

CHAPTER 11: TALK ABOUT TALK ABOUT GOD

or

Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics

“Shall windy words have an end?” “I have uttered what I did not understand.” (Job 16:3, 42:3)

Time to talk about God, I said. But no—alas! First we must talk about talking about God.

It is frustrating to have to stop every few steps to examine our presuppositions and ground rules. But the alternative is worse. To charge ahead without a road map will only lead us to confusion. So before we proceed to talk about God we must consider several questions:

I. First, does our modern common sense even permit God-talk? We will (A) look at the extreme viewpoint which suggested that it does not, (B) look at some of the developments which make it clear that it does, and then (C) draw some conclusions about common sense and God-talk.

II. Once we have established the possibility of talking about God we need to look at (A) how the rules of logic apply to this use of language, and (B) what kind of verification is appropriate.

III. Finally in this chapter we will touch briefly on the difference between speaking conceptually of God and speaking in images, and the appropriate use of each.

I. Does Modern Common Sense Allow for God-Talk?

Let us begin by repeating our basic common sense of how the world works. We share a sense that we live in a closed causal universe. Events in this world are explained by reference to causes in this world. God does not go “zap,” intervening from “someplace else” into the processes of this world.

This is not to say that there are no phenomena beyond our powers of explanation. Indeed there are. But we assume that there *is* an explanation for each of these which fits our common sense, which we just don't know yet.

Does this common sense that the world is a closed causal unit allow room for God? Some would say that our "modern scientific" common sense doesn't allow for any reality that we can't touch, weigh and measure. Have we, in fact, found ourselves carried inexorably to this extreme?

IA. The Road to Logical Positivism

There has certainly been an element of this in our culture in the last couple of centuries. There has been a tendency to try to explain every possible phenomenon in terms of the physical sciences. During this time physics and chemistry and biology amassed one discovery and conquest after another. Intelligent people got swept up in the feeling of triumph and declared not only that we could explain all *physical* processes this way, but that we could explain *all* of reality with these sciences. This led to a circular redefinition of reality. Once people accepted as an article of faith that modern science could explain the totality of our world, they had to say that anything which fell outside the scope of science isn't real. This is the attitude that says, "If it can't be studied and analyzed by chemists or physicists or biologists, it doesn't exist."

It is very understandable that some people would be led to this extreme. Modern science is the basis of our technology, the basis of our material way of life. It depends on precise measurements, repeatable experiments and strict controls—none of which is applicable to the spiritual realm. If you adopt this kind of science as the appropriate way of investigating all of reality, then you also close your eyes to anything not open to this sort of approach. Which may be quite a bit.

The question we have to answer is whether this attitude has permeated our common sense. Certainly we must admit that elements of it have crept in. But this is far different from saying that our modern common sense has adopted wholesale the view that only the material world is real. It has not. This view has had only a temporary sway over a minority of people. And in fact its high water mark was already past by the third quarter of the twentieth century, having reached its zenith at different times in different disciplines.

We have a strong urge to try to explain all of reality in one way, so it was probably inevitable that the methodology of the physical sciences would be carried into inappropriate areas. If we had to pick one symbolic high point of this invasion it would be the publication of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1935. In this work Ayer pro-

pounded “logical positivism” with his “principle of verifiability”. He maintained that for a statement to be either true or false—and thus, for it to have any meaning at all—it must be verifiable. That is, we must be able to test any statement, must be able to prove it right or wrong. (Here is a principle right out of the classical physical sciences.) If it can’t be tested, said Ayer, it doesn’t have any meaning for us.

It was quickly pointed out that this would mean that a statement such as “the moon is made of green cheese” is meaningless. But while “the moon is made of green cheese” may have been unverifiable—remember, this was in 1935—and may be an altogether silly thing to say, we all know perfectly well what it means. That’s how we know it’s silly. It is *not* meaningless. So Ayer decided that a statement need be only verifiable “in principle”. That is, we do not actually need to be able to verify it at the present time with our present technology, but it must be possible that we *could* do so if we had the necessary capabilities, just as we found out for sure several decades later about the moon (for those who had lingering doubts).

But there are still a lot of statements that are not testable or verifiable even “in principle”. Ayer would rule out as meaningless such statements as “God is good”, “God is responsible for the evils in the world”, and “God loves you”. Now each of these three statements is debatable. Each has been subject to fuzzy thinking at times. Each has proven to be of interest to people and has in fact been the subject of intense debates. They are all impossible to prove or disprove empirically. They are, in fact, unverifiable. So logical positivism would say that they don’t mean anything.

But are they meaningless? What do you think? Do you have an idea as to what any of these three statements is saying? If you do, then Ayer is wrong.

Or, to give another example: a philosophy professor of mine claimed to have an invisible, weightless elf that lived inside his watch. As unverifiable—and as silly—as this statement was, you and I both know perfectly well what he meant. Which was precisely his point. It is simply not true that unverifiable statements cannot have meaning for us.

As for A. J. Ayer, within a couple of decades his book was relegated to the ignominious lot of a classic example to show undergraduates how not to reason. (See J. L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* [Oxford University Press, 1962].) Even in the skeptical world of modern analytic philosophy, common sense could not be dragged into adopting a world-view based on the physical sciences alone. Here and there, of course, different

¹For those interested in fine points, Ayer distinguishes between his own “logical empiricism” and the positivism of the “Viennese circle”. The difference is little enough in any case, and is certainly not germane to our discussion. For that matter, I can’t remember why it was ever called “positivism”, but that isn’t germane either.

individuals reached this point (and some still do). But the tide had already turned, not least in the sciences themselves.

IB. Signposts on the Road Back

We will note three areas which serve to highlight the journey back from logical positivism and which also show that our underlying common sense does not itself rule out the spiritual.

(1) Modern (or "Post-Newtonian") Physics²

In the orderly world of Victorian physics there were particles and there were waves, and the two quite properly refrained from fraternizing, and all physical processes were at least in principle predictable. Since then our understanding of the basic pieces and forces that make up the world has undergone a revolution.

Without going into unnecessary detail let us just note two of the cornerstones of modern physics. First: the basic building-blocks of the universe cannot be neatly classified as either waves or particles in the traditional sense. Instead they behave sometimes as one, sometimes as the other. Our neat traditional dichotomies of matter vs. energy, body vs. mind, cannot be maintained at the most basic level.

Second: the result of a given action on a particular individual atomic particle cannot be predicted. That's right, the certain predictability of cause and effect also disappears at the subatomic level. We are left with probability. On a large scale it can be a very strong probability, but it is probability nonetheless.

Our view of the physical world can no longer be what it once was. The neat certainties and easy distinctions of Newtonian physics turned out to be too neat and too easy and too naïve. Even if we don't remember—or never learned—what Einstein meant by general or specific relativity, we need to understand that theoretical physics has drastically changed our understanding of reality. In fact, physics now resembles metaphysics more than anything else, with its theories to explain how realities unobservable by us produce the visible world. More importantly, mechanical certainty has given way to probability and the matter vs. energy distinction has faded away.

²A necessary note on the word "modern": some people use "modern" physics to mean physics from Newton up to—but not including—Einstein. I suppose this is the influence of all those college courses entitled "Modern Philosophy" or "Modern European History" which never get past 1850. One would then have to call the physics of today "post-modern". This is an intriguing adjective. But then what would you call the theories of the next century? "Post-post-modern"? Come, now. Are we so cowed by the last generation that we have surrendered "modernity" to be ever theirs? Or are we so taken with ourselves that we have to find a new word to fit us? This is silly. If modern physics must be called "post" anything, it is post-Newtonian.

Why does this matter? For two reasons: it takes away the simple, mechanistic understanding that hard, physical, certain reality was the paradigm by which we must understand the world. We can't even understand the *physical* world this way! And secondly, it points to deeper realities underlying the visible world. If our common sense can accept this for physical forces then surely it does not rule this out for spiritual forces and entities.

(2) Holistic Medicine³

The medical sciences made such great strides in the past century that some physicians, concentrating on the vast amount of knowledge about our physical processes, forgot that there are other factors which affect human health. And some preferred to avoid such an "unscientific" area as human emotion. But this could not last for very long. The connections between our mental/emotional health and our physical health were just too apparent, with cause and effect running in both directions.

So the lesson was relearned. In the 1970s two movements in this direction made significant progress. The first is "holistic medicine", a general movement towards treating the whole patient instead of just physical symptoms. Unfortunately, in some areas "holistic medicine" came to mean anything that wasn't part of Western scientific medicine. Thus it came not only to mean a concern for a person's psycho-social (as well as physical) well-being, but it came also to include some practices which remain untested and which strike some as quackery. However, regardless of whether "holistic medicine" means to you the broader movement or the questionable fringe, the fact is that it has helped re-establish what many folks never forgot: that if we limit our attention to the strictly physical aspects of a person's health, we limit our ability to adequately treat many physical conditions. The emotional/mental realm has power to affect the physical. Did anyone seriously doubt that people can—and do—die of broken hearts?

The second movement, much more specific, represents the inclusion of a more holistic approach in the medical establishment. It is the creation of the "new" physician specialty of "family practice". While a number of factors combined to establish this as a specialty—complete with three-year medical school residencies and national boards and certification—it represents a definite move away from treating human beings piecemeal. Family physicians are trained to consider the whole of an individual's psycho-social situation in treating a problem.

Both holistic medicine and family practice represent a renewed recognition that our emotional health has a real impact on our physical health. This is important to our current argument because it shows that

³If I had not just expounded upon the use of the word "modern" I would have something to say here about the missing "w" in this word.

our common sense—and even our medical science—recognizes that even our physical health, much less reality as a whole, cannot be reduced to physical processes alone.

(3) Parapsychology

Under the rubric of parapsychology is grouped the study of such things as telepathy, clairvoyance, communications with the dead and other exotic phenomena and pseudo-phenomena. Personally, I do not believe in demons or magic or Ouija boards. In fact, I'm rather convinced that they are bunk. I am not so sure about ghosts, but have never (to my knowledge) seen one myself—which state of affairs, I hasten to add, I have no urge whatsoever to alter.

Surely the only attitude to take towards claims in this area is a healthy skepticism. Of what possible relevance, then, is parapsychology?

If we are *honest* skeptics, and if we bother to acquaint ourselves with even a small portion of the available evidence, we will find—even after we dismiss a lot of reports as pure rubbish—that it is impossible to deny that there are some strange sorts of communication going on. (Or perhaps they only seem strange to those of us who were in danger of surrendering too much to the physical sciences.) The plain fact is that there are a number of people who have known immediately when a relative has died, or who were able to lead their families to their great-grandfather's grave in the dark in a cemetery they'd never been to before, or who have sensed approaching danger in a very specific way. There may not be a great lot of people with these experiences, but there are far too many to deny or ignore. And some of them are very credible witnesses. The two people who I have known who had experiences of this type were rather skeptical sorts.

I would personally be much more comfortable if we could just deny that this sort of thing happens. But we cannot. The evidence is too compelling. These phenomena are even beginning to receive serious study at respected academic institutions.

The point here is not that ghosts may exist. The point here is rather that some people have experiences that involve a reality beyond our known physical world. And whether or not we choose to believe these people, we are willing to grant that it is *possible* that this happened to them and that it is worth our while to investigate some of these phenomena. Our common sense recognizes that reality is not limited to the physical universe.

IC. Conclusions on Common Sense and God-Talk

We began Section I of this chapter with the question of whether our common sense today allows for talk about God at all. I have briefly

noted some aspects of modern physics, medicine, and parapsychology to point to what you probably already knew: there is nothing in our modern common sense itself which rules out our consideration of a spiritual reality.

It needs also to be said that common sense is not a single, monolithic way of thinking without variability or flexibility. It has been in some degree of flux for at least the last five centuries. But while there are times when the geography of our common sense may alter suddenly and drastically in one area of thought—the earthquakes of Copernicus and Darwin, for instance—it is more often like a glacier. Movement isn't noticeable at all. You can only tell movement has happened by looking at the marker of its position a year or a decade or a century ago.

It is not unusual for a small segment to try to carry the mass of common sense with it to one extreme or another. But glaciers are not easily convinced. While a section of ice may lead in a new direction or to new limits, making the most noise and gaining the most attention, these peninsulas are also the most likely to be those that break off and fall into the sea as icebergs, floating away and disappearing.

The surrender of the whole universe to the physical sciences, represented by A. J. Ayer in philosophy (and by others in medicine and psychology) was a loud, daring little ice floe that tried to pull the glacier with it, failed, and fell into the sea. (Two other fringes of the glacier at present shall meet a similar fate, both trying to pull in the opposite direction of Ayer and company. One is mysticism taken to the extreme of being anti-rational, the other is the rear guard counteroffensive being conducted against evolution. Both will pull on the glacier, will fail to drag us along in spite of the noise they make, and will end up as icebergs, impressive but of nuisance value only.)

Meanwhile the glacial wisdom of our common sense has reasserted itself, having freed itself of an extreme, obstreperous, largely academic faction by shedding it into the sea. Does this modern common sense, viewing the world as a closed causal continuum and explaining physical effects—with some notable exceptions—with physical causes, allow for talk about God? Yes. Perhaps not the God of the Old Testament—the glacier has moved a good way since then—but yes, talk of God. Yes, because the strict dichotomies of matter vs. energy, body vs. mind, physical vs. spiritual, simply do not work. The two interact and are at times indistinguishable. Yes, because we recognize that there are mental and spiritual phenomena which cannot be explained in terms of the physical but which are nonetheless a real part of our world. Yes, because we recognize the power of the psyche to affect the body. Yes, because our common sense allows for something more beyond visible reality.

Our common sense does not allow for talk of a God that goes “zap” from “out there” somewhere, for a God who is a specific interventionist. But it does allow for a God who is in the context, who is somehow in