

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 slithy 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. But we reject his point of view and think that our view of dons is the appropriate one.

If Flew is right, Hare argues, we differ with the lunatic not over an assertion but over something else. Hare makes up the word *blik* to name this something else. The lunatic has an insane blik about dons and we have a sane one. Hare insists: if we reject the lunatic's view, but his view is not an assertion but a blik, then our view is not an assertion either. But the difference between the two views is very important.

In fact, it's not clear that this example serves Hare entirely well. The correct description of our difference with the lunatic is a little more subtle. What we find deficient in his way of putting things is precisely that his view is impervious to the evidence. If we were in sympathy with Flew's understanding of assertions, we could say that we differ with the lunatic precisely because for us, "The dons are out to get poor Charlie" *is* an assertion, and for the lunatic, it isn't. Part of what *makes* him a lunatic is the way in which his attitude toward dons is impervious to all evidence.

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

18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume. Think about what it means to base one's belief on evidence. In most cases, it amounts to the view that we can infer the future from the past, and more generally that we can infer facts about the larger world on the basis of a sample. Why do we think the sun will rise tomorrow? Because it always has. Why do we think that sugar will dissolve in water? Because up to now it has always done so. Our belief -- if that's what it should be called -- that a part can serve as evidence of the whole is one that all reasoning about the world must presuppose. It is one that we cannot prove by evidence, because we would have to *presuppose* it in order to reason from the evidence.

But now turn things around. Consider the opposite belief: that the past is no guide to the future; that the part is no guide to the whole. Since the belief that the past *does* provide guidance to the future, and that the sample does tell us things about the larger population is one that evidence can't establish, then by Flew's criterion, the opposite view isn't an assertion. But in that case, the view that we can use the past to reason about the future, the part to reason about the whole, and in general that scientific or ordinary "inductive" reasoning is possible is also not an assertion. But even if it isn't it is clearly a tremendously significant attitude in a perfectly familiar sense of "significant."

Hare's point, then, is that we don't necessarily delegitimize a view just by showing that it isn't an assertion in Flew's sense. Some of our most important attitudes are clearly legitimate even if they don't count as being assertions by Flew's lights.

Hare makes the point by explicit reference to Hume in a part of the text that Robinson left out. (Click [here](#) to read it yourself.) But he illustrates in a straightforward way. We have a certain confidence in the stability of things like steel, which leads us to think that our steering column won't all of a sudden turn to rubber. More generally, we have a certain confidence in the stability of nature. But would we ever conclude that nature is *not* law-governed? Would we ever let anything count as evidence *against* our view that the world is stable? Hare thinks not. This view is therefore not an assertion by Flew's criterion. But that hardly puts it in the category of meaninglessness in the pejorative sense.

Hare sees religious belief as of the same sort. In a portion of his reply that Robinson did not reproduce, he makes it clear: he rejects the idea of God as cosmic architect.

What does he believe instead? He adverts to Biblical language: "The earth is the Lord's and the pillars thereof." There are two things (at least) at work here. One is the influence of such 20th century philosophers as Paul Tillich. Tillich insisted that as soon as we identify God with any *thing*, we have stooped to idolatry. The idea that God is not just one more thing in the universe is actually a very old one. St. Thomas Aquinas certainly accepted it, and he was by no means the first. The mystics, as Karen Armstrong makes clear in her book *A History of God*, would have accepted it too (or many of them would have.) Tillich tried to take this idea and make it into the basis of a systematic theology. He often did not use the word "God" at all, talking instead of "the ground of being." On his view, God was beyond all possibility of literal description. We could use symbols to gesture at the reality we sometimes call God, but no symbol can do any more than gesture at the ground of being.

It seems quite clear that Tillich's influence is present in Hare, but there is another strain of thought that shows up there too. A number of 20th century philosophers of religion argued that religion is a particular "form of life" -- a term from Ludwig Wittgenstein -- and that religious language cannot be understood outside that form of life. So the language of the psalms, as part of the religious form of life, is a perfectly good way for a religious person to express his or her religious attitude. But to take that language and dissect it to discover whether it is borne out by the evidence is to play a quite different language game (another Wittgensteinian phrase) -- to step outside the form of life in which religious language has meaning.

There is something to this, one might think. It would explain why it is that religious believers and non-believers often seem simply to talk past one another. However, Flew points out that what Hare has in mind is actually quite unorthodox. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, it is surely true by the standards of Western Christianity, or at least by the standards of the typical believer.

Does that matter? It's hard to say. With Armstrong in the background, we can say that Hare in fact seems to be in a long line that distinguishes between picturesque talk about God and the inaccessible nature of the divine itself. The orthodoxy that Flew points to, Armstrong might insist, is just the exoteric or outer version of religion as opposed to its mystical core. (In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, this difference might be described as a difference between *kerygma* -- the explicitly proclaimed religion -- and *dogma* -- the deeper truth.

We can push in another direction, in any case. Flew seems to be saying: in order for a statement to be meaningful -- to be a

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.

© Copyright 1998, Allen Stairs. All Rights Reserved
stairs@glue.umd.edu

[Back to the Main Page](#)