Problem of Religious Language in Analytic Philosophy of Religion.

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Abstract

Religion is a difficult subject to discuss since it would be difficult to be objective about because it is such a personal topic, meaning subjective claims are always expressed. The problem of religious language considers whether it is possible to talk about God meaningfully if the traditional conceptions of God as being incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, are accepted. Because these traditional conceptions of God make it difficult to describe him, religious language has the potential to be meaningless. An Objective claim to test the existence of a supernatural all powerful deity/deities would be the law of non-contradiction meaning that such a belief is either real or imaginary. Theories of religious language either attempt to demonstrate that such language is meaningless, or attempt to show how religious language, while problematic, can still be meaningful. People who are intuitive thinkers are more likely to be religious, but getting them to think analytically even in subtle ways decreases the strength of their belief, according to a new study in Science.

Analytic thinking undermines belief because, as cognitive psychologists have shown, it can override intuition. And we know from past research that religious beliefs—such as the idea that objects and events don't simply exist but have a purpose—are rooted in intuition. Theories of religious language either attempt to demonstrate that such language is meaningless, or attempt to show how religious language, while problematic, can still be meaningful.

Introduction

Many problems of philosophy are of such relevance to human concern, and so complex in their use, that they, are in one form or another, last for a long period. Though in course of time they yield in part to philosophical inquiry, they may need to be rethought by each age in the light its broader scientific knowledge and deepened ethical and religious experience. Until the mid 20th century, many analytic philosophers, under the influence of logical positivism, even thought that talk about God and related matters (such as religious experience) was not just false, but meaningless. Reasoned arguments for the existence of God simply had no place in this way of doing philosophy, and natural theology finally seemed dead and buried, after its last spasms in the 19th century with the Paley and the Bridgewater Treatises.

However, once logical positivism and its criterion of meaning were abandoned, analytic philosophers could once again turn to philosophy of religion. We then have the rise of authors like Alston, Plantinga, Swinburne and others who - with their sophisticated argumentation - made philosophy of religion intellectually respectable. No longer was it possible for philosophers to simply dismiss God's existence on the basis of the logical incompatibility of evil and the divine omni properties, etc. Moreover, arguments that were perceived as hopelessly inadequate, such as the ontological argument and the cosmological argument got refurbished.Even fideism became again a respectable position, given arguments for the proper basis of theism. Many philosophers and theologians have protested against the concentration of philosophers on religious statements to the neglect of other religious uses of language. Their complaint can be briefly summed up as follows. The heart of religion is found in talk to God in prayer, worship, and liturgy. Talk about God is a secondary phenomenon that gets its

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religious significance by its dependence on the former. The valid concerns of philosophers with statements about God can be pursued while recognizing their connections with the rest of religion. Instead of speaking of predicates of religious statements, one could speak of religious concepts. Because predicates express concepts, problems about the meaning of the former are translatable into problems about the content of the latter.

Never since the late Middle Ages has philosophical theology so flourished as it has during the past thirty years. There have been intensive and extensive discussions by philosophers on such topics as the relation of God to evil, the precise nature of God's omnipotence, whether God knows what persons will freely do, whether or not God is eternal, impassible, simple, and so forth. In contemporary discussions, it is not the question of God's existence that generates the problem of religious language. If God does not exist, any attempt to describe God will be an inaccurate description of reality.

Discussions about religious language attempt to articulate how one could speak of God, if in fact, God exists. The problem of religious language is generated by the traditional doctrine of God in the Abrahamic traditions. Since God is thought to be incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, the predicates we apply to corporeal, finite, temporal creatures would not apply to God. Analytic philosophy will help us to gain justified beliefs, and abandon unjustified ones, and argumentation can play an important role in this. Divinity is a problem for theists, and it's a positive development that it gets a lot of attention in analytic philosophy of religion, which will focus in my paper.

Objectives of the study

The objective of paper is to discuss the place of religious language in analytic philosophy of religion. I had made a detail study related to issues such as – meaning of religious language, traditional account of religious language, empiricists' account of religious language, analogy of games, theory of analogy by Acquinas, vienna circle account, falsification problems etc in order to fulfill the purpose. Questions that I am dealing with the topic are - What is religious language? What is the traditional account of religious language? What is analytic philosophy of religion? Whether analytic philosophy of religion successfully deals with religious language or not? Does traditional account of religious language reflects in the Empiricist account, positivist's account and in Wittgenstein's account?

The significant problem of the topic is that can the analysis of religious language in analytic philosophy of religion will help us gain justified beliefs, and abandon unjustified ones, and can argumentation play an important role in this? Divinity is a problem for theists, and its positive development that it gets a lot of attention in analytic philosophy of religion, and the task of religious language is to analyze it meaningfully.

Review of literature

While discussing the topic I had followed the following books

Sallie Mc Fague, in his *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* discusses that religious language is both idolatrous because it fails to express sufficient awe of God, and irrelevant because without adequate words it becomes meaningless. Gregory Rocca, in his *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* accepted that using the negative leaves certain confusion, but maintained that this confusion was the closest to God's mystery that humans can get. Kenneth Seeskin, in his *book The Cambridge companion to Maimonides* mentions that Maimonides attempted to illustrate God's indescribable nature and draw attention to the linguistic limits of describing God.

However, Frederiek Depoortere, van Erp, Stephan; Boeve, Lieven in the book *Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology* discusses about symbolic nature of religious language. Aliser McGrath in his *Science and Religion* discusses about Ian Ramsey's theory of analogy. Further, Frank Rees, in his *Wrestling with Doubt: Theological Reflections on the Journey of Faith* discusses about Paul Tillich's concept of faith. Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation:Collected Essays in Christology.* David Hume in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* his account of metaphysics has important place in his account of religious language.

The term "religious language" refers to statements or claims made about God or gods. This is a typical philosophical problem of religious language. If God is infinite, then words used to describe finite creatures might not adequately describe God. For example, is God good in the same sense that Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan is good? This difficulty challenges us to articulate the degree that attributes used for finite beings can be used for God and what these attributes mean when they describe God. The ambiguity in meaning with respect to the terms predicated of God is the "problem of religious language" or the "problem of naming God." These predications could include divine attributes, properties,or actions. Since the doctrines of the divine in Eastern religious traditions differ radically from the doctrines of the Abrahamic traditions, the problem of religious language has not been accorded much attention in Eastern philosophy.

The problem of religious language is worrisome to practitioners of the Abrahamic religious tradition because it has the potential to undermine those traditions. All three faiths proclaim truths about God in written texts, commentary traditions, and oral teachings. In fact, speech about God is essential to both personal praxis and organized celebration in these traditions. Without adequate solution to the problem of religious language, human speech about God is called into question. Without the ability to speak about God and to understand the meaning of what is spoken, the Abrahamic faiths are vulnerable to the criticism that their sacred texts and teachings are unintelligible.

The problem of religious language also provides a challenge for philosophers of religion. If

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there is no adequate solution to the problem of religious language, large discussions in the domain of philosophy of religion will also be rendered unintelligible. For example, philosophers of religion debate the nature of divine and human freedom. These claims about God would be rendered unintelligible if human speech about God is impossible. Thus, the problem of religious language is a philosophical problem that must be solved in order to provide a framework for understanding claims about God in both the house of worship and the academy.

Traditionally religious language has been explained as via negativa, analogy, symbolism, or myth, each of which describes a way of talking about God in human terms. The via negativa is a way of referring to God according to what he is not; analogy uses human qualities as standards against which to compare divine qualities; symbolism is used non-literally to describe otherwise ineffable experiences; and a mythological interpretation of religion attempts to reveal fundamental truths behind religious stories. Alternative explanations of religious language cast it as having political, performative, or imperative functions.

Empiricist David Hume's requirement that claims about reality must be verified by evidence influenced the logical positivist movement, particularly the philosopher A.J. Ayer. The movement proposed that, for a statement to hold meaning, it must be possible to verify its truthfulness empirically – with evidence from the senses. Consequently, the logical positivists argued that religious language must be meaningless because the propositions it makes are impossible to verify.Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has been regarded as a logical positivist by some academics because he distinguished between things that can and cannot be spoken about; others have argued that he could not have been a logical positivist because he emphasised the importance of mysticism. British philosopher Antony Flew proposed a similar challenge based on the principle that, because statements about religious belief cannot be falsified, statements about it are rendered meaningless.

The analogy of games – most commonly associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein – has been proposed as a way of establishing meaning in religious language. The theory asserts that language must be understood in terms of a game: just as each game has its own rules determining what can and cannot be done, so each context of language has its own rules determining what is and is not meaningful. Religion is classified as a possible and legitimate language game which is meaningful within its own context. Various parables have also been proposed to solve the problem of meaning in religious language. R.M.Hare used his parable of a lunatic to introduce the concept of "bliks" – unfalsifiable beliefs according to which a worldview is established – which are not necessarily meaningless. Basil Mitchell used a parable to show that faith can be logical, even if it seems unverifiable. John Hick used his parable of the Celestial City to propose his theory of eschatological verification, the view that if there is an afterlife, religious statements will be verifiable after death.

Religious language is a philosophical problem arising from the difficulties in accurately describing God. Because God is generally conceived as incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, ordinary language cannot always apply to him. This causes problems for religious belief, since the ability to describe and talk about God is important in religious life. French philosopher Simone Weil expressed this problem in her work Waiting for God, in which she outlined her dilemma: she was simultaneously certain of God's love and conscious that she could not adequately describe him.

The medieval doctrine of divine simplicity also poses problems for religious language. This suggests that God has no accidental properties – these are properties that a being can have which do not contribute to its essence. If God has no accidental properties, he cannot be as he is traditionally conceived, because properties such as goodness are accidental. If divine simplicity is accepted, then to describe God as good would entail that goodness and God have the same definition. Such limits can also be problematic to religious believers; for example, the Bible regularly ascribes different emotions to God, ascriptions which would be implausible according to the doctrine of divine simplicity.

The theologian Sallie Mcfague believes that the more recent problem of religious language is based on individual experience, owing to the increased secularisation of society. She notes that human experience is of this world rather than regular encounters with the divine, which makes the experience of God uncommon and potentially unnecessary. Because of this, she argues, religious language is both idolatrous because it fails to express sufficient awe of God, and irrelevant because without adequate words it becomes meaningless .[1]

The via negativa, or apophatic way, is a way of understanding religious language in terms of negation. It suggests that God cannot be known in human terms, and so describes God according to what he is not. For example, to propose that God is good would be equivalent to proposing that he is not evil. Scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas proposed that the via negativa can be used as a negative path to God. Aquinas believed that knowledge of God is beyond anything that can be conceived and so argued that the best way to describe God is by speaking negatively. He accepted that using the negative leaves certain confusion, but maintained that this confusion was the closest to God's mystery that humans can get. [2]

Jewish philosopher Maimonides believed that God can only be ascribed negative attributes, a view based on two fundamental Jewish beliefs: that the existence of God must be accepted, and that it is forbidden to describe God. Maimonides believed that God is simple and so cannot be ascribed any essential attributes. He therefore argued that statements about God must be taken negatively, for example, "God lives" should be taken as God does not lack vitality'. Maimonides did not believe that God holds all of his

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attributes perfectly and without impairment; rather, he proposed that God lies outside of any human measures. To say that God is powerful, for example, would mean that God's power is beyond worldly power, and incomparable to any other power. In doing so, Maimonides attempted to illustrate God's indescribable nature and draw attention to the linguistic limits of describing God. [3]

Thomas Aquinas argued that statements about God are analogous to human experience. An analogous term is partly univocal (has only one meaning) and partly equivocal (has more than one potential meaning) because an analogy is in some ways the same and in some ways different from the subject. He proposed that those godly qualities which resemble human qualities are described analogously, with reference to human terms; for example, when God is described as good, it does not mean that God is good in human terms, but hat human goodness is used as a reference to describe God's goodness.

Philosopher Tades Smedes argued that religious language is symbolic.[4] Denying any conflict between science and religion, he proposes that 'to believe' means to accept a conviction (that God exists, in the context of Christianity), which is different from 'knowing', which only occurs once something is proven. Thus, according to Smedes, we believe things that we do not know for sure .[5] Smedes argues that, rather than being part of the world, God is so far beyond the world that there can be no common standard to which both God and the world can be compared. He argues that people can still believe in God, even though he cannot be compared to anything in the world, because belief in God is just an alternative way of viewing that world (he likens this to two people viewing a painting differently). Smedes claims that there should be no reason to look for a meaning behind our metaphors and symbols of God because the metaphors are all we have of God. He suggests that we can only talk of God pro nobis (for us) and not in se (as such) or sine nobis (without us). The point, he argues, is not that our concept of God should correspond with reality, but that we can only conceive of God through metaphors.

In the twentieth century, Ian Ramsey developed the theory of analogy; a development later cited in numerous works by Alister McGrath He argued that various models of God are provided in religious writings that interact with each other: a range of analogies for salvation and the nature of God. Ramsey proposed that the models used modify and qualify each other, defining the limits of other analogies. As a result, no one analogy on its own is sufficient, but the combination of every analogy presented in Scripture gives a full and consistent depiction of God. The use of other analogies may then be used to determine if any one model of God is abused or improperly applied. [6]

Philosopher Paul Tillich argued that religious faith is best expressed through symbolism because a symbol points to a meaning beyond itself and best expresses transcendent religious beliefs. He believed that any statement about God is symbolic and participates in the meaning of a concept. Tillich used the example of a national flag to illustrate his point: a flag points to something beyond itself, the country it represents, but also participates in the meaning of the country. He believed that symbols could unite a religious believer with a deeper dimension of himself as well as with a greater reality.

Tillich believed that symbols must emerge from an individual collective unconsciousness, and can only function when they are accepted by the unconscious. He believed that symbols cannot be invented, but live and die at the appropriate times. [7] Christian philosopher John Hick believed that the language of the Bible should be demythologised to be compatible with naturalism. He offered a demythologised Christology, arguing that Jesus was not God incarnate, but a man with incredible experience of divine reality. To Hick, calling Jesus the Son of God was a metaphor used by Jesus' followers to describe their commitment to what Jesus represented. Hick believed that demythologising the incarnation would make sense of the variety of world religions and give them equal validity as ways to encounter God .[8]

Peter Donovan argues that most religious language is not about making truth-claims; instead, it is used to achieve certain goals. He notes that language can be used in alternative ways beyond making statements of fact, such as expressing feelings or asking questions. Donovan calls many of these uses performative, as they serve to perform a certain function within religious life. For example, the words "I promise" perform the action of promising themselves – Donovan argues that most religious language fulfils this function.[9]

Ludwig Wittgenstein also proposed that language could be performative and presented a list of the different uses of language. Wittgenstein argued that "the meaning of the language is in the use", taking the use of language to be performative. The philosopher J. L. Austin argued that religious language is not just cognitive but can perform social acts, including vows, blessings, and the naming of children. He distinguished performative statements as those that do not simply describe a state of affairs, but bring them about.

Historian of religion Benjamin Ray uses the performance of rituals within religions as evidence for a performative interpretation of language. He argues that the language of rituals can perform social tasks: when a priest announces that a spiritual event has occurred, those present believe it because of the spiritual authority of the priest. He believed that the meaning of a ritual is defined by the language used by the speaker, who is defined culturally as a superhuman agent .[10]

In the conclusion of his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that statements that make claims about reality must be verified by experience, and dismissed those that cannot be verified as meaningless. Hume regarded most religious language as unverifiable by experiment and so dismissed it. "Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact of existence? No. Commit it then to the

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flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." [11]

Hume criticised the view that we cannot speak about God, and proposed that this view is no different from the sceptical view that God cannot be spoken about. He was unconvinced by Aquinas' theory of analogy and argued that God's attributes must be completely different from human attributes, making comparisons between the two impossible. Hume's scepticism influenced the logical positivist movement of the twentieth century.

The logical positivism movement originated in the Vienna Circle and was continued by British philosopher A.J. Ayer. The Vienna Circle adopted the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements: analytic statements are those whose meaning is contained within the words themselves, such as definitions, tautologies or mathematical statements, while synthetic statements make claims about reality. To determine whether a synthetic statement is meaningful, the Vienna Circle developed a verifiability theory of meaning, which proposed that for a synthetic statement to have cognitive meaning; its truthfulness must be empirically verifiable. Because claims about God cannot be empirically verified, the logical positivists argued that religious propositions are meaningless.

Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein finished his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* with the proposition that "Where of one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Beverly and Brian Clack have suggested that because of this statement, Wittgenstein was taken for a positivist by many of his disciples because he made a distinction between what can and cannot be spoken about. They argue that this interpretation is inaccurate because Wittgenstein held the mystical, which cannot be described, as important. Rather than dismissing the mystical as meaningless, as the logical positivists did, Wittgenstein believed that while the facts of the world remain the same, the perspective from which they are viewed will vary.

The falsification principle has been developed as an alternative theory of meaning which attempts to establish the meaninglessness of religious language. It casts religious language as unfalsifiable because there is no way that it could be empirically proven false. Analytic philosopher Antony Flew argued that a meaningful statement must simultaneously assert and deny a state of affairs; for example, the statement "God loves us" both asserts that God loves us and denies that God does not love us. Flew maintained that if a religious believer could not say what circumstances would have to exist for their statements about God to be false, then they are unfalsifiable.

Using John Wisdom's parable of the invisible gardener, Flew attempted to demonstrate that religious language is unfalsifiable. The parable tells the story of two people who discover a garden on a deserted island; one believes it is tended to by a gardener, the other believes that it formed naturally, without the existence of a gardener. The two watch out for the gardener but never find him; the non-believer maintains that there is no gardener, whereas the believer suggests that the gardener is invisible and cannot be detected.

Flew contended that if this interpretation is accepted, nothing is left of the original gardener proposed by the believer. He argued that in a similar fashion, religious beliefs suffer a "death by a thousand qualifications" because religious beliefs are qualified and modified so much that they end up asserting nothing meaningful. Flew applied his principles to religious claims such as God's love for humans, arguing that if they are meaningful assertions they would deny a certain state of affairs. He argued that when faced with evidence against the existence of God, such as the terminal illness of a child, theists will qualify their claims to allow for such evidence; for example they may suggest that God's love is different to human love. Such qualifications, Flew argued, make the original proposition meaningless; he questioned what God's love actually promises and what it guarantees against, and proposed that God's qualified love promises nothing and becomes worthless. [12]

The analogy of a game was first proposed by Hans-George-Gadamar in an attempt to demonstrate the epistemic unity of language. He suggested that language is like a game which everyone participates in and is played by a greater being. Gadamer believed that language makes up the fundamental structure of reality and that human language participates in a greater language; Christianity teaches this to be the divine word which created the world and was incarnate in Jesus Christ. [13]

Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed a calculus theory of language, which maintained that all language should be analysable in a uniform way. Wittgenstein believed that religion is significant because it offers a particular way of life, rather than confirming the existence of God. Therefore, he believed that religious language is confessional – a confession of what someone feels and believes – rather than consisting of claims to truth. Wittgenstein believed that religious language is different from language used to describe physical objects because it occupies a different language game.

D.J. Phillips defended Wittgenstein's theory by arguing that although religious language games are autonomous, they should not be treated as isolated because they make statements about secular events such as birth and death. Phillips argued that because of this connection, religions can still be criticised based on human experiences of these secular events. He maintained that religion cannot be denounced as wrong because it is not empirical. In response to Flew's falsification principle, British philosopher R.M. Hare told a parable in an attempt to demonstrate that religious language is meaningful. Hare described a lunatic who believes that all university professors want to kill him; no amount of evidence of kindly professors will dissuade him from this view. Hare called this kind of unfalsifiable conviction a "blik", and argued that it formed an unfalsifiable, yet still meaningful, worldview. He proposed that all people – religious and non-religious – hold bliks, and that they cannot be unseated

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by empirical evidence. Nevertheless, he maintained that a blik is meaningful because it forms the basis of a person's understanding of the world. Hare believed that some bliks are correct and others are not, though he did not propose a method of distinguishing between the two.

Suggestion

Speech about God is essential to both personal praxis and organized celebration in these traditions. Without adequate solution to the problem of religious language, human speech about God is called into question. If there is no adequate solution to the problem of religious language, large discussions in the domain of philosophy of religion will also be rendered unintelligible. This suggests that God has no accidental properties – these are properties that a being can have which do not contribute to its essence. If God has no accidental properties, he cannot be as he is traditionally conceived, because properties such as goodness are accidental. If divine simplicity is accepted, then to describe God as good would entail that goodness and God have the same definition.

Conclusion

Thus we found that with respect to the problem of religious language, multiple solutions have been suggested and defended. Four of these solutions have been presented in this entry. The first solution suggests that all statements about God are meaningless. The second solution suggests that all attributes predicated of God are to be interpreted equivocally. The third solution suggests that the attributes predicated of God are to be interpreted univocally. The fourth solution suggests that the attributes predicated of God are to be interpreted analogously. While no single solution has emerged to the satisfaction of all religious communities or philosophers of religion, three of the historical solutions offer a way in which statements about God might be understood. Maimonides' solution severely limits the degree to which human beings can speak about God. Alston's solution raises at least two objections that require a satisfactory response and a possible modification of his proposal. Finally, the solution of Aquinas requires a medieval metaphysics in which one affirms the relation of creation between creatures and God, a foundation many contemporary individuals would reject. Consequently, there is much research and thought that is still to be done on the problem of religious language.

Statements about God or religious phenomena are philosophically problematic. How are we to understand talk of 'the infinite' or 'eternal life' or 'omnipresence' when we have no direct experience of these concepts? What does it mean to say that 'God loves us' when we have so little understanding of God? Such religious utterances seem impossible to derive from our everyday experience, and for this reason they are hard to verify. For some, this is inevitable given the subject; for others, it suggests that religious statements are in fact empty of meaning.

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