IS RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AUTONOMOUS?

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Introduction

Language is a principal vehicle of communication by means of which humans transact their day-to-day business with their fellow humans. In a way, language is a link between man and man, past and present, and present and future. As humans we are engaged in multifarious activities. Or to use Wittgenstein's expression we lead various forms of life. In every form of life that we lead we adopt a specific kind of language which depicts that form of life. Outside the realm of that particular form of life that language may not convey any sense or may convey something which is totally different from its ordinary sense. Thus there are various forms of language representing various forms of life. Not only that, every form of language has its own "rules of grammar". Here, I do not mean to understand the term "grammar" in its usual sense as is understood by the grammarians of language, but in a different sense altogether. The "grammar" of a form of language brings out the tacit dimensions of that particular form of language when it functions. The above mentioned suppositions serve as a backdrop of my approach. My objective in this paper is two pronged. On the one hand, I propose to show that being verifiable is not a condition for being intelligible or meaningful. On the other hand, I propose to show that the language of religion has its own "grammar"; therefore, it is as meaningful as any other form of language, and is as technical as the language of science.

Analysis and the Religious Language

Neither Russell nor Wittgenstein of *Tractatus* has given any importance to the statements of religion, ethics and aesthetics in their treatment of language. This is because the statements of religion, ethics and aesthetics cannot be brought under the purview of the ideal or logically perfect language which is designed to mirror the reality as it is. The reality, as Wittgenstein puts it, has logic and

mathematics (tautologies) as its scaffoldings. Since the statements of the religion, ethics and aesthatics do not conform to the logico-mathematical model of language they must lie outside the boundaries of reality (world). Consequently, anything that lies within the scaffoldings of logic and mathematics is affable and anything that is beyond the scaffoldings of logic and mathematics is ineffable. In other words, anything ineffable is inexpressible. To quote the statement of Wittgenstein as regards the sense of the values;[1]

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen; in it no value exists- if it did exist, it would have no value.

> If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case.

Proceeding further Wittgenstein writes;[2]

> So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

> Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

Also he believes;[3]

> that ethics cannot be put into words.

> Ethics is transcendental.

> (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same)

It is very clear from the above statements of Wittgesntein that ethics and aesthetics cannot be expressed in language. Though Wittgenstein did not say anything about religion here, the status of religion is as good as ethics and aesthetics. As a matter of fact, religion, ethics and aesthetics form part of our value structure. If ethics and aesthetics are ineffable, so also religion. But elsewhere Wittgenstein said something about religion. As regards religion he writes as follows:[4]

> How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference to what is higher, God does not reveal himself in the world.

Well, it is a known fact the God is that point of reference in religion. He being transcendental, not in the Kantian sense, cannot be approached, therefore, he is indescribable. However, Wittgenstein never denigrated the values by saying that

they are non-sensical in the sense in which they are treated as non-sensical by Hume and his ideal followers (logical positivists). In fact Wittgenstein's respect for mystical or inaffable aspects can be seen from the following statement of Wittgenstein about the *Tractatus.* [5]

> My work consists of two parts; the one presented here plus all that I have
> not written. And it is precisely the second part that it is the important
> one.

The values (religion, ethics and aesthetics) belong to the unexplained part of the *Tractatus*. The importance of these values, especially religion, is highlighted in the later works of Wittgenstein.

Taking the cue from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus,* the logical positivists went a step further in claiming that the statements of religion, ethics and aesthetics are non-sensical. Of course they derived their inspiration from Hume's treatment of metaphysics of transcendental kind. According to logical positivists, a statement is meaningful (literally meaningful) if and only if it is empirically verifiable. However, the analytic statements of logic and mathematics are exempted from this rule . Since the statements of religion, ethics and aesthetics are neither analytic nor empirically verifiable they are treated as non-sensical, especially the statements of religion. Some consolation is granted to the statements of ethics by characterizing them as the emotions of the speaker(s) in question. Thus they are more exhortations to a moral virtue. The factually significant propositions are distinguished by their being empirically verifiable or falsifiable. As regards the nature of values Wittgenstein held that there is something higher which is not affable; whereas Ayer, a leading British exponent of logical positivism, claimed that there is nothing higher and any attempt to express it cannot but be meaningless. To quote Ayer in this context: to say that "God exists" is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true of false.[6] Armed with this kind of criterion to judge the meaningfulness of a statement, the verificationist can issue a challenge to a religious believer. The challenge is that in respect of the non-analytic assertions of religion what would it be to accept as verification or falsification of the assertions which he (a religious believer) believes? If there is no answer from a religious believer, then the verificationist will claim that such statements which form the cornerstone of the believer's faith are not genuine assertions. They are only pseudo-statements

appearing in the surface grammar of the genuine ones.

Based on the account given above the following questions can be raised:

(1) Is there any need to construct an 'ideal' (technical or logically perfect) language to mirror the reality? Can't our ordinary language serve the purpose?

(2) Is verification an only handy test available to judge the meaningfulness of any statement?

As regards the first, the inventors of the 'ideal language' are of the opinion that anything that cannot be expressed in 'ideal language' cannot be expressed at all, for they believed that the language of science is the most 'ideal' or 'technical' in the sense that it mirrors the reality as it is. In other words, the 'ideal language' mirrors the reality as it appears to be. The protagonists of this view did not make any distinction between what is the case and what appears to be the case. Not only that, the term 'reality' is meant to cover only those aspects of reality which are objectively experienced. Thus objectivity is the sole criterion on the basis of which the sense of a proposition is determined. Since science is wedded to objectivity, the 'ideal language' being scientific in its nature must depict only those aspects of reality that are objectively accessible.

However, a different criterion of the term 'technical' can be evolved. The concepts used in any specialized field of study are considered to be technical since they cannot be understood by everyone excepting those who are familiar with that particular field of inquiry. For example, the concepts such as 'acceleration', 'atom', 'quantum','velocity', etc. are the technical concepts used in the language of physics. Similarly, the concepts such as'God', 'soul','transmigration','resurrection','rebirth', etc. are the technical concepts used in the language of religion. In this sense religion is as technical as science.

Coming to the question of verification, is the type of observation admissible in science is the only type of observation? Even within the scientific realm the method of verification differs from one branch of science to the other. If the scientific mode of observation were the only type of observation, then objectivity is the sloe criterion of verifiability. The assumption behind this view is that the analysis of the meaning of statements is somehow dependent on the scientific techniques of observation. Why should anyone consider science as the

only paradigm of truth? It is a known fact that there exists a polarity between science and religion as the modes of scientific explanation are different from the modes of religious explanation. The proof demanded in scientific explanation is totally different from the proof demanded in confirming a religious experience. If science relies on objectivity, religion relies on subjectivity. By applying the methods of science to religion we are committing a category mistake as science and religion belong to two different categories of human experience. The scientistm advocated by the logical positivists exceeded its limits. By holding that all clear language, the guardians of the principle of verification became "the dogmatic theologians and heresiologists of the orthodox church of Natural science."[7]

An attempt was made by the philosophers like Antony Flew to defend the thesis of logical positivists, namely, being verifiable is the criterion of being intelligible. According to Flew, the statement of a religious believer that "God exists" cannot be true unless it is also meaningful. Flew claims that: "to assert that such and such is the case is necessarily equivalent to denying that such and such is not the case."[8] What Flew meant by this statement is that for any meaningful statement that is not true or simply false by definition, there must be some conceivable states of affairs which, if it occurred and known, would count as evidence that the statement is false. For example, though we have good evidence to say that Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of India, we can at least conceive of finding a counter evidence to show that he is not. But in the case of the statement "God exists" what would count against its being true? Of course theist cannot conceive of any evidence to disprove the statement "God exists". Hence, claims Flew, the statement "God exists" is not a statement at all since it cannot be false. If a statement cannot be false, it cannot be true either. Therefore, it is meaningless.

Flew's attempt to show that the statements of religious believers are not statements at all follows from his failure to distinguish the status of the statements of religious believers from that of ordinary empirical statements. The statements of religious believers have God as their point of reference; whereas ordinary empirical statements have various objects (perceptible objects) as their point of reference. Thus we are dealing with two different types of ontological categories. The evidence required to establish one ontological category is different from the evidence required to establish the ontological category of

another type. Thus Flew's argument against the view that the statements of religion are meaningful is not all that illuminating.

John Hick, a philosopher of religion with considerable repute, argued in favor of the view that the statements of religion are meaningful. Hick is in agreement with the verificationists so far as the meaningfulness of a statement is concerned. He then asks: What empirical evidence would verify the statement "God exists"? Here Hick invokes the notion of "eschatological verification". According to him: "The central core of the concept of verification ... is the removal of ignorance or uncertainty concerning the truth of some proposition."[9] Hick suggested that ignorance or uncertainty (rational doubt) concerning the statement whether "God exists" is true could be cleared by a man's surviving his death and discovering his experience in the new environ in which he is placed. For Hick this is religiously unambiguous situation accepted by the followers of Christianity. Accordingly Hick writes:[10]

> There are ... two possible developments of our experiences such that, if
> they occurred in conjunction with one another (whether in this life or
> another life to come) they would assure us beyond rational doubt of the
> reality of God, as conceived in the Christian faith. These are, first, an
> experience of the fulfillment of God's purpose for ourselves, as this has
> been disclosed in the Christian revelation, second, with an experience of
> God as he has revealed himself in the person of Christ.

Hick's attempt to dispel the rational doubt concerning the truth of the statement "God exists" by means of "eschatological verification" has its own shortcomings. A person after surviving death, according to Hick, is encountering a new environment. In other words, he is experiencing it, but not verifying it, if one is really verifying, is he verifying it for his own sake or for the sake of others? Moreover, the account given by Hick is only acceptable to those who have faith in Christian theology. Then how about non-believers of Christian theology? Will they accept the interpretation given by a Christian theologian? Normally a given interpretation of particular experience verifies a claim only if the conceptual context within which the interpretation occurs is acceptable.

Most of the problems concerning the statement of religion surface due to our ignorance of the nature of religious language. A proper inquiry into the nature of religious language may dissolve a number of problems. In fact a correct

understanding of the nature of religious language may disqualify them as problems.

The Nature of Religious Language

The credit goes to Wittgenstein for introducing the notion of 'language-games' to philosophy. Wittgenstein and his followers have capitalized on this notion to dissolve many a philosophical puzzlements. The notion of 'language-game' paved the way for the autonomy of religious language. May be, prior to Wittgenstein many philosophers tried to defend the language of religion in their own way. But the introduction of the notion of 'language- game' enabled philosophers to handle the issues of philosophy more confidently than ever. One can without any diffidence say that there is something called language of religion which is distinct from the other forms of language. The religious concepts and phrases have any meaning insofar as they are related to the language of religion. They tend to become meaningless when they are transplanted into some other kind of discourse. The uniqueness of religious language is due to what the language is about.

There are a number of statements which religious people assent to in faith. For example, religious believers claim that "God exists", "God is omnipresent", "God is benevolent". These statements "do not just differ in respect of what they are about. Entirely different connections would make them into religious beliefs".[11] According to Wittgenstein, "A religious belief is arrived at not by reasoning or by any ordinary ground for belief, but rather by regulating for all in his life."[12] At times religious believers use the terms such as 'dogma', 'faith', etc. to refer to religious beliefs. Thus Wittgenstein firmly believes that the game that we play with the words in religion is totally different from the game played with the same words in science. At times the words may be different. In order to drive his point home, Wittgenstein further illustrates:[13]

> We do not talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. Nor about knowing. In a religious discourse we use such expressions as : 'I believe that so and so will happen' and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science.

As regards the belief in God's existence, Wittgenstein remarks:[14]

What would it feel like not to have heard of Christ? Should we feel left
alone in the dark? Do we escape such a feeling simply in the way a
child escapes it when he knows there is someone in the room with him.

Does it in any sense mean that we should treat Christ as an invisible protector?
Wittgenstein need not convince himself about the existence of God by means
of miracles. According to him, a miracle is part of religion. Miracles may help
us in strengthening our faith in God. This does not in no way mean that one's
faith is shaken by rejecting the miracle. All that Wittgenstein aims at is to
establish the autonomy of religious language.

A notable contribution in favor of the autonomy of religious language
comes from Peter Winch and D. Z. Phillips. Let us consider their views.

Winch argues against the view that the scientific language alone is
justifiable as it corresponds to objective reality. He supposes that the every idea
of an appeal to objective reality is confused as there is no external relation
between language and reality. What is real is rather established by the concepts
of our language that we use. It is unrealistic to think that we step outside the
concepts and compare them to something called 'reality' to which we have
accessibility independent of our conceptual system. According to Winch, God's
reality is independent of anybody's conception. God's reality is seen only in the
context of religion in which the concept of God is used. God has reality if and
only if there are certain shared rules which determine what can and cannot be
said about God. Thus "it is within the religious use of language that the
conception of God's reality has its place."[15]

In agreement with Winch, Phillips puts forward his view that there is an
autonomy about various areas of discourse. In his famous work *The Concept of
Prayer* Phillips writes as follows:[16]

One can say within any such context, whether it be science or religion,
'This is the rule must be observed, this is the meaning which a word
must have if it is to belong to this conceptual family.' But when
philosophers say, "This is the meaning which a word must have" without
specifying any context, they are guilty of arbitrary linguistic legislation.
The must is not logical 'must'; but simply the must of their own
preferences, or the 'must' of one context which they have elevated,
consciously or unconsciously to be a standard for all others.

Like Winch, Phillips warns us that any attempt to impose a definite meaning to an expression irrespective of its occurrence in different language-games might lead to all sorts of mental cramps.To seek meaningful use of 'God talk' outside the realm of language-game which depicts that form of life is to commit what Phillips calls "the naturalistic fallacy in religion". Phillips is convinced that often philosophers content themselves with examining the 'surface grammar' of any discourse; whereas if we look into the 'depth grammar' of the religious language we find that it arises within a form of life to which the user is experientially committed.

The arguments adduced by both Winch and Phillips in support of the autonomy of religious language supplement the thesis of Wittgenstein, namely, there are several language-games. Each game is played according to its rules. The rules of one game cannot be employed in another game.

Conclusion

To conclude : the view that the language of science is the only meaningful language, since the statement of science can be objectively verified, is a myth. We tried to show that being verifiable is not a condition for being meaningful or intelligible. In our day-to-day affairs we do make assertions of different kind which are intelligible to others irrespective of their being verifiable or falsifiable. Every assertion that we make would certainly have an object of reference depending upon the context. Depending upon the nature of the object of reference we attach meaning to that assertion. There are assertions which can be empirically verified, and there are also assertions which cannot be empirically verified. Every assertion being an assertion carries some sense with it depending upon the context. As Wittgenstein aptly puts it, we share certain fundamental beliefs as social beings. So truth consists in our agreement or disagreement of propositions which ultimately refer to these fundamental beliefs.

Since there are many forms of life, corresponding to every form of life there is a form of language. The concepts used in that form of language have their points of reference within the framework of that form of life. Every language-game has its own rules, so also the language-game of religion. The rules are not constitutive rather regulative in their character. In other words, the

language is not dependent on the rules, rather it is other way round. Rules are meant to regulate the game that we play. In agreement with others we may change the rules of a game, thus. its conventions. Once this view of language-game is acceptable to us, we do not mind granting autonomy to the language of religion. Thus the concepts used in that language-game are as technical as the concepts used in any other language-game. Unless one is trained in that language-game one cannot make head or tail of it.

NOTES

1.   L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1978), 6.41.

2.   *Ibid.*, 6.42.

3.   *Ibid.*, 6.421.

4.   *Idid.*, 6.432.

5.   . Letter to Ludwig Fiker, quoted in Ved Mehta's *Fly and Fly- Bottle* (London, 1963), P. 41.

6.   A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Hormondsworth, 1974), P. 152.

7.   W. H. S. Barnes, *The Philosophical Predicament* (London, 1950), P. 101.

8.   Antony Flew, "Religious Language Is Not Meaningful" in *Problems in Philosophical Inquiry* (ed.) Julius R. Weinberg & Keith E. Yandell, (New York, 1971), P. 638.

9.   John Hick, "Religious Language Is Meaningful" in *Problems in Philosophical Inquiry*, P. 644.

10.   *Ibid.*, P.653.

11.   L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversation on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Beliefs (ed.) Cyril Barret, (Oxford, 1978), P. 54.*

12.   *Ibid.*, P. 57.

13   *Ibid.*, P. 54.

14.   L. Wittgenstein, *Culture & Value* (London, 1978), P. 13.

15.   P. Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society" in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1,1964, P. 309.

16.   D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept Of Prayer* (London, 1965), P.10.