Flew, Hare and Mitchell: A Symposium on Theology and Falsification

The symposium entitled "Theology and Falsification" is a much-anthologized piece. In it, Flew issues a challenge to typical versions of theism: he charges that they are not false but rather meaningless. Hare and Mitchell respond in very different ways.

Flew begins with a parable. He tells us of two explorers who discover a clearing that is in some ways like a humanly-made garden and in some ways like a purely natural phenomenon. One explorer is convinced that there is a gardener; the other disagrees. They set about to test the hypothesis that there is a gardener, using fences, bloodhounds, night watches and the like. No evidence of a gardener turns up. But at every stage the believer qualifies the hypothesis: the gardener comes at night; he is invisible; he has no odor; he cannot be detected by any of the senses. Finally the exasperated non-believer asks: what is the difference between this very peculiar gardener and no gardener at all?

Flew's claim is that this is what often happens to religious claims: "A fine, brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications."

This seems particularly clear in cases of such claims as "God loves us as a father loves his child." In the face of a child dying in agony, with no apparent intervention by God, the believer must resort to qualifications: God's love is "not a merely human love" or "God's ways are mysterious." The non-believer asks: what is the difference between saying that God loves and that he doesn't -- or that there is no God at all?

Flew then sets forth the logic of the situation, as he sees it. Any statement says the same thing as its double negation: "God loves us" says the same thing as "It is false that God doesn't love us." The point is that if "God loves us" means anything -- if it is an assertion, to put it in Flew's way -- then "God doesn't love us" must also mean something.

Note carefully what Flew's point is: a genuine assertion rules some things in -- the positive content -- and rules some things out -- the negative content, if you will. If knowing that God loves us tells us anything about the world, there must be a contrast with the way things would be if God didn't love us. "God doesn't love us" must mean something in the sense that if it were true, there is a certain way that the world would be that differs from how it would be if God loves us. The believer, as Flew sees it, lets nothing count against the claim that God loves us -- or that there is a God. So nothing counts for it either, and such statements tell us nothing. They are, perhaps, like saying "It will either rain tomorrow or it won't," or even, perhaps, like saying "'twas brillig and the slithey toves did gyre and gimbel in the wabe."

So Flew issues his challenge to the theist: tell us what imaginable circumstances would count against the claim that there is a god, or that God loves us. If the answer is that nothing would, then concede: these claims have no content.

Hare responds first. He concedes: if we accept Flew's criterion for something's being a genuine assertion as opposed to a preference for one metaphor over another -- then Flew wins the argument. But Hare suggests by his parable that this is a bad way to construe meaningfulness. We imagine a lunatic who is convinced that all the dons at Oxford (dons are professors who live in the individual colleges) are out to get him. No amount of evidence to the contrary persuades him to change his view. By Flew's criterion, then, when he says that the dons are out to get him, he is not making an assertion and is not saying anything meaningful. We reject his point of view and think that our view of dons is the appropriate one.

All the same, Hare would insist that there is a deeper point that this analysis would miss. It is a point that goes back to the
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genuine assertion -- there must be things that would count against its truth. But some have asked: what is the status of that sort of statement? Is Flew's criterion of meaningfulness itself meaningful by his own standard? What would count as evidence against it? And if the answer is "nothing," where does this leave Flew's argument?

There are various sorts of replies that Flew might make -- that principles of meaningfulness are not meant to describe the world, for example, but to do some other sort of job. But Hare's response, in effect, is that the same is true of religious assertions. The question is whether this can be quite right. Are religious assertions really not intended to convey any information about the world?

This is an irresolvable debate. The mystic or the Tillichian theologian might insist that insofar as religious statements are simply descriptions, they are not truly religious statements -- they confuse God with something less than ultimate. But does that mean that any way the world might be is compatible with religion?

Perhaps the answer is yes. After all, it might be pointed out that the ontological argument claims that God exists necessarily --indeed that God's non-existence is inconceivable. If that is so, nothing could count as evidence against God's existence. Here it might be complained: Anselm was guilty of doing just what the mystics and the Tillichians complain about: making God into a particularly glorious object. However, it isn't clear that this is true either. The being than which none greater can be conceived, if there is such, is truly in a category by itself -- like nothing else.

What we see here, then, is that Flew's criterion has genuine appeal -- we somehow feel that statements about God should be genuine assertions, and should convey genuine information. But we also see that, in historical perspective, it is not at all clear that statements about God have simply been intended as assertions by all those who made them.

Mitchell's reply is much more straightforward. He agrees that statements about God should be assertions by Flew's standard, and he insists that evil, for example, does count against the assertion that God loves us. His parable is meant to do a different job than Hare's. It is meant to suggest that Flew has overlooked an attitude that is different from simply treating religious statements as hypotheses, and different from treating them as mere manners of speaking. The believer in God, like the believer in the Stranger of Mitchell's parable, has an attitude of trust. The actual evidence is ambiguous. Some things suggest that the stranger is on the side of the resistance, some things suggest that he isn't. But the partisan in Mitchell's parable as been moved by the stranger enough to trust that even when it seems otherwise, the stranger really is on his side. The religious believer has a similar attitude of trust in God, Mitchell claims. The trust is not without a sense of tension and conflict -- if it were, it would be the sort of meaningless non-assertion that Flew attacks. But the believer has committed himself or herself to not abandoning belief in the face of seeming evidence to the contrary, because the believer has adopted an attitude of faith.

Flew sees the analogy as flawed. The stranger is a limited mortal. That makes it easy to explain why he does not always appear to be on our side. But God is not limited in any way; no excuses could be made for God's lapses. However, Mitchell could surely point out: it isn't a matter of making specific excuses. It is a matter of having faith that there is some explanation, even if we can't see what it is -- of saying that we don't understand, but we trust. The question Flew would presumably ask is: don't we understand well enough?

But answering that question is not the task of these notes.