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## Philosophy of Religion

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Ryan Baker

### **Philosophy of Religion**

Many pre-socratic philosophers were of an empiricist school of thought before such a term was utilized. They considered the material and the physical to be reality, while things not constituted by tangible things were not reality. Philosophers beginning with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle then began to popularize metaphysical philosophies like Plato's concept of forms. Forms are the essence of a given thing. To recognize a material circle in the world, one must understand the immaterial form of the circle. Forms themselves are intangible, but they are held to be as real as their tangible counterparts that reflect them. This conception of reality in which intangible and metaphysical things were considered as real as the material world was dominant in the realms of both philosophy and religion for nearly two thousand years. During the period known as the enlightenment, philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume began to refine and popularize empiricist ideas. Empiricism is the school of philosophy that holds that the only way to acquire knowledge is through the five senses. An empiricist, then, would not consider any immaterial or metaphysical objects to be real. This foundation led to logical positivism a few centuries later. Logical positivism holds that the only things that can contain meaning are the definition of concepts, or empirically verifiable facts. This worldview thus removes all religion and philosophy that deals with metaphysical or immaterial concepts.

This background sets the stage for the Flew, Hare, and Mitchell discourse. This back and forth begins with Antony Flew as he establishes his position with the parable of the gardener. The parable begins with two explorers happening upon a garden. The first explorer holds that there must be a gardener that tends to the garden, while the second is skeptical of that claim. After some time, during which no gardener is spotted, the first explorer amends his claim

allowing for an invisible gardener. They then set up an electric fence to establish proof that the invisible gardener is indeed tending the plot. When no shrieks of agony adorn their camp, the first explorer again amends his claim allowing for an invisible gardener that is intangible such that he cannot be physically detected. This culminates in what Flew describes as the death of a thousand qualifications. While the first explorer began with a meaningful statement, that a gardener tends the plot, by the end of the period of observation he is left with only a meaningless husk of a gardener, such that there would be no difference between the first explorers gardener and no gardener at all. This parable serves as analogy to religious claims in which God is always qualified such that the original claims are often tautological or simply picture preferences. When an assertion is qualified to the point that it cannot be disproven, then assertion really is not asserting anything at all. Since many religious arguments are such there is no physical evidence that could disprove them, Flew holds that they are not making meaningful assertions and can be disregarded.

Hare responds to Flew by formulating what he has termed blik. Hare explains blik through the parable of the lunatic and the Dons. The lunatic is convinced that all the dons are planning to murder him. The lunatic is shown around a campus and meets plenty of benevolent dons, but still believes that they are trying to murder him. Ultimately there is no evidence that could be presented about the dons that could convince the lunatic otherwise. The lunatic is said to hold an insane blik about the dons, while most people have sane blik. Blik are not assertions, since they cannot be proven wrong, however, they are critically important because they inform what we consider to be explanation or proof. Everyone has a blik about everything because the world must be interpreted through a blik. Hare holds that the substance in this debate is to be found in how people behave differently given their different blik. If the first explorer cares

tenderly for the garden due to his blik, and the second explorer ruins the plot due to his, it seems Hare should hold the first explorers blik despite the lack of evidence.

Mitchell responds to Flew by focusing on the idea that believers will not let anything count against their belief. In the parable of the gardener, the gardener is always qualified after evidence fails to appear, but never does the first explorer allow that the lack of evidence points to the lack of a gardener. Mitchell uses the problem of evil to show that believers of religion do allow things to count against their beliefs. He would grant that the problem of evil, instances in which a child is dying from a disease, etc. certainly count against their belief in an all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing God. But as believers, these counterpoints never overturn their beliefs. He also concedes that there is a point at which religious statements could be considered ridiculous, such as a believer saying, "It is God's will." after a deadly natural disaster. Mitchell holds that religious statements are assertions, which is made coherent by allowing evidence to count against those assertions.

Flews' original arguments seem to hold true under the parameters he set forth. When making assertions, there must be evidence that could corroborate or disprove said assertions. Hare adds an interesting dimension to the conversation with his idea of blik. Flew clearly has a logical positivistic blik, such that only statements defining words or that are empirically verifiable have meaning. With this worldview, one is obligated to hold a tentative belief that there is no gardener, God, or any being that is not potentially empirically verifiable. Conversely, Mitchell has a theological blik which he seeks to make coherent by claiming religious statements are indeed assertions and there may be a lack of evidence for, or even evidence that points to the contrary of, those religious beliefs.

It appears to me that there is a category mistake in the way Flew is speaking about religion. In strictly scientific materialistic terms, Flew's position holds up to scrutiny, but religious claims are not meant to be tested in a laboratory. If the extent of Flew's arguments were that religion has no place in the laboratory (what exactly is studied in the laboratory must be informed by some sociological artifact, but that is a separate discussion) then he should find little opposition, save for a very particular breed of modern religious believer that attempts to assert that religious texts are entirely materialistic, historical documents. Any further, and the language in Flew's arguments fail to adequately capture the whole of religious language, and thus cannot be used to eradicate it completely. Perhaps Flew's interpretation of a religious text speaking on the creation and nature of the cosmos, which does not purport to be astronomical, scientific fact, has no meaning whatsoever, and is indeed poetry, or picture preference, but I think this view is an object of his blik rather than necessarily following from his arguments.

### **Paul Tillich's Symbolism of Religious Language**

In speaking about religious ideas, it is imperative that a distinction be drawn between literal and symbolic language. To speak of religious texts, and the events depicted therein, as though they were intended to be historical documents, or submitted to scientific journals, is simply a nonstarter. Much of today's discourse about science and religion, and the ostensible contradictions between them, is based primarily on this linguistic and conceptual dissonance.

In his article *Religious Language*, Paul Tillich explores the difference between symbolic and literal language. He begins by explaining symbols, and how they are distinct from general signs. Signs and symbols are similar in that they both point to something beyond themselves. What distinguishes symbols from signs is that symbols take part in the power of the things they represent. The example of flags is used to illustrate how a symbol participates in the power of

what it represents. The flag of a nation is something that is revered by its patriots. If anyone should hold disdain for that nation, then the desecration of that flag is performed to demonstrate that disdain. The flag is used in these acts because it participates in the power of what it symbolizes. Conversely, letters, and many of the words they comprise, are examples of signs that are representative of somethings beyond themselves, but do not participate in the power of what they represent. This fact is why spelling the name of a nation and desecrating the paper on which it was written is much less effective than desecrating the flag itself. That combination of letters does not participate in the power of what it represents. Any word, however, which does participate in the power of what it represents would be considered a symbol. This fact is why the name and image of the prophet Muhammad is held sacred in the Muslim faith, but other words, such as “cup”, merely refer to an object with no direct connection between them.

What is the point of using symbols at all, instead of simply using that which they represent? Tillich next describes the functions of symbols, which is to open up levels of reality. The example of art is used to describe this phenomenon. People experience art of a given medium in a very particular way. The feeling one gets by reading a poem filled with symbolic language cannot be achieved in any other way, and the same goes for other mediums such as music or painting. The realities opened up by a particular piece correspond directly to what Tillich calls our interior reality, or soul. The exterior reality may only be appreciated insofar as that level of reality is open in one’s soul. This explains why some people are moved by certain art and others are unaffected. Next it is explained how symbols come to exist. Symbols are not mandated by any one person or group, rather they come to exist only if a society accepts and understands that a given symbol participates in the power of what it represents. In this manner, symbols cannot be manufactured. It may be someone’s intent to manufacture a symbol, but until

it is accepted into the unconscious of a population, it is merely a sign. Symbols go extinct in the same way, by no longer being accepted by society as participating in the power of what they represent.

With this background, Tillich now explains religious symbols. Religious symbols are symbols which open up a fundamental level of reality. Religious symbols refer to a base reality, what is often called ultimate reality, upon which all other levels of reality are situated. This is the deepest understanding of reality and as such it is what is deemed holy. The formulation of religious symbols is informed by everything in the world one may experience, which explains why so many religions with so many disparate seeming ideas come to exist. Societies come to understand certain things as participating in the power of ultimate reality and since everything exists within ultimate reality, anything can become holy to a given society, so long as it conforms to the criteria of representing and taking part in the power of ultimate reality. To interpret any religious symbol, one must simply understand its relationship to ultimate reality. This process by which religious symbols come to be also explains idolatry, and why it is warned against. Idolatry is holding that religious symbols are the holy object in themselves, rather than simply participating as a referent to the actual holy, which is ultimate reality. Once something assumes the identity of being holy in itself, it ceases to represent ultimate reality.

There are two levels of religious symbols, the transcendent level and the immanent level. The transcendent level would be the symbol of God. Tillich qualifies this, however, explaining that God cannot be considered a symbol only. God is to be considered ultimate reality, essentially being itself. This aspect of God is not symbolic, as it is reality in itself. Once it is understood that God is being, or ultimate reality, then the symbolism of God can be understood as a way of representing and interfacing with ultimate reality. This interfacing with

ultimate reality is where much of the confusion regarding religion is founded. People engage in what is called the ego-thou relationship to speak to God. This personifies God to make interfacing with ultimate reality possible. We can engage ultimate reality only as humans, and as such we can only engage symbolically. This engaging with ultimate reality is utilizing the transcendent symbolism of God. Without this symbolism we could not interact with ultimate reality. The symbolic personification of God is the source of confusion when understood literally. All manner of acts and attributes are assigned to God, but when these symbolic characteristics are taken to be literal, as though through a modern scientific materialist lens, then absurdities abound. Through such a lens, these acts and attributes are understood within time and space, when symbolically they may represent time and space themselves, or at least may not conform to our conception of time and space as we personally experience them. Tillich illustrates this symbolic language in practice using the sentence, "God has sent his son.". He explains that this sentence contains both temporal and spatial elements wherein God is symbolic of all spatiality, and the act of sending his son is symbolic of causality, or time. To understand the sentence as though a parent sent their child to school would be to fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of the sentence.

The immanent level of religious symbolism involves all that which represents ultimate reality, including incarnations and sacraments. These are the objects which personify and are imbued with the holy. Religious symbols at the immanent level are how we represent holy things in the world as we experience it. It is through this lens that we may properly interpret many seemingly strange and esoteric religious ceremonies and rites. Take for instance communion, a sacrament in which the body and blood of Christ are consumed. This could be construed literally as a ceremony conducted by deluded aspiring cannibals, but the symbolism of such a sacrament



explains much more thoroughly what is actually happening. To make bread is to take flour, something that is too fine to eat, and make it into something more course and edible. Eating the body of Christ symbolizes the integration of the holy, or ultimate reality, which is too fine, or distant, for us to understand alone. The body of Christ represents spiritual knowledge, and the bread is imbued with his holy characteristics for the duration of the ceremony. The bread here is literally bread, but during the ceremony it is more than bread since it is also the body of Christ at a more fundamental level than that of our typical phenomenology.

Last, Tillich explains truth in regard to religious symbols. Religious symbols are sociological artifacts that are born out of circumstances that cause a collective belief that something is symbolic of the holy. For a religious symbol to be true, the symbol must be held as participating in the power of that which it represents, namely ultimate reality or the holy, here and now. As soon as this is no longer the case, the symbol ceases to be true and it is consigned to irrelevance with countless other symbols that are no longer believed in. This process of collective belief and disbelief is the only way by which religious symbols can be deemed true or false. No empirical or historical fact could ever prove or disprove the truth of a religious symbol. A symbols veracity is inexorably linked to the situation in which it was born. When the circumstances change, so to does the truth or falsity of a religious symbol.

Tillich closes by interpreting the symbolism of the cross of Christ. Christ is the embodiment of divinity, as he is the son of God, but even so he did not wish to become an idol to be worshipped instead of God. So instead of becoming another God, Christ took up the cross and suffered and died to deny idolatry. The symbolism of Christ here is true for all symbols; a symbol participates in the power of what it represents, but it does not become what it represents.

## The Faith of Tillich

The concept of faith has taken on colloquial definitions throughout time that obfuscate its original theological meaning. Faith can be used in common language to mean belief in something, but Paul Tillich defines faith as a state of ultimate concern. Within this framework everyone is a person of faith, and the only difference between people is the object of their faith. People can become ultimately concerned with, and faithful to, just about anything. When something is ultimately concerning, there is an ultimate surrender to that thing. Whatever is placed at the highest point in the hierarchy of value will demand a majority of one's resources. Tillich describes examples in which nationalism and financial success can each become ultimately concerning. If financial success is of ultimate concern, then the acts and thoughts of a person will, to the exclusion of other acts and thoughts, point toward an end of financial success. Personal relationships, one's physical health, and all other aspects of life will be nourished only insofar as they are useful to the end of financial success. With an ultimate concern of nationalism, all things which do not serve the goals of a nation will be subordinate to the nationalist cause. This value structure could mean the deaths of an indefinite number of people, so long as it is done to serve the goals of the nation, since that is the primary concern over all other things. This is not to say everything done in the name of serving these kinds of things as ultimate concerns will be horrible, but Tillich contends that ultimate concerns of these kinds will inevitably lead to despair and emptiness. Determining the object of ultimate concern is thus ultimately concerning, since every aspect of one's life will be oriented towards this object, and the result will be either despair or fulfilment. It is a project of existential concern and it is a defining characteristic in the life of man. Tillich examines biblical religion and the philosophical

discipline of ontology to see if they could be joined to discover a sort of unified ultimate concern of being.

Ontology is the philosophical study of being itself. In studying being, one is already approaching ultimate concern since anything that could be a concern exists and can therefore be examined ontologically. Even if one holds a supposedly inadequate ultimate concern, that object participates in being simply by existing. It would follow that being itself would make a fulfilling ultimate concern. What makes any given thing unfulfilling as an object of faith is that it is finite. We cannot find everything we desire in finite objects since they are necessarily missing something. Being itself is the only ultimate concern that excludes nothing. When one is ultimately concerned with some finite portion of being, this is what is known as idolatrous faith. Idolatry is strongly warned against in biblical religion since it is understood in the bible that ultimate concern for something partial or finite will ultimately lead to despair. The idea that the object of faith must be infinite allows for the synthesis of ontology and biblical religion through God. The concept of God is difficult to define, and there are many schools of thought in both religion and philosophy that attempt to explain what God is. Tillich would contend that God is the end to both the ontological and the biblical projects. God, ontologically speaking, is being itself. God is not a finite being within a larger context of existence, rather everything that exists is within the context of God. To study the nature of being is to study the nature of God. Biblical religion understands this conceptualization of God and examines our relationship to God as being itself. This is done through the language of personal relationship. Personal relationship is the mode in which people engage with the world. We are people, and we must relate as people to other people and to all things external to ourselves. This personal mode of interaction, on the infinite scale of being itself, is how we interact with God. It is important to understand this

relationship since God, which is being itself, is the one truly ultimate concern by which people can find fulfilment. Faith in God is true faith while faith in any subordinate level of being is idolatrous faith.

When discussing faith there is an opposite that must also be considered, namely doubt. Doubt, in colloquial terms, is the lack of faith. If faith is belief without evidence, then doubt is merely disbelief. This is not the faith and doubt discussed by Tillich. Doubt in Tillich's theological framework is not the lack of faith, rather it is necessarily a part of faith. Faith is ultimate concern with ultimate reality. Ultimate reality, or being itself, is infinite. There is nothing outside of reality that exists. This is a necessary characteristic of being, but this fact means that we as finite beings can never fully comprehend the scope of being. We can only understand being insofar as it can be understood by its finite parts. So even in true faith, we cannot ourselves be certain about that towards which we have faith. This lack of certainty, our lack of comprehension of the infinitude of being, is doubt. This doubt presents existential risk. If the object of our faith is shown to be fraudulent and not truly ultimate, then our very foundation is removed from beneath us and we are left to despair without direction or purpose. Doubt is this ever-present risk that must be faced when declaring faith. This dynamic of faith is why Tillich asserts that to accept faith with the doubt necessarily linked to it is an act of courage.

### **Symbolic Understanding**

The world may be viewed through different lenses. It may be normally experienced, it may be seen through a microscope or telescope, it may be interpreted as narrative, along with a countless number of other viewpoints. Understanding that multiple layers of reality exist may lead one to conclude that the world is comprised of an infinite number of viewpoints that coexist equal to one another and is ultimately indecipherable. Paul Tillich and other religious thinkers

would disagree with this conclusion. Instead of amorphous viewpoints existing independently, religious thinking understands the world as layers built upon one another. There are superficial layers with which we interact in daily and mundane proceedings, and these exist on top of deeper layers that ground these experiences. What differentiates religious thinking from other schools of thought is the idea of a foundational layer of reality by which all other layers of reality are contingent. This is the layer of ultimate reality, and this is the substance with which religion deals. Ultimate reality is being itself. Everything that is real, that is made of substance, and that exists is a part of this ultimate reality. Since everything that exists comes from this layer of reality, it follows that this is where our ultimate concern should be directed. The language used in religious texts is symbolic in that it is speaking on this metaphysical structure of reality.

This symbolic understanding of religion contrasts with the fundamentalist viewpoint of religion. The fundamentalist viewpoint understands religious texts as literal documents. If a given text says that a God figure spoke to a person, then there was actually a spoken conversation that must have taken place at some point in space and time. Events described must actually have taken place as described. Ultimately, the truth content of a given text is dependent upon these conversations and events having happened. This is not to say that fundamentalists do not understand the use of metaphor, poetry, or other styles of prose, but this literal reading of texts is what is meant when arguing for or against a fundamentalist conceptualization of religion.

The two conceptualizations of religion differ drastically, and the reading of a religious text with either lens will yield drastically different results. Let us interpret the first few verses in the bible through both the symbolic and fundamentalist lenses:

1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

<sup>2</sup> And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

<sup>3</sup> And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

<sup>4</sup> And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

<sup>5</sup> And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

<sup>6</sup> And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

A fundamentalist reading of these verses may start by understanding God as a being physically creating heaven and earth. The second verse is more difficult to interpret literally since the language is clearly poetic. Without some grounding framework there is confusion over what is actually happening in time and space. How does the earth exist without form and with what waters is God interacting? How does speaking lead to the creation of light, and how does light have any moral character? What does it mean that light and darkness are separated and what was the first day? What and where exactly is this firmament? It is easy to argue against the fundamentalist position since the literal conceptualization is grounded in a scientific materialism. The entire process and method of science can then be brought to bear on any of the questions above, and there is little scientific support for most religious claims. These verses do not appear to be reporting true facts as if in a journalistic context, but this does not mean they are without truth value.

A symbolic reading of these verses would begin with the conception of God as being itself, rather than *a* being within the universe. This is the most fundamental distinction between the two conceptualizations of religion, since God is the most basic and supreme principle in all

religion. So God creating heaven and earth is when the being of the universe came to be. In the second verse it is important to delineate some symbolic concepts that are foundational in the bible and many other religious texts. The first concepts are time and space, which are represented by water and land respectively. Other symbolism crucial to understanding religious texts is that of light as representative of truth, while darkness is the lack of truth. Water and land are categories with which we interact daily and are more effective in describing the metaphysical structure of the world than abstract, theoretical categories like time and space. The same is true for light and darkness since we experience these qualities simply by existing in the world. These concepts can reflect each other such as light and land being truth and stability while water and darkness representing change and uncertainty. Returning to the second verse we can better understand what is meant by the seemingly difficult language. The earth being void and without form means a time before substance and stability, which is similar to darkness on the face of the deep being uncertainty in the midst of change. Then the spirit of God moves upon the face of the waters and speaks light and land into being. These events explain the existence of truth and stability and their coming into an uncertain, instable world. It is important that these things were spoken into being as this highlights the creative function of speech that is so important to our experience of the world. Being made in the image of God is a complex idea over which there has been much confusion, but the example of speech and categorization shows that humans have a certain dominion over the world since without this categorization the world would be unnamed and unrecognizable. As God is being, and creates order in being, so to do humans create order out of the chaotic being around them.

Something integral to the nature of symbolism is that it can apply at all levels of reality. While the biblical narrative is a macrocosmic explanation of the world coming to exist, the same

language can be used to explain the coming into existence of phenomena at the microcosmic scale. Symbolic language pertains to ultimate reality and therefore is applicable to all levels of reality contingent upon that ultimate reality. When God says let there be light there is the creation of truth and meaning into the previously meaningless and uncertain world. When humans name animals into taxonomical classifications they are taking an unknown, amorphous group of creatures and making sense of them. When parents name a child the same process occurs bringing meaning and reality to the unnamed infant. When God creates heaven and earth there is the coming into being of the world, which is earth, and it is given higher meaning, which is heaven. When humans construct temples or capitol buildings there are the buildings themselves and the meaning of the buildings. When an artist creates a painting there is the creation of both the material painting and the meaning of the painting. This sort of fractal application is a powerful feature of symbolism which distinguishes symbolism from mere sign or metaphor. Symbolism in this way provides a reading of religious texts that is not dependent on historical reality such that a scientific or historical discovery could disprove it. The symbolic reading of a text will contain truth value beyond a literal or historical interpretation since the truth obtained through symbolism will apply to all levels of reality, as opposed to a more narrow and specific scientific or historical domain.