

## Talking about God *Steve Grant*

One of the perennial problems encountered within the philosophy of religion is how it is that we can talk meaningfully about God when he is so utterly different to anything else we have ever encountered. When we say 'Socrates is wise', we make a claim which can be justified with regard to the behaviour and actions of a specific individual, where we have reliable eyewitness accounts and a record of what he said and did. But when we say 'God is wise', we predicate wisdom of God in what looks like much the same way as we do of Socrates, despite the fact that an immaterial, all-powerful all-knowing being is the subject of countless disputes over his precise nature and over whether or not he even exists. How can we justify using 'wisdom' or any other predicate in this way when we talk of God? The aim of this article is to consider one of the classic attempts to answer this question by claiming that there is no justification for attributing wisdom, omnipotence, omniscience or any other property to God, because such talk is meaningless.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the writer I shall look at does not claim that God doesn't exist, but that when we try to talk of him it is nonsense.

### *Falsificationism*

The approach I wish to consider was advanced in a short piece by one of British philosophy's most famous atheists, Antony Flew.<sup>2</sup> Flew begins with a parable from the writer John Wisdom. Two explorers come across a clearing in the jungle, and one claims that there is obviously a gardener who tends it. The second is sceptical, so they construct a series of increasingly elaborate tests to see if the gardener can be spotted. After each attempt fails, the believer suggests that this is because the gardener must have certain properties which mean that the guard dogs, electrified fence and ongoing observation cannot detect him. This means that the original claim that there is a gardener has now mutated into the claim that there is an invisible, intangible gardener which cannot be smelled by the dogs. Flew asks us to consider how such a figure would differ from an imaginary gardener, or no gardener at all, and claims that the process of qualifying the original claim by providing the gardener with an ever wider set of properties leads us eventually to the point where we are saying something far removed from what we started out with.

This line of argument is now used to move us towards a much more damaging claim about how theists talk of God. Flew argues that this process of qualification is one which is typical of theism, in that whenever one attempts to pin down a theist, she qualifies her original statement, rather than defending the view of God originally put forward, and he uses the problem of evil to highlight this. We are told that God loves us, and the sceptic points to a child dying of inoperable throat cancer. The loving father is frantic with worry, but God does not intervene. We then ask about the claim that God loves us, and the claim is then qualified such that it now becomes 'God's love is not merely a human love, or God's love is an inscrutable love.'<sup>3</sup> Flew claims that this process of qualification throws into doubt whether or not the theist can really be making an assertion at all. If allowing a child to die horribly when one has the power to prevent it does not conflict with the claim that God loves us, then it starts to

become unclear as to whether or not the theist is really using the word 'love' in a way which is recognisable. Flew ends with the question, 'What would have to occur...to constitute for you a disproof of the love of God, or of the existence of God.'<sup>4</sup>

How then does Flew move from the claim that theists will not allow any evidence to count against the claim that God exists and that he loves us, to the claim that they are not really saying anything? The answer to this lies in what one must know if one can be said to understand any statement. More specifically, Flew claims that if I understand the meaning of a positive assertion, then it follows that I must understand its negation. That is to say, if I genuinely understand the meaning of a statement such as 'snow is white', it must follow that I would understand the meaning of 'snow is not white'. And if I understand both the positive assertion and its negation, then I must have an idea as to what evidence would help to rule out one or other of them. With the example of the colour of snow, I can simply suggest that we consider lots of examples of snow, checking the colour in each case, and see if it either is or isn't white. In other words, because I understand the meaning of the terms, I can say what sort of evidence would support my claim or disprove it. And it is here that we come back to the difficulties with religious language. If the theist genuinely understands what she is saying when she says God exists or God loves us, then she must understand the negation of each (God doesn't exist, God doesn't love us), and she must be able to state what evidence would settle the dispute one way or the other. But if the theist's strategy is to qualify her original claim at every turn, and not to allow any evidence to count against her claims, then this is said to indicate a failure of understanding, for if the theist genuinely understood what she was saying, she would be able to tell us what evidence would count against her claims. It is this putative failure which leads Flew to conclude 'the Believer's earlier statement had been so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all'<sup>5</sup> – she isn't really saying anything.

It may help to understand Flew's attack if we put his line of argument into context. The name of his approach on the question of the meaning of religious language, falsificationism, comes from a theory advanced by Karl Popper with regard to what counts as a good theory in science.<sup>6</sup> According to Popper, the best theory is one where we do everything we can to falsify it. It is this which we try to do when we conduct a controlled experiment, and if the theory stands up to the experimental method, then it is a good one. Poor theories will be exposed (shown to be false) through experiment. Once one adapts this approach to the subject of religious language, then Flew's claim is essentially that the strategy of the theist is analogous to that of a scientist who never allows any experiment to count as one which can be used to test her theory. And just as we would argue that the theory cannot be deemed valid until some means of falsifying it is agreed upon, a statement about God could only count as a proper statement if we can say what evidence would demonstrate it is false.

### *Responses to Flew*

Flew's argument has a compelling quality to it, and carries the sort of force that many arguments have when bringing forward the problem of evil as means of attacking religious belief. But there is widespread agreement that he falls short of establishing the conclusion that theists aren't really saying anything when they talk of God. Perhaps the most telling response to this theory comes from R M Hare,<sup>7</sup> who provides a counter example to Flew's claim that we are not really asserting anything if we

won't accept any evidence to count against our claims. Hare asks us to imagine the following sort of scenario.

Imagine a student who is convinced that her teachers secretly wish to murder her. Let us say she confides this to one of her tutors who then goes out of his way to introduce her to the friendliest teachers, who all treat her with unfailing charm. But far from changing her views, this simply reinforces the paranoid student's belief that a particularly devious plot is underway and that the outward friendliness of the teachers is simply a means of luring her into a false sense of security. No matter what the tutor says or does, the student refuses to accept that she is not the subject of a deadly plot. Now, Hare points out that there are many things that one can accuse the student of, but it is surely *not* the case that she isn't really saying anything. Indeed, it is possible to disagree with her and to try to bring her to see things differently only because we attribute to her statements a series of meanings which correspond to what we ourselves understand to be the meaning of killing someone, engaging in a conspiracy etc. Flew might wish to respond that it is nevertheless possible that the student doesn't really understand what she is saying, and isn't therefore asserting what we take her to be saying. But this does not follow from the fact that she will not allow any evidence to count against her claim. It is entirely coherent to argue that she won't accept any evidence, but she is nevertheless asserting something, and what she is asserting is clearly meaningful.

Hare's counter example would appear to establish that a failure to allow any evidence to count against what you believe will not justify the conclusion that your claims are without meaning (which I take to be entailed by their not really being assertions at all). But a further series of arguments against has been put forward by Basil Mitchell. Mitchell begins by simply denying Flew's claim that theists do not allow the problem of evil to count against their belief in God. Indeed this is widely regarded as a monumental challenge to the belief in the God of classical theism as an all-powerful, all-loving morally perfect being. It is precisely for this reason that so much literature has been generated on the part of those who feel the need to reconcile the existence of this God with the existence of evil in the world.<sup>8</sup> Mitchell further contends that belief in God can't be understood in the way in which Flew presents it, rather as we might try to justify a belief in the existence of some alien species towards whom we have no specific attachment. To approach religious belief in this way is to misunderstand the nature of faith, and Mitchell responds with a parable of his own to make his point.

Mitchell asks us to imagine a resistance fighter in occupied France during the Nazi occupation, who meets a stranger who claims to be on the side of the resistance. There are moments when the stranger appears to offer great help and support, but other times when he is seen helping the enemy. The resistance fighter retains his belief in the ultimate goodness of the stranger despite the obvious doubts which arise, and argues in favour of him despite opposition from others. It is this sort of struggle which captures the nature of faith in God in the face of the difficulties posed by the problem of evil, and Mitchell claims that Flew's account fails to address the distinct nature of religious faith. Discussion of faith needs to be couched in terms of loyalty, friendship, trust and other such personal commitments, and cannot be captured entirely in an approach adapted from determining the quality of scientific theories.

## *Conclusion*

There can be no doubt that the problem of religious language is one which poses a considerable problem for both theists and sceptics alike. The theist must offer an account of how it is we can talk of something so far removed from what we encounter in ordinary experience. The atheist is in a surprisingly similar situation, in that unless she wishes to take something like Flew's line, and deny any meaning at all to religious language, then she must also provide a theory of meaning which explains how it is that life is breathed into the language used to describe something which she claims does not exist. What we are left with is the rather perplexing philosophical problem of how to reconcile the intuition that we do indeed speak meaningfully when we speak of God, with the intuition that meaning is surely related at some level to the way in which we experience the world. Failure to overcome this problem will ensure that it remains an enduring issue within the philosophy of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Another famous attempt to defend such a claim is to be found in A J Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic* (Dover Publications, 1946).

<sup>2</sup> Antony Flew, 'Death by a Thousand Qualifications', reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: a Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2000)153-155.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 154.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid I*,154.

<sup>6</sup> Popper's ideas in this area were originally put forward in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London; Hutchinson, 1959). A summary of his views can be found in Carl Hempel's *Philosophy of Natural Science* (New Jersey; Prentice-Hall, 1966), 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> The arguments put forward by Hare, and the ensuing ones by Basil Mitchell can both be found in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London; 1955).

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent cross-section of view on the problem of evil, see Part V of the Brian Davies edited text referred to in FN 1 above.