ABSTRACT

The Unnecessary Aporia of Religious Language:

Exploring the Meaning and Function of Religious Locutions

Dylan Q. Ziegler

Statements about God are often highlighted as a unique philosophical problem. Religious language typically takes the form of indicative statements of fact but resists the traditional means of verification or falsification. Despite this apparent deficiency, religious statements continue to abound and individuals who find themselves saying the wrong things about God can face harsh consequences. How can one explain the simultaneous ambiguity, uniquity, and existential involvement of such religious locutions? The Greek philosophical tradition tends to emphasize clarity in language and certainty in knowledge, such that religious statements are frequently sidelined in serious discussion. Modern empiricism, established on foundationalist and objectivist epistemological assumptions, promotes a view of language as an inert container for reified mental contents. The designative theory of language, as it will be called, prohibits any semantic influence of language over the content of the proposition. The natural destination of this historical trajectory, logical positivism, goes so far as to claim that any statements that does not admit to empirical verification or falsification is *meaningless*. In response to this challenge, several theories, generally grouped as cognitive and non-cognitive, hope to offer new approaches to religious language that still abide by the same epistemological commitments.

The Wittgensteinian notion of 'language games' opens up the possibility of different realms of discourse having contextually derived criteria. Meaning becomes a function of use. From his essential insights, several further developments spring forth. Religious language may convey something of a fundamental conviction, which is immune to absolute verification though not insensitive to factual evidence. The clear demarcations between knowledge, language, and activity are broken down in the speech act theory of J.L. Austin and Michael Polanyi's tacit dimension. Finally, the possibility of the positive cognitive contributions of metaphor, symbol, and analogy are posed. A new picture of language emerges which offers a nuanced understanding of the fundamentally hermeneutical character of experience and knowledge, as well as the constitutive role of language in thought. In the final analysis, the meaning of religious language could be redeemed as a function of its use, as projecting 'possible worlds' which must be appropriated and indwelt through active and empathetic participation.

Keywords: religious language, language theory, meaning, epistemology, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Paul Ricoeur, symbol, metaphor, cognitivity, conviction

THE UNNECESSARY APORIA OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE:

EXPLORING THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

by
Dylan Q. Ziegler

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Divinity

Asbury Theological Seminary

May 2020

X_____ X_____
Dr. Kevin Kinghorn   Dr. Ruth Anne Reese
Thesis Advisor   Second Reader

        X_____
        Dr. Lawrence Wood
        Third Reader

Contents

Chapter 1: The Problem of Religious Language

> And is it complicated? Well, it is complicated a bit; but life and truth
> and things do tend to be complicated. It is not *things*; it is
> *philosophers* that are simple. You will have heard it said, I expect,
> that over-simplification is the occupational disease of philosophers,
> and in a way, one might agree with that. But for a sneaking suspicion
> that it's their occupation.
> <div align="right">- J.L. Austin, Philosophical Papers</div>

What is the meaning of religious language? Or perhaps, how do religious claims function differently than ordinary statements? The question alone spurs a series of further questions of clarification. The primary concern of the inquiry aims at the philosophical analysis of the ways in which language is used to religious ends. While the question is as old as philosophy itself, the methodology has been irreversibly altered in the past century, as philosophy itself took a linguistic turn. Whereas metaphysics and epistemology once took center stage, language has become the near obsessive focus of philosophical investigation, namely in the Analytic tradition. Of course, opinions diverge wildly within the philosophical and theological communities. Yet, a strain of empiricism has had a lasting impact that has seriously challenged the legitimacy of religious claims in any faith community.

The duration of the concern for language in religion vastly outstrips that of philosophy. Since the earliest forms of religion, words have been regarded as sacred, holy, and powerful. The phrases or descriptions used to express the divine are set apart and regarded with a certain zealous respect. Some of the earliest instances of this reverence for religious language can be observed in the ancient Hebrew disinclination to speak the name of God, despite that name being well known.[1] The name was forbidden and avoided to any extent by pious Hebrews, ostensibly due to some inherent power it possessed. St. Augustine also gives expression to the deep respect

---

[1] Ian T. Ramsey, ed., *Words about God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 1.

for language that has pervaded religious circles for centuries. He famously remarks that one must pursue theological descriptions of the Triune God "not because the phrases are adequate – they are only an alternative to silence (*non ut illud deceretur, sed ne taceretur*)."[2] It is evident that the aporia of religious language is not a new discovery, but has plagued religious thought since its inception.

There is a recognized deficiency in language to express the primary subject of religion, namely God. Theologians have long recognized their inability to exhaustively describe the reality of an immaterial, immortal being, even with their most eloquent expressions. St. Thomas Aquinas points out that "this is what is ultimate in the human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know God."[3] Apophatic mystical traditions have taken this notion so far as to suggest that we cannot say *anything* about God. The early Christian Fathers are replete with admissions of the ineffability of the divine. Clement of Alexandria points out that "even in union with Christ, we only reach in a measure to the conception of God, knowing not what He is, but what He is not."[4] The Cappadocian Father, Basil, echoes this negative theology, insisting that "faith is competent to know that God is, not what He is."[5] So, is language left impotent in the face of the religious experiences of believers?[6]

If the history of religion is any evidence, the answer is clearly negative. The recognition of the putative ineffability of God has not stopped theological works from proliferating at an

---

[2] Augustine, *De Trin*, n.d., v. 9. Quoted in Ramsey, *Words about God*, 2.
[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*, n.d., 7. Quoted in Ramsey, *Words about God*, 2.
[4] Ramsey, *Words about God*, 16.
[5] Ramsey, 17.
[6] The reader will quickly notice a plethora of references to the Christian tradition in the course of this study. The reason for this is two-fold. First, I belong to a Christian tradition myself, and find the results of this research most directly applicable to my own experience. My own perspective will inevitably shape the illustrations used for making points. Secondly, the vast majority of philosophers of religion make use of Judeo-Christian illustrations in their own writings. Thus, the discipline itself has a certain Christocentric shape by default. The general applicability of any and all conclusions should not be hindered by the predominance of Christian examples.

increasing rate, even today! Even on the far side of the most far-reaching critical philosophy, religious books, sermons, devotionals, prayers, and creeds continue to expound on the attributes of God. The history of religions is full of sacred texts, specific mantras, and words of power. Purportedly, they are saying *something* about the religious dimension. In fact, religious traditions take very seriously what is said about God. Depending on whether one finds themselves being labeled as an Arian, Pelagian, or Arminian, or more recently a liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, or evangelical, a person's job or even life could be on the line.[7] Men and women have been maimed, burned alive, cast out of communities, and even crucified for their choice of religious statements. While much of the mystical traditions of both the East and West claim that religious words have no descriptive power at all, orthodox and mainstream traditions have fought furiously for the correct terms and phrases to describe the divine. Those who find themselves on the wrong side of these conciliar debates often suffer severe consequences. The martyrs, at the very least, seem to find the proper words important enough to suffer torture and death. Surely, *they* at least believe they are saying something meaningful about God.

1.1 What is Religious Language?

Before we can begin exploring an answer, we will need to clarify the question. In order to do so, we must understand the parts of the problem. First, what is religious language? What counts as a religious statement? It may be important at the start to delineate the meaning of 'language', for it will be used in a slightly different sense than the common usage. Language, here, does not refer to a natural language of German, French, or Mandarin. Rather language is used to refer to a realm of discourse that may or may not include some technical terms and phrases and which is used in a specific 'form of life'. This is language in the Wittgensteinian

---

[7] Dan R Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Analogy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 2.

sense. Discrete academic disciplines, religious traditions, and even trades belong to particular 'forms of life' and thus give rise to a specific language. The words used may or may not change between languages, but the way in which they are used changes. The later Wittgenstein develops this into a notion of contextual criteria of truth which will be addressed in a later chapter. For now, it is important to note that languages refer to realms of discourse, not native tongues.

So, for our purposes, religious language does not necessarily refer to technical terms such as 'Bodhisattva,' 'Avatar,' or 'Incarnation,' but to the entire use of language in the context and for the purposes of religious beliefs. Of course, as a language develops and second-order reflection clarifies the practical beliefs of a community, more technical and precise words will be formed. Peter Donovan helps clarify that "language becomes *religious* language in being used religiously; being used, that is to say, in the pursuit of various goals, and the expression of various beliefs, which we find in religion."[8] 'Religious', rather than being understood attributively, is better understood *adverbially*. It refers to ordinary language being used in a religious manner.

The phrase 'religious language' still needs to be elucidated further. Even within a form of life, ordinary language is used to depict religious ceremonies, ideals, and practices without incurring any philosophical problems. When a mother says, "You will go to church as long as you live under my roof," she is certainly making a statement about a feature of religious life for her family. However, there is little trouble in interpreting and understanding what she means by such a statement. The precise range of religious language which is of particular interest in this study will be those locutions, statements, or claims made that purport to assert metaphysical states of affairs, predications of God, or the relations of divine entities.

---

[8] Peter Donovan, *Religious Language* (London: Sheldon Press, 1985), 1.

M. J. Charlesworth, in the introduction to his compilation of articles called *The Problem of Religious Language*, helpfully distinguishes between three levels of religious language. Other philosophers, such as the French hermeneutical philosopher Paul Ricoeur, make use of similar multi-ordered structures of religious speech. It will be helpful to differentiate these levels from the start. The first level of religious language is that which is used in the actual *practice* of the believer's life of faith.[9] The words used in worshipping God, praying to God, expressing one's beliefs, performing rituals and evangelizing to others all belongs to the level of immediate application. The whole range of expressions, phrases, symbols, and justifications comprise a first-order linguistic activity. Ricoeur, through an analysis of human fallibility, guilt, and evil, claims that the primary language of the life of faith is inherently and irreducibly symbolic.[10] One operates from this first level when initially articulating some religious experience of transcendence, guilt, or redemption.

The second level rises above the immediate religious consciousness of the individual and attempts to make sense of and theorize about that experience. This level of abstraction from the phenomenological impressions to the systematic implications is properly called *theology*. When a believer attempts to articulate precisely how Christ may be present in the bread and wine as experience in the Eucharist, they are engaging in second-order reflective language. When a Buddhist explicates the experience of Enlightenment and the realization of no-self, they are likewise engaged in reflectively systematizing their religious experience. This "theologizing" is not restricted to theistic faiths, despite the misnomer. The focus of much of the present study will be on the first and second order language, insofar as both involve a blend of seemingly literal and figurative statements. Statements which predicate attributes to God will constitute a bulk of the

---

[9] M. J Charlesworth, *The Problem of Religious Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 3.
[10] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), 151.

focus group, but religious language should not be thought of as merely statements about God as some thinkers do as even athiestic statements can properly be considered 'religious' in a particular sense.[11]

The final level is that of the philosophical implications of a given articulation of one's experience. In this way, one can see how the orders of religious language necessarily build on one another. Second-order reflection must follow primary expression. This final third level logically follows as a sort of meta-theology which teases out the necessary implications of one's theological reflection. The theological explication of religious experiences necessarily presupposes certain things about the world and God (Aquinas refers to these as the 'preambles of faith'). For example, Charlesworth points out that Christian belief typically presupposes that the concepts of God and a supernatural realm are both intelligible and not self-contradictory. Atheistic naturalism would, of course, presuppose the inverse. Philosophical theology is the discipline dedicated to critically examining these third-order implications.

Each of these levels remain logically distinct while necessarily overlapping and informing one another. It is impossible to have a religious experience without in some way reflecting on it and consequently presupposing certain things about the world. They always interpenetrate one another and influence the formation of one another.[12] On the other hand, however, there is a certain sense in which each level has a distinct language and the same thing can be said at each level with a different sense. One can easily imagine how the statement, "Humanity is fallen," can have a different sense whether it is said in the course of practicing,

---

[11] See William Hordern, *Speaking of God*. One may ask why not use the word meta physical? Of course, all religious statements are *de facto* metaphysical statements as well. However, metaphysical carries connotations of particular branch of philosophy which will unhelpfully hinder the present discussion. For that reason, I will restrict the descriptor to 'religious language'.
[12] Charlesworth, *The Problem of Religious Language*, 4.

theologizing, or philosophically analyzing one's religious belief. This study will focus primarily on the first two levels as interdependent linguistic acts. They will not always be so clearly delineated, especially in discussions of metaphor, symbol, myth, and analogy which alternatively represent both levels.

1.2 The Meaning of Meaning

Second, it may be beneficial to briefly speak to the difficulty of defining 'meaning'. Such a circular and seemingly self-defeating philosophical question threatens to be frustratingly unanswerable. How is one to define the meaning of 'meaning'? What tools or concepts could one even use? Clearly narrowing down what one intends by the word will go far in helping to answer the parent question of the meaning of religious language. Unfortunately, there are dozens of theories without a clear means of arbitration. One can refer to a family heirloom or a recent tattoo as 'meaningful'. Here, meaning suggests something of significance, importance, or value. One may also refer to an abusive father seeking forgiveness from a child to be deeply 'meaningful'. In this case, meaning gets at the fact that the gesture is indicative of a dramatic change of character. Perhaps it is the signifying of the inner reality that marks meaning? Similarly, the meaning of symbols is often their ability to depict an invisible, intangible reality. However, this cannot be the only meaning of meaning since other indicative utterances point to concrete empirical realities.

Meaning likely has various dimensions which extend with its usages (an understanding of meaning which will anticipate the later Wittgenstein). In this sense, it would be helpful to isolate the specific 'meaning of meaning' within the context of language. The meaning of language is typically associated with its ability to convey information successfully. Since Gottlob Frege, language has been thought of in terms of *sense* and *reference* (*Sinn* and *Bedeutung*). Sense

generally refers to the cognitive intelligibility of a given word or sentence. A sentence must 'makes sense' if it is to be understandable or graspable.[13] A sentence does not make sense if it does not convey any cognitive information. Sense is a semantic concept, distinct from but dependent on grammar. Noam Chomsky's well-known example, "Colorless greed ideas sleep furiously," is an instance of a grammatically correct sentence that is nonsense.[14] All the words belong to the proper parts of speech and are put together in the proper syntactic form, but still do not exhibit any semantic sense.

Neither does having a sense guarantee the reference of the same statement, although sense forms a necessary baseline requisite for reference. The reference of an utterance is the ostensive function by which it points to or depicts. A sentence refers successfully if it connects up with reality. According to the traditional designative theory of language, the truth-value lies primarily (if not exclusively) in the *empirical* reference of a sentence. In fact, this view seems to collapse the sense of a claim to its ability to refer. According to this view, "God is full of grace" has a sense in that it follows the proper syntax and gives rise to a corresponding thought in the mind of the reader. Yet, some of the later positivists would assert that this statement is essentially *nonsense* because it fails to refer to something in the world.

The overwhelming empiricist bent of recent philosophy and science has shaped the colloquial understanding of language towards this restricted conception of meaning. First, this view posits the locus of meaning to be the *word*. Each word has a meaning, and sentences only have meaning insofar as they represent composites of the constituents. The atomistic sense perception of the modern empiricists is thus mirrored in a verbal atomism. Second, the picture theory of meaning tends towards an understanding that a claim must offer putative means for

---

[13] Gottlob Frege, "Sense and Reference," *The Philosophical Review* 57, no. 3 (May 1948): 211.
[14] Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (Martino, CT: Mansfield Centre, 2015), 15.

verification or falsification to qualify for meaningfulness. So, a statement may be meaningful in what it claims, but turn out to be false after a more thorough investigation. For example, "the earth has a second moon," is a false statement, but one could conceivably arrange for a proper investigation into the matter and offer evidence which would support either its verification or falsification. However, the statement, "God is full of grace" does not admit the same possibility. According to the designative theory, this disqualifies it from meaning entirely such that it is considered "nonsense" and "meaningless." This view singles out religious language as being a spurious form of properly functioning language.

The latter chapters will show how such a restrictive understanding of meaning is insufficient for explaining the features of language use observed today. Later theorists will broaden the range of possible referents from being only what can be empirically verified. Beginning from a phenomenological epistemology, later approaches provide a more nuanced understanding than the binary true/false function of reference in the common understanding. Contrary to the above view, meaning in all language, not just religious, lies at the level of the *sentence*, or even the *entire discourse*. Charles Taylor writes that "a word only has a meaning (reference) in the context of a sentence."[15] Further, many statements in both science and religion are more or less true, not simply true or false. There is a continuum of correspondence to reality and fiction. All historical reports involve some fictive elements and all children's stories contain some correspondence to the world as it is. It is not a matter of 'yes' or 'no', but of 'how much' and 'in what way.' In this way, religious language is not a unique realm of discourse which exhibits peculiar problems but operates similarly to all language.

---

[15] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 114.

1.3 Ordinary Language, Extraordinary Subject

What is the meaning of religious language? We can now return to the central question to explore the problems implied in it. As observed above, even today religious language makes up a regular facet of life for many. What exactly is the problem with it? *Prima facie*, religious believers express their beliefs about very peculiar states of affairs involving entities which are immaterial, beyond space and time or any empirical observation, and purportedly exhibit infinite qualities of which there are no equivalent parallels in common experience. Not only does this being exist beyond the formal and logical categories of the mind, it is supposed to be the cause and support for the world as it exists. This divine being gave rise to the world *ex nihilo*. In reciting the creeds, this seems to be what the believer is doing. In most cases, this is what even the *believer* thinks they are doing when they recite the words, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth…"[16]

Of course, regardless of whether one is describing the desk chair they are sitting in or a nonspatiotemporal, immortal, immaterial being, they have only the same finite language to do it with. As the believer professes quite surprising claims about certain supernatural states of affairs, they are using mundane words such as 'creator', 'father', and 'might'. If one were to describe their mighty father as the maker of the bunk beds, there would be little question about the meaning of the claim. In fact, one could examine the construction of the bed, the biological records of the carpenter responsible, and even measure his biceps (if we want to quantify 'might'). In other words, one easily grasps both the sense and reference of the same ordinary words when used to depict a typical state of affairs. The problem enters when they are applied to this divine being with the added caveat that those same words are to be understood in a radically

---

[16] Charlesworth, *The Problem of Religious Language*, 5.

different way. The *meaning* has altered almost beyond recognition. It is this alteration that gives rise to the problem of religious language. The same words used in a variety of ordinary contexts, with clear and precise meaning, are reapplied to metaphysical entities with an unpredictable semantic change.

Perhaps this strangeness and unregulated semantic shock is simply a result of unfamiliarity of the outsider? Religious believers themselves seem to have no issue using, recognizing, and correcting the uses of words to describe the divine. However, if the issue were merely one of 'learning the language' in religious circles, the problems and questions of meaning would dissipate with time as faint ideas and rough guesses converge on the truth of the matter. Of course, this is not what one finds in the study of religion. In fact, the newcomers seem to more readily accept the new application of familiar language than the veteran theologian who recognizes the limitations of words for capturing the full reality of their specimen. It is really only as one spends significant time practicing and reflecting on a set of religious statements that questions such as, "Is that *literally* true?", "What exactly does that *mean*?", "In what *sense*…?", begin to emerge.

It is in the immediate reception of religious locutions that they make perfect sense and only after extended scrutiny that they reveal cracks and stretch marks. The very words are being stretched beyond their original use, the resulting semantic creation being only partially recognizable. Donovan highlights the Lord's Prayer as a clear example of an oft-quoted prayer which falters under inspection. "'Our Father' (though not our parent), 'Who art in heaven' (though not amongst the stars)…, 'give us this day our daily bread' (which we will have to buy)…, 'deliver us from evil (does that mean accidents and illness too?)."[17] The words

---

[17] Donovan, *Religious Language*, 7.

themselves are perfectly clear as they are read. Yet, we are left wondering what exactly they

mean to imply? Certainly not the original, unqualified definition. Central to the problem of

religious language, then, is the *sui generis* sense in which familiar words are used. Arthur Danto

gets at this logical oddity in an examination of another religious statement:

> Suppose I am told of a new theological discovery, namely that
> Brahma wears a hat. And then I am told that it is a divine hat and
> worn infinitely, since Brahma has neither head nor shape. In what
> sense then is a hat being worn? Why use these words? I am told that
> God exists but in a 'different sense' of exists. Then if he doesn't
> exist (in the plain sense) why use that word? Or that God loves us –
> but in a wholly special sense of love. Or God is a circle whose centre
> is everywhere and circumference nowhere. But this is then to have
> neither a centre nor a circumference, and hence not to be a circle.
> One half of the description cancels out the other half. And what is
> left over but just noise?[18]

Thus, the everyday language used to describe God becomes stretched to the point of

breaking. Many have claimed that religious statements are consequently meaningless or

nonsense since they strain the semantic bounds of ordinary language so far that they lose any

sense of intelligibility. A believer may claim that God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. In doing

so, they are trading on the commonly understood meaning of "create". Yet, as the skeptic probes,

it is revealed that God does not create in the same sense as any known example of create, i.e. out

of some pre-existing material. In ordinary language, it is difficult to understand how one could

be said to have created unless it is possible to inquire "Out of what was it made?" The plain

sense of creation implies pre-existing material out of which it was created. So, when applied to

God's supposed action, the entire mode of speaking becomes qualified to the point of

meaninglessness. God is good, powerful, just, present, wise, a person, etc.… just not at all in the

way in which these words are typically understood. When used of God, they are qualified

---

[18] Arthur C. Danto, *Faith, Language, and Religious Experience. A Dialogue*, ed. Sidney Hook (Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 147. Qtd. in Donovan, 7.

beyond the point of recognition. What is being given in one hand by the original statement is immediately retracted by the other in the qualification.

Perhaps all religious language is figurative or symbolic in a similar manner to poetry. Paul Tillich is well known for attempting to cast all theology as purely symbolic. Religious language is largely metaphorical, so perhaps it is using those evocative expressions to depict an empirical reality? It is not hard to find remarkably beautiful and expressive texts in the canons of world religions. Some of the most powerful and moving words have been written in Scriptures. When one claims that God speaks, listens, or acts, it is not implied that God has a body as do all others who carry out those same actions. The claim is just *figurative*. When Jesus descends to Hell, ascends to heaven, or returns to judge the living and the dead, he does so metaphorically. Yet, many believers will likely become nervous at this suggestion. Many will admit that talk of God as a shepherd, rock, or even having hands or a face are meant to be understood metaphorically. What about the image of God as Father? God as existing? God as a person? For most participants in religious language, there is a point at which these terms must be grounded in or translatable to a literal equivalent. Even Tillich, originally asserting that all theological assertions were symbolic, came to the point where he felt he had to claim that "God is being" is a literal statement which grounds the rest of the symbolism.[19]

They are surely right that not all religious statements can be reduced to a figurative sense. Much of what is written in religious texts is not just metaphysical speculation, but putative historical reportage. Even in four successive verses in the book of Acts, four distinct uses of religious language are recorded without any clear indication of the literal or figurative sense in which it is meant to be understood.

---

[19] William L Rowe, *Religious Symbols and God; a Philosophical Study of Tillich's Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 180.

> Acts 2:1 – "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place". (Historical report)
> Acts 2:2 – "And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." (Unusual event)
> Acts 2:3 – "And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them." (Peculiar experiences)
> Acts 2:4 – "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterances." (Interpretation using unique, religious terms.)[20]

There is no clear distinction between what claims are intended to be understood univocally and which are poetic flights of interpretation meant only to enhance the retelling of historical events. The problem is heightened by the fact that these meanings are hardly ever agreed upon even *within* a religious community. Far from being an issue of translation between insiders and outsiders, the meaning of religious statements is even more sharply contested from those in the same tradition. Christian fundamentalists and liberals, Orthodox and Conservative Jews, and Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists all emerge as groups come to understand these claims in widely diverging ways.

How should one understand the meaning of religious utterances with any sort of reliability? What is needed, it seems, is a philosophy of religious language which enables one to encapsulate the wide variety of uses as well as accounting adequately for the various facets of religious life. The questions that we have encountered thus far emerge from certain presuppositions about the nature and function of language generally, presuppositions which are deeply rooted in the Western philosophical tradition. It seems that the way forward is to ferret out these fundamental influences so a more adequate account can be found.

Traditionally, accounts of this philosophical view of language can be classified according to certain strict dichotomies: cognitive/non-cognitive, descriptive/non-descriptive,

---

[20] Donovan, *Religious Language*, 9.

designative/constitutive. Many writers use these classifications interchangeably, but it is not clear that they are synonymous. Cognitivity refers to the informativeness of a statement (sense), but descriptiveness gets at the ability of a statement to describe a state of affairs (reference). A statement is cognitive if it is able to provide legitimate knowledge to the hearer. On the other hand, non-cognitive statements are often associated with expressions of feeling, subjective value, and opinion. A statement is descriptive if it points to a factually relevant event or attribute, the converse being that a non-descriptive statement will do something other than depicting or referring to a factually sensitive idea. Thus, a statement such as, "Unicorns are white", can be *cognitively* informative while failing to describe any actual entity. The distinction between the two is complicated by the fact that various theories of meaning differ on whether sense, reference, or both are necessary components. The final dichotomy of designative/constitutive is used by Charles Taylor in *The Language Animal*.[21] These terms perhaps most effectively articulate the distinction this study will draw. This is not a classification of religious language specifically, but of language as a whole. Moving back another level to the primary philosophy of language is the best way to root out the presuppositions which inevitably lead to such intractable issues with not just religious, but ethical, metaphysical, and aesthetic languages as well. Regardless of the apparent, albeit nuanced, differences, many of the authors discussed will use them interchangeably. Charlesworth implies that the terms cognitive/non-cognitive are more given to pejorative connotations than the descriptive/non-descriptive distinction and opts for using the latter.[22] For the purposes of this study, I will loosely follow Taylor's use of designative and constitutive as the meta-classification of theories, and use cognitivity and descriptiveness according to the distinct definitions outlined above.

---

[21] Taylor, *The Language Animal*.
[22] Charlesworth, *The Problem of Religious Language*, 7.

1.4 The Problem and the Solution

To review, religious language is problematic because it involves the reappropriation of mundane, everyday language to supramundane states of affairs, namely god and the afterlife. These uses occur at all three levels of religious language use (practicing, theologizing, and apologizing) but primarily in the course of predicating features or actions of divine entities or depicting metaphysical states of affairs. The meaning of typical statements is analyzable in terms of sense and reference as discussed above. The difficulty with those of the religious variety can be discussed along similar lines, with the added urgency of the fact that these states of affairs about which religious language claims to make assertions is purportedly of ultimate existential significance.

First, religious language, at least *prima facie*, appears to be stating facts in that they appear to have a *reference*. Metaphysical statements follow the same indicative syntax as those of the empirical variety. Believers argue, reason, justify, and apologize for the claims they make about God as if they are subject to factual verification. The vast majority of people who use religious language are under the impression that it is describing real states of affairs. At least on the face, religious statements appear to be sensitive to factual evidence. As the positivists were all too eager to point out, though, these same religious claims do not seem *verifiable*. Rudolf Carnap objects to the descriptive view since the believer fails to "give any content to his propositions because he cannot specify what evidence would make them true or false."[23] Non-descriptivists will argue that religious claims are just expressions of attitudes or values veiled in mythical language. While this solves the problem of the unverifiability of religious language, it does not account for the actual use of it. People *do* argue, reason, and justify their statements

---

[23] Charlesworth, 7.

about God. Linguistic analysis, following the later Wittgenstein, has given much greater attention and weight to the actual use of language in practice over the supposed theories of "ideal" languages. An adequate account of religious language will need to accommodate both the fact that such statements appear to make factual claims while resisting final verification or falsification.

Second, statements about gods, devils, and the afterlife tend to be shot through with figurative language. In this regard, it does not have a clear *sense*. The religious way of life involves countless uses of ordinary language in extraordinary contexts. Often, the reality which the believer is attempting to describe is beyond ordinary experience and resists clear depiction with linguistic faculties meant to depict the empirical world. The result is the use of qualifiers and markers which cue the hearer into the logical oddity of the statement. Much of the tradition of Western philosophy has viewed metaphor and analogy as mere "ornamentation" for literal, univocal language. These poetic forms of language are evocative, but to be avoided in any serious discussion which prizes clarity and precision. It should be possible to translate anything stated figuratively into a straight, literal equivalent without any semantic remainder. Yet, we find that even the strictest of religious creedal dogmas involve models and metaphors which resist any one-to-one translation into univocal prose. Is all religious language irreducibly metaphorical? If so, how can it be understood?

Perhaps this is best understood through an illustration. If someone describes their car as a "trusty steed", we are familiar enough with this metaphor to understand the implication of dependability. However, if they describe their 2004 Chevy Cavalier as a "birch tree", we are not quite sure what they mean. There may be some overlap of attributes for the car, surely, but they do not disclose themselves as readily. Is the car sturdy? Does the paint flake? Does it sway in the

wind? One may know full well about both the car and birch trees, but still be unable to figure out what exactly is meant by the oblique use of words. In cases such as this, one may be required to ask for a further, more literal-descriptive, translation of the figurative language. The problem with religious language, when similar questions arise, is that literal descriptions are elusive if extant at all. How is one to even determine if "treeness" is an apt metaphor without knowing the literal equivalent for which it is supposed to stand? The need for a univocal grounding for symbolic systems of thought is something Paul Tillich struggled with in his own take on theological language. If there is no literal foundation, upon which one can refer back to when exploring the similarities and differences between the signifier and signified, how can one adjudicate between appropriate and inappropriate metaphors? So, as with the *reference*, religious language seems caught between the fact of its pervasively metaphorical nature and the real need to arbitrate between more and less adequate locutions.

The problems highlighted so far are troubling in themselves. The whole of religious discourse seems to provide a *sui generis* language which defies easy classification and interpretation. Many have despaired of it having any significant meaning at all. One may simply see this and wonder why it needs to matter at all. "So, what if religious believers are making confused pseudo-statements. What does that have to do with me?", says the agnostic skeptic. The answer is *everything*. The unique subject matter of religious language introduces a new element to the normal formula of sense and reference, *existential significance.* More than simply claiming to describe the weather yesterday or give steps for making a recipe, religious language is claiming to communicate something of ultimate import. "In its oblique and evocative character, much religious language resembles poetry. But unlike most poetry, religious utterances commonly claim to convey information of unique significance, the understanding of which may

be of supreme importance for its hearers."[24] The statements made about God are relevant to everyone, for they purport to say something of ultimate significance for not only each person's eternal fate, but about how one is to live their life here and now. The existence or non-existence, malevolence or benevolence, and expectation of an afterlife all matter to everyone. From this radical relevance, the investigation into the aporia of religious language receives its urgency.

The rest of this study will focus on an exploration of various approaches to religious language and the implications for the life of faith. They will each be evaluated on the ability to account for the facets and demands of religious language listed above. A truly adequate theory will need to provide an answer for the ambiguous and figurative sense, unverifiable reference, and ultimate significance of statements about the divine. What will be needed is a broader, more holistic account of language than the narrow empiricism which pervades the popular conception of knowledge and language today.

1.5 Plotting the Course

In order to begin disentangling the philosophical review of religious language from the mire of paradoxes and insoluble issues, it will be imperative to understand how we arrived at such conclusions. The questions raised above come from a certain conception of the nature and function of language which Charles Taylor refers to as the designative theory. Chapter 2 will survey Western thought on language and trace certain features of this theory through the centuries. The trajectory set by the Greek philosophical foundations in Plato and Aristotle to avoid poetry and figurative expressions gradually form a dichotomy between factual claims, expressed as literal-univocal, and value judgments, typically expressed in figurative or evocative language. Chapter 3 explores this epistemological dichotomy that underpins the perspective on

---

[24] Donovan, *Religious Language*, 14.

language through the Enlightenment and leads to the radical conclusions of Logical Positivism in the early twentieth century. The conclusions of the early Wittgenstein, Ayer, and Flew will be of particular interest as the ultimate logical conclusion of the trajectory set by Plato. The University Debate will be explored in brief as a paradigmatic discussion of the mid-century conversations being had concerning the meaning and justification of religious claims. Nearly all theories were categorized as either cognitive or non-cognitive, depending on where they found the ultimate significance of religious language.

Chapter 4 deals with the later developments of Wittgenstein, which set the course for the widely varying responses of most twentieth century thinkers. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejects most of his early positivist conclusions in favor of a much wider theory of "language games". In doing so, he initiates a paradigm shift in language theory by introducing the idea of contextual criteria for meaningfulness emerging from a 'form of life.' The implications of his insights are numerous. Three major developments will be explored through the works of subsequent writers: (1) the idea of religious language as expressing fundamental evaluative frameworks, called convictions, (2) the broadening of the concepts of language and knowledge to include activity, (3) and finally the possible cognitive significance of figurative language. The research will conclude with a synthesis of these insights in what emerges as a more hermeneutical approach to religious language. The best expression of this new approach is found in the work of Paul Ricoeur, who introduces the concept of 'projecting worlds' as the primary function of discourse. This notion encapsulates the three insights of Wittgenstein's paradigm shift along with a more holistic epistemology. Together, they present a more adequate account of religious language than the traditional designative theory.

Chapter 2: The Designative Theory

> One may observe, in all languages, certain words, that if they be examined, will be found, in their first original and their appropriated use, not to stand for any clear and distinct ideas. These, for the most part, the several sects of philosophy and religion have introduced… For having either had no determinate collection of ideas annexed to them, when they were first invented; or at least such as, if well examined, will be found inconsistent; it is no wonder if afterwards, in the vulgar use of the same party, they remain empty sounds, with little or no signification…
>
> - John Locke, *Language and Its Proper Use*

In 1922, a group of scientists, philosophers, and mathematicians began meeting in Vienna, Austria to discuss the direction of a new philosophical movement called "Logical Positivism". This new brand of philosophy sought to redefine the entire project of philosophy as one of language analysis and elucidation. In contrast to the centuries of metaphysical and ethical speculation, this new movement hoped to rid the philosophical world of what it deemed "nonsense". All meaningful language was either empirically verifiable or tautologous. This fundamental claim was wielded to devastating effect on religious, ethical, and aesthetic domains of speech. Anything that did not meet their narrow definition of meaning was *anathema*. Of course, this was not a happy coincidence for those gathered. The so called "Vienna Circle" was driven by an underlying suspicion of metaphysics which motivated their project. The hegemonic influence of science on the modern world had led to a deification of the standards of empirical investigation. The criteria for validity in the laboratory could be applied to the realm of everyday discourse. The result was a damning judgment of all metaphysical claims not just as false, but as not even meeting the qualifications for being considered for factuality, as *meaningless* or *nonsense*. One review of the movement said:

> It was a revolutionary force in philosophy, for it stigmatized metaphysical, theological, and ethical pronouncements as devoid of cognitive meaning and advocated a radical reconstruction of philosophical thinking which would give pride of place to the methods of physical science and mathematical logic… Today logical positivism no longer exists as a distinct movement, yet its effects, direct and indirect, recognized and unrecognized, continue to be felt.[25]

Long after the time when anyone would voluntarily associate themselves with the title of logical positivist, the ideas promoted by the movement continue to exert a discernable influence on both the academic and colloquial views of language.

Logical positivism represents the purest distillation of what will be called the *designative theory of language*. The designative theory is a long-standing tradition in Western philosophy of viewing language as exclusively an instrument of information encoding for the purposes of communication. Words are used for the purposes of inertly depicting, representing, or describing one's thoughts. Thoughts, in turn, are mental pictures of reality. Words correspond to objects, and propositions to states of affairs. As an extension of the mental functioning of a person, language has an essentially cognitive function. As such, clarity and precision are paramount virtues. One cannot easily communicate information if the words are not used univocally in a straightforward manner. The true measure of success for a statement is whether or not it fulfills its ostensive function universally to refer accurately to the empirical state of affairs depicted in its sense. Any utterance must be verifiable in order to even qualify to be measured against this rule.

This basic theory of language is held either implicitly or explicitly by a vast majority of both professional philosophers and lay people today. Despite the number of inconsistencies and

---

[25] Peter Achinstein and Stephen F. Barker, eds., *The Legacy of Logical Positivism: Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1969), v. As quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 42.

insoluble issues this approach leads to, one form of this view or another underlies all of the questions raised in the first chapter. This is how one is typically taught that infants acquire language in development and how adults claim to learn a second language. Unfortunately, the designative theory is unable to account for the complex realities one finds in the wide, presumably cognitive, use of religious language found in the world. Why, then, does this theory continue to exert such a profound influence on the theological and philosophical disciplines? What alternatives are available for such a seemingly 'commonsense' view of language? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to outline the history of the designative theory and the underlying assumptions which must be rejected in the course of adopting a more holistic, hermeneutical understanding of language. Only then can one make sense of religious language as it is observed and practiced today.

2.1 The Greek Paradigm of Language

Language does not become a formal subject of inquiry until the past century with the linguistic turn in philosophy and the inception of the analytic tradition. However, theories of language are implicit throughout the course of philosophy, as far back as the Greeks. After the abortive attempts of the pre-Socratics to determine the nature of reality, the Sophists began using rhetoric as a means of acquiring political power. As a primary objective, truth became subverted to power as the "proto-Machiavellians" viewed the latter as the operative element in the former.[26] The one who could sway the masses with eloquence of speech and manipulation of the passions could *determine* truth. The Sophists trained politicians and demagogues to use their linguistic prowess to earn clout at the expense of any true inquiry into the true, the good, or the beautiful. Socrates criticized these early abuses of language as appealing to the emotive element

---

[26] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 8.

rather than the mind. Language was to be used for the pursuit of truth, not emotional manipulation.

The foundational Greek paradigm of language is that of *clarity* over ambiguity. Univocal, prosaic speech was valued over poetic, expressive discourse which was viewed as misleading. Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' illustrates how reality is already a shadow of the 'really Real.' Language, as a picture of that picture, is an even farther removed derivative of Truth. Thus, clarity and precision are important for ensuring the clearest depiction of reality as possible. Recognizing the ongoing project of clarifying and elucidating philosophical truth, Plato also prioritizes spoken language over written words. Speech is temporary and can be adapted in the constant pursuit of knowledge. Written words are frozen and given to misinterpretation, an insight which anticipates the element of distanciation on which Ricoeur plays much later. Plato writes, "No man of intelligence will venture to express his philosophical views in language, especially not in language that is unchangeable, which is true of that which is set down in written characters."[27] Already, Plato seems to point to the difficulty of expressing certain ideas in words. Within his statement is an implicit caution against any distortion in the process of verbalizing. Words should communicate the words as transparently as possible, in order to avoid any unanticipated importation of meaning or personal judgment.

Plato also opposes any poetic or evocative language as subverting the right ordering of the soul. His famous image of the charioteer, who represents the intellect, having to reign in the recalcitrant horse, which represents the passions, makes his point in an ironically poetic manner. For Plato, the intellect is responsible for keeping the emotions in check. Artistic expressions which appeal to the passions threaten to upset this virtuous ordering of the tripartite soul. In his

---

[27] Plato, "The Seventh Letter," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, Great Books of the Western World (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 810.

famous 'attack on the arts' in The Republic, Plato places strict limits on the role of the poets in society.[28] Not only is figurative language potentially destructive and misleading to the individual, it can lead to the disintegration of society as a whole.

> We have, then, a fair case against the poet and we may set him down as the counterpart of the painter, whom he resembles in two ways: his creations are poor things by the standard of truth and reality, and his appeal is not to the highest part of the soul, but to one which is equally inferior. So we shall be justified in not admitting him into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason… the poet sets up a vicious form of government in the individual soul: he gratifies that senseless part which cannot distinguish great and small, but regards the same things as now one, now the other; and he is an image-maker whose images are phantoms far removed from reality.[29]

Plato, though a master wordsmith in his own right, would have artistic expressions of language banned in his ideal society. By misrepresenting reality as a copy of a copy and appealing to the basest part of the human soul, the poet is no better than the Sophist for Plato.

Aristotle adopts the dichotomy between literal and figurative language while offering a slightly more amenable view towards the latter. Prosaic discourse is still the primary bearer of meaning, but poetics are essential in the pursuit of *practical* philosophy. Aristotle even goes so far as to say that metaphorical language is "necessary for life", a far cry from the position of his master.[30] The important contribution to the designative theory is the connection of literal language to cognitively significant investigation and the consequent relegation of figurative language to ethical concerns. This connection significantly anticipates crucial dichotomies of later modern epistemology. So, while poetics have a proper place in Aristotle's philosophy, it is limited to a second-rate communicator of practical concerns.

---

[28] Jerry H Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 71.
[29] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. F. M. Cornford, vol. Book X (England: Oxford University Press, 1966), 336–37.
[30] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 10.

Dan Stiver identifies three primary features of the Greek paradigm of language implicit in these accounts. First, *meaning lies at the level of words*. This points to a primitive verbal atomism, in which the locus of meaning lies at the lexical level of speech. Later thinkers will challenge this assumption and push meaning back to the semantic/syntactical level. Second, *meaning is derived from the literal/univocal use of words*. "The meaning of figurative language can be grasped only if it can be transposed or reduced to literal language."[31] This view gives rise to the 'substitutionary theory of symbolic language', which continues to find expression in both medieval and modern philosophies of metaphor. The final feature is *the instrumentality of language for thought*. Language is subordinate to knowledge, serving only to organize and give expression to understanding. Thoughts occur first, only later being given verbal expression as words are assigned to the thoughts. Thinking is a distinct and prior process to speaking. The experience of finding the right word to express a thought demonstrates this logical priority. Consequently, epistemology is always closely tied to theories of the nature and function of language, usually relegating it to a secondary concern. Language is valuable only insofar as it clearly and transparently communicates the thoughts. These thoughts are only valuable insofar as they are accurate and true. Thus, clarity in language and certainty in knowledge become the dominant virtues in light of the Greek foundations.

2.2 The Transposition into Modern Epistemology

The modern view of language adopts and develops the foundational Greek paradigm. Clarity is the ideal of language, certainty the ideal of knowledge. Designative theories of language tend to get subsumed in larger epistemological frameworks as it is simply taken for granted that words ideally serve as a transparent container for the far more foundational ideas, or

---

[31] Stiver, 11.

knowledge. So, exploring the development of the modernist epistemology is crucial for teasing

out the implications for the designative theory of language. Certainty is embodied in the two

main features of modern epistemology, *foundationalism* and *objectivism*, both of which find their

origins in the French Rationalist, Rene Descartes, and fuller expression in subsequent Western

thinkers.

Foundationalism is the theory of knowledge which claims that reliable knowledge (the

assumed *achievable* ideal) must be built up from firm foundations. Just as a multi-storied

building is built up from a meticulously positioned cornerstone, knowledge is built up brick by

brick from certain indubitable 'basic beliefs.' Basic beliefs typically refer to ideas which are not

affirmed on the basis of some other, prior belief. This noetic structure obviously implies the

paramount importance of the starting point from which one builds knowledge. So, the search for

basic epistemic units from which more complex beliefs could be constructed began. Descartes

set the standard for the epistemic bedrock in his *Discourse on Method* as "clear and distinct"

foundational beliefs.[32] There must be at least one basic belief which is beyond all doubt from

which all necessary truth must proceed. Following the Galilean model of science, the best

approach is to break down the idea into its constituent parts and examine how they combine.

These atomistic bits of knowledge must be the foundational blocks from which one can construct

the rest of their knowledge.

Descartes "stressed that our knowledge of the world was built from particulate "ideas", or

inner representations of outer reality. We combine them to produce our view of the world."[33]

According to this theory, errors arise in combining the noetic elements incorrectly, not in the

---

[32] Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, trans., "Discourse on Method," in *Descartes, Spinoza*, Great Books of the Western World (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 52.
[33] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 107.

inaccuracy of the basic beliefs themselves which are incorrigible. As the foremost rationalist of his time, he sought for this in the awareness of one's own thinking self, or ego. The only belief that cannot be doubted without contradiction is that one thinks, since to doubt such a belief would require thought. This fundamental insight is Descartes most famous contribution to modern epistemology; *cogito ergo sum*.

Closely associated with foundationalism is objectivism, which insists on the necessity of unmediated access to the epistemic building blocks. It is imperative that knowledge remain neutral, impartial, insulated from the historical contingencies and personal judgments of the inquirer. In order to pursue knowledge, one must abstract themselves from their history, their traditions, and their presuppositions in order to judge accurately and objectively. As such, the thinking self must remain a disengaged observer of reality. Richard Bernstein notes the close relation of the two principles:

> By 'objectivism' I mean the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness. An objectivist claims that there is (or must be) such a matrix and that the primary task of the philosopher is to discover what it is and to support his or her claims to have discovered such a matrix with the strongest possible reasons. Objectivism is closely related to foundationalism and the search for an Archimedean point. The objectivist maintains that unless we can ground philosophy, knowledge, or language in a rigorous manner we cannot avoid radical skepticism.[34]

Modern epistemology demands absolute certainty as a prerequisite for knowledge. This is achieved through finding a fixed epistemic component which can be combined through reasoning into a fuller noetic structure. "Cartesian anxiety" emerges from the assumption that

---

[34] Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 8.

without such a rock-solid foundation, epistemology is doomed to failure and radical relativism ensues.[35]

Whereas Descartes sought his foundation in the thinking self, the ego, later thinkers look to the immediate perception of the world as the fundamental components of knowledge. In retrospect, it is easy to see the underlying similarities of the classic rival traditions of rationalism and empiricism. Both sought to find what could be considered properly basic beliefs upon which to construct a theory of knowledge. While the rationalists follow Descartes in basing it on analytic propositions, later empiricists such as Locke take incorrigible sense perception as the basic atomistic bits of information. This turn towards empirical sense-data as the foundation of knowledge eventually becomes the premise by which some of the most challenging criticisms of religious language are leveled.

Locke adopts many of the same features of Descartes theory while turning from the rationalistic conception of properly basic beliefs to one founded on empirical sense-data. He places similar demands on thought, including the need for individual self-reflection to ensure that each person arrives at knowledge of their own accord and checks for validity themselves. This is accomplished by breaking down one's thought process into its basic units, prior to any interpretive action of the mind. Despite having parody in methodology, he builds up knowledge from particulate sense perceptions. Ideas "are produced in us… by the operation of insensible particles on our senses."[36] These atomistic components are then combined to form a picture of reality which can more or less correspond with what is the case. With Hobbes, Locked claims that the individual sense perceptions may be certain while their composite "reckoning" may be

---

[35] Dan R Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 7.
[36] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, 2.8.13.

flawed.[37] "Thought is the working over of an inert raw material. It is both the building and its materials. The mind is like a room, containing the materials we use for building. Language is part of the construction machinery."[38]

Two further elements are implied in this conception of knowledge and language, the passivity of the mind and the transparency of the words. First, in order for sense perceptions to serve as a firm foundation, the mind must receive them immediately, without any mediation. Objectivity precludes any influence from one's historical contingencies. Interpretation is the enemy of necessary truth since it implies some subjective element in the process. In modern epistemology, the mind must receive the sense-data unmolested by the biases and prejudices of the mind. This is what Gadamer refers to as the Enlightenment "prejudice against prejudice itself."[39] Reliable knowledge will be arrived at reliably. This means that for each person who attempts to investigate a particular fact, it will be, at least in principle, possible for them to arrive at the same conclusion. This requires any subjective influence on the sense perception to be excluded from the reasoning process. Otherwise, knowledge would fail to serve its objective function.

Charles Taylor refers to this passive reception of sense-data as the 'mechanistic perspective of the mind.' The basic input of data is received as a machine would receive its code. The computer adds no interpretive additions to the string of 1's and 0's to which it is designed to respond to. The same string of code put into two separate computers will ideally end in the same result, provided they are both well-functioning machines. The individual computer makes no difference since it brings no individual additions to the computational formula. In fact, if two

---

[37] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 105.
[38] Taylor, 107.
[39] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, Second (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Corp., 1960), 270.

computers respond differently, that is "subjectively" in this example, it is taken as apparent that one of them is broken or needs updated. It is *deficient*. The modern empiricist conception of the mind functions likewise. Taylor writes: "Mechanistically, the mind is simply the recipient of the impingement, but this passivity is what ensures the order of thought that the basic unit of knowledge is a quite uninterpreted datum. Causal passivity is the basis of an epistemic foundation, which is prior to any working of the mind and its power to combine."[40]

The mind remains passive in the reception of the primary building blocks of knowledge. Any unique additions to meaning must imply the "malfunctioning" of the human mind. Only after receiving this knowledge as thought can it then be translated into language and transmitted to others. The primacy of thought means that language is considered *monological* in the sense that it always occurs first in the individual and only subsequently as a publicly shared phenomenon. Language emerges as words, or "marks", are connected with ideas in a process of externalization.[41] Publicly shared languages result from a convergence of these individual languages through a process of arbitration ("Oh, you call that a *tree*…"). Thus, words are given meaning by "a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea."[42] Locke views the process of submitting to a social vocabulary by this process as analogous to submitting to a social contract. In fact, according to Locke "every man hath so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases."[43] The demand for self-reflective thinking emerges again as a right of each individual. "The imposture of a vocabulary

---

[40] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 107.
[41] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 3.2.2.
[42] Locke, 3.2.1.
[43] Locke, 3.2.8.

unratified by my reason can lead to the imposture of tyrannical political rule unratified by my consent."[44]

This leads to the second, further implication of the modern empirical theory of knowledge, *the transparency of language*. In the broader designative tradition, it is assumed that language serves the purposes of organizing and expressing thought. According to Hobbes, "The general use of speech, is to transfer our mental discourse, into verbal; or the train of thoughts, into a train of words." [45] Language depicts knowledge and serves as an instrument of communication. In the modern epistemological framework, it is vital that this knowledge be conveyed without distortion. Thus, transparency or unobtrusiveness becomes the ideal of language. Strict, univocal definitions are required to ensure that there are no accidental semantic imports when communicating the certain conclusions of knowledge. "The need is for clarity, perspicuity, to have always in mind the grounding of the word in thought."[46]

In his outline of a well-established society, Hobbes had already insisted on the need for clear, univocal language. Without this, "there had been amongst men, neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears, or wolves."[47] Yet, language cannot serve the purposes of reason or society if language does not function clearly and univocally. Words must correspond as "notes" to depict specific thoughts, or "signs", without any excess or unregulated meaning. For this reason, metaphors, rhetoric, and inherent implications must be banned. The process of "reckoning", as that of building up from an epistemic foundation is subverted by the use of figurative and excessive language. The entire meaning of the word is given in its designation. Hobbes writes:

---

[44] *The Language Animal*, 109.
[45] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 18.
[46] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 107.
[47] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 18.

> To conclude, the light of human minds is perspicuous words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; reason is the pace; increase science the way; and the benefit of mankind the end. And on the contrary, metaphors and senseless and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui*; and reasoning upon them is wandering among innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention and sedition, or contempt.[48]

The clarity of language is not just the requirements of sound reason, nor just the demand of scientific progress, but is necessary for the well-functioning of society. While Locke attributes the responsibility of the lexical imposition to the individual, Hobbes assigns it to the sovereign, the *leviathan*. Ironically, in his condemnation of metaphorical language, Hobbes tips his hand to the essential role of figurative language by referring to it as the common folklore of the *ignes fatui*, the will-o-the-wisp. It seems that even philosophers critical of metaphor cannot escape the endemic figurative language that inevitably shapes all discourse.

So, to recap, the designative theory of language is born out of the convictions of the Greek philosophical foundation to the Western philosophical tradition, namely the concern for clarity in language (unambiguous, univocal sense) and certainty in knowledge (foundationalist justification and passive, mechanical perception). Language is an instrument of, and subordinate to, the autonomous, individual's perception of reality as atomistic sense perceptions which can be combined through a process of reasoning to form coherent thoughts. These thoughts represent the world in a more or less one-to-one correspondence and form an inner picture of reality. The transparency and unobtrusiveness of language is required for the smooth functioning and reliable communication of these ideas as social creatures with a shared lexicon.

What of religious language? So far, there does not seem to be any explicit rejection of the possibility of religious knowledge or language. The largely figurative nature of most religious

---

[48] Hobbes, 29–30.

expressions, the subjectivity of religious experience, and the existential involvement of the speaker do not bode well for metaphysics as the modern period progresses. How is one to reduce all religious statements to flat, univocal designations? What sensations constitute a genuine experience of the divine? Do these perceptions count as incorrigible, basic beliefs? Are religious convictions the result of an error in Hobbes' 'reckoning'? For the early modern period, these questions were typically glazed over with a vague deism or bland ambivalence. It would be David Hume, the famous Scottish skeptic, who brings them to the fore and declares bankrupt not only the claims of metaphysics and religion, but also the ambitions of both rationalism and empiricism to have found any necessary truth.

Though Hume belongs to the same British empiricism as Locke, he carries out the empiricist critique further than his predecessors. Hume claims to have found both the rationalist and empiricist theories of knowledge wanting, though they present the only possible objects of reasoning. For Hume, the only meaningful statements are either assertions of fact or statements of their logical relations, they are either *synthetic* or *analytic*. Synthetic statements convey knowledge of the empirical world. Their truth or falsity is contingent on their correspondence (or lack thereof) to reality. The statement, "The Atlantic Ocean is east of the United States," is a proposition that, while true, could conceivably be false. One can imagine a world in which this was not the case. Synthetic assertions rely on one's experience of the world to verify them. Analytic statements, on the other hand, refer not to the world, but to the way in which words or symbols are used or defined. These typically refer to definitions or tautologies. "All bachelors are unmarried" is a typical example of an analytic truth. These statements are true simply by virtue of the arbitrary definitions of the words. In a famous passage, Hume explicates these two possible statements. He writes,

> All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, relations of ideas and matters of fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain… Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. …Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction…[49]

The problem is that analytic truths, while certain, do not correspond to reality, and synthetic conclusions, while truly observations of reality, were dependent on unproveable assumptions. Jerry Gill summarizes Hume's skepticism by saying, "Deduction, with its "self-evident" premises, turned out to be definitional (analytic) and empty of factual content, while induction proved to be based upon the indemonstrable assumption that the future must be like the past."[50] With this, Hume feels he had conclusively demonstrated the impossibility of factual truth-claims from both empiricism and rationalism. While not *necessary* truth, these two realms of analytic and synthetic knowledge provided the proper objects of thought. Anything beyond observations of fact and their logical relations is "beyond the pale," as it were. This reduction of meaningful statements is known as "Hume's fork" and is wielded by later logical empiricists in the twentieth century to devastating effect.[51]

As one might expect, Hume had little room in his strict empiricism for religious speculation. In a famous statement in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he writes:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it

---

[49] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel, vol. Hume Selections (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 115–16.
[50] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 73.
[51] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 38.

> contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and experience? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[52]

Hume considers all religious language, which he calls the "religious hypothesis", "useless and therefore senseless."[53] Since metaphysical statements are purportedly statements of factual significance, yet they resist the very means of verification appropriate to all synthetic statements, they do not constitute knowledge; they are "non-cognitive". At the end of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume (through Philo) quips, "Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination?"[54] If there is no hope for precision, clarity, or demonstrable proofs, why bother saying anything at all?

Inspired by the skepticism of Hume, Kant adopts and develops Hume's fork into an epistemological system which sees the essential unity of synthetic and analytic elements in all factual knowledge. Rather than comprising two entirely distinct forms of assertions, both *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge is implied in the formation of any ideas of the world. Kant conceived of the physical world as the realm of *phenomena*, where the logical relations between empirical objects combined to form knowledge. The categories of the mind correspond to the categories of the world enabling apprehension of the world as sensible and coherent. These categories include relations such as causality, space, and time. The empirical perceptions received through the human sensory organs are passively and automatically filtered through the conceptual categories. The pure atomistic empiricism of earlier epistemologists is untenable. Without the conceptual

---

[52] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume Selections:193.

[53] Terrence W Tilley, *Talking of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 5.

[54] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Charles W. Hendel, vol. Hume Selections (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 390.

filters, "such perceptions would then belong to no experience at all, they would be without an object, a blind play of representations."[55] With the combined content of the sense-data and form of the conceptual categories, however, true knowledge is possible. By combining the two separate forms of assertions into a single category of *a priori-factual* claims, he felt he had finally answered the questions implied in Hume's skepticism.

Kant's account of metaphysics is not nearly so positive as his account of phenomenal knowledge. Since induction and deduction are methods intended for the cognitive conceptualization of the phenomenal world, the application of the categories is perfectly appropriate.[56] Metaphysics and religion are admittedly the study of the reality as it 'really is', called *noumena*, independent of the logical relations of the empirical world. As such, the application of the categories to such theological speculation is bound to lead to distortion. The human mind is limited to the categories which characterize it. When speculating about noumenal realities, what other categories is one to use?

> All concepts, therefore, and with them all principles, though they
> may be possible *a priori*, refer nevertheless to empirical intuitions,
> that is, to data of a possible experience. Without this, they can claim
> no objective validity, but are a mere play, whether of the imagination
> or of the understanding with their respective representations.[57]

Religious language, due to its clear unempirical reference, cannot possibly qualify as legitimate propositions in Kant's system. The inappropriate application of conceptual-phenomenal categories to realities which purport to be exempt from them can only lead to "empty abstractions or anthropomorphic hypostatizations."[58] Building on this critique, Kant goes on to deconstruct many of the classical arguments for God's existence, demonstrating their

---

[55] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Muller (Anchor Books, 1966), 107.
[56] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 78.
[57] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 189.
[58] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 79.

results as confused and mistake.[59] Traditional theological reflection is thus rendered incoherent

and impossible. In fact, Kant even proposes a reappropriation of the term 'metaphysics' to

describe the project of logically demonstrating the limits of the human intellect and concomitant

incapacity of theological speculation.

This critique was not the end of religion *per se*. Kant situated religion away from the

cognitive sphere of conceptualization and safely within the realm of practical reason. In *Critique*

of Practical Reason, Kant outlines his account of morality as operating not by pure reason, as did

scientific understanding, but by *practical reason*. This practical reason is concerned with the

determination of human free will under the categorical imperative rather than the conceptual

understanding of the world under the categories of the mind.[60] For Kant, morality "implies" the

reality of God and immortality of the human soul, though not as objects of empirical

investigation or "essential unity", but as postulates of practical reason.[61] He does this not out of a

negative view towards religion so much as a desire to preserve a sphere of influence which

would be insulated from the demands of conceptual knowledge. Thus, he removes religious

belief from the realm of cognitive faculties of humanity and positions it as a non-cognitive

extension of morality. In doing so, he anticipates the later non-cognitivists such as Richard

Braithwaite and R. M. Hare who saw religious language as expressive of moral outlooks on the

world rather than conceptual beliefs.

Still, Kant recognizes that metaphysical speculation would not so easily fade away and

would likely continue to plague the philosophical world. He was himself aware of the temptation

---

[59] Gill, 79. Gill lists three examples that are worth noting. The first is the application of the category of 'substance' to the noumena, the result of which was the concept of a soul. The second is the application of causation, resulting in the concept of the world. Finally, the third is the application of possibility and necessity, which combines with a noumenal realm to form a concept of God. These correspond to the following names respectively: The psychological idea, the cosmological idea, and the theological idea.
[60] Gill, 81.
[61] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 425.

to go beyond the limits of pure and practical reasons to claim some knowledge of the supramundane entities. Again, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he warns against such delusions saying,

> The domain is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth - enchanting name! - surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion.[62]

Kant as right to suppose that the entire metaphysical and theological projects would continue on in spite of his limitation of truth to the phenomenal realm. However, more and more attention is given to these metaphysical truth claims until in the twentieth century, philosophy as a whole took a hard, linguistic turn. Partly due to the restrictions Kant places on reason and language, philosophy becomes increasingly viewed as a commentary on math and science rather than commentaries on Plato and Aristotle. Consequently, language is refined even further and placed under strict criteria of justification, namely those of the natural sciences.

---

[62] Kant, 187.

Chapter 3: The Linguistic Turn

> What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk
> about we must pass over in silence.
> > - Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Following the critical skepticism of Hume and the bifurcation of epistemology in Kant, religious language is increasingly viewed by philosophers as fundamentally flawed. Theology and religion continue to diverge from philosophy into their own dedicated disciplines in which they could ignore the conclusions of the philosophers, or creatively reinterpret traditional doctrines. The narrow empirical positivism which emerges in the twentieth century British empiricism is viewed with alarm and caution by most believers. How is one supposed to understand statements about God? The only options seem to be an uncritical acceptance of religious language as functioning exactly as ordinary speech, or to view it as a defunct brand of confused metaphysics. The criticism of religious statements would only become more pointed with the rise of the Analytic tradition in England.

Twentieth century philosophy is characterized by a preoccupation, verging on obsession, with language. This new linguistic focus arises out of the remains of the Enlightenment skepticism towards metaphysics and necessary truths, which previously served as the focus of philosophical attention. The Analytic tradition finds its origin in the developments of G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Despite the eagerness of many to claim that this new direction is 'revolutionary', it inherits a number of fundamental insights from the philosophical tradition outlined in the previous chapter. There are numerous similarities between the medieval nominalists, such as William of Occam, and they clearly foreshadow both dualistic

Kantian epistemology and Hume's British empiricism.[63] In the course of this exploration, the

parallels with the previous chapter will become apparent.

3.1 Early Philosophy of Language

The new movement does not emerge unprompted but grew out of a response to a crisis in

philosophy. The rise of empirical science to prominence begins to intrude on the traditional

territory of philosophy and gives the impression that the time of the philosopher may be coming

to an end. The standards of knowledge are conforming to the hard sciences to the exclusion of

the human sciences, a force which Dilthey and Gadamer combat feverishly.[64] Gilbert Ryle

comments, "Sterile of demonstrable theorems, sterile of experimentally testable hypotheses,

philosophy was to face the charge of being sterile."[65] Philosophy falls prey to its own criticism as

the skeptical projects of Hume and Kant leave philosophy without a legitimate domain in which

to operate. Metaphysical investigations are dismissed as neither synthetic nor analytic

knowledge, and most empirical questions are being increasingly answered by scientific

investigation. Increasingly disparaged as an obsolete discipline, Ezra Pound comments that

"After Leibniz's time a philosopher was just a guy who was too damn lazy to work in a

laboratory."[66] While this is certainly an overstatement which ignores the groundbreaking work of

some of the most important philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the sentiment

is widely shared among scientists today. In response, philosophers begin to turn their attention to

a virgin field, that of language. In place of the speculative prose of metaphysics and the narrow

---

[63] William Hordern, *Speaking of God: The Nature and Purpose of Theological Language* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 18.

[64] Paul Ricoeur and John B. Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 61.

[65] Quoted in Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 20.

[66] Quoted in Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 19.

empirical investigations, philosophy would occupy its attention with concerns of the meaning and function of language.

As we have seen, language has always been of concern to philosophers, albeit a secondary one. The clarity, precision, and neutrality with which language is used in philosophical and theological discourse is as old as Plato. However, it is in the twentieth century when the attention to language raises to a fever pitch and the roles of epistemology and linguistics are reversed; the standard for meaningfulness came not from the criteria for knowledge but from proper syntax and semantics. Theology, traditional metaphysics, and even ethics are threatened with 'meaninglessness' or 'nonsense' as new conditions are placed on truth claims and discourse that align closely with those in the natural sciences. Logical positivism, while not representative of the entire Analytic tradition, becomes the inevitable conclusion of the trajectory set by the traditional philosophical view of language. The demand for clarity, certainty, and transparency is brought to the fore and the *mental* atomism of thought is recast as the *verbal* atomism of words. In short, the picture theory of meaning is adopted by the new analytic philosophers and wielded against religious language with devastating effect. The effects of logical positivism are still felt today in the colloquial understanding of religious uses of language.

The first major contributions to the designative theory of language come from Gottlob Frege, who develops a highly technical system of thought which reconceives logic, mathematics, and semantics in the nineteenth century. The empiricists before him had developed a system of atomistic meaning based on the discrete sense perceptions which were thought to be the basic epistemic building blocks. Words meant objects, or at least what could be perceived of them. This ostensive function was where they received their meaning. Sentences were merely more

complicated organizations of those primary meanings. However, Frege shifts the locus of meaning from the word-level to that of the sentence.[67] Taylor points out that in doing so, "Frege helped overcome the double atomism of the earlier theory, that of linguistic meanings, and that of the individual subject."[68] In reducing the function of individual words to that of 'naming', Frege reserves true meaning for the combination of these atomistic bits. Russell and the early Wittgenstein both advance similar theories, positing single words as verbal 'simples' which correspond to logical 'simples.' Propositions, then, as combinations of multiple simples, form 'complexes' which may correspond to states of affairs. One way to illustrate this is by the use of the single sign, 'chair.' Alone, this ostensibly empirical object conveys no meaning about the world since, without a clear demonstrative, it fails to refer univocally. 'Chair' may refer to this chair, that chair, or *any* chair without further demarcation. It actually operates as a universal, a classification of deep interest for Frege. Until placed in a particular syntax which belongs to asserting, judging, questioning, etc., a word is basically meaningless.

In 1892, Frege published his most well-known essay called *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*, or *On Sense and Reference*. In this article, Frege distinguished between two elements of meaning in every proposition, sense and reference. Language use occurs as one perceives a visible object, conceives a mental picture of the object, and then makes use of words which they believe refer to the given object. The innovation he made is distinguishing the mental picture implied by the sentence from the actual referent. A proposition may conceive of a particular state of affairs, but it requires a further mental step to connect *why* this may or may not refer to a particular situation. In fact, the middle psychological step constitutes a *reason* why certain statements can

---

[67] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 114.
[68] Taylor, 118.

successfully refer to an object or state of affairs.[69] According to one commentator,

"understanding or grasping even the logical significance of an expression cannot consist merely

in knowing or understanding what its *Bedeutung* is."[70] This problem is illustrated by the use of

two parallel propositions.

(1) Hesperus is Hesperus.

(2) Phosphorus is Hesperus.

While the two names have the same reference (the planet Venus), they appear to convey a

different sense, the morning star and the evening star. The second statement at least has the

possibility of being cognitively informative in a way that the first one does not. If one does not

know that the morning star and evening star are both the planet Venus, then (2) would be

cognitively informative even though it is the same statement as (1); it is syntactically identically

but semantically incongruous. McCulloch writes, "(1) is and always was a platitude to anyone

familiar with the name 'Hesperus', whereas (2) had to be discovered by empirical means and can

still be news to those unversed in the ways of philosophers and the heavens."[71] The different

information content is a result of its having a different *Sinne*. Sense gets at the mental picture

evoked by any given statement and results in the reference. It seems to follow that the sense of a

word may even be different for someone hearing a statement than it would be for another and

consequently involves some element of subjectivity. However, Frege seems to be getting at an

"invariant core of literal or conventional meaning which attaches to expressions" rather than a

perspective view which would lead to a more hermeneutical conclusion.[72] Still, Frege helped

---

[69] Taylor, 113.
[70] Gregory McCulloch, *The Game of the Name: Introducing Logic, Language, and Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 18.
[71] McCulloch, 135.
[72] McCulloch, 136.

distinguish the variance of meaning in seemingly equivalent statements which will be used to great effect in religious language analysis. The separation of the psychological picture of a word led to a reconsideration of the objective function of logical propositions which gave rise to non-cognitive interpretations of symbol and myth that identified the meaning of religious language with the sense alone. For now, it will suffice to note that sense and reference became essential features of nearly all subsequent language theories, helping to nuance the flattened sense of meaning handed down by the logical empiricists.

3.2 The Early Wittgenstein

Even more important than the advent of the linguistic turn, for the development of language philosophy, is probably the central figure in the first half of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Austrian-born genius picked up the work of Frege through his mentor, Bertrand Russell. Starting out as an aeronautic engineering student, Wittgenstein became interested in studying the philosophy behind mathematics. He visited and studied for a semester under Russell who had recently published *Principia Mathematica* in partnership with Alfred North Whitehead. The precocious Wittgenstein asked Russell if he had the ability to study philosophy or if her were a "complete idiot" and should return to aeronautics. After Russell had him write a brief philosophical essay and upon reading the first sentence of it, he declared, "No, you must not become an aeronaut."[73] Wittgenstein proved to be an eminently influential thinker in his own right and will serve as a central figure in the development of the philosophy of language in the twentieth century. He made such a dramatic impression on the philosophical world that Russell remarked in an obituary notice, "Getting to know Wittgenstein was one of the

---

[73] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language,* 37-38

most exciting intellectual adventures of my life."[74] Together, their philosophical work set the

stage for the conclusions of the historical trajectory being traced.

Wittgenstein wrote his first major work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* during his

service in World War I. It was an enigmatic little book which put forward the basic tenets of

logical positivism, and basically served as the sacred text to the participants of the Vienna Circle.

It is beautifully organized in a strictly logical fashion around seven numbered propositions. The

main concern of the book is answering the questions of sense and reference raised by Frege. In

his preface to the book, Russell writes that the book was meant to answer the questions of "(1)

the conditions for sense rather than nonsense in combinations of symbols; (2) the conditions for

uniqueness of meaning or reference in symbols or combinations of symbols."[75] The method is

was to construct an ideal, logically-perfect language which exhibits rules of syntax that precludes

nonsense and discrete symbols with unique and univocal references. "The whole function of

language is to have meaning", according to Russell, "and it only fulfills this function in

proportion as it approaches to the ideal language which we postulate."[76] Lying behind this

impressive feat is the conviction that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we

cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."[77] Clearly, Wittgenstein bears the legacy of the

ancient Platonic commitments to clarity and certainty.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein conceives of the world as the "totality of facts, not of

things."[78] The only meaningful statements are either synthetic propositions or demonstrations of

analytic relations between them. Synthetic language paints a logical picture of the world, both

---

[74] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 39
[75] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Pears D. F. and McGuinness B. F. (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1974), x. Subsequent citations from will be marked with both the page number and the proposition number, when applicable.
[76] Wittgenstein, x.
[77] Wittgenstein, 3.
[78] Wittgenstein, 5, 1.1.

what is and is not the case, such that each statement has either a positive or negative factual value.[79] Just as a piece of sheet music represents the musical performance by notation, so too do statements of fact represent reality by language.[80] Reality is comprised totally of what can be stated clearly in factual relations in variations of the standard form '*aRb*'.[81] Here, Hume's fork is developed with the new logical tools of Russell and Frege to basically reverse the roles of epistemology and language from the designative tradition. Instead of meaningful language being derived from what can be known, the range of possible knowledge is delimited by the total sum of logical propositions that can be said. Such a radical proposal gives an unheard-of priority to the logical nature of language in considerations of reality and metaphysics that would not be without ramifications in the consideration of religious language.

The only other form of meaningful speech is analytic relations of those facts. Logical truths of this sort are indeed meaningful, but they are tautologous. Just as Kant distinguishes between the content and form of the categories, so too does Wittgenstein point to these symbolic formulations as depicting the relations between simples without conveying any informative-factual content about the world. "A tautology follows from all the propositions: it says nothing."[82] The logical connectors such as 'if,' 'and,' 'or,' and 'but,' do not correspond to objects in the world but the logical relations between such objects.[83] These symbols display the structure of the picture of the world and make it evident how objects might be arranged. They present the "scaffolding" of the world but have no direct content themselves.[84]

---

[79] Wittgenstein, 10, 2.21.
[80] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 39.
[81] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 12, 3.1432.
[82] Wittgenstein, 39, 5.142.
[83] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 40.
[84] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 63, 6.124.

The totality of facts, as a picture of reality, is comprised of simples in combination to present states of affairs. With Frege, Wittgenstein writes, "Objects can be *named*. Signs are their representatives. I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *put them into words*. Propositions can only say *how things are*, not *what* they are."[85] It is only in full sentences that true meaning emerges, as individual words can do no more than name objects; they tell nothing *about* the object. Error occurs in the misuse of these logical 'simples' by equivocation or improper syntactical combinations. The task of philosophy ought to be the elucidation of these propositions for the purpose of clarification of thought. Philosophy, properly speaking, is "not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations."[86] It sets limits to what can be said, and consequently, what can be *thought*. Rather than put forward philosophical theories, hypotheses, or systems, the role of the philosopher is to be a clarifier of language for science and mathematics. Previously, philosophers had concerned themselves with putting forward metaphysical systems speculating about the nature of reality. Yet, one cannot speak clearly about them without equivocation or confused logic; they are skewered by Hume's fork. As William Hordern puts it, "In a very real sense, analytical philosophy is philosophy *become humble*."[87]

Finally, Wittgenstein addresses the limits of language itself. One cannot speak about what is not revealed in the world. By this, he obviously presupposes that only that which is revealed empirically qualifies for legitimate expression. All statements of theology, ethics, and metaphysics are disqualified, not as false propositions, but as *nonsense*. Religious language, on this account, is not just a confused or false state of affairs that does not obtain, but is a pseudo-statement, meaningless, nonsense. Here, more than any of the previous designative theorists, the

---

[85] Wittgenstein, 13, 3.221.
[86] Wittgenstein, 25, 4.112.
[87] Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 22. Emphasis mine.

absolute rejection of religious claims is absolute. One simply cannot say anything informative about the divine, afterlife, or moral fabric of reality since they admittedly lie beyond empirical evidence. "*How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world."[88] It is at this point where Wittgenstein most obviously embodies the Kantian dichotomy of phenomena and noumena. The same split that has loomed implicit in the designative theory is finally given its most comprehensive systematization in the logical positivists.

It should be noted that the early Wittgenstein does not concede to sheer naturalism as he is often accused of. The final enigmatic pages of the *Tractatus* point to a mysticism which the Vienna Circle were far from comfortable with. Wittgenstein writes, "We feel that even when *all possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain untouched. Of course, there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer."[89] The natural sciences are the totality of facts about the world, even if they remain undiscovered at any given point. The corpus of facts presents the total sum of possible propositions, and also the complete list of meaningful statements. Nothing more can be said, regardless of whether or not one is convicted of the existence of gods, devils or morals. It is with this mystical intimation that Wittgenstein concludes the book saying, "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence."[90] What is the '*what we cannot speak about*'? It is impossible to say. If there is more, one cannot hope to express it with language. The young Austrian seems to imply that even though univocal statements about the empirical world are the only legitimate uses of language, the things that were most important in life – morality, aesthetics, and religion – contained a significance that

---

[88] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 73, 6.432.
[89] Wittgenstein, 73, 6.52.
[90] Wittgenstein, 74, 7.

dwarfed the expressible. Stiver points to the Kierkegaardian and Tolstoyian background of his Viennese upbringing as being a source of this profound appreciation for the depth of human life.[91] It served as a continual source of contention between him and the austere Russell. In fact, even as he permitted Russell to publish the *Tractatus*, he felt that Russell had not fully understood it.

3.3 The Advent of Logical Positivism

Following the publication of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was so convinced that he had solved all the problems of philosophy that he quit the discipline entirely, turning instead to gardening and teaching elementary school. During that time, a gathering of scientists, mathematicians, and empiricist philosophers began gathering in Vienna and carried out the project of creating an ideal logical language with a zealous fervor. The Vienna Circle, as it came to be known, presents the most poignant challenge to religious language yet. The theory they advanced came to be known as 'logical positivism' and later as 'logical empiricism', and it more or less promoted the same system of thought as Wittgenstein did in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's first text serves as the central text until, in 1936, A.J. Ayer publishes the clearest exposition of logical positivism, *Language, Truth, and Logic*. The works bear a remarkable similarity, even being published with the same hubris of having found the final answer to philosophy's problems.[92] While using the Wittgensteinian atomistic conception of the world as his starting point, Ayer made explicit two principles which characterize the positivistic view of language: the verification principle and the translatability principle.

The *verification principle* is simply the imposition of the standard of empirical verification for the meaningfulness of language. It represents the corollary conclusion of the

---

[91] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 41.
[92] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 133.

assertion that propositions represent factual states of affairs but makes explicit the need for

means of scientific investigation for the proper use of language in a given statement. For

example, what does the proposition, "The book is on the table" mean? On this account, it means

that if one examines the table, they should find a rectangular object with approximately 258

pages. They can measure it, feel it, and even smell it if they enjoy the scent of an old book. In

short, they can *verify* the statement with empirical methods of investigation. How does religious

language compare? As another example, take the statement "God is present". What does this

statement mean by comparison? What methods would one use to find evidence to verify such a

statement? If nothing can be found, then the statement is not claiming anything significant at all.

In the early years of logical positivism, they insisted on absolute or conclusive verification.[93]

Later on, it became apparent that even empirical facts could not achieve absolute certainty

through "strong verification," and the demand was lessened to being verifiable in principle, or

"weak verification."[94] He writes in the preface,

> For I require of an empirical hypothesis, not indeed that it should be
> conclusively verifiable, but that some possible sense-experience
> should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. If a
> putative proposition fails to satisfy this principle, and is not a
> tautology, then I hold that it is metaphysical, and that, being
> metaphysical, it is neither true nor false, but literally senseless.[95]

So, positivism concedes that all that is required to satisfy the criterion of verifiability is that *any*

amount of empirical evidence could count towards the proposed claim. Still, this precludes most,

if not all, religious language use they were aware of.

       In addition to the prerequisite of verification, logical positivism promotes a project of

translation from inadequate languages into acceptable forms. It will suffice to call this the

---

[93] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 43.
[94] Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 9.
[95] Ayer, 31.

translatability principle. Robert Brandom, professor of philosophy at the University of

Pittsburgh, describes the "classical program of semantic analysis" as the attempt to show

"whether, and in what way, one can make sense of the meanings expressed by *one* kind of

locution in terms of the meanings expressed by *another* kind of locution."[96] Logical positivism

represents the inception of the modern version of this analytic process, and advocates the

reinterpretation of statements operating from a particular illicit vocabulary as elaborations of

another, more primary, vocabulary. This leads to the argument that

> everything that can be known, or thought, every fact, must in
> principle be expressible in the base vocabulary in question. It is in
> this sense (epistemological, semantic, or ontological) a universal
> vocabulary. What it cannot express is fatally defective: unknowable,
> unintelligible, or unreal.[97]

For the logical positivists, the vocabulary of empirical sense-data formed just that universal

vocabulary. Any assertion which did not belong to the empirical language should be able to be

translated into sensory language without any loss in meaning. For example, to say "God is good"

is to express "I received a much-needed financial gift" in an elaborate or evocative manner,

nothing more. Religious language is thus a form of poetry which expresses mundane, empirical

realities in a merely ornamental figuration. The translatability principle leads to Ayer's ethical

theory of emotivism, in which value and ethical judgments of 'x' are reinterpreted as flat

expressions of approval or disapproval; "hooray for x!" or "boo, x!" respectively.[98]

   The acute attention to metaphysical and religious language is no accident. Many of the

Vienna Circle's members are driven by a "metaphysical suspicion" which strongly influences the

nature of their conclusions. It is ironic that a project driven by the conviction that philosophy

---

[96] Robert Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.
[97] Brandom, 219.
[98] Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 107.

ought to be emptied of value judgments and imperatives would be fueled by such a strong emotional reaction to a specific breed of language use. Even the use of terms such as *nonsense* are adopted precisely because they exhibit an ambiguous pejorative connotation. Perhaps, as with ethical claims, they could be viewed as *expressive* of non-cognitive states of emotion or attitudes towards life? Later non-cognitivists adopt this approach, but the early positivist felt that religion did not even do it well. While poetry and ethics make it clear that they are operating from a distinct vocabulary, religious language frequently takes the misleading form of indicative speech. For this reason, Ayer refers to the metaphysician as a "misplaced poet"[99] and Rudolf Carnap comments that they were "musicians without musical ability!"[100]

Even as the logical positivist movement is gaining momentum, it begins to exhibit warning signs and complications. There are a number of historical reasons for the eventual dissolution of the Vienna Circle and scattering of main members to America and the rest of Europe, not least of them was Europe's entanglement in the second World War. More fundamentally, however, the distillation of the whole designative approach to language began to demonstrate its own internal inconsistency. The verification principle, which served as the backbone of the hygienic elimination of metaphysical claims, could not meet its own criteria. When Hume's fork is applied to this principle, it clearly does not satisfy the criteria of empirical verifiability. Is it an analytic statement which emerges from the totality of all propositions as a reflection of the way propositions are used? Certainly not. The history of language is full of non-verifiable statements, and in fact represents a strictly modern convention. Ayer is left with the

---

[99] Ayer, 44.
[100] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 44

facile assertion that it is a "recommendation", a claim which left one with the freedom to either

accept or reject it and continue on their merry way.[101]

A later philosopher, Karl Popper, alters the approach slightly by pointing out that

scientific methodology was not concerned with verification as much as it was with *falsification*.

Hypotheses were tested repeatedly to look for negative results, not positive. Even a highly

successful theory is still open to future falsification with refined methods of investigation. He

writes,

> According to my proposal, what characterizes the empirical method
> is its manner of exposing to falsification, in every conceivable way,
> the system to be tested. Its aim is not to save the lives of untenable
> systems but, on the contrary, to select the one which is by
> comparison the fittest, by exposing them all to the fiercest struggle
> for survival.[102]

Thus, meaningful language is not that which is potentially verifiable, but that for which some

form of empirical sense-data could present the possibility of falsification. This falsification

principle would prove to be more incisive even than the claims of the verification principle.

So, the designative tradition has evolved from the desire for clarity and certainty in the

Greek foundations into the empiricist epistemology of Locke and Hume. Characterized by a

radical concern for statements representing sense-data and objective states of affairs, language

becomes a tool for communicating the direct, unmediated access to reality provided by the

senses. In order to ensure the integrity of language as the expression of knowledge, the

positivists insist that the only meaningful propositions are those which admit some pieces of

empirical evidence that can count for or against the verification or falsification of the factual

claim being made. Religious, ethical, and aesthetic language are discarded as abortive uses of

---

[101] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 46.
[102] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 46.

language. Once the claims of the positivists were shown to be self-defeating or flimsy at best, further theories of religious language proliferated.

Many of the responses to the positivistic challenge of the meaninglessness of religious language sought to articulate the way in which it could be truly meaningful. These views are typically divided between two main camps: cognitive/descriptive and non-cognitive/expressive. Cognitive or descriptive theories of religious language attempt to explain it in terms of genuine, factual *descriptions* which may be subject to relevant evidence. Non-cognitivist or expressive accounts attempt to provide an explanation of the ongoing significance of religious language as *expressions* of personal values, attitudes, or moral stances towards life. Cognitivity was exclusively rational and subject to objective, empirical evidence. Non-cognitive statements were prohibited from involving any factual sensitivities. The dichotomy between fact and value which Hume proposed, and Kant systematized were adopted so that religious language had to find its meaning either as genuine knowledge claims or as expressions which must be filtered through a reductionistic lens of ethics or attitudes. It seems evident that either of these two camps operate from the same objectivism, foundationalism, and positivism. Both sides unquestioningly accept Descartes' disengaged observer, immediate and unmediated access to reality, and the dichotomous split between fact and value such that religious statements belong to one realm or the other exclusively. For this reason, I consider both camps under the title of the 'designative theory of language' since both groups of theories of religious language remains the same while they place the significance of religious language on one side or the other of that epistemological divide. For descriptivists, religious utterances are subject to factual evidence which can be supported or questioned on rational evidence. For the expressivists, religious language put forward personal stances towards life which were value judgments. Some use a non-cognitive

perspective to disparage religious statements for not qualifying for truth. Others use the same position to point out that they cannot be false either, which seems to be worth the price of cognitive significance.

3.4 The University Debate: Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Approaches

The dissolution of logical positivism gave rise to a vast range of theories of the meaning of religious language. Philosophy of religion was a burgeoning field and become almost entirely preoccupied with the discussions of the cognitivity of religion. Even though the positivist movement proved to be a failure, its emphasis on verifiability or falsifiability remain influential. Many attempt to prove the legitimacy of religious statements by either showing the possibility of their verification, or by appealing to an entirely ethical reductionism. Non-cognitivism appeals to the metaphoricity of religious claims as evidence of its poetic meaning and possible translation to ethical language without any semantic loss. Of course, religious statements are not factual assertions, they merely present a moral system wrapped in a metaphorical narrative. Metaphor is viewed as a mythological shell for the existential or moral *kerygma*. Others push back and attempted to establish the absolute factuality of the claims of sacred texts as a means of grounding the cognitivity of religious language in general.

In the 1950's an important discussion emerged through the academic journals called the University Debate. This ongoing discussion emerged as a response to the collapse of logical positivism, and the subsequent lacuna of a sound theory of the meaning of religious language. The participants include Anthony Flew, R.M. Hare, Basil Mitchell, and John Hick and their responses to the same question represent the range of responses that proliferated in the following decades, and they serve as helpful paradigm cases of each of the typical responses; positivist,

non-cognitive, and descriptive respectively. Ironically, their positions are all posed as parables

which, in the interest of clarity and brevity, I will include in full below.

First, Anthony Flew poses the falsification challenge to the meaningfulness of religious

language in terms of the parable of the gardener, adapted from an earlier parable from John

Wisdom.

> Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well's The Invisible Man could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Skeptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"
> In this parable we can see how what starts as an assertion, that something exists or that there is some analogy between certain complexes of phenomena, may be reduced step by step to an altogether different status… But through the process of qualification may be, and of course usually is, check in time, it is not always judiciously so halted. Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications. And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger, the endemic evil, of theological utterance.[103]

In succinct and profound form, this parable encapsulates some of the strongest challenges

to religious language put forward. If nothing can possibly count for or against a particular

statement, in what sense is it saying anything at all? If one says, "God is a Father", but is not a

---

[103] Timothy A. Robinson, ed., *God*, Second (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 341.

male biological progenitor, and is wholly transcendent of the fallible people we know as fathers in our experience, in what sense is the statement saying anything informative about God at all? Do religious statements not die the "death of a thousand qualifications"? Religious language has always struggled with the inadequacy of theories of metaphor and analogy to answer this question. Most predications rely on some form of figurative expression or literal qualification. The problem, as Flew sees it, is that one by one these qualifications render the original statement meaningless. Flew states this challenge in the context of the problem of evil, pointing out that if no amount of evil and suffering can impact the locution, "God is good", then can the statement be meaningful at all?

It seems that a few problems emerge with the critical position presented by Flew. First, he adopts Karl Popper's falsification principle and applies it far beyond the realm of scientific investigation for which it was intended. Popper explicitly limits the extension of the principle to only empirical investigation.[104] However, that is to presuppose that God is an object of empirical inquiry, which hardly any Christian would agree with. Second, as mentioned with regard to the verification principle, the falsification principle is likewise self-defeating. It makes a normative statement which itself is not subject to either verification or falsification. If Flew's point is granted, and we agree to accept only empirical evidence for or against God, it seems unlikely that the traditional use of language to describe God and religious experiences can be defended as meaningful. As such, Flew presents a valid *argument*, which works if certain presuppositions are granted, while not being a conclusively valid *proof*. As Stiver states, "Flew, therefore, demands from the believer as positive evidence what the believer would regard as negative evidence."[105]

---

[104] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 49.
[105] Stiver, 49.

The second interlocutor in the University Debate is R.M. Hare, who is well-known for advocating a non-cognitive interpretation of religious language. Hare poses a second parable in response to Flew which illustrates how he saw religious utterances as functioning. Hare writes:

> A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, 'You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?' But the lunatic replies, 'Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you'. However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same.
>
> Now we say that such a person is deluded. But what is he deluded about? About the truth or falsity of an assertion? Let us apply Flew's test to him. There is no behavior of dons that can be enacted which he will accept as counting against his theory; and therefore his theory, on this test, asserts nothing. But it does not follow that there is no difference between what he thinks about dons and what most of us think about them-otherwise we should not call him a lunatic and ourselves sane, and dons would have no reason to feel uneasy about his presence in Oxford.
>
> Let us call that, in which we differ from this lunatic, our respective bliks . He has an insane blik about dons; we have a sane one. It is important to realize that we have a sane one, not no blik at all; for there must be two sides to any argument - if he has a wrong blik , then those who are right about dons must have a right one. Flew has shown that a blik does not consist in an assertion or system of them; but nevertheless it is very important to have the right blik .[106]

Clearly, Hare accepts Flew's critique that religious language does not communicate any cognitive information. He poses the idea of a *blik*, an entirely expressive account of moral value. Yet, he points out that it is still "important to have the right blik." If something is *important,* then it must bear some personally significance. As one should expect, religious statements often involve existential significance. But does that necessarily imply that it is *meaningful*? Significance, it seems, may be necessary but not sufficient for meaningfulness. Further, how

---

[106] Robinson, *God*, 344–45.

would one go about determining the *right* blik if it involves no cognitive elements whatsoever? Does the lack of a rational element preclude the possibility of rational arbitration between competing bliks? This line of questioning is the typical response to most non-cognitive accounts of religious language as expressions of an attitude towards life that does not admit a cognitive element. How is one to know if they are the lunatic in the parable or the friend? What Hare does manage to do in the development of an adequate theory is point to the fact that it is not only empirical language which can be meaningful. The later Wittgenstein actually builds this notion into a full book of reflections on the wide range of contexts in which language can be meaningful.

Terrence Tilley further points out that Hare's account of bliks hardly goes far enough in attempting to account for the wide uses of religious language.[107] How is one to make sense of the claim that "God raised Jesus from the dead" in terms of bliks? For Hare, the blik is intended to refer to the presuppositional account of the facts. Yet, with the religious claim above, there are clearly further presuppositions which undergird this claim and would need to be explicated in terms of more primary bliks. In this sense, the original claim is not so much presuppositional as it is suppositional. What of the historical religious claims implied by such a claim? Clearly Hare's theory of bliks is too limited in its scope and function to account for the full range of religious locutions.

Other non-cognitive accounts, such as Richard Braithwaite, attempt to deal with the issue of religious diversity by incorporating Frege's distinction of sense and reference. Braithwaite advocated a view of religious language as expressing certain policies for living, namely moral codes. Religious assertions should be seen "as being primarily declarations of adherence to a

---

[107] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 35.

policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life."[108] Each unique religion presents a

unique *narrative sense* by which sometimes identical policies of life may be communicated. As

one lives by the religious story of Christianity or Islam, they may be called to adopt the same

selfless way of life by different means. He points out that the 'facticity' of these religious stories

is not the locus of meaning. Rather, it is the non-cognitive ethical policy which makes it

meaningful, and the specific tradition which gives it a unique sense. So, there is a real difference

in religious language which can account for the diversity and dialogue experienced in the world.

Yet, many users of religious language would be reticent to affirm the idea that their claims have

no factual content, on par with a Dostoevsky novel. The assertion of a pure *fictionalism* again

falls into the trap of being unable to account for the debates, arguments, and apologetics which

abound. While the non-cognitivists are eager to claim that religious utterances themselves are not

directly factual, they do seem to involve factual considerations. Once again, this will anticipate a

fuller account which makes use of a creative interplay of factual and fictional elements in all

religious language.

The final representatives in the University Debate will represent attempts at a providing

fully descriptivist accounts of religious language. Basil Mitchell will put forward another parable

that accepts the challenge of Flew's to put forward an account which does not submit to non-

cognitivism.

> In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance
> meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend
> that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan
> that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in
> command of it and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter
> what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of
> the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

---

[108] Tilley, 25.

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, "He is on our side."

Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friend murmur against him: but the partisan still says, "He is on our side". He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, "The Stranger knows best". Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say "Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side"? But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, "Well, if that's what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better."

The partisan of the parable does not allow anything to count decisively against the proposition "The Stranger is on our side". This is because he has committed himself to trust the Stranger. But he of course recognizes that the Stranger's ambiguous behavior does count against what he believes about him. It is precisely this situation which constitutes the trial of his faith.

When the partisan asks for help and doesn't get it, what can he do? He can (a) conclude that the stranger is not on our side or; (b) maintain that he is on our side, but that he has reasons for withholding help.

The first he will refuse to do. How long can he uphold the second position without it becoming just silly?

I don't think one can say in advance.[109]

Here Mitchell argues that religious statements make claims which are subject to evidential arguments of validation rather than conclusive proofs of verification or falsification. The partisan is willing to recognize that significant portions of the Stranger's behavior counts against the statement, "The Stranger is on our side". However, he is unwilling to accept them as definitive because of his commitment to put his trust in the Stranger based on his own empirical evidence of his intimate experience with the Stranger. There is much to say for this distinction between verification and validation. As Ricoeur will also argue, religious statements rely on

---

[109] *God*, 345–346.

phronetic judgment, more closely akin to the weighing of evidence in legal proceedings than in a scientific study. It involves subjective and objective elements in a holistic appraisal of the whole corpus of evidence. Stiver says that it represents less the links in a chain and more the legs of a chair.[110] It seems that the key difference in Mitchell's parable, beside the cognitivity of religious claims, is the *personal* dimension. Perhaps the personal dimension can help account for some of the difficulties encountered in religious language as well.

Mitchell originally affirms that the Stranger's actions against the resistance count as evidence against his being sympathetic to the cause. The rebels should rightly be suspicious of his true allegiances due to the ambiguity of the evidence. Yet, the possibility of it actually taking effect as counterevidence remains an open question. It is like the question about whether the pacifist would take up arms to defend their family from an intruder of the situation arose. One may never know until they are put in the situation. In reality, many religious believers would assert that *true faith* would never let trials dissuade them from their beliefs. But if evidence is unable to amount to a genuinely considered counterclaim, then in what sense is it evidence in the first place? The general religious sentiment acknowledges that the doubts of the religious speaker may then be tested by evidence, but that the faithful believer will always make sense of the evidence in such a way as it is compatible with their original statement. Stiver says this seems "suspiciously close to faith being compatible with any state of affairs whatsoever, or 'dying the death of a thousand qualifications.'"[111] Such a take hardly answers Flew's original parable in a convincing way.

Perhaps the religious locution could be cognitively verified in the future and thus remain meaningful in the empirical sense? John Hick picks up on the hint of future verification and

---

[110] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 54.
[111] Stiver, 54.

builds a theory of "eschatological verification". If the requirement for cognitive meaningfulness

is predicated on the possibility of either verification or falsification, Hick thought, then of course

statements about the afterlife belong to that category since, one way or another, those claims *are*

in principle subject to verification. He published an article in response to the University Debate

in 1960 in which he coined another parable of the 'Road to the Celestial City.'

> Two men are traveling together along a road. One of them believes that it leads to a Celestial City, the other that it leads nowhere; but since this is the only road there is, both must travel it. Neither has been this way before, and therefore neither is able to say what they will find around each next corner. During their journey they meet both with moments of refreshment and delight, and with moments of hardship and danger. All the time one of them thinks of his journey as a pilgrimage to the Celestial City and interprets the pleasant parts as encouragements and the obstacles as trials of his purpose and lessons in endurance, prepared by the king of that city and designed to make of him a worthy citizen of the place when at last he arrives there. The other, however, believes none of this and sees their journey as an unavoidable and aimless ramble. Since he has no choice in the matter, he enjoys the good and endures the bad. But for him there is no Celestial City to be reached, no all-encompassing purpose ordaining their journey; only the road itself and the luck of the road in good weather and in bad.
> During the course of the journey the issue between them is not an experimental one. They do not entertain different expectations about the coming details of the road, but only about its ultimate destination. And yet when they do turn the last corner it will be apparent that one of them has been right all the time and the other wrong. Thus, although the issue between them has not been experimental, it has nevertheless from the start been a real issue. They have not merely felt differently about the road; for one was feeling appropriately and the other inappropriately in relation to the actual state of affairs. Their opposed interpretations of the road constituted genuinely rival assertions, though assertions who assertion-status has the peculiar characteristic of being guaranteed retrospectively by a future crux.[112]

So, Hick presents a set of circumstances in which the religious claims of one or another

must be factually accurate and, while not subject to experimentation in the present, will be

---

[112] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 56.

provided an opportunity at future verification. He seems to defend the empirical meaningfulness of religious language while challenging Flew's experimental criterion. Yet, this view seems to suffer from even more defects than any of the prior ones. First, Hick only presents two possible cases, and one of them is inevitably correct. As it stands, the number of religious claims seems unlimited and there is *no* guarantee that any of them are wholly verifiable. While this may be a helpful comparison between Christianity and naturalism, the parable begins to break down as representative of the true diversity of religious statements made in the world. Second, it only accounts for eschatological locutions. Of course, religious statements are far more frequently about the past or present than they are about the future destination of humanity. In fact, his parable does not help make sense of religious language in the present at all! His defense of the logical nature of religious language may serve as a foundation for a Pascalian wager, but does not help navigate the issues of interpretation, understanding, and use of statements concerning present religious experiences.[113]

At the end of the historical examination of the development of the designative theory of language, there arise a number of competing camps which each purport to explain the meaning of religious language. The University Debate represents a paradigm case of positivism, non-cognitivism, and cognitivism. It is true that each position offers some help to the inquirer in teasing out and answering the issues related to religious language. Non-cognitivism explains well the diversity of religious claims and the underlying sense of ethico-moral religious stories as attitudinal stances towards life. Yet, they cannot account for the many historical and factual-indicative statements in religious traditions for which it would be difficult if not impossible to provide a reliable, reductionistic interpretation. The cognitive accounts attempt to play by the

---

[113] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 98.

rules set out by the logical empiricists and provide a means by which factual evidence can count against belief, and even how religious claims can be conclusively verified, if only in principle. Mitchell's account may eventually fall prey to irrationalism if he is pushed to conclude that, while considered, no evidence is actually considered as genuine evidence for or against the trust one places in the original belief. Hick's eschatological verification shows promise but offers no real help in adjudicating statements in the present.

It seems, then, that the each of the successors of the designative theory are inadequate in one respect or another. The fully developed theories which emerge from the traditional assumptions about language seem hamstrung in their ability to do justice to the full complexity of language as it is used in daily religious life. As has been shown, the designative theory traces its roots to the ancient Greek emphases on certainty in knowledge and clarity in speech. It is not so much the importance that these values held that create so many unfixable issues for this tradition. Rather, it is the *belief in their achievability* that shapes the course of the tradition in such a way as to limit the recognition of the full scope of the function of language as essential to the reflective and phenomenological appreciation of the world. One never "arrives" at absolute and unmediated knowledge of the world. Certainty always remains an unattainable ideal of the human mind, not an observable reality. Words are inextricably bound up with implications, inferences, and value-judgments, such that absolute transparency is not even a possibility. As such, many statements, including religious claims, appear to involve innumerable It was only until recently that the philosophy of language began to incorporate a more nuanced and complex notion of language acquisition and use.

For one, the traditional theory assumes a clear split between objectivity and subjectivity. The base model of the human mind and cognition stems from Descartes disembodied ego. Locke

posits a mode of empirical knowledge-acquisition through the unmediated perception of particulate sense-data. The mind is responsible for this objective process of reasoning while the body, entirely distinct from the mental faculty, gives rise to emotions and value judgments. Out of the Cartesian mind-body dualism emerges a view of knowledge as pure, neutral, and uninvolved. According to Taylor,

> This is the fault of any designative theory of meaning. But the reification wrought by modern epistemology since Descartes and Locke, that is, the drive to objectify our thoughts and "mental contents", if anything made it worse. The furniture of the mind was accorded a thing-like existence, something objects can have independent of any background.[114]

Thoughts were conceived of as independent and exact pictures of empirical reality as it existed outside of the mind. Language was simply a neutral and inert means of externalizing these inner mental pictures. What we find with religious language is anything but inert. Religious claims appear laden with values and morals as well as factual and historical assertions in an inextricable blend. Religious statements are literal and figurative, metaphorical and univocal. Such a limited view of language can hardly make sense of religious utterances God as a person, father, or friend.

On this account, assertions are exclusively factual propositions or emotive expressions in accordance with the epistemological dualism of Hume and Kant. Wittgenstein and Ayer systematize this distinction and identified meaningful combinations of words with empirical states of affairs, such that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[115] Religious language presents a unique challenge to this easy divide since it appears to involve elements of subjective involvement, functions as indicative statements, and yet refuses to admit either

---

[114] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 13.
[115] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 56, 5.6.

verification or falsification. The theories represented by the University Debate attempt to wrestle through the problems from within the designative tradition. In fact, they were successful in anticipating some aspects of what will prove to be a much more adequate account of religious language. Unfortunately, their marriage to some of the above presuppositions cripples their ability to account for the features of metaphysical statements observed in their wide use.

Despite the claim of early logical empiricists to be 'empirical', they did not take the empirical reality of language-use as their starting point. Instead, they put forward largely *prescriptive* accounts of how religious language *should* be used, not an analysis of how religious language actually *is* used. As Russell and Wittgenstein explicitly stated in the *Tractatus*, the goal was to postulate an ideal language and attempt to impose the regulations implied in that to language as it was used in practice. Rather than giving a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of language as it appears in the world, this prescriptive approach attempts to force the model that had been found to be successful in empirical science onto every realm of discourse. Taylor argues that all of the abortive designative theories of language meaning are "sustained by a Cartesian-type error, that of ontologizing what seems to them a good method (and is, indeed, for some purposes). That is, they take a late-achieved, regimented language of accurate description and inference as the key to language in general."[116] The designative view of language does provide a useful paradigm for the empirical sciences and rightly should be applied to language use in that context. It is the misappropriation of this ideal to areas of discourse, which do not exhibit the same purposes or functions as that of the natural sciences, that accounts for the inadequacies of the designative theories of language.

---

[116] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 116.

Chapter 4: The Paradigm Shift

Not everything that can be said can be said clearly, and what we
cannot remain silent about we must speak of as best we can.
- Jerry Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*

From where does religious language derive its meaning? The philosophical problems of religious utterances emerge from their unique modes of operation. Metaphysical statements of the religious variety claim to describe extraordinary events and experiences of the divine. As a matter of necessity, religious language uses many of the same words and sentences as ordinary, everyday language. It looks like indicative speech, and functions like descriptive factual assertions, yet it resists any experimental verification or falsification typically demanded of this form of discourse. More than this, it is shot through with metaphorical imagery and analogical attribution. A seeming majority of statements about God are figurative, which raises the question of how they should be understood. According to the traditional view of language, metaphor is superfluous ornamentation which can be reduced to a straightforward paraphrase without any semantic loss. With religious metaphors, the translations are heavily contested, even in the same tradition. As the historical trajectory of the designative theory of language is understood, the implications of the underlying assumptions become evident. The proper role of language is restricted to a narrow role of describing factual states of affairs or expressing emotional states. The modernist epistemology leaves philosophers with two choices for where to locate the function of religious language, either objective or subjective, and the latter is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of the positivistic challenges of Ayer and Flew. None of the theories based in this tradition offer a full enough theory of religious language to account for the continued use of it as it is found in the world today, let alone the other realms which were equally discounted such as ethics and aesthetics.

It is at this point that we turn our attention to the more recent developments that offer more promising explanations of the meaning and function of language in general and religious language in particular. First and foremost, it seems strange to assume the atomistic sense perception implied in the empiricist epistemology. With more than a few seconds of reflection on one's own experience, it becomes evident that the world is not experienced as isolated bits of sounds, colors, or textures, but primarily as a meaningful whole. In direct contradiction to the Humean "simple impression", the background "unity of the world is presupposed by anything which could present itself as a particulate bit of 'information,' and so whatever we mean by such a particulate bit, it couldn't be utterly without relation to all others."[117] One cannot underestimate the impact of this paradigmatic shift in epistemology. The logical atomism of Frege-Russell-Wittgenstein is predicated on the notion of individual sense-data forming the basic epistemic building blocks of the mind. Only later are they combined into meaningful wholes as composite 'simples.' Conceiving of reality as such narrow bits of data is actually a late-achieved mode of reflection, not the way in which one originally perceives their world. Without a background of meaningful relations and narrative, "such perceptions would then belong to no experience at all, they would be without an object, a blind play of representations, - less even than a dream."[118] In the wake of the twentieth century positivists and their commentators, a different approach to language emerges that dovetails with phenomenological and hermeneutical theories of knowledge. Together, they open up the bounds of meaning and recognize the fundamental situatedness of all language.

---

[117] Taylor, 15.
[118] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 107.

4.1 The Wittgensteinian Paradigm Shift

The early pioneer of the formulation of logical positivism eventually became its biggest critic. Ludwig Wittgenstein, after spending years away from the philosophical world, began to recognize the deficiencies implied in his picture theory of meaning in the *Tractatus*. The impossibility of the ideal language he and Russell had proposed was becoming more evident as he contemplated more the realities of language in the world. In this way, his critique of the designative theory will mirror this study. It is the *actual use* of language which provides the paradigm, not some postulated ideal. Wittgenstein comments that,

> The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. – We have got on to the slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground![119]

The logical strictures of the traditional understanding of language provide the perfect conditions for ideal communication. The problem is that these perfect conditions are never *achieved* in all the contingencies and vicissitudes of real life. The designative theory of language places a requirement on language that it can never hope to meet! For this reason, it is powerless to help the one who wants to understand or use *actual language*, religious or otherwise. What is needed in a theory is the nuance, complexity, and messiness of real language use which provides the friction Wittgenstein desires. "Back to the rough ground!"

How does language occur in living contexts? Wittgenstein criticizes his former position by way of critiquing Augustine's account of the picture theory of meaning. Augustine sees words

---

[119] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Third (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), 46.

as naming objects, which is what constitutes the entirety of their meaning. As he examines the example of "slabs" or "bricks", Wittgenstein observes that words are never used in such a clinical and isolated manner. The word 'brick' has meaning only in the context of bricklaying. One learns the words in the context of being ordered to 'bring bricks' or 'lay bricks', never as 'brick'. In fact, "a great deal of stage-setting is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense."[120] In order to get a sense of what a word means, one needs to examine how it is used in context by the community responsible for its use. They are never acquired one by one as some internal dictionary, each with a univocal definition entry. In the idealized dictionary, each word contains only one definition. Turn to any *real* dictionary, however, and one will immediately notice a long list of definitions for each word.

Not just words, but even sentences may actually have multiple legitimate meanings depending on the context in which they occur. Lakoff and Johnson use the example, "Please sit in the apple-juice seat."[121] This sentence is perplexing in isolation. However, if one is getting ready to be seated for dinner and there are different drinks beside each setting, the sentence is perfectly understandable. Formerly, propositions were isolated and examined just as sense and reference, 'saying something about something.' Rather, statements are not just combinations of individual names, mere inert signs and notes, but are always and essentially "*someone* saying something *to someone* about something."[122] Meaning is a function of *contextual criteria*. Both the speaker, with their background horizon of history, culture, and presuppositions, and the hearer, with their horizon, are essential to the determination of meaning. Gill illustrates this point by highlighting J. L. Austin's famous saying, "The bull is charging." Depending on the setting in

---

[120] Wittgenstein, 257.
[121] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 12.
[122] Ricoeur and Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 138. Emphasis mine.

which these words are spoken, they may function as "a description, a warning, an example of English grammar, a joke, a signal, a coded message, an example of the multi-functional nature of language (as is the case now), a translation of a non-English utterance, as esthetic evaluation, etc."[123] The same statement can take on a completely distinct and legitimate meaning depending on the setting in which it was said, by whom, and to whom.

Wittgenstein's explanation of these varied uses takes the form of his famous 'language games.' Without ever giving a clear description of what he means by the term, he uses the idea of language games to intimate that speaking always belongs to a particular activity which occurs in the broader background of human life. The notion of 'games' serves as a suggestive analogy for the various forms of language. Each unique game can rightly consider itself a 'game', while bearing only vague associations with many others. As Hordern says, "The criteria that distinguish chess from baseball are quite different from the criteria that distinguish chess from checkers or baseball from softball."[124] It is impossible to give a single, conclusive definition of games, but one can still have a tacit awareness of what is considered a game and what is not. Games bear only a "family resemblance" to one another, some more closely and others more distantly. "Think of the tools in a toolbox," writes Wittgenstein, "there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a gluepot, glue, nails, and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects."[125] One may attempt to define the concept 'tool' as 'that which modifies something else.' As a definition, this works more for some and less for others. It may be easy to see how it fits for a handsaw, but less so for the rule. "There is not a common essence; rather, there are overlapping characteristics… at one end of a spectrum to another."[126]

---

[123] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 100–101.
[124] Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 81.
[125] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 6.
[126] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 65.

Wittgenstein points out that just as strands combine to form a strong rope, there is no single thread that reaches the entire length of the rope. They connect to each other, and by extension form a unified whole. Language functions analogously, with terms admitting loose definitions and entire regions of discourse requiring different criteria for legitimate meaningfulness. At the risk of mixing metaphors, one more quotation from Wittgenstein can help communicate the variety of loose association of language games in reality. Here, he compares the multiplicity of language games to the cabin of a train.

> We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; the fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro.[127]

Language operates on similar principles of having discrete 'games' in which certain rule sets define legitimate and illicit discursive 'plays.' One cannot stand outside the activity as a disengaged observer and legislate rules for a particular game, nor can one import foreign rules from one game into another. A soccer player attempting to kick a field goal for three points is nonsense because it is not a play in the game. Of course, this is precisely the sort of foreign importation the positivists and the early Wittgenstein were guilty of. The rules of the empirical-scientific language game were taken as the definitive bounds of *all* language games, to the detriment of all metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic uses of language.

Philosophical problems, such as the aporia of religious language, arises when one pulls language out of its original game and enforces an alien set of rules on it. By wrenching the words from their original context and examining them in isolation as instruments of transparent and

---

[127] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 7.

logical communication, as in the case of the positivists, it inevitably leads to insoluble problems and confusion. Wittgenstein points to the experience of repeating a single word until it sounds silly and loses its sense of being a word. It becomes a sound rather than a word and feels 'off.' Extracting language from its native environment and placing it under a semantic microscope creates philosophical problems by making it a foreign species in a strange environment. As Tilley writes, "to extract that part of the language from the language game and to examine it *in vitro* instead of *in vivo* changes the meaning of that part that has been extracted."[128] That language was never intended to be meaningful in such a critical context. In Wittgenstein's words, "Philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*."[129] Languages resist the strict demand for such precise definition, and one must remain content with a 'loose' definition based on the range of semantic use. In his *Knowing God*, Jerry Gill calls this the "principle of sufficient precision" and suggests viewing the requisite level of precision as determined by what is appropriate to the context. In the laboratory, absolute clarity is appropriate, whereas in the life of faith, a wider semantic range should be permitted.[130] Wittgenstein argues that the only way to alleviate seemingly insoluble aporias (to show "the fly the way out of the fly-bottle") is to abstain from prescribing certain rules and ideals for language, and instead observe the actual use of language in its own unique game.[131]

What exactly constitutes a language game? Wittgenstein remains as enigmatic as ever in his later work and never fully describes the term. Some argue that language games refer to particular cultures, activities, or occupations alternatively. Perhaps appropriately, he leaves

---

[128] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 66.
[129] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 60.
[130] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 65.
[131] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 309.

"ragged what is ragged" and only gives a precise definition by means of examples of use.[132]

Examples of language games include: Giving orders, obeying them, describing, reporting, speculating, forming a hypothesis, presenting, reading, imagining, singing, guessing, joking, praying, and confessing among many more.[133] What becomes apparent in this list is that these activities can each be completed in various parts of life. The idea used to link these two is that language games, as discrete areas of discourse, are tied to *forms of life*. The form of life refers to a particular way of being in the world, and a corresponding way of understanding the world as it is. Language derives its meaning from the "entire background of activities and practices" rather than containing its own meaning in some transparent referential function.[134] Only through empathetic participation can one eventually discern the meaning of a term through observing its use in practice. Just as it is easier to pick up on the rules of a board game as you play, so too is it easier to learn the meaning of words as they are put to use. The criteria of meaningfulness are bound to the specific language game being played, and more fundamentally, determined by the form of life connected to it. The chess community determine the range of legitimate and illegitimate moves in the game. Likewise, the community which comprises and participates in the form of life determines the range of meaningful uses of language. Speaking only ever occurs as a part of a form of life, it belongs to a larger framework of understandings and presuppositions which help determine the shape of life.

Language games are also distinguished by unique vocabularies. One of the main features of a discrete game is when the words used in it are unique and only definable in terms of other words which belong to that language game. Ethical terms such as 'good,' 'bad,' 'duty,' and

---

[132] Wittgenstein, 71.
[133] Wittgenstein, 10.
[134] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 61.

'ought,' belong to the set of vocabulary specific to that realm of discourse. Other ones, such as 'incarnation,' 'transubstantiation,' 'perichoresis,' and 'supralapsarian,' belong to the Christian theological form of life. Hordern points out that defining these terms will eventually lead to a circularity in their definitions. This circularity is not self-defeating or begging the question but characterizes a particular realm of discourse with its own legitimate criteria of meaning. William Quine suggests the metaphor of "the web of beliefs", by which words mutually support one another in their meaning.[135] Some may be more central and others peripheral in the overarching structure of the language game, but they are integrally related and interdependent for their meaning. Contrary to Cartesian foundationalism, this approach posits a constellation of mutually supported claims which remain suspended by one another. As Wittgenstein says, "the foundation-walls are carried by the whole house."[136] It is difficult to articulate how one might justify their statements apart from participation in the form of life which gives rise to the use of language. The lines of demarcation blur between definition and term. Wittgenstein uses yet another metaphor to illustrate his point,

> It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid… But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.[137]

There is a dynamic interplay between the meaning of terms such that they support the constitution of each other's' definitions. But why use the words in this way? How does it get its meaning originally?

---

[135] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 64.

[136] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 248.

[137] Wittgenstein, 96–97.

Wittgenstein points to the form of life out of which meanings emerge as the final justification for words. All searches for an ultimate justification eventually come to an end. The meaning, as the use of words, is grounded in the entire lived history of the community in which it remains alive as a part of speech. "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life."[138] There are no foundational "basic beliefs" that appear as intuitively certain from which one can build up a reliable and 'correct' knowledge. Eventually, the investigation will arrive at the question, "Why do you play the language game belonging to *this* form of life?" Wittgenstein responds, "If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do.""[139] One can dig no further. The situatedness of a speaker in a particular form of life gives rise to a way of understanding the world which undergirds their assessments of evidence, meaning, and good and bad. At the foundation of knowledge is not an immediate perception, but a way of "*being-in-the-world*" as thrown into a meaningful world before critical reflection even begins.[140] Meaning is not built up through inductive empiricism, but *apprehended* and only subsequently broken down into constituent impressions.

So, in the later work of Wittgenstein, one finds a radical shift from the traditional picture theory of meaning. An argument can certainly be made that the later Wittgenstein pushes the philosophical landscape towards postmodernity in a significant way. Rather than functioning as a narrow correspondence between words and referents, meaning emerges from the use of words as embodied in a particular form of life. In essence, he reverses the traditional modernistic conception of meaning directing use so that it is actually the *use* that determines the *meaning*.

---

[138] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 226.
[139] Wittgenstein, 85.
[140] Ricoeur and Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human sciences*, 56.

Areas of discourse, such as religious language, comprise language games which properly belong to a particular way of understanding and being in the world. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this work on more recent linguistic and hermeneutical theories of meaning and language. Yet, it was not without challenges. This attempt to blend the subjective and objective elements which were formerly divided by the modern epistemological dualism threatens to swing the pendulum too far the other way. Many felt that this led to a lapse into fideistic subjectivism. With each language game determining its own semantic criteria, how can there be any intersubjective critique?

Wittgenstein's insights have led to a number of significant advances in the understanding of the complexity of actual language use. For the sake of remaining within the scope of this study, the main implications of Wittgenstein's paradigm will be limited to a short list. Wittgenstein may have opened a veritable floodgate of innovation for linguistic theory, but he did not flesh out many of his own contributions. Wittgenstein died relatively shortly after releasing his groundbreaking thoughts, and it was left to some of his successors to tease out more fully the implications of his thought. The following sections will explore the contributions of later thinkers to some of the key insights he provided, namely (1) language games as referring to fundamental convictions and their defense against fideism, (2) the interpenetration of language, knowledge, and activity, and (3) the possible cognitivity of metaphors, symbols, and analogies.

4.2 Religious Convictions and Pictures of Reality

First, one of the most important insights provided by the later Wittgenstein is the reference to the use of language in a form of life as the final justification. As mentioned above, if one digs far enough down to the bottom of one's justifications, evidence, and reasons for using certain language, they will eventually hit bedrock and their "spade is turned." This leads to a

view of meaning as expressing the most fundamental *convictions* of a person, rooted in their way

of life. Language expresses a 'picture' which one may see or not. While many believers attempt

to offer rational defenses of their beliefs and truly feel they are succeeding, they are really

speaking past one another. According to Wittgenstein, "Giving grounds, however, justifying the

evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as

true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of our

language-game."[141] Rather than offering evidence for a particular religious statement or view, the

language is itself expressive of a picture of the world which determines what may be accepted as

evidence or not. In a way it is reminiscent of Hick's travelers to the Celestial City, who see

positive experiences as having a different meaning emerging from their different fundamental

convictions about the nature of the world. Our religious language, on this view, gives expression

to "what we judge *with*, not what we judge."[142]

This shift is quite a radical departure from the careful and clinical attention to objectivity

found in the designative approach. Here, religious language (and any language game) expresses a

form of life, a way of being in the world which represents how one sees the world. Rather than

offering hypotheses to be judged by evidence, religious expressions actually display a mode of

understanding which is constitutive of the way that one judges. Language is no longer a tool for

the transparent communication of inner mental thoughts which correspond to sense perceptions

of the world. It instead expresses the most fundamental convictions of a person about the world.

One Dutch philosopher of religion who promoted the idea of religious language as

convictional language is Willem F. Zuurdeeg. In his *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*,

Zuurdeeg outlines an understanding of religious language as expressions one's convictions, "all

---

[141] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 204.
[142] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 63.

persuasions concerning the meaning of life; concerning good and bad; concerning gods and devils; concerning representations of the ideal man, the ideal state, the ideal society; concerning the meaning of history, of nature, and of the All."[143] Not content with Ayer's relegation of religious language to 'emotivism', Zuurdeeg sets out to chart a theory of convictional language which blends together both objectivity and subjectivity, cognitive and non-cognitive. As Hordern says, the Christian and the Muslim differ not just in how they "emote", but in what (or who) has *convicted* them.[144] Deriving from the Latin term *convinco*, which means to "overcome, conquer, or refute", Zuurdeeg argues that religious language is as much descriptive of one's convictor as it is expressive of oneself. In some ways, humans *are* their convictions. They represent a deep tie to their sense of self and are consequently spoken about and defended as one would about themselves. This self-involvement may help account for the existential significance of religious language acknowledged in the first chapter.

Convictions, then are quite different than the colloquial sense of being "convinced". They do not arise solely in response to the cumulative evidence for some hypothesis as in science, and in fact, often emerges in spite of mounting evidence to the contrary. It belongs to a different sort of function entirely. The *convictus* is overcome by a *convictor* who is *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*, a mystery which makes us tremble but also attracts us or fascinates us.[145] One does not reason their way to a conviction as a disengaged mind, they are overwhelmed, drawn, or *grasped*. "We will therefore not say that a scientist *is convinced* that a certain hypothesis is true, but that he takes it to be true. We will say, however, that a Nazi was *convinced* that the Aryan race was called to lead the world."[146] This is the reason for the impotence of apologetics. Hardly

---

[143] Willem F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 26.
[144] Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 68.
[145] Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, 28.
[146] Zuurdeeg, 26. See also Rudolf Otto's well-known, *The Idea of the Holy* on the concept of the *numinous*.

anyone is reasoned into or out of a religion in life. Generally, they are 'grasped' by a certain

conception of the world, a *form of life*. Using terms such as 'grounds' and 'justification' imply

the detached observation of the designative theory. Instead, Zuurdeeg argues that convictions

require participation and the immediate involvement in a particular way of life. It is only an

existential engagement with a particular convictor that one may be convinced in the proper

sense.

There is an implicit level of personal commitment in any conviction which transcends

mere belief that something is true. When one is convicted by Allah, they commit to living the life

of a faithful Muslim. In Wittgenstein's terms, the language game requires a commitment to the

form of life. According to Zuurdeeg, assenting to a particular religious tradition, becoming

convinced, involves a change in the whole person.

> A man who really has 'become convinced that' is no longer the same
> man. Many times, a person is convinced, not only 'in spite of' the
> facts, but even 'in spite of' himself. Saul kicks against the pricks
> (Acts 9:5). After his conversion he receives another name (Paul);
> that is to say, he has become another man. Conversion is a very
> strong, clear, outspoken form of becoming convinced.[147]

This new identity stems from an entirely new understanding of the world. Everything in a

person's life will be cast in a new light from the luminescence of the new convictor. The

language of conviction, then, is expressive of this personal involvement and identity. "In a real

sense a man is what he says in convictional language."[148] A change from one language game to

another is not just indicative of a different vocabulary. According to Wittgenstein's connection

of the games to the way of life, adopting a new language is expressive of a change of

convictions, that is, of the way of understanding and being in the world. This idea does not imply

---

[147] Zuurdeeg, 31.
[148] Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 69.

that conversion is a change from *no* conviction to a religious conviction. "Nobody can live totally without convictions."[149] Conversion always involves the transition from one conviction to another, even if the original conviction is atheistic naturalism. Of course, one can participate in multiple language games and be convicted by multiple convictors. A person can easily be both a Catholic and a Republican, though they typically speak from one or the other at any given time.

Essential to his account of religious language is the notion that language is always intervention, it is always powerful.[150] This presupposes a dynamic and creative faculty of language in human life which would be utterly anathema in the traditional understanding. When the rebel leader gives the word, the revolution begins. When the protestor voices their moral conviction, she invites others to see the world the same way. Language is the means by which humanity *establishes* our inevitably situated and perspectival reality. For Zuurdeeg, playing a particular language game is essential to the formation of oneself and their world through the realization of their conviction. His use of the word "establish" is not accidental. Others suggest the word "create", which he feels betrays the Heideggerian insight of the 'being thrown into the world' and what was already given in one's existence. Yet, the designative theory's preference for "affirm" seems to weakly imply that a conception of the world exists apart from one's subjective involvement. Thus, he attempts to account for both the objective "given" of the world and the subjective "convictions" about its meaningful conception as a whole. Religious language always and emphatically says, "Here I am, and this is what life means to me."[151] In this way, religious language is always a witness to a particular convictor and to an understanding of one's world that is shaped by it.

---

[149] Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, 31.
[150] Zuurdeeg, 85.
[151] Zuurdeeg, 90.

There is much to be commended in Zuurdeeg's underappreciated work. First, his attention to both the objective and subjective elements of experience leads to a more holistic epistemology. Ordinary experience is not divided up into discrete colors, sounds, and sensations, as the modern empiricists claimed. Consciousness emerges *already in* a narrative context. An attempt to define the meaning of language must always start from a perspective, and there is no "Archimedean point" from which we can begin our critical analysis. Hordern concurs that "we cannot find some realm outside all convictions from which we can weigh the merits of one another's convictions."[152] Zuurdeeg's notion of convictions pays due to both the sensitivity to a world which is given in existence and to the idea that religious locutions are always self-involved and laden with personal judgment. Second, he offers perhaps the most appropriate term to describe the reference of religious language, *conviction*. This word points to the meta-level function of the religious way of life, as *determining the evidence*. Operating as a sort of background structure, convictions organize one's perception of reality by highlighting certain features as important and others as unimportant. Hordern claims that the real reason metaphysical question resist conclusive arbitration is that "what really divides men is their concept of what is evidence."[153] Asking to justify one's conviction, or standard of what counts as evidence for one claim or another, is like asking why the standard meter stick in Paris is considered to be a meter long. It simply *is* the standard of measurement agreed upon by a community of people who share a particular form of life. As Hordern says, "the giving of reasons must come to an end… if someone does not play the game, no further reasoning can force him to do so."[154]

---

[152] Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 70.
[153] Hordern, 101.
[154] Hordern, 98.

Finally, he puts forward the idea of being "grasped" by a convictor and overwhelmed, not by evidence, but by an attraction to an understanding of life. This is both a strength and a fatal weakness of Zuurdeeg. For one, this depiction is consonant with the lived experience of coming to a particular persuasion about life and religion. Apologetics is notoriously inept as a means to bringing someone to faith and seems to serve those already in a religious form of life rather than those who belong to another. The common experience of being converted to a position bears a striking resemblance to his description of being impelled or drawn towards a certain conviction about how to understand the world and live in it. On the other hand, Zuurdeeg fails to maintain his early attention to the sensitivity of convictions to factual considerations. The idea that the convictor draws "*irresistibly*" seems to suggest there is little to no act of volition in the commitment to a conviction. As Hordern comments, "In the deepest sense, we do not choose our convictors arbitrarily or otherwise: we are chosen by our convictors."[155] At some point, rational defenses fail and one has no option but to claim 'this is what I do'. Zuurdeeg, while contributing greatly to the theory of religious language, eventually lapses to irrationalism in the absence of any place for a true critical function in the acceptance of religious convictions. Why should one choose one religious tradition over another? Additionally, without the possibility of offering critique between language games, there is no way to articulate a legitimate protest against fanatical or harmful ways of thinking and being in the world.

One of Wittgenstein's most prominent students, D.Z. Phillips, attempts a similar blending of subjective and objective elements as Willem Zuurdeeg, while also preserving the possibility of intersubjective criticism. In response to Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Beliefs*, Phillips developed a theory of the religious

---

[155] Hordern, 100.

language game as expressing *pictures* of reality. Much like Zuurdeeg's convictional language, it seems that Phillips' pictures offer a particular way of viewing reality. Seeing the world through the religious picture is not like assenting to a hypothesis. Tilley quotes Phillips saying, "It does not involve the weighing of evidence or reasoning to a conclusion. What it does involve is seeing how the belief regulates a person's life."[156] Phillips wants to avoid saying that religious language makes either empirical-factual claims, like Flew, or emotional-attitudinal claims, as Ayer and Braithwaite maintained. Religious statements weave together the background against which "hypotheses are verified, and attitudes assessed."[157] In short, they are the "criteria, not the object of assessment."[158]

Phillips' concept of 'pictures' does not point to an illustration of some more fundamental belief or activity. The picture of the whole of reality is prior to any of the parts of one's life. According to him, learning to understand the picture is constituted by learning how to *react* accordingly. When one no longer understands the picture of reality, they can no longer act *as if* it is the case. In a sense, behavior is the primary means of expressing this picture of life. He ties the religious language game so closely to the form of life from which it arises, that for him the behavior is as fundamental as the speech itself. Speech, in some ways, can be embodied. Reacting according to a picture is participating in and understanding the picture. It is "seeing it". Dramatic events can change this picture and cause the loss of meaning. He illustrates this by pointing to the traumatic death of a loved one.

> The untimely death of one's child renders talk of God's love meaningless for one. One might want to believe, but one simply cannot. This is not because a hypothesis has been assessed or a theory tested and found wanting. It would be nearer the truth to say

---

[156] Quoted in Tilley, *Talking of God*, 62.
[157] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 63.
[158] Quoted in Tilley, *Talking of God*, 63.

that a person cannot bring himself to react in a certain way; he has no use for a certain picture of the situation.[159]

When one can no longer react to the picture religious language paints of reality, they have lost its meaning. As with Zuurdeeg, one is always guided by a conviction, or 'picture' in this case, of one sort or another. The naturalist is as convicted of their belief as the fanatic. However, situations can change such that one loses sight of this larger conception of reality entirely.

Phillips has faced many charges of simple fideism over the years. While certainly leaning towards the noncognitive end of the spectrum, he defends himself from the charges on several occasions, citing three primary features of his theory which differentiate him from irrationalism. First, he refuses to completely cordon off language games from one another. Following Wittgenstein's encouragement to "leave ragged what is ragged", Phillips articulates an understanding of language games as interpenetrating one another and overlapping at significant junctures. Just as 'running' is an acceptable move in both the games of soccer and football, so too are there congruent moves in different language games. Second, then, these games can offer critique on the areas where they overlap. The religious language game contains historical, scientific, and moral claims. Where these statements overlap with their primary realms of discourse, there can be a fruitful dialogue. Of course, the game which is dabbling in a secondary function would be wise to defer to the original community in which historical, scientific, and moral statements are formed. For just this same reason, a soccer player can learn a lot from a track sprinter about explosiveness and form in running. Finally, the rejection of an objective, universal perspective does not preclude the possibility of criticism altogether.[160]

---

[159] Quoted in Tilley, *Talking of God*, 63.
[160] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 71.

Both of these thinkers have substantial insight into the function of language. They build on Wittgenstein's insistence on the form of life being the final justification which one can offer for their religious statements. Zuurdeeg's notion of convictional language will be perhaps the clearest term one will find for getting at precisely what it is that religious language purports to express. Decades later, James McClendon and James Smith picked up the term and developed it alongside Austin's speech-act theory in their book, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*.[161] They actually proposed a much more clearly articulated definition of convictions as "persistent beliefs such that, if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before."[162] Similarly to Zuurdeeg, they found this word to capture the unique interplay of objective description, subjective perspective, and existential involvement that is characteristic of religious language. Phillips supplements this account in significant ways by providing a thorough defense of a critical function not only within a given form of life, but also between language games. The recognition of the many forms of statements within just religious language (historical, scientific, moral, etc.) helps alleviate the profusion of confusion illustrated in the first chapter. In creeds, worship, and scriptures, religions can and do blur the line between the religious language game and other areas of discourse. As they do, they ought to keep in mind the criteria for meaningfulness which those communities embody in their disciplines.

4.3 The Convergence of Knowing, Doing, and Saying

One of the primary insights of the later Wittgenstein is to draw attention to the dynamic interplay of concepts such as saying, doing, and knowing. Previously, there was a strict divide

---

[161] James McClendon and James Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).
[162] McClendon and Smith, 87.

between statements made, actions taken, and mental cognition. Words merely depict the inner contents of the mind, the mental representations of reality. The designative theory views language as playing a subsidiary role in the communication of pure cognitive knowledge. In shifting the view of meaning from the referential function of words to their use in life, the later Wittgenstein suggested that words actually do quite a bit more than point to clear thoughts. He writes, "To repeat – naming is something like attaching a label to a thing. One can say that this is preparatory to the use of a word."[163] The designative function of words is a *prerequisite* for their use in life and consequently their true meaning. This observation raises the question, "What all can be done with words?" If meaningfulness is a function of use, then it becomes apparent that one needs to figure out what all tools are in the toolbox![164]

After Wittgenstein, the most influential language theorist is J.L. Austin, an Oxford professor of language and truth in the middle of the twentieth century. Without explicitly acknowledging the influence of the later Wittgenstein, his theory clearly builds on some of his ideas. Austin develops a theory of language as "speech-acts" which contained not just the descriptive function but a performative one as well. Philosophy had long been obsessed with what he called "constative" uses of language to the exclusion of "performative" uses. Traditionally, language was assumed to only have a descriptive, representational function. Austin terms this assumption, the "descriptive fallacy."[165] In contrast, he found that language involves performatives in addition to the constative uses emphasized in the past. Performatives nearly always occur in the first person present indicative active form and do more than simply state a fact; they *make what is said a fact*. Austin writes,

---

[163] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 13.
[164] Wittgenstein, 20.
[165] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 109.

> Suppose, for example, that in the course of a marriage ceremony I say, as people will, "I do" – (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife). Or again, suppose that I tread on your toe and say "I apologize". Or again, suppose that I have the bottle of champagne in my hand and say "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth". Or suppose I say "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow". In all these cases it would be absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done – the action of betting, or christening or apologizing. We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action.[166]

Early on, he attempts to categorize all statements according to these two categories, but later he found this to be an unhelpful dichotomy. Instead, his later thought shows a theory which attributes both functions to nearly all speech acts in varying degrees. He found a clear distinction to be impossible because it assumes that any statement can have only one function, or "force", at a given time.[167] All statements contain multiple different forces simultaneously, so that a statement can both be stating and enacting a reality. Rather than being subject to the basic categories of 'truth' or 'falsity', performatives can be either felicitous or infelicitous, happy or unhappy, to the extent to which they are either successful in their function or fail to establish the fact. It is not hard to imagine religious equivalents to Austin's examples and immediately recognize the importance of such a theory. "I baptize," "I pronounce," "I bless," and even "I curse," all represent similar performative expressions in the religious language game. In some important ways, this helps to account for some of the oblique uses of language in religion which confounded the traditional theory of meaning.

Austin then developed a system distinguishing three main types of force implicit in all speech acts. He forms these three levels as a logical, not necessarily temporal, distinction and they are all almost always present simultaneously in any statement. The first is the *locutionary*

---

[166] Ramsey, *Words about God*, 148. Originally published in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 222–223.
[167] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 109.

act which refers to the actual words said or *what* is said. The second type is *illocutionary*, and

gets at the purpose for saying certain words, or *why* it was said. The final type is the

perlocutionary act which is simply the effects of the speech act on the hearer. A full explication

of these three levels is beyond the scope of this study, but it will suffice to point out that he

eventually came to associate meaning with all three of these levels. This builds on Wittgenstein's

loosening of the bounds of semantic import so as to make the theory of meaning match the

ordinary experience of speakers.

Austin's theory also challenged the binary concepts of truth and falsity, and he argued for

more of a continuum of truth than a strict all or nothing classification. In the classroom or

laboratory, the terms 'true' and 'false' may prove convincingly conclusive. However, "in real

life, as opposed to the simple situations envisaged in logical theory, one cannot always answer in

a simple manner whether it is true or false."[168] In everyday language, much less in religious

contexts, people are aware of a range of appropriateness and inappropriateness between the hard

and fast answers of 'true' and 'false'. In many cases, the answer is neither a simple yes or no, but

"rough". Austin illustrates this point with his famous example:

> Suppose that we confront "France is hexagonal" with the facts in this case, I suppose, with France, is it true or false? Well, if you like, up to a point; of course, I can see what you mean by saying that it is true for certain intents and purposes. It is good enough for a top-ranking general, perhaps, but not for a geographer. "Naturally, it is pretty rough", we should say, "and pretty good as a pretty rough statement." But when someone says: "but is it true or is it false? I don't mind whether it is rough or not; of course, it's rough, but it has to be true or false – it's a statement, isn't it?" How can one answer this question, whether it is true or false that France is hexagonal? It is just rough, and that is the right and final answer to the question of the relation of "France is hexagonal" to France. It is a rough description; it is not a true or a false one.[169]

---

[168] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 141.
[169] Austin, 141.

The appropriate response to the question, "Is it true or false?", depends on the context in which it was asked. It depends on the language game being played. In accordance with Gill's "principle of sufficient precision", it seems that the level of adequate precision is largely dependent on the subject matter being discussed. With religious language, more flexibility may be permitted due to the oblique nature of the subject.

In his work, Austin also poses a challenge to the traditional dichotomy between fact and value judgments. Since Hume, it has been taken as a given that statements either describe empirical facts or express value judgments. One cannot begin with a premise from one realm and argue to a conclusion in the other. These theoretical categories can never cross-pollinate since cognitivity is reserved for the factual realm. However, Austin complicates this simple dichotomy by pointing out that there are plenty of cases in which statements cannot be sorted into only two strict compartments. For example, "Taylor Swift writes good music," represents a mixed statement of both factual and value judgments. It expresses an evaluation of the music, which is obviously non-cognitive and subjective, but it is predicated on the factual state of affairs that Taylor Swift does make music. The claim is not *absent* of cognitive significance as evidenced by the fact that it would be perfectly acceptable to ask for *reasons* as to why the judgment has been made. While the answer may not be conclusive, it broadens the scope of what can be considered cognitively significant. These blended statements of cognitive and non-cognitive elements comprise a large swath of religious statements about which it is perfectly appropriate to debate and argue.

One may rightly point out that Russell and the early Wittgenstein would have likely asked to break down the complex claim into elementary propositions, so that the statement, "Taylor Swift makes good music," be understood as two separate claims; "Taylor Swift makes

music," and "The music that Taylor Swift makes is good." These can easily be categorized as factual and value judgments respectively once broken down to the constituent claims which comprised the original. However, Jerry Gill raises an important rebuttal to such a move. Even these elementary propositions can be broken down and the question, "Is what she makes to be called 'music'?", can reassert the difficulty Austin was getting at. Even how we arrive at our strict definitions implies a subjective judgment based on personal experiences and one's entire background horizon. Different definitions of music, informed by one's convictional foundations, arise from different forms of life. Even at the most basic levels, there is an inevitable interplay between subjective and objective, cognitive and non-cognitive, and fact and value.

Finally, Austin calls attention to the embodiment of language and fluidity of the distinctions between action and speech. The identification of performatives suggests that language can rightly be viewed as a type of action. Since all speech acts contain multiple forces in their illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, it is easy to see how language functions as an action. Gill argues this account leads one to view "language as a means by which the speaker projects himself into reality and thereby changes it. The traditional view dichotomizes language (thought) and action (reality), whereas Austin's view blends them in a functional manner. Speaking is, after all, an action through which the gap between the self and reality is spanned."[170] Language operates as a bridge between the internal and external worlds of experience by reifying the contents of the speech act. Not only can we do things with words in this way, we can also *say things without words*. The blurring of speech and action leads to a reconsideration of non-verbal communication as being a possible bearer of meaning as well. It is obvious enough that there are signs and symbols in the world that serve as communicative mediums. One only has to think of

---

[170] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 112.

their daily commute to bring to mind the signs, lights, and signals which serve as non-verbal 'words' to others. However, there are a whole slew of bodily gestures, facial expressions, and subtle postures which emerge as genuine locutions in Austin's scheme. Gill quips, "Even silence, in the right circumstances, speaks loudly."[171] The notion of embodied language was not developed fully by Austin, although he conclusively demonstrated the impossibility of restricting meaning to straight factual assertions.

The idea of embodiment led to some later developments by a renowned Hungarian physicist-turned-philosopher named Michael Polanyi. Coming from a background as a physical chemist, Polanyi's attention was directed to a reformulation of the modernist conception of scientific knowledge.[172] Austin blurs the lines between language and action, and Polanyi blurs the lines between knowledge and action with his idea of the tacit dimension. The predominant paradigm accepted the mind-material dualism, promoted by Locke and Hume, in which the observing ego was required to be disengaged, neutral, and uninvolved in the epistemic process. Polanyi sees the need to reclaim a more holistic epistemology that embraces the participation of the knower in the epistemic act. Polanyi writes,

> The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge. Any falling short of this ideal is accepted only as a temporary imperfection, which we must aim at eliminating. But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge.[173]

In an unprecedented reversal, Polanyi's inclusion of the self-involvement of the knower situates him as a post-critical philosopher. Instead of striving for the attainment of cognitive purity, he

---

[171] Gill, 113.

[172] Laurence W Wood, *Theology as History and Hermeneutics: A Post-Critical Conversation with Contemporary Theology* (Lexington, Ky.: Emeth Publisher, 2005), 81.

[173] Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, MA: Doubleday & Company, 1983), 20.

claims that the ideals of objectivism would destroy the very possibility of knowledge. He develops a theory of *tacit knowledge* that enables a more positive account of religious language.

Polanyi's post-critical epistemology is founded on a shift in his view of knowledge as a function of *awareness* and *activity*. These two facets form continua on which all judgments can be mapped. The two poles of the awareness continuum are *focal* and *subsidiary*. In any experience, the knower directs their attention towards certain features. These form the bounds of their focal awareness. The peripheral factors which form the background of the observation fade to the subsidiary level of awareness. His example of this dimension of awareness is simple. "Even while listening to speech or reading a text, our focal attention is directed towards the meaning of the words, and not towards the words as sounds or as marks on paper. Indeed, to say that we read or listen to a text, and do not merely see it or hear it, is precisely to imply that we are attending focally to what is indicated by the words seen or heard and not to these words themselves."[174] The placement of any one factor on this continuum is relative, of course, and depends on where one's attention is being directed at any given moment. As attention is drawn to the actual figures on this page, the *meaning* of them is relegated to subsidiary awareness. Inversely, as a reader 'loses themselves' in a text, the actual letters and words fade to distal awareness. Drawing from Gestalt psychology, Polanyi demonstrates that it is the *active* shifting of our awareness between particular impressions and meaningful wholes that one discovers knowledge.[175] Gill teases out the implications of this view saying, "Knowledge as awareness simply cannot be limited to that of which we are focally aware."[176] More than that is needed in the epistemic situation. In order to be proximally or focally aware of one thing is to presuppose a

---

[174] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 92.
[175] Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 6.
[176] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 130.

background against which it seen. One must "have a 'place to stand' – to attend *from* – in order to be able to attend *to* anything at all."[177]

The activity continuum lies between the polar ends of *bodily* knowledge and *conceptual* knowledge. The range of human behaviors spans conceptual acts, which are primarily verbal expressions, to non-verbal gestures and movements. Polanyi then claims that all activities and behaviors involve some manner of judgment. On the conceptual end, verbal assertions of fact obviously express judgments. However, even barely conscious responses and supposedly non-cognitive exclamations such as expressions like "Hello", "Amen", or "Hallelujah" involve judgments of some sort. They are judgments of the type of situation and the proper response to it. On the bodily end of the spectrum, concerted efforts as well as quick reflexes arise from a constellation of judgments about the situation in which it is in. Gill points out that this is the reason one can be charged with "misjudging" a long fly ball in the outfield or how quickly to stop at a red light.[178] Certain behaviors or bodily responses also accompany cognitive conceptualization, such as the furrowing of one's brow when thinking to oneself. So, cognitivity and knowledge are far wider categories than supposed by the traditional theory of knowledge. Insofar as an activity, conceptual or bodily, makes a judgment, it implies some claim to knowledge which can be appropriate or inappropriate to the situation in which it was offered. In this way, all acts imply some form of cognitive judgment which can be assessed.

Gill interprets Polanyi as superimposing these two continua over one another so that as the poles of focal awareness and conceptual activity are coordinated, the resulting region is considered *explicit knowledge*. So far as the opposite ends intersect, subsidiary awareness and bodily activity, one can identify what is properly called *tacit knowledge*. Polanyi wanted to assert

---

[177] Gill, 130.
[178] Gill, 131.

that the tacit dimension constitutes an integral domain of knowledge that should be regarded with the same status as explicit. Taylor refers to this embodied language as "enacted meaning", and points to its role in actively constituting one's understanding of the world. What can be considered as instances of tacit knowledge? Gill points out that most of us "walk, swim, shoot basketballs and the like without being able to articulate this knowledge in words."[179] Polanyi's primary example is the ability to recognize the physiognomy of the human face in a crowd of thousands or even millions. It would be difficult to articulate explicitly exactly what one recognizes as it is the subtle combination of countless indiscriminate features. When looking at a friend or spouse, it is not their nose, or eyebrows, or ears that one recognizes. It is the meaningful whole which establishes a sense of familiarity in the mind, not a composite built up from individual sense perceptions in an inductive process. In all of these examples, the knowledge *how* to do something often appears ineffable.

Explicit knowledge has been the only accepted knowledge in the objectivist epistemology. In fact, this is the knowledge with which philosophy is quite familiar. As the early Wittgenstein writes, "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[180] However, Polanyi wants to argue for the necessity of tacit knowledge which can never be made explicit. Further, there is nothing that can be made *entirely* explicit, and any and all statements imply some fundamental level of tacit knowledge. He writes,

> Things of which we are focally aware can be explicitly identified; but no knowledge can be made *wholly explicit*. For one thing, the meaning of language, when in use, lies in its tacit component; for another, to use language involves actions of our body of which we have only a subsidiary awareness. Hence, tacit knowing is more fundamental than explicit knowing: *we can know more than we can*

[179] Gill, 134.
[180] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 56, 5.6.

tell and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell.[181]

Even the most clinical observations made in science depend on a panoply of embodied skills and subsidiary awareness for their existence. Well, how does one learn tacit knowledge? Certainly, the methods of inquiry will differ from those on the conceptual, focal end of the spectrum.

Polanyi describes the process of internalizing tacit, bodily, and subsidiary knowledge by means of 'empathetic indwelling'. Some knowledge, namely that which resists externalization in language, may require active participation in the process of inquiry in order to be learned. Any motor skill or athletic feat exhibits this character. The simplest example is teaching a child to ride a bicycle. One can only verbalize a portion of what it means to *know how* to balance on a moving bicycle. Eventually, the child needs to get on the bike herself and 'feel out' the knowledge through her body. Even the most well-trained professional athlete may only be able to articulate some parts of how they perform when asked to seriously consider it. Still, there will remain parts of their embodied knowledge that remain ineffable. The tacit dimension involves this process of groping, grasping, or probing through active participation in the object of study. The scientist as well cannot avoid some personal involvement in the study in which they partake.[182]

So, what are the implications of these developments for religious language? First, knowledge must be viewed with a wider lens. All knowing involves degrees of focal or subsidiary awareness, not an absolute certainty as demanded by modern epistemology. Science itself involves a tacit dimension in its investigations, thought it often refuses to recognize it. Religious knowledge, especially, will lend itself to the tacit and embodied end of the spectrum

---

[181] Quoted in Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 133. The reference listed for this quotation appears to be incorrect in the Gill text.
[182] Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 25.

due to the admittedly oblique nature of the subject. The historical difficulty with articulating

religious knowledge should not be viewed with suspicion but should be expected. Many

apophatic mystical traditions emphasize the ineffability of certain religious experiences and

knowledge of the divine. If, as Polanyi suggests, a legitimate dimension of all knowledge

remains tacit and resists proper verbalization, one could expect elements of religious knowledge

do to the same.

Second, the view of language likewise needs to be wider. Wittgenstein initiates a

broadening of the range of linguistic acts to the point of blending it with a way of life. Austin and

Polanyi both appear to take up this mantle and push the boundaries even farther. 'Language'

includes non-verbal, bodily actions which function as communicative acts in much the same

way. This means that the analysis of language and the implications for meaning need to be

carried out to these other forms of enacted language. Kneeling before an altar is a cognitive act

as much as it is expressive of a particular attitude. It 'says' something about the judgment the

worshipper makes about the world in which they live, and the appropriateness of that sort of

behavior in the situation. Rituals, gestures, ceremonies, and postures all act as bodily 'speech

acts' and should be treated with similar consideration.

The later Wittgenstein introduces the idea that language has a more multifarious role in

life than was afforded by his previous position and the logical empiricists. More than just

depicting factual states of affairs in propositions or acting as emotive expressions, language can

do things. Austin "discovered" performatives in his theory and clearly condemns the narrow

view of language in the designative theory as a "descriptive fallacy".[183] This view is

complimented by Polanyi's tacit dimension, in which more than verbal expressions can be

---

[183] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 108–9.

regarded as genuine cognitive statements. All cognitive situations occur on continua between

focal, conceptual, and explicit assertions and subsidiary, bodily, and tacit enactment. The

original boundaries of religious locutions as verbal assertions about God must be expanded to

include the numerous tacit and implicit claims a believer makes in their daily lives and in their

worship. The actions that a believer takes are as indicative of their cognitive statements as are

their verbal expressions. Someone who spends twenty minutes each morning praying or

meditating is *saying* something in a real sense. This speech-*act* must be treated with the same

lens as do the explicit statements they make about their beliefs in creeds or in dialogue.

4.4 The Cognitive Significance of Metaphor, Symbol, and Analogy

The traditional designative theory of meaning seeks absolute clarity and certainty in any

language. This immediately rules out the possibility of metaphor as making any positive

cognitive contribution to philosophical debate since it unnecessarily obscures the straight-

forward, literal propositions which lie at the root of any genuine speech act. Aristotle, Locke, and

Hobbes all notoriously disparage the use of metaphor and figurative language as deceptive and

misleading. Only univocal language can be considered legitimate and cognitive because only

univocal terms can be used successfully in a syllogism without committing the fallacy of

ambiguity.[184] Since theological language is so thoroughly figurative, it is thought that religious

statements could be considered meaningful only insofar as they can be translated into literal,

empirical vocabulary. So, if one says, "God is a father," they simply imply that God is loving

and nothing more. It may be a poetic way of expressing the statement, but nothing informative is

gained in doing so, and there is no semantic loss if translated as a literal paraphrase. This

standard was called the translatability principle in logical positivism and was used for the

---

[184] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 118.

"hygienic" purposes of eliminating all metaphysical speech.[185] In the later Wittgenstein, however, meaningful discourse is broadened to include the possibility of metaphor, analogy and symbol as being cognitive and even *essential*. He opens up the possibility of regions of language where metaphor can even lead to insights which cannot be communicated by any other linguistic convention; it may even be *irreducible*. Wittgenstein left the insight characteristically "ragged," which leads to numerous thinkers to develop the ideas further in the latter half of the twentieth century.

First, it may be helpful to outline some of the terms involved as many different thinkers use them in a wide-ranging manner. Metaphor, symbol, and analogy have been alternatively used as either entirely distinct categories of language or as nearly synonymous by different authors. Paul Tillich (and Langdon Gilkey after him) establish one tradition which views nearly all theological language as symbolic, but they only differentiate it explicitly from *signs*, not from conventional semantic terms like metaphor and analogy.[186] Ricoeur follows suit and emphasizes the primacy of symbol as the first-order expression of religious experiences with myth serving as the corresponding second-order theological reflection.[187] A symbol is the primary language of religion, before abstract conceptualization is even possible in the forms of myth, theology, or philosophy. Thus, Ricoeur coins his well-known adaptation of the Kantian phrase, "the symbol gives rise to thought."[188] Both Tillich and Ricoeur point to a sense that symbols bear a more intimate resemblance between their referents than metaphors. Tillich in his insistence that the symbols "participate" in the referent (a flag participates in the power and dignity of the country)

---

[185] Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*, 1.

[186] Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 48.

[187] Paul Ricoeur, "Structure and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 28.

[188] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 347–57. This phrase is the title of the conclusion to the book and is given full treatment therein.

and Ricoeur pointing to their being "bound to the cosmos."[189] Yet, neither of them carefully

outline the distinctions in terms and use it as a universal phrase for figurative language. Stiver

highlights the fact that Janet Soskice provides a more precise distinction that "metaphors are

figures of speech and are not events or things, as symbols can be, although symbols can also be

words."[190] So, symbols can be understood as broader category of either literary or non-literary

figuring of a in terms of b, while metaphors are strictly linguistic constructions. A flag, a cross,

or a lotus flower can all be religious symbols, but not metaphors. Explaining God as a father,

mother, or friend can be considered symbolic, but can more accurately be described as

metaphors.

In either case, symbol and metaphor do exhibit a similar dynamic of representing one

object in light of another. They highlight what David Tracy calls "similarities-in-differences,"

and say simultaneously, "a = b" and "a ≠ b". How does this function differ from analogy?

According to Sallie McFague and Janet Soskice, analogy resembles univocal language more

closely because of its more extensive and explanatory nature.[191] Analogy tends to outline

precisely how one object resembles another. So, "God is a Heavenly Father," is a metaphor while

saying, "God is like a Father in that he is loving," would represent an analogy. They claim that

analogy is an inert extension of literal meaning while metaphor is a creative semantic innovation.

David Burrell and David Tracy disagree with this assessment and provide theories of analogy

that basically align with McFague and Soskice's definitions of metaphor. There is so much

disagreement about the classification of terms in this discussion that it is difficult to find a

conclusive answer. For the sake of this research, metaphor will be understood as a unique

---

[189] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 124.
[190] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 124.
[191] Stiver, 125.

linguistic convention in which the juxtaposition of two concepts causes a clash of meaning and subsequent semantic disclosure. Symbol will be regarded as a wider category which applies much of the same cognitive significance but in non-literary dimensions. Analogy will finally be taken as depicting "$a = b^n$", where "b" is an attribute observed in creation applied to God. This somewhat restricted view of analogy is in line with the Thomistic view of analogy as "proportionality" and "attribution". Just as medicine is healthy because it is the cause of health, so too is God wise because he is the ultimate cause of all wisdom.[192]

One of the early and most recognized theories of cognitive metaphor comes from Max Black, who coined the "interaction theory of metaphor." Before him, I. A. Richards suggested that metaphor was essential in describing reality and was irreducible to literal equivalents.[193] Black takes it a step further and insists that metaphor actually *creates* reality.[194] Rather than being seen as saying one thing while meaning another, metaphor should be viewed as saying something in terms which are suggestive of others. In other words, two constellations of meaning tied to particular concepts are interacting in the use of a metaphor. This interaction calls forth "associated commonplaces" which "filters and transforms" not just the referent, but both involved concepts. For example, when Jesus says to his followers, "You are the light of the world," both the concepts of the 'disciples' and 'light' will be viewed differently.[195] Richards calls the two elements the "tenor" and the "vehicle," while Black referred to them as the "frame" and the "focus."[196] A generous designative theory of language may be willing to concede this much, but how exactly is one supposed to determine which aspects of the frame are meant to be

---

[192] Stiver, 24.
[193] Ramsey, *Words about God*, 169.
[194] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 115.
[195] Matthew 5:14
[196] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 25–47. Quoted in Ramsey, *Words about God*, 173.

implied in the focus? Black's classic example is, "Man is wolf." He writes, "Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in "wolf-language" will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot, will pushed into the background. The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others – in short, *organizes* our view of man."[197] In doing so the metaphor gives rise to an entirely new semantic dimension through a Gestalt-like reframing of both constituents. Wolves may appear more human-like after the metaphor has been grasped, and humans will be seen as more wolf-like.

Ian T. Ramsey proposes another of the more articulate accounts of religious metaphor called, "qualified models." He argues that the new insights brought forth by metaphors should be viewed as "disclosure events," in which familiar concepts mediate an awareness, tacit or otherwise, of "depth." Metaphors and models present catalysts of thought, through which one can grasp the new dimension. Ironically, to illustrate the possibility of these disclosures, Ramsey uses examples from geometry and mathematics. Most obviously, he points to the experience of recognizing twelve straight lines on a paper as a cube.[198] As one begins to reflect on the structure of the lines, a new dimension or depth emerges. Gill reports Ramsey's frequently cited phrase describing these *disclosure experiences*; "the light dawns, the penny drops, and a whole new perspective is revealed."[199] Likewise, the concept of a mathematical limit draws one's attention to the concept of infinity. While resisting straightforward explication in literal language, the meaning of 'infinite' and 'zero' are discerned through disclosure experiences. In his estimation, the same is true for religious models and metaphors. The religious dimension is always mediated through the "lower" physical and moral dimensions.[200] So, religious language serves to evoke

---

[197] Quoted in Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 116.
[198] Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 25–26.
[199] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 182.
[200] Gill, 176.

"cosmic disclosure" experiences in which a new 'depth' can be perceived in the mundanity of reality. In such an experience, "the Universe confronts us" as "something declaring itself to us, something relatively active when we are relatively passive."[201] Ramsey intends for this account to be applicable for all religious experiences and language, and so the experience of a confrontation with the depth of the universe may not necessarily lead to a theistic interpretation. The purpose of religious language thus becomes to express a cosmic disclosure in such a way as to lead others to the same disclosure experience.

Ramsey views three distinct forms of religious locutions: one-word positive attributions ("perfect" or "simple"), one-word negative attributions ("infinite" or "impassable"), and two-word positive predications ("God is lion" or "God is lamb"). Central to his account is the empirical grounding of any of the three levels. The former two represent what I am delineating as analogy and operate similar to the concept of a limit in math. "One learns the use of terms like "perfection" by inductively examining various aspects of experience and ordering them according to their decreasing imperfection until "the penny drops" and one discerns what is meant."[202] This method lies very close to the Thomistic tradition of understanding analogical predication of God.

For any two-word 'qualified model,' which represents what I am calling *metaphor*, there is an anchoring in an empirical reality such as father, shepherd, or rock. This model is paired with a qualifier which points the interpreter in the direction of the disclosure. For example, "Heavenly Father" begins in experience with the model of a father. The qualifier, "Heavenly" warns that there is a logical distinction between the empirical model and the new semantic innovation. This qualifier acts as a conceptual pointer which suggests the direction in which the

---

[201] Ramsey, *Words about God*, 212.
[202] Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, 204.

meditative reflection should move. Gill warns that the "pointer is not to be mistaken for a description of the destination."[203] In accordance with Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge being partially ineffable, the cosmic disclosure is not easily described exhaustively. Instead, one uses religious metaphor to help others arrive at the same insight through critical reflection. Instead of merely evoking an emotion or attitude towards the world, there is always an inevitable merging of subjective values and objective reference through the empirical anchoring. One can perceive a new organization of the same sensory data, a new dimension of depth, which transcends the sum of the particulars and provides new fruitful insights that could not have been attained otherwise.

Paul Ricoeur makes much of this idea of the clash of meanings and the resultant new insight. At first, the literal incongruity of the terms gives rise to a "semantic shock" which directs the hearer to a "semantic innovation" which is informed by the interaction of the two terms.[204] It is precisely the "semantic impertinence" which cues the hearer into the new semantic pertinence being communicated. As Ian Ramsey says, the qualifier alerts the reader to the logical oddity of that particular combination of words. Ricoeur writes, "Logical absurdity creates a situation in which we have the choice of either preserving the literal meaning of the subject and the modifier and hence concluding that the entire sentence is absurd, or attributing a new meaning to the modifier so that the sentence as a whole makes sense."[205] Likewise, Taylor describes the function of metaphor as "an inappropriate figuring of A through B, which yields an insight when one grasps an appropriateness of a new kind."[206] Ricoeur echoes Black's interaction theory by claiming that "all of the connotations which are suitable must be attributed; the poem *means all*

---

[203] Gill, 205.
[204] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 116.
[205] Ricoeur and Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 173.
[206] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 140.

that it can mean."[207] Metaphor leads to a "momentary creation of language, a semantic innovation" in which a new sense emerges from the clash of the originals.[208] This is more than dressing up factual knowledge in a flashy new form, metaphor has an "ontological vehemence" that actually points to what has not been known before.[209] It opens up new depths of understanding and has the power to provide novel insights which were inaccessible when restricted to the univocal mode of expression. Figurative language should be considered a proper and indispensable form of language, especially in areas of discourse dealing with metaphysical objects.

Unfortunately, both Black's and Ramsey's theories of metaphor are noticeably vague when it comes to how exactly certain features are made prominent and others suppressed. Inquirers will likely want more specifics on the actual mechanics of metaphor. How exactly is one to determine which implications are intended versus accidental? Soskice and Eva Feder Kittay qualify the theories of metaphor by claiming that the process of discerning through the clash of meanings is more rule-*influenced* than rule-*governed*.[210] Metaphors clearly cannot be reduced to a set of precise standards, nor are they to be considered completely anarchic. They behave in recognizable patterns but resist any clear-cut verification or translation into literal equivalents as the positivists demanded. The appropriateness of one religious metaphor for God versus another is a matter of "personal hermeneutical judgement that cannot be conclusively demonstrated."[211] Religious symbolism is always given to a simultaneous yes and a no. There is an inevitable trading on senses when comparing two literally different entities. The Lord is not a

---

[207] Ricoeur and Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 177.
[208] Ricoeur and Thompson, 174.
[209] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies for the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, Robert Czerny, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 299.
[210] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 118.
[211] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 109.

shepherd, but somehow *is* a shepherd. There is a judgment about how and in what way a new constructed whole should be made from the incongruous parts. Ricoeur points to the *phronetic* character of both the judgments and the semantic constructions as he writes,

> In both cases, it is a question of 'making sense', of producing the best overall intelligibility from an apparently discordant diversity. In both cases, the construction takes the form of a wager or guess. As Hirsch says in Validity in Interpretation, there are no rules for making good guesses, but there are methods for validating our guesses. This dialectic between guessing and validating is the realization at the textual level of the micro-dialectic at work in the resolution of the local enigmas of a text. In both cases, the procedures of validation have more affinity with a logic of probability than with a logic of empirical verification – more affinity, let us say, with a logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability. Validation, in this sense, is the concern of an argumentative discipline akin to the juridical procedures of legal interpretation.[212]

Gone are the demands for certainty and transparency, the prerequisites of logical uniformity and empirical verification. In metaphor, and especially in that pervasive breed of symbolic religious language, the evidential weighing of evidence lends itself more to *validation* than to *verification* in the process of discerning a new emergent meaning through a disclosure situation. Ramsey argues, "the theological model works more like the fitting of a boot or a shoe than like the 'yes' or 'no' of a roll call." He calls the justification of particular theological claims as a matter of "empirical fit" rather than empirical verification.[213] It is a matter of testing particular statements against the phenomena which determines the degree of fittingness. The more consistent, simple, comprehensive, and coherent a particular theological metaphor has, the better.[214] This applies for particular metaphorical expressions as well as more fully developed models and theological systems. One may judge between entire religious traditions by

---

[212] Ricoeur and Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 175.
[213] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 130.
[214] Ramsey, *Words about God*, 216.

empathetically indwelling the "metaphysical map" and judging which accounts for a wider array

of phenomena in a simpler manner.[215] While not reducible to a rote method of interpretation,

metaphors can still function *reliably*. Again, one can hear Wittgenstein's call to "leave ragged

what is ragged" and look to the use for the meaning, not a unified definition.

The evidence of the pragmatic reliability of metaphors lies in their common successful

usage. Religious language is not the only language game where cognitive uses of metaphor

represents a legitimate 'move' in the game. Everyday language and scientific discourse are both

rife with examples of metaphorical language used reliably but without specific criteria for

verifiability. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson are well known for their work, *Metaphors We*

Live By, in which they outline the pervasive influence of common metaphors in everyday

language. Stable metaphors such as "argument is war," "time is river," and "language is conduit"

function as seemingly irreplaceable constellations of relations which shape both our discourse

and interactions with such objects. In a way, the structural metaphors influence our perceptions

of the objects irreversibly. The "Conduit metaphor" of language has reinforced (or caused?) the

designative theory of language by instilling in words a sense of their meaning independent of any

speaker or hearer. Words contain thoughts and can be used to transmit them from one mind to

the next. Better words do so transparently and reliably. Phrases such as "I *gave* you that idea,"

"His words *carry* little meaning," It's hard to *get* the idea *across* to him," and "It's difficult to

put my ideas *into* words" become part of our regular, presumably literal, discourse.[216] This

inevitably shapes, or at least reinforces, the collective perception of words and thoughts to lead

to the traditional picture theory of meaning. Lakoff and Johnson argue quite convincingly that

even language that has traditionally been considered univocal is fundamentally metaphorical.

---

[215] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 110–11.
[216] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 11.

The weight of the traditional criticism of figurative expressions, particularly in religious language, begins to dissipate once one realizes how much of that criticism relied on structural metaphors for its own cognitive significance.

Religious language is shot through with metaphor. Rather than being seen as a cause for alarm, this should comfort the believer. Metaphors, symbols, models, analogies, and myths serve as the only suitable means for cognitive theological reflection. Only figurative language can help grasp (though never possess), communicate (though never transparently), and reflect (though never purely objectively) about one's disclosure experiences with the divine. The final aspect of metaphor that plays a determinative role in the reflection of their religious significance is their insufficiency and mortality. Religions each contain sets of central metaphors and models which help mediate the awareness of the divine. The fault of fundamentalism is the deification of these linguistic inventions at the expense of the reality itself. None can be confused for the referent, and none can be used indefinitely. As Tillich points out, the idolatrous element in religion is the tendency to attribute ultimacy to the finite symbol.[217] While some metaphors and symbols remain fruitful and produce a fecundity of theological reflection for centuries, others die and become "ossified".[218] Over time, metaphors become familiar and domesticated so that their original semantic shock is no longer effective. As the situation changes and the memory of original insight fades, their use as a means of creative semantic innovation dies and, through a process called lexicalization, become incorporated into the dictionary as a univocal term or phrase.[219] In Polanyi's terms, the emergent meaning fades from focal to subsidiary awareness in the linguistic act.[220] Thus, due to the inadequacy of any single model or metaphor to exhaustively

---

[217] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 13.
[218] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 121.
[219] Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 50.
[220] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 144.

and conclusively describe the religious dimension, there is a constant need for a "profusion of metaphors."[221] As Ramsey concludes, "the believer is committed to an endless exploration of countless models, in this way constantly improving his understanding of the one God who confronts him in any and every cosmic disclosure."[222]

The importance of metaphor, it seems, must be affirmed. Not only would it be difficult eliminate metaphor from religious language, it would be impossible to attempt to extricate even ordinary and scientific language from its intimate relations with figurative expressions. However, this does not condemn all linguistic expressions to semantic indeterminacy. Black's interaction theory and Ramsey's qualified models both present valid and fruitful models for understanding the cognitive pertinence of metaphorical language, religious or otherwise. Religious language admits to more of an empirical fit than verification due to the often-tacit nature of the objects of awareness. This retains the factual sensitivity of theological metaphor while doing justice to the logical oddity of using ordinary language to speak about a divine subject. Together, the insights elicited by Wittgenstein's reflections on language lead to the emergence of a radically different appraoch to religious language specifically.

---

[221] Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 133.
[222] Ramsey, *Words about God*, 218.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The same epoch holds in reserve both the possibility of emptying language by radically formalizing it and the possibility of filling it anew by reminding itself of the fullest meanings, the most pregnant ones, the ones which are most bound by the presence of the sacred to man.
It is not regret for the sunken Atlantides that animates us, but hope for a re-creation of language. Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.

- Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*

What is the meaning of religious language? How do religious statements concerning God differ from statements about ordinary life? Are people able to speak meaningfully about religious matters at all? These questions have driven the present inquiry to explore the traditional understanding of language and the puzzling questions that it produces when applied to religious locutions. Language is the only tool that one has for communication, even for divine subjects which exist far beyond the scope of everyday objects which language appears designed to depict. This involves an inevitable stretching of language to encapsulate notions of realities which it seems utterly incapable of doing. Believers may claim that God is love but be unable to produce any set of circumstances in which this could be conclusively or even partially verified. If one wants to view religious statements as saying *something* about the world (as most believers do), then surely there ought to be states of affairs which can verify the claim. If there is no possible experience that could count either for or against the determination of its truth or falsity, then it hardly seems like the believer is saying anything meaningful at all![223]

The typical reply is that claims about God, whether claiming he is Father, love, or shepherd, are merely *figurative*. They do not say what they mean, but they embellish the literal truth, which is merely that God is compassionate *like* a father would be. A critic will likely just

---

[223] Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 31.

retort that it would have been better to have said that in the first place. Figurative expressions seem to merely dress up what would be straightforward, univocal speech. In this case, religious language strikes the philosopher as misleading and would be better off communicating what it intended to say. Metaphor always implies an element of indeterminacy as well, so it is not even clear what the literal paraphrase *should* be. Why is religious language so pervasively metaphorical if such expressions can contribute nothing positive to the meaning of the statement, and even negatively impact its success as a designative locution? The questions of the factual reference and figurative sense above are exacerbated by the fact that understanding these statements is a matter both of existential signifiance and requiring existential involvement. Teasing out the implication of religious language is purportedly the most important question to be answered as it involves not only eternal ramifications, but largely determines one's concept of self, the world, and the significance of life itself.

The questions raised above derive from a particular view of language which I have called the *designative theory.* This account claims that language has the sole functions of describing reality and communicating ideas from one mind to another. It is successful to the extent that it can complete these functions transparently, without any semantic distortion, and reliably, according to set logical formulas (*aRb*). This view of language emerges from the majority philosophical tradition stemming from the Greeks, which values clarity in language and certainty in knowledge. Modern epistemology adopted these values and developed idealistic theories to support them such as epistemological foundationalism, Cartesian dualism, and empirical objectivism. Metaphor and analogy were seen as a subversive ornamentation of more fundamental literal propositions. The result was a view of language as properly communicating only particulate sense-data in strict propositional form to communicate the empirical world

exclusively. There was a complete split between the objective, empirical realm and the subjective realm of values and morals. Absolute knowledge could only be achieved through the passive reception of incorrigible sense impressions by the neutral, disembodied *cogito*.

The linguistic turn in philosophy in the twentieth century led to a much greater scrutiny of language use and led the logical positivist movement to dismiss all metaphysical, religious, and ethical speech as mere "emotivism."[224] Religious language remained an observable phenomenon, though, so various theories were posed as to how exactly it was functioning. Caught in the tangle of Humean empiricism, these theories had to place the significance of religious statements on either the fact or the value side of the epistemological divide; either cognitive or non-cognitive. Yet, neither side is able to account for both the subjective and objective elements which manifest in religious claims, and none could provide a sufficient account. Additionally, the traditional theory of language could not account for the features found in religious language, namely it being putatively rational, continually ubiquitous, and existentially significant. At the same time, the verification principle, upon which logical positivism was founded, was hoisted on its own petard as it became evident that it was not empirically verifiable itself. One of the early proponents of this view began to see the immense casualties this theory of language would inflict on human life. Ludwig Wittgenstein, who emerges as the central figure in the development of language theory, returned to philosophy and promulgated a devastating critique of the designative theory. The later Wittgenstein recognized that language operates by different criteria for meaningfulness in different areas of discourse, called language games. These games emerged from a particular way of life with its whole background of culture, activities, and assumptions. The role of language everywhere cannot be

---

[224] Ayer, 107.

reduced to its role in the laboratory, and the stringent demands of scientific discourse are utterly inappropriate in the realm of everyday or religious languages. This sparked a paradigm shift in language which gave rise to an entirely new wave of linguistic and epistemological theories.

5.1 A Hermeneutical Approach

What emerged from the Wittgensteinian paradigm shift is a nuanced approach to religious language rooted in a holistic epistemology. Against the idea that experience consists of the mind receiving atomistic sense-data passively, it is argued that experience is fundamentally *embodied* and characterized by *active interpretation of meaningful wholes*. Rather than seeing knowledge as a function of a detached, objective mind, it always occurs *within a particular 'form of life'*, with its accompanying presuppositions, practices, and history. Beliefs and conclusions are always *underdetermined* by the evidence and rooted in the critical hermeneutical judgments of the individual. The function of language, *pace* Ayer, extends far beyond the inert description of factual states of affairs. Taylor writes, "Attributing features is only one of the things we do in language, and not the most "primordial."[225] Facts can be *established* in and through language, and the line between verbal and non-verbal speech acts is fluid. Figurative language is no longer relegated to secondary status but can actually be seen as more fundamental than univocal speech, the latter consisting of lexicalized remains of the former. Further, symbols and metaphors actually provide unique cognitive access to certain tacit and embodied religious disclosures which are otherwise ineffable. Thus, a hermeneutical approach proposes a view of language which attempts to makes sense of the observable uses of language in everyday life, rather than prescribing an ideal language based on the artificial bounds of the scientific discipline.

---

[225] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 47.

First, a more hermeneutical view of language is rooted in a holistic, post-critical epistemology. Martin Heidegger is well-known for his theory that human beings are "inextricably beings-in-the-world who precede the subject-object split."[226] Humans are "*Dasein*," or "being thrown" into existence already in the context of a form of life. In other words, the primordial human experience is of the world as meaningful entities in the context of a broader narrative, not as atomistic sense-data. One does not naturally experience blotches of color or indiscriminate sounds, the supposed incorrigible sense perceptions, they hear trees and crickets. He writes, "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise.'"[227] Knowledge, deriving from such experience, is inextricable from an entire matrix of hermeneutical presuppositions. The disengaged and objective observer supposed by the modernists is an illusion. Stiver writes, "we can never start from scratch, but *always too late*, so to speak, in and with our presuppositions."[228] The primary experience of knowledge is not detached and critical reason, it is existential participation. Ricoeur agreed that the pretension of direct and unmediated access to knowledge was suspect. Knowledge is always mediated through the self and language, which are both mired in a background constellation of history, activities, and presuppositional connotations, called a *horizon*. There is no indubitable foundation from which to build knowledge since all cognitive activity begins *from somewhere*. He writes,

> In contrast to philosophies concerned with starting points, a meditation on symbols starts from the fullness of language and of

---

[226] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 38.

[227] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 207.

[228] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 53. Emphasis mine.

> meaning already there; it begins from within language which has already taken place and in which everything in a certain sense has already been said; it wants to be thought, not presuppositionless, but in and with all its presuppositions. Its first problem is not how to get started but, from the midst of speech, to recollect itself.[229]

As beings who are "thrown" into existence, humans are already embedded in a particular narrative, a form of life, from which subsequent reflection will take place. There is no 'pure reason' as Kant would have it since each person must stand somewhere to survey the data. That 'somewhere' has a background horizon which colors the perception of the sense-data through an active interpretation of the world. Language, as a fundamental component of the form of life, also exerts an influence on one's thoughts and reflections. Words, phrases, and expressions do not just emerge secondarily as a means of expressing neutral thoughts, they help *inform* the thoughts. These insights clearly undermine the objectivism of the designative theory of language. The Cartesian anxiety about relativism tends to panic at the suggestion that absolute knowledge cannot be founded on indubitable foundations. However, this does remove the burden on language of having to transparently communicate such pristine knowledge between minds. The original Greek paradigms of certainty and clarity begin to appear imprudent, even naïve, in light of more recent post-critical hermeneutics. Scientific precision seems dependent on establishing artificial bounds which ensure reliability. In religion, however, the full force of perspective is felt.

The rejection of presuppositionless knowledge dramatically alters the traditional picture of language. If one can never get at understanding apart from the influences of one's subjectivity, many of the challenges to religious language are silenced. Religious language cannot operate

---

[229] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I," in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 287–88.

without subjective influence, but neither can any other language! All language, except for that which is artificially restricted in a particular discipline, involves hermeneutical judgments about the sense perception of the world. Everyone speaks from somewhere, not as a disengaged observer. For religious language, this frees it from the expectation of being purely objective and allows a much greater appreciation of the implicit subjectivity of all religious convictions.

The central claim in hermeneutical philosophy is that all understanding of experience, knowledge, and language involves an interpretive act by the subject. Ricoeur used this insight to propose a universal theory of hermeneutics that could incorporate both sides of the Diltheyan split, both understanding and explanation, in a single holistic theory of truth and speech. This perspective undermines the strict epistemological dichotomy implied by modern objectivism and leads to an entirely different mode of understanding religious propositions. Ricoeur postulated a "hermeneutical arc" which included a prior stage of pre-critical naivete, a critical phase of explanation, and a post-critical understanding. This paradigm was then applied to all communicative events, not just discursive exchange. Congruent with the insights of Wittgenstein, Austin, and Polanyi, he considered activities, events, spoken language, body language, and even selves as "quasi-texts" which required interpretation. So, the full range of tacit and explicit knowledge or language were subject to Ricoeur's hermeneutical analysis.

He further elaborated on the process of interpretation in terms of 'worlds.' The "world behind the text" referred to the background horizon situation in which it was written. The "world in front of the text" gets at the spatio-temporal and cultural context of the receiver of the communication.[230] These may be nearer together in verbal discourse or separated by an element

---

[230] Ricoeur, 139–40.

of distanciation in the case of written texts and historical events.[231] The most important world was the "world *of* the text", which for him represented a conception of the world removed from the world as it "really is" by both the situated perspective of the speaker and the distanciation of the text from the speaker. All works of discourse have the power to present a *possible* or *projected world*, which the hearer must judge for its empirical fit with their own view. This proposed world is neither purely fictitious nor absolutely factual. Ricoeur hopes to bridge the subjective-objective split in religious language by an analysis of literature. On the one hand, he denies the possibility of pure factual knowledge and description without any perspectival influence. On the other, "no discourse is so fictional that it does not connect up with reality" or it would be completely incomprehensible.[232] For Ricoeur, historiography contains elements of both fact and fiction. No historical account tells how things really were apart from a perspective. Conversely, even folklore and fiction operate according to logical structures recognizable in the world and thus bear some semblance to the world as it is experienced.

The projected world of the text becomes a central feature of all language. Rather than finding the referential dimension of discourse in its ostensive function (as did the positivists) or the authorial intent (as did the Romanticists), Ricoeur claims that the projected world of the text is that to which the text refers and the radical locus of meaning. The language game of art, poetry, and religion, at the very least, are intended to project a particular "configuration" of the world and offer to the recipient a possible world in which to inhabit. Stiver points out, "This does not mean that one has to accept or actually live out the proffered world, but it means that one grasps to some extent what it might mean so to live. And then one can accept, reject, or accept

---

[231] Ricoeur and Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 131.
[232] Ricoeur and Thompson, 141.

with modifications."[233] Ricoeur's projected world offers a similar theory to that of Zuurdeeg's

fundamental convictions, but with the acknowledgement of a critical element in deliberation.

Whereas Zuurdeeg claimed that the *convictus* was the active party in bringing someone to live

into a new conviction, Ricoeur retains the balance between subjectivity and objectivity with his

insistence on the essential role of factual evidence, cognitive sensitivity, and phronetic

adjudication. In his hermeneutical arc, the middle step of evaluation secured a role for factual

criticism based on textual, historical, and empirical data. The 'fusion of horizons' is a dynamic

process of appropriation which always measures the claims of the projected world, the

conviction, against that of the situated experience of reality.

5.2 Understanding Reference and Facticity

Finally, with the additional insight of Ricoeur, we can return to the question. What is the

meaning of religious language? Can religious statements be meaningful? It seems that the

questions which spurred the investigation are themselves mired in the presuppositions of the

designative theory. To inquire about the meaning of language presupposes an understanding of

meaning as empirical reference and assumes the exclusive function of language is to designate

that referent. Now, the better question emerges; what does religious language *do*? Language does

not just depict the world; it *constitutes* a world. Religious language, as an entire realm of

discourse, projects possible configurations of the world, convictional frameworks of reality and

existence. Religious convictions are the numerous matrices through which all reality is filtered

and by which the assignments of significance are allotted. This is not a function of particular

statements within a tradition, but of the language game as a whole. Each unique religious

tradition seems to present a unique organizing framework of the world, including atheistic

---

[233] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 69.

naturalism. It would be difficult to maintain, as some of the early non-cognitivists did, that particular statements depicted this "picture" of life. Specific metaphors or predications of God do not easily admit to a translation in terms of conviction. Rather, it is the entire language game, as arising from a particular way of life, that projects a possible world for someone to inhabit.

How does one account for religious dialogue and argumentation? Does this view not fall prey to the same fideism as Braithwaite and Zuurdeeg? If nobody can find some position outside all convictions from which they can weigh the merits and demerits of other convictions, how can decisions be made about which religious tradition to affirm? Religious language, as convictional language, sits at the convergence of objectivity and subjectivity. As such, there can be no conclusive verification. The reasons and evidence offered in favor of a particular religious statement or another will always underdetermine the conclusions.[234] However, there are always connections to reality which can be judged based on Ramsey's concept of "empirical fit." The truth of this fittingness will be judged more like a legal case or a discernment of interest in a potential spouse than a scientific hypothesis. Ramsey writes that making judgments about religious language is like determining whether someone loves you or not. It typically involves discerning "how stable the assertion is as an overall characterization of a complex, multi-varied pattern of behavior which it is impossible in a particular case to specify deductively beforehand."[235] Likewise, weighing the empirical fit of a conviction to the experienced world will require looking for consistent patterns rather than specific evidence. Due to the possibility of tacit and embodied knowledge which resists explicit verbalization, this process requires active engagement through participation, or at the very least, empathetic imagination. When confronted with a novel conviction, the proper response is to receive, engage, and dialogue with other

---

[234] Stiver, 44.
[235] Ian T. Ramsey, *Models and Metaphors* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 38.

possible conceptions of the world. Again, Hordern writes, "Through empathy and imagination, we can understand the conviction of others, which is a prelude to real dialogue between convictional positions."[236]

The type of reason used in these instances is unlike the pure reason advocated by Kant. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur adapted a notion of critical evaluation based on Aristotle's theory of *phronesis* to describe the type of reason needed to make judgments about interpretations of the worlds *of* texts. Aristotle saw demonstrable and certain conclusions of science as the only true knowledge. Areas such as ethics and politics were more subject to change and continual reinterpretation. So, he claimed that what was need in these fields was a practical wisdom, called *phronesis*.[237] Phronetic judgments are neither arbitrary nor absolutely justified. They involved reasons, critical evaluation, and consideration, but could never be conclusively convincing for everyone at all times. It becomes obvious on the present account of language that the justifications of religious language involve phronetic judgment rather than a final verification from some privileged position. In a process which Gadamer referred to as a "fusion of horizons," diverse conceptions of reality can enlarge the believers' own convictions through a creative synthesis.

5.3 Making Sense of Religious Statements

So, the religious language game is involved in the projection of possible worlds, convictions about the particular organization of significance and meaning in the world. All language belongs to one conviction or another, religious language belongs to the religious conviction. Yet, there are still some unique features of religious language that bear explaining,

---

[236] Hordern, *Speaking of God*, 70.
[237] Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur*, 42.

namely the pervasive use of metaphor. Even if the religious form of life is not concerned with pristine logical propositions, surely figurative language still proves to be unhelpful and oblique?

Religious language is primarily concerned with relating aspects of one has life to God in an attempt to articulate what may be tacitly known about God. Polanyi clued us in to the fact that we cannot tell very easily everything we know. Whole dimensions of human knowledge are on the subsidiary, rather than focal, and embodied, rather than explicit, ends of the spectrums. Religious awareness is no different. Ramsey's idea of disclosure experiences of depth offers a means by which such tacit knowledge could be acquired. One occasionally recognizes a 'depth' to reality which seems to disclose itself to them, just as the dimension of depth emerges as one recognizes a cube in the lines on a page. These experiences often elude clear univocal description of the sort that the designative theory demanded. Religious believers, as participants in the form of life out of which religious expressions emerge, are well aware of this fact and have long wrestled with the inability to perfectly depict the numinous. Religious folks opted for less straightforward speech since it was doomed to inadequacy anyways. Thus, religious language is at all levels thoroughly symbolic or metaphorical.

As discussed in the previous chapter, metaphor has become widely recognized as fundamental to language in general, with many literal words being derived from long-dead figurative expressions. The legs of a chair are literally the legs. The original metaphor can clearly be seen within the lexical sign, but one hardly experiences the 'semantic shock' of a living metaphor. Similarly, religious language often begins with metaphor, symbol, or analogy and only later develops some semblance of a literal equivalent. Metaphor cannot simply be ornamental or embellishment. Ricoeur points out that symbol is primary, critical reflection arrives later.[238] It is

---

[238] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 18.

the literalization of descriptive language which is parasitic on the more fundamental figurative dimension. First-order religious language begins with creative semantic innovation. Second-order reflective language such as theology, doctrine, and creeds represent a distillation of the more primary figurative meanings. Ricoeur famously writes, "the symbol gives rise to thought."[239] This reordering amounts to a complete reversal of the modernist paradigm of language.

There are also several reasons for this priority in religion specifically. Religious language is frequently metaphorical and figurative because it is an attempt to articulate what has not been said before. Creative theologians are pioneers in the landscape of the ineffable. Charles Taylor emphasizes the constitutive function of language in his book, *The Language Animal*. Taylor points out that to exist in the linguistic dimension *is to encounter its limits*, what Paul van Buren calls the "edges of language."[240] Language functions as an extension of the self, expanding our zone of articulacy with each productive metaphor and apt analogy. As someone with a visual impairment uses a stick as an extension of themselves to navigate an otherwise unknown world, humans use language to grope, grasp, and map out the boundaries of the effable. In ordinary discourse, this happens when we misunderstand one another and ask if the speaker can try to say it differently. It is this exploratory function to which T. S. Eliot referred to as "raids on the inarticulate."[241] In religious language, figurative expressions appear to be more effective at expanding the articulate since they serve as effective catalysts for further reflection. As one concept is framed in terms of another in a metaphor or symbol, believers can be made aware of aspects of God which they were previously unable to describe. Taylor writes, "the impact [of

---

[239] Ricoeur, 347–57.
[240] Tilley, *Talking of God*, 30.
[241] Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 24.

linguistic constitution] can be described as a regestalting of our world and its possibilities, which opens a new (to us) way of being."[242]

Metaphors are the primary means by which this regestalting is initiated. In them, one concept is figured in terms of another. In religious language, this typically involves God being figured in terms of a common feature of life with which there are a number of associated commonplaces. God also has a whole range of associations which arise from the way of life and thought of a community. There is a dialectic exchange between semantic innovations and traditional associations through which the religious community determines the proper criteria for meaning. In a way, the liberal and conservative poles of every religious language are necessary for the ongoing production of theology. Some metaphors become central to the community's concept of God and get codified into doctrines and creeds. In the Christian community, God as person, father, and king have been common examples of such core images. These metaphors once evoked much more semantic shock in the contexts and situations in which they emerged. Picturing God as a father was perhaps scandalous at one time. After a while, the seeming semantic impertinence is lessened, such that critical reflection is no longer inspired. The religious language game operates analogously to a lava font, which relies on fresh spurts of liquid magma to arise from within. While still fresh, it flows over the old, cooled obsidian until it solidifies itself and loses its power to produce heat and light, until the energy fades. Likewise, religious language relies for its continued meaning on the profusion figurative language as fonts of creativity which illuminate old associations in new frames and evoke fresh discernment through disclosure experiences.

---

[242] Taylor, 46.

Theology, as second-order reflective language, is similarly metaphorical. Rather than discrete metaphors or analogies, theological doctrines tend to more closely resemble Ramsey's notion of models. Models are essential for conceptualizing certain features of reality and can even lead to new insights. As such, all doctrines, creeds, and tenets of faith should be recognized as both essential and fallible. These formulations are necessary for prompting the discernment of tacit, contextual, and mediated knowledge of God. The project of theology is to continually seek to find the formulations which answer the question asked by the situation. Since the human capacity is influenced by their horizon, their potential to be grasped by a new conviction will likely depend on the way in which the world is projected. The fault of fundamentalism, in whatever religious tradition it emerges, is that it "confuses the eternal truth with a temporal expression of this truth."[243] Theological doctrines, like symbols, can be more central or peripheral depending on their role in the form of life and their ongoing fecundity. What must be avoided is the idea that those doctrines and creeds which are central to a particular life of faith are unmediated descriptions of religious reality. Ian Ramsey communicates this perfectly:

> Doctrines are not rightly understood as descriptions of God; they provide rules for, guides to, the best ways of theological talking that we can devise. Christian Doctrines are the most reliable guide we can produce to the best ways of talking about what God has done in Christ. Doctrines are not photographs of God delivered unambiguously through the conciliar post-bag; they are essays in language, man's endeavors to grapple as consistently and reliably as possible with a mystery about which (pace Wittgenstein) he cannot be silent. They are rules for significant stuttering.[244]

In the end, what is needed is not the elimination of religious language as a meaningless vestige of a premodernity. The insights of phenomenology and hermeneutical philosophy help to offer a more adequate account of religious language. This theory does not find itself caught in

---

[243] Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, 13.
[244] Ramsey, *Models and Metaphors*, 218–19.

the dichotomies of modern epistemology but seeks to appreciate the presuppositions and perspectives which influence all knowledge. Once this step is taken, the problems of religious language appears more like the opportunities than aporias. Religious diversity is to be expected due to the subjective element in knowledge. Believers will attempt to use religious claims as factual propositions because they do point to a particular conception of the world, albeit not an unmediated one. Ambiguity will always surround the multitude of metaphors, symbols, and myths involved in the religious language game because there is a necessary and fruitful indeterminacy in figurative language. This semantic flexibility is the source of its creative power. Religious language, in all its various forms, establishes possible worlds which, if people choose to inhabit them, open up entirely new ways of being in the world. Adjudicating between rival conceptions is a matter of phronetic judgment; always rational and ever underdetermined. It involves dialogue and participation in the way of life form which the statement emerged. Indwelling a particular form of life means empathetically participating in the underlying convictions of the community as fundamental organizations of the meaning and significances of the world.

What of meaning? With this fortified theory of language, meaning cannot be restricted solely to the empirical reference of a proposition, nor can it be bound to the word or sentence alone. Meaning is a function of use, and use occurs in situations. As Ricoeur says, discourse is always "someone saying something about something to someone." The 'sense,' the informative content of what is being said, may have a plethora of meanings depending on the context in which is was said. Remember Austin's example, "the bull is charging." The natural polyvalence of the statement can only be narrowed when it is incarnated in a particular situation. The

meaning of any statement, religious or otherwise, is an emergent property of the fusion of horizons between speaker and hearer.

Religious language projects 'worlds,' fundamental convictions about the configuration of the meaning and significance of certain features of the world. Convictions differ from just taking something as a fact or being persuaded that a certain state of affairs is the case. There is an irreplaceable element of personal involvement in all convictional language. As McClendon and Smith point out, convictions cannot be relinquished or adopted easily, without significant alteration in the identity of the one being convicted. Religious language games belong to particular ways of being-in-the-world, which require existential participation in order to understand, judge, or adopt. Only through an empathetic indwelling in the Buddhist, Jain, or Hindu way of life can one understand the semantic boundaries of expressions made from within those traditions. It is the requisite self-involvement that helps account for the existential significance of religious locutions compared to ordinary indicative assertions. This theory of language is far more complex than that of the traditional designative theory, and perhaps all the more appropriate because of it. Language, once pictured as a window to the mind, now looks more like a stained-glass window to reality. People will continue to use language to talk about God, not in order to describe perfectly, but that they might grapple with those aspects of human experience about which we have difficulty remaining silent.

References

Achinstein, Peter, and Stephen F. Barker, eds. *The Legacy of Logical Positivism: Studies in the Philosophy of Science*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1969.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*, n.d.

Augustine. *De Trin*, n.d.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J. O. Urmson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

———. *Philosophical Papers*. Edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.

Ayer, A. J. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, 1952.

Bernstein, Richard J. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Black, Max. *Models and Metaphors*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962.

Brandom, Robert. *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Charlesworth, M. J. *The Problem of Religious Language*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Chomsky, Noam. *Syntactic Structures*. Martino, CT: Mansfield Centre, 2015.

Danto, Arthur C. *Faith, Language, and Religious Experience. A Dialogue*. Edited by Sidney Hook. Oliver and Boyd, 1962.

Donovan, Peter. *Religious Language*. London: Sheldon Press, 1985.

Frege, Gottlob. "Sense and Reference." *The Philosophical Review* 57, no. 3 (May 1948): 209–30.

Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall. Second. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Corp., 1960.

Gill, Jerry H. *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971.

Haldane, Elizabeth S., and G. R. T. Ross, trans. "Discourse on Method." In *Descartes, Spinoza*. Great Books of the Western World. Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by Michael Oakeshott. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Hordern, William. *Speaking of God: The Nature and Purpose of Theological Language*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002.

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Charles W. Hendel. Vol. Hume Selections. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.

———. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by Charles W. Hendel. Vol. Hume Selections. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by F. Max Muller. Anchor Books, 1966.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690.

McClendon, James, and James Smith. *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994.

McCulloch, Gregory. *The Game of the Name: Introducing Logic, Language, and Mind*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by F. M. Cornford. Vol. Book X. England: Oxford University Press, 1966.

———. "The Seventh Letter." In *The Dialogues of Plato*. Great Books of the Western World. Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.

Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958.

———. *The Tacit Dimension*. Gloucester, MA: Doubleday & Company, 1983.

Ramsey, Ian T. *Models and Metaphors*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

———. *Religious Language*. New York: Macmillan, 1955.

———. , ed. *Words about God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Structure and Hermeneutics." In *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.

———. "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I." In *The Conflict of Interpretations*, edited by Don Ihde. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.

———. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies for the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin, Robert Czerny, and John Costello. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.

———. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967.

Ricoeur, Paul, and John B Thompson. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Robinson, Timothy A., ed. *God*. Second. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.

Rowe, William L. *Religious Symbols and God; a Philosophical Study of Tillich's Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Stiver, Dan R. *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Analogy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

———. *Theology After Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Taylor, Charles. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016.

Tilley, Terrence W. *Talking of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis of Religious Language*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.

———. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *On Certainty*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969.

———. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Third. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958.

———. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by Pears D. F. and McGuinness B. F. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1974.

Wood, Laurence W. *Theology as History and Hermeneutics: A Post-Critical Conversation with Contemporary Theology*. Lexington, Ky.: Emeth Publisher, 2005.

Zuurdeeg, Willem F. *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951.