious language is not empirically meaningful and so not meaningful at all. Flew's development of falsificationism (belief in God is meaningless because nothing could prove that God doesn't exist) and Hare's response (religious belief is a 'blik') are possibilities here (looking at Hare opens up the question whether bliks are meaningful or not).

A different response is to say that religious language is empirically meaningful. John Hick contends that even if Ayer's verificationism was right, religious language wouldn't be meaningless. He develops the idea of 'eschatological verification', whereby experiences of God in the afterlife would establish the truth of the existence of God (it is harder, however,

to conceive of just what experiences in the afterlife might establish the non-existence of God; but verificationism doesn't require this).

Letting go of the empirical
But another set of developments in response to Ayerchallenges the view that 'God exists' is an empirical hypothesis. Ayer spured on the search for a satisfactory, non-empirical account of religious meaning. There are any number of contenders here, though perhaps Wittgenstein (and developments by D Z Phillips) stands out as the most famous. Wittgenstein argued that 'God exists' is not a statement of fact. It is not about a thing, an object that exists as part of the world like natural objects do. It is not a claim about an entity at all. Of course, if it is not an empirical statement, then believing it is not an empirical belief: 'a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a belief, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.' He argued that if we look at how the statement is used, what it expresses for people who believe it, we see that it is not used as a description, it is used to express a form of commitment.

Religious language expresses an emotional attitude and understanding of life and a commitment to living life according to that understanding. It is not a description of the way the world is. Phillips argued that this means that God is not 'logically prior' to religion, some thing to which religion is a human response. Talk of God only makes sense within religious practices. To understand religious language is to understand the place of certain statements in the life of the believer and religious community. And the nature of religious faith and morality shows that these statements are not factual.

Symbolic language: Tillich and beyond
Paul Tillich argued that religious language must describe what we know of God, through religious experiences, symbolically. Understanding just what this means is difficult. Tillich's idea is that our understanding of God takes the form of symbols, either in words, e.g. Jesus as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', images, e.g. God as 'light', events, e.g. the Resurrection, or things, e.g. the cross. Religious language is part of, expresses, and tries to describe the meaning of these symbols and the understanding of God they embody.

Tillich argues that symbols are 'irreducible', i.e. their meaning cannot be fully expressed in literal language, they can't be straightforwardly replaced by something else. Over time, as the human situation changes, different symbols become more powerful and other ones die; but this is not a matter of 'choice'. Recent theologians have developed the implications of these ideas, to argue that understanding symbols and finding the words to express their meaning doesn't follow any obvious rules. Since it is not possible to give a literal statement of the meaning of a symbol, we are able to understand symbols even though we cannot say exactly what it is we understand (here the *via negativa* was onto something). Although trying to spell out its meaning is useful, we will never do so fully. Finally, we need to be sensitive to the fact that symbols 'point beyond' themselves so that we don't mistakenly try to draw literal implications from them (e.g. God as father does not imply that God is male).