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Religious Language

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Introduction

Here is a preliminary sketch of the aim of research on religious language. Our principal objective is to give a general account of the meaning of religious sentences. Religious sentences are sentences with a religious subject matter: they concern, for example, supernatural agents (God, other deities, angels, etc.), their properties and their actions. A general account of the meaning of religious sentences includes the following: determining their truth-conditions, showing whether they express beliefs or non-propositional attitudes, giving an account of the meaning of religious terms and how they combine to form meaningful sentences. We also need to consider whether there are distinctive features of religious language that have implications for theories of truth and reference.

Most contemporary work on religious language is concerned with one or more of these issues; and, although answers to some of them may appear straightforward, they are all matters of substantial debate. Even the question of whether we should be concerned with religious *language* is contentious. Let us consider some of the main points of discussion:

1. Should we be concerned with the meaning of the *sentences* and constitutive terms that make up religious language, or the *utterances* and expressions that make up religious speech or discourse? An utterance is the production of a token sentence, usually in verbal or written form. William Alston argues that language is not religious by virtue of its having a religious subject matter: 'religious language' is an inapt title for this field of philosophical research. Rather, we should be concerned with the use of language in religious contexts.

> What is erroneously called religious language is the use of language (any language) in connection with the practice of religion – in prayer, worship, praise, thanksgiving, confession, ritual, preaching, instruction, exhortation, theological reflection, and so on.
> ('Religious Language' 220)

There are, therefore, two views about our topic: that we should be concerned with sentences with a religious subject matter, or with utterances in a religious context. Note that Alston's theory has some surprising implications. For example, the utterance of a sentence in a religious context will count as religious even if the sentence has no religious subject matter (consider, for instance, all of the sentences uttered on non-religious topics in a discursive sermon). We shall touch on this topic in the chapter on Alston and metaphor.

2. What are the truth-conditions for religious sentences? The correct account of this might seem pretty obvious – 'God is omnipotent' is true just in case God is omnipotent – and, in general, we should be able to work out the truth-conditions of an indicative religious sentence from what is said. This is disputed, however, by reductionists. Reductionists propose that the truth-conditions of the sentences under discussion are given by some *other* class of sentences. To take some non-religious examples, phenomenalists contend that statements about the external world can be analysed in terms of statements about our actual or possible experiences, while some behaviourists take sentences about mental states to be reducible to sentences about behaviour and dispositions. Naturalistic reductions of theistic religious language have been proposed by, among many others, Julian Huxley and Henry Wieman. The prospects for religious reductionism are considered by Ayer, and we shall look at this issue further in the chapter on Ayer.

3. Are religious sentences truth-apt and do religious assertions express religious beliefs? Here, again, it may seem that the correct theory is obvious: religious sentences represent the world as being a certain way, and when sincerely uttered they convey the speakers' beliefs. However, this is denied in non-cognitivist – also called 'expressivist' or 'emotivist' – theories of religious language. According to expressivists, religious utterances do not express religious beliefs but rather stances, plans, emotions and other non-propositional attitudes. Religious expressivism has frequently been defended in philosophy (and in theology) but has never received widespread acceptance. As we shall see in the three chapters that follow, the theory is held by some as a response to Ayer's critique of religion, it is sometimes (contentiously) associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein, and can be seen (in a *very* restricted way) to form part of Berkeley's account of religious language.

4. We saw above that there are different views about whether an utterance is religious by virtue of its context or by the subject matter of the sentence that it expresses. But to what extent does context play a part in determining the meaning of what is said? Clearly, there are some expressions that are context-sensitive: 'I', 'you', 'here' or 'now' are fixed by the person uttering them or the time or place in which they are uttered. When one of these 'indexical' expressions occurs in a sentence, its meaning has to be filled in with details from the context in which the sentence is used. But does context intrude in other ways on what is said in religious discourse? According to Wittgenstein, a religious believer who asserts

'There will be a Last Judgement' is not contradicted by a non-believer who denies it (*Lectures and Conversations* 55). However, the sentence 'There will not be a Last Judgement' is the negation of the sentence 'There will be a Last Judgement', and neither sentence contains any obvious indexical. So presumably, on Wittgenstein's view, the meaning of these sentences must be changed in some way in the course of utterance: the meaning of religious utterances is in part determined by (non-standard) contextual factors. We shall return to this issue when looking at Putnam's discussion of Wittgenstein, and also consider Putnam's contention that even our concepts of reference and truth take on distinctive features when used in the context of religious discourse.

5. Early writers on religious language – notably the church fathers – were concerned with whether a predicate used of God such as 'good' has the same sense when it is used in a non-religious context (is 'univocal'), in a different but related sense ('analogical'), or in an entirely different sense ('equivocal'). More recent attention has focused on the role of metaphor in religious discourse. We can distinguish literal utterances like 'God created the world', where the speaker means what is said, from metaphorical utterances like

God is my rock,
The Lord is my shepherd,
God is our Father

where a speaker seems to use a (false) sentence to convey something else. Metaphors like these are commonplace in religious discourse. One line of inquiry about religious metaphor, pursued recently by Janet Soskice, considers the relationship between metaphors in religion and in science. A second issue, explored by William Alston in his paper on metaphor, is whether *all true* utterances about God are metaphorical. This position, one recent exponent of which is Anthony Kenny, is primarily motivated by metaphysics: because God is 'transcendent', nothing can be literally predicated of Him. Alston rejects this argument: all metaphors posit some kind of comparison that can at least in part be literally specified.

Through much of the twentieth century, research on religious language was extensively occupied by the problem, raised most effectively by A. J. Ayer, of whether religious claims can be verified by evidence – and, if not, whether they can be held to be meaningful. However, as we shall see in the chapter on Ayer, the verification challenge – at least as far as it is supposed to present a problem to the meaningfulness of religious claims – is without substance. The concern with the verifiability of religious claims has tended to obscure the central role played by questions about religious language in the philosophy of religion. Specifically, certain facts about the truth and content of religious sentences and utterances have to be in place for familiar questions about metaphysics and epistemology – the topics that we shall explore in subsequent sections – to come into play. For example, work on issues such as divine properties or the existence of God, and on epistemological issues such as the rationality of religious belief, require the rejection of non-cognitivist and metaphorical interpretations of religious language.

If you are interested in pursuing questions about religious language further, the following are useful:

Alston, W., *Divine Nature and Human Language*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.
Alston, W., 'Religious Language', in W. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
Moore, A. and Scott, M (eds), *Realism and Religion*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
Scott, M., 'Religious Language', *Philosophy Compass*, 2009.
Stiver, D., *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

Introduction to Ayer

A. J. Ayer (1910–89) made his name philosophically with the publication of *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), written while he was only 24. The book is a popular exposition of 'logical positivism', a theory developed from some of the ideas of an early-twentieth-century grouping of philosophers called the Vienna Circle. A guiding motivation of Ayer's book was the defence of a strong form of *empiricism*, the theory that all of our knowledge and significant ideas about the world derive from experience. Chief among the stated aims of Ayer's book is the elimination of metaphysics, that is, inquiry into issues that transcend matters of science and the observable world. Philosophy should instead be concerned with the analysis of the meaning of key concepts such as freedom, causation, knowledge, etc. To this end, Ayer proposed the notorious *verification principle*, according to which 'a statement is held to be literally meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable' (p. 12). That is, unless a statement is verifiable (can be rendered probable or conclusively established by experience) or is analytic (true only by virtue of the meanings of the words that make it up), it is literally meaningless. Since ethics, aesthetics and religion all appear to involve metaphysical commitments that are neither analytically true nor verifiable, the upshot of the verification principle seems to be to render these areas of language largely meaningless. In the following piece, taken from the penultimate chapter of his book, Ayer draws out the dramatic implications of logical positivism for religious language.

A. J. Ayer, 'Critique of Theology' (selection from *Language, Truth and Logic*, ch. 6)

[a]→ It is now generally admitted, at any rate by philosophers, that the existence of a being having the attributes which define the god of any non-animalistic religion cannot be demonstratively proved. To see that this is

so, we have only to ask ourselves what are the premises from which the existence of such a god could be deduced. If the conclusion that a god exists is to be demonstratively certain, then the premises must be certain; for, as the conclusion of a deductive argument is already contained in the premises, any uncertainty there may be about the truth of the premises is necessarily shared by it. But we know that no empirical proposition can ever be anything more than probable. It is only *a priori* propositions that are logically certain. But we cannot deduce the existence of a god from an *a priori* proposition. For we know that the reason why *a priori* propositions are certain is that they are tautologies. And from a set of tautologies nothing but a further tautology can be validly deduced. It follows that there is no possibility of demonstrating the existence of a god.

b→ What is not so generally recognized is that there can be no way of proving that the existence of a god, such as the God of Christianity, is even probable. Yet this also is easily shown. For if the existence of such a god were probable, then the proposition that he existed would be an empirical hypothesis. And in that case it would be possible to deduce from it, and other empirical hypotheses, certain experiential propositions which were not deducible from those other hypotheses alone. But in fact this is not possible. It is sometimes claimed, indeed, that the existence of a certain sort of regularity in nature constitutes sufficient evidence for the existence of a god. But if the sentence 'God exists' entails no more than that certain types of phenomena occur in certain sequences, then to assert the existence of a god will simply be equivalent to asserting that there is the requisite regularity in nature; and no religious man would admit that this was all he intended to assert in asserting the existence of a god. He would say that in talking about God he was talking about a transcendent being who might be known through certain empirical manifestations, but certainly could not be defined in terms of those manifestations. But in that case the term 'god' is a metaphysical term. And if 'god' is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists. For to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.

c→ It is important not to confuse this view of religious assertions with the view adopted by atheists, or agnostics.[1] For it is characteristic of an agnostic to hold that the existence of a god is a possibility in which there is no good reason either to believe or disbelieve; and it is characteristic of an atheist to hold that it is at least probable that no god exists. And our view that all utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical, so far from being identical with, or even lending any support to, either of these familiar contentions, is actually incompatible with them. For if the assertion that there is a god is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no god is

[1] This point was suggested to me by Professor H. H. Price.

equally nonsensical, since it is only a significant proposition that can be significantly contradicted. As for the agnostic, although he refrains from saying either that there is or that there is not a god, he does not deny that the question of whether a transcendent god exists is a genuine question. He does not deny that the two sentences 'There is a transcendent god' and 'There is no transcendent god' express propositions one of which is actually true and the other false. All he says is that we have no means of telling which of them is true, and therefore ought not to commit ourselves to either. But we have seen that the sentences in question do not express propositions at all. And this means that agnosticism is also ruled out.

Thus we offer the theist the same comfort as we gave to the moralist. His assertions cannot possibly be valid, but they cannot be invalid either. As he says nothing at all about the world, he cannot justly be accused of saying anything false, or anything for which he has insufficient grounds. It is only when the theist claims that in asserting the existence of a transcendent god he is expressing a genuine proposition that we are entitled to disagree with him.

d→ It is to be remarked that in cases where deities are identified with natural objects, assertions concerning them may be allowed to be significant. If, for example, a man tells me that the occurrence of thunder is alone both necessary and sufficient to establish the truth of the proposition that Jehovah is angry, I may conclude that, in his usage of words, the sentence 'Jehovah is angry' is equivalent to 'It is thundering'. But in sophisticated religions, though they may be to some extent based on men's awe of natural processes which they cannot sufficiently understand, the 'person' who is supposed to control the empirical world is not himself located in it; he is held to be superior to the empirical world, and so outside it; and he is endowed with super-empirical attributes. But the notion of a person whose essential attributes are non-empirical is not an intelligible notion at all. We may have a word which is used as if it named this 'person', but, unless the sentences in which it occurs express propositions which are empirically verifiable, it cannot be said to symbolize anything. And this is the case with regard to the word 'god', in the usage in which it is intended to refer to a transcendent object. The mere existence of the noun is enough to foster the illusion that there is a real, or at any rate a possible entity corresponding to it. It is only when we inquire what God's attributes are that we discover that 'God', in this usage, is not a genuine name.

It is common to find belief in a transcendent god conjoined with belief in an after-life. But, in the form which it usually takes, the content of this belief is not a genuine hypothesis. To say that men do not ever die, or that the state of death is merely a state of prolonged insensibility, is indeed to express a significant proposition, though all the available evidence goes to show that it is false. But to say that there is something imperceptible inside a man, which is his soul or his real self, and that it goes on living after he is dead, is to make a metaphysical assertion which has no more factual content than the assertion that there is a transcendent god.

It is worth mentioning that, according to the account which we have given of religious assertions, there is no logical ground for antagonism between religion and natural science. As far as the question of truth or falsehood is concerned, there is no opposition between the natural scientist and the theist who believes in a transcendent god. For since the religious utterances of the theist are not genuine propositions at all, they cannot stand in any logical relation to the propositions of science. Such antagonism as there is between religion and science appears to consist in the fact that science takes away one of the motives which make men religious. For it is acknowledged that one of the ultimate sources of religious feeling lies in the inability of men to determine their own destiny; and science tends to destroy the feeling of awe with which men regard an alien world, by making them believe that they can understand and anticipate the course of natural phenomena, and even to some extent control it. The fact that it has recently become fashionable for physicists themselves to be sympathetic towards religion is a point in favour of this hypothesis. For this sympathy towards religion marks the physicists' own lack of confidence in the validity of their hypotheses, which is a reaction on their part to the anti-religious dogmatism of the nineteenth-century scientists, and a natural outcome of the crisis through which physics has just passed.

It is not within the scope of this inquiry to enter more deeply into the causes of religious feeling, or to discuss the probability of the continuance of religious belief. We are concerned only to answer those questions which arise out of our discussion of the possibility of religious knowledge. The point which we wish to establish is that there cannot be any transcendent truths of religion. For the sentences which the theist uses to express such 'truths' are not literally significant.

Commentary on Ayer

Ayer's strategy is to argue that religious beliefs and statements are metaphysical. That is, they address a subject matter that transcends science and our experience. As such, they fall foul of the verification principle: since they are neither (i) verifiable nor (ii) analytically true, they are literally meaningless. However, for this strategy to work, Ayer needs to show that there is no plausible non-metaphysical reading of religious language, according to which religious statements are verifiable. He also needs to show that the central claims of religion could not be necessarily true. He begins by attempting to show the latter in [a]→.

Ayer quickly dismisses the idea that there could be a successful deductive proof for the existence of a god. The first part of Ayer's argument runs as follows. The conclusion of a deductive argument is contained in its premises, and therefore the conclusion is only as certain as the premises. It follows that, if a deductive argument for the existence of a god is to prove that a god exists with certainty, we shall also need to be certain about the premises on which it relies. Consider, for example, the following argument:

1. If I passed my exams, there is a loving God.
2. I passed my exams.
3. There is a loving God.

A deductive argument is called *valid* if it satisfies the following condition: if the premises are true, then the conclusion cannot be false. The argument above is deductively valid, since the truth of the two premises of the argument – (1) and (2) – guarantees the truth of the conclusion (3) (it has the form of a *modus ponens*: $p \rightarrow q$, p therefore q). Now, while Ayer's point that the conclusion of the argument is 'contained' in premise (1) appears correct, it only appears as the consequent of a conditional. Neither premise actually states that there is a loving God – premise (1) only says that there is a loving God *if* I passed my exams. However, Ayer's more general point seems plausible: a deductive argument can only guarantee the truth of its conclusions if it does not introduce any new information that could possibly be false. So we should not expect the conclusion delivered by a deductive argument to be any more reliable than information given in premises on which it depends. In this case, even if we grant the truth of (2), premise (1) is clearly unreliable.

1. Consider the following argument: *2 + 2 = 4* ***therefore*** *either 2 + 2 = 4 or a concept which contains a synthesis is to be regarded as empty and as not related to any object if this synthesis does not belong to experience either as being derived from it or as being an a priori condition upon which experience in general in its formal aspect rests*. Do you think that this argument is valid? Can you explain why – perhaps despite appearances – the conclusion of the argument introduces no new information?

This leaves the question of whether there could be a deductively valid argument for the existence of a god that relies on premises about which we are certain. Ayer's response comes in two parts. First, Ayer briefly makes the point that an empirical proposition – one that describes the external world – cannot serve as the premise to a deductive argument for the existence of a god, because while empirical claims may be more or less probable they cannot be certain. Second, Ayer rejects the idea that a deductive argument that proves the existence of a god could depend on *a priori* premises, i.e. premises that are known to be certain independent of our experience of the external world. All *a priori* necessary claims, Ayer contends, are just analytic (or 'tautologies'): they are made true just by the meanings of their constituent terms. And we cannot arrive at the conclusion that there is a god from merely analytic truths.

Why does Ayer maintain that all *a priori* truths are analytic? Consider the empiricist motivation of Ayer's book mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. One problem for empiricism is that there seem to be propositions, most notably some mathematical propositions, that appear to be not only informative about the world but also knowable by reflection without recourse to experience (i.e. *a priori*). Ayer cannot concede that we can have *a priori* knowledge of reality without giving up

on empiricism. His solution is to argue that, while there can be true *a priori* claims, including mathematical and logical truths, they are all analytic. For example, Ayer takes the truth of '7 + 5 = 12' to arise from the fact that '7 + 5' means the same as '12', just as 'An eye-doctor is an oculist' follows from the fact that 'eye-doctor' is synonymous with 'oculist'. The truth of these claims is in no way informative about the nature of reality but is the result of the meanings of their constituent terms. As such, *a priori* truths do not provide counter-examples to Ayer's empiricism.

There are a number of points at which Ayer's argument that all *a priori* truths are analytic can be challenged. Ayer himself raises the problem (in chapter 4) that, if a mathematical claim is true simply by virtue of the meanings of the symbols it contains, how can there be any place for discovery and invention in mathematics? If a mathematical equation merely conveys that the meaning of one statement is synonymous with another, why are some equations surprising? However, there are other difficulties. One is that there are non-mathematical propositions that we can know *a priori*: 'No object can be red and green all over at the same time', 'No object can wholly be in two different places at the same time' or (more debatably) 'Backwards causation is impossible'. It is not clear how Ayer could explain the truth of any of these claims from the meanings of their constituent terms. For example, it does not seem to follow from the meanings of 'object', 'red', 'green', 'all over', 'same time', etc., that no object can be red and green all over at the same time. Another difficulty for Ayer is that there is the ontological argument for the existence of God that has been presented as doing exactly what Ayer contends is impossible: providing a deductively valid proof based on *a priori* true premises. For more details on this, turn to the chapter on Anselm.

2. Do you think that it is true that no object can be red all over and green all over at the same time? If so, do you think that you can explain, just given the meanings of the terms 'object', 'red', 'green', 'all over', 'same time', etc., why no object can be red all over and green all over at the same time? (What, exactly, does it *mean* to say that something is 'red all over' or 'green all over'?)

Let us grant Ayer's contention that the existence of a god cannot be deductively proved, and look at his more surprising claim that the existence of a god cannot be shown to be probable, either. In reading [b]→, it is important to recall that Ayer's aim here is to show that religious beliefs have an ineliminable metaphysical component, and so (in so far as they are metaphysical) can be shown by the verification principle to be factually meaningless. With this in mind, his central line of argument is straightforward. A proposition can only be judged probable if it offers some factually contentful hypothesis about the world. But what is the content of the claim 'God exists'? One idea is that God accounts for the law-like character of the world and, in so far as the hypothesis that the behaviour of the world is law-like forms the content of the claim that God exists, it is factually significant. But this is clearly not *all* that a religious believer means by 'God exists'. It also means that there exists a transcendent deity. Ayer's position is as follows. If 'God exists' posits the existence of a transcendent deity, it is a metaphysical claim. But

if 'God exists' is a metaphysical claim – it is not verifiable and, as Ayer has argued, it is not analytically true – then it follows from the verification principle that it is literally meaningless.

As Ayer makes clear in [C]→, his view that religious claims are literally meaningless is different from denying or doubting the existence of a god. The atheist denies the existence of God, or any other religious agent, and consequently believes that the statements of religious discourse involve systematic error. Although sincerely uttered religious statements aim accurately to describe the world, they are, on the atheist view, unsuccessful in doing so because the facts in question do not obtain: none of the religious agents and properties that religious statements describe actually exists. The atheist, the religious believer and the agnostic disagree with each other in their assessment of the truth of religious claims. But they agree that religious claims are either true or false and at least in the business of representing reality, even though they may not be successful in doing so. In contrast, Ayer denies that religious claims are representational. They are never descriptive, factual, true or false. Rather, they are literally meaningless. Now, it may seem that Ayer's position implies – or, perhaps, must collapse into – atheism. For, in arguing that religious claims do not represent or describe a religious reality, is not Ayer in effect *denying that there is* such a reality? Not exactly. The important distinction here is between denying that a claim is true, meaning that it is not true, and denying that a claim is true, meaning that it lacks a truth-value. Ayer's view is that religious claims lack truth-values, not that they are untrue.

3. Suppose that someone says: 'I am an atheist: I hold that it is not the case that God exists *because* I hold that it is not even meaningful to claim that God exists.' Does Ayer have to dispute what this person says? On his own principles, can Ayer assert that it is not even meaningful to claim that God exists?

We shall evaluate the verification principle shortly. It is worth pausing to consider at this point what exactly Ayer has established, allowing that the verification principle is correct. Ayer claims to have shown that religious claims are 'literally meaningless', that they are 'nonsense', that they 'cannot be true or false', and that they lack 'factual content'. These points certainly sound intimidating, and make matters look pretty bad not only for religious believers but also for any positive account of religious discourse. But Ayer more than somewhat overstates his position: he has not shown that religious claims are meaningless, nor has he shown that people should not be religious. What he establishes – and this is on the (very big) assumption that the verification principle is true – is that religious claims do not represent a metaphysical subject matter. That is, they do not successfully describe anything that goes beyond what can in principle be verified by our experiences. This is certainly a radical conclusion, but not the same as saying that religious claims are meaningless. Notably, Ayer effectively concedes this point in the preceding discussion of ethics. As with religious claims, Ayer argues that ethical claims are unverifiable and are not analytic, and therefore lack factual content. But Ayer also has a positive story to tell about what ethical claims mean. Although they do not

serve to represent features of the world or to impart knowledge about the world, they do have a different non-cognitive function. Ayer proposes an *emotivist* theory of ethics, according to which an ethical claim such as 'stealing money is wrong' does not say anything that is true or false, but rather functions primarily to evince a feeling of disapproval, and to arouse a similar feeling in others. On this theory, calling something good or bad is meaningful but non-cognitive: it expresses an attitude rather than a belief about the action or event that one is evaluating. Ethical emotivism, in a substantially modified form now called expressivism, remains a topic of extensive debate in ethics. Is there a viable non-cognitivist theory of religion? Ayer is silent on the matter, though such a theory has been proposed by R. B. Braithwaite (1955) and R. M. Hare (1992). Although non-cognitivism in religion has received occasional support by philosophers and theologians, supporters have struggled to find a plausible formulation of the theory. Braithwaite's formulation, in particular, appears to face formidable problems (Swinburne 1993). We shall consider the non-cognitive aspects of religious language in the section on Berkeley that follows.

4. How plausible would it be to claim that religious assertions express attitudes towards life, or towards the universe? If it were true that religious assertions express attitudes towards life or the universe, do you think that the expressed attitudes would be positive (or would they rather be negative or neutral)?

In [d]→ Ayer rejects *naturalistic reductionism* about religious language. Reductionists typically propose a relationship between two classes of statement – the *given* class of statements, which are part of the field of discourse under discussion, and the *reduced* class of statements, which are the statements that specify the truth-conditions of statements of the given class. Typically, the reductionist proposes that what makes a statement of the given class true is that some statement or collection of statements of the reduced class is true. The particular form of reductionism that Ayer rejects is one in which religious statements constitute the given class, and naturalistic statements – those concerning scientifically detectable features of the natural world – constitute the reduced class. If a naturalistic reduction of religious statements were successful, their truth would be determined by statements which are non-metaphysical and verifiable, and consequently they would be literally meaningful.

Reductionist theses abound in philosophy. One example is phenomenalism, the view that statements about the external world can be analysed in terms of statements about our actual or possible experiences. So a phenomenalist might analyse 'There is a chair in the next room' as 'Were one to go into the next room, one would see a chair', reducing a statement about the external world in the given class to a statement from the reduced class about what one would perceive under certain circumstances. Scientific positivists analyse statements about unobservable entities, such as electrons, in terms of regularities in our experience. Behaviourists reduce statements about mental states to statements about behaviour and dispositions. A reductionist about the past analyses statements about the past in terms of our

present memories, historical records, archaeological evidence, etc. Reductionist theories have also been proposed for religious discourse. Troubled by the implausibilities and metaphysical excesses posed by the family of Olympian gods, an interpretation of ancient Greek literature that treats statements about gods as representing natural forces and human temperament offers an appealing reductionist reading. Julian Huxley suggests a naturalistic reduction of monotheistic belief along with other central Christian beliefs: religious statements are ways of talking about phenomena for which we cannot find ordinary explanations. God, for instance, is identified with the forces of nature. However, there seems little prospect of a thoroughgoing reductionist account of religious statements. The limits of a reduction like Huxley's are apparent. It may be possible to give an analysis of the content of some basic claims about God in naturalistic terms; some of God's actions in the world, for example, might be taken as referring to unexplained natural phenomena. But it is not clear how this approach could be extended further. What reductionist interpretation should we give to 'Jesus is risen' or 'There will be a Last Judgement', or most statements of theology and doctrine? Those statements for which no plausible reductionist analysis is available will presumably have to be regarded by the reductionist as in error. But, if the reductionist believes that most religious statements are false, why continue to maintain a reductionist analysis for a small sub-class of them? If metaphysical error so permeates religious discourse, there seems little motivation to retain a partial reduction in preference to accepting atheism.

5. The above examples of reductionist claims – phenomenalism, behaviourism, antirealism about the past – are all cases that seem *prima facie* pretty implausible (or so it seems to us!). Can you think of examples of reductionist claims that are true, or at any rate more plausible than the examples given above?

To get a clearer idea of the range of available theories of religious language, it is useful to make a brief detour at this point to consider religious subjectivism, a noteworthy variety of religious reductionism. The subjectivist maintains that religious claims report or describe the states of mind of religious believers. The reduced class of statements in this case are statements about human psychological states. A subjectivist account of the statement 'God loves you' might be that the statement reports the speaker's feeling of benevolence towards those being addressed. Subjectivist theses have also been advanced for ethics and aesthetics. An ethical subjectivist might argue that statements of approbation or disapprobation should be taken to represent the speaker's feelings of approval or disapproval. So 'Breaking promises is wrong' would report the speaker's feeling of disapproval towards breaking promises; the claim is true, therefore, if it accurately represents the believer's feelings. For a brief period after his return to philosophy in the late 1920s, Wittgenstein seems to have adopted a subjectivist theory of religious claims, though there is little hint of it in any of his subsequent or preceding work. In 'A Lecture on Ethics' from 1929, Wittgenstein distinguishes two states: a 'wonder at the existence of the world' and 'the experience of feeling absolutely safe'. He then proceeds:

> the first of [these experiences] is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct.
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> (*Philosophical Occasions* 42)

Wittgenstein presents us with some surprisingly crude subjectivist equations: to say that God created the world is to report one's sense of amazement at the world; to say that the world is safe in the hands of God is to report one's feeling of absolute security; to say that God disapproves of our conduct is to report one's feelings of guilt. On this analysis, it follows that what makes these statements true is that one has the appropriate feelings that they report.

Two final points about subjectivism. The first is that, despite its superficial similarity to non-cognitivism, subjectivism is a cognitivist theory: religious statements have truth-apt content, and their truth or falsity depends on the truth or falsity of the relevant statements about our psychologies to which they are reduced. According to the non-cognitivist, in contrast, religious statements in question express attitudes, but do not say anything about one's state of mind. In saying 'God created the world' one gives voice to attitudes that one has; one does not report that one has certain attitudes. Second, most cognitivists will also be unsympathetic to subjectivism. Whereas the subjectivist takes the truth of a religious assertion to be determined by the mental states of religious believers, most other cognitivists take their truth to be determined by the religious facts that they represent. Moreover, there is a very good reason for thinking that the subjectivist is wrong. Modifying one of Wittgenstein's examples, suppose that 'God disapproves of sloth' is true just in case 'I feel guilty when I act slothfully'. It seems to follow that Rachel, who feels guilty about bouts of laziness, when she says 'God disapproves of sloth' will not disagree with Jim, who is unrepentantly lazy, when he says 'God does not disapprove of sloth'. And Rachel will not be correct when she says that Jim is wrong (nor will Jim be correct when he says that Rachel is mistaken). Subjectivism seems to undermine disagreement between religious believers.

6. Suppose we accept that subjectivism about religious statements is discredited because it undermines the possibility of genuine disagreement between religious believers. Should we think that subjectivism about other classes of statements – e.g. ethical or political claims – is discredited on the same grounds? If not, why not?

The verification principle is now largely discredited. That something is seriously awry with the principle is shown when we apply to it its own standards. The verification principle is *itself* neither empirically verifiable nor a tautology, so literally meaningless according to its own criteria. The central reason for the theory's collapse, however, was the spectacular failure to come up with a workable version of the principle. Suppose we say that a statement is factually meaningful if it can

be conclusively verified. Then universal generalisations such as 'Copper expands when heated', which cover an unlimited number of instances, will fail the test. This is because any finite number of observations of copper expanding when heated will at most establish the high probability of the generalisation; since we are only in a position to observe a limited number of copper–heat interactions that have or will occur, the statement cannot be conclusively verified. Similarly, while it may be possible to show that statements about the distant past are highly probable, they cannot be conclusively verified.

In response to this difficulty, Ayer proposed a less demanding criterion according to which a statement S is weakly verifiable, and thereby meaningful, if observation statements can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain additional premises which cannot be deduced from the premises alone. An observation statement is one that reports an actual or possible observation. So from the generalisation 'Copper expands when heated' and the additional premise 'There is a piece of copper on the table' we can deduce the observation statement 'If the piece of copper on the table is heated, it will expand', and the generalisation is meaningful because weakly verifiable. Unfortunately for Ayer, the upshot of weakening the verification principle is to allow *any* statement to be (weakly) verifiable. For, if we combine a statement S and an observation statement O with the additional premise 'If S, then O', we can deduce O from S. For instance, take the statement 'God is merciful' and an observation statement 'This ticket will win the lottery': the observation statement can be deduced from 'God is merciful' using the additional premise 'If God is merciful, then this ticket will win the lottery'. We do not, of course, need to believe that this gerrymandered premise is true. Ayer is seeking to give us a criterion for the meaningfulness of statements; the truth or falsity of the additional premises is not at issue. Clearly, we shall be able to use the same strategy to deduce observation statements from any religious statement (or any statement at all), with the upshot that religious statements will satisfy the weaker verification condition.

In the estimation of most contemporary philosophers, the verification principle is dead; none the less, it is interesting to consider what relationship, if any, there should be between the meaning of religious statements and their verifiability. Here are three different responses. (1) The sharp distinction between the 'empirical' subject matter of science and the 'metaphysical' subject matter of religion, on which Ayer's critique relies, might be rejected. John Hick (1960), for example, has argued that religious statements could be verified by post-mortem experiences (should belief in the afterlife actually be true); William Alston (1991) has proposed that we can perceive or have 'experiential encounters' with God. Richard Swinburne argues that some religious statements might be considered akin to scientific theories. 'God exists', according to Swinburne, can be shown to be probable by virtue of its role in explaining (among other things) various orderly features of the universe. (2) A different line of response, associated with the Wittgensteinian tradition in philosophy of religion, is that the verificationists' mistake was to connect meaning so closely with *empirical* verification. Empirical verification may be a suitable standard for observational discourse, but religious discourse is characterised by distinct standards that can be identified by looking at the way in which religious statements are in practice justified and used. We shall explore this option in more detail in the

chapter on Putnam and Wittgenstein. (3) Another response, shared by many who are sympathetic to option (1), is that Ayer's critique confuses separate issues. There is an epistemological question about whether we can *know*, even in principle, that a religious assertion is true, and a distinct question as to whether a religious assertion is true. The truth of a religious assertion, on this view, is determined by whether it corresponds with reality. Ayer's critique conflates the knowability of a religious claim with its being truth-apt.

7. Consider the claim: *Every raven is the same colour as some other raven*. Do you think that this claim is meaningful? Do you think that there is some decisive test that could actually be performed to determine whether this claim is true (or false)? Do you think that you can give informative characterisations of possible states of the world in which this claim is true (or false)?

Ayer's theory of meaning is no longer defended, but useful contemporary discussions of his theory and its impact can be found in the reading given in the introduction to this section. For more on expressivism in ethics and religion, the work by Simon Blackburn cited below is a good starting point.

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Introduction to Berkeley

George Berkeley (1685–1753) is widely known for his defence of idealism, the theory that the world is constituted by ideas rather than by physical matter, but the following selection from his *Alciphron* (1732) addresses the distinct issue of his theory of ideas and language as it applies to religion. *Alciphron* was written by Berkeley during a visit to Rhode Island and published nearly two decades after his two most famous philosophical works, *Principles* (1710) and *Three Dialogues* (1713). The *Alciphron* is a Christian apologetic, a defence of Christian belief against its sceptical critics, consisting in seven dialogues. Chief among the dramatis personae are: Euphranor and Crito, who speak for Berkeley and Christianity, and Alciphron, a critic of religious belief described by Berkeley as 'freethinker' or 'minute

philosopher'. The dialogues are wide-ranging and can move rapidly between topics. The following selection, taken from the seventh dialogue, extracts material that most directly concerns religious language; omitted are digressions on free will and personal identity. The discussion picks up at a point at which Alciphron has been persuaded by Euphranor and Crito that a strong case can be made in support of Christian belief. Alciphron remains sceptical, however, as to whether we have a clear understanding of what many central Christian claims mean.

George Berkeley, *Alciphron* (selection from the seventh dialogue)

1. The philosophers having resolved to set out for London next morning, we assembled at break of day in the library.

Alciphron began with a declaration of his sincerity, assuring us he had very maturely and with a most unbiased mind considered all that had been said the day before. He added that upon the whole he could not deny several probable reasons were produced for embracing the Christian faith. But, said he, those reasons being only probable, can never prevail against absolute certainty and demonstration. If, therefore, I can demonstrate your religion to be a thing altogether absurd and inconsistent, your probable arguments in its defence do from that moment lose their force, and with it all right to be answered or considered. . . . Things obscure and unaccountable in human affairs or in the operations of nature may yet be possible, and, if well attested, may be assented to; but religious assent or faith can be evidently shewn in its own nature to be impracticable, impossible, and absurd. This is the primary motive to infidelity. This is our citadel and fortress, which may, indeed, be graced with outworks of various erudition, but, if those are demolished, remains in itself and its own proper strength impregnable.

EUPHRANOR. This, it must be owned, reduceth our inquiry within a narrow compass: do but make out this, and I shall have nothing more to say.

ALCIPHRON. Know, then, that the shallow mind of the vulgar, as it dwells only on the outward surface of things, and considers them in the gross, may be easily imposed on. Hence a blind reverence for religious faith and mystery. But when an acute philosopher comes to dissect and analyse these points, the imposture plainly appears; and as he has no blindness, so he has no reverence for empty notions, or, to speak more properly, for mere forms of speech, which mean nothing, and are of no use to mankind.

2. Words are signs: they do or should stand for ideas, which so far as they suggest they are significant. But words that suggest no ideas are

insignificant. He who annexeth a clear idea to every word he makes use of speaks sense; but where such ideas are wanting, the speaker utters nonsense. In order therefore to know whether any man's speech be senseless and insignificant, we have nothing to do but lay aside the words, and consider the ideas suggested by them. Men, not being able immediately to communicate their ideas one to another, are obliged to make use of sensible signs or words; the use of which is to raise those ideas in the hearer which are in the mind of the speaker; and if they fail of this end they serve to no purpose. He who really thinks hath a train of ideas succeeding each other and connected in his mind; and when he expresseth himself by discourse each word suggests a distinct idea to the hearer or reader; who by that means hath the same train of ideas in his which was in the mind of the speaker or writer. As far as this effect is produced, so far the discourse in intelligible, hath sense and meaning. Hence it follows that whoever can be supposed to understand what he reads or hears must have a train of ideas raised in his mind, correspondent to the train of words read or heard. These plain truths, to which men readily assent in theory, are but little attended to in practice, and therefore deserve to be enlarged on and inculcated, however obvious and undeniable. Mankind are generally averse from thinking, though apt enough to entertain discourse either in themselves or others: the effect whereof is that their minds are rather stored with names than ideas, the husk of science rather than the thing. And yet these words without meaning do often make distinctions of parties, the subject-matter of their disputes, and the object of their zeal. This is the most general cause of error, which doth not influence ordinary minds alone, but even those who pass for acute and learned philosophers are often employed about names instead of things or ideas, and are supposed to know when they only pronounce hard words without a meaning.

3. . . . And now, for the particular application of what I have said, I shall not single out any nice disputed points of school divinity, or those that relate to the nature and essence of God, which, being allowed infinite, you might pretend to screen them under the general notion of difficulties attending the nature of Infinity.

4. *Grace* is the main point in the Christian dispensation; nothing is oftener mentioned or more considered throughout the New Testament, wherein it is represented as somewhat of a very particular kind, distinct from anything revealed to the Jews, or known by the light of nature. The same grace is spoken of as the gift of God, as coming by Jesus Christ, as reigning, as abounding, as operating. Men are said to speak through grace, to believe through grace. Mention is made of the glory of grace, the riches of grace, the stewards of grace. Christians are said to be heirs of grace, to receive grace, grow in grace, be strong in grace, to stand in grace, and to fall from grace. And lastly, grace is said to justify and to save them. Hence Christianity is styled the covenant or dispensation of grace. And it is well

known that no point hath created more controversy in the church than this doctrine of grace. What disputes about its nature, extent, and effects, about universal, efficacious, sufficient, preventing, irresistible grace, have employed the pens of Protestant as well as Popish divines, of Jansenists and Molinists, of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Arminians, as I have not the least curiosity to know, so I need not say. It sufficeth to observe that there have been and are still subsisting great contests upon these points. Only one thing I should desire to be informed of, to wit, What is the clear and distinct idea marked by the word *grace*? I presume that a man may know the bare meaning of a term, without going into the depth of all those learned inquiries. This surely is an easy matter, provided there is an idea annexed to such term. And if there is not, it can be neither the subject of a rational dispute, nor the object of real faith. Men may indeed impose upon themselves or others, and pretend to argue and believe, when at bottom there is no argument or belief, farther than mere verbal trifling. Grace taken in the vulgar sense, either for beauty, or favour, I can easily understand. But when it denotes an active, vital, ruling principle, influencing and operating on the mind of man, distinct from every natural power or motive, I profess myself altogether unable to understand it, or frame any distinct idea of it; and therefore I cannot assent to any proposition concerning it, nor, consequently have any faith about it: and it is a self-evident truth, that God obligeth no man to impossibilities. At the request of a philosophical friend, I did cast an eye on the writings he showed me of some divines, and talked with others on this subject, but after all I had read or heard could make nothing of it, having always found, whenever I laid aside the word grace, and looked into my own mind, a perfect vacuity or privation of all ideas. And, as I am apt to think men's minds and faculties are made much alike, I suspect that other men, if they examine what they call grace with the same exactness and indifference, would agree with me, that there was nothing in it but an empty name. This is not the only instance where a word often heard and pronounced is believed intelligible, for no other reason but because it is familiar. Of the same kind are many other points reputed necessary articles of faith. That which in the present case imposeth upon mankind I take to be partly this. Men speak of this holy principle as of something that acts, moves, and determines, taking their ideas from corporeal things, from motion and the force or *momentum* of bodies, which, being of an obvious and sensible nature, they substitute in place of a thing spiritual and incomprehensible, which is a manifest delusion. For, though the idea of corporeal force be never so clear and intelligible, it will not therefore follow that the idea of a grace, a thing perfectly incorporeal, must be so too. And though we may reason distinctly, perceive, assent, and form opinions about the one, it will by no means follow that we can do so of the other. . . .

5. EUPHRANOR. Be the use of words or names what it will, I can never think it is to do things impossible. Let us then inquire what it is, and see

if we can make sense of our daily practice. Words, it is agreed, are signs: it may not therefore be amiss to examine the use of other signs, in order to know that of words. Counters, for instance, at a card-table are used, not for their own sake, but only as signs substituted for money, as words are for ideas. Say now, Alciphron, is it necessary every time these counters are used throughout the progress of a game, to frame an idea of the distinct sum or value that each represents?

ALCIPHRON. By no means: it is sufficient the players at first agree on their respective values, and at last substitute those values in their stead.

EUPHRANOR. And in casting up a sum, where the figures stand for pounds, shillings, and pence, do you think it necessary, throughout the whole progress of the operation, in each step to form ideas of pounds, shillings, and pence?

ALCIPHRON. I do not; it will suffice if in the conclusion those figures direct our actions with respect to things.

EUPHRANOR. From hence it seems to follow, that words may not be insignificant, although they should not, every time they are used, excite the ideas they signify in our minds; it being sufficient that we have it in our power to substitute things or ideas for their signs when there is occasion. It seems also to follow that there may be another use of words beside that of marking and suggesting distinct ideas, to wit, the influencing our conduct and actions, which may be done either by forming rules for us to act by, or by raising certain passions, dispositions, and emotions in our minds. A discourse, therefore, that directs how to act or excites to the doing or forbearance of an action may, it seems, be useful and significant, although the words whereof it is composed should not bring each a distinct idea into our minds.

ALCIPHRON. It seems so.

EUPHRANOR. Pray tell me, Alciphron, is not an idea altogether inactive?

ALCIPHRON. It is.

EUPHRANOR. An agent therefore, an active mind or spirit, cannot be an idea, or like an idea. Whence it should seem to follow that those words which denote an active principle, soul, or spirit do not, in a strict and proper sense, stand for ideas. And yet they are not insignificant neither; since I understand what is signified by the term *I*, or *myself*, or know what it means, although it be no idea, nor like an idea, but that which thinks, and wills, and apprehends ideas, and operates about them. Certainly it must be allowed that we have some notion that we understand, or know what is meant by, the terms *myself*, *will*, *memory*, *love*, *hate*, and so forth; although, to speak exactly, these words do not suggest so many distinct ideas.

ALCIPHRON. What would infer from this?

EUPHRANOR. What hath been inferred already – that words may be significant, although they do not stand for ideas. The contrary whereof

having been presumed seems to have produced the doctrine of abstract ideas.

ALCIPHRON. Will you not allow that the mind can abstract?

EUPHRANOR. I do not deny it may abstract in a certain sense; inasmuch as those things that can really exist, or be really perceived asunder, may be conceived asunder, or abstracted one from the other; for instance, a man's head from his body, colour from motion, figure from weight. But it will not thence follow that the mind can frame abstract general ideas, which appear to be impossible.

ALCIPHRON. And yet it is a current opinion that every substantive name marks out and exhibits to the mind one distinct idea separate from all others.

EUPHRANOR. Pray, Alciphron, is not the word *number* such a substantive name?

ALCIPHRON. It is.

EUPHRANOR. Do but try now whether you can frame an idea of number in abstract, exclusive of all signs, words, and things numbered. I profess for my own part I cannot.

ALCIPHRON. Can it be so hard a matter to form a simple idea of number, the object of a most evident demonstrable science? Hold, let me see if I cannot abstract the idea of number from the numerical names and characters, and all particular numerical things. Upon which Alciphron paused awhile, and then said, To confess the truth I do not find that I can.

EUPHRANOR. But, though it seems neither you nor I can form distinct simple *ideas* of number, we can nevertheless make a very proper and significant use of numerical names. They direct us in the disposition and management of our affairs, and are of such necessary use, that we should not know how to do without them. And yet, if other men's faculties may be judged of by mine, to obtain a precise simple abstract idea of number, is as difficult as to comprehend any mystery in religion.

[8] But, although terms are signs, yet having granted that those signs may be significant, though they should not suggest ideas represented by them, provided they serve to regulate and influence our wills, passions, or conduct, you have consequently granted that the mind of man may assent to propositions containing such terms, when it is so directed or affected by them, notwithstanding it should not perceive distinct ideas marked by those terms. Whence it seems to follow that a man may believe the doctrine of the Trinity, if he finds it revealed in Holy Scripture that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are God, and that there is but one God, although he doth not frame in his mind any abstract or distinct ideas of trinity, substance, or personality; provided that this doctrine of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes proper impressions on his mind, producing therein love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby becomes a lively operative principle, influencing his life and actions, agreeably to that

notion of saving faith which is required in a Christian. This, I say, whether right or wrong, seems to follow from your own principles and concessions. . . .

[10. CRITO.] It seems that what hath been now said may be applied to other mysteries of our religion. Original sin, for instance, a man may find it impossible to form an idea of in abstract, or of the manner of its transmission; and yet the belief thereof may produce in his mind a salutary sense of his own unworthiness, and the goodness of his Redeemer: from whence may follow good habits, and from them good actions, the genuine effects of faith; which, considered in its true light, is a thing neither repugnant nor incomprehensible, as some men would persuade us, but suited even to vulgar capacities, placed in the will and affections rather than in the understanding, and producing holy lives rather than subtle theories. Faith, I say, is not an indolent perception, but an operative persuasion of mind, which ever worketh some suitable action, disposition, or emotion in those who have it; as it were easy to prove and illustrate by innumerable instances taken from human affairs. . . .

But, to convince you by a plain instance of the efficacious necessary use of faith without ideas: we will suppose a man of the world, a minute philosopher, prodigal and rapacious, one of large appetites and narrow circumstances, who shall have it in his power at once to seize upon a great fortune by one villainous act, a single breach of trust, which he can commit with impunity and secrecy. Is it not natural to suppose him arguing in this manner? All mankind in their senses pursue their interest. The interests of this present life are either of mind, body, or fortune. If I commit this act my life will be easy (having nought to fear here or hereafter); my bodily pleasures will be multiplied; and my fortune enlarged. Suppose now, one of your refined theorists talks to him about the harmony of mind and affections, inward worth, truth of character, in one word, the beauty of virtue; which is the only interest he can propose to turn the scale against all other secular interest and sensual pleasures; would it not, think you, be a vain attempt? . . . And what effect can this have on a mind callous to all those things, and at the same time strongly affected with a sense of corporeal pleasures, and the outward interest, ornaments, and conveniences of life? Whereas that every man, do but produce in him a sincere belief of a Future State, although it be a mystery, although it be what eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, he shall, nevertheless, by virtue of such belief, be withheld from executing his wicked project: and that for reasons which all men can comprehend, though nobody can be the object of them. I will allow the points insisted on by your refined moralists to be as lovely and excellent as you please to a reasonable, reflecting, philosophical mind. But I will venture to say that, as the world goes, few, very few, would be influenced by them. We see, therefore, the necessary use, as well as the powerful effects of faith, even where we have not ideas.

Commentary on Berkeley

Alciphron, the religious sceptic, begins by conceding in [1] what he believes has been established in the preceding dialogues: that persuasive arguments can be given for Christian beliefs. In this dialogue he raises a distinct line of objection. An argument in favour of any belief, however persuasive it may appear, Alciphron contends, will be of no value in establishing the truth of that belief if we lack a cogent conception of what the belief is about. However, this is precisely the problem with Christian beliefs: they are 'impossible' and 'absurd'. Consequently, all of Euphranor's and Crito's arguments for religious belief must be rejected. Moreover, Alciphron claims, worries about the cogency of religious belief are the primary motive for religious scepticism.

Consider two different ways in which Alciphron's sceptical argument might be developed. Suppose you read the chapter on Paley's design argument and form the opinion that there is a version of the design argument (a better one than Paley's!) that – perhaps in combination with other arguments – provides good reasons to believe in the existence of an omnipotent deity. That is, they make it more likely than not that an omnipotent deity exists. However, suppose you then look at the chapter on Savage's omnipotence paradox and you conclude that the notion of an omnipotent deity requires *both* that the deity can do anything logically possible *and* that there is something logically possible that he cannot do (either lift or create a stone that is too heavy for him to lift). That is, you conclude that the concept of an omnipotent deity is internally inconsistent: it can be used to generate contradictions. It follows from this second conclusion that your first conclusion about there being good arguments for the existence of an omnipotent deity must have been mistaken. For, if the concept of an omnipotent deity is internally inconsistent, it is logically impossible for an omnipotent deity to exist. To this extent, a conceptual analysis of the claims for which we are arguing should be prior to determining their truth, since it can reveal unexpected inconsistencies which show that the claims at issue cannot be true. This is why Richard Swinburne begins his multivolume defence of Christian belief with *The Coherence of Theism*, which aims to establish that the religious claims that he is defending are both internally consistent and consistent with each other. Finding an inconsistency, therefore, is one way in which arguments that seem to show a conclusion to be probable can be overturned.

Calling faith 'impossible' suggests that Alciphron might be aiming to show that religious beliefs are inconsistent. However, he pursues a related but different line of argument for the same sceptical conclusion. Rather than try to show that religious concepts yield contradictions, Alciphron contends that we lack any clear ideas corresponding to many religious expressions that are central to Christian faith. Interestingly, this is a potentially more robust argument for scepticism than the first one we looked at. Consider again those two conclusions: that there is a successful design argument for an omnipotent deity and that if an omnipotent deity can do anything logically possible, then it is impossible for such a being to exist. The latter conclusion will only undermine the first if the analysis of omnipotence as 'can do anything logically possible' is the only one available. There may be another

way of capturing the concept of omnipotence that avoids paradox and presents no obstacle to the initial conclusion that an omnipotent deity exists. In contrast, suppose that the problem with omnipotence is not that conceptual analysis uncovers paradoxes but that we lack *any* credible analysis of what it means. That is, while we use the term 'omnipotent' and expressions like 'omnipotent deity', we lack even a rudimentary concept of what omnipotence is. Then, short of inventing a new meaning for 'omnipotence', conceptual analysis will not help against the sceptic's argument. As we shall see, however, Alciphron advances his objection to more Christian-specific concepts like 'grace' and 'Trinity'.

1. Could it be true that we have concepts for which we are simply unable to give analyses? It is clear that we don't obtain all of our concepts by way of analysis: we must already have some concepts in order to provide analyses for other concepts. But might it be the case that there are concepts that we do not obtain by way of analysis for which we are unable to give analyses? How plausible do you think it is that we can give credible analyses of the following concepts: *game*, *knowledge*, *cause*, *person*, *god*, *artwork*, *philosophy*?

In [2] Berkeley, via Alciphron, rolls out his theory of language and prepares the ground for the discussion of religious language. The background to Berkeley's account is the theory of communication developed by John Locke in book III of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke takes language to be an artificial construction of repeatable articulate sounds and that these sounds facilitate communication by being used to stand for ideas:

> Besides articulate Sounds, therefore, it was farther necessary, that [man] should be *able to use these Sounds as Signs of internal Conceptions*; and to make them stand as marks for the *Ideas* within his own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men's Minds be conveyed from one to another.
>
> (3.1.2)

The connection between a particular word and the idea it stands for is 'arbitrary', established by choice and convention. However, once established, we can use words to record our ideas and the thoughts that they constitute, and convey them to other people. From this Locke concludes: '*Words in their primary or immediate Signification*, *stand for nothing*, *but the* Ideas *in the Mind of him that uses them*' (3.2.2).

One standard but unfounded objection to Locke is that his account commits him to an extreme form of subjectivism. If words stand only for ideas, and specifically for ideas in the mind of the person using them, the upshot seems to be that we can only talk about our own ideas. That is, all we shall be able to communicate with words are facts about our own states of mind. J. S. Mill puts the point as follows: 'When I say, "the sun is the cause of the day", I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of day' (Mill 1973–4: 25). It is often the things in the world about which we have ideas that we are talking about,

rather than the ideas that we have about those things – Locke's theory seems to make the former impossible. However, this objection is now held to be based on a misreading of Locke. First, Locke's claim that words primarily *signify* or *stand for* ideas should not be equated with the claim that words primarily are about or *refer to* our ideas. Signification is a looser notion that can mean reference but also representation, expression or making known. Second, while words may have as their primary signification ideas, they also (secondarily) signify things. So Locke can be understood as arguing that, while words must signify ideas to be meaningful, and that successful linguistic communication consists in conveying ideas with words, words can also refer to things, and what they refer to is determined by the signified idea.

Berkeley takes as a starting point Locke's theory that words stand for ideas, and then elaborates on this theory with three further related points. (1) Words are significant and facilitate communication in so far as they are associated with the same clear ideas in the speaker as they suggest in hearers. For example, my use of the word 'Berkeley' becomes significant by my associating it with an idea of Berkeley, and it can be successfully used in communicating with you the reader as it suggests to you the idea of Berkeley. Without the association with ideas words are nonsense, and without the suggestion of ideas words serve no purpose. Berkeley also claims that every word needs to have an idea associated with/suggested by it to be significant. This is implausible. Both you and I can understand the meaning of *this* sentence, for example, without having a distinct idea associated with each word. Moreover, there seem to be numerous words useful in communication for which we have no particular idea. Even Locke concedes that words like *and* or *but* 'are not truly, by themselves, the names of any *Ideas*' (3.7.2). However, as we shall see shortly, Berkeley allows that words have other purposes than standing for ideas. (2) Thinking consists in a train of ideas, and thought is communicated with a sequence of words suggesting a corollary sequence of ideas. (3) Our disinclination to think through what we are saying or hearing has the result that we sometimes use words that lack a suitable association with and suggestion of ideas. The use of these insignificant words to make distinctions or arguments is, according to Berkeley, the 'most general cause of error'.

2. It seems very implausible to say that 'and' and 'but' are words that lack meanings. Indeed, you might think that you can give a pretty good account of the meanings of these words. What, then, is the difficulty in the suggestion that 'and' and 'but' *are* the names of ideas, namely, those ideas that constitute the meanings of these terms?

The problem that Berkeley now addresses – through Alciphron – is to what extent this third point applies in religious discourse. The discussion proceeds as follows. First, Alciphron begins by setting out different uses of the term 'grace'. His aim here is twofold: to point up the centrality of grace to Christian faith and to show the variety of ways in which grace is talked about and the very different functions that grace is supposed to serve. Second, Alciphron notes that there is disagreement

on almost every aspect of what grace actually is. So what, Alciphron asks, is the idea signified by the term *grace*? Clearly, Alciphron's conclusions are that no clear and distinct idea is signified by 'grace', that using the expression will be a 'cause of error' as described earlier, and that grace cannot be an object of faith. However, in arguing for this conclusion, Alciphron appeals, on the one hand, to the serious confusion in our thinking about grace and, on the other hand, to his inability to think of a clear and distinct idea when he considers what 'grace' means. These suggest two different lines of argument for his conclusions:

(A) Although I can form an idea of grace in its 'vulgar' sense as beauty or favour, the thing posited by Christian believers and discussed in theology denotes an 'active, vital, ruling principle, influencing and operating on the mind of man, distinct from every natural power or motive'. The latter applies ideas of motion and force drawn from physics to something incorporeal. But these physical ideas, which are clear in themselves, are essentially properties of corporeal objects and it is impossible to understand how they could be applied to incorporeal objects.

(B) It is possible to tell whether or not there is a clear and distinct idea associated with a word by introspection. However, when I consider what I mean by the word *grace* I find a 'perfect vacuity or privation of all ideas'. Since human introspective abilities are similar, I conclude that the same will be true if other people reflect on what they mean by grace. The upshot is that 'grace' is nonsense, and cannot be an object of faith.

Note also that the conclusions to (A) and (B) are slightly different. The point of (A) is that, while grace may suggest various ideas, they are so confused that we cannot identify any clear and distinct idea. The point of (B) is that, when we reflect on the meaning of grace, we find a complete absence of ideas. Whether or not Berkeley intends for Alciphron to present two distinct arguments, the main conclusion of [4] is clear: the word *grace* suggests no clear and distinct idea. The upshot, Alciphron argues, is that 'grace' is an insignificant term that does not suggest or convey clear and distinct ideas. As such, grace cannot be an object of faith.

Berkeley/Euphranor's response in [5] is to concede that, while Alciphron is correct that the word *grace* does not suggest a clear and distinct idea, it does not follow that the term is insignificant because the Lockean theory of language is incomplete: not all words are significant just by virtue of suggesting ideas. He offers three lines of argument.

First, consider the way in which counters can be substituted for money in a betting game, where the players agree to mark the counters to represent particular sums of money. The counters have a useful practical function both because it is easier to bet using counters than cash, and because it is quicker to see the standing of each player and determine the winnings. Evidently, however, it is possible to play the game and use the counters without framing ideas of what the counters represent, even though each counter signifies a sum of money. We can use words, Berkeley suggests, just as we use counters, as a practical way of signifying things without actually having ideas of what are signified. For instance, an arithmetical calculation may have a practical function in guiding our behaviour even though, while

performing the calculation, we do not frame any ideas of the figures that constitute it. So, Berkeley concludes, words can have a practical function in 'influencing our conduct and action' that is distinct from their role in suggesting ideas. Note here that Berkeley's conclusion is suitably modest: he has only shown that some words can have both a practical and an idea-suggesting function, and can be significant even when only fulfilling the practical function. He has not yet established that there are significant words that have only a practical function.

3. Can you think of some examples of words that have uses as practical ways of signifying things even in the absence of ideas of that which is signified? Could it be, for example, that the word 'God' is such an expression?

Second, Berkeley contends that some words may be significant even though they suggest no clear and distinct ideas, such as *myself*, *will*, *memory*, *love*, *hate*. However, his argument for this is puzzling. It seems to go like this: (*a*) Ideas are inactive, (*b*) Some words – those referring to agents, action, emotions, etc. – stand for active things, (*c*) ideas do not resemble active things, (*d*) an idea resembles what it denotes; therefore, (*e*) words for active things do not stand for ideas. Putting aside what exactly Berkeley takes 'inactive' to mean, his argument seems to involve a faulty step at (*d*) which conflates an idea with what an idea refers to. An idea can be about something active without itself being an active thing. However, the inactivity of ideas plays a more interesting role in Berkeley's positive account of religious words that we shall come to shortly.

4. What is wrong with the suggestion that an idea resembles what it denotes? Pick an idea of a particular thing – say, your idea of Barack Obama – and draw up two lists, one of which gives the properties of Barack Obama, while the other gives the properties of your idea of Barack Obama. Be careful to distinguish between the properties that your idea *has*, and the properties that your idea *attributes* to Barack Obama. In order to help with the second part of this task, try to give an account of the nature of ideas: what, exactly, *is* an idea?

Third, Berkeley introduces abstract ideas and touches on a substantial area of dispute between himself and Locke. An apparent problem for the Lockean theory of language is that, in addition to naming expressions that pick out particular things, we also use general terms – 'horse', 'white', 'square', 'animal' – and can frame general statements about kinds of things. But what ideas are suggested by general terms? According to Locke, for each general term there is a corresponding general idea that is created by our faculty of abstraction. Beginning with the idea of a particular thing, and noticing ways in which it resembles other particular things, abstraction allows us to generate a new idea by extracting those respects in which the things resemble each other and filtering out their dissimilarities. For example, we can generate the concept 'number' by abstracting those respects in which one,

two, three, etc., resemble each other, and leaving out those features where they differ. Berkeley, in contrast, while he allows that general terms are usable and useful, denies that we have any faculty of abstraction or that we can form an idea of number that is distinct from any particular number. The debate between Berkeley and Locke on abstract ideas is discussed in detail by Mackie (1976) and Lowe (1995). For the purposes of Berkeley's argument about religious language, it represents another respect in which he is prepared to break away from the theory that words must stand for ideas in order to be meaningful.

Berkeley's argument so far has been that there are words that do not suggest ideas but are still significant because of their practical function. They may play a role in guiding our behaviour, motivating us to act, or modifying our emotions or dispositions. A word may be significant, according to Berkeley, by having one or more of these functions even though they do not suggest any ideas. This is a position that Berkeley sketched out, but did not develop with much detail, in the introduction to his *Principles*:

> Besides, the communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language, as is commonly supposed. There are other ends, as the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition.
>
> (Introduction 20)

In [8]–[10], Berkeley uses this account of language to respond to Alciphron's sceptical objections and set out his positive account of the Christian mysteries. In effect, Berkeley – via his characters Euphranor and Crito – concedes to Alciphron that terms like 'Trinity', 'grace' and 'original sin' do not in their ordinary usage stand for any clear and distinct ideas. But these terms *are* nevertheless significant because of their desirable practical and motivational role for people with Christian faith. Berkeley gives three examples. Belief in the Trinity generates feelings of love and hope, and modifies behaviour towards gratitude and obedience in a way that is consistent with Christian principles. Belief in original sin, he proposes, produces an appropriate sense of unworthiness that promotes good habits. Belief in a 'future state' can motivate the believer to act morally.

5. Do you think that it is *plausible* that Christians can agree that terms like 'Trinity', 'grace', 'the afterlife' and 'original sin' do not stand for clear and distinct ideas on their ordinary usage? Do you think that it is plausible that Christians might suppose that terms like 'Trinity', 'grace', 'the afterlife' and 'original sin' have desirable practical and motivational roles *given* that they do not stand for clear and distinct ideas? How, exactly, could these terms play their motivational roles if they do not stand for clear and distinct ideas?

Berkeley supplements his proposal about the meaning of the Christian mysteries with two points about religious faith in [10]. The first is that faith is motivational:

it generates strong feelings and emotions, and causes the faithful to act in suitably Christian ways. Why does Berkeley draw this to our attention? His argument seems to be this. As we saw earlier, Berkeley believes that mere ideas do not motivate. If Christian beliefs suggested only ideas, that would not explain the motivational qualities of Christian faith. So, by giving some core religious beliefs a non-cognitive, practical function, it is also possible to explain motivational and affective qualities of faith. Berkeley's second point is that it is actually morally and religiously desirable that at least some core expressions of faith should be linked to our emotions and dispositions rather than to our ideas. Consider someone given to a life of indulgence. No new ideas or theories, however artfully expressed, are likely to effect a lifestyle change. Faith, in contrast, by introducing a change in the person's attitudes and dispositions can result in a change in the person's behaviour.

How should we evaluate Berkeley's account of religious language? There are no current defenders of the crude Lockean theory of language that largely informs Berkeley's argument, even with his modifications. As we have seen, the suggestion that there is a one-to-one relationship between words and ideas is clearly untenable. However, there are certainly current defenders of a related theory that, rather than focusing on particular words and their relationship with ideas, proposes that sentences aim to express states of mind. Moreover, it is possible to revise the main components of Berkeley's argument sympathetically with this theory. Alciphron's worries about the idea of grace, Trinity, original sin, etc., can be understood as questioning whether religious claims about the Christian mysteries genuinely express beliefs. That is, we lack any concept of grace, etc., and so cannot form beliefs about them. Berkeley's positive proposal stated by Euphranor and Crito can be seen as embracing the view that sentences can have other purposes than expressing thoughts or propositions, but may instead have the practical function of encouraging or implanting desires and other attitudes in ourselves and others. Claims about the Christian mysteries, on this view, play a non-cognitive role in religious faith. In the light of this sympathetic reconstruction, how should we assess Berkeley?

6. Unlike the kind of non-cognitivism looked at in the chapter on Ayer, Berkeley extends the non-cognitivist aspect of his theory to a very restricted range of religious statements – the Christian mysteries – but otherwise adopts a thoroughly cognitivist account of religious discourse. For example, he takes the various forms of behaviour that the non-cognitive uses of religious discourse promote to be in accordance with Christian thinking about proper belief and practice, which Berkeley believes is both cognitively contentful and rationally defensible. The preceding dialogues in *Alciphron* present such a defence, including arguments for the existence of God. To what extent therefore is it possible to combine a non-cognitive account of some religious claims with a cognitive account of others? Suppose, for example, we give a cognitivist account of 'God is good' and say that it expresses a belief, and we give a non-cognitivist account of 'Salvation is given by divine grace' and say that it has the practical function of encouraging moral behaviour. What, then, is meant by 'If God is good, then salvation is given by divine grace'?

7. Berkeley introduces a non-cognitivist account of the Christian mysteries as part of a *defence* of Christian faith against Alciphron's sceptical attack. But does he concede too much? It is not clear that Berkeley has a response to Alciphron's objection that claims about the Christian mysteries cannot be a matter of faith. If Berkeley agrees with Alciphron that assertions about the Christian mysteries do not express beliefs – his positive non-cognitive story about their meaning notwithstanding – then how is he to avoid the conclusion that they cannot be the subject of faith? So can Berkeley offer any positive account of what it is to have *faith* in matters to do with the Trinity, grace, etc.?

8. How plausible are Berkeley's specific proposals for a non-cognitive account of the Trinity, grace, the afterlife and original sin?

9. Alciphron's scepticism seems to be motivated in part by a kind of introspective experiment on religious terms: we reflect inwardly to see if we have any clear and distinct idea of what they mean. Is this a satisfactory way of determining what an expression means or whether it is meaningful?

10. Berkeley's discussion focuses on Christian beliefs. To what extent could the arguments that he considers be applied more widely to other religious beliefs?

For historical background to Berkeley's *Alciphron*, along with an abridged version of the text, see:

Berman, D., *George Berkeley – Alciphron in Focus*, London: Routledge, 1993.

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Mackie, J. L., *Problems from Locke*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
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Introduction to Putnam

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), widely considered one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, is one of the few major figures in recent analytic philosophy to have contributed to the philosophy of religion. His work in the area, which principally concerns religious language, has been influential and has generated a substantial literature. However, interpretation of Wittgenstein's views is seriously

hampered by his most concentrated treatment of religious language surviving only in the form of lecture notes taken by his students. These were published as part of *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* in 1966. Wittgenstein's other work in the field, published in *Culture and Value*, is made up of often interesting but only occasional remarks extracted from his extensive notebooks. Consequently, philosophers of religion sympathetic to Wittgenstein's views – D. Z. Phillips the most prominent among them – have tended to apply ideas and themes from Wittgenstein's extensive and more developed work on the philosophy of language to religion, rather than look in detail at the source material.

Hilary Putnam has been a leading figure in analytic philosophy since the 1960s and is best-known for his significant contributions to philosophy of language, mind and science. In his recent book *Renewing Philosophy*, Putnam aims to reassess a range of issues in contemporary philosophy and particularly in the philosophy of language. In the course of this, he provides us with one of the most accessible and philosophically well informed discussions of Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion in recent years.

Hilary Putnam, 'Wittgenstein on Religious Language' (selection from *Renewing Philosophy*, chs 7–8)

[1] I was first led to study the published notes on the Lectures on Religious Belief by their subject, of course, but as I studied them and though about them it came to seem to me more and more that besides the interest they have for anyone who has thought about the subject of religious language and religious belief, they also have great interest for anyone who is interested in understanding the work of the later Wittgenstein. They were given, in fact, in a transitional period, the summer of 1938, when Wittgenstein's later views were in development, and they by no means bear their meaning on their sleeve. Even if we had the full text of what Wittgenstein said in that room in Cambridge in 1938, I suspect we would be deeply puzzled by these lectures; as it is, we have only twenty-one printed pages of notes summarizing the three lectures.

[2] The first of the three lectures sets the interpretative problem before us. What Wittgenstein says in this first lecture is very much contrary to received opinion in linguistic philosophy, and there is an obvious problem as to how it is to be understood. In this lecture, Wittgenstein considers a number of religious utterances, not utterances about God, but about the afterlife, or the Last Judgement, such as 'an Austrian general said to someone, "I shall think of you after my death, if that should be possible"'. (Wittgenstein says, 'We can imagine one group would find this ludicrous, another who wouldn't.') Again, Wittgenstein imagines someone asking him if he believes

in the Last Judgement, and on the first page of the published notes Wittgenstein says, 'Suppose I say that the body will rot, and another says "No. Particles will rejoin in a thousand years, and there will be a Resurrection of you".' Wittgenstein's comment is 'If some said: "Wittgenstein, do you believe in this?" I'd say: "No." "Do you contradict the man?" I'd say: "No." . . . Would you say: "I believe the opposite," or "There is no reason to suppose such a thing"? I'd say neither.' In short – and perhaps this is the only thing that is absolutely clear about these lectures – Wittgenstein believes that the religious man and the atheist talk past one another.

I remember that the first time I had lunch with a great student of comparative religion, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, Smith said to me that when the religious person says 'I believe that there is a God' and the atheist says 'I don't believe there is a God' they do not affirm and deny the same thing. We shall see that Wittgenstein makes the same point later in his lectures. Religious discourse is commonly viewed (by atheists) as pre-scientific or 'primitive' discourse which has somehow strangely – due to human folly and superstition – managed to survive into the age of the digital computer and the neutron bomb. Wittgenstein (and Smith) clearly believe no such thing. Wittgenstein's picture is not that the believer makes a claim and the atheist asserts its negation. It is as if religious discourse were somehow incommensurable, to employ a much-abused word. But there are many theories of incommensurability, and the problem is to decide in what way Wittgenstein means to deny the commensurability or homophony of religious and non-religious discourse.

a→ [3] The first lecture provides us with a number of clues. When a question is an ordinary empirical question, the appropriate attitude is often not to say 'I believe' or 'I don't believe', but to say, 'probably not' or 'probably yes' or possibly 'I'm not sure'. Wittgenstein uses the example of someone's saying 'There is a German aeroplane overhead'. If Wittgenstein were to reply, 'Possibly I'm not so sure', one would say that the two speakers were 'fairly near'. But what if someone says 'I believe in a Last Judgement' and Wittgenstein replies 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly'? Wittgenstein says, 'You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us'. For a typical non-believer, the Last Judgment isn't even a possibility.

b→ I don't think that Wittgenstein is denying that there is a state of mind in which someone on the verge of a religious conversion might suddenly stop and say, 'What if there is a Last Judgment?'. But I think that Wittgenstein would deny that this is at all like 'Possibly there is a German airplane overhead.'

c→ Wittgenstein distinguishes religious beliefs partly by what he calls their unshakeability. Speaking again of the man who believes in a Last Judgment, Wittgenstein says: 'But he has what you might call an unshakeable belief. It will show, not by reasoning or appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in [*sic*] all his life. This is a very much stronger fact – foregoing pleasures, always appealing to this picture. This in one

sense must be called the firmest of all beliefs, because the man risks things on account of it which he would not do on things which are by far better established for him. Although he distinguishes between things well-established and not well-established'.

In understanding these remarks I think it is important to know that although Wittgenstein presents himself in these lectures as a non-believer, we know from the other posthumous writings published as *Culture and Value* that Wittgenstein had a deep respect for religious belief, that he thought a great deal about religious belief, especially about Christianity, and that in particular he paid a great deal of attention to the writings of Kierkegaard, and especially to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The man who has an unshakeable belief in the Last Judgment and lets it regulate for all his life, although he is very willing to admit that the Last Judgment is not an established fact, sounds like a Christian after Kierkegaard's own heart. Yet Kierkegaard himself wrote that faith 'has in every moment the infinite dialectic of uncertainty present with it'. It would be ludicrous to suppose that inner struggles with the issue of religious belief are something that Wittgenstein did not know. When he takes the unshakeableness of a religious belief as one of its characteristics, he does not mean that a genuine religious belief is always and at every moment free from doubt. Kierkegaard spoke of faith as a state to be repeatedly re-entered, and not as a state in which one can permanently stay. But I think that Kierkegaard would agree with Wittgenstein – and that Wittgenstein is here agreeing with Kierkegaard – that religious belief 'regulates for all' in the believer's life, even though his religious belief may alternate with doubt. If I confidently believe that a certain way is the right way to build a bridge, then I will set out building the bridge that way. If I come to have doubts, I will not go on building the bridge in that way (unless I am a crooked contractor); I will halt the construction and run further tests and make calculations.

Wittgenstein uses the following example:

Suppose you had two people, and one of them, when he had to decide which course to take, thought of retribution and the other did not. One person might, for instance, be inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment, and another person doesn't think of this at all.

If he is ill, he may think: 'What have I done to deserve this?' This is one way of thinking about retribution. Another way is, he thinks in a general way whenever he is ashamed of himself: 'This will be punished.'

Take two people, one of whom talks of his behaviour and of what happens to him in terms of retribution, the other one does not. These people think entirely differently. Yet, so far, you can't say they believe different things.

[Wittgenstein adds] It is this way: if someone said: 'Wittgenstein, you don't take illness as a punishment, so what do you believe?' – I'd say: I don't have any thoughts of punishment.

There are, for instance, these entirely different ways of thinking first of all – which needn't be expressed by one person saying one thing, another person saying another thing.

I think we take this example in the wrong way if we suppose that the person who thinks of his life in terms of retribution is supposed to be what we ordinarily call a religious believer. The example doesn't depend on whether he is or isn't. What Wittgenstein means to bring out by the example is that one's life may be organized by very different pictures. And he means to suggest that religion has more to do with the kind of picture that one allows to organize one's life than it does with expressions of belief. As Wittgenstein says, summing up this example, 'What we call believing in a Judgment Day – The expression of belief may play an absolutely minor role'.

d→ Wittgenstein also contrasts the basis upon which one forms empirical beliefs and the basis upon which one forms religious beliefs. 'Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons' in the religious case. 'They are, in a way, quite inconclusive'. He contrasts two cases: a person who believes that something that fits the description of the Last Judgment will in fact happen, years and years in the future, and who believes this on the basis of what we would call scientific evidence, and a person who has a religious belief which 'might in fact fly in the face of such a forecast and say "No. There it will break down."' Wittgenstein says that if a scientist told him that there would be a Last Judgment in a thousand years, and that he had to forgo all pleasures because of such a forecast, that he, Wittgenstein, 'wouldn't budge'. But the person whose belief in such a forecast was religious and not scientific 'would fight for his life not to be dragged into the fire. No induction. Terror. That is, as it were, part of the substance of the belief.'

The quoted passages give some sense to the texture of these notes. What seems most important in the first lecture is the repeated claim that the relation between Wittgenstein (who thoroughly conceals his own struggle with or against religious belief in these lectures) and the believer is not one of contradiction:

If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgment Day, in the sense in which religious people have belief in it, I wouldn't say: 'No. I don't believe there will be such a thing.' It would seem to be utterly crazy to say this.

And then I give an explanation: 'I don't believe in . . .', but then the religious person never believes what I describe.

I can't say. I can't contradict that person.

In one sense, I understand all he says – the English words 'God', 'separate', etc. I understand. I could say: 'I don't believe in this,' and this would be true, meaning I haven't got these thoughts or anything that hangs together with them. But not that I could contradict the thing.

e→ At this point, a number of possible interpretations of what Wittgenstein is saying might occur to one. (1) I already mentioned the Kuhnian idea of

incommensurability. Perhaps Wittgenstein thinks that religious language and ordinary empirical language are incommensurable forms of discourse. The non-religious person simply can't understand the religious person. (2) The religious person and the non-religious person can understand one another, but the non-religious person is using language literally and the religious person is using it in some non-literal way, perhaps emotively, or to 'express an attitude'. (3) Ordinary discourse is 'cognitive' and the religious person is making some kind of 'non-cognitive' use of language. What I shall try to show in the light of these lectures, and especially the third and concluding lecture, is that Wittgenstein regards the first as a useless thing to say, and the second and third as simply wrong.

This will, of course, not solve the interpretative problem, but it will in a sense sharpen it, and make it interesting. If Wittgenstein is not saying one of the standard things about religious language – for example, that it expresses false pre-scientific theories, or that it is incommensurable – then what is he saying and how is it possible for him to avoid all of these standard alternatives? Still more important, how does he think we, including those of us who are not religious (and I don't think that Wittgenstein himself ever succeeded in recovering the Christian faith in which he was raised, although it was always a possibility for him that he might), are to think about religious language? What sort of a model is Wittgenstein offering us for reflection on what is always a very important, very difficult, and sometimes very divisive part of human life?

Superstition, Religious Belief, Incommensurability

In the second lecture Wittgenstein discusses the difference between the use of pictures to represent people, including biblical subjects, such as Noah and the ark, and the use of pictures to represent God. 'You might ask this question: "Did Michelangelo think that Noah in the ark looked like this, and that God creating Adam looked like this?" He wouldn't have said that God or Adam looked as they look in this picture.' Interestingly, Wittgenstein says: 'In general, there is nothing which explains the meanings of words so well as a picture, and I take it that Michelangelo was as good as anyone can be and did his best, and here is the picture of the Deity creating Adam. If we ever saw this, we certainly wouldn't think this the Deity. The picture has to be used in an entirely different way if we are to call the man in that queer blanket "God", and so on.'

f→ One concern of Wittgenstein's in the first two lectures is to contrast superstition and credulity – which often coexist with religion, to be sure – with religious belief in his sense. (Again, the parallelism with Kierkegaard is striking.) In the first lecture, the example of superstition is a Catholic priest who tries to offer scientific arguments for the truths of religion. Wittgenstein's comment is:

I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition.

But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons.

In the second lecture, Wittgenstein says:

Suppose I went to somewhere like Lourdes in France. Suppose I went with a very credulous person. There we see blood coming out of something. He says: 'There you are, Wittgenstein, how can you doubt?' I'd say: 'Can it only be explained one way? Can't it be this or that?' I'd try to convince him that he'd seen nothing of any consequence. I wonder whether I would do that under all circumstances. I certainly know that I would under normal circumstances.

'Oughtn't one after all to consider this?' I'd say: 'Come on. Come on.' I would treat the phenomenon in this case just as I would treat an experiment in a laboratory which I thought badly executed.

Wittgenstein is concerned to deny any continuity at all between what he considers religious belief and scientific beliefs. When there is a continuity, and only when there is a continuity, Wittgenstein is willing to use words like 'ridiculous', 'absurd', 'credulous', 'superstition'.

[4] To come back now to the question of incommensurability. An example might seem to be afforded by Wittgenstein's own thought experiment at the beginning of the first lecture, of imagining two people of whom the first one says 'I believe in a Last Judgment' and the second (whom Wittgenstein imagines to be himself) says 'Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly.' Here Wittgenstein does say 'It isn't a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane, which you could express by saying: "You mean something altogether different, Wittgenstein."' Now, at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigation* (#43), Wittgenstein famously (or notoriously) wrote, 'For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.' If, as is too often done, one simply ignores the qualification 'though not for all', and ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that meaning can always be defined as use, then it is natural to read this 'theory of meaning' back into the statement I just quoted, from the first of the Lectures on Religious Belief, and to take it that when Wittgenstein insists again and again that the religious person and the non-religious person are using words in different ways, then he literally means that the words 'I believe in a Last Judgment' have a different meaning for someone who can speak of the Last Judgment as a matter of 'probability' and for a religious believer. But Wittgenstein doesn't say this. In the notes we have of the first lecture. Wittgenstein replies to his

imaginary interlocutor, 'The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning.'

Something lovely happens here. Wittgenstein is often charged with simple-mindedly equating use and meaning. Yet here he imagines an interlocutor who plays the role of the stock 'Wittgenstein' and proposes to say that the words 'I believe in a Last Judgment' have a different meaning in the two uses (one is, of course, completely imaginary), and the real Wittgenstein reminds the stock 'Wittgenstein' that we don't use the word 'meaning' that way, that is, that the difference in these two uses is not something that we would ordinarily call a difference in meaning.

Wittgenstein says something more about this towards the end of the same lecture. He points out that as an educated person who has read (and, as we know, has thought deeply about) the religious classics there is a very good sense in which he knows what the religious person means, although there is another sense in which Wittgenstein is inclined to say 'I don't know whether I understand him or not': 'If Mr. Lewy [Cassimir Lewy, one of the students present at these sessions] is religious and says he believes in a Judgment Day, I won't even know whether to say I understand him or not. I've read the same things as he's read. In a most important sense, I know what he means.' Wittgenstein immediately goes on to ask, 'If an atheist says: "There won't be a Judgment Day", and another person says there will, do they mean the same? – Not clear what the criterion of meaning the same is. They might describe the same things. You might say, this already shows that this means the same.'

So Wittgenstein is warning us against supposing that talk of 'meaning the same' and 'not meaning the same' will clarify anything here. In a perfectly ordinary sense of meaning the same, we might say that they do not mean the same (although Wittgenstein is still inclined to say 'I don't even know whether I should say that I understand him or not'); and to dismiss the question whether the words mean the same here, that is, whether the sentence means the same, as of no help here, is precisely to dismiss 'incommensurability' talk. That the two speakers aren't able to communicate *because* their words have different 'meanings' is precisely the doctrine of incommensurability.

[5] Another familiar move is to say that religious language is 'emotive', that is, that it is used to 'express attitudes'. It might seem possible (at least to some) to read these lectures as holding some version of this doctrine, if it were not for the very end of the third lecture. At that point Wittgenstein returns again to the question of whether he (as a non-believer) should say that he understands the sentences of the religious person or not.

> Suppose someone, before going to China, when he might never see me again, said to me: 'We might see one another after death' – would I necessarily say that I didn't understand him? I might say [want to say] simply, 'Yes. I *understand* him entirely.'
>
> *Lewy*: 'In this case, you might only mean that he expressed a certain attitude.'

I would say 'No, it isn't the same as saying "I'm very fond of you"' – and it may not be the same as saying anything else. It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute something else?

Suppose I say: 'The man used a picture.'

I want to postpone discussion of the last suggestion for a few moments. The reply to Lewy is extremely interesting. What I take Wittgenstein to be pointing out is that there is a perfectly ordinary notion of expressing an attitude, and what he is doing is contrasting the kind of metaphysical emphasis that non-cognitivists (either about religious language or about ethical language) want to put on the notion of expressing an attitude with the ordinary unemphasized use of that notion. If I am fond of someone, I may express my fondness in a variety of ways, for example, by saying 'there's no one like you'. In such a case, we might say that I was expressing an attitude, and we can say what the attitude was, namely, I was expressing my fondness for the person. That attitude can be expressed explicitly, by saying 'I am very fond of So-and-so'. However, Wittgenstein is refusing to say that language is 'used to express an attitude' when there is no possibility of replacing the language in question by an explicit expression of the so-called attitude. The reason is not hard to guess. Wittgenstein refused to turn the distinction between saying something because that is, quite literally, what one means to say, and saying something to express an attitude, into a *metaphysical* distinction. As a metaphysical distinction it makes no sense at all without an appropriate metaphysical notion of a 'real fact' (the sort of fact that David Lewis can 'take at face value'); and that, evidently, is what Wittgenstein thinks we haven't got. . . . In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell suggested that Charles Stevenson, the father of emotivism, wrote as if he had forgotten what ethical arguments sound like. Wittgenstein is saying that Lewy is talking as if he had forgotten what religious language sounds like. The philosophical doctrine of non-cognitivism does not help us to understand what religious discourse is really like any more than the philosophical doctrine of incommensurability does.

[6] What then is Wittgenstein saying? I believe that what Wittgenstein (in company with Kierkegaard) is saying is this: that religious discourse can be understood in any depth only by understanding the form of life to which it belongs. What characterizes that form of life is not the expressions of belief that accompany it, but a way – a way that includes words and pictures, but is far from consisting in just words and pictures – of living one's life, of regulating all of one's decisions. Here the believer, Kierkegaard, would add something that Wittgenstein does not say, but that I think he would agree with: namely, that a person may think and say all the right words and be living a thoroughly non-religious life. Indeed, Kierkegaard insists that a person may think he or she is worshipping God and really be worshipping an idol. (I suspect that this is one of the reasons that Kierkegaard is so much hated by fundamentalists. For Kierkegaard an authentically religious form of life is characterized by a constant concern that one not replace the

idea of God with a narcissistic creation of one's own; and this concern expresses itself in uncertainty as much as in certainty. For Kierkegaard, to be absolutely sure you are 'born again' is a sign that you are lost.) What Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have in common is the idea that understanding the words of a religious person properly – whether you want to speak of understanding their 'meaning' or not – is inseparable from understanding a religious form of life, and this is not a matter of 'semantic theory', but a matter of understanding a human being.

The Religious Person 'Uses a Picture'

[7] Still, Wittgenstein himself does say that the religious person 'uses a picture'. Is this not a way of saying that religious language is non-cognitive? Indeed, Yorick Smythies seems to share this worry, since he objects towards the very end of the third lecture, 'This isn't all he does – associate a use with a picture.' Wittgenstein's initial reply is, 'Rubbish' – hardly an encouraging response. Wittgenstein goes on to explain that when he says the religious man is using a picture, he does not mean by that anything that the religious person himself would not say:

Smythies: 'This isn't all he does – associate a use with a picture.'

Wittgenstein: Rubbish. I meant: what conclusions are you going to draw? Etc. Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God?

'He could just as well have said so and so' – this [remark] is foreshadowed by the word 'attitude'. He couldn't just as well have said something else.

If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions.

Isn't it as important as anything else, what picture he does use?

Of certain pictures we say that they might just as well be replaced by another – e.g. we could, under certain circumstances, have one projection of an ellipse drawn instead of another.

[He *may* say]: 'I would have been prepared to use another picture, it would have had the same effect . . .'

The whole *weight* may be in the picture. . . .

When I say he's using a picture, I'm merely making a *grammatical* remark: [What I say] can only be verified by the consequences he does or does not draw.

If Smythies disagrees, I don't take notice of this disagreement.

All I wished to characterize was the conventions [*sic*] he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant.

'All I wished to characterize was the conventions [consequences] he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant.' One of the most impressive remarks a great philosopher

has ever made in a discussion! Wittgenstein is saying here that to say the religious person is using a picture is simply to describe what we can in fact observe: that religious people do employ pictures, and that they draw certain consequences from them, but not the same consequences that we draw when we use similar pictures in other contexts. If I speak of my friend as having an eye, then normally I am prepared to say that he has an eyebrow, but when I speak of the Eye of God being upon me, I am not prepared to speak of the eyebrow of God. But the impressive thing here is not what Wittgenstein says, but the limit he places on his own observation. Pictures are important in life. The whole weight of a form of life may lie in the pictures that that form of life uses. In his own notes, some of which are republished in the collection *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein says 'It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition, but it is equally true that we *always* eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of all our thinking is to be respected and not treated as superstition'.

. . . I have been discussing the suggestion that Wittgenstein thought that religious language is non-cognitive (even if he doesn't explicitly say so). But what can 'non-cognitive' come to when one suggests that 'religious language is non-cognitive'? The traditional realist way to spell out the suggestion that religious language is non-cognitive would be to say that ordinary descriptive terms like 'my brother' and 'America' and 'the Arc de Triomphe' all refer to something, but words used in the religious contexts Wittgenstein discusses do not. Isn't Wittgenstein hinting that when one speaks of the Eye of God or the Last Judgment one is *merely* using a picture, that is to say, one isn't referring to anything? . . .

[8] In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein attacks the idea that one can use a word only if one possesses a necessary and sufficient condition for its application. He uses the word 'game' as an example (the example has now become famous), and he says that in the case of that word we don't have a necessary and sufficient condition. We have some paradigms – paradigms of different kinds, in fact – and we extend the word 'game' to new cases because they strike us as similar to cases in which we have used it before (he describes this as our 'natural reaction'). He speaks of games as forming a family, as having a family resemblance, and he also uses the metaphor of a rope. The rope is made up of fibers, but there is no fiber running the length of the whole rope. There are similarities between one game and another, but there is no one similarity between all games.

While the notion of a family-resemblance word has become commonplace, many people miss Wittgenstein's point: as Rush Rhees emphasized a long time ago, Wittgenstein was not just making a low-level empirical observation to the effect that in addition to words like *scarlet*, which apply to things all of which are similar in a particular respect, there are words like *game* which apply to things which are not all similar in some one respect.

Wittgenstein was primarily thinking not of words like *game*, but of words like *language* and *reference*. It is precisely the big philosophical notions to which Wittgenstein wishes to apply the notion of a family resemblance. On Rush Rhees's reading (and I am convinced he is right), what Wittgenstein is telling us is that referring uses don't have an 'essence'; there isn't some one thing which can be called referring. There are overlapping similarities between one sort of referring and the next, that is all. That is why, for example, Wittgenstein is not puzzled, as many philosophers are, about how we can 'refer' to abstract entities. After all, we are not causally attached to the number three, so how can we refer to it? Indeed, do we know that there is such an object at all? For Wittgenstein the fact is that the use of number words is simply a different use from the use of words like *cow*. Stop calling three an 'object' or an 'abstract entity' and look at the way number words are used, is the advice.

Now, the relevance of this to a lecture on the philosophy of religion is as follows: just as I have suggested that Wittgenstein would not have regarded talk of incommensurability as helpful, and would not have regarded talk of certain discourses' being 'cognitive' and other discourses' being 'non-cognitive' as helpful, I suggest that he would not have regarded the question as to whether religious language *refers* as helpful either. (He speaks of a 'muddle'.) The use of religious language is both like and unlike ordinary cases of reference: but to ask whether it is 'really' reference or 'not really' reference is to be in a muddle. There is no essence of reference. Religious thinkers will be the first to tell you that when they refer to God, their 'referring use' is quite unlike the referring use of 'his brother in America'. In short, Wittgenstein is telling you what *isn't* the way to understand religious language. The way to understand religious language isn't to try to apply some metaphysical classification of possible forms of discourse.

Commentary on Putnam

After briefly introducing the topic in section 1, Putnam addresses in section 2 what he takes to be the central issue raised by Wittgenstein in his lectures: the incommensurability of religious and non-religious discourse. Section 3 draws on evidence from the lectures as to what Wittgenstein understands by incommensurability. Putnam looks at, and rejects, two possible interpretations: in section 4 that religious believers and non-believers mean something different when they use religious terms, and in section 5 that religious claims are non-cognitive. In section [7] Putnam discusses Wittgenstein's idea that religious believers use 'pictures'. In sections [6] and [8], Putnam explains the differences between religious and non-religious discourse in terms of the different – but resembling – conceptions of reference operating in them.

Putnam introduces in section [2] some examples from Wittgenstein's lectures on religious belief where the claims of someone who believes in an afterlife are contrasted with expressions of disbelief in the afterlife. In these cases, Wittgenstein

proposes, the believer and non-believer do not 'contradict' or say the 'opposite' to one another. According to Putnam, Wittgenstein thinks that the religious believer and the atheist talk past one another and also that in general there is a failure to connect between religious and empirical claims. Understanding in what way religious and non-religious discourse are not commensurate is the *interpretative problem*.

1. Do you think there is any plausibility to the idea Wittgenstein seems to be hinting at in the quoted comments in section 2, that religious believers and atheists are talking past one another? In what way might they be failing to communicate?

Putnam follows up with three clues, in [a]→, [c]→ and [d]→ respectively, from Wittgenstein's lectures as to what he might mean. (1) Wittgenstein proposes that we tend to express either belief or disbelief in religious statements rather than tentative agreement or disagreement, whereas with empirical claims it is often appropriate to describe them as more or less probable. Putnam notes that Wittgenstein is not denying that someone could wonder whether there is, for example, a Last Judgement. But he thinks that Wittgenstein would deny that is 'at all like' speculating on whether an empirical claim might be true. (2) Wittgenstein takes religious beliefs to be characterised by their 'unshakeability', which Putnam sees as a point of contact between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. Although Putnam thinks that both of them would allow that a religious believer may experience moments of uncertainty, he understands them as proposing that religious beliefs typically have a regulative function in the life of a religious believer. Putnam develops this with Wittgenstein's comments comparing religious belief with the example of someone organising their life with a picture. (3) Wittgenstein contends that the reasons for religious beliefs often look different from the reasons given for empirical beliefs. A religious belief in the afterlife does not seem to depend on the strength of the empirical evidence for or against it. Even the possession of compelling evidence for the Last Judgement, Wittgenstein thinks, would not generate the life-changing commitments characteristic of religious belief.

2. Explain the point that Putnam makes at [b]→.

3. What does it mean to say that a religious belief is 'unshakeable'? What is the relationship between a belief being unshakeable and it 'regulating' or 'organising' one's life?

4. Carefully read through [d]→. What point do you think Wittgenstein is making here? Is it correct to say that someone who believed in the Last Judgement on the basis of evidence would not have a religious belief?

Before advancing his own solution to the interpretative problem, Putnam introduces in [e]→ two possible accounts of what Wittgenstein is proposing (options (2) and (3) cover similar ground), neither of which he thinks are successful: incommensurability and non-cognitivism.

The incommensurability thesis is associated with Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science and in particular with his (1962/1970) book *The Structure of Scientific Reality*. According to Kuhn, the development of science is not a uniform progression of knowledge but has 'normal' and 'revolutionary' stages. During periods of normal science, scientists work on a range of problems and questions against a background of shared theoretical beliefs, scientific standards and techniques – what Kuhn sometimes calls a 'paradigm'. During periods of revolutionary science, this background consensus characteristic of normal science breaks down, and there are revisions to scientific belief and practice: there is a 'paradigm shift'. Kuhn went on to claim that science guided by one paradigm is 'incommensurable' with science guided by a different paradigm, i.e. that there is no common standard by which to assess the theories of different paradigms. Moreover, on the grounds that even one's observations are influenced by one's theories, Kuhn suggests that scientists operating with different paradigms will perceive the world differently.

One way of understanding the incommensurability thesis is that there is a change in the meaning of scientific terms when paradigms change. Kuhn gives the example of the term 'mass', which, he suggests, has a different meaning in Newtonian and in Einsteinian physics – a point that he extends to the entire repertoire of apparently common terms like 'space', 'time', 'matter', 'force', etc. (1962/1970: 149). The background to this view is meaning holism, the theory that the meanings of terms are extensively interconnected and that changing the meaning of one term results in changes in the meanings of all interconnected terms. A paradigm shift, on this theory, effects a systematic change in the meanings of scientific terms. This also seems to be what Putnam has in mind as a way of interpreting Wittgenstein, when he says that the atheist and the religious believer 'do not understand' each other. Wittgenstein's position would be something like this: the atheist and the religious believer work with different paradigms or 'worldviews' that result in them meaning something different when they talk about 'God', 'Last Judgement', etc. Despite appearances, they do not mean the same thing when they use these terms – and, moreover, lacking the other's paradigm, do not understand each other's meanings. This provides an answer to the interpretative problem, because it follows from the incommensurability of religious and non-religious discourse that the atheist and the religious believer do not (and are unable to) contradict one another. My denial of what you say will only contradict you if what I deny is the same as what you assert to be true.

We briefly considered the second option, non-cognitivism, in the first two chapters. For the non-cognitivist, a religious utterance like 'There will be a Last Judgement' does not express a religious belief that there will be a Last Judgement, but rather expresses an attitude. Which attitudes are in play (and which attitudes are being expressed by this particular utterance) will depend on the version of non-cognitivism in question, but they might include: hope, awe, guilt, approval/disapproval, solidarity. So, on the non-cognitivist view, religious statements are used to give voice

to one's attitudes. How does this provide an answer to the interpretative problem? Putnam's point seems to be, in line with a position taken by David Hume, that attitudes do not contradict either with other attitudes or with other beliefs. My wish to play loud chant and drone music into the night, for example, may conflict with my neighbour's wish for a quiet life, and may need practical resolution, but my desires do not contradict my neighbour's beliefs or desires. So if religious non-cognitivism is right, then religious statements (which express attitudes) do not contradict with other statements (which express attitudes or beliefs).

5. Explain the distinction between superstition and religious belief introduced at [f]→. How do the following two examples illustrate the distinction? Why does Putnam introduce this distinction at this point in the discussion? Is the distinction useful?

Putnam rejects the incommensurability theory as a solution to the interpretative problem in section 4 on the grounds that Wittgenstein himself seems to reject this idea when he suggests that the difference between someone who asserts 'I believe in the Last Judgement' and someone with no religious convictions who doubts or denies it 'might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning'. And Wittgenstein follows up by apparently giving the question of whether the religious believer and the atheist mean the same thing little importance. Putnam rejects the non-cognitivist solution to the interpretative problem in section 5 because Wittgenstein in conversation with Lewy seems to reject the idea that a statement expresses an attitude unless it could be replaced with a statement of the attitude being expressed. Since this does not seem possible for most religious claims (what statement of one's attitudes could replace 'I believe in the Last Judgement'?), Wittgenstein seems to be rejecting religious non-cognitivism.

Putnam seems right in rejecting incommensurability as a plausible answer to the interpretative problem. And Putnam is not alone in thinking that Wittgenstein's brief dialogue with Lewy also shows that he rejects non-cognitivism (see Clack 1999: 36). But there is a problem. Recall the distinction in the chapter on Ayer between religious non-cognitivism and subjectivism: the subjectivist thinks that religious claims can be reduced to claims about our mental states, whereas the non-cognitivist thinks that religious claims give voice to our mental states (and specifically our attitudes rather than our beliefs). Subjectivism, as we saw, is a form of cognitivism – albeit, not one that many religious cognitivists would endorse. Now, consider the dialogue between Lewy and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein appears to take the student's question as asking whether religious claims *report* attitudes, and so could be replaced by a statement of how one feels; in this case, whether 'I will see you after death' means 'I am very fond of you'. But this is just a form of subjectivism. So there does not seem to be anything in Wittgenstein's exchange with Lewy, therefore, to suggest that he rejected non-cognitivism.

Putnam recognises the *prima facie* plausibility of the non-cognitivist reading of Wittgenstein in his discussion of pictures – could Wittgenstein be saying that the religious believer is *merely* using a picture to guide her life?

6. Examine the discussion in section 7. What does it mean to say that a religious believer 'uses a picture'? Is it true? Why does Wittgenstein say that some pictures should be 'respected and not treated as superstition'?

In section 8, Putnam gives his own answer to the interpretative problem. He begins with Wittgenstein's idea that for some words there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for their use, but rather an interconnected collection of related uses. These are 'family-resemblance' terms. According to Putnam, Wittgenstein thought that terms of central philosophical interest, like *reference* and *truth*, are also family-resemblance terms. In other words, there is no one set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct use of 'refer', and of the different sets of conditions that are used there is none that is uniquely privileged over the others. By implication, Putnam thinks that *different* standards of reference and truth are operative within religious discourse from those that are operative in scientific, mathematical or other kinds of discourse.

How does this help with the interpretative problem? Putnam's point seems to be that Wittgenstein's position is that the atheist and the religious believer do not contradict because they employ different (though possibly related) concepts of reference and truth in their talk of God. What are these different concepts? Putnam refers us to the 'forms of life' in which religious and other expressions are used. Unfortunately, he does not spell out the details. But possibly he has something like the following in mind. For a non-believer inquiring into whether some object has a property, the availability of publicly accessible evidence and the testability of the claim about that thing will be among the crucial standards that are used in finding the correct answer. In contrast, for a religious believer asking whether God has a certain property, the judgement of a respected figure in a religious community, the claims of an authoritative text, or personal religious experiences may play a role in determining the correct answer. This is not to say that a religious believer disregards empirical evidence when evaluating the truth of religious claims; but, as Wittgenstein seems to suggest in [d]→, it is not a failing of the standards of *religious* discourse to believe where there is no supportive empirical evidence. So the reason that someone who asserts 'There will be a Last Judgement' is not contradicted by someone who denies it is that the non-believer and the believer are employing different criteria in the assessment of the truth of this claim.

We have noted that Putnam's rejection of the non-cognitivist interpretation of Wittgenstein is not entirely persuasive. But how does Putnam's version of Wittgenstein's views on religion stand up as an account of religious discourse? Here are a couple of problems.

The first problem concerns a seeming muddle between religious discourse and the use of religious discourse to express religious beliefs. Wittgenstein does not say what class of statements he takes to be religious and attempt to offer some general characterisation of them. Rather, he considers statements that we would usually agree express religious beliefs and contrasts them sometimes with statements that we would not take to be religious, for example, statements about physical objects

in our environment, and at other times with statements that express disbelief about religious matters. For example, he contrasts the following two statements:

1. There is a German aeroplane overhead.
2. There will be a Last Judgement.

Putnam characterises these as an empirical and a religious statement. And Wittgenstein also contrasts

2. There will be a Last Judgement.
3. There will not be a Last Judgement.

But note that (2) and (3), unlike (1) and (2), are both religious claims in the sense that they employ religious terms and have a religious subject matter; where they differ is that (2) uses religious language to express a religious conviction, whereas (3) uses religious language to express disbelief. We have, in effect, *two* interpretative problems: why Wittgenstein thinks that religious believers and non-believers talk past one another, and why he thinks that religious and non-religious discourses are not commensurate. Now, Putnam proposes in [8] that we can resolve the interpretative problem on the basis that the concept of reference operating in religious discourse is different from – though presumably related to – the concept of reference operating in other fields of discourse. But how is a distinction between reference in religious discourse and reference in non-religious discourse going to solve the interpretative problem of why religious believers and non-believers – even when they are both using religious discourse – talk past one another? If, on the other hand, Putnam were to suggest that religious believers and non-believers use different standards of reference, how will that help with the apparently quite distinct issue of the relationship between religious and non-religious discourse?

7. Do you think that it is plausible to say either that religious discourse has different standards of reference and truth from non-religious (specifically scientific) discourse, or that religious believers employ different standards of reference and truth from non-believers?

The second problem concerns the family-resemblance account of reference, truth, and other concepts. Suppose that we accept that to understand the meaning of an expression we need to know about the 'form of life' of which it forms a part. Accordingly we look at religious and non-religious discourse and find, perhaps on the lines suggested above, that different standards are used (particularly with regard to empirical evidence and testability) to determine whether an expression refers or a statement is true. Why should it follow from this that there is any change in the necessary and sufficient conditions for 'truth' or 'reference'? The methods we use to establish the temperature of a room are different from those we use to establish the temperature of the surface of the sun, but it does not follow that 'It is true that this room is 22C' and 'It is true that the photosphere of the sun is

about 6000C' involve different concepts of *truth*, or that if we say of each sentence that it is referring to temperature we are using different concepts of *reference*. In other words, while religious truths and scientific truths may be different, and there may be different ways of discovering them, it does not follow that we have more than one concept of truth. Moreover, if we accept Putnam–Wittgenstein's conclusion that the concepts of truth and reference vary in their meaning in different areas of discourse, then our talk of truth and reference will be ambiguous. The implications of this are drawn out by Timothy Williamson. Consider two discourses D1 and D2 in English, and two statements A1 and A2 which belong to D1 and D2 respectively. 'A1 or A2' will be a disjunction in English. It is a platitude about truth that a disjunction is true if either of its disjuncts is true. But if different truth-predicates apply in D1 and D2 this platitudinous inference will be invalid, because the claim that a disjunction is true if and only if one of its disjuncts is true will involve an equivocation. A similar problem arises for other platitudes about truth. The rule for conjunction is that 'A1 and A2' is true if and only if A1 is true and A2 is true. But this will only hold if a single concept of truth applies for both D1 and D2. So it must be the case that there is a single truth-predicate for both discourses, and for all discourses in English, unless we are to give up on elementary logical operations.

We have touched on just a few of the issues and problems that have been central to work on Wittgenstein and religion. For a lucid introduction to Wittgenstein's lectures and writings on religions, see:

Clack, B., *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

D. Z. Phillips has written extensively on Wittgenstein and religion. For a useful collection of his work, see his *Wittgenstein and Religion*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.

There are two principal sources for Wittgenstein's work on religion:

Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief, Oxford: Blackwell, 1966.

Culture and Value, ed. G. H. von Wright, H. Nyman and A. Pichler, 2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

In addition, a posthumously discovered notebook written in the 1930s that contains numerous comments on religion has been published as:

Public and Private Occasions, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann, Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Introduction to Alston

William Alston (1921–2009) was professor emeritus at Syracuse University, New York. He was one of the most significant philosophers of religion of recent decades, and

one of a small group of philosophers to help initiate the resurgence of interest in the topic in the late twentieth century. His work in philosophy of religion has focused primarily on issues in epistemology and language (though Alston would perhaps prefer the latter to be characterised as religious *speech*). His book *Divine Nature and Human Language*, from which the following chapter is taken, has become a seminal text in the field.

Metaphors are widespread and occur frequently in religious discourse. 'God is my rock', 'God is love', 'The Lord is my shepherd' are just three examples of metaphorical claims about God. However, motivated by the idea that God is transcendent, some philosophers (Anthony Kenny in *The Unknown God: Agnostic Essays*) and theologians (Sallie McFague in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*) have argued that it is impossible to speak any literal truth about God. In so far as one can say anything true about God, therefore, it must be metaphorical. Moreover, it must be irreducibly metaphorical – if there is any literal component to a metaphorical claim about God, then the claim will be false. Alston draws on some general considerations about the nature of metaphor and applies them to religious metaphors to show that this position is untenable.

William Alston, 'Irreducible Metaphors in Theology'

I

My primary concern in this essay is with the possibility of irreducible metaphor in talk about God, and with the kind of significance such talk would have if possible. But before tackling those problems head on I should indicate why it seems to many that theology needs irreducible metaphors.

The impossibility of literal talk about God has become almost an article of faith for theology in this century. Of course it is not denied that one can *make* a statement in which some term, used literally, is applied to God; that is not regarded as being beyond human powers. The impossibility alleged is, rather, an impossibility of saying anything *true* about God while using terms literally. Various reasons have been given for this sweeping proscription. Perhaps the most popular in our day is the *transcendence* of God, His 'wholly otherness'. This appears in various forms; Tillich, e.g., holds that (a) God is not *a* being, but Being Itself, since anything that is *a* being would not be an appropriate object of religious worship, and (b) only what is *a* being can be literally characterized. Those who identify themselves with the mystical tradition emphasize the principle that God is an ineffable, undifferentiated unity. Coming from another quarter is the infamous verifiability criterion of meaning, which has been used to argue the still more sweeping thesis that no theological predication has any truth value at all.

I myself do not regard any of these arguments as successful, but this is not the place to say why. The present point is that arguments like these have been convincing to many contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion. But many of them are not prepared to give up theological discourse. And so they must find some other way of construing what look like literal theological statements, such as,

God created the heavens and the earth.
God spoke to Jeremiah.
God brought the Israelites out of Egypt.
God sent His only begotten Son into the world.
God forgives the sins of those who are truly repentant.
God's purpose is that we shall all enjoy eternal life.

One popular move is to give them some non-cognitive interpretation, as expressive of attitudes, feelings, or commitments,[1] or evocative of mystical experience, 'insight', or 'seeing X as Y'.[2] But again a sizable proportion are unwilling to give up the idea that it is possible to make *true statements* about God, to articulate something that really does pertain to the divine nature, to convey in words some apprehension, however inadequate, of what God is like.

To those who find themselves in this position, metaphor can seem a promising way out. In many spheres of discourse we manage to make true statements without using terms literally. We can correctly describe what Russia did at the end of Word War II by saying that she dropped an iron curtain across Europe, even though no iron curtain was literally dropped. Why can't we analogously provide some insight into the divine nature and operations by saying things like 'God spoke to Jeremiah', even if none of these predicates are literally true of God? Just as the dropping of an iron curtain across a stage provides a useful 'model' for thinking about what Russia did just after Word War II, why can't human speech provide a useful model for thinking about God's relation to Jeremiah, and sending one's son to do a certain job provide a useful model for thinking of God's relation to the work of Jesus Christ? But of course if *no* term can be literally
a→ applied to God, our metaphorical talk about God will be *irreducible*. A metaphor is *irreducible* if what is said in the metaphorical utterance cannot be said, *even in part*, in literal terms. Obviously, if no term can be literally applied to God, we cannot do *anything* to spell out in literal terms what is said metaphorically about God. Hence theologians who go the route we

[1] See, e.g., George Santayana, *Reason in Religion* (New York: Scribner, 1905), and R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).
[2] See, e.g., W. T. Stace, *Time and Eternity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), J. H. Randall, Jr., *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion*, (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), chap. 4, and John Wisdom, 'Gods,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 45 (1944–45).

have been describing will wind up construing talk about God as made up of irreducible metaphors.[3]

II

We can effectively come to grips with our central question only if we have an explicit account of the nature of metaphor. To this I now turn.

Despite the frequent occurrence of terms like 'metaphorical *meaning*' and 'metaphorical *sense*' in discussions of the subject, I believe that they reflect a confused, or at least a loose, way of thinking about metaphor. To get straight about the matter we need to keep a firm grip on the Saussurian distinction between *language* and *speech*. A (natural) language is an abstract system, a system of abstract sound types or, in principle, types of other sorts of perceptible items. The systematicity involved is both 'internal' and 'external'. The phonology, morphology and syntax of a language constitute its 'internal' system – the ways in which its elements can be combined to form larger units. The 'external' system is revealed by the semantics of the language – the ways in which units of the language have the function of 'representing' things in, and features of, the world.[4] A language serves as a means of communication; that is its basic raison d'être. *Speech* is the *use* of language in communication (using speech in an extended sense to cover written as well as oral communication). It is what we *do* in the course of exploiting a linguistic system for purposes of communication.[5]

[3] I want to emphasize that in this essay we are not asking the (silly) question as to whether it is possible to have metaphors of any sort in talk about God, nor are we asking what status our metaphorical God-talk actually has. It is obvious that much talk about God is metaphorical. For example:

The Lord is my shepherd.
His hands prepared the dry land.
The Lord is my rock and my fortress.
In thy light do we see light.
The Lord looks down from heaven.

I believe that it is commonly supposed that metaphors like these are reducible, that it is possible to say in literal terms at least part of what is being said about God metaphorically in these utterances. In saying 'The Lord is my shepherd' I am saying that God will protect me and see to it that my needs are satisfied; and so on. But we are not concerned in this paper to determine whether this is so. We are concerned with a certain project – interpreting all talk about God, including the more literal-sounding statements just mentioned, as *irreducible* metaphors. We are dealing with a question that is fundamental to that project, viz., whether there can be irreducible metaphors, and if so what status they would have.

[4] This is a very crude way of characterizing semantics, but it will have to do for now. There is no general agreement on what an adequate characterization would look like.

[5] Language and speech may also be interrelated in other and more intimate ways. Thus, in my view, language *exists* only as a set of potentialities for speech; the fact that speech is patterned in certain ways *constitutes* the reality of a natural language; if there were no speech, there would be no *actual* languages. But that is quite compatible with the existence and fundamental importance of the distinction drawn in the text.

Now the fact that a given word or phrase has the meaning(s) or sense(s)[6] it has is a fact about the language; it is part of the semantic constitution of the language. Thus it is a (semantic) fact about the English language that 'knit' has among its meanings:

1. To form, as a fabric, by interlacing a single yarn or thread in loops, by means of long thin bluntly pointed rods.
2. To draw together; to contract into wrinkles; as he knit his brow in thought.[7]

The fact that a word has a certain meaning is (part of) what gives it its usability for communication; it constitutes part of the linguistic resources we draw on in saying what we have to say.

The term 'metaphor', on the other hand, stands for a certain way of *using* words, a mode of *speech* rather than a type of meaning or any other feature of *language*. More specifically, it belongs to the family of *figurative* uses of terms ('figures of *speech*', as they are appropriately called in the tradition) that stand in contrast with *literal* uses of terms. Let's make explicit the distinction between *literal* and *metaphorical* uses, restricting ourselves to the uses of predicates in subject–predicate statements, since that is the application with which we are especially concerned.

We may think of each meaning of a predicate term 'correlating' the term with some (possibly very complex) property.[8] Each of the definitions of 'knit' given above specifies a (relational) property with which 'knit' is 'correlated' in one of its meanings. Different theories of meaning provide different accounts of the nature of this correlation. Thus the 'ideational' theory of meaning found in, e.g., Locke's *Essay*, holds that a meaning of a predicate term 'correlates' it with a certain property, P, *iff* the term functions as a sign of the *idea* of P in communication. It will be convenient to speak of a predicate term 'signifying' or 'standing for' the correlated property.

Now when I make a literal use of a predicate term, in one of its meanings, in a subject-predicate sentence, I utter the sentence with the claim that the property signified by the predicate is possessed by the subject (the referent of the subject-term), or, if the predicate is a relational one, that the property holds between the subjects. Thus if I make a literal use of 'knit'

[6] We shall not distinguish between *meaning* and *sense*.

[7] *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1959). I am far from claiming that this is the best or most adequate way to specify these meanings. Indeed it is far from clear, at this stage of development of the art, what is the most adequate way to specify meanings. But it does seem clear that 'knit' has the two meanings thus specified, however lamely and haltingly, and that its having these two meanings is (a small) part of what makes the English language what it is at the current stage of its history.

[8] I would want this supposition to be compatible with the fact that most (all?) predicate terms have meanings that are vague, have 'open texture', or suffer from indeterminacy in other ways. This means that an adequate formulation would have to be considerably more complicated than the one given here.

in saying, e.g., 'My wife knitted that sweater', I would be claiming that the relation specified in the first of our two definitions holds between my wife and that sweater. And if my statement is true, if that relation does in fact hold between these terms, then we may say that 'knit' is *literally true* of these terms, or does *literally apply* to them.

But suppose I say, as Shakespeare has Macbeth say, 'Sleep knits up the ravelled sleeve of care'. It is clear that sleep cannot possibly do to care either of the things listed as meanings of 'knit'. Nor, if we surveyed all the meanings that 'knit' has in the language, would we find any relation that literally holds between sleep and care. Hence, if I am sensible, I will not be uttering that sentence with the claim that 'knit' literally applies to sleep. Instead I will be using the term *metaphorically*. But what is it to use the term metaphorically? In presenting a brief answer to that question I shall be more or less following the admirable account given by Paul Henle in chapter 7 of *Language, Thought, and Culture*.[9]

When I use a predicate term metaphorically, or in accordance with some other figure of speech (metonymy, synecdoche, irony, hyperbole, or whatever), I am not turning my back on the meaning(s) that term has in the language. Even though I am not claiming that the term is literally true of the subject in any of those senses, I am not ignoring those senses. On the contrary, I am using the term in one of those senses, though not in the same way as in literal speech. Instead of straightforwardly applying the term in that sense to the subject, I am engaged in the following multi-stage operation. First, I envisage, and 'invite' the hearer to envisage, something of the sort to which the term does literally apply. In the case under discussion this would be a person repairing a ravelled piece of fabric. Let's call something to which the predicate literally applies an *exemplar*. Needless to say, we will ordinarily be dealing with *envisaged*, rather than actual exemplars. In the metaphorical statement cited earlier, 'Russia has dropped an iron curtain across Europe', the exemplar is a person dropping a curtain (a rather unusual one, made of iron) in front of a stage. In 'Life's a walking shadow', the exemplar is a shadow cast by a walking man (among other possibilities). Now what the metaphorical statement most basically 'says' is that the exemplar can usefully be taken as a 'model' of the subject. The hearer is invited to consider the exemplar *as* a model of the subject, as a way of discovering, highlighting, or rendering salient, various features of the subject.

As so far characterized, a metaphorical 'statement' does not appear to be making any truth claim about the subject, other than the implicit claim that it is sufficiently like the exemplar to make the latter a useful model of

[9] Paul Henle, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958). The literature on metaphor bristles with controversy. Nevertheless, I believe that there is widespread agreement on the general lines of the following account; and the agreement would be much greater if everyone were to get straight on the language–speech distinction.

the former. So long as I am simply *presenting* a model to the hearer for him to use as he sees fit, I am not myself attributing any particular feature to the subject. Now this may sometimes be a complete account of what the speaker is doing; he is simply suggesting a model that has caught his fancy, that feels right to him. But more typically the speaker is concerned to exploit the model in a particular way; he will 'have in mind' one or more particular points of resemblance (between model and subject) that he intends to be attributing to the subject.[10] Thus when Churchill said 'Russia has dropped an iron curtain across Europe', he wasn't just throwing the image of an iron curtain up for grabs, leaving it to his auditors to make of it what they would. He meant to be exploiting the model in a certain way – to assert that Russia has made it almost impossible to exchange information, goods, and persons between her sphere of influence and Western Europe.

Thus in the typical metaphorical statement the speaker is 'building on' the relevant meaning of his predicate terms in two ways. First, he is presenting the sort of thing to which the term literally applies as a model of the subject. Second, he has in mind one or more resemblances between model and subject, and he extracts from these resemblances what he means to be attributing to the subject. In the Churchill quote, the resemblance is the inhibition of communication. In the 'knitting' lines from Macbeth the resemblance is that the agent is doing something to restore the patient to a sounder condition, one more nearly in accord with what it is 'supposed' to be. And these points of resemblance are just what are being attributed to the subject(s).

Note that the speaker is doing this 'on his own'. Of course the semantic content of the sentence plays certain constraints on him, because that is what he has to work with. But within that framework it is 'up to him' *whether* he uses the predicate term metaphorically, and, if so, what features of the model he selects for attribution to the subject. . . .

The sharp outlines of this idealized picture will have to be softened in various ways if it is to faithfully depict the often blurred reality of metaphorical speech. Let me mention the most important qualifications. (A) 'Speaker' will have to be taken in an extended sense to include 'hearers' as well. For a hearer may himself exploit the model in certain specific ways, and thus endow the statement with a propositional content not foreshadowed in the speaker's intentions; and do this without abandoning the communicative role of the hearer. We can handle this by thinking of the hearer as making a metaphorical statement himself. (B) . . . Speaker intention can be of all degrees of explicitness. The speaker need not rehearse to himself in so many words that he intends to be asserting that. . . . In certain cases he may not even be able to say, in literal terms, what it is that he is asserting, but be asserting that nonetheless. (This might be elicited by

[10] Of course, these 'havings in mind' and these intentions can be of all degrees of explicitness and articulateness, just as with other thoughts and communicative intentions.

skilful questioning.) What it finally comes down to is what the speaker would take as truth conditions of his utterance when they are presented to him. Of course, as with all such issues, questions can be raised as to whether his later responses to suggested truth conditions accurately reproduce his dispositions at the moment of utterance. But like practically all interesting concepts, the concept of *what a speaker asserted* does not come with foolproof decision procedures attached. . . .

III

With this background we may turn to our central problem concerning the possibility and status of irreducible metaphors in theology. A metaphor is irreducible if what it says cannot be said, even in part, in literal terms. How we answer our central question will depend, inter alia, on how we pick out *what is said* in a metaphorical utterance. So a word on this is in order.

There are, no doubt, various ways of drawing a distinction between *what* is said, *how* it is said, and other aspects of what is *done* in a speech act. One way of drawing these distinctions is dictated by the fact that we are interested specifically in the use of metaphors to attribute properties to subjects, with an attached 'truth claim', the claim that the property in question does indeed belong to the subject in question. Hence the 'what-is-said' on which we will concentrate is the proposition(s) *asserted* in an
b→ utterance, those propositions the speaker is claiming to be true. When we ask whether what is said in a metaphor can be said in literal terms, we are asking whether the *propositional* content of the metaphorical statement can be literally expressed. This is by no means the whole story about a metaphorical statement. As we have seen, a speaker makes a metaphorical statement by using the literal meaning of his predicate to present a model of the subject. Now, by definition, that *way* of asserting a certain proposition cannot be reproduced in a literal utterance; any assertion done
c→ that way is, by definition, a metaphorical assertion. And any feature that attaches to a metaphorical statement by virtue of this distinctive mode of statement will likewise fail to survive transportation to the literal mode. Thus it is often pointed out that a metaphorical statement is characterized by a certain 'open-endedness'. However definite an attribution the speaker means to be making via his model, he is also *presenting* the model as a source of hitherto unnoticed insights into the nature of the subject. And so metaphorical statements have what might (metaphorically) be called a penumbra of inexplicit suggestions that surround whatever definite propositional content is presented. Again, this cannot be captured in a literal re-statement. Even if we explicitly assert in literal terms *that* the model may be indefinitely rich in insights into the subject, that is not the same as *presenting* the model with the implied suggestion of untapped resources. Thus we are not asking whether metaphors can receive exact

or exhaustive literal paraphrase, as that question has often been understood in the literature.

Moreover we are not even asking whether the propositional content can be exactly or exhaustively expressed in literal terms. It may be, e.g., that the 'open-endedness' alluded to in the last paragraph affects the propositional content of a metaphorical statement. It may be that in a metaphorical statement there is no sharp line between what is being asserted and what is only more or less explicitly suggested, so that propositions asserted metaphorically possess a kind of fuzzy boundary that is not shared by propositions expressed literally. But even if that is so it would not prevent the propositional content from being partially expressed in literal terms. Remember that our concern is with the idea that, since no predicates can be literally true of God, God can be spoken of only in metaphors that are wholly irreducible. Our question is, then, whether there can be a metaphorical statement the propositional content of which cannot be expressed, even in part, in literal terms.

In tackling this question it will be useful to consider separately the two d→ strata of truth claims we have found to be contained in metaphors. First, there is the very *unspecific* claim that the exemplar is sufficiently similar to the subject, in some way(s) or other, to make the former a useful model of the latter. (Call this M-similarity.) Second, there is, normally, some more *specific* attribution that is derived from one or more particular points of resemblance.

The first level can be handled very quickly. There is obviously no difficulty in literally applying the predicate 'M-similar' to any pair of entities whatever. Moreover this predicate will be literally true of the exemplar and subject whenever the metaphorical statement is true, or, indeed, whenever the metaphor is successful or appropriate in any way.[11] Thus the literal expressibility of that much of the propositional content unquestionably holds for any metaphorical statement whatever. This gives us a 'floor' of guaranteed literal paraphrasability that cannot be gainsaid.

The additional, *specific* proposition content is a more complicated problem. Yet I believe there to be a simple argument that shows that the specific content must, in principle, be expressed in literal terms. Let's restrict ourselves to the predicative part of the propositional content, since we have

[11] If the basic truth claim were only that exemplar and subject are similar in some way or other, then we could say without qualification that it could never fail to succeed. It is a priori true that any pair of objects exhibit similarity in indefinitely many respects. Just for starters, each shared non-identity constitutes a point of similarity. But the basic presupposition has a bit more content than that; it stipulates similarity in such a way as to make the one a useful model for the other. It is not clear just what that takes. Presumably the fact that X and Y are both non-identical with Z would not suffice by itself. But since we are often surprised at what ingenious modellers can make of unpromising material, it is not clear that this presupposition cuts out anything that would be allowed by the more unqualified presupposition. Hence it may be that even this presupposition is satisfied by any pair of objects whatever. But I do not feel confident in pushing this point.

just been taking for granted the reference to the subject; and let's consider the statement 'God is my rock'. Let us say that when a speaker asserts this, the property he means to be attributing to God is P. What would it take to express P in literal terms? There must be some predicate term such that by a literal employment of that term in the frame 'God is ___' I can attribute P to God. That is, we need a term that signifies P, so that just by virtue of the term's meaning what it does one can use it to attribute to some subject. And what does it take for that to be possible? An adequate answer to that question would involve going into the mechanisms by which terms acquire meaning in natural languages – a very murky subject. But at least this much is clear. So long as it is possible for members of the linguistic community to form a concept of P, it will be possible for P to become the meaning of a predicate term in the language. For so long as I can form the concept of P, it will be possible for me to associate an element of the language with P in such a way as to use that element to attribute P to something. How could that be impossible for me to do, so long as I have 'cognitive access' to P? And if the property is cognitively accessible to me, then, unless this is by virtue of superhuman powers, it will be in principle, cognitively accessible to any other human being. But if it is conceptually accessible to the language community, there is no bar in principle to a word's signifying the property *in the language*.

And now we are ready for the final turn of the screw. The sufficient condition just uncovered is automatically satisfied whenever a certain property figures in the propositional content of a metaphorical utterance. For, as we have seen, it cannot so figure unless the speaker has that property in mind as what he means to be attributing to the subject. And he cannot have the property in mind without having a concept of that property. No matter in how inexplicit or inarticulate a fashion he 'has it in mind', he will be in possession of at least an equally inexplicit or inarticulate concept. Therefore a statement cannot possess a propositional content unless it is, in principle, possible that a language should contain words that have that have the meanings required for the literal expression of that content. . . .

IV

e→ The argument against irreducibly metaphorical statements has been a completely general one. Let's now apply the results to theology. Of course the direct application is obvious; it is just universal instantiation. If there can be no irreducible metaphorical statements anywhere there can be none in theology. So this way out is unavailable for one who denies the possibility of literal predication. But let us not be too hasty. The distinction between two levels of propositional content may give our quarry some room for manoeuvre. In particular, we might imagine an opponent of literal predication attempting to construct the following halfway house.

'Let's grant that in order to have any metaphorical truth claim at all, one must at least be presupposing that the exemplar is like the subject in some significant way(s); and your point that at least this presupposition can be literally expressed is an undeniable one. Nor is this a trivial point; it does show that the unqualified denial of literal predication cannot be sustained, if we are to talk of God even metaphorically. But that denial never was (should have been) issued in so unqualified a form. What we anti-literalist are really concerned about is not those abstract, "structural" predicates like (*significantly*) *similar in some way or other*, but specific predicates like *wise*, *loving*, *makes*, *forgives*, *commands*, and so on. Therefore if we can make the denial of specific literal predictability stick, we will have gotten what we were after. For in that case it will be impossible to say, literally, what God is like, what He has planned, done, what He would have us do, and so on. We deniers of literal predication will be only minimally shaken by having to admit that God is, literally, *significantly like* f→ *a king in some way or other*. Again, we will admit that you have shown that if we issue a metaphor with some specific property "in mind" as the one we mean to be attributing to God, then it is, in principle, possible to make that attribution in literal terms. Since we are operating within these constraints, the way out is to construe theological statements as limited to the unspecific claim, as far as "propositional content" is concerned. So when one says "God gave me courage to face that situation", he is to be interpreted as simply putting forward the model of one human being encouraging another, with only the unspecific claim that this is sufficiently similar to God's relation to my being encouraged to be usefully employed as a model thereof. There is no further claim of some particular point of similarity, P. The speaker is simply suggesting that we think of the matter in terms of that model. And hence the assertion need be literally paraphrasable only so far as the totally unspecific claim is concerned.' . . .

Metaphorical statements about God that are restricted to the *unspecific* truth claim will suffer from a number of disabilities that render them unfit for theological duty.

(A) Since virtually any such statement will be true, the theological attributions we like will enjoy this status only at the price of sharing it with indefinitely many statements we do not like. Perhaps we can best appreciate this point by starting from the weaker but more clear-cut presupposition of *some similarity or other between exemplar and model*. As noted above, since it is a priori true that any two entities are similar in indefinitely many respects, if that were all that were being claimed in a statement about God, all such statements would be true alike; it would be just as true, true in the same way, that God is cruel as that God is merciful, just as true that God is a spider, or a mud-pie, or a thief as that God is the creator of heaven and earth and that he has reconciled us to Himself. To be sure, the presupposition with which we are working is not as empty as that; it involves the more specific claim that the exemplar is *M-similar* to God, similar in

some way(s) that renders it suitable to be used as a model. But since the force of this further restriction is so difficult to assess, we are in a similar position. Though I cannot claim it is a priori true that God is M-similar to anything whatever, it is difficult to be confident, with respect to any proffered example, that it is not M-similar to God. . . .

(B) The theological relations in which a theological statement stands with other statements (theological and otherwise) are determined by their propositional contents, i.e., on this position, by the unspecific presupposition. And that content fails to stand in the desired logical relations. First consider contradictoriness. For the same reasons that led us to suppose that virtually any statement about God will turn out to be true, we will also be forced to recognize that a given statement about God will be logically incompatible with virtually no other statements about God. 'God is loving and merciful' does not logically exclude 'God is arbitrarily cruel and bloodthirsty'. For the fact that a loving and merciful human being is a suitable model for God certainly does not *logically* exclude the possibility that an arbitrarily cruel and bloodthirsty human being is a suitable model for God (in some respect or other). Not even straight contradiction works. The fact that human wisdom is a suitable model for God does not *logically* prevent the lack of wisdom (the holy fool) from being a suitable model. Thus 'God is wise' is logically compatible with 'God is not wise'.

(C) Nor does entailment fare better. Consider the following apparently unexceptionable argument.

1. A perfectly loving being will forgive the sins of the truly repentant.
2. God is perfectly loving.
3. Therefore God will forgive the sins of the truly repentant.

Surprisingly enough, on the position under consideration one does not fall into contradiction by affirming the premises and denying the conclusion. For even granting the literal truth of the first premise, it is certainly *logically* possible that both a perfectly loving human being and an unforgiving human being are useful models of God, in some respect(s) or other. Thus we must abandon all hope of inferring theological propositions from other propositions, theological or otherwise, or of rejecting some theological propositions because they contradict others; in short, any hope of logically systematizing theology in any way whatever.

. . . I take it that these consequences are radically unacceptable to the 'religious attitude' or, to speak less pretentiously, to the bulk of those in the mainstream of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A theology the propositions of which are logically compatible with anything else sayable of God, which can be true only in the same way virtually anything one might say of God is true, which have not determinate consequences either for theory or for practice, se eviscerated a theology is stripped of all its impact for human life.

Commentary on Alston

Alston's paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 introduces the idea of irreducible metaphors in talk about God. Section 2 explains the distinction between 'language' and 'speech', and sets out an account of metaphor.

1. Look at the examples of literal and metaphorical religious claims that Alston gives in section I and footnote 3. Give some examples of your own of metaphorical and literal religious claims. What is the difference between a metaphor and a simile?

Questions about the meanings of metaphors have become a major topic in philosophy of language over the last twenty years. To give some context to the following discussion of religious metaphor, and to see how it connects up with contemporary work on metaphor, we shall begin by briefly setting out two contrasting and standard theories of metaphor.

A simple and elegant theory of metaphor has been proposed by Donald Davidson. On Davidson's account, 'a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning (nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal)' (2001: 246). Davidson rejects here two intuitively plausible theories of what metaphors mean. On the one hand, metaphorical claims are not distinguished by their having some metaphorical meaning that sets them apart from literal claims; for Davidson, what a metaphor says is exactly what it appears to say. Moreover, this is typically straightforwardly false: 'God is our father', 'God is my rock', etc., are literally false claims. According to Davidson, a metaphor means simply what it says: a false claim, and often glaringly so. However, Davidson is not proposing that metaphorical language is just a way of making false claims. Although in using a metaphor the speaker does not communicate a content or intention to us, we are presented with an image or a picture. For example, 'God is our father' presents an idea of God having the role of a father to us. This picture may prompt us to have further ideas – that God protects us, cares for us, etc. However, these further ideas are not what are communicated by the speaker's utterance. All that is communicated is the (false) claim that God is our father. The impact that a metaphor has on its audience is therefore a causal phenomenon: 'Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact' (Davidson 1979: 262).

The second standard theory draws on work by H. P. Grice on 'conversational implicature'. Consider that metaphorical claims are marked out by their saying something that is (usually) plainly false – 'All the world's a stage', 'Tony is a bulldozer', etc. This fact about metaphorical claims can be taken to indicate that the speaker is not following conventional linguistic practice (where one typically does not make assertions that are patently false), and so intends something other than what is said. John Searle (1979: 85) argues

> In order to understand the metaphorical utterance, the hearer requires something more than his knowledge of the language. . . . He must have some other principles, or some other factual information, or some combination of principles and factual information that enables him to figure out that when the speaker says, 'S is P', he means 'S is R'.

Searle's theory of metaphor is modelled on Grice's account of irony. Someone who says 'That was charming', having just been insulted, is saying something the literal meaning of which is not intended. Anyone taking the claim non-ironically would miss out on what was meant. Attuned to the conventions of irony, we shall recognise that the sentence should not be taken at face value: the speaker is communicating just the opposite, that the experience was unpleasant. In a similar way, once we are in command of the principles governing metaphorical sentences, we can interpret 'Juliet is the sun' as communicating something other than what is literally said: Juliet has a range of properties, one example of which might be 'essential to my life'.

One point on which these theories differ is that, whereas Davidson thinks that the meaning of a metaphor is just what it literally says, Searle thinks that metaphors have secondary metaphorical meanings that can be extracted from contextual information and the speaker's intentions. A second important matter on which the theories differ is that, while Davidson takes the meaning of a metaphor to be determined by what it says, Searle takes a metaphor's meaning to be fixed (at least in part) by what the metaphor suggests or implies. The distinction between what an utterance says and what it implies is a traditional way of drawing the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. So Davidson's account of metaphor can be seen as a semantic theory, while Searle's is a pragmatic theory. (Note that a number of objections have been raised against each of these theories. For further reading on this topic, see the bibliography.)

2. Carefully read through section II and summarise in your own words Alston's position on metaphor. Explain what he means by 'exemplar'. Would you describe it as a semantic or a pragmatic account of metaphor?

3. We can distinguish between *theories* of metaphor that give us an account of what metaphors mean and how we understand them from *classifications* of metaphor which tell us how to identify metaphors and distinguish them from literal claims. Does Alston give us a theory or a classification of metaphor?

Alston gives us a succinct statement of the theory that he is attacking at [a]→. Let's call this the *irreducibility thesis* or *IT*. To refute IT, Alston aims to show that the content of a metaphor can, at least in part, be expressed literally. However, he begins by noting at [b]→ and [c]→ two respects in which the meaning of a metaphor might not be possible to capture in literal terms. First, only the propositional content of a metaphor could be conveyed in a literal utterance: we should not expect that the

way in which the metaphor presents a model of the subject could be captured literally. Second, a metaphor involves a comparison between exemplar and subject that may be 'open-ended', and these 'inexplicit suggestions' cannot be captured literally.

Notwithstanding these two exceptions, Alston argues that the propositional content of a metaphor can be at least partially expressed in literal terms. He identifies at [d]→ two sorts of literal truth-claim in the content of any metaphor. First, there is an unspecific part, that the exemplar is (literally) similar to the subject in a way that makes it a useful model for the subject. Alston calls this *M-similarity*. That a metaphor involves positing an M-similarity follows straightforwardly from Alston's account of metaphor given in section II. The posited M-similarity between the subject and the exemplar in a metaphor guarantees that it can be given a partial literal paraphrase. Second, there is the *specific* content. Suppose the speaker asserts 'God is my rock', intending to attribute to God some property P (this being the specific content). In so far as the speaker can form some concept of P, it should be possible to express it in language and use it as a predicate term. Consequently, it should be possible to express for any metaphor about God a corresponding literal sentence of the form 'God is P', where P can be substituted with the specific point of resemblance that the speaker intends. Alston is not suggesting, of course, that the speaker should be in a position to state this literal claim, but only that it is in principle expressible.

Since Alston's argument applies to all metaphors, it appears to follow – as Alston points out at [e]→ – that it must also apply to religious metaphors and that therefore it is possible to express at least part of a metaphor's content literally and IT fails.

4. Supporters of IT argue that we cannot say anything literally true about God. But IT is itself a claim about God that is presumably intended by its supporters to be literally true. Does it follow that IT is self-defeating? How serious a problem is this for IT?

5. Alston notes at [f]→ that the supporter of the irreducibility thesis could just concede that metaphorical talk of God involves literal predication but *only* of the unspecific sort. Summarise in your own words Alston's objection to this modified position in [a]→, [b]→ and [c]→.

6. Alston claims that his objections to the modified version of IT in [a]→ to [c]→ show that the theory is religiously unacceptable. Is he right? Is the theory also philosophically unacceptable?

In one respect Alston is too generous to the irreducibility thesis. Although he argues that the content of metaphors is *in part* literally expressible, he seems prepared to concede that the content of metaphors is not wholly expressible in literal terms. Call the thesis that the content of a metaphor can in principle be wholly captured literally the *reducibility theory* or *RT*. Why does Alston concede RT? As we have seen,

he argues at [C]→ that metaphors are 'open-ended' in that they have any number of inexplicit implications, and these cannot be exhaustively captured literally. But the fact that a metaphor might suggest or imply further ideas is not really relevant to whether its content is literally expressible. However, Alston goes on to claim that there may be cases where the open-endedness 'affects the propositional content of a metaphorical statement'. What Alston seems to have in mind here is that the content of a metaphor could be inherently suggestive and difficult to pin down or specify its truth-conditions. This seems to be his main reason for conceding that metaphors may only be partially expressible literally. But, even supposing that a metaphor has open-ended content, why should not this be paraphrased literally? Literal statements, just as much as metaphorical ones, can be ambiguous, suggestive, elusive, insightful, baffling, etc. What is required for a literal expression of an open-ended metaphor, therefore, is a literal sentence or collection of sentences that are similarly suggestive. Alston's worry with RT seems to confuse a literal paraphrase of a metaphor with an attempt to make it fully explicit. Clearly, it may not always be possible literally to specify all of the inexplicit suggestions of a metaphor, since there may be an arbitrarily large number of them. But RT requires only that there are literal sentences that can convey a similar range of inexplicit suggestions. Alston gives no reason why this should not be possible.

Does Alston successfully refute IT? Here, too, we might wonder whether he has been too generous with the theory. Consider the two accounts of metaphor given at the beginning of this commentary. On the Davidsonian theory, IT looks unintelligible. If a metaphor is typically just a (patently) false literal sentence that is used to (causally) stimulate further ideas, then there is no metaphorical meaning to reduce or paraphrase in literal terms. The content of 'The Lord is my shepherd' will be (literally) <the Lord is my shepherd>, which (taken literally) is trivially false.

On the face of it, a similar problem is going to arise for Searle's theory. Here, too, it is the evident literal falsity of the metaphorical utterance that indicates that some secondary meaning – what it implies in this context, or what can be inferred about the speaker's intentions – should be looked for. So it appears that IT again fails from the outset, since metaphors have literally expressible content. However, perhaps the IT could be modified, while keeping to the spirit of the position, in the following way.

IT*: Statements about God have a primary meaning (a literal content) that is literally expressible, but a secondary meaning that is irreducible and cannot be literally paraphrased.

Unfortunately, IT* runs into a serious difficulty. Take the statement 'God is our father'. On Searle's theory, the evident falsity of the literal content of this claim leads us to look for a secondary component of the meaning (such as what the speaker intends), for example, that God cares for us, guides us, nurtures us, etc. But IT* requires that these latter claims are themselves non-literal. But suppose they are all metaphorical (which they don't appear to be). Then Searle's account requires that they must have false literal content that leads us to some secondary meaning or, in this case, to a tertiary meaning. But now the same problem will arise for the

tertiary sentences. Are they literally expressible, in which case IT* fails, or are they metaphorical, in which case we shall have the same problem with quaternary claims? So it seems that a more pressing problem for the supporters of IT than the one that Alston presents is whether there is a version of the theory that makes sense on any standard.

7. Despite the problems with IT, the intuition that motivates the theory – that God's transcendence should present *some* kind of difficulty with saying anything literally true about him – does not seem entirely unreasonable. Is there a better way of developing this intuition into a theory about what we can literally say about God that avoids the pitfalls of IT? Is it coherent to argue, for example, that we can only make true *negative* claims about God – i.e. that for any property x we can truly say 'God is not x', but not 'God is x'?

For more discussion of metaphor in religious language, see:

Soskice, J. M., *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

For other works on metaphor in philosophy of language, see:

Guttenplan, S., *Objects of Metaphor*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
Davidson, D., 'What Metaphors Mean', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
Searle, J., *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.