

Religious language and verificationism

AYER'S ARGUMENT

In the 1930s, a school of philosophy arose called logical positivism, concerned with the foundations and possibility of knowledge. It developed a criterion for meaningful statements, called the principle of verification. On A J Ayer's version (*Language, Truth and Logic*), the principle of verification states that a statement only has meaning if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. (can be shown by experience to be probably true/false).

'God exists', and so all other talk of God, is 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 'God exists' is not analytically true. Therefore, to be meaningful, 'God exists' must be empirically verifiable. Ayer argues it is not. If a statement is an empirical hypothesis, it predicts our experience will be different depending on whether it is true or false. But 'God exists' makes no such predictions. So it is meaningless.

Some philosophers argue that religious language attempts to capture something of religious experience, although it is 'inexpressible' in literal terms. Ayer responds that whatever religious experiences reveal, they cannot be said to reveal any facts. Facts are the content of statements that purport to be intelligible and can be expressed literally. If talk of God is non-empirical, it is literally unintelligible, hence meaningless.

Responses

We can object that many people do think that 'God exists' has empirical content. For example, the argument from design argues that the design of the universe is evidence for the existence of God. And on the other hand, the problem of evil takes the existence and extent of suffering to be evidence against the existence of God.

John Hick argues that even if we can't verify the existence of God in this life, that doesn't mean religious language is meaningless ('Theology and Verification'). He develops the idea of 'eschatological verification', whereby experiences of God in the afterlife would establish the truth of the existence of God. In arguing that talk of God is meaningless, Ayer overlooked possible experiences of life after death.

These responses accept the verification principle. But the most common response has been to reject it, as it famously faces serious objections. What is the status of the principle itself? It does not appear to be analytically true; and 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, then it's false!

One response to this is to broaden the verification principle, and claim a sentence is meaningful if it is analytic, or empirically verifiable, or empirically falsifiable. To be able to say 'this is a fork' meaningfully, we have to know what kinds of situation would lead us to say 'this is not a fork'. Anthony Flew argued that religious language is meaningless

because, for a religious believer, nothing could prove that God doesn't exist. If 'God exists' is a statement of fact, then it must be possible to imagine the conditions under which we would say that it was not a fact. For example, the theory of evolution by natural selection is a hypothesis; if aliens came to Earth and demonstrated that they had planted 'fossils' (which actually they had made) for us to find, we would give up the theory. What would make us give up the claim that 'God exists'? We can argue that there are no tests of this kind, so 'God exists' is not a factual claim.

THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

However, we can object that this argument has a very limited view of meaning. It assumes that for 'God exists' to state a fact, we have to know how to test whether that fact is true or false against sense experience. But we could argue, first that there are more types of experience than sense experience; and second, that the meaning of 'God exists' is related to and secured by making sense of facts. For example, we could use the argument from design to infer that God's existence is the best explanation for the nature of the universe (or use the problem of evil to infer that God does not exist). In this case 'God exists' is a hypothesis, but not a scientific hypothesis, since we use philosophy, not science, to test it. What we mean by 'God exists' will be shown by these arguments.

An alternative response is to agree that 'God exists' is not a statement of fact, but to insist that it still has meaning as an expression of a non-cognitive attitude or commitment. In support of this, we should note that people don't normally acquire religious beliefs by argument or testing evidence. Instead, they come to an understanding of the world that is expressed in values and a way of living. When someone converts to a religion, what changes isn't so much intellectual beliefs, but their will, what they value and how they choose to live.

On this view, religious 'beliefs' are expressions of attitude and commitment, attitudes towards other people, nature, oneself, human history and so on that put the world in a certain light and which support commitments to act in certain ways and to mature as a spiritual being. The core of accepting a religious faith, on this view, is the intention to follow the way of life prescribed by that religion.

We can object that there is much more to religious 'beliefs' than a commitment to a way of life. What can we say about different religions that recommend similar ways of life? If commitment to a way of life is all that matters, then does it matter at all what one believes? Many religions have thought it does; some have even argued that how one lives is not the main point at all. So religious 'belief' is not the same as an attitude towards how to live. Furthermore, many religious believers would say that they live a certain way because God exists and showed us how to live. But if this statement only expresses the commitment to live a certain way then it doesn't answer the question why live that way. If religious 'belief' is just a commitment, what supports that commitment or is it arbitrary?