Compare and contrast the distinctive problems of religious and ethical language

Linguistics, Language

The problem or religious language has troubled philosophers since earliest times. How do we speak of a transcendent God, beyond direct human experience, infinitely more perfect in all ways than human beings, in the limited language that is available to us? At the same time, believers want to be able to speak of God so they have to find a way that expresses how God is different from all other things and beings, and yet is meaningful to them. Religious language is language that deals with God and other theological matters, including religious worship, practice, behaviour and doctrine.

It includes terms which we ascribe only to God -in their primary context (i. e. omnipotent) and words which are about distinctively religious beliefs (i. e. the Last Judgement). However, even when we speak of religious issues we invariably have to use language that is drawn from our common linguistic and lexical store, and this raises problems of a particular kind. Ethical language poses peculiar problems too. Important ethical words — or as A, J. Ayer called them, ethical symbols in a proposition such as good, bad, right or wrong, are very difficult, if not impossible, to define.

Similarly, there are considerable problems in determining what we consider to be an objectively true statement about a matter of morality and what is merely subjective opinion. Before we can begin to establish what constitutes good or bad moral or ethical behaviour we need to consider whether we can define what morality is. The branch of moral philosophy that is concerned with this issue is meta-ethics, which examines the issue of what we mean when we say that a thing or an action is good, bad, right, wrong, moral or immoral.

A primary consideration is whether ethical language can be said to have any meaning. If we are unclear as to the meaning of basic ethical terms such as these, then how can we begin to make authoritative, or at least convincing, claims about the morality of particular actions? The statement ' Killing is wrong' is complicated enough, since we are immediately faced with a vast range of different situations In which not everyone would agree that killing was wrong, but if we are not even sure about what we mean by wrong, then ethical debate will be fraught with difficulties.

There are many ways of approaching both this problem and that of religious language which can be considered, and in so doing their distinctive characteristics are exposed. Perhaps the primary characteristic problem of religion can be summarised as the problem of how to talk meaningfully about God. Aquinas observed that we could talk of two things as either completely different (equivocally) or as meaning exactly the same thing (univocally), but that neither of these approaches works for talking about God.

If we use human language of God — saying that he is wise or loving, for example we don't intend to say that he is exactly the same in his possession of wisdom or love as human beings are, if we did mean this, then we would be saying that God is no better than or different from, humans, and so would he really be God at all? Would he be a god worthy of worship (assuming, perhaps wrongly, that God must be perfect to be worthy of worship)? At the same time, we don't mean that his love or wisdom is so different from man's that it is beyond our comprehension.

We have some concept of what love means when applied to man and although we apply it to God differently, something of that original concept remains. Neither way is totally satisfactory however, since it s effectively a compromise, and neither too could the principle of the via negativa — speaking of God in terms of what he is not — ever satisfy the believer who wants to make positive claims about him. Aquinas suggested, therefore, that analogy provided the means of speaking successfully about God, which preserved his difference, while allowing the relationship between man and God to be expressed.

Hence, to say that John is wise and God is wise makes the connection clear because John's wisdom comes from God. There is still a difference, however, because we know that God, as the cause of wisdom, possesses it in a different and greater way. This only deals, however, with cognitive statements about God — statements that are intended to be true or false. When a believer says that ' God is good' they intend it to be objectively true — that there is an objectively real being called God, who possesses in a real and objective way the quality we know as goodness.

This exposes another characteristic problem of religious language — that it assumes that there is such an objective reality. Some philosophers have suggested that since this is a false assumption to make, then religious language cannot be meaningful. This was the argument of the Logical Positivists, who claimed that since it was impossible to verify or to falsify the existence of God, then all religious claims were meaningless, and that even to ask the question ' Does God exist? ' was meaningless. A. J.

Ayer claimed that religious language confused statements about empirical propositions (such as the claim that there is a regularity within nature) with metaphysical claims — for example, that such regularity within nature points to the existence of God. However, Ayer (1936) maintained, ' surely no religious man would admit that this was all he intended to assert in asserting the existence of God' because ' 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 terms of those manifestations.

On this basis, Ayer asserted, ' God' is therefore a metaphysical term and ' then it cannot be even probable that God exists'. This was a very radical approach to religious language, growing out of a philosophical movement that made it impossible to discourse on anything chat could not be verified or falsified using objective, mathematical or analytical criteria. And it is with this movement that we find a very important point of connection with ethical language. The Logical Positivists, and A. J.

Ayer especially argued that ethical language was meaning less if it were understood as intending to express a proposition that has factual content. Ethical statements could not have objective reality because they were nothing more than the expression of a subjective opinion. If someone claims ' Abortion s wrong', for example, they are not making an objectively true statement with which we are obliged to agree because it can be verified using the Positivists' criteria of meaning, but rather someone is just expressing what they feel.

Feelings are not objective, but subjective, so cannot be relied upon, and hence the statement is meaningless. Ayer used the example of the claim ' You acted wrongly in stealing that money', which he argued conveys no more information than the statement ' stealing money'. The ethical claim ' You acted wrongly' is an expression of moral disapproval but adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. He suggested that simply adding exclamation marks to the statement — stealing money!! ' — would serve just as well as ' You acted wrongly' and in both cases nothing was being said that could be true or false. Ayer (1936) wrote: ' Another man might disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he might not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of any moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me .... For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition. '

Ultimately, therefore, Ayer effectively dismissed the ability to make ethical and religious assertions on the same grounds, although he was later forced to acknowledge that his theories were in some ways too strict, and he allowed that some things might be verifiable in principle, and on those grounds would be meaningful. Not surprisingly, this approach has been challenged by many thinkers, who observe that those who make ethical and religious claims do, at least some of the time, understand what they say to have factual content, irrespective of whether those claims can be verified or falsified, or whether they have truly empirical status.

Richard Swinburne (1979) argued that: ' there are plenty of examples of statements which some people judge to be factual which are not apparently

confirmable or disconfirmable through observation. For example: Some of the toys which to all appearances stay in the toy cupboard while people are asleep and no one is watching actually get up and dance in the middle of the night and then go back to the cupboard, leaving no traces of their activity. Hence, when we claim that God has an eschatological plan which he will fulfil, or that there are certain moral commands which humankind recognises as having some universal, real, value, then it is likely that in most, if not all, situations the speaker will be intending to express something they believe to be in some way literally true. However, one way in which both religious thinkers and ethicists have tried to deal with these problems is to abandon the cognitive use of ethical and religious language altogether.

This means that, in the case of religious language, when we make statements such as ' God is wise' we are not referring to an objectively real God to whom this description objectively applies, but to something which is anti-realist. Anti-realist language serves another function than that of making cognitive objective statements which can be proved true or false. Such a function, for example, might be to express the sense of community that binds believers together or to express the concept of God in descriptive terms that are drawn from symbolic and mythological language. God is our rock' or the Lord is my shepherd are examples of claims about the nature of God which are not intended to be interpreted literally, but which still convey ways of understanding God that are very important to the believer. Such language assumes a coherence theory of truth in so far as the truth or falsity of a claim — or more precisely its value and application, or use — is related to the other statements with which it is associated, rather than to objectively

real situations. A classic anti-realist approach was offered by Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games.

He proposed that religious language is anti realist, subject to rules, and expressing a form of life, without making statements that a true or false. Language can be used correctly or incorrectly within the rules of the game, but its primary purpose is not to make factual statements. Thus, it is non-cognitive. All Forms of life have their own language and hence stand alone from each other. Wittgenstein was concerned only with the use or language, rather than the meaning of it, since it is the context that defines its function.

Just as in a game of cricket certain terminology is applied in a way that is appropriate to that game and not to another, so too can religious language be used appropriately or inappropriately, reflecting the way the speaker understands the world. Wittgenstein used the example of the very different understandings of the world expressed by those who hold a religious view of the world and those who do not: Suppose someone were a believer and said: I believe in a Last Judgement, and I said, " Well, I'm not so sure.

Possibly', you would say that there was an enormous gulf between us.... Suppose someone is ill and he says: ' This is a punishment' and I say ' If I'm ill, I don't think of punishment at all'. If you say, ' Don't you believe the opposite? ' —you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have a different picture' (cited in Mitchell (ed. 197]), Is this the same of ethical language?

If we say ' Stealing is wrong', are we saying some thing that we be has objective truth or are we saying something that we think has a meaning for a specific moral community, but is not necessarily an objective fact which we expect everyone to agree with? This is a hard question to consider, since if it has objective truth we do need to consider where it originates from. If it originates From the Bible, then we need to ask whether the Bible or whether it just expresses the opinions of a relatively small group of people who, while separated by several centuries, were nevertheless united by a shared belief.

If it originates from God, then we are back to questions about God's existence and whether we can speak objectively of an objective lawgiver (God) giving objective laws. ' Stealing is wrong' may just be a consensus arising out of the experience of the community over many centuries, and has evolved into a moral law because it allows for society to operate more effectively — but this does not necessarily make it an absolute moral truth which would be logically impossible to deny. If the religious believer has difficulty defining God in meaningful ways — i. . what does it mean to say ' God is loving'? then the ethicist also has difficulties defining ethical terms. What does it mean to say that something is good?

Can we define good itself in terms of something else? G. E. Moore identified a real problem here, and claimed that we can no more define good than we can define yellow. An inner sense directs humans to know what is right or wrong, just as we simply know what is yellow, but, as Moore (1993 edn) argued: ' If I am asked, What s good? my answer is that good is good, and — that is the end of the matter. ' All attempts to define good result in us

defining it in terms of something else — such as the greatest good for the greatest number' or ' that which distributes love most widely' or ' those actions which can be universalised'. This leads to the naturalistic fallacy — saying that because something ought to be the case, then it is: because more people ought to be made happy by action A rather than action B, then action A is morally good.

In ethical terms, to say that something is good, and therefore prescribe it as a moral action we should be obliged to perform, is unconvincing to many. Why should we seek the happiness of the greatest number, do our duty or pursue the virtues? These may be good in some circumstances, or even most, but that alone is not sufficient to make them a matter of moral obligation. In the same way, the religious believer has difficulty defining God in a way that is acceptable to everyone.

Anselm claimed that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, but in reality not everyone will accept that description — even believers. Those who define God in terms of an objective reality — a being who is good, loving, omnipotent and omniscient, and who can be directly experienced in and through the world — may appear to be very far from someone who defines God as a transcendent supreme being or source of enlightenment, but who cannot be encountered in the physical world.

However, both parties may claim to believe in God and resist the challenge - of the other to redefine God. Ultimately, therefore, it is clear that both issues of morality and theology are infinitely complex, and language is too limited

and too overlaid with presumptions to make it possible to speak of ethics or of God without a vast range of problems.