Religious Language, Emotivism and Cognitivity

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A NUMBER of contemporary philosophers have argued that religious utterances are non-cognitive expressions of emotion. These utterances, it is argued, do not assert anything which **could** be true or false. This contention seems quite paradoxical in the light of the fact that the behaviour and reactions of persons using religious language indicate that they intend (on many occasions but not all) their utterances as cognitive—disputable perhaps, but at least capable of being true or false. The emotivist's contention is also paradoxical in the light of the fact that religious utterances are often understood as asserting something by the hearer. Futhermore, religious language makes use of all the modes of speech characteristic of cognitive discourse. That is, there is considerable lingustic evidence which **prima facie** supports a cognitive interpretation of religious discourse.[1]

(1) First, of all, religious utterances often take the form of indicative sentences just as do other sentences known to be cognitive. Is this not **prima facie** evidence that religious utterances are cognitive? That is, if religious utterances are simply expressions of emotions, commands or interjections, why do they not take the form of commands or interjections?

It is possible that the indicative form of religious utterances is an accident of our language, but since such utterances also take the indicative form in other languages, this is unlikey. Certainly the fact that they take this form cannot be dismissed as having no import. However, the fact that an utterance takes the indicative form is surely not a necessary and sufficient condition for its cognitivity. Quite often sentences take the indicative form but are commands, not assertions. For example, the sentence "John is going home!" is quite often used to command, not describe. However, in spite of the fact that a sentence takes the indicative form is not a necessary and sufficient condition of its cognitivity, the fact that religious utterances often take the indicative form requires some explanation if one is to interpret them as simply expressions of emotion, commands, or interjections. And if this cannot be explained, then the fact that religious utterances take the indicative form argues strongly for a cognitive interpretation of these utterances.

(2) A second kind of linguistic evidence that religious utterances are cognitive (or are intended to be cognitive) is found by looking at religious questions. Questions like, "Is God really a just God?", indicate that the speaker is asking for an answer that can be true or false. If religious utterances were purely emotive, then questions of this kind would hardly be appropriate.

However, does the fact that religious discourse includes questions which appear to require answers which can be true or false **prove** that religious utterances are cognitive? No. It does show that they **are intended** to be cognitive. But surely explanation must be given to this fact about language if the emotive interpretation of religious discourse is to be justified.

(3) A third fact about language, which tends to support a cognitive as opposed to a non-cognitive interpretation of religious utterances, is the fact that religious utterances often appear in indirect discourse as the object of a cognitional verb,

[1] Peter Glassen, "The Cognitivity of Moral Judgments," *Mind*, vol. 66, no. 269, January, 1959), cites similar linguistic evidence in support of a cognitive interpretation of *moral* judgments.

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like "know" or "believe." For example, one quite often finds judgments like, "I know that God is a just God" or "I believe that God is a just God." Here religious utterances are indirectly referred to as objects of cognition. This fact (3) is pretty clear evidence that when ordinary people make religious utterances they intend to say something cognitive and are quite often understood as such. But if the emotive interpretation of these utterances is true, then they **can** carry no cognitive meaning. Utterances like, "I believe there is a just God," must be viewed as expressing commands or feelings. The plain man who makes such utterances must be shown that he isn't really saying anything which **could** be known. This of course seems paradoxical to the religious person who obviously intends to say something cognitive when making religious utterances.

(4) A fourth kind of evidence for the cognitive interpretation of religious discourse is the fact that appraisal terms like "correct" or "mistaken" and "true" or "false" are applied to religious utterances. Thus, we find persons saying: "It is a mistake to think of God as transcendent," "The Christian conception of God is the true one." This is further evidence that in ordinary religious discourse religious utterances are intended to convey cognitive meaning. Again, if the emotive view is correct, it must explain why in ordinary religious discourse both the addressee and the addresser intend their remark to be cognitive but are misled in doing so. The emotivist must show that both parties to a religious dispute are disagreeing in **attitude** but not disagreeing **in belief.**

The above four characteristics of religious language and its use show that religious discourse often makes use of all the modes of speech characteristic of debates in which there is a disagreement in belief and hence this discourse appears to be cognitive. A justification of emotivism requires an explaining away of these facts about religious discourse. The emotivist must show that although people intend to make cognitive assertions in religious discourse and are understood as doing so, and although in religious discourse all the modes of speech characteristic of cognitive discourse are used, what really occurs is the expressing of an attitude and perhaps the attempt to alter the attitude of one's opponent.

On what grounds can the emotive interpretation of religious discourse be justified? Generally the justifying ground for this interprtation of religious utterances is a particular criterion of cognitive meaning which dictates what sort of cognitive statements there can be. Non-cognitivists in regard to religious utterances have generally based their views on the empirical verifiability criterion of meaning, arguing that there can only be two kinds of cognitive sentences —empirical or contingent propositions and analytic or necessary propositions. Since religious utterances are not set forth as analytic or tautological and since they appear not to be contingent in the sense that some empirical data **could** falsify them, it is argued that religious utterances must really be emotive utterances. They are expressive of certain sorts of attitudes but are non-cognitive.

The problem with this method of ruling out the cognitivity of religious utterances is that it is too arbitrary. The non-cognitivity of religious utterances is deduced from a general epistemological theory but no justification is given of the criterion of meaning from which the deduction is made. This approach is in a very real sense against the tenor of empiricism as a methodological approach.

Surely the enlightened empiricist wil not argue that it could be discovered **a priori** what sorts of cognitive statements there can be. If this is true, then the question arises as to how one can empirically discover what sorts of cognitive sentences there are. Apparently this is to be done by looking at the use and users of language and discovering what sorts of utterances are commonly used by speakers to assert something and are commonly understood as asserting some-

thing by those who are addressed. When we do this—when we look at the use and users of religious language—we find that religious utterances often fall into the class of utterances which are intended by speakers to assert something capable of being true or false and which are also understood as such by the hearer. These utterances are not intended by the speaker to be simply expressions of emotion or commands. Nor are they understood as such by the hearer. This is shown by the evidence (1), (2), (3) and (4) cited above.

However, does this evidence from langguage prove religious utterances are cognitive, Certainly it proves that religious utterances **are intended** to be cognitive, but does this prove that they are cognitive? That is, it the case that the only evidence relevant to the issue of the cognitivity or non-cognitivity of religious utterances is that of whether religious utterances are ordinarily **used** by speakers with the **intention** of asserting something and are ordinarily understood as asserting something? Could it not be the case that one could intend to say something cognitive but really not do so? And could it not also be the case that one could be understood as saying something cognitive but not really assert anything? Certainly it is not self-contradictory to deny that certain sentences, set forth as being cognitive, are cognitive. Since this is the case, then there is no necessary relationship between one's intending a sentence to be cognitive and that sentence being cognitive. Nor is there a necessary relationship between one's being understood as asserting something and one's really asserting something. Since this is the case, the evidence cited above, (1), (2), (3) and (4), does not **prove** the cognitivity of religious utterances. However, it is **prima facie** evidence that religious utterances are cognitive and this evidence must be explained away by the emotivist if he is to justify his account of religious utterances. The emotivist must show that, although religious utterances are often intended to assert something and are so understood, they really simply express commands or feelings. I am not sure how this could be done. Certainly the deduction of this conclusion from a general epistemological theory seems somewhat arbitrary. Perhaps careful analysis of sentences made in religious discourse and intended to be cognitive could show that these sentences are merely emotive. This would appear to be a less arbitrary approach than the deduction of the emotive status of religious utterances from a general theory of meaning. But what is shown by an analysis of sentences made in religious discourse? What is shown is that religious language is often used with the intention of asserting and often is understood as such but it does not show that religious utterances **are** cognitive. It seems that one must have what C. I. Lewis has called a "criterion-in-mind" before one can begin sorting out what sentences are **really** cognitive from thsoe that **appear** to be or are merely intended to be cognitive. That is, do we not require a criterion of cognitive meaning prior to the actual examination of religious discourse or any other discourse? If this is true, then it appears that one is committed to some sort of "arbitrariness" before one can get on with the task of analyzing religious discourse with the goal of separating cognitive from non-cognitive utterances.

The adoption of a particular criterion of cognitive meaning is the result of trying to answer questions like "Should sentence X be accepted as asserting something?" Any criterion or cognitive meaning is a normative criterion devised to answer this question and the issue of justifying such a criterion is that of justifying a norm. The point we wish to make is that the issue between the cognitivist and non-cognitivist in regard to religious utterances is a normative one. It is an issue that cannot be resolved simply by examining religious discourse, because, first of all, data concerning the use or function of sentences in religious discourse (the evidence cited above) shows only that religious sentences **are**

intended as cognitive and are understood as such, **not** that religious sentences really **are** cognitive. That is, the fact that an utterance is intended to be cognitive and is understood as such appears not to be a good criterion (in the sense of necessary and sufficient conditions for calling the utterance cognitive. Secondly, it seems that we must have some criterion-in-mind (some criterion of cognitive meaning) before an analysis of religious discourse, with the purpose of discovering its cognitivity or non-cognitivity, can be fruitful.

Cognitivity, then, is not something that wears its face on the surface of things and can be discovered simply by looking for it. The phrase "cognitively meaningful" is partially normative, and a judgment that a particular utterance is cognitively meaningful is very much like an evaluative judgment in ethics. It amounts to saying that we **ought** to treat that judgment as being capable of truth or falsity. This normative judgment concerning cognitivity is confronted with the same difficulties that arise in justifying an ethical principle. A justification requires that one give some sort of reasons. But what is a "good" reason for a given criterion of cognitive meaning? Is the fact that a given criterion of cognitive meaning "eliminates metaphysics" and directs the attention of philosophers to something more important a "good" reason for adopting that criterion? Certainly not for some thinkers. Is the fact that a criterion of cognitive meaning "provides the framework for a general theoretical account of the structure and the foundations of scientific knowledge" (Hempel) a "good" reason for adopting that criterion? Many thinkers, theologians in particular, would argue that this is not a "good" reason for adopting a criterion of cognitive significance—since there is a kind of knowledge other than scientific.

There seems to be a wide difference of opinion as to what constitutes a "good" reason for calling an utterance cognitive or non-cognitive. It does seem clear to me, however, that this issue of cognitivity is a normative issue. Borrowing an analogy from ethical theory, those who argue for the cognitivity of religious discourse might accuse one who identifies the meaning of "cognitive" with "empirical verifiability" of a "naturalistic fallacy." It is like defining "good" in terms of "pleasure." Just as it is significant to ask of experiences which are pleasant whether or not they are good, so also it is significant (for many people) to ask of sentences which cannot be empirically verified in principle what those sentences assert and further if they are true. It might be said that the term "cognitive" has what Waisman calls an "open texture" or "open horizon."

However, in spite of the difficulties of justifying a purely emotive account of religious utterances, the emotivist's critique points to the need for a more careful analysis of religious discourse and an attempt to specify more carefully what one intends to assert when making certain religious utterances, and further what sort of reasons or evidence is relevant to the verification or falsification of religious utterances. Although the way language is used (1, 2, 3, and 4 above) is **prima facie** evidence for the cognitivity of religious discourse, it is not sufficient evidence. Reference to some sort of verifying data or reasons is required. Since this reference is generally lacking, the burden of proof of cognitivity still rests with those who claim that religious discourse is cognitive. Certainly the contention of the emotivists that the question of cognitive meaningfulness is logically prior to the question of the truth or falsity of any utterance—is sound, and this fact, in general, has been neglected by many who use religious discourse.