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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

§1 *Introduction*

Religious belief is often justified by referring to a particular kind of experience or revelation or at least to the possibility thereof. Religious experience, however, are seemingly to be quite different from our ordinary experience with objects in space and time: they refer – at least so it is claimed – transcendent objects (beyond the universe in space-time) or ordinary objects (like our own person) in an extraordinary way. Some conditions of ordinary experiences seem not to be satisfied by them: Are they reproducible? Is it possible to refer to the objects of these experiences intersubjectively? Can they be expressed clearly? – and so on. The last question in particular hints at the connection with the problem of religious language. Religious experience seem to depend on a particular language to get expressed properly. Can there be such a way of talking? Religious language, on the other hand, seems to need religious experience to ground its attempt to talk in a way that distinguishes itself from our ordinary talk about objects in space and time.

§2 *A Reconstruction of Religious Language is Possible*

Often „analytic philosophy of religion“ is taken as the description of the language game “religious speech”. An analytic investigation of religious language, however, will be not only descriptive, like a sociological or anthropological study of religious language might be. In the sense of the meta-scientific investigation, reconstruction and rebuilding of scientific language in applied philosophy of science, a reconstructive, normative investigation of religious language is possible. This investigation is reconstructive in as much it asks for the basic conditions and rules which govern this way of speaking. It is normative in as much the discovery of conflicting intuitions or language use a more coherent way of talking this way, given the supposed aims of talking thus, can be established. An example of such a meta-discursive investigation is the investigation of the argumentative function of (an appeal to) revelation. So this meta-linguistic approach asks for the conditions of possibility of the religious way of talking. Now, what are the characteristics of religious language? Assertions made by religions like “Jesus is the son of God” are supposed to be true. The believer takes it to be a fact that Jesus is the son of God. Was religion only a way of

instructing to act by moral rule (say by the ten commandments), it could be considered as a part of moral discourse. Religion, however, wants to be more than an ethic, and the ethic given is thought to be grounded in religious facts (e.g., that it is a fact that God made the world, that God gave us the commandments – etc.). Religious speech contains speech acts like commanding, praying, exclamations or singing. Cultic acts are distinguished from playing or theatre, however, by claiming that the objects which are addressed in a song or a prayer are really existent. Making assertions, therefore, is fundamental to religious language.

Claiming the existence of a revelation is another characteristic feature of religious talk in many religions. As a move in the religious language games it is analogous to going back to the data of observation in the sciences. Nevertheless revelation cannot be reproduced intersubjectively. There is a fundamental problem with revelation: since there are too many candidates for revelations the source of the revealed message has to be established as being (religiously) reliable beyond doubt; now this means either we get a regress of revealed reliability of the revelation's source or the contents of the revelation guarantee its authenticity making it thus superfluous for them to be revealed (instead of just spoken) in the first place. So distinguishing one source of revelation is part of faith itself. Revelation itself cannot justify belief to the unbeliever. A coherent faith might be erected upon the initial assumption. So analysing a move like reverting to revelation is possible. This analysis would have to look at the role of religious experience in revelation. Different religions make different assumptions how transcendent objects or individuals reveal themselves. Let us here take a closer look whether the claims inherent in the religious assertions can be justified within a religious language game *sui generis*.

§3 *Is there a Religious Discourse?*

Although we have seen that a reconstruction of religious speech is possible, we have not seen that there is a way to validate religious assertions in a definite way, like it is possible to validate scientific assertions in the theoretical discourse (which is defined by trying to establish truth or at least warranted belief intersubjectively by rules of argumentation and the scientific methods). Religious talk would be definite in that sense if there were methods of arguing that correspond to religious claims like the scientific methods correspond to claims of scientific truth. Methods the employment of which could convince an opponent (i.e. somebody who so far does not believe the religious claims in question). Such a religious discourse would correspond to religious truth like theoretical discourse corresponds to

ordinary truth claims. Religious claims are considered to be true. We might start the search for a religious discourse by considering the question how these claims could be verified or warranted. Verifiability or justifiability or warrantability would bring a procedure of verifying, warranting or justifying with it. One could assume that in a more or the less holistic epistemology – nowadays widely considered to be on the right track – the chances of justification are not that bad. If justification is holistic there can be statements which have no immediately associated observable consequences, but which are justified within the theoretical system they are part of. By being part of the system they have indirect empirical significance. If this theory was the best theory available these statements would be justified and accepted. But this is just how scientific theory evaluation proceeds. If the assumption of God's existence was part of our best physical theory Gods existence would be established scientifically. The assumption would be the result of a theoretical discourse. One might call this the „dilemma of verification” (or justification, or warranting).

What about falsifiability? If falsifiability was the reverse of verifiability, this would mean that the believer would be prepared to believe „until further notice“ and would accept an empirical refutation of her belief. Inasmuch as religious claims possess relevance they should have consequences. So by *modus tollens* they might be falsified if not other background assumptions are modified. But believers just do not behave that way. They do not put themselves the question of falsifying their faith. Since at the same time they still consider the religious claims to be true they just believe them without committing them to a definite discourse of the type we look for. So either religious claims are all unfalsifiable truths, which is doubtful given the conflicting religions, or the believer only treats them as unfalsifiable. One might call this the “dilemma of falsification”.

So it is very doubtful that there is a discourse *sui generis* to establish religious truths.

§4 *How Are Religious Terms Introduced into Language?*

Suppose then that religious assertions can be treated like scientific assertions. So religious claims could make sense. But they really make sense only if the terms employed in these assertions have a well defined meaning. Whatever precisely the best theory of meaning requires, it will require that the meaning of a sentence is well defined only if there are conditions in which the application of that very sentence in distinction to other sentences will be considered right and conditions under which its application will be considered wrong. An expression generally can be considered *well defined* in its meaning if its semantic distinctness

supervenies on the structures of the world (structural difference between round and square objects in the world provide the basis for distinguishing applying “round” or “square”). “generally” if there was an alternative for religious expressions. Such an alternative is not to be seen. Using a well defined expression employs criteria of use referring to the conditions defining its meaning. A theory of religious language use cannot neglect this, since we can ask why the expression “Odin” was used instead of “Thor” if these have definite meaning. Even if the rules of use are determined in part by the religious belief system itself the expressions are always connected to ordinary expressions (e.g. “has only one eye”), which have definite criteria of applicability. On pains of making religious terms void of content this connection cannot be completely severed. The only consistent act for somebody who claims the inexpressibility of religious belief to counter this reasoning is to remain silent. A mere announcement that the expressions occurring in religious statements are not used in their ordinary understanding gets into even more trouble: On pains of not being understood it has to be possible to translate metaphors and hints into more precise terms; if this is not possible, one may ask whether the metaphors or the hints are meaningfully employed at all. Religious statements cannot be mere unusual. If the expression „God“ can be subsumed under different and non-arbitrary predicates, the use of these predicates and not others has to be based on facts concerning the properties of God. It is not sufficient to call religious speech „metaphorical“. In metaphorical speech a transfer takes place (expressions are used to convey something that can be expressed by them because of a partial, maybe abstract, structural correspondence between their usual conditions of use and the intended area or object of reference). In any metaphorical use, however, there are before applying a metaphor descriptions which are used non-metaphorically. If you express something that was described before by using a metaphor, still there was a (partial) non-metaphorical description before. This applies also if something that is described at the moment (say a perceived object) has not been put into words before. So for example in case of seeing you might have „This is darker than its background“. In the case of hearing you might have “This is louder than a car”. The use of metaphors depends on such expressible distinctions between ordinary properties. So an ordinary description, even if only partial, precedes a religious description. Objects of religious descriptions have to be describable non-metaphorically if they are to be described metaphorically or “analogous”. Metaphorical language use, therefore, cannot defend the claim that religious terms refer to something if it is claimed at the same time that they do not refer by ordinary language use. By being non-describable in non-metaphorical speech an object just is non-describable simpliciter. The only alternative is that the perceived, so far undescribed

object is perceived in a mode of perception in which partial non-metaphorical descriptions are not at hand. Religious experience might be like that. An object given in a religious experience, understood thus, could not be described by ordinary usage in any way. Its expressability would depend on a completely different way of referring to objects. The thesis that religious terms have a definite meaning would not only imply that there has to be some religious experience, but would also require that there is a distinct mode of expressing these experience that does not work like ordinary perceptual reports. (We look at this in the next paragraph.)

Morphological rules can give us expressions (like „inexpressible“, „all-knowing“) which have a definite meaning because of the definite meaning of their parts, even though we cannot make out whether their conditions of use are present. Some religious terms can be embedded thus into our ordinary system of meanings. They enter into logical relations with other sentences including observational sentences. Sentences containing them have meaning and can be used to make statements that are true or false.

Though even if not all religious terms are meaningful, there might be some that have a well defined meaning. If transcendent objects are not only transcendent but spend some of their time in our universe religious objects can be talked about with ordinary vocabulary.

§5 *Can Religious Language Be Based in Religious Experience?*

Somebody who wants to defend religious language could reply thus to the preceding paragraph:

Asking for the meaning of religious terms presupposed our ordinary conception of meaning and reference (applied paradigmatically to physical objects). Our non-logical vocabulary refers first to physical objects and then to mental events. With respect to these entities conditions of use of a term can be specified, and it is a fact of the matter which can be decided intersubjectively whether these conditions are given or not. Talking about physical entities is the paradigmatic case of introducing expressions. Is it proper to criticise religious language from this perspective?

A justification of that criticism is that our conception of meaningful language is founded in this paradigm. Meanings have to be intersubjective. The conditions of use of ordinary terms guarantee that. Furthermore religious language claims truth. Claiming truth involves intersubjective verifiability/justifiability. And intersubjective reference is a way to do

this. And, as we have seen, religious language contains ordinary expressions which are defined by their normal rules of use.

Once again a reply by the proponent of genuine religious language is possible: What if there were other ways of speaking? To criticise them on the standard case would be a *petitio*. All that is shown by non-fulfilment of the standards of ordinary reference is that neither we talk about objects in space and time nor about mental events, i.e. we talk about a realm of objects *sui generis*. The claims of religious language involve truth, but even if truth is tied to meaning a second connection between meaning and physical referents is needed to require that we have to talk in the ordinary way in religion. Meaning might be founded in different ways. And besides the ordinary expressions in religious talk there are the genuine religious terms. Using ordinary terms cannot be avoided because of the volatile nature of the religious realm and the need to introduce it by using analogies.

This reply needs a foundation in a theory what it means to talk religiously in the narrow sense. Suppose there is a realm of reality which is not the realm of physical objects. It could scarcely be described by ordinary terms. Using them for this job would convey the impression of vagueness or improper usage. This realm needed a new vocabulary. We can think of this vocabulary as being similar to our ordinary categories, so we might assume that the new realm contains objects and properties, although they might lack the stable structure we know from physical objects. This might be the very definition of this realm. So the vague language would correspond to the volatile objects residing there. Descriptions would have to be interpreted as being associative and as trying to evoke in the listener an access to the objects referred to. Since somebody else could thus understand my religious talk it would not be merely subjective.

So a theory might run, but I take it to be extremely difficult to deliver on such promises of a theory. A better solution to justify speaking of revelation and transcendent objects can be provided, which we turn to in the next paragraph.

§6 *Experiencing Revelation Using our own Language*

A particular solution can be given within those religions in which God speaks to us. He is speaking in our language. So his words are understandable to us. We recognise him – depending on the particular faith – as God either because of his words (as the Qran claims) or because of his miraculous deeds accompanying his revelation (as in the case of the incarnation in Jesus Christ). In this case religious language is founded by God. He neither

needs religious experience nor a peculiar kind of language – he just is in the transcendent realm. From the moment, however, we start interpreting his revelation and try to describe God in his properties, especially when reporting of a religious experience of him, the old difficulties reappear. We can talk about Jesus, inasmuch as he is human, in an ordinary way, but not of the son of God or the Holy Spirit – and that is the crucial part of our description. So we need besides or instead of the faculty to express some genuine religious experience a special faculty – in the Christian faith provided by the Holy Spirit – to understand the revelation. Obviously this approach does still presuppose a lot. In both theories (expressing a genuine religious experience vs. Being able to understand God speaking to us) accepting religious language remains part of faith itself. Referring to the Holy Spirit as securing the proper understanding of a revealed message will not convince a non-believer. Claiming that only the chosen ones can understand the message leads straight into esoteric isolation. In case of the assumption of genuine realm, a genuine experience and a genuine language we need a distinction to hallucination or muddled talk. The religions of the book can at least provide a coherent system of religion which does not make that much presuppositions. Christianity deminishes the role religious experience and expressing that experience plays. Maybe we do not need any religious experience of a problematic sort at all. This can be seen by drawing a distinction within the notion of religious experience:

Religious experience can be introduced as experience of religious objects (i.e. the experience is characterised *referentially*). This need not require any new mode of experience. When Thor splits a tree and we see the split tree we have an experience of Thor`s deeds independent from the fact whether we describe it thus or not. Religious experience can, secondly, be introduced by a mode of experience. According to this it would be evident for the experiencing person that she has such an experience because she finds herself in state peculiar mental state. Some religions (e.g. those speaking of “enlightenment” or “satori”) require for their foundation an account of religious experience of the second sort, which seems to be difficult to provide. Religion in general does not need such an account. Religions based on revelation in language (like Christianity or Islam) refer to a religious entity (God) because that entity is talking to us in *our* – maybe somewhat extended – language. The authorisation of revelation may happen by miracles. Miracles are exceptions to the laws of nature, but they are *not* exception to our perceptual faculties. People just saw Lazarus coming back from his grave. So a religious experience of the second, more problematic kind need not be claimed here. So even if there is no such religious experience and thus much of religious language cannot be founded on it, there are still religious claims around.

Even if many of the assumption made in the defence of religious language are difficult to refute, why should we make them? This question asks for the connection between the topic of religious experience and religious language and wider religious topics like immortality, atonement or the question of the meaning of life, which cannot be taken up here .¹

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¹ But see for the wider context: M. BREMER, *Der Sinn des Lebens. Ein Beitrag zur analytischen Religionsphilosophie*, Frankfurt a.M., 2002.