

1. Religious Language¹

*Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision.*²

There has always been a sense in which, although words have given flight to our understanding, have enabled us to master our world, they also constrain us. Language is our means, not only of describing reality but of interpreting it. It may be fair to say that human beings would wish language to be a neutral form of communication, but experience suggests that it is anything but. Nevertheless, it is our only substantial means of communication and thus it is left to Philosophers to draw attention to the influence that language may be having on the meaning we seek to convey. Some Philosophers have seen this as the only true role of Philosophy. In *'Language, Truth and Logic'*³, **AJ Ayer** argued that philosophy should no longer be seen as a metaphysical concern, nor as an attempt to provide speculative truths about the nature of ultimate reality. Instead, he saw as an activity of defining and clarifying the logical relationships between empirical propositions⁴.



If this is the role of Philosophy then studying the Philosophy of Religion would seem to be redundant. Not much can be discovered about God through the senses, through touch, taste, smell, hearing or sight. It follows that without meaningful propositions, the job of clarifying the logical relationships between

them would not take long! Fortunately for legions of Religious Studies teachers, not all Philosophers share Ayer's view on the role of Philosophy or on the nature of language for that matter.

The Nature of Language

Language has often been singled out as something which distinguishes human beings from other animals. Until recently the possibility that any other animal or life-form could use language was downplayed, even dismissed. Descartes associated language with the possession of a rational mind and a soul, definitely not something which could be attributed to other animals. Throughout history Philosophers and Theologians have claimed that any similarity between humans and animals in terms of apparent understanding, emotions and communication was illusory. Animals may appear to be like us, but that is generally a human projection or *'anthropomorphism'*, they are actually different.

Weight of evidence has caused a change however. Today, the use of a basic language is taken as a sign of developed intelligence in animals. Studies have highlighted that a Border-Collie dog might be able to understand up to 200 different words and that an African Grey Parrot might do almost as well⁵. The greater spotted

woodpecker seems to communicate through the pattern of its pecking⁶ and both sea lions⁷ and dolphins⁸ have been the subjects of language comprehension studies which claim to demonstrate their ability to grasp abstract concepts, communicate effectively and even do simple arithmetic.

The following extract from *'Animals in Translation'*, a recent book which suggests a widespread use of language by animals, shows the sort of evidence for animal language which is cited by scientists today...

*Can Slobodchikoff at Northern Arizona University has done some of the most amazing studies in animal communication and cognition. Using sonograms to analyze the distress calls of Gunnison's prairie dog... he has found that prairie dog colonies have a communication system that includes nouns, verbs, and adjectives. They can tell one another what kind of predator is approaching -- man, hawk, coyote, dog (noun) -- and they can tell each other how fast it's moving (verb). They can say whether a human is carrying a gun or not. They can also identify individual coyotes and tell one another which one is coming. They can tell the other prairie dogs that the approaching coyote is the one who likes to walk straight through the colony and then suddenly lunge at a prairie dog who's gotten too far away from the entrance to his burrow, or the one who likes to lie patiently by the side of a hole for an hour and wait for his dinner to appear. If the prairie dogs are signalling the approach of a person, they can tell one another something -- about what color clothing the person is wearing, as well as something about his size and shape (adjectives). They also have a lot of other calls that have not been deciphered. Dr. Slobodchikoff was able to interpret the calls by videotaping everything, analyzing the sound spectrum, and then watching the video to see what the prairie dog making a distress call was reacting to when he made it. He also watched to see how the other prairie dogs responded. That was an important clue, because he found that the prairie dogs reacted differently to different warnings. If the warning was about a hawk making a dive, all the prairie dogs raced to their burrows and vanished down into holes. But if the hawk was circling overhead, the prairie dogs stopped foraging, stood up in an alert posture, and waited to see what happened next. If the call warned about a human, the prairie dogs all ran for their burrows no matter how fast the human was coming. Dr. Slobodchikoff also found evidence that prairie dogs aren't born knowing the calls, the way a baby is born knowing how to cry. They have to learn them. He bases this on the fact that the different prairie dog colonies around Flagstaff all have different dialects. Since genetically these animals are almost identical, Dr. Slobodchikoff argues that genetic differences can't explain the differences in the calls. That means the calls have been created by the individual colonies and passed on from one generation to the next. Is this "real" language? A philosopher of language might say no, but the case against animal language is getting weaker. Different linguists have somewhat different definitions of language, but everyone agrees that language has to have meaning, productivity (you can use the same words to make an infinite number of new communications), and displacement (you can use language to talk about things that aren't present). Prairie dogs use their language to refer to real dangers in the real world, so it definitely has meaning.*⁹

Obviously, Language is more than just communication. Humans as well as animals, even bacteria are able to communicate without using language, whether through movement or by excreting chemicals for example.



A conventional definition of Language might be a *"human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desires by means of a system of sounds and sound symbols"*¹⁰ However, this seems to preclude languages such as British Sign Language from being given equal status

with sound-based languages. It seems that a broader definition is needed. **Jean Piaget** (1896-1980) suggested that *"Language is only one aspect of the symbolic (or semiotic) function. This function is the ability to represent something by a sign or symbol*

¹ An excellent book on Religious Language by Dan Stiver is now available through Google Books at http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zFJ2pWeBkPkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=religious+language+symbol+sign+metaphor&source=bl&ots=mBsBs1Cm91&sig=Llnb9xQoeN8MblNdXyJEPTvisQ8&hl=en&ei=UTOvTOGBI8Kvswau5PXKDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&sqi=2&ved=0CCIQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false Once hard to get hold of and not cheap – but now on everybody's laptop for free. Discuss the moral implications of this one...

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Part II

³ Originally published in 1936, Penguin 2001, p140

⁴ This is the position held by Philosophers of the 'analytic' school of Philosophy.

⁵ http://www.cambridge.org/resources/0521612357/3215_Ch3AddTextAnimalLg.pdf see also the work of Irene Pepperberg 'Cognition in the African Grey parrot: Preliminary evidence for

auditory/vocal comprehension of the class concept'. In *Animal Learning and Behavior*, 11, pages 179-185 (1983).

⁶ Chauvin and Chauvin *'Behavioural Complexities'* 1980, New York: International Universities Press.

⁷ Schusterman and Krieger, 1984

⁸ Herman, Richards and Woltz, 1984

⁹ *Animals in Translation* by Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, Bloomsbury Publishing (2006), Chapter 6

¹⁰ Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Berlin: Cornelsen & Oxford University Press. 1974, p.472

or another object. In addition to language the semiotic function includes gestures...deferred imitation...drawing, painting and modelling¹¹

If language is the use of accepted signs and symbols, usually auditory, to represent objects and concepts and to communicate about them, then it is clear that some animals do use language. Projects such as those run by Gardner and Gardner in the 1960s and 70s and by Premack in the 1970s showed that primates could use complex sign language, using verbs, adverbs, adjectives etc. as well as nouns to communicate. Duane Rumbaugh trained chimpanzees Lana and Kanzi to use a keyboard to communicate abstract concepts, though Terrace questioned the authenticity of their 'language', arguing that it was just highly-developed mimicry of the trainers¹². A video, showing how Kanzi acquired language is available [here](#)¹³.

Nevertheless, human beings seem to have an extraordinary capacity for using language. Humans use a huge number of words and incredibly complex grammatical systems, they are capable of learning and communicating in a variety of different languages and in conveying very subtle meanings through the creative use of existing languages or through creating new words and phrases. Words have incredible power, they can change people's beliefs and behaviour and they can evoke powerful emotions.

Given that it is through language that we are able to understand our world, and that humans seem to have much more understanding than any other animal, it is perhaps not surprising that we still feel different, privileged. No matter what scientists suggest, it is difficult to reconcile reading the Bible or Shakespeare with the knowledge that these authors were at least 94%¹⁴ similar to Kanzi - and perhaps 50% similar to bananas.¹⁵ Language is close to what sets us apart and what makes us feel that we possess the Truth, that we have the capacity to comprehend the world objectively.

Needless to say, language and religion have always had a close relationship. Language is what converts personal insights and faith into doctrine and institutional practice. The Educational Psychologist Howard Gardner has long suggested that human beings exhibit different intelligences¹⁶. Whereas one person might be able to understand music and have insights into the natural world, another will be finely attuned to the movement of their body and be effective at working with people. There is little doubt that most Philosophers of Religion have linguistic intelligence; they love to talk and more, to write, they endow words with a huge status¹⁷. Think about it, God even created the world through words

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light."¹⁸

¹¹ Piaget, J. (1970). *Genetic Epistemology*. New York: Columbia University Press. p45.

¹² Terrace, H.S., Petitto, L.A., Sanders, R.J. & Bever, T.G. (1979). Can an ape create a sentence? *Science*, 206, 891-902.

¹³ http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,42474171001_2009072,00.html

¹⁴ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=human-chimp-gene-gap-wide> checked 4/10/10

¹⁵ <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg17523584.000-people-arent-bananas.html> encourages you to look beyond these headlines!

¹⁶ *'Frames of Mind'* (1983) and many subsequent books

¹⁷ An interesting discussion about the state of Philosophy may be found in Lawrence Kimmel's article *'Sense and Sensibility'* (Philosophical Investigations Volume 8, Issue 3, Pages 199-207, available in some libraries online or as a pdf.). Is Philosophy *'indeed, as an academic majority contend, merely about language'* or is it more than linguistic scepticism or solipsism, actually relevant to life.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:1-3 (NIV)

The name of God has such power in Judaism that it may not be said aloud and God is said to come to the prophet as a "still, small voice" in the whirlwind. In John's Gospel Jesus is called "The Word of God"¹⁹, the creative essence of the divine.

Can I mean what I say about God?

While Philosophers of Religion love words, it is their business to analyse what those words mean and it is particularly difficult to do this when they refer to God. Words represent concepts. Traditionally the bond between the word and its concept was held to be solid and static. Just as Kanzi makes a specific noise every time a banana is in sight and this is grounds for the noise *meaning* banana, human words are held to refer to, to *mean* particular things in a definite way. It is easy to establish what the meaning of a word is when the object it refers to is in plain view, but much more difficult when it represents an abstract concept, which cannot be experienced but only defined in terms of other words. The philosopher **GE Moore** (1873-1958) put his finger on this difficulty. How can we express what a concept such as 'goodness' is without simply listing examples of things we believe to be good? Even concepts such as 'yellow' are difficult to define. If we just list apparently yellow things we still cannot be sure that the definition is accurate – what if I am colour blind?²⁰ Nevertheless, at least with yellowness my meaning refers to a sense experience which most people share.



Empiricist philosophers accept that sense experience is the best source of knowledge and the point of reference when we try to establish meaning in language²¹. For logical positivists such as **Moritz Schlick** (1882-1936)²² or **AJ Ayer** (1910-1989) meaning can either be **analytic**, in other words one word can be shown to mean the same as another and a statement can be demonstrated to be a **tautology** (for example "unmarried men are bachelors" or 2+2 = 4). Or meaning can be **synthetic** and refer to a sense-experience (for example "the ball appears to be red")²³. Analytic statements do not extend the sum of human knowledge and synthetic statements can only relate to a limited range of conversational topics! Nevertheless empiricists are satisfied to reject all other statements as 'meaningless', including all discussion of morality, beauty and, of course, religion.

¹⁹ John 1:1-18, *Logos* is Greek for 'Word'

²⁰ **David Hume** made this point well over a century before Moore, and he drew on the writings of Newton "For the rays, to speak properly, are not colored. In them there is nothing else than a certain power and disposition to stir up a sensation of this or that color." *Optics* (1704) and probably **Galileo** before that.

²¹ These extend from **Locke** to **Hume**, **Schlick** and **Ayer**

²² Schlick was perhaps the most famous of the so-called "**Vienna Circle**". The circle also included **Kurt Godel** (famous in RS circles for putting forward a version of the Ontological Argument, otherwise for being a brilliant Mathematician and friend of **Einstein**) and **Rudolph Carnap**. Schlick's chief interest in Philosophy was epistemology and the nature of scientific truth statements; he was trained as a Physicist in the first instance. He developed the idea that the function of Philosophy was to examine the nature and extent of meaning in statements and (with **Bertrand Russell** in England) effectively founded the so-called 'Analytic' school of Philosophy, the influence of still dominates departments in the English speaking world. This is why the Philosophy of Religion, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics etc. are seen as minority interests in most University Philosophy departments and the mainstream is Philosophy of Language, Logic and the Philosophy of Mind. Schlick was assassinated by a Nazi former student in Vienna in 1936 aged 54 for his opposition to German influence in Austria and being part of a Philosophical movement labelled 'Jewish' by the Nazis, though Schlick was not himself Jewish. Nevertheless, the assassin was given a government position after the Anschluss in 1938, rather than being punished for the murder of his teacher.

²³ This distinction was first made by **Immanuel Kant** in the Critique of Pure Reason 1781, A6-7/B10-11. Confusingly, Analytic statements are sometimes referred to as '**a priori propositions**' and Synthetic statements as '**a posteriori propositions**' – prior and post referring to when knowledge comes in relation to experience. Alternatively, analytic statements rely on **deductive** reasoning and synthetic statements on **inductive** reasoning. The distinction between Synthetic and Analytic statements has been accepted as a cornerstone of empiricist enquiry since Kant, though it has been questioned by **Quine** (1951 "Two dogmas of Empiricism")

Yet despite the fact that statements of value or faith cannot be 'verified' in this life (and the fact that doubters suggest that for many people values and beliefs are not falsifiable²⁴ either) it is clear that talk about right, wrong, beauty, metaphysical truth and God is very meaningful to most people. That is not to say that Philosophers who make it their life's work to explore truth about morality, aesthetics, metaphysics and theology do not accept the difficulty of communicating about things which cannot be experienced directly.

How can the human mind, let alone limited words, grasp the concept of God? In front of the burning bush Moses was told "I am what I am"²⁵. Can any one of us go further in trying to describe the creator and sustainer of the Universe? Jewish thinkers, taking their cue from Exodus, have resisted defining or describing God beyond what He reveals about Himself through the scriptures. Moses **Maimonides**²⁶ (1135-1204), the great medieval scholar of Cordoba, argued that nothing positive can be ascribed to God but we can, as philosophers, use logic to say what God clearly is not. This approach is known as the **Via Negativa** or '**apophatic way**' and had been adopted for centuries²⁷ before Maimonides, in an attempt to avoid the **anthropomorphism** and over literalism that using positive language about God can encourage. In the Christian West, a similar 'via negativa' was being trodden by Theologians such as **Gilbert of Poitiers** and **Alan of Lille** in the 12th Century. Commenting on the writings of St. Augustine and Boethius they concluded that is God is wholly simple, He is totally other and using any positive terms to describe his nature or attributes would be folly.



Maimonides and his contemporary, the Muslim scholar **Ibn Rushd**²⁸, worked to explore the implications of the writings of **Aristotle**, which had been preserved in Arabic translation in the libraries of the East when they were destroyed and lost to the West at the collapse of Roman civilisation. Aristotle taught that knowledge is based on *experience*, concepts

result from the 'filing' of experiences and language refers to these concepts. Words are simply auditory signs²⁹, in language each sound signifies a specific concept, and all people who have the same experiences end up with the same concepts. When applied to the question of meaning in religious language, Aristotle's philosophy could lead to two different conclusions. Either we can

²⁴ The falsification principle was developed by **Karl Popper** (1902-1994). Concerned that many scientific statements are not strictly verifiable, and yet need to be accepted as meaningful if science is to achieve anything, Popper analysed the history of science and so suggested that science works by accepting as meaningful or even true those statements which have not been proved false, but which would be accepted as false should falsifying evidence be produced. This extends the range of possibly meaningful statements but still excludes religious, moral and aesthetic statements from being meaningful UNLESS the utterer is prepared to accept that they would reject their beliefs if the situation changed. For example – *murder is wrong* would be meaningful unless or until a murder caused more happiness than sadness. *God is good* would be meaningful until evidence of horrendous suffering in His creation was presented. **Anthony Flew** developed the principle specifically as a challenge to Religious belief, but was challenged in doing so by **Basil Mitchell** and **Richard Swinburne**, both of whom argued that falsification is inadequate grounds for accepting that something is meaningful (Swinburne said that we KNOW that toys don't get out of the cupboard and play when we are not looking, though we can't verify or falsify this) and Mitchell said that not all religious belief is unfalsifiable and that Flew ignores the concept of commitment. People promise to believe despite challenges, that is the nature of faith. **John Wisdom's** (1903-1993) parable of the gardener also explores the idea of falsification in a religious context.

²⁵ Exodus 3:14

²⁶ Known sometimes as Rambam, 1135-1204

²⁷ For example, **Pseudo-Dionysius** and Eastern Christian theologians developed this approach within Christianity nearly 900 years earlier, perhaps drawing on the neo-Platonic tradition of Plotinus, who wrote in the *Enneads* "Our thought cannot grasp the One as long as any other image remains active in the soul...To this end, you must set free your soul from all outward things and turn wholly within yourself, with no more leaning to what lies outside, and lay your mind bare of ideal forms, as before of the objects of sense, and forget even yourself, and so come within sight of that One." Muslim scholarship has also used negative theology (*Lahoot salbi*) particularly the followers of the Mu'tazili school of Kalam (often called the Mu'atili, because they are frequent users of the *ta'til* negation methodology) and today many Shi'a Muslims and the Ash'ari and Sufi.

²⁸ Known as Averroes in Europe

²⁹ A sign is defined as something which points towards something beyond itself – for example an arrow fixed to a tree points to the direction of a path, it does not represent the path or its destination in any way. It does not participate in the meaning of the thing signified in the way a symbol does. For example, a small image of a woman and a man might serve to show which sex WC facilities are intended for. These are symbols.

say and know little about God because most of us have no direct experience of Him with which to develop our concept; as **Wittgenstein** said "of what we cannot know we must remain silent". Or, if we see the world and everything in it as the direct creation of God, our experience of the laws of creation could be seen to reveal the nature of the creator, thus making it possible to know and speak of God quite confidently. Maimonides came to the first conclusion and Ibn Rushd the second.

Aristotle taught that knowledge is based on experience, concepts result from the 'filing' of experiences and language refers to these concepts. Some words refer just to one 'file' or concept and are **univocal** – their meaning is clear, cannot be used in different senses or confused. Other words refer to a number of different files or concepts – their meaning is thus obscure and can easily be confused. Take for example the word 'bat'. It could refer to a cricket bat or a small furry flying mammal. The same word has completely different meanings in different contexts, nothing is shared. The term is **equivocal**. Other words still are used in **analogical** sense; they may be used in different contexts but some meaning is shared.

The idea that some terms are used analogically had its roots in Aristotle, but was discussed extensively by Arabic Philosophers in the heyday of Islamic Philosophy (including **Al Farabi** (870-950), **Ibn Sina** (980-1037, sometimes called Avicenna) and **Al Ghazali** (1058-1111) and by Christian thinkers such as Aquinas' tutor, **Alexander of Hales**, in the early 13th Century. Originally, the term 'analogical' was related to the term 'ambiguous', stressing the uncertainty over the degree of meaning that could be shared by the same word used in different senses.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a Dominican, was brought up in a Philosophical world that was obsessed by logic and grammar. As all aspiring academics at the University of Paris did, Aquinas commented on Aristotle's 'Categories', one of the two works of Aristotle available in Latin prior to the early 12th Century. Aquinas developed the idea that terms applied to God are **analogical**, but tried to explain exactly what the proportion and nature of shared meaning would be when a term is applied to God and to an earthly thing. Using Aristotle's distinctions, he did not believe that terms applied to God are **equivocal** (essentially meaningless) but he did not believe that they should be seen **univocally** either, words applied to God cannot mean exactly the same as if they were applied to things in the world of experience. For Aquinas, God created the world and therefore it must tell us something about Him, but God is other, different from the world of time and space and potentiality that He caused to be.

Language tends to imply a worldly framework. If I say that *Peter acts* then we can imagine what that might mean – but how can God act in the same way? God is beyond time and space, He doesn't have a body, so what can God's action really mean? For Aquinas, language can only be used analogically of God (from *analogia*, the Greek for proportion). Saying *Mary is good* and *God is good* shares some meaning, a proportion of the meaning, but not all the meaning. Aquinas uses a truly medieval example to explain. A good bull has a sleek coat, big muscles and a strong interest in cows; a good God would scarcely have these attributes! Nevertheless a good bull also produces good things (healthy urine and manure, high-quality semen and prize-winning calves) and does what good bulls are supposed to do, conforms to the ideal. In this we can see the proportion of meaning that could be shared between a good bull and a good God. God could also



produce good things and fully fulfil His divine nature, not falling short in any respect. God being good in that He produces good things is known as **Analogy of Attribution**, God being God in that he perfectly fulfils His nature is known as **Analogy of Proportion**. Altogether, this is known as Aquinas' **Doctrine of Analogy**.

In summary, some scholars see that language can be used literally or univocally of God. These include St. Anselm and Duns Scotus for examples. Other scholars see that language can never be used to describe God. Words are bound to space and time and God is beyond both; words applied to things and to God would share no meaning and would be **equivocal** (like bat as in cricket and bat as in flying rodent). These include Maimonides. Aquinas takes a middle way, arguing that a proportion of meaning is shared through his doctrine of **analogy**.



➤ Which diagram might represent which approach?

John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) came from Scotland before studying at Oxford, Cambridge and Paris. He was a Franciscan and so balanced his Philosophical genius and scholarly positions with a sincere belief that Christianity was about ministering to the poor and taking the Gospel message literally.

Scotus applied his mind to defending the possibility of using language univocally, so that saying "God is Good" or "Jesus is the Word of God" can be understood unequivocally. Like **St. Anselm** (1033-1109) he held that "[t]he difference between God and creatures, at least with regard to God's possession of the pure perfections, is ultimately one of degree"³⁰



Whereas earthly things are limited by their physical existence, God is infinite and has no limitations. When we say God is good, the concept of goodness is the same as when we say "Peter is good", but to a much greater degree.

This contrasts with the thinking of Aquinas. Aquinas suggests that God is wholly simple and thus other, not a thing. Language is tied to things with earthly limits and only a proportion of the meaning can be shared between a word applied to God and the same word applied to a thing. While Scotus' concept of God as infinite is similar to Aquinas wholly simple God on one level, on another it is very different. As Williams writes, "For Scotus infinity is not only what's ontologically central about God, it's the key component of our best available concept of God and a guarantor of the success of theological language. That is, our best ontology, far from fighting with our theological semantics, both supports and is supported by our theological semantics."³¹ In other words, if we believe that we can define and understand God at all, then this guarantees that the reason and language with which we define Him is a reliable means of defining and understanding Him. Denying the univocity of language would, for Scotus, deny the possibility of meaningful Philosophy and Religion.

Scotus, like Aquinas, assumed an Aristotelian world view. All things are caused and (at least for the Christian philosopher) this suggests that all things must have either been kept in being or initially have been brought into being by an "uncaused causer",

which is what we call God. If God is the original cause of all things then it is reasonable to expect that the cause and the effect share characteristics. Just as you share characteristics with your parents and someone could understand something about them by knowing you, and just as your DT project might reveal something about you, creation might reasonably reveal something about God. Further, for Scotus, the concept of 'being' (Latin 'ens') cannot be seen to be analogical. For something to exist must mean the same in any situation and in this at least we can have direct understanding of what God is, being itself.

Where Scotus and Aquinas were influenced by Aristotelian Philosophy, **Rene Descartes** (1596-1650) had a more Platonic view of concepts or ideas.

Plato understood 'reality' in metaphysical terms, the physical world of time, space and sense-experience being just a limited shadow of an unlimited noumenal reality beyond, which we can access through reason. For Plato reason is unique to human beings and language is the medium of reason. Human beings can grasp concepts without having to create them out of sense-experiences. Knowledge can be *a priori*, before experience. Words represent concepts in an absolute, static way. Plato suggested that language is innate and influenced most western philosophers in seeing that human beings are naturally distinct from other animals being given the 'gift' of language and rational communication and comprehension, a unique way of grasping objective truth.



Plato influenced the dominant school of philosophy in Europe up to the 18th Century, which developed thereafter into what we will call '**Philosophical Idealism**'³². Examples of Plato's influence can be seen in the writings of St Anselm, who believed that human beings can define God and analyse that definition for evidence of God's existence, and Descartes.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is famous for writing, "*cogito ergo sum*", "I think therefore I am". Human beings are characterised by the ability to think, and for thinking to occur, language is necessary. Animals, on the other hand, have no language, cannot think and are nothing but well-constructed, complex machines. In the *Meditations* (1637) he wrote...



"For it is a very remarkable thing that there are no men, not even the insane, so dull and stupid that they cannot put words together in a manner to convey their thoughts. On the contrary, there is no other animal however perfect and fortunately situated it may be that can do the same. And this is not because they lack the organs, for we see that magpies and parrots can pronounce words as well as we can, and nevertheless cannot speak as we do, that is, in showing that they think what they are saying. On the other hand, even those men born deaf and dumb, lacking the organs which others make use of in speaking, and at least as badly off as the animals in this respect, usually invent for themselves some signs by which they make themselves understood. And this proves not merely animals have less reason than men but that they have none at all, for we see that very little is needed to talk."³³

³⁰ Richard Cross "Duns Scotus" Oxford University Press, 1999 page 39

³¹ Thomas Williams <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/duns-scotus/#DivlnfDocUni> Checked 14/9/10

³² This has been given many names but here refers to all philosophers who see that truth is in the world of logic and ideas, not found in the world of sense-experience.

³³ Descartes '*Meditations*' Trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p. 42

In a 1646 letter to the Marquess of Newcastle Descartes wrote

"none of our external actions can show anyone who examines them that our body is not just a self-moving machine but contains a soul with thoughts, with the exception of words, or other signs that are relevant to particular topics without expressing any passion. I say words or other signs, because deaf-mutes use signs as we use spoken words; and I say that these signs must be relevant, to exclude the speech of parrots, without excluding the speech of madmen, which is relevant to particular topics even though it does not follow reason. I add also that these words or signs must not express any passion, to rule out not only cries of joy or sadness and the like, but also whatever can be taught by training to animals"

Descartes' Idealism was rejected by John Locke and the empiricists at the time of the Enlightenment, again working on the basis of **Aristotle** (*De Anima*, Book III, Chapter 4). Their approach came to replace that which descended from Plato and developed into what we might call '**Philosophical Realism**'.³⁴

Aristotle writes of the human mind as an '*unscribed tablet*' and always stresses that understanding originates in collections of sense-experiences. For Aristotle "*man is the measure of all things*"³⁵ and, although he never seems to doubt that all humans experience and rationalize the exterior world in the same way, which would indicate that human concepts and words bear a static, absolute relationship with the way things are as we experience them, there is little idea that concepts or language are innate.

This approach was developed by the Islamic Philosopher **Ibn Sina** (980-1037) who argued that

*"The human intellect at birth is rather like a tabula rasa, a pure potentiality that is actualized through education and comes to know. Knowledge is attained through empirical familiarity with objects in this world from which one abstracts universal concepts. It is developed through a syllogistic method of reasoning; observations lead to prepositional statements, which when compounded lead to further abstract concepts."*³⁶

Ibn Sina inspired medieval European philosophers to come to similar conclusions, including **St Thomas Aquinas** 1225-1274.



Like these Medieval Philosophers, **John Locke** (1632-1704) famously saw the human mind as a '*tabula rasa*'³⁷ (blank slate) onto which records of sense-experiences are written and later categorised. Yet his work and that of later empiricists influenced a new, radical approach to language and meaning. If

language is composed of words and words are merely signs which we attach to files of similar sense-experiences then there must be serious doubt as to whether two people mean the same thing when they use the same word, let alone over the traditional idea, shared by both Plato and Aristotle, that words and the concepts they are linked to are static, absolutely knowable, analysable. **David Hume** (1711-1776) took the empiricist approach to language forward, acknowledging that the meaning of terms is subjective, dependent on personal human experience, rather than being potentially objective. "*It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of Nature.*" He used the example of red light, noting that we see objects as red, but we know (as a result of scientific enquiry) that they just have a surface that is disposed to reflect light at a frequency which our eyes interpret as red. Ultimately all human understanding is based on sense-experience, and that is not as solid as it may appear.

This approach to language had become mainstream by the end of the 19th Century. Yet today it is being challenged in some quarters. **Noam Chomsky** (1928-present) is the most famous opponent of empiricist theories of language acquisition. He proposes instead a 'generative' or 'nativist' theory which cites evidence that human beings do not learn language in the way that animals do; they seem to be predisposed to acquire language even when they are not given much encouragement or stimulation to do so. Generative theory seems to suggest that human brains are 'hardwired' for language, enabling children to understand verbal communication and engage in it very, very quickly. This insight might be seen to relate to Plato's Philosophy on one level. This approach is not universally accepted. Today, many writers propose theories which tread a middle line between the empiricist and nativist approaches, suggesting that language is acquired through a combination of natural predispositions and personal experiences, nature and nurture.

The theories of **Ludwig Wittgenstein** 1889-1951 have had an enormous influence on modern theories of language and, more broadly, on theories of truth, knowledge and reality. He came from a family of wealthy secular Viennese Jews. He was not considered intelligent as a boy and was sent to technical school – where a class-mate was Adolf Hitler. When he left school Wittgenstein travelled to Manchester to study aeronautical engineering, but 'found philosophy' and philosophy found him just before WWI, when he walked into the rooms of **GE Moore** at Trinity Hall, Cambridge. The college soon took him onto staff, though he hadn't even got a degree!



Although an awkward and silent man, Wittgenstein was obsessed by communication. Could words have a static relationship with concepts? Could meaning be definite? Wittgenstein went back to Austria at the outbreak of war in 1914 and enlisted as a private soldier, serving on a river battle-ship on the eastern Front.

He served alongside men from all corners of the Austro-Hungarian empire, men with very different educations, experiences and cultures from his own. He found that although they could all talk, in German, they could not communicate effectively. Words carried different meanings for different people, depending on their "form of life". Wittgenstein later used the analogy of a game to explain this. The meaning of words and phrases depends on all the people communicating knowing the 'rules of the game' – if some people play by different rules or are ignorant of the rules then miscommunications will ensue. This is known as Wittgenstein's theory of '**language games**'.

³⁴ Broadly speaking, realists see that the truth is "*out there*", exists independently of our minds in the physical world, and may be perceived through our senses.

³⁵ Protagoras

³⁶ John Locke coined the term in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, drawing on the writings of Aristotle (*De Anima*, Book III, chapter 4) and the Stoics and of Islamic Philosophers Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Tufail. The writings of Aristotle, Ibn Sina and Ibn Tufail had previously inspired Aquinas to challenge the accepted Platonic view of language as innate. A translation of Ibn Tufail's novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, exploring the idea of the human mind as a blank slate shaped entirely by experiences, was read by Locke. The medieval Emperor Frederick II apparently tried to enact the plot in real life, unsuccessfully, and a similar story forms part of Jill Paton Walsh's excellent novel 'Knowledge of Angels', which more generally explores the central questions in Thomist philosophy including the evidence for God's Existence and the nature of language, knowledge and faith.

³⁷ internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy article on Avicenna at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/avicenna/> (checked 24/9/10)

Back in Cambridge after the war, Wittgenstein lectured a generation of Philosophy students (including Elizabeth Anscombe & Norman Malcolm) and encouraged them to question the nature of the link between language and meaning and to consider the implications of objective truth being beyond the reach of our subjective tongues. The idea that what is true or what is meant by a statement in one "**form of life**" might be different from what is true or meant by a statement in another began to be accepted.

Think about it; if a New York Gangster says that something is "wicked" he might mean something different from the Rev. Peabody, when he says something is "wicked"... You might mean something different when you call someone "gay" to your grandmother, when she uses the term. It would be wrong to say that anybody in these examples is mistaken in their use of words – but the meaning of those words clearly depends on the cultural context in which they are used. In the 1980s sticky packing tape was marketed in Australia under the brand name Durex. When Australians visiting Britain went to the stationers asking for Durex to seal a parcel they were not meaning to cause a lot of laughter – but the different connotations of "Durex" in the UK made sure that there was a lot of laughter. Words, even in the same language, do not seem to have a static relationship with the things or situations that they refer to. The relationships seem to be "**culturally relative**". The question is; if language and meaning is culturally relative and language is the only medium for describing and communicating about truth, is truth culturally relative? Can there be an absolute truth beyond all the linguistic confusion?

Some philosophers took Wittgenstein's work to mean that there is no absolute truth. What is true for one person may not be true for another; truth is just relative. This is known as "**anti-realism**", and in Philosophy of Religion is associated with the thought of **DZ Phillips** (1934–2006) for example. Phillips proposes that it is perfectly proper to say that 'God exists' or 'The Lord is my shepherd' within a religious form of life. These statements are true for religious people. It is equally true to say that 'God does not exist' within an atheistic community however; that is true for atheists. The anti-realist approach does make sense of much religious language. Religious writers tend to use **signs, symbols and metaphors** which require the reader to have an appropriate cultural background or to have learned the particular usage of terms in order for them to make any sense.



RB Braithwaite suggested that it is best to see Religious language as **non-cognitive**. He argued that religious statements are really moral statements, they express an attitude and so have an emotive meaning, they are designed to shape people's feelings and behaviour and are meaningful in having such results. The place of **story** in religion is particularly important for Braithwaite. He sees a story not as something to believe in rationally, but something that conveys a moral or message which we can apply to real life. Philosophers such as **Paul Tillich** (1886-1965) and have argued that Religious Language is **symbolic**, statements are not designed to be taken literally, but through being immersed in an appropriate culture and form of religious language we come to understand the spiritual meaning which these symbolic words point towards, spiritual meanings which cannot be more clearly explained. He wrote...



"Faith consists in being vitally concerned with that ultimate reality to which I give the symbolical name of God. Whoever reflects earnestly on the meaning of life is on the verge of an act of faith."
And *"Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate."*

William Alston has been particularly critical of those who see religious language as symbolic, saying that this approach diverts attention from analysing what is really meant by Religious claims, and from really engaging with faith. Others have criticised any idea that religious language is non-cognitive, these include John Wisdom and **Ian Ramsey** (1915-1972).



Ian Ramsey was Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Oxford and then the Bishop of Durham. He tried to bring together the philosophical tradition of empiricism, verificationism and falsificationism with the reality of faith and with developments in psychology and sociology on the back of Wittgenstein. He argued, contra Ayer and Flew, that religious language was indeed based in experience but that these experiences are '**logically odd**' and thus difficult for the individual to describe using literal, prosaic language – so we tend to add a '**qualifier**' to show that the term we are using is not intended to be taken on face-value. For example when referring to God we might say omni-potent rather than potent or powerful, omni-scient rather than just knowing, omni-bevolent rather than just good. The 'omni' or 'all' or 'timelessly' or 'divinely' is a qualifier which characterises religious language from other language. Further, he suggested that religious language is also **symbolic**, but not, he argued, more so than language in science.

According to Ramsey, in both science and religion we set up a **model** to help us to understand something which is difficult. We use coloured ping-pong balls and cocktail sticks to explain the structure of molecules, talk about light and sound being 'waves' and atoms having 'hooks' to explain their valences. Ramsey claims that in religion we rarely talk in positive terms and that the main function of religious terms is to evoke an understanding in others, based on shared experience, rather than to set out meaning in a precise way. Ramsey's idea of 'models' and how they are used in Science and Religion is similar to the theory of **Thomas Kuhn** in some ways.

Ian Crombie (1917-2010), who recently died in Oxford where he was once a Fellow in Philosophy at Wadham College, suggested that the necessarily mysterious nature of the object of religious language meant that it could only ever be evocative, never precise in its meaning or reference. He explored the use of deliberate category mistakes and obviously inadequate terminology by religious writers, seeing that this could be a device to communicate about the nature of God by demonstrating the inadequacy of language and human reason. It is worth noting that Wittgenstein's work may not lead to the anti-realist conclusion. It may be that there is a truth beyond what we experience and what we can talk about. Although Philosophers may feel that there is little point in admitting the existence of something we cannot know and analyse, perhaps doing so is important, challenging the notion that 'man is the measure of all things' and leaving room for imagination, faith, God.

Today many Philosophers of Religion see themselves as **Critical Realists** as opposed to being Idealists, Realists or Anti-Realists. On the one hand critical realism holds that it is possible to acquire knowledge about the external world as it really is, independently

of the human mind or subjectivity. On the other hand it rejects the realist view that the external world is simply as it is perceived. Recognizing that the mind shapes what it perceives, it holds that one can only acquire knowledge of the external world by critical reflection on the process perception and its place in the world. This means that all language and knowledge, including scientific claims, must be seen as potentially coloured by our particular human perspective. This could be seen as a return to Kantian epistemology.

The Philosopher and Theologian **Bernard Lonergan** proposed applying critical realism to Theology and the Philosophy of Religion and his thinking has influenced a generation of others, including **Tom Wright** and **James Dunn** as Biblical Scholars. An interesting exercise in applying Critical Realism to Theology is the historical novel "*The Shadow of the Galilean*" by **Gerd Theissen**, which tries to explore the role of the observer in creating and interpreting religious stories. Tom Wright, once Reader in Theology at Worcester College, Oxford and currently the Bishop of Durham, wrote...

"I propose a form of *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of "knowing" that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence "realism"), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence "critical").³⁸

Critical Realism was first applied to the discourse between science and religion in in the 1950s by **Ian Barbour**, and since has been adopted by **Arthur Peacocke** and **John Polkinghorne** and more recently by **Alister McGrath**. It has become a particularly dominant epistemology (theory of knowledge) for those writing about Science and Religion, perhaps because of advances in Scientific knowledge. **Quantum science** suggested that traditional logic may not represent the way things really are. Quarks can be in two places at once, can exist and not exist simultaneously and are changed by being viewed. This indicates that reality is not as simple as it may once have seemed.

Using a critical realist epistemology to underpin her theory of language **Sallie McFague**³⁹ developed what she called 'metaphorical theology', drawing on the work of Barbour and Ricoeur". Using this approach she has developed new metaphors for God as Mother, Lover, and Friend, and the world as the body of God which challenge traditional theology's patriarchal assumptions.

In 1985 **Janet Martin Soskice** published a thorough study of metaphor in religious and scientific language⁴⁰, arguing that the latter can be meaningful because the former is widespread and accepted to be meaningful in that context. Her work arose as a result of Critical Realist enquiries into science and religion. She asks



"What, therefore is truth? A mobile army or metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long-usage seems to a nation fixed, canonic and binding: truths are illusions or which one has

forgotten they are illusions; worn out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal."⁴¹

Soskice draws a parallel between Science and Theology, arguing that both are based on realism. In Science realism is social and contextual; theoretical terms are seen as representing reality without claiming to be absolutely true." Similarly, in Theology there is a distinction between referring to God and attempting to define God. In both Science and Theology language is being used to represent reality in the knowledge that it may be inadequate, confusing and could be improved upon.

Critical Realism encouraged writers in Science and Theology to reflect on the process of their own thinking and writing and see that they could not be neutral observers, to accept that although both science and theology are about 'truth', that this can be elusive. In this they were inspired by the theories of **Thomas Kuhn**, first put forward in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). **Georg Hegel**



(1770-1831) suggested that history could be understood in terms of people following one theory (thesis), others reacting and rebelling against it with another contradictory theory (antithesis) and, over time a new 'middle way' (synthesis) emerging. The synthesis in turn becomes the theory against which a new generation rebels and so on. Kuhn applied Hegel's theory and the concept of *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) which was developed by **Herder** and other followers of Hegel to explain the development of Science. For Kuhn science is conducted within a **paradigm**, a model of the world which makes it almost impossible for scientists to accept results and theories which challenge its tenets. However, from time to time, a **scientific revolution** occurs when the accepted paradigm is replaced by a new paradigm, and progress then ensues.

Dr. John Snow was a lone voice in suggesting that Cholera was borne in dirty water. The detailed evidence he collected, documenting the relationship between certain wells and infection outbreaks was ignored because all leading scientists were convinced that most illnesses were spread by 'miasma', dirty smelly air. It took a crisis and a complete change in thinking for Snow to be hailed as a genius and hero – sometime after his death. In science more than any other area, consensus holds power. This is because science purports to uncover 'truth' and often claims to possess truth – and there can only be one truth. Whereas an economist might accept several different theories, holding each to shed light on the truth and none to be the absolute truth, in science there is more pressure to accept one theory in its totality and to reject all opposition. Ironic this, it may be said for a discipline that has been said to operate according to the **falsification principle**.



In 1988, **Hans Küng** applied paradigm analysis to the history of theology and compared the results to the history of science. In contrast to the way paradigms are successively replaced in science, giving it an irreversible history, in theology contrasting paradigms, such as Thomism, Reformation theology, modernity, may well coexist. Kung's analysis of how

³⁸ *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 35

³⁹ 1982

⁴⁰ *Metaphor and Religious Language* OUP 1985

⁴¹ *Ibid.* page 78

theology develops suggested that none of the various theological paradigms may claim to possess the truth, that members of one or other school of thought should become aware of their position, reflecting on the process of theological development and becoming more critical about truth-claims that are made. This suggestion was not welcome in some quarters; Kung's authority to teach Catholic Theology was taken away by the Church on the advice of his erstwhile friend Joseph Ratzinger, now the Pope.

Test Yourself

Can you define the following terms...

- a. Paradigm
- b. Model
- c. Inductive
- d. Deductive
- e. Synthetic
- f. Analytic
- g. Univocal
- h. Equivocal
- i. Analogy
- j. Analogy of attribution
- k. Analogy of proportion
- l. Metaphor
- m. Sign
- n. Symbol
- o. Via negativa
- p. Idealism
- q. Philosophical Realism
- r. Critical Realism
- s. Tabula Rasa
- t. Anti-realism
- u. Cultural relativism
- v. Nativist theory of language acquisition
- w. Empiricism
- x. Anthropomorphism
- y. Apophatic way
- z. Ambiguous

1. What is a language?
2. Why does talking about God present particular problems for Philosophers of Language?
3. Can you explain, briefly, what each of the following philosophers contributed to the discussion of Religious Language?
 - Moses Maimonides
 - St. Thomas Aquinas
 - John Duns Scotus
 - Rene Descartes
 - David Hume
 - AJ Ayer
 - Ludwig Wittgenstein
 - Ian Barbour

Questions for Discussion

- i. Is it fair to say that animals use language and that humans are just developed animals in this respect?
- ii. Both Plato and Aristotle believed that all people share identical concepts and that words signify those concepts. Do you think that this is credible?
- iii. Is verificationism a plausible epistemology?
- iv. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of an anti-realist approach to meaning in language.
- v. Is the use of sign, symbol and metaphor in religion a helpful means of communicating truth or unnecessarily confusing and likely to discredit the whole business of faith?

- vi. Can we meaningfully refer to or describe God? What are the implications for religion of your conclusion?

Stretch and Challenge (potential extension-essay titles...)

- Is religious language meaningless?
- To what extent does Aquinas' doctrine of analogy overcome the difficulties of discussing a wholly simple God?
- If Maimonides is right, what future is there for institutional religion?
- What does it mean to say that "God is Good"?
- Is any statement 'true'? Discuss with reference to Critical Realism as well as other theories of knowledge.

Reading Suggestions

Everybody should go beyond that boring and simplistic exam-board text! Love the subject for its own sake, not just to jump through a hoop!

"The Puzzle of God" (Fount, London, 1999) and "What is Truth" (UNSW Press, Australia, 1999) by Peter Vardy

These two books deal with the questions raised in this extract in different ways and are available in most departmental/school libraries – should be accessible to any AS/A Level student.

"Religious language" by Peter Cole and John Lee (Abacus, London, 1994)
A good basic introduction to the topic – accessible to all AS/A2 level students.

"Aquinas" (Continuum, London, 2003) and "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion" (OUP, Oxford, 2003) by Brian Davies

Excellent higher-level summaries of the Doctrine of Analogy and its significance to Aquinas' broader Philosophy and of the topic as a whole in relation to the Philosophy of Religion. Anybody aspiring to get a C grade or above should have a go at this level of reading.

"The Philosophy of Religious Language" by Dan Stiver (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 1995)

An excellent, full treatment of the topic. Some of this text is now available now on google books at

http://books.google.com/books?id=zfj2pWeBkPkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=religious+language&hl=en&ei=FKHToSXCzYsqvq4DhAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

"Metaphor and Religious Language" by JM Soskice (Clarendon, Oxford, 1987)

"Metaphorical Theology" by Sallie McFague (Augsberg Fortress, 1959)

"Religious Language" by Ian T Ramsey (SCM, London, 1973)

These three books are ideal for the A candidate, taking them into the realm of undergraduate study and preparing them for University Interviews and the first day of term in October 2012/2013!*

Resource update!



These notes, along with many more, will soon be available through The Tablet Student Zone at <http://new.thetablet.co.uk/> This new

free resource, written and developed by Charlotte Vardy, includes detailed written introductions, pitched at AS/A2 level, to all key topics in the Philosophy of Religion, Ethics, Religion and Science, the study of Religions and the study of Religious Texts (Religion and Culture, including Art and Media, will be added later). There are also brief video-introductions to each topic and a bank of longer videos from scholars such as Richard Swinburne dealing with aspects of RS A Level. There are exam and essay tips, a quote-bank, sample essay-questions, downloadable teaching resources based on archive tablet articles and more... Launch is expected in October 2011.