

A Response to the Critical Analysis of Religion by Logical Positivism

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Abstract

Critics of religion during the 1930s claim that religious discourse is at best metaphorical and at worst 'cognitively meaningless.' Some sympathetic critics, like the Wittgenstein of the 'Lecture on Ethics,' think that religious discourse may be charitably viewed metaphor or simile. Avowed logical positivists like A.J. Ayer argue that the apparent statements of religion are neither true nor false, which is to say that they are not statements at all. On the contrary, Ayer argued that those apparent statements should be construed as mere expressions of emotion or perhaps as injunctions. Much has passed since those early days of the logical positivists, but even now their arguments exert enormous influence on religious scholarship and practice.

This paper argues that logical positivism does not succeed in making its essential point, which is that religious discourse is merely expressive. This is not to deny that some religious discourse is expressive. In fact, it would be absurd to ignore the emotional content of religious life. Nevertheless, important parts of religious discourse play a cognitively meaningful role in our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we find ourselves. Moreover, the paper claims that there aren't significant conflicts between the scientific world view and religion, if only the methodology and claims of each are properly understood and carefully qualified. Broadly logical positivism is mistaken about religious discourse because it claims too much for empirical science, and it misses the main point of religion.

1 Introductory: Adumbrations of Logical Positivism

Logical positivism is the view that the class of genuine statements or propositions, of objects that are true or false, is far smaller than traditionally thought. Moral claims, aesthetic claims and claims about the supernatural are merely apparent. Logical positivists argue that they are cognitively meaningless, that is to say, that they are not objects of cognition, because they are in principle unverifiable. Nothing whatever could count in favor of their truth or of their falsity because they aren't the sorts of 'claims' that could be true or false. It is impossible to overstate the enormity of the claim. It means, for example, that in drawing the conclusion that God exists in the Meditation III Descartes was not merely incorrect; he did not merely have a false belief, but rather didn't have a belief at all. To carry the matter one step further, one could say that *Descartes didn't even have an idea of God*, because according to Descartes, it is in the nature of the eternal God to exist, but according to logical positivism, it is impossible to conceive of a thing whose nature it is to exist, which follows from the fact that nothing could count as evidence for the claim that something exists whose 'nature it is to exist'. We are driven to the conclusion that Descartes had neither a genuine belief that God exists nor even an idea of God. The father of modern philosophy *merely thought* he had an idea of God, but actually did not have an idea of God at all. Logical positivists must think that Descartes was just confused! Surely, however, it is important to remember that here we are not only assessing the thought of the father of modern

philosophy but also of the discoverer of analytic geometry, the notation for exponential functions and operations involving exponential functions.

This paper argues that logical positivism is entirely wrong about religious discourse and belief for two reasons. Logical positivism claims too much for empirical science and cedes too much ground to it. More importantly, however, logical positivism misses the point of religion, which I believe is the cultivation of the spiritual life and the emotions that are essential to it. It sometimes seems that logical positivism emerged suddenly in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century; that it spread through Western culture like wild fire, fiercely consuming the religious in its path, everything including millennia of the teaching and practice of the Abrahamic religions. There are no claims to truth, the logical positivists teach, other than (a) perception, construed broadly to include observations by microscope and telescope, (b) generalizations based on those perceptions, and (c) the logic and mathematics that validate scientific inference. Yet, as is often the case, history shows that radical change sometimes has deep roots, and that is the case when it comes to logical positivism. It will be useful in shaping the argument against logical positivism to review its etiology. In a sense it is right to see logical positivism as rising precipitously in the early twentieth century, to identify it as the *culminating* event of several centuries of thought that led to radical subjectivism, that is, to the view that with the exceptions of the natural sciences and mathematics, there aren't objective standards by which to judge truth or falsity. In another sense, however, it is wrong to see logical positivism as a distinctively twentieth century view. Indeed, in that sense its roots extend to the very beginnings of early modern philosophy.

1.1 Hobbes, Locke and Comte

According to Hobbes, a sign is an antecedent of a 'consequent'; as lightning is of thunder; as thunder is of rain. Words too are signs, conventional signs, and hence they are antecedents of things words signify, but what could those things be? Hobbes concludes that the consequents of words must be the ideas that words call to mind; but which ideas are they, and how do we get them? They are derived from experience, Hobbes teaches, principally from the senses, but further from reflections upon the operations of our minds. All that raises the question: Whence the idea of God; what idea could 'God' signify? Surely Hobbes argues: Only an idea that comes from experience! But then how could there be any genuine idea of God; who is supernatural, something beyond experience? Hobbes comes very close to twentieth century logical positivism; the only thing that is missing in Hobbes is the insouciant disregard of twentieth century logical positivism for *anything at all* beyond experience.

Locke's philosophy of language is much closer to Hobbes' theory of signs than is generally thought. Like Hobbes, Locke thinks of words as conventional signs of ideas. Locke, however, is far more cautious than Hobbes when it comes to religion and to God in particular. For Locke the idea of God is essentially anthropomorphic, deriving from reflections upon the operations of our own minds. We conceive God, but dimly, as it were through a glass half full, and that makes room for modest faith. To be sure, Locke agrees that we can know by demonstration that God does exist, but like Hobbes, Locke has doubts about God because of the difficulty in seeing how we can form an adequate idea of *God* given our modest intellectual resources.

The broad empiricist tradition that derives from Hobbes and Locke is carried on through subsequent centuries, especially in the thought of Hume, Comte, and Mill. Although the positivism of Comte is generally deemed to be outside of British empiricism, Comte's positivist views undoubtedly influenced Mill. Comte himself was fascinated by religion and drawn to it, but like the later logical positivists, he was concerned to maintain the intellectual standards of natural science. In fact, Comte sought to *explain* religion through the 'scientific' study of it, which many have counted as the founding of the discipline of the sociology of religion.

This very brief discussion is meant to draw a distinction between two closely related but distinguishable moments in the history of philosophy of religion that respond to subtly different questions: One question is how we come to know or reasonably believe truths about God; the other question is how we can think about God at all. Of course, they are related, but it is significant that early doubts about religion did not arise because it was deemed to be 'unscientific,' but rather because philosophers doubted that we could give a satisfactory account of how we could have religious ideas. Inasmuch as many early modern philosophers thought that a satisfactory account of the origin of religious ideas would need to be 'scientific,' it is easy to see why the two sources of doubt have not always been carefully distinguished.

1.2 Wittgenstein and T.S. Eliot

Worries about the possibility of thinking about God, of having an actual idea of God, extend far into the twentieth century, right up to the time of the great logical positivists, Ayer and Tarski. For example, in his 1929 'Lecture on Ethics' Wittgenstein claims that we can conceive God only through simile and metaphor. The problem, Wittgenstein claims, is that words derive their meanings through reference to

'facts,' and God is not located among the 'facts' to which we have public access. Hence 'God' could not have come to have its meaning in the way that, say, 'the morning star' and 'Venus' derive their meanings. Religion, Wittgenstein argues in his famous lecture, 'run[s] against the boundaries of language,' ... 'against the walls of our cage,' which is 'perfectly, absolutely hopeless.' What religion says 'does not add to our knowledge in any sense.' Yet, wonderfully and curiously, Wittgenstein ends his lecture by qualifying his deflationary conclusion about religion; dramatically insisting that it [religion] is: 'a tendency in the human mind which I cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.' (Wittgenstein, 1929, p. 86) The conclusion is *wonderful* because it recognizes what is distinctive about religion and the character of the worship and reverence that it necessarily involves; to wit, that it is full of wonder. It is *curious* because Wittgenstein seems at once to affirm the wonder of religion and yet denies that there can be any *basis* for the wonder religion excites, inasmuch as it 'runs against the boundaries of language'. (Wittgenstein, 1929, p. 86) Indeed, if the various modes of religious expression excite genuine wonder (and not merely saccharine sentimentality), then those metaphors must be *authentic*, but how can a metaphor be authentic unless it is a metaphor *for* something, and just how can '*that something*' excite deep respect in someone who thinks that it is beyond 'the walls of our cage;' indeed, in someone who thinks '*that something*' cannot even be conceived? This last metaphor, 'the walls of our cage,' reveals Wittgenstein's ambivalence toward religion. Cages are meant to restrain and contain, usually in incommensurable places and ways. They are meant to keep one from what is better outside the cage, perhaps much better. If we have been kept in 'the walls of our cage' by religious language, what better place could that be than the better place Wittgenstein denies?

Wittgenstein's theory that religious texts are essentially metaphorical was by no means new. Eliot writes of Crashaw that he knew 'quite well' that simile or metaphor is used for 'serious effect which could be got in no other way.' Eliot immediately adds on his own authority, that it is a mistake 'to suppose that a simile or metaphor is always something meant to be visible to the imagination; and even when it is meant to be visible, that all parts of it are meant to be visible at once.' (Eliot/Schuchard, 1933, p. 271) This raises the *philosophical* question: Can it be that metaphysical *poetry*, with its similes and metaphors, gets at a truth that discursive, analytic philosophy inevitably misses?

After ‘deconstructing’ (as we modern readers might say) Crashaw and Donne¹, Eliot takes care to reassure his readers that he is not denying, for example, that Donne is a Christian believer; yet he also warns that ‘not only belief, but *the meaning of belief*, differs for different individuals and more certainly for different times.’ (Eliot/Schuchard, 1933, p. 279) It is exactly at this point that Eliot defers to I.A. Richards for help in understanding ‘believes,’ but immediately qualifies his deference by disassociating himself with Richards’ theories about ethics (and therefore his religious ethics), ‘which are erected upon purely individual–psychological foundations.’ Yet, Eliot’s final word returns us to the sign, claiming that ‘the essential thing of course is always to be able to say *Credo*; but the meaning of *Credo* and hence its pledges vary a good deal in meaning from age to age’. (Eliot/Schuchard, 1933, p. 279) Does it follow that we can always find a way to agree about anything if only because we are free to meddle with the meaning of ‘believe’? Not as far as Eliot is concerned. Eliot sees the triumph of metaphysical poetry in Dante, where there is both ‘the metaphysical development of feeling and also ... *cosmological belief* [emphasis mine].’ To a lesser extent, the same is true of Donne, whose belief is narrower [because his] ‘theological orthodoxy and his personal piety are corroded by skepticism.’ (Eliot/Schuchard, 1933, p. 295) Even so, we shall return to Eliot’s claim that the essential thing is always ***to be able [intelligibly] to say Credo.***

The lesson we shall need to take away from Eliot for present purposes is that if we *mean* by ‘belief’ the fruit of contemporary scientific discourse and theory, we shall be unable to locate a place for religious belief within the bounds of reason. Logical positivism claims that science does in fact impose a narrow sense of ‘belief’ upon us, if only because it insists that the only possible objects of beliefs are propositions validated by perception, or the natural laws extrapolated from perception, or the mathematics and its underlying logic by which all the empirical data are rationalized and systematized. But is it really true that *natural science* insists upon the positivist conception of belief, or is it perhaps that philosophers and other thinkers parlay empirical science into desultory positivism? This paper acknowledges that science insists that rational belief about nature be grounded the methodological vision of the early seventeenth century, which has remained virtually unchanged to this day, *but* does natural science really insist that only scientific belief is rational belief? Do Boyle, Newton, and Einstein?

¹ Eliot writes that the difference between divine and human (erotic) love is ‘much subtler than any of the distinctions modern psychologists are able to draw.’ Crashaw, Eliot claims, is a ‘voluptuary of religious emotion,’ and Donne a ‘voluptuary of religious thought.’ What is wrong with all this is not the erotic component but rather the psychologistic component, which represents God as a human object. (Eliot/Schuchard, 1933, p. 276, especially fn 26) Of course, ‘erotic’ does not mean the same thing in the divine context as it does in the human context; in the divine context, it implies the longing for spiritual union.

Neither does Eliot:

...it is not science that has destroyed religious belief, but our preference for unbelief that has made illegitimate use of science ... For if we understand that religion has nothing to lose and nothing to gain by the progress of science, then we are at every moment prepared to give up some cherished belief, such as the belief in the movement of the sun round the earth, which we had previously thought belonged to religion and find belongs only to science. There are certain dogmas which cannot be given up; it is possible that we still hold some beliefs as part of our faith which really belong only to immature science. We have had superstition in religion, and we have had superstition in science; we can do without both. (Eliot, *Listener*, 1932, p. 432; quotation from Eliot/Schuchard, 1933, p. 223 fn 46.)

2. Logical Positivism and Contemporary Science

As we have seen, there is a distinction to be drawn between *having an idea* and *having a true belief about the object of an idea*. This distinction is a wedge dividing skepticism about religion from non-cognitivism about ethics. Logical positivists claim that the putative statements or propositions of ethics are actually mere expressions of emotion and attempts to persuade (or even coerce). Some have wanted to sing the same song about religion, but there is a difference. 'Good' is an *attributive*, 'God' is a *substantive*. That something is good if and only if it excites a pro-attitude at least makes sense grammatically. It yields the theory that when we apparently assert that something is good, we are merely expressing our pro-attitude toward it. This leads to a complementary treatment of substantive expressions like 'the good' or 'the good for man' (viz. humankind). *The good* will just be whatever elicits the pro-attitude expressed when we say that something is good. The grammar, however, is completely reversed in religious discourse. To assert the existence of God cannot be merely to express an attitude or to issue a command. There isn't any way to read this affirmation except as a statement. The sacred and the holy consequently derive their meaning from their connection with God, from God's revelation in the otherwise mundane, where the sacred is what leads to the holy (the separate) and the holy to the divine. The asymmetry between religious and ethical discourse is extremely significant. Religious discourse comes naturally to the rescue of ethics, for surely God can be trusted to distinguish good from evil. But the converse is not true, or so many philosophers from Plato on down have said, because they have believed that the good may be affirmed and the divine consistently denied.²

² This is not to deny that there are powerful arguments to be made in favor of the view that moral awareness in a way is an awareness of God. This view has a venerable history; for recent treatment see (Evans, 2013).

Even so, logical positivists have denied that we have a genuine idea of God, but it is not because they *begin* with the idea that the assertion of God's existence is not a genuine assertion; that it is the mere expression of an attitude or a wish. Rather, logical positivists come to the conclusion that God's existence cannot be intelligibly asserted because they accept a theory that says that only certain kinds of claims are 'cognitively meaningful,' and the claim that God exists or even that the divine is real is not among them. Generally, atheists deny the existence of God, not the meaningfulness of the assertion that God exists; agnostics doubt the existence of God, not the meaningfulness of the assertion that God exists. Even if the only way to refer to God is through simile and metaphor, it remains God to whom we are referring in simile and metaphor. If logical positivists cannot substantiate their argument for the cognitive meaningfulness of religious discourse by ruling out reference to God, even if only by simile and metaphor, then how do they delegitimize the divine?

2.1 A.J. Ayer and the Verifiability Principle

The answer, of course, is that logical positivism claims that affirmations about God cannot be genuine because nothing could count as 'evidence' for or against them. This is a corollary of the famous Verifiability Principle of Meaning which states that the only genuine statements or propositions (or more broadly, bearers of truth value) are judgments of perception, the empirical generalization of science based upon the data gathered by perception and the principles of mathematics and logic that are used to rationalize and systematize those data. In other words, the cognitively meaningful is reserved for claims that can be confirmed (or at least substantiated to some degree) by sense perception or demonstrated by the purely formal techniques of logic and mathematics.³ Natural science, logic and mathematics constitute not only all that may be *reasonably* asserted but also all that may be *intelligibly* asserted.

This new argument obviously complements and bolsters the earlier, deflationary argument. It does not flatly assert that we cannot think of God because the word 'God' cannot be a sign of anything; this new argument asserts that we cannot make any *intelligible claims* about God at all, even that God does not exist; *ergo* the earlier argument about signs has been resurrected. How can we really have an

³ The Verifiability Principle of Meaning went through successful re-formulations in the 1940s. The attempts were led principally by A.J. Ayer who created the *lingua franca* of positivism in his great work, *Logic, Truth and Language*. However, the formulations of the Verifiability Principle of Meaning were all found wanting, usually for technical reasons. The last formulation was decisively refuted by Alonzo Church in 1947. (Church, 1947, p. 53) Church's argument is technical, but the essential idea is that Ayer's principle fails to rule out cognitively meaningless consequences of apparently cognitively meaningful propositions

idea of God if we cannot make any intelligible claim about God – not even the claim that God does not exist? All we can do is to make claims about the word ‘God,’ and the whole theory can then be neatly summarized in the mere sentence form: There is no intelligible claim of the form ‘God is ...’

2.2 The World-View of d’Holbach and Laplace

I claim that natural science, broadly construed to include ordinary judgments of perceptions and mathematics, had its strongest claim to define the limits of rational belief at the end of the Enlightenment, during the period of Laplace and d’Holbach. These philosophers believed that the legacy of Newton is the conviction that the natural world is completely ‘deterministic,’ by which they meant that every event is *necessitated* by prior events and when natural science is finally complete, could be predicted with complete certainty⁴. The powerful implications of this view permeated philosophy at the time and continue to influence it to this day. The view itself has been elegantly articulated by Carnap. In classical physics we may refer to an instantaneous state of a physical system. Assuming that we know the spatial location and ‘momentum variables’ of each particle, we can then predict, with absolute certainty, each subsequent instantaneous state. (Carnap, 1966, p. 84f) Assuming that nature is constituted by the sets of instantaneous states of independent physical systems, and that nature is reality, it follows that every event is predictable and determined with certainty by past states. This is the view of classical physics based upon Newton’s vision that inspired Enlightenment thinkers. It drove them to the conclusion that a true and complete understanding of nature does not leave logical space for miraculous events, events that from the standpoint of science are anomalous exceptions to natural law and that from the standpoint of religion are attributable to God. Unfortunately for the Abrahamic religions, it is the idea that there are anomalous events attributable to God that makes room for intercessory prayer. The classical vision described by Carnap appears to rule out that possibility entirely.

To be sure, there are creative ways of validating the possibility of intercessory prayer without contradicting the determinist view of the late eighteenth century. For example, one might argue that God in creating nature foresaw the need of people for intercessory prayer. Taking that into account, He

⁴Even Hume, who denied that there could be proofs of the projectability of scientific belief, agreed that every scientific belief asserts an invariable association of events, which is *necessary to scientific explanation*. That is why it is for Hume that ‘a cause is always necessary,’ even though there aren’t any necessities in nature. (Hume, *Treatise*, I.iii.1/ pp. 78 – 82). Kant too agreed that the ‘phenomenal’ world is completely deterministic, but goes further than Hume in arguing that whatever determines necessitates. Note that the claim that determinism necessitates is different and much stronger than the claim that no explanation of physical phenomenon is acceptable without a cause. Causal explanations tell us when an event is imminent, which is different from showing that it is necessary.

determined the universe in a way that allowed for ‘miraculous’ events to occur if and only if they were also the objects of intercessory prayer. Because the events actually do accord with natural law in way that is *undetectable* to human beings, they would naturally be considered to be miracles and, indeed, would accord with the view that *certain events would not have occurred without intercessory prayer*. Those events would not be miracles in the literal sense; for example, as ‘exceptions’ to the laws of nature in the sense defined by Hume (Hume, 1977/1748, p. 115 fn 1). Even so they would validate the idea that the course of history without prayer would have been entirely different from the course of history with prayer. We shall shortly see that contemporary physics allows for a richer conception of intercessory prayer.

2.3 Development of Contemporary Science: Heisenberg, Non-locality and the Multiverse

It is interesting and significant that the classical view of physics, championed in the late Enlightenment, has been completely supplanted. In the first place there has been the development of quantum physics and the famous Uncertainty Principle, which argues that the position and momentum of certain particles (like electrons) cannot be calculated. Whether this entails that the particles do not have determinate positions and momenta, or rather that we just *cannot know* their determinate positions and momenta is irrelevant for present purposes. Either way, the Uncertainty Principle undermines the idea that every instantaneous state can be predicted with certainty from a prior state.

There have been further developments along these lines as well. Physicists now take seriously the possibility that there may be casual connections that are in principle untraceable. Thus, events at one ‘end’ of space-time may influence events at the other ‘end,’ an influence that may be unknowable because it is impossible for information to be exchanged over intervals so great. This is the so-called Einstein-Podolsk-Rosen hypothesis (henceforth EPR), and it opens the door to the possibility that apparently miraculous events could have a natural cause. (Einstein himself did not take the theoretically possibility of EPR seriously; in fact it was with respect to this possibility that he made his famous statement that God does not play dice with the universe).⁵ Yet, if the universe had been created by God with EPR in mind, and had the universe been structured so that a certain identifiable class of untraceable causal connections events would occur if and only if occasioned by intercessory appeals to

⁵ For an introductory discussion of the issues, see (Albert and Galchen, 2009). For a more challenging discussion, see (Maudlin, 2011)

God, space would have been found for natural events caused by God, which would also be miracles (although not precisely in the way traditionally conceived by religion).

There are further developments in contemporary physics that suggest that idea of the complete predictability of nature is an over-simplification. For example the phenomenon of beta decay implies that although we can identify the half-life of a radioactive substance, we cannot tell *which* half of its isotopes will decay. Considerations like these may well prompt theists to argue that indeterminacy makes a logical space for divine intervention into human affairs. Although this is a possibility worth exploring, it is not the possibility that I want to develop here. Overturning logical positivism and making room for the cognitively meaningful religion discourse does not, in my view, depend upon dismantling the claim of natural science to be the authoritative source of knowledge about nature. The argument for religion against positivism is much deeper, and what I have to say for it could just as well have been said if Laplace and d'Holbach had been sustained rather than supplanted by subsequent advances in natural science.

2.4 The Explanatory Role of Science

It is worth making one last point about the connection between positivism and scientific explanation. It has been emphasized recently, as I shall stress in subsequent pages, that the central fact about the universe requiring explanation is that that it is conducive to human life, or as I shall say, taking the liberty of extending its literal meaning, 'anthropic.' That the universe is anthropic may well have been 'baked in the cake,' but surely it was not *necessary* for the cake to be baked as it was. It is interesting, for example, to imagine what the universe would have been like if the universal constant of gravitation had been different, or if gravitational force were inversely proportional to the *cube* rather than the *square* of the distance separating point masses -- a conjecture that at least seems to make some sort of sense intuitively on the theory that the effect of gravitational force might be naturally supposed to be dissipated over three dimensions. In any case it is a supposition of logical positivism itself that *existence claims are always contingent*. As Hume, who is often interpreted as a proto-positivist, argues: 'Whatever is, may not be. No negative fact can involve a contradiction. The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence.' (Hume, 1975/1777, p.164)

Here Hume is ruling out ontological proofs of the existence of God, that is, arguments that claim to show that unlike ordinary things, God necessarily exists, or perhaps more plausibly, that God

necessarily exists if God exists at all. Whatever Hume intends to show about God, if *whatever is may not be*, the universe could just as well have been hostile as friendly to human life. In any case, the universe accommodates human life: What could possibly be the explanation for the fact that the universe is anthropic? Theists will eagerly seize upon it as an opportunity to argue for the existence of God, but the argument is surely speculative. After all, the universe must exist in *some way*, if not necessarily *this way or that way*. Why not 'the anthropic way'? Some thinkers now suppose that we may live in a multiverse, that is, one of a multitude of universes, and that it just happens, by chance, that this universe is anthropic. (Jenkins and Perez, January 2012, pp. 42–9.) Human life does not require a special explanation, a supernatural explanation, any more than the fact that an ordinary die comes up, say, 3, five times in a row requires a special, supernatural explanation. If you had *forever* to throw a die and threw it long enough, it would come up 3 five hundred, five million (or five however-many) times in a row.

Whatever the merits of the multiverse conjecture, one thing that is certainly significant about it is that it does *not* offer an *explanation* of the fact of an anthropic universe. To say that one of a multitude of universes turned out by chance to be anthropic is just another way of saying that we really do not have an explanation of the anthropic universe. After all, why should there be a multiverse in which at least one universe within it, on the basis of the ordinary calculation of chances, would be anthropic? Perhaps we need a multi-multiverse! The move to the multiverse to explain the anthropic universe risks the objection of endless regress.

I believe that *contemporary* physics undermines the chief argument for logical positivism against religion, which is the argument that the success of science leaves no room for the supernatural to be woven through the natural world. Yet, I have not argued in detail for that view because it too misses the mark. The validity of religious experience does not depend upon making room for the supernatural in the *natural* world, especially as an explanatory device. The reasonableness of religious faith does not rest upon what science finds out today, tomorrow or yesterday. Religious faith is not another form of explanation that supplements or competes with scientific explanation. My argument against the critical analysis of religion by logical positivism is directed just as surely against the positivism inspired by the determinism of Laplace and d'Holbach, whether or not physical science currently supports their determinist theory. Religious faith does not wait upon scientific belief.

It may be countered, correctly, that *religions* have been seen, in virtually all its varieties, places and times, as supplements and competitors of natural science. My *argument* is not that this well-established view is wrong as a part of the analysis of *religion*, although I do think that it is wrong, but rather that it is *beside the point* because it involves a mistake about religious *faith*. The validation of religious *faith* does not depend upon the success of religion as an explanation of natural phenomena, even though I follow Eliot in arguing that religious faith is a *kind* of belief with ‘cosmological significance.’

3. Religion and Religious Practice

It is tempting to *define* faith as an alternative or competitor of scientific belief, but that is a mistake. The reason it is a mistake is that whatever *justifies* faith—‘religious belief’, what makes it *rational*, is entirely different from what justifies scientific belief. Belief is rational when it is responsive to reason, and broadly speaking, logical positivists were entirely correct, and admirably scrupulous, in refining our conception of *scientific* belief. But in applying their definition of reasonable belief to religion and concluding that religion is unreasonable, they conflated belief with faith, or more narrowly and precisely, scientific belief with religious belief.

It is more or less instructive to begin with grammar. We can say that we have faith *that*, and people who think of religious faith as a kind of belief akin to science will be especially comfortable with that construction. Yet it is much more natural to say that we have faith *in*. There is an asymmetry between faith and belief. Although we do say that we believe *in*, it is more natural to say ‘believe that.’ ‘Faith in’ or ‘belief in’ seems to allude to an elusive non-rational component. ‘Belief that’ carries the promise of rational justification. ‘Faith that’ is odd, because if we think our faith is completely justified, we refer to it as belief. An athlete, like Johnny Bench who advertises and presumably believes *in* ‘blue emu,’ a cream that is claimed to relieve muscle pain, may not have a solid scientific justification for his claim that blue emu relieves muscle pain. But it is understandable that he does not choose to pitch blue emu by merely stating his *faith in* it. ‘*Faith-in*’ cannot be judged by the usual scientific standards of reasonableness applied to belief-formation, and that, of course, would not make for persuasive advertising, because the purpose of the advertisement is to imply that there is a scientifically justified reason for thinking that blue emu relieves muscle pain.

I concede that the foregoing ‘analysis’ doesn’t take us very far, and that one ought not to expect much from distinctions extracted from ordinary language. Ordinary language may be the touchstone of analytic philosophy, but in my opinion ordinary language doesn’t take philosophy very far.⁶ Everything we have noticed thus far about belief and faith is just semantics, and nothing much of substance rests on it; but just to be clear, but the foregoing establishes the way in which I want to use the terms ‘faith’ and ‘belief.’ The validation of a claim to *know that* or *believe that* requires an argument of the sort envisioned by logical positivists; ‘*Faith that*’ can be used similarly, but the *validation* of ‘*faith in*’ requires, I shall argue, something else.

Before moving on to the validation of faith, there is a serious-sounding objection to confront. I have distinguished *faith in* from *believes that* and *believes in*. Yet ‘*Credo*’ means ‘I believe’ or ‘I give credence to.’ ‘*Credo*’ has been used in that way for millennia. Until the early modern period, it really did mean ‘believe’ in just the sense in which reasonable belief requires something like logical or scientific validation. All that has changed, however; and it has changed because our conception of the reasonable justification of belief has changed. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what logical positivism (or empiricism more broadly) successfully argued. ‘*Credo*’ no longer means what it once did mean. It still means a kind of belief, just as Eliot claims, *a belief of cosmological significance*, but it also means the kind of belief that I express by ‘*faith in*.’ To say, however, that religious belief does not mean what it once meant -- that it no longer must seek justification by appealing, for example, to teleological, cosmological and ontological ‘proofs’ -- does not show that ‘*faith-in*’ is a matter of irrational existentialist commitment. Faith in the divine can be reasonable or unreasonable. Moreover, if ‘*Credo*’ no longer means what it once meant, it is not because we must mean something different by its *objects* (viz. God) – as the Wittgenstein of the ‘Lecture on Ethics’ insists; it is rather because the meaning of ‘*believes*’ itself has changed *because our conception of the justification of belief has changed*; yet none of that matters to Eliot. For him the *essential thing* remains unchanged: *To be able to say Credo*, and according to Eliot, we are still able to say *Credo*.

⁶ I urge a cautious assessment of the promise of ordinary language as a touchstone of philosophy because I believe that theories deriving from the analysis of ordinary language are radically underdetermined by the data they seek to analyze.

3.1 Credo and Faith-in

We can have faith *in* almost anything – which is *not* to say that we can repose faith that is *reasonable* in almost anything. We can have faith in a government, in a spouse, in a university, in an automobile, in a pilot, in our lucky stars, and – in the divine. Religious faith is faith in the divine, but just what is the divine? It is a necklace from which hang the holy, the sacred, God, the gods, the angel hosts; and much else and many others. I only gesture at a definition of the divine; three *necessary conditions* of it are (a) that the pendants that hang from the necklace are typically *called* ‘divine’, (b) that the divine are aspects of reality (as opposed to fictions or fantasies), and (c) that they are *not* an objects of scientific explanation. What distinguishes one religion from another is principally how each elaborates (a), (b) and (c), but I shall not be concerned with particular religions here, although that is not to say that I shall not have particular religions in mind.

Generally, when we say that we have faith in something, we mean that we trust *that something* to *do something* or *be something*, usually *for us*. Faith is authentic only when it is not sentimental, contrived, or insincere – especially cynically insincere. It is well-placed when that something in which we have faith doesn’t let us down, for which reason it is incoherent to say that we have faith in something which or someone whom we do not trust. Although I am interested in religious faith, I shall also show that explanations about religious faith can be generalized. Broadly, there are two ways in which religious faith can be justified. The first of these types of faith is illustrated (though not defined) in Pascal by his famous Wager. The second is also prompted by Pascal, but is not as clearly described by him as the Wager. It is prompted by his claim that the heart has reasons that reason does not know.

The essence of Pascal’s Wager is that *if God exists*, one has everything to gain by living a devout life in obedience to Christian principles, and little to lose; on the other hand, if one does not live a devout life according to Christian principles, one has everything to lose and little to gain. Contrariwise, if *God does not exist*, then one has something of value to gain (the respect of others) by living a devout life in accordance with Christian principles, and little to lose (except a few fleeting, vain pleasures); on the other hand, if one does not live a devout life according to Christian principles, one has little to gain (except a few fleeting, vain pleasures) and something of value to lose (the respect that one would have by leading a devout life in accordance with Christian principles). (Pascal/Levy, *Pensées*, 1995/160,680/pp. 152 -58)

There are familiar objections to this line of thought: One is that religions besides Christianity could also offer the Wager argument, and there would not be, as far as the Wager is concerned, a reasonable way to choose the one, true religion in which to repose faith. Another objection is that if God does not exist, *all that one has* are the pleasures of this life, however vain and fleeting, and it is not a small thing to forego them. Yet another objection is that it is not merely improbable but impossible that God exists; so the expected utility of the benefits accruing from the sacrifices demanded by a devout Christian life amounts to zero. Moreover, some argue that since God certainly does not exist, there is nothing to fear in rejecting a devout life in obedience to Christian principles, which is at best 'boring' and at worst self-punitive.

The power of these objections depends upon how we conceive the *point* of Pascal's argument; that is, what the argument is meant to accomplish. I read it this way: Pascal was writing, among others, to his friends and associates, who might have argued that a religious way of life is a foolish bet.⁷ Conceiving bets as they might have been analyzed in seventeenth century France, we might define a bad bet on outcome O to be one where expected utility of O is less than not-O, where the expected utility of a bet is the product of the probability of the outcome and the payoff of the bet. So, if the payoff of a bet on God is X and the payoff of a bet against God is Y, then a bet on God will be reasonable if $(Pr(\text{God}) * X) > (Pr(\text{not-God}) * Y)$. So, Pascal was arguing that those who mock the religious for their foolishness are themselves foolish, because the expected utility of a bet on God is greater than the expected utility of the bet against God.

This is a way of justifying *a way of living*, but it is not a good way to justify *Credo*. Pascal's Wager is about the reasonableness of choosing a devout life in obedience to Christian principles. But it could be, as the Wager itself suggests, that the bet might have been made *without having faith* in the divine at all. One might think that the probability that God exists is very low, but the payoff if God does exist is so high, that it is wise to bet on God. Pascal was right to argue with his friends that they were *by their own standards* making a foolish bet in rejecting a devout life based on Christian principles, but that is not a way to show that *bona fide* faith is reasonable, that it is reasonable to trust God.

⁷ In *Pensées* Pascal actually refers to 1 Cor. 1:18: 'For the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish, foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God.' Pascal goes on immediately to introduce the Wager with these words: 'that takes away the blame from them of producing it without a rational basis; *it does not excuse those who accept it.*' [emphasis mine] (Pascal./Levy, *Pensées*, 1670/1995, §680, p.153) That is why it is that I think that Pascal is offering his argument to those who believe that accepting the Cross is foolishness because they fear that they will perish anyway. Surely 1 Cor. 1:18 must have reminded Pascal of some of his own friends and potential readers.

3.2 The “Emotively Meaningful”

This paper seeks to explain what is wrong with the critical analysis of religion by logical positivism. So far, we have declined to confront logical positivism on the issue of the scientific respectability of religion, as though we could have reasonably hoped to show that religious belief is commended by or on scientific principles or even that religious belief is just another kind of belief that can claim reasonableness *sui generis*. We also have declined to fall back on arguments about the reasonableness of living *as though or on the assumption* that a particular religious view is true because living that way amounts to a good bet. That is *neither* to deny the considerable literature seeking to show that religious belief is reasonable and important, *nor* is it to affirm arguments claiming that religious lives are good bets and irreligious lives are bad bets.

As we have seen, logical positivism distinguishes carefully between cognitive and emotive meanings. Although logical positivism insists that ethical, aesthetic and religious discourse is (or contains) cognitively meaningless components, it nonetheless concedes that religious and ethical discourse may have ‘emotive’ meaning, *but what could emotive meaning be?* We have seen that Wittgenstein, in the period of his life in which he found himself in sympathy with logical positivism, shows enormous respect for the metaphors and similes of religion that evoke authentic emotional responses; responses that he would not, ‘for all the world ridicule.’ What are those authentic emotional responses?

Here it is difficult to begin the discussion at the level of abstraction that is distinctive of contemporary philosophical thought because here it is right to begin with the concrete; with reasons that the heart has that reason does not know. Imagine, for example, an unappealing little, new-born creature, perhaps a snake or a lizard or a worm, having fallen into a pond, desperately struggling to reach shore to begin its life. The struggle is itself a *precious* thing because it is a metaphor for the struggle of all living things. Perhaps it was something like this that Schweitzer had in mind when he wrote of *reverence* for life.

Consider the feelings aroused when looking at photographs taken from Cassini, with Saturn in the foreground and Earth in the background. Or perhaps the images collected from Hubble by the IMAX presentation of a trip through galaxies in twenty minutes. These dramatic images evoke the awe at the creation, awe that unites humankind.

How about this example? Someone is driving a car, cautiously, along a busy street. A child, chasing a ball, runs into the street, and just in time, the driver jams the brakes, stops the car – sparing the helpless, feckless child. Thank, thank – but whom or what?

These are examples of experiences that evoke *authentic* emotional responses. The metaphors and similes they conjure may be *cognitively* meaningless, but surely they must be among the uses of language that logical positivists count as *emotively* meaningful; indeed, if they are not ‘emotively meaningful,’ what would be? Reverence, awe, thankfulness are among the emotions that I believe Pascal refers to as reasons of the heart. They are not the only ones.

There are also the theological virtues; special excellences of the ‘soul.’ Take hope, for example, which Foot explains would not be a virtue if all were really lost when all appears to be lost; (Foot, 2002, p. 9) or charity, which is *sorrowed* by aggression and returns evil with good, or faith itself, which grounds the courage that refuses to bow down to evil. What shall we say of these dispositions? That they are cognitively meaningless? Sure: They *prove* nothing, but they *reveal* something, and what they reveal are the reasons that the heart knows but reason does not.

We may divide these responses into two groups. The first group are emotional responses that require objects. The objects of thankfulness, awe and reverence include the divine. There are times when thankfulness is appropriate but there isn’t a finite thing to whom we owe thanks. The same goes for reverence and awe. The most important experiences of these emotions are simply unintelligible without the divine because there is nothing but the divine that could be their object. The second group includes emotions that make logical space for the divine and for which the divine makes logical space. Without hope there isn’t logical space for courage, because there isn’t a point in resisting where there isn’t hope. Without charity there isn’t logical space for mercy or forgiveness. Without faith there isn’t logical space for hope or charity, because when life is at its worst it appears hopeless and hateful. Without the divine there isn’t room for faith just because life appears hopeless and hateful precisely when there isn’t anything less than the divine in which to repose faith, and then, of course, only the divine will do. Now, I do not offer this as a proof of anything, and *I do not expect logical positivists to be impressed by it at all, for they can concede every word I have written and still argue that the point that I (and religion) miss is that in the end there really isn’t any reason to make logical space for the theological*

virtues or to look to the divine to supply objects of our emotions. That brings us to my response to logical positivism.

The account of emotive meaning given by logical positivists is anemic, even inert, and that is at the core of my response to the critical analysis of religion by logical positivism. Generally, logical positivists think that the emotive content of words is exhausted by the distinction between pro-attitudes and con-attitudes. Pro-attitudes and con-attitudes are expressed, say, by words like ‘hooray’ or ‘boo.’ To be sure, ‘boo-hooray’ versions of logical positivism are crude, and I certainly do not ascribe them to all logical positivists. What I do claim is that the heart of logical positivism necessarily involves the denial of reasonableness to emotion. So, a so-called ‘thick’ ethical term like courage will have a descriptive and an emotive component. The descriptive component will be rich; something like the disposition to respond with firmness to fear. The emotive content will be impoverished; merely be a pro-attitude – nothing more, despite the fact that it is hope that sustains courage, faith that sustains hope, and the divine in which all faith ultimately lies.

Reverence, awe, thankfulness, faith, charity and hope connect us with the divine because they are among the nexus of the divine. They hang one by one from its necklace. But just what does that metaphor mean; what is the connection between the divine and the emotions and dispositions with which it is associated? Here we should be careful, and not say something that logical positivists themselves would not accept: At least (and at most) this, that the divine ‘carries the mind’ (in the way of associative empiricism) to the nexus of its characteristic feelings and emotions; returning the favor, those emotions and dispositions carry the mind to objects of faith, which are, as Eliot would say, ‘beliefs’ that are of cosmological significance. Mere sentimentality and affectation depend upon the human will,⁸ but authentic emotion forces itself on the human heart. It doesn’t make sense to be thankful, but to nothing at all. Even those who seek a deflationary explanation of ‘religious’ emotions feel the need to find something to thank for what is thankful, if only their ‘lucky stars.’ When all appears to be lost, we invest hope, but in what – a lucky break? We do say that we are in awe in the fearful, but the right word for that seems to be ‘terrified.’ ‘Awe’ is appropriately reserved for what humbles and, yet, inspires, and in the final analysis it is only the divine that can at once humble and inspire us to live

⁸ This is analogous to a point made by Wiggins. Whatever commitments are made by the human will can be unmade by the human will. But the distinction between good and bad cannot itself be a function of something that can be made and unmade at one’s own convenience. (Wiggins, pp. 94 - 104) The same goes for authentic emotion, as opposed to sentimentality or mere affectation.

admirably in the grip of the contingencies of life and the certainty of death. The fact that emotively meaningful language connects us to the divine does not prove the divine is real, but it does show that the divine is intelligibly connected to the emotively meaningful, and that is what logical positivism denies and why it is that positivists claim *Credo* cannot be intelligibly said, which is precisely what is wrong with the critique of religion by logical positivism.

3.3 Towards a Refutation of the Critique of Religion by Logical Positivism

It is time to try to be a bit more precise about the logical structure of the present response to the critique of religion by logical positivism. The argument of logical positivism against religion (though not all logical positivists mean to *attack* religion), has a simple, straightforward structure.

P1. The only claims that are cognitively meaningful are those that may be confirmed by perception, by scientific generalizations derived from data collected by perception, or by the logic and mathematics that captures those generalizations and represents them as functional relations among physical magnitudes.

P2. The putative assertions of religion are not among those claims.

P3. Therefore the claims of religion are cognitively meaningless; neither true nor false; they are not really assertions at all.

My response to the critique of religion by logical positivism is:

R1. Whether or not religious claims are cognitively meaningless, they are emotively meaningful, and are in fact authentic (not merely sentimental or affected).

R2. Hence they are conceptually connected with the nexus of divine concepts.

R3. The nexus of divine concepts is meant to apply to reality; and therefore claims about the divine are meant to be intelligible.

R4. Now suppose for a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, that the divine is not intelligible.

R5. Therefore, the divine is not real.

R6. Whatever is not may nonetheless be. (From Hume, and the heart of logical positivism; to wit, all existence is contingent.)

R7. Therefore, the divine *may* exist.

R78. Therefore, the divine is intelligible, and hence the critique of logical positivism of religion fails.

I offer this argument as an *internal* criticism of the critique of religion by logical positivism. That means that I am *trying* to rely *only* upon positivist assumptions and beliefs.⁹ I point out that the entire response assumes nothing that logical positivism does not affirm, *except one crucial thing, and that is the inference from (R4) to (R5)*. The diehard positivist will insist that we *cannot even intelligibly assert that the divine exists*. And that means by (R1), (R2) and (R3) that the divine cannot be conceptually

⁹ For a discussion of the significance of the distinction between internal and external criticisms of religious belief, see (XXXXXX, *Forum on Public Policy*, Vol. 2, 2013.)

connected to religious avowals of reverence, awe, thankfulness, faith, charity and hope and hence those emotions and virtues cannot even be *intelligibly* argued to fall within the nexus the divine. In fact, logical positivism might very well claim that I am not even entitled to the supposition (R4) for my *reductio* argument. Logical positivists may argue that the supposition that the divine is not intelligible is itself cognitively meaningless if only because it contains reference to the 'unintelligible' divine. I *concede* that logical positivism just might push the argument to this very extreme, and that is why this essay is a *response rather than a refutation* of the critique of religion by logical positivism.

Even so, only the harshest, most cynical view of human experience can risk denying the *authenticity* of the human experiences that turn us to the divine, because cynicism must then claim those religious emotions are insincere affectations or else that they are merely sentimental. Yet can anyone really believe that the examples that we have considered – of reverence, awe, and thankfulness; of courage and faith; of hope and charity—are merely sentimental affectations, despite the fact that they plausibly define what is distinctively human and unite all humankind across the lands and through the ages? Certain logical positivists (or their successors) may be prepared to take that final step, but can even they really believe that it is more plausible to think that the reasons of the heart are mere sentimentality than it is to think their cynical rejection is mere affectation? Wittgenstein for one was unwilling to take that risk. The real problem with the harshest forms of logical positivism is that their conception of the emotively meaningful eviscerates the emotions that virtually define our humanity.¹⁰

4. Summary and Conclusion

We have argued that there are two strands of thought that led to the critiques of religion by logical positivism. The first is that it is impossible even to form an idea of God. This view, at least inspired by Hobbes, is the child of radical empiricism. We rejected it because according to it we cannot even intelligibly assert that God does not exist. On the contrary, the possibility of authentic emotional response to permanent features of the human condition connect reasons of the heart to the divine, and the divine in turn makes those reasons of the heart intelligible.

A second strand in the critique of religion by logical positivism lies in the determinism of classical physics, which inspired the central doctrine of logical positivism, the Verifiability Principle of Meaning.

¹⁰ Even those taking a skeptical view of religious faith acknowledge the significance and genuineness of religious emotion. See, for example (Dworkin, 2013, especially pp. 21 – 31)

Despite the fact that there was never a fully satisfactory statement of the principle, it has had enduring effect. As a matter of fact, much of contemporary physics, from Heisenberg to EPR, seems to run counter to the verifiability principle -- but never mind for present purposes.

There is much to concede to logical positivism. Perhaps whatever can be known about nature can be known only by science, but that proves neither that only nature is real nor that whatever else is real is inaccessible because it is not accessible by science. The crucial question is whether or not the verifiability principle rules out *Credo*, the intelligible affirmation of the reality of the divine and God's existence. Well, in a sense it does, if we take reasonable belief to be *defined* by logical positivism itself. But there is another sense of belief, of having faith in something that presupposes trust and bypasses the standard of justification of scientific belief. In that sense, religious belief is associated with emotively meaningful concepts. Those concepts connect us by association with the divine, and the *divine* makes those concepts *intelligible* and they in turn make the *divine intelligible*. To borrow a metaphor from Quine, they are a nexus of concepts, like a closed curve in space, and that closed curve defines what Wittgenstein calls 'a form of life,' which is seen from the inside only by those who have experienced it. It is true that the resulting sense of belief is neither scientific nor in discoverable in those who have sought refuge in rich ontologies. Perhaps, as Eliot thinks, it is found in Dante, if not in Donne or Crashaw. In any case, even if (or though) the nexus of divine concepts does not *demonstrate* the content of *Credo*, nothing in logical positivism rules out *Credo*. And as the poet said so eloquently, the essential thing is *to be able to say Credo*.

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