

INTRODUCTION

Here is some commentary on some claims made about religious language. It may be of use to those teaching or studying religious language within Philosophy or R.S. A-Level.

Appeals to use

One of the most intriguing methods of immunizing religious claims against possible refutation is to insist they're *not really claims after all*. If no claim is made, well, then, there's no claim there for the theist to be mistaken about, or indeed for the atheist to refute.

If you choose to immunize your religious beliefs against rational criticism by this strategy, appealing to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein is useful, as Wittgenstein stressed the variety of ways in which language is used. Yes, language is used to make claims, but it's used in many other ways too. Wittgenstein warns us against being seduced by superficial similarities between sentences into overlooking these deeper differences in use.

So if, for example, your claim that God exists is met with some devastating-looking objections, you might try something like this:

'Ah, I see you are guilty of a crude misunderstanding. You have understood me to be making some sort of claim that you might refute. But of course, as Wittgenstein explained, and as sophisticated religious people like myself know, "God exists" is not used to make a claim at all. The sentences "God exists" and "I believe God exists" might look similar to sentences such as "Electrons exist" and

“I believe Mount Everest exists”, but pay close attention and you will see that their use is very different.’

But if religious language is used, not to make claims, but in some other way, *how* is it used? And, crucially, how does this difference in use mean that what is said is then immune to refutation?

Let’s look briefly at three suggestions: that ‘I believe in God’ is used (i) to express an attitude, (ii) to make a promise, (iii) to express our trust.

(i) Expressing an attitude

Expressivist theories crop up in several areas of philosophy. Take moral discourse, for example. We say that things are morally good or bad, right or wrong, and so on. Of course

Killing is wrong

looks very much like it is used to make a claim, a claim which, we suppose, is true (of innocent humans, at least). However, if those words are used to make a claim, and if claims are made true by facts – e.g. if my claim that ‘The pen is on the table’ is made true by the fact that the pen is lying there on that table – then we face the philosophical puzzle of finding the peculiar fact that makes ‘Killing is wrong’ true. Where is it? And how do we find out about it? Readers who have some knowledge of moral philosophy will know these are not easy questions to answer.

The philosopher A. J. Ayer developed an ingenious solution to this puzzle. He maintained that although ‘Killing is wrong’ might *look* like it’s used to make a claim, it is actually used very differently – to express an attitude. Consider:

Hoorah for the Red Socks!

Boo to killing!

Neither of these sentences is used to make any sort of claim. They are used, rather to express how we feel about something.

On Ayer's view, moral talk is also expressive. 'Killing is wrong' is used, in effect, to say, 'Boo to killing!'. We use the sentence to express an attitude of disapproval towards killing. But if 'Killing is wrong' is used expressively, then what is said is also neither true nor false. But then no mysterious moral fact is required to *make* it true. Puzzle solved!

Ayer's theory of how moral language is used is called *emotivism* or, for obvious reasons, the *boo-hoorah theory*.

You have probably already guessed how an expressivist account of how 'God exists' is used might be used to immunize what is said against any sort of refutation. True, the sentence 'God exists' looks superficially similar to, say, 'electrons exist', which is used to make a scientific claim. And when it comes to such scientific claims, it makes sense to ask what the evidence is for supposing it is true. The claim that electrons exist could also turn out to be false. But what if, despite the superficial similarity between the two sentences, 'God exists' is used differently? What if it is used, not to make a claim, but to *express an attitude*?

What sort of attitude? Perhaps an attitude of awe and reverence towards the universe. Perhaps to say 'God exists' is, in effect, to go, 'Oh Wow!' in amazement that the universe exists at all. If that's how 'God exists' is used, then, because no claim is made, the theist cannot be making any kind of error, and the atheist is left with nothing to refute.

So, if, having said 'God exists', the theist is faced with an objection, they might try to sidestep that criticism by saying, 'Oh dear, you appear to have misunderstood. You have supposed I was making some sort of *claim* that you might *refute*. No no, no, I was... expressing an attitude of awe and wonder.'

Again, notice how very thin a variety of theism this is. Actually, given that atheists are also awed by the mystery of why there is anything at all, it seems it would also be appropriate for them to say, 'God exists!' While this sort of theism might succeed in immunizing itself against any sort of rational refutation, it does so at the price of making itself indistinguishable from the attitude of a great many atheists.

(ii) Making a promise

Sometimes language is used, not to make a claim about the world, but to perform an action. Such ‘performatives’ include, for example,

I name this ship Titanic

I promise to clean the car

I bet you ten pounds

I apologize

Let’s focus on promises. When I say, ‘I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’, in a court of law, I don’t *make a claim* about the world, a claim that might turn out to be true or false. Rather, I make it true that I have promised by saying those words.

Now suppose we ask a theist:

Do you believe in God?

They reply,

I do.

This might look, superficially, much this exchange:

Do you believe in electrons?

I do.

But what if ‘I do’ in the former case is understood, not as expressing agreement with a certain theory or opinion, as in the electrons example, but rather as *making a promise*. Compare:

Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?

I do.

Here, 'I do' is used to make a not claim, but a promise. But if that's also how 'I do' is meant in response to 'Do you believe in God?', then, similarly, no claim is made. Rather, a promise is given.

According to theologian Nicholas Lash, this is how theists such as himself respond to the question, 'Do you believe in God?'

If someone is asked: 'Do you believe in God?' and replies 'I do', they may be saying one of two quite different things, because the English expression 'I believe in God' is systematically ambiguous. On the one hand, it may be the expression of an opinion; the opinion that God exists. On the other hand, as used in the Creed, in a public act of worship, it promises that life, and love, and all one's actions are henceforth set steadfastly on the mystery of God, and hence that we are thereby pledged to work towards that comprehensive healing of the world by which all things are brought into their peace and harmony in God. 'Nicholas Lash, do you take Janet Chalmers to be your lawful wedded wife?' 'I do.' 'Janet Chalmers, do you believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?' 'I do.' The grammar of these two declarations is the same.

So there are, Lash says, two kinds of theists. Those whom, in response to the question 'Do you believe in God?', use 'I do' to express agreement with an opinion, and those who use 'I do' to expresses such a promise. There are, correspondingly, two kinds of atheism: the atheism that rejects the opinion that God exists, and the atheism that involves a refusal to enter into any such promise.

According to Lash, atheists like Richard Dawkins are attacking a crude, unsophisticated form of theism on which belief in God amounts to belief in the truth of a certain opinion. Lash says,

the atheism which is the contradictory of the opinion that God exists is both widespread and intellectually uninteresting.

But then Lash actually *agrees* with Dawkins that *the opinion that God exists should be rejected*. Lash's kind of 'belief in God', by contrast – which he maintains is the kind of belief shared by the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, properly understood – *offers no opinion for the atheist to contradict*. If these theists make no claim, then their variety of 'belief in God' can neither be contradicted nor shown to be false. In which case, *the arguments of critics like Dawkins must entirely miss their mark*.

Is Lash's brand of theism immune to the arguments of critics like Dawkins? It's not clear to me that it is.

Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Lash is correct and 'I believe in God' is used not reveal ones opinion but to issue a promise. Does it follow that Lash holds no theistic opinion into which Dawkins might sink his teeth?

While it may be that no claim is made in the issuing of a promise, such a claim may nevertheless be *presupposed*. Notice that when we issue a promise, we issue it to *someone* – to something like a person. You can't make a promise to a brick or a daffodil. If you tried, you would be guilty of anthropomorphizing – of mistakenly supposing that the brick or daffodil is something like a person. So if 'I believe in God' really is used to make a promise, that raises the question: *to whom is this promise made?*

Presumably, Lash is not merely making a promise either to himself or to, say, other Christians (if he were, then they, or he, could choose cancel it whenever they liked). If Lash is making a promise, it seems he is making promise *to God*. But then, on Lash's view, even if 'I believe in God' is not used to assert that one believes there is a God who is something like a person, it does seem that Lash nevertheless *presupposes* there's some such person-like being to whom such a promise might be made. In which case, Lash is committed to an opinion that might, be refuted. In fact, it's precisely the opinion that there exists such a transcendent person to whom such a promise might be made that Dawkins is attacking.

(iii) an expression of trust

Some theists maintain that 'I believe in God' is used, not to agree that a certain claim – God exists – is true, but rather as an expression of *trust*. I believe in God in the same way as I believe in my wife, or my bank manager. I believe they can be trusted. I believe they are dependable. When I say, 'I believe in my wife', I don't mean that I suppose she exists, but that I have faith in her.

According to these theists, atheists who think that they can show that religious belief is irrational by showing that the claim 'God exists' is false are missing their target. Again, 'God exists' is not used to make a claim.

Does this move succeed in immunizing theism against rational criticism? Again, I don't see how. Often, when we place our trust in someone, it's a reasonable thing to do. It's reasonable if we have good reason to suppose the person in whom we are placing our trust exists, and is likely to be reliable. It's not so reasonable if we have good grounds for supposing the person in whom we are placing our trust is, say, a convicted fraudster, or entirely mythical.

Suppose I say, 'I believe in fairies', meaning by this, not that I believe in the truth of the opinion that fairies exists, but that I place my faith, my trust, in fairies to keep the bottom of the garden tidy, say. If it's pointed out to me that there's excellent evidence that there are no fairies at the bottom of the garden, it won't do for me to say, 'Ah, but *I never claimed there was, did I?*' Even if I made no such *claim*, the fact is that my placing my trust in fairies is highly unreasonable given the overwhelming evidence there's no such thing.

Similarly, even if someone who says 'I believe in God' is not agreeing to the truth of a *claim* – the claim that God exists – but rather communicating their trust or faith in God, we might still have excellent grounds for supposing that this trust or faith is misplaced. If, for example, we have excellent evidence that there's no such transcendent, compassionate being that will ultimately right all wrongs, etc. Which, arguably, we do (that, at least, is what the evidential problem of evil suggests).

So, it's not clear that the suggestion that 'I believe in God' is used to express faith or trust even works as an immunizing tactic.

Now you see it, now you don't

We have just looked at three strategies promising to immunize religious beliefs against refutation – strategies that turn on the suggestion that *religious language is not used to make claims, but in some other way*. We have seen that it's by no means obvious that the last two suggestions even work as immunizing strategies. However, let's suppose for the sake of argument that they do work. There remains a further problem with these strategies – the main problem with which I'm concerned here. The problem is that those employing these strategies *often appear to apply them in an inconsistent and partisan way*.

Take for example Nicholas Lash's suggestion that 'I believe in God' is used to make a promise rather than offer an opinion. Even if this is true, Lash does also nevertheless seem to offer various opinions on the subject of God. Books full. For example, in the same article, Lash says God is both 'the mystery we confess to be Creator of the world' and that upon which we are absolutely dependent. So it seems that Lash is of the opinion that there's a creator upon which we depend. God, Lash says, 'freely, and forgivingly, communicates Himself'. Our creator, Lash adds, also issues invitations to us and is that upon which we should have our hearts set. In short, Lash regularly uses language that looks remarkably like literal talk about the sort of cosmic super-person that Dawkins denies exists.

Now an atheist will no doubt say, at this point, 'But I *disagree* with these claims made by Lash. I *disagree* that the world has a creator that is something like a person – a person on whom we should have our hearts set.' To this, Lash says, in effect, 'You're guilty of a crude

misunderstanding. You take me to be offering *opinions* with which you might *disagree*.¹

So is Lash offering us opinions, or isn't he? He seems to say plenty about God, but then, when it looks like what he said might be subjected to damaging critical scrutiny, it turns out he never said anything after all. Lash is undoubtedly a sincere and intelligent man who is genuinely aiming for rigor and, as far as it is achievable, clarity. But if Lash is doing something else with language other than giving opinions, why, then, doesn't he just clearly and unambiguously *do that other thing*? Why choose to express yourself in such a quintessentially opinion-stating, and thus highly misleading, manner?

Adapted from Stephen Law's Believing Bullshit (Prometheus, 2009). think@royalinstitutephilosophy.org

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