

The Structure of Religious Languages



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Abstract

The climax of the academic tradition of philosophy of religion is represented to-day by the so-called linguistic analyst, who makes it his function to subject to a close analytical scrutiny, some common statements on God, soul and other topics concerning religious belief.

That is why they talk of, logic of religion and subject religious language to a close analytical scrutiny. But the logical positivists as well as the logical analyst are using language in a somewhat narrow sense. They would grant the status of language to mathematical expressions, but not to language of art. Wittgenstein seems to be thinking of language in a narrow propositional sense, when he says for example that "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language".

The logician does not want the horizons of language to be widened. In particular, the Anglo-Saxon logical analyst does not want to be liberated from what Nietzsche called the prison-house of language we cannot throw off the rational.

For a serious study of religious language, we have to take into account the entire range of religious symbolism as expressed through the various religious texts, through forms of literature e.g. dialogue, drama, Poetry, mythology, aphorisms etc.

The criteria for such structuring would not only be the linguistic meaning and logical relationship, but also their emotional content.

Thus the procedure for the structuring of religious language is neither logical nor ontological nor even axiological but hermeneutic.

It therefore, appears to me to be somewhat frivolous merely to indulge in logical analysis of religious Language as the Anglo-Saxons have done. To talk of logic of religious language is as absurd as talking of logic of poetry".

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Introduction

The title I am giving to this humble paper may sound somewhat perplexing, because I am here speaking of, 'religious languages' rather of a 'religious language'. It is my view that the expression of, and response to religious experience is not manifested always, and perhaps seldom, in the logical or propositional form. But under the influence of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of religious philosophy, we have got accustomed to speak of a 'logic of religion' or 'language of religious discourse' to characterise the logical or linguistic analysis of the proposition in which theological arguments are expressed. For example, the scholastic arguments for the existence of God ('More particularly the instance of Anselm's celebrated essay 'Why the theist is a fool') belong to this tradition. The commentators on religious texts have also been scrupulously 'logical' in their approach to religious experience. Professors of philosophy and theology are perpetrators of this scholastic tradition. The climax of the academic tradition of philosophy of religion is represented to-day by the so-called linguistic analyst, who makes it his function to subject to a close analytical scrutiny, some common statements on God, soul and other topics concerning religious belief.

But here there is a divergence of opinion among the Anglo-Saxon thinkers. Logical positivists (e.g.A.J.Ayer) following on Wittgenstein dismissed religious statements as pseudo-propositions falling into the same class as metaphysical statements. And like ethical statements, religious statements were also emotive having no meaning. This prompted Gilbert Ryle to make his famous remark that "in our half century, philosophy and theology have not been on speaking terms"¹. However, a later phase of logical positivism has compromised with theology on certain

points. But they are still indifferent to a theological we weltanschauung, though they no longer regard theological statements as being devoid of significance. That is why they talk of 'logic of religion' and subject 'religious language' to a close analytical scrutiny (as they would subject ordinary-language statements also to such scrutiny)². But the logical positivists as well as the logical analyst are using 'language' in a somewhat narrow sense. They would grant the status of language to mathematical expressions, but not to language of art. (Wittgenstein does use the analogy of music and the musical score very often.) Wittgenstein seems to be thinking of language in a narrow propositional sense, when he says for example that "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language". (Philosophical Investigations, 109). Earlier however, Wittgenstein had curtailed the function of language, which is to 'mirror' or 'picture' reality (the metaphors are Wittgenstein's). He had declared in the Tractatus: "To give the essence of a proposition means to give the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world", (5.4711) and "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world", (5.6) and again "The totality of propositions is language" (4.001). The logician does not want the horizons of language to be widened. In particular, the Anglo-Saxon logical analyst does not want to be liberated from what Nietzsche called 'the prison-house of language'³ we cannot throw off the rational.

Scheme which binds our interpretation of all modes of communication including the 'religious'. The supremacy of the logical, of the prosaic should be challenged. One can break out of the prison-house only if man is liberated from the compulsions of faith, of philosophy and dogma. This liberation is achieved according to Nietzsche in the death of God.

A serious and exhaustive study of symbolism at various levels of the aesthetic and the religious has already been made by writers like E. Cassirer⁴, W.M. Urban⁵ and S.Langer⁶. Their method involves mapping out the entire range of aesthetic symbolism from poetry, plastic arts, drama, myth etc., and it would include even the symbolism of science, religion and metaphysics. Karl Jaspers⁷ throughout his works also deals with the problem of symbolism in his doctrine of ciphers. The ciphers are essentially symbols standing for the transcendental; they are spontaneous and arise only in an authentically existential situation, which armchair philosophy can only seek to analyse and explain inadequately. Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* had also spoken of ciphers as the beautiful language through which Nature 'speaks to us'.⁸ The emotive content of ciphers cannot of course be isolated from their over-als meaning, which only an authentic being can grasp. Thu-Jaspers deals with 'ciphers' of transcendence (which he contrasts with the 'signa' of existence) at various levels of man's intellectual and emotional activity-Philosophy, Art, Religion.

For a serious study of religious language, we have to take into account the entire range of religious symbolism as expressed through the various religious texts, through forms of literature (e.g. dialogue, drama, Poetry, mythology, aphorisms etc.) through

plastic arts & music. It would be necessary to structuralize the entire range of symbolism. The criteria for such 'structuring' would not only be the linguistic meaning and logical relationship, but also their emotional content. 'Nicolai Hartman' has given us the procedure for stratification in the realm of ethics and meta- Physics.⁹ what he calls 'strength' 'height' and 'depth' in the stratification of values can be applied to the ordering of the religious symbols. It is difficult of course to structurize religious symbols according to their emotional content, or according to their'. It requires what Hartmann would characterize as 'Wertsicht' or an evaluative perceptivity to penetrate into the depth of the emotional meaning. This perspective is not unlike that of literary appreciation and criticism. Understanding the full significance and depth of the various orders of symbolism is in fact somewhat similar to what Plato would call 'epekeina tes ouisias'¹⁰ i.e. going beyond the logical and metaphysical world of the intelligible to the 'meta-noetic', i.e. going beyond the mere world of metaphysical knowledge to the non-sensory inner core to which Eduard Spranger referred as the 'unsinnlich Innere' somewhat similar to the Greek conception of 'prosopon' the inner countenance of being. Thus the procedure for the structurizing of religious language is neither logical nor ontological nor even axiological but hermeneutic

It therefore, appears to me to be somewhat frivolous merely to indulge in 'logical analysis' of religious Language as the Anglo-Saxons have done. To talk of 'logic of religious language' is as absurd as talking of 'logic of poetry'. Besides it would be doing rank injustice to religion if we reduce it to a 'theology'. In my opinion, the Anglo-Saxon tendency to analyse religious language suffers from this confusion of religions with 'theology'. The procedure for ordering religious

Language is no doubt a priori, by which the intellect tries to grasp the inner meaning and coherence of subject-matter, but this can be supplemented by an a posteriori procedure of descriptive understanding and interpretation. But to ignore the inner core of religious experience while considering religious language as expressed in theological argumentation is to present only one side of the picture

References

1. Quoted by Basil Mitchell, Faith and Logic. Introduction, p.2, London.1950.
2. On this point see Basil Mitchell. Op.cit,pp.2-6
3. Nietzsche: Gesammelte Werke (Museum Edition, Munich, 1926-29), Vol.XIX, p.34. See also Erich Heller's essay 'Ludwig Wittgenstein: Unphilosophical Notes' in the volume New Essays on Religious Language, Ed. By Dallas M.High, New York, 1969.
4. In philosophie der symbolischem Forman, 2 Vols. Darmstadt. 1956.
5. In language and Reality, London, 1939
6. In Felling and form, London, 1953
7. In Philosophie, Vol. III, 129ff. (Berlin/ Heidelberg, 1956)
8. Critique of Judgment, 42.
9. Refer in particular to his Asthelik, Berlin, 1983. See also his Aufbau der realen Welt, Berlin, 1940
10. The Republic, 509 b.