

Religious Language

What you need to know:

The distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism about religious language. The empiricist/logical positivist challenges to the status of metaphysical (here, religious) language: the verification principle and verification/falsification (Ayer). Hick's response to Ayer (eschatological verification) and issues arising from that response.

Further responses: the 'University Debate'

Anthony Flew on falsification (Wisdom's 'Gardener')

Basil Mitchell's response to Flew (the Partisan)

Hare's response to Flew (bliks and the lunatic)

and issues arising from those responses.

Key Terms

Cognitivism: Religious language contains propositions which can be known. They refer to the world and have a truth value. They are subject to being true or false.

Non-Cognitivism: Religious language is meaningful, even if they do not contain propositions that refer to the world and are not subject to being true or false.

Blik: A foundational and unprovable assumption about the world. It is not falsifiable and it does not make factual claims about the world that can be tested.

Hick's Eschatological Verification

P1: Verification means we can describe a situation (in principle) in which rational doubt is removed.

P2: In principle, after someone dies, they will encounter and recognise God.

C1: Therefore, in principle, after someone dies the rational doubt that there is a God will be removed.

C2: Therefore the claim that 'God exists' can be verified in principle by at least one person.

Possible Exam Questions

What does Hare mean by the term 'blik'? (3 marks)

What is the difference between cognitivist and non-cognitivist attitudes to religious language? (3 marks)

Briefly outline The empiricist/logical positivist challenges to the status of religious language. (5 marks)

Briefly outline Ayer's verification principle. (5 marks)

Briefly outline the falsification principle. (5 marks)

Is religious language meaningful? (25 marks)

Outline the verification principle and explain Hick's claim that religious statements are verifiable eschatologically. (12 marks)

Explain Mitchell's view of religious language and how he uses his 'Partisan' story to illustrate this. (12 marks)

Explain Flew's view of religious language and how he uses his 'Gardener' story to illustrate this. (12 marks)

Explain Hare's view of religious language and how he uses his 'Lunatic' story to illustrate this. (12 marks)

The verification principle (Ayer)

A statement is meaningful if and only if:

(a) It is a tautology – it is true by definition (analytic)

(b) It can be verified by sense experience (synthetic)

However, this meant that scientific claims were not meaningful, as we cannot verify a claim in all places or situations. As a result, Ayer distinguished between strong verification and weak verification:

Strong verification: it can be verified/falsified by observation

Weak verification: we can describe a possible observation that would make it probably true/false.

P1: Claims are meaningful if they are true by definition (analytic) or verifiable in principle (factually significant).

P2: Religious language makes claims that are not true by definition.

P3: Religious language makes claims about metaphysical entities (e.g. God or heaven)

P4: Metaphysical entities are beyond observation and experience and cannot be verified.

C1: Religious claims are not factually significant because we do not know what conditions would need to be met for us to verify these claims as true/false.

C2: Religious language makes claims like 'God exists' that are not meaningful, but are pseudo-statements

Moreover, Ayer shows that belief in God's existence is not even probable. If it were probable, it would be an empirical hypothesis – predictions we can verify. God's existence makes no verifiable predictions and so cannot be proved by verification.

Religious Language

Anthony Flew on falsification (Wisdom's 'Gardener')

P1: A meaningful assertion is one that can be falsified; a meaningless assertion cannot be falsified.

P2: To falsify an assertion means describing what the world would be like if that statement were false.

P3: Atheists provide many examples of what the world would be like if the claims 'God exists' or 'God love us like a father' were false (for example pointless suffering in the world)

P4: Believers refuse to accept these examples as falsifying – instead they qualify or amend their claims to avoid them being falsified.

P5: Moreover, believers cannot conceive of any examples of what the world would look like if the claims 'God exists' and 'God loves us' were false.

C: Believers' claim that 'God exists' or 'God loves us' are unfalsifiable and meaningless.

Hare's response to Flew (bliks and the lunatic)

P1: A blik is a foundational approach to the world, which can be neither verified or falsified and form the basis of our beliefs.

P2: Religious claims like 'God loves us' are expressions of a foundational approach to the world, which can be neither verified or falsified.

C: Religious claims like 'God loves us' are not assertions, they are expressions of bliks, but are meaningful.

Basil Mitchell's response to Flew (the Partisan)

P1: A meaningful assertion is one that can be falsified.

P2: To falsify an assertion means describing things that count against the assertion.

P3: Believers who claim that 'god loves us' recognise that the problem of evil/pain/suffering does count against their assertion.

C1: 'God loves us' is a genuine assertion

P4: However, believers will not discard their belief, even if evidence counts against it

P5: This is because of their faith in God – and they will always commit to finding an explanation for the counter-evidence (for example, trying to solve the problem of evil.)

C2: Therefore, religious statements like 'god loves us' are genuine assertions but not conclusively falsifiable.

The Parable of the Gardener (Flew)

Two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves. At last the Skeptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"

The Parable of the Lunatic and the Dons (Hare)

A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, 'You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?' But the lunatic replies 'Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you'. However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same.

The Parable of the Partisan (Mitchell)

n time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance--indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him. They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side'. Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side'. He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, 'The Stranger knows best'. Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say 'Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?' But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, 'Well, if that's what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better'.