Chapter 2
The Cognitivity of Religious Language

Abstract Religious language has been challenged by verificationists as not cognitive, and so religious claims have no meaning. This challenge fails, because even limited versions of verificationism are untenable. Some have granted that religious language has meaning, but does not make assertions, so is neither true nor false. Some have argued that religious language belongs to a different practice from ordinary language, and so should not be assessed according to ordinary understandings of rationality. Both of these charges have untenable consequences.

Keywords Verificationism · Logical positivism · A.J. Ayer · Rudolf Carnap · Ludwig Wittgenstein · Language game · Expressivism

Claims about religious experiences are couched in the terms of natural languages, which seem to be used in more or less their ordinary meanings. That is to say, people report their experiences in the languages they speak. In communities, and in scholarly traditions, technical terminology develops, but most people who have religious experiences don't make use of that specialized vocabulary. The simplest way to understand their claims would therefore be to take them at face value as descriptive claims about experiences, objects of experience, and their qualities. But many theorists have thought there was some special problem about religious language. Aquinas thought that talk about God could not be straightforwardly literally true, since God's nature is beyond our comprehension, so he developed his ingenious theory of analogy to account for talk about God. Some, in recent times, have thought that the doctrine of analogy developed by Aquinas does not go far enough; the purported objects of religious experience are not the kinds of things that can be represented in language. In the Buddhist traditions, especially Zen, there is a strain of thought according to which the enlightenment experience is inherently indescribable; e.g., Suzuki (1961, p. 243). The Buddha himself said things like that about nirvana, and about the state of an enlightened being after death.

> Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathagata would describe him: That the Tathagata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathagata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply (Thanissaro 2010).

In the Advaita Vedanta school of Indian philosophy, some think that the real nature of Brahman, the conscious ground of all reality, is to be absolutely non-dual, without any distinction or difference. Brahman, in this view, is indescribable, as to describe it is to import distinctions (see Śankara 1946, p. 22). Some have claimed that the inability to speak literally of such objects renders religious language useless; others have found some other role for it besides description.

If language is incapable of capturing anything important about religious experiences, then there is nothing further to say. In order for a claim to count as evidence for another claim, it has to be true. *A fortiori*, it must have a truth-value. In order to have a truth-value, it must be meaningful. Therefore, before we can answer the question as to whether religious experience can provide evidence for religious belief, we have to decide whether the claims about religious experiences and their objects are meaningful, and capable of being true or false. Only meaningful claims with truth-values can stand in evidential relations to one another. The common-sense assumption that such language is like ordinary discourse in this way is controversial enough to require a defense, which is the business of this chapter.

Meaningfulness

The most important and influential challenge to the meaningfulness of religious language comes from verificationism. Some who are not global verificationists, including some who take this tack to defend religion, think that something like it is true in the realm of religious language. But let us address the most general form of the verificationist principle before passing on to these more nuanced views.

While there may have been precursors, verificationism as we understand it today is the child of the logical positivists, a group of philosophers who sought to ground philosophical discourse in reality by insisting that philosophers use the standards of science. Since the chief virtue of science, they thought, is that it can check its claims empirically, and generally has no truck with things not tied to the empirical world, then philosophy ought also to confine itself to what is empirically grounded. They went so far as to say that anything not so grounded is without factual meaning. In order for a claim to have meaning, they said, it must be possible to understand, at least in principle, what it would take to check to see whether the claim is true. Thus, any airy talk about metaphysical entities or processes that do not show themselves in observable ways is strictly meaningless. So, likewise, are all religious claims, including those claims that mystics make.

It is hard to find anyone who accepts that strict form of verificationism today, primarily because the view seems to have logical consequences that are hard to

accept, and successive formulations of the principle intended to solve those problems have failed to help. One of those consequences we could call *Nonsense Creep*. Like Hume's fork, the idea began with an admirably hardheaded attempt to keep philosophical discourse from floating off into blather, untethered from all observable reality.[1] While some rebelled against the death of metaphysics—the word itself became a reproach—many were willing to accept that a lot of metaphysical system-building had produced a lot of language of dubious semantic value, and that verificationism could provide an antidote to that tendency. Hegel, a favorite target of the positivists and their intellectual descendants, fell prey to this criticism, and his talk of the Absolute was dismissed as ultimately meaningless. This judgment has the consequence that we were spared the task of trying to understand it. Moral language followed, as moral claims also defy observational testing. Some of the positivists wished to retain some use for moral talk; Rudolf Carnap, for example, reinterpreted moral talk as disguised imperatives, thus keeping a role for moral discourse while denying it factual, descriptive content (1935). A.J. Ayer treats moral claims as expressions of moral sentiment (1952), in which case moral talk does have descriptive content, but it loses its normative force. Some then began to find problems with mental language, purporting to refer to private mental states, which led to behaviorism (Carnap 1959). Michael Dummett (1969) has even gone so far as to suggest that antirealism about the past is a tenable position, since claims about the past seem to be uncheckable by present observation. This consequence of the application of the verificationist principle, apart from any of the objections below, is by itself troubling. The spread of the nonsense-charge from areas of philosophy that many agreed had drifted into cloud-cuckoo-land, to those that no one had thereto suspected of vacuity, has all the marks of a degenerating research program. If a philosophical principle requires us to revise that much of our ordinary beliefs, it begins to look like it was the principle that was at fault, not the beliefs that the principle condemns.

This suspicion is borne out by the fact that the verificationist principle also suffers from technical defects, some of which were noticed almost as soon as the principle was announced, and many of which have stubbornly resisted repair. Moritz Schlick (1979) noted immediately that requiring verifiability, even in-principle verifiability, would render many universal generalizations meaningless, since there is no way to verify that something is true of all beings, which is what the universal quantifier demands. Requiring falsifiability, on the other hand, renders existential generalizations meaningless, since it is impossible to discover that there is not a single example of the being in question anywhere in spacetime. It also proved difficult to reduce dispositional statements to observation statements. While the fragility of a glass is grounded in its actual constitution, we can't translate disposition talk into talk of actual properties. It is difficult to see how we could have any experience grounding claims about how an object behaves in counterfactual situations. Thus propositions that entail that a thing has a dispositional

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[1] A good account of the historical background and development of the verification criterion of meaning can be found in Misak (1995).

property are meaningless. These problems can perhaps be addressed by the simple expedient of not demanding conclusive verification, but rather some lesser degree of confirmation, but problems remain. For example, Carl Hempel (1959) noted that forming a truth-functional compound with one component an ordinary empirical claim and the other a bit of metaphysical nonsense can yield a compound that is itself verifiable, even though a large component of it might be nonsense.

The most famous technical problem with the verifiability criterion is that it seems to fail its own test. Since there is no empirical way to verify the criterion itself, and it is clearly not analytically true, then by its own lights it is meaningless. Verificationists noticed the potential for this problem from the very beginning, and they responded by saying that the criterion was never meant to be understood as a claim about what meaning is, but rather as a proposal for how to delimit scientific discourse, or as a convention for a formal language.[2] While these modifications may save the verifiability criterion from bald self-referential incoherence—though it is not obvious that they do; why should we accept a proposal for limiting scientific discourse if the proposal is self-undermining?—they do so at the cost of removing its teeth. As Alston said, "Wouldn't proposing that certain sentences not be classed as meaningful be like proposing that certain bottles of milk not be classed as sour? If the sentences are meaningful, then what is the point of classifying them as not? If they are not meaningful, then the proposal is redundant" (1964, p. 78). Instead of showing that metaphysical/religious/moral claims are meaningless, all the revised criterion can show is that they are not scientific claims, or not part of the carefully delimited formal language Carnap favored. If the criterion is just a proposal, then we are free to reject it, if we have some use for the language in question. Furthermore, it is difficult to see what is to be gained by adopting a proposal that, by its own lights, cannot be true. That seems, by itself, sufficient reason to reject the proposal.

As far as claims about religious experience—as opposed to abstract theological claims—are concerned, there seems to be no principled way to rule out religious experiences as kinds of observations. In other words, religious language might have an anchor in experience, after all; showing that religious language is not based in empirical observation presupposes a negative answer to the question whether religious experience is possible.[3] Ayer dismisses out of hand the possibility of religious experience as evidentially relevant, but it is far from obvious that there is any logical incoherence to the idea of an experience of a transcendent reality. He says of the mystic,

> The fact he cannot reveal what he "knows," or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his "knowledge," shows that his state of mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state. So that in describing his vision the mystic does not give us any information about the external world; he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind (1952, p. 119).

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[2] Both Carnap (1937) and Reichenbach (1938) make this suggestion.

[3] Swinburne (1977, pp. 22–29) makes this point.

It seems obviously to beg the question to say that experience of God, because it is not experience of the physical world, is not experience of an objective reality (Ayer fudges this distinction with the phrase "external world").

While verificationism as a theory of meaning seems to have no defenders left (Martin 1990 is an exception), there are still theorists who deploy verificationist-style reasoning to challenge religious language. Antony Flew, for example, famously argued for the vacuity of religious discourse on the grounds that religious folk never admit anything could count as evidence against their beliefs. He said:

> Some theological utterances seem to, and are intended to, provide explanations or express assertions. Now an assertion, to be an assertion at all, must claim that things stand thus and thus; *and not otherwise*. Similarly an explanation, to be an explanation at all, must explain why this particular thing occurs; *and not something else*. Those last clauses are crucial. And yet sophisticated religious people—or so it seemed to me—are apt to overlook this, and tend to refuse to allow, not merely that anything does occur, but that anything could occur, which would count against their theological assertions and explanations. But in so far as they do this their supposed explanations are actually bogus, and their seeming assertions are really vacuous (1955, p. 96).

Kai Nielsen offers a more developed version of this argument.

> Given that believers (or at least reasonably orthodox ones) take their key religious claims to be factual claims, the verificationist challenge puts it to believers to show what evidence (what experience) would count for or against the truth of their religious beliefs. What would we have to experience to be justified in asserting "My Savior liveth" or to experience to be justified in denying it? If it is impossible to answer that, then, the claim goes, "My Savior liveth" lacks cognitive and factual significance (2001, p. 472).

There are several things puzzling about this kind of line of reasoning. First of all, as Basil Mitchell pointed out in his discussion with Flew, believers do take the existence of suffering and evil to count as evidence against the existence of God. If they did not, they wouldn't waste so much time on theodicies and defenses and whatnot (Flew et al. 1955, p. 103). There is also no dearth of believers who endorse cosmological or design arguments, who think that theism is not only verifiable, but actually verified. But the worst problem with this kind of verificationist argument is that it confuses the status of the belief with the behavior of the believer. A person's unwillingness to give a claim up is not the same as the claim's unfalsifiability. There could be any number of reasons for religious believers being apparently immune to evidence. They may be just expressing their faith. If I claim that nothing could show my wife is an international jewel thief, I may simply be expressing a high degree of confidence that she is not. I am convinced no evidence will show me to be wrong, but I am far from convinced that no evidence *could* show me to be wrong. People unfamiliar with different kinds of modalities can be forgiven for not understanding the idea of logically possible counterevidence. Alternatively, they may be making a statement of their intentions, in the light of the Duhem-Quine thesis; that is, they may understand that any claim can be held constant if one is willing to make adjustments elsewhere in the belief system, and they are announcing that they intend to hold belief in God constant in that way. Whatever the explanation, even if there is something defective about their

behavior, it need not show that their utterances are meaningless, incoherent, or vacuous.

Truth-Aptness

Even if we grant that religious discourse is meaningful, it does not automatically follow that it can be evaluated as true or false. I will call the property of being evaluable as to truth-value "truth-aptness". Sentences can be used to perform speech acts that are different from what their surface structure would suggest. Declarative sentences can be used to issue commands ("You will do this") or to express emotions ("I'll be damned"), interrogative sentences can be used to make assertions (so-called rhetorical questions), and so forth. We saw that some of the positivists chose to take this kind of tack to save moral discourse without granting it factual content. So the fact that much of religious discourse is expressed in declarative sentences does not by itself show that religious discourse is truth-apt. We have seen above how some of the logical positivists gave this kind of reinterpretive reading to moral language, taking moral claims to be disguised imperatives or expressions of emotion. Imperatives and expressions of emotion, while meaningful, are not rightly evaluated as true or false.

Similar reinterpetive strategies are available for religious language. One way that religious language might fail to be truth-apt is if it is expressive rather than descriptive. Braithwaite (1971), for example, assimilates religious utterances to moral claims, and then offers an expressivist view of moral claims. Driven by what he mistakenly takes to be the legitimate challenge of verificationism, he offers an expressivist analysis of moral claims, where what is expressed is an intention to behave a certain way. He says, "All that we require is that, when a man asserts that he ought to do so-and-so, he is using the assertion to declare that he resolves, to the best of his ability, to do so-and-so" (1971, p. 79). Not only does this spare moral language the embarrassment of being unverifiable, it also gives a nice explanation for the motivating power of moral beliefs. He then proposes that the same benefits will accrue to analyzing religious claims in the same way. To say God loves us is to express an intention to live according to a particular set of moral norms.

> The view which I put forward for your consideration is that the intention of a Christian to follow a Christian way of life is not only the criterion for the sincerity of his belief in the assertions of Christianity; it is the criterion for the meaningfulness of his assertions. Just as the meaning of a moral assertion is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to act, so far as in him lies, in accordance with the moral principle involved, so the meaning of a religious assertion is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to follow a specified policy of behavior (1971, p. 80).

Braithwaite admits that such a view is not, by itself, fine-grained enough to account for the actual world of religious belief and action. After all, a great many religions espouse the same moral code as Christianity, so assertions of belief in Christian doctrines would have the same meaning as expressions of belief in the

corresponding doctrines of Islam, say, or even Buddhism. So he adds a refinement to the theory: what distinguishes assertions of the doctrines of different religions is the set of stories to which the doctrines refer. So an assertion of belief in Christ amounts to an assertion of intention to act according to the Christian moral code, where that is specified in part by reference to stories of the life of Christ. Otherwise similar assertions of belief in Buddhist doctrine may involve assertion of intention to live by the same code, but the code in the case of a Buddhist will be specified by reference to the life of the Buddha, and likewise for the other religious traditions (Braithwaite 1971, p. 84). The stories themselves will be understood the ordinary way, as strings of empirically verifiable (at least in principle) historical claims, some intended literally, and some not.

This refinement makes for some odd consequences. Many believers take many of the stories in question to be true, so when they assert them, they are making ordinary empirical claims. "Christ died on the cross" and "The Buddha left his family to pursue the life of a religious seeker" both amount to ordinary historical claims, with just the meaning ordinary understanding would give them. But "Christ died on the cross for my sins", or, "The Buddha left his family and found nirvana" become statements of intention. It is at least odd if such superficially similar claims had completely different analyses. Worse, it seems that in these two examples, the second claim contains the first, so that the expressive statement entails the factual one. But mere expressions can't entail anything. Braithwaite allows that one need not believe the stories are true for them to inform one's statements of intention, but many people in fact do believe the stories, and take the truth of the stories to be the ground of their beliefs. To say that all they are doing is expressing intentions would be to deny that they know even the most basic facts about their own beliefs and intentions.

Whatever the merits of expressivism in ethics, expressivism seems to be a disaster as an analysis of religious belief. Not only does it make logical relations among different claims problematic, and make it the case that religious believers are mistaken about the nature of their own beliefs, but it also makes it analytically impossible to have literal religious beliefs. If a believer says, "God is real and he loves me", Braithwaite will say that the believer is expressing commitment to a moral code. If the believer denies this, saying, "I am committed to that moral code, but only because God really exists and really loves me", Braithwaite would have us understand that utterance as meaning "I am committed to the moral code, but only because I am committed to the moral code." It is unlikely that the believer means any such thing. While we may misunderstand our own beliefs to some extent, and be confused about the meanings of our utterances to some extent, this is surely too large an error to believe.

To deny the truth-aptness of religious language, though, one need not reassign it to one of the familiar kinds of speech act. It may be that religious discourse is not truth-apt, but is *sui generis*, demanding its own special analysis. This is the sort of view often attributed to Wittgenstein; religious discourse has its own rules, and it is a mistake to try to evaluate as if it were simply ordinary descriptive discourse. The idea is that different kinds of use of language amount to different

practices, each with its own standards for meaningfulness and its own rules for evaluating the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an utterance. Carnap (1956) developed a similar view, although he did not use it to account for religious language; his aim was to understand how talk of abstracta, especially numbers, could make sense in an empiricist, scientific framework. His idea was that to countenance a kind of entity is to endorse a particular way of talking, a particular linguistic framework. Questions within a framework, internal questions, can be answered by reference to the rules of the framework itself. Questions as to what kinds of things there are-external questions-amount to questions as to what frameworks we should adopt. In other words, they are practical questions about which ways to talk serve our pragmatic interests best. Thus metaphysical questions about the reality of numbers really mean, "Shall we talk about numbers, or not?" The reason such metaphysical questions seem intractable is because we mistake them for theoretical questions, and try to answer them accordingly, when they are really pragmatic questions about the usefulness of number-talk.

While Carnap did not make the application to religious talk, it is an easy move to make. Here's one way this might go: Questions about the truth of religious claims cannot be settled by means of the rules of our ordinary physical-object linguistic frame. In particular, questions about the existence of God or other beings mentioned in religious discourse are ruled out of court, as it is analytically entailed by permissible assertions within the religious linguistic frame that God exists. Whether God exists as an internal question is answered analytically in the affirmative. Whether God exists as an external question is a question about the propriety of God-talk, not a theoretical question about the existence of an entity. Both a priori argumentation and empirical investigation are inappropriate. Discussions of the nature of God, then, are to be evaluated by the rules of the religious linguistic frame, not the scientific or mathematical ones. It would not be accurate to say that, on this view, religious assertions are not truth-apt, but they are certainly not true or false in the same way that more ordinary assertions are.

Some of this way of thinking of things grounded Wittgenstein's idea of *language-games,* or *forms of life.*[4] Like Carnap, Wittgenstein proposes that different kinds of assertions have different presuppositions, so it is a mistake to try to evaluate all assertions according to the same rules, by the same procedures. Wittgenstein goes farther than Carnap; Carnap thought of all linguistic frames as involving ontologies, and supporting assertions. Truth is the same thing in all frames, and the laws of logic apply equally. For Wittgenstein, however, it is an error to see all language games as assertive at all. When he lists the various uses of language, many of the items on the list are not rightly understood as assertions (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 23).[5] "A man walked into a bar", means one thing in courtroom testimony and another thing in a joke. It would be a serious misunderstanding the game of joke-telling to

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[4] I wish to leave open the question whether these are the same thing. Whether they are or are not, the same points can be made.

[5] All references to Wittgenstein's works will, where possible, cite section numbers rather than page numbers, as the section numbering is constant across all editions.

investigate to see if the claims in the joke are true. More than that, it is not even clear that 'man' and 'bar' mean the same things in the two situations.[6] As Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, "When language games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change" (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 65).

Wittgenstein himself made the application to religious language, both in *On Certainty* and in his *Lectures and Conversations*.[7] He takes religious language to be a distinct language-game (or perhaps each religion is a different language-game) from ordinary talk about the world, and so it is insulated from the need for public verifiability. Someone outside the religious language-game cannot even contradict an assertion made within it, even by uttering the assertion's negation. The extra-religious assertion is not, and cannot be, the negation of the intra-religious assertion. At the very beginning of his lectures on religious belief, he says:

> An Austrian general said to someone: "I shall think of you after my death, if that should be possible." We can imagine one group who would find this ludicrous, another who wouldn't. … Suppose someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: "not at all, or not always."
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> …
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> 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 is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly, I'm not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near (1966, p. 53).

If we are disagreeing about the presence of a certain kind of airplane, we are engaged in the same kind of practice, both playing the same game, and so our claims are comparable, and evaluable by the same rules. We do contradict one another, and which of us is right is to be settled by empirical inquiry. But if we disagree about the existence of God, or the Last Judgment (assuming we are not two believers disputing about the particulars of theology), my not believing puts me outside the practice you are engaged in. In Carnap's terminology, I am refusing to make use of the religious linguistic framework. Consequently, my assertion does not contradict yours, any more than my telling a joke involving Saint Peter at the pearly gates contradicts anybody's doctrine of heaven. Wittgenstein (1966, p. 55) says, "I can't contradict that person". I cannot even say that your belief is unreasonable, since reasonableness may be a feature of some, but not all,

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[6] A misunderstanding along this line is exploited to comedic effect in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Brian is trying to tell a parable about two servants, and his interlocutor demands to know the servants' names. When Brian can't answer, and then finally just chooses two names, the interlocutor complains that he is just "making it up".

[7] Many defenders of Wittgenstein's view (e.g., see Phillips (1971), Mulhall 2001) have spent a lot of time arguing that the criticisms leveled at the view have been based on misunderstandings of it. While I believe that the description of Wittgenstein's view is correct, I am not concerned here with Wittgenstein exegesis. If this is not Wittgenstein's view, it is at least a view in his spirit, and one actually held by some philosophers.

language-games; even if it is a feature of two different language-games, the standards of reasonableness may vary:

> If someone believes something, we needn't always be able to answer the question 'why he believes it'; but if he knows something, then the question "how does he know?" must be capable of being answered.

> And if one does answer this question, one must do so according to generally accepted axioms. This is how something of this sort may be known (1972, pp. 150–151).

And what those axioms are varies from language-game to language-game:

> Whether a thing is a blunder or not—it is a blunder in a particular system. Just as something is a blunder in a particular game and not in another (1966, p. 59).

> Am I to say that they are unreasonable? I wouldn't call them unreasonable. I would say, they are certainly not reasonable, that's obvious. 'Unreasonable' implies, with everyone, rebuke. I want to say: they don't treat it as a matter for reasonability (1966, p. 58).

D.Z. Phillips develops this view:

> In the light of these examples, what are we to say about the man who believes in God and the man who does not? Are they contradicting each other? Are two people, one of whom says there is a God and the other of whom says he does not believe in God, like two people who disagree about the existence of unicorns? Wittgenstein shows that they are not. The main reason for the difference is that God's reality is not one of a kind; he is not a being among beings. The word God is not the name of a thing. Thus, the reality of God cannot be assessed by a common measure which also applies to things other than God. (1971, pp. 126–127)

In ordinary-object language, to say that X is not the name of a thing (unless there is some special weight being put on 'thing') is the same as to say that there is no X. To say that there is a God, but 'God' is not the name of a thing, is therefore to say that God-talk goes by different rules from ordinary object talk, and so must not be evaluated by the same rules as ordinary object talk.

If this view is correct, then whatever truth-value claims of religious experience have, they have only in the context of the religious language-game. Since such a language-game includes as one of its axioms that God exists, then the question as to whether religious experiences count as good evidence for religious belief is ill formed. To ask that question is to import a standard of evidence from a game where it is at home to another game where it is alien; it would be like asking if moving a pawn to the back rank constitutes a touchdown.

There are good reasons to suppose that this is not an accurate picture of language in general, never mind of religious language in particular, or at least that if it is true, there is nevertheless only one language-game, and one set of rules for reasonableness. First of all, it seems that if there are a multiplicity of language-games, we do in fact perform inferences that countenance entailments from one to another. For example, we routinely allow assertions in math-talk to be evidence against assertions in object-talk; if I think I see two people go into a room, then two more, that is excellent reason to think there are now four people in the room. While inferences from jokes or novels to the real world are not allowed, that

seems to be better explained by saying that jokes and fictions have different illocutionary force because they are intended that way; the sentences have their ordinary descriptive meaning, but they are not being used to make assertions. There is no reason to treat differently from one another different claims that seem all to be equally intended as assertions of truths.

It is easy to be misled by the analogy with games. While it is clear that there are lots of different games, and each has its own rules, and judging moves in one game by the rules of another is a mistake, the case with language seems to be different. There are, of course, different *languages*, but they are intertranslatable (and they are not what was intended by 'language-games', anyway). But what are the different language-games? Wittgenstein does list several different uses of language, but it is not at all clear that they constitute different language-games. With games, we can explicitly list the rules, and that makes it clear when we are dealing with different games. But is praying so different from requesting? We can't explicitly list the rules of praying and requesting.[8] They may, for all we can tell, operate by the same rules of reasonableness.

But even if a diversity of language-games is an adequate theory of language in general, it doesn't make sense to treat religious language as a special and separate language-game, to the extent that it has its own rules for reasonableness. If it were, then every believer who has engaged in natural theology has been making a mistake, not just those who have subjected religious belief to rational criticism. The laws of first-order logic, at least, apply within religious discourse as in all other kinds of discourse. John Hyman puts it very well:

> It is certainly impossible to insulate religion entirely from rational criticism: "If Christ be not risen, our faith is vain" implies "Either Christ is risen or our faith is vain" for exactly the same reason as "If the weather is not fine, our picnic is ruined" implies "Either the weather is fine or our picnic is ruined." But if religious beliefs are not invulnerable to logic, why should they be cocooned from other sorts of rational scrutiny? (Hyman 1999, p. 155).[9]

The proponents of the language-game picture face a dilemma. If religious discourse is not subject to the rules of reasonableness that other kinds of discourse are, then there is no reason to suppose that arguments made within religious discourse have any force for those outside the discourse. And it's not just the reasonings of Anselm and Aquinas that are at stake here; Jesus's appeal to his hearers to infer what their Father in heaven would do based on what they as earthly fathers do could have no force. The Buddha frequently invites us to reason along with him, and the kinds of reasoning he employs are the familiar ones we use in other contexts. On the other hand, if religious discourse is subject to the same rules of reasonableness, then there is no point to saying it is a separate language-game. Many modern thinkers are happy to grasp the first horn of the dilemma, but most believers through the ages (and even today) would find that a bizarre concession to make.

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[8] Morawetz (1978, pp. 52–54) makes this observation.

[9] Kai Nielsen has made the same point in many places, starting with his (1967, pp. 191–209).

Conclusion

It seems, then, we are left with no reason to exempt religious language from evaluation in ordinary ways. There is no reason to think religious assertions are meaningless, or not really assertions, or not subject to rational scrutiny. While religious language may be odd in many ways, it gets its life, its point, from being of a piece with ordinary talk. That means that claims about religious experiences are, in particular, assertions with truth-values, and can enter into evidential relations with other assertions. Our next task, then, is to begin that evaluation.

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