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# Unfalsifiability and Religious Belief

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IN AN EARLIER ISSUE of this *Journal* Professor Nielsen has attacked Hick's familiar and (I think) doubtful suggestions concerning the eschatological verification of religious claims.<sup>1</sup> In a more recent issue Professor Mavrodes has taken Nielsen to task with the claim that the verification or falsification procedure is itself logically circular.<sup>2</sup> I have no wish to quarrel with this claim; it is entirely sound, if perhaps somewhat overdue. Of course verification will not do as a test for the meaningfulness of religious utterances in any but the most technical and trivial sense, and this should have been recognized long ago. But it will perhaps serve as an occasion for articulating some of the more important kinds of uses and meanings that such utterances actually have. To do this is, in fact, the ulterior purpose of the present remarks.

Most contributors to this discussion have two features in common. Neither critic nor defender has shown much concern to catch the actual utterances of religious believers; the repeated ascription of the claim "God exists" is a single if striking example of this attitude. Nor has either paid much attention to the various contexts in which these utterances are actually used; indeed, it is almost as though they supposed that such utterances carried within themselves a single and obvious meaning determinable without reference to the specific religious context in which they actually occur. We hope to avoid both these errors. We shall choose as our example a properly religious utterance ("God is love") and examine it in its three principal religious contexts. In this way we hope to determine its various uses. This is a matter of great importance. We are not asking about this utterance as such. Our question is rather which of these uses are falsifiable and which are not.

In order to set forth these uses more clearly we shall begin with a model having the same complex relation to scientific activity as our own example has to religious belief and practice. The philosophical critics of science have pointed out a number of instances of such scientific claims, but we shall content ourselves with the simple and obvious "The world has an order." There is good reason for beginning in this way. Though the scientists have not explicitly answered their critics, their actual use of this and similar utterances provides the basis for an answer to the charge before us. This charge rests ultimately upon certain traditional and restrictive theories about the way in which words and, derivatively, utterances can function. It therefore seems best to begin with a model from another realm which actually

1. Cf. Kai Nielsen, "Eschatological Verification," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (1963), 271-81.

2. Cf. George I. Mavrodes, "God and Verification," *ibid.*, 10 (1964), 187-91.

functions in a way not allowed by these theories. When its behaviour has been charted, we can then describe the various uses of our example, and hence of religious utterances as such.

For both our model and our example we shall distinguish the three most important typical uses. These we shall describe as the *assertional*, the *self-instructional*, and, for want of a better term, the *ontological-linguistic* use (or sense). These distinctions are closely linked to two different uses of the key or operative concept in the utterance, which we shall describe as the *determinate* and the *heuristic* use (or sense) and indicate as, for example, love(m) or (n) or (o) and love(X) respectively. It goes without saying that both the various senses of the term and the different uses of the utterance reflect the intention of the speaker and, behind this, the context within which the utterance occurs.

### I

Though philosophers have tended to concentrate on the terms of an utterance, its meaning is, in fact, largely determined by the context in which it occurs. This is certainly true of the scientists' "The world has an order," an utterance with three typical contexts and, corresponding thereto, three distinct meanings or uses.

Imagine a scientist who has finally discovered a causal link between A and B. He has unearthed a connection and later will spell it out in detail. But for the moment his concern is simply to report or announce his discovery. He can do this in a number of ways: "There was a connection after all"; "Yes, I have discovered the law"; or, in a more expansive mood, "The world has an order." He means, of course, a particular connection, a particular law, and, equally, a particular order.

This use of "order" is quite clear. The scientist has discovered a particular order or uniformity and wishes to report this fact. Hence "order" is simply shorthand for a particular, specifiable or determinate order, an order that he could produce or specify upon demand. This is the determinate sense or use of the term and can be marked as order(m).

Leaving aside the relatively complicated question of the existence of such determinate orders—does anyone now wish to assert the existence of Newtonian gravity?—we may say that the nature of this utterance seems quite clear. It is intended as a factual claim on all fours with "There is a cat in the next room"; "There is a tree on the lower campus"; etc. It asserts a state of affairs—that A is the cause of B—and can be falsified by a single counter-instance—a case where A is not followed by B. This is assertional use of the utterance, and it can be expressed as "The world has order(m)."

But this same utterance also appears in another and perhaps more revealing context. Imagine that our scientist has failed to discover the suspected causal connection; imagine even that he has encountered evidence that tells decisively against conceptions long held by him. He could, of course, give up in despair; he could decide that there was no hope of making sense of

all of the evidence before him. Alternatively, he could recall his scientific commitment to see every single part as coherent with the whole. In that event he might well steady himself with the remark "Everything *must* fit together," "The universe is a single whole," or (equally appropriate) "The world has an order."

It is clear of course that in this case the scientist is no longer using the word "order" as shorthand for some determinate or specifiable regularity. Again, it is equally clear that he does not intend his utterance in anything like its earlier sense. Indeed, in the present context, he cannot intend a claim about the world at all. He is rather telling himself to treat every event as part of the world; to see all phenomena, however strange, as falling within its order. Of course, he is not enjoining himself to force this event into some conception already held. Instead, he is instructing himself to get on with the job of formulating a conception with room for this event. Again, he is using "order," not to stand for this or that particular order, but simply for order as such. He is using it in the sense of "form," "shape," or "way." He is using it in its heuristic sense, and this we can mark as order(X).

It is important not to be misled by the linguistic form of "The world has an order." Here it is not a claim about the world, but rather a pledge or vow that the scientist is taking. It is his self-command to get on with the job, to continue in the scientific enterprise. This is the self-instructional use, and it can be expressed as "Treat every single event as relevant to the proper determination of the world's real order(X)" or, more briefly, "Treat all events as part of the world's order(X)." Alternatively, it can be expressed as "Understand 'order' in a heuristic sense." This is, significantly, an equivalent form of self-instruction.

But there is another and very different context in which the scientist might use this utterance. Imagine that he is attempting to meet the philosophers' challenge to state and defend the so-called assumptions of his discipline. Imagine, for that matter, that he is trying to justify the procedure already described. Such situations are rare, but the use engendered by them is interesting and highly significant.

It is important to distinguish at the outset between the answer that the scientist actually gives and that which the philosopher expects and requires of him. Since the time of Hume, philosophers have been prone to assume that science can be justified only by showing that this is indeed a certain kind of world. They have required a demonstration or, at the very least, a reasonable assurance, that the world was a certain way: for example, that it had an objective pattern, that it was sufficiently orderly, that it had the requisite degree of simplicity, that it was suitably geared to the human mind, etc. They required an assurance concerning what was essentially a contingent matter of fact. The scientist who accepts this challenge on its own terms commits himself to giving such an assurance. He commits himself to saying something essentially similar to what was said by the scientist in the first situation—similar, but of course much more general. Such a scientist, if he

used our utterance, would intend it in what might be called its metaphysical sense. Of course it is precisely this use that the scientist seeks, and must seek, to avoid.

There is a standard and telling objection against the justification of science by the results of any empirical investigation. Since these results come from such investigation, they cannot stand as its foundation or justification. Philosophers who continue to demand a metaphysical justification for science might well recall Hume's insight that such justification was logically impossible.

But if this standard objection shows the impossibility of such a justification, there is another objection that points to the true justification—and, further, to the one that the scientist intends. The underlying difficulty with the metaphysical justification is that it assumes an essentially pretentious and unrealistic account of the insight or understanding afforded by science and, as a result, accounts for the intelligibility of the world in terms of what is essentially a happy accident. In fact, science does not require that the world have this shape or that. It requires only that the world have some shape or other. And this it cannot lack. The intelligibility of the world, at least as discovered by science, so far from being a happy accident, is rather a necessary consequence of its being anything at all.

We can now, perhaps, better understand the sense in which the scientist might here intend "The world has an order." Clearly he cannot employ "order" in a determinate sense. Nor can he in this situation ascribe some determinate order to the universe. He cannot now make any empirical or even metaphysical assertions about the world. But it would be mistaken to conclude that he cannot employ the term "order" or that he cannot significantly apply it to the world. Whether such use and application is possible is the crucial question, and it is not to be settled merely by prejudice or the acceptance of familiar theories about the way in which language ought to function.

It is widely supposed that we can significantly assert a predicate only if we can at least in some sense specify that predicate—that, for example, we can say "The world has an order" only if we are able to spell out what we mean by "order." But words function in many ways and this condition, though ordinarily satisfied, is not always necessary. As in the previous case, it is possible to employ this term in a heuristic sense. And this is precisely how the scientist now intends it. It is not shorthand for some determinate order, but rather a synonym for "form," "shape," or "way," a sense we can mark as order(X). When he so uses "order" to justify his work, he is employing our model utterance in its ontological-linguistic sense. This use we can express as "The world has order(X)."

The same assumptions that prompt us to suppose that predicates must be specifiable also prompt us to think that their use in a determinate sense is a condition of our making a real statement or claim about the world. But this is not true. "Order" need not be given a determinate use; it need not be

intended in the sense of order(m) or (n) or (o). It can instead be employed in a heuristic sense; it can be intended in the sense of "the way the world is, however that may be," and, so used, it can be part of a genuine factual claim about the world. Further, because the world could not conceivably lack order in this sense, this particular claim possesses an interesting and important feature: unlike many such claims it is both true and necessarily true.

The remarks take care of the first or "ontological" part of our description, but it is important to recognize the second and, particularly, to see the connection between the two. The importance and role of the "linguistic" aspect can be put quite simply. Knowing that the world has and must have order in the heuristic sense is not at all like knowing one or more of the ordinary empirical details of the world. It follows simply and directly from understanding the scientists' heuristic use of this term and its necessary connection with the world. "Order" is not simply what we have learned to call an open-textured concept. It is not simply that its lines are somewhat shifting and blurred. It is rather that what is ordinarily called the content or meaning of this concept is determined finally and entirely by the actual character of the world; its meaning is simply a copy of the actual shape of the world, whatever that should prove to be. In short, the utterance and the truth of the utterance follow from the heuristic use of this term. But (it must be added) this utterance is not in any sense a merely linguistic truth. The fact it asserts is no less a fact, and no less important, for the fact that it follows and follows necessarily from a certain use of a word. Science does not rest upon some merely contingent matter of fact. Its real and only necessary foundation is something that could not be other than it is; it is simply the presence of order in a sense that the world could not conceivably lack. It is to underline and protect this truth that we have described this as the ontological-linguistic use.

## II

Though differing in certain respects from our scientific model, the religious utterance "God is love" functions in an essentially similar way; certainly its characteristic uses are parallel to those already cited. These can be indicated quite briefly.

"God is love" is most commonly used in the assertional sense, i.e. as a factual claim about God. The believer recognizes or has come to see some event as an expression of God's love, and he now wishes to predicate this quality or character of God. Of course, he may feel that his conception of love is not entirely adequate—that it does not do justice to the true nature of God's love. But these sophisticated and proper doubts do not obtrude upon his normal use of this utterance. In the situation or context he uses "love" in a determinate sense, and he explicitly intends to assert this of God. His meaning can then be expressed as "God is love(m)."

Though this is not the most decisive or distinctive use, it is nevertheless of very great importance. Such uses play a prominent part in the life of worship, and they constitute an important part of what are called the beliefs of the religious man. It is in fact such claims that constitute what is usually called the content of belief. It is of such that we speak when we speak of someone as *believing that*.

We have described this as the assertional use of the utterance, but this description is not strictly correct. Because "love" may stand for a host of different determinate values, the utterance, as here used, is not so much an assertion as a blank for a variety of possible assertions. This point is central for the question of the unfalsifiability of this use.

But there is another more interesting and decisive use of this utterance. A striking example is that of the young man who, having known only good fortune and happiness, now learns that he is dying of cancer.

It is merely a prejudice to insist that in this situation such a person must intend "God is love" simply as an habitual and purely automatic response. It is also prejudicial to suppose that he must recognize his situation as an expression of God's love or that he intends his utterance as an assertion. In any event, linguistic form is a notoriously unreliable guide to actual use. In fact there is no reason to think that the believer who uses this utterance in such situations need intend a factual claim. Rather, I suggest, he is doing something quite different and, finally, much more important. He is engaging in self-instruction or, perhaps, self-pledging. He is enjoining himself to see this presently incomprehensible event as revealing, however darkly, something more of the nature of God's love. He is using "love" in a heuristic sense. By the same token, he is using the entire utterance in what we have called the self-instructional sense. His meaning is then best expressed as "I must treat all events as pointing to God's love(X)."

This use is typical of the religious believer and indicative of a very important element in the religious life. Religion does not consist entirely in the holding of certain beliefs; equally important is the acceptance of a discipline to act in a certain way. And it is this that the believer undertakes when, in such situations, he deliberately says "God is love." He is steadying himself, binding himself to respond in a certain way. This may still be described as belief, but it should be qualified as *belief in* rather than *belief that*.

As with our scientific model, the third use of this utterance occurs in the face of criticism and, perhaps, self-doubt. The sceptical critic sees the young man's plight as clear proof that God is not love and as decisive evidence against the believer's claim. And perhaps the young man himself begins to doubt. Such situations, however rare, bring out the distinctive character of the third use of this utterance.

It might be thought that the believer is here claiming to see how everything, including his present misfortune, is indeed an instance of divine love. This would make his utterance a straightforwardly factual claim,

corresponding to the metaphysical use of the scientific model. But this use is open to the same objections as in the previous case. In any event, the young man does not know the meaning or content of love in a way that would permit him to see how his condition squares with God's love. He is not in a position to see his misfortune as an expression of that love. Indeed, if he could so see it he would not be in his present difficulty.

There is, of course, another obvious interpretation of this utterance. It might be argued that the young man is using "love" analogically. On this view, he would take the highest conception of love that humans can know and apply this analogically to God. No doubt such terms are sometimes so used; no doubt many have been taught so to use them. I want only to suggest that in such situations they are in fact used in another and very different sense.

Such a use has already been seen in the case of our scientific model. The scientist can say "The world has an order" even when he is unable to specify that order. And he can know that his utterance is true even when, in the ordinary sense, he does not know the meaning of "order." That is because for the scientist order is simply a copy of the way the world is.

The believer's use of his utterance in the situation now being considered is exactly parallel. He does not know the meaning of love in the ordinary sense; he cannot produce an account of love of which his present situation is clearly an instance. Nevertheless, he does know that for him, as a believer, the content or meaning of love is defined by God's actions or, as we might put it, by the whole of experience, including his present situation. Because of this he can assert and know as true the claim "God is love." In our own terms, he can and does use "love" in a heuristic sense and, equally, he can and does use the entire utterance in an ontological-linguistic sense.

A brief word must be added in explanation of this description. The believer is indeed making a factual claim about God, but one which, unlike ordinary factual claims, could not be false. The scientists' use of "order" is such that the world could not lack it. Similarly, at least at this point or extremity, the believer's use of "love" is such that God could not fail to show or express it. Of course, this does not bind God's action any more than "The world has an order" places a restriction upon nature. It is simply a way of saying that "love" is finally defined from the outside.

### III

Even this survey of some of the distinctive uses of religious utterances has made it clear that the question of the unfalsifiability of such beliefs is less simple than has been widely supposed. Such beliefs are complex and varied, and the question is really which of their senses are unfalsifiable and, further, whether their unfalsifiability is in any sense a real defect.

The self-instructional use of religious beliefs is central to the religious life even in its narrowly religious aspects. But such beliefs, when so used, are

not subject to falsification. A piece of self-instruction may be good or bad; it may be wise or ill-considered. But it cannot be true or false. It is not even the sort of thing that might be either true or false. Hence the demand that such uses be subject to falsification is simply mistaken. By the same token, the demand that religious belief as such be subject to falsification is a sign of failure to note and understand the importance for religion of this particular use.

The assertional use of such beliefs states or expresses a factual claim and is therefore properly subject to the falsifiability test. But the application of this test is not so simple as one might imagine. As already suggested, utterances when so used are not so much assertions as a blank or shorthand for a variety of assertions, a variety made possible by the fact that the key term in such utterances is really a variable for a number of different determinate conceptions. And because this use travels together with the self-instructional one, because the two are constantly set against each other, one determinate conception constantly replaces another, and new factual claims are urged to replace those already defeated. Hence, while evidence can and does tell against any instance of this use, it cannot tell against the use itself. The believer's factual claims are frequently defeated, but the form in which these claims are made need not itself ever be subject to final defeat.

The ontological-linguistic use of religious beliefs shows important differences from both of the preceding uses. Because religious utterances, so used, assert a factual claim, it might be supposed that they were proper candidates for the falsifiability test. But again, such utterances are factual with a difference. Though they assert factual claims, they could not, as here used, be false; there is nothing that could conceivably tell against them. Hence the protest that such claims or beliefs are unfalsifiable is entirely beside the point. They simply are unfalsifiable, and this is neither a defect nor a virtue; instead, it is merely a consequence of their being the kind of claim that they are.