Ethical Importance of Theological Assertions

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Introduction:

To understand the Non- Cognitive view of Religion it would be necessary to see the historical perspective of different philosopher's views regarding the religious language. The view of Christian theologians are especially important in this regard. The debate about an investigation into the non- cognitive view of religion involves at least three main issues that can be stated as follows :

1.   Emergence of linguistic analytical school of philosophy and its implication on different branches of philosophy.

2.   Its implication on theological thinking.

3.   The cognitive and non- cognitive approach to religious language.

Emergence of Linguistic Analytical School of Philosophy:

With the emergence of Linguistic analytical school of philosophy, the approach to philosophical questions underwent complete change in 20th century. Analytical philosophy posed questions against metaphysical issues and questions. It tried to show that these issues and questions don't convey any meaning. Although this conclusion was the same as that of the Logical Positivist thinkers, the reasons were very different from them. While the Logical Positivists tried to prove the worthlessness of metaphysical issues in the light of verifiability theory of meaning, Linguistic Analysts, led by Wittgenstein, proved their meaninglessness on the ground of use theory of meaning.

Logical Positivism, in the form of a movement, presented a clear agenda to eliminate metaphysics and religion. Rudolf Carmap, Moriz Schlick, Neurath, Ayer and others tried to show the meaninglessness of statements of metaphysics and religion in the light of the verifiability criterion of meaning. Claims of religion were dismissed altogether on the ground that they were not verifiable in sense experience.1 But later some of them revised their position.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose earlier philosophy of language helped the Logical Positivists to develop the criterion of meaning, Later brought a radical change in his thought and gave a non-cognitive but important meaning to the statements of faith. Instead of testability, he adopted the "Use Theory of Meaning" and showed that how a word is used in an ordinary language. Using language, according to Wittgenstein, is like playing a game.2 We can play a game only if we understand the rules of the game. If we know how the words are use in ordinary language then only we can use language or play a language- game. Wittgenstein, in his lectures on religion, has stated that religious assertions are very different from scientific hypothesis. They, in fact manifest

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what the religious believer does and what he does not do what he chooses and what he abandons.3

Wittgenstein held that whatever could be said, is said in language. A more important notion of language that he introduced is that it is a "form of life".4 Here the term 'Language – game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is a part of an activity, or of a life- form. We name things and then we can talk about them : can refer to them in talk. One could define the word "red" by pointing to something that which was not red. That would be as if one were suppose to explain the word "modest" to someone whose English was weak, and one pointed to an arrogant man and said "that man is not modest". That it is ambiguous is no argument against such a method of definition. Everything that is speakable gets expressed in language. Anything that can't be expressed in language can't be a part of our life either. This is one of the implications of the notion of language as a form of life. That is why Wittgenstein holds- "The limit of my language is the limits of my world."5 Since Theology tries to speak of something that is beyond the reach of language, its project is doomed to fail necessarily.6 But Wittgenstein does not dismiss the possibility of meaning to the assertions of faith. As stated in above what the religious believer believes can be grasped only by understanding what kind of things he does in the light of his faith. Wittgenstein's approach opened the scope of a new interpretation of statements of faith, which was subsequently adopted and developed by different philosophers of analytical trend of Late twentieth century, and that trend continues till this date.

It was shown by the Linguistic Analytical school of philosophers that the meaning of a word consists in its use in the language and to understand the use is to understand its meaning. Given this understanding of meaning theologians of twentieth century faced a challenge in the form of delineating the use of theological assertions. Theological assertions (assertions containing religious beliefs) can be proved to be meaningful only if it could be shown how they are used by religious believers. This task was undertaken and accomplish by different thinkers of 20th century in two broad ways :

(i)   A Cognitive approach to theological assertions.

(ii)   A Non-Cognitive approach to theological assertions.

Approaching Religious Language from a Cognitive Point of View:

The cognitivist thinkers try to show that the theological assertions are cognitively meaningful, or they contain within them some sort of truth- claim about a reality here or here-after. The authors of cognitivist view argue that theological assertions are verifiable/ falsifiable and as such they are genuine statements about some matter of fact. Some authors, influenced by the Logical Positivist criterion of meaning, try to show that theological assertions are verifiable in some form of human experience, hence they are meaningful. John Hick, I.M.Crombie and Basil Mitchell are the main authors of this view.

Some analytical thinkers meet the falsificationist challenge head on and defend, in their own ways that the statements of faith are factual and subject to verification or verification. Their view is called the cognitivist view or cognitivism about religion. Basil Mitchell, John Hick and I.M. Crombie falls in this category. Logic of faith and factual discourse have been distinguished in philosophy as conceptual inquiry.7 In the domain of analytical philosophy of our age, philosophical discrimination8 between the two realms and acknowledgment of each of them are

regarded as a significant contribution. Wittgenstein rightly points out : "It is wrong to suppose that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose; to convey thoughts which may be about houses, pains, good and evil or anything else you please." 9 He insists thereby on study of the use of the language called "religious language", "ethical language" etc. by the virtue of their own merits. Language is not to function in a particular or definite way, rather it functions in diverse ways. In course of our inquiry, we have seen how our language functions not only to describe, to establish verbal conventions or to express or evoke emotion, but also to change the situation in direct ways. All the instances of doing, not asserting.10   This is what is known as conative function. There are ways of conative function,11 commitment of oneself to a way of life, having an attitude, a disposition for behavior, doing and not merely saying. Thus religious language becomes meaningful and for ultimate values of life. Religious language being complex by nature has different sources viz., the religious scriptures, authorities, myths, metaphors, models, convictions, commands, concerns, attitudes and experiences etc. and therefore, it manifests in and through variant expressions.

The issue of Verifiability/ Falsifiability of Theological Assertions :

The cognitivist thinkers try to show that the theological assertions are cognitively meaningful, or they contain within them some sort of truth- claim about a reality here or here-after. The authors of cognitivist view argue that theological assertions are verifiable/ falsifiable and as such they are genuine statements about some matter of fact. Some authors, influenced by the logical positivists criterion of meaning, try to show that theological assertions are verifiable in some form of human experience, hence they are meaningful. They are of the view that the truth content in theological assertions can be verified with reference to the fact witnessed in that experience. John Hick is an eminent author of this view. He, in his celebrated- "Theology and Verification", tries to build a case for "Eschatological Verification" of those assertions.

John Wisdom,' has raised question, 'what possible experiences would verify, "God exists"?' 'What possible experiences would falsify God exists' What conceivable state of affairs would be incompatible with the existence of God? In this way it was apparently assumed that verification and falsification are symmetrically related. Both logical and psychological conditions must be fulfilled in order for verification. In this respect, 'verify' is like 'know'. Knowing is an experience which someone has or undergoes, or perhaps a dispositional state in which someone is, and it cannot take place without someone having or undergoing it or being in it; but not by any means every experience which people have or every dispositional state in which they are, is rightly called knowing. For example: 'There is a table in the next room'. The verifying experiences in this case are experiences of seeing and touching, predictions of which are entailed by the proposition in question, under the provision that one goes into the next room; and the absence of such experiences in those circumstances serves to falsify the proposition and it cannot take place without someone having or undergoing it being in it; but not by means every experience which people have, or every dispositional state in which they are, is rightly called knowing.

The idea of an eschatological verification of theism can make sense, however, only if the logically prior idea of continued personal existence after death is intelligible. Suppose that at some learned gathering in this country one of the company was suddenly and inexplicably to

disappear, and that at the same moment an exact replica of him were suddenly and inexplicably to appear at some comparable meeting in Australia. The person who appears in Australia is exactly similar, as to both bodily and mental characteristics, with the person who disappears in America. There is continuity of memory, complete similarities of bodily features, including even fingerprints and also of beliefs, habits and mental propensities. In fact there is everything that would lead us to identify the one who appeared with the one who disappeared, except continuity of occupancy of space.

In the present context my only concern is to claim that this doctrine of the divine creation of bodies, composed of a material other than that of physical matter, which bodies are endowed with sufficient correspondence of characteristics with our present consciousness, for us to speak of the same person being raised up again to life in a new environment, is not self- contradictory. It cannot be ruled out meaningless.

There are, I suggest, two possible development of our experiences such that, if they occurred in conjunction with one another(whether in this life or in another life to come), they would assure us beyond rational doubt of the reality of God. Some other thinkers, like I.M.Crombie, also argue for the factual meaning of the theological assertions. However, they don't vouch for any peculiar experience for their verification. Crombie tries to say that theological assertions are the utterances that religious believers make in a human experiences that most people pass through, and the meaning of these assertions derive from this sort of experience. Thus the meaning of these assertions are experiential.

Basil Mitchell try to prove that factuality of theological assertions on the ground of the falsifiability theory of meaning. In reply to the criticism that theological assertions are factually vacuous, he presents his argument in the symposium on "Theology and falsification". He takes a very different stance from that of the others. He does not accept the Verifiability theory as the criterion of meaning. He opts for the falsifiability criterion to argue for the factuality of theological assertions. He argues that theological assertions are factual statements because the religious believers hold them as actually referring to some real state of affairs. That is why when something happens that seems to stand against such assertions a religious believer accepts that it is contradicting what he believes. A religious believer often passes through such moments of doubts in his life. Whenever he/she finds the instances of cruelty and evil in human life, which seem to contradict his belief in the existence of a benevolent God, a doubt creeps in her/his mind. This doubt indicates that she/he admits that something seems to falsify what he beliefs. According to the Falsifiability criterion of meaning any assertion must be falsifiable if it is factual. In other words, if an assertion actually asserts a matter of fact then it must be intelligible under what condition it will become false. If someone holds that her/ his assertion is actually about a matter of fact then she/he admits and understands the falsifiability conditions of theological assertions, these assertions are to be acknowledged as factual. Although the religious believers, due to their strong faith in the benevolence of God, try to justify the occurrence of such counter- evidence and hope that ultimately the truth of their belief will be re-established, the presence of doubt shows the falsifiability of this belief. Thus theological assertions are to be acknowledged as factual.

Like these authors Wisdom, Wilson and others try to show that theological assertions have

cognitive or factual meaning. They are all of the view that we cannot actually understand the meaning of theological assertions without accepting that they refer to some reality here or here-after.

A Non- Cognitive approach to Theological Assertions :-

The non- cognitivist thinkers, try to show that there is no cognitive content or truth-content in theological assertions; however they are not meaningless since they are meant for some other purpose. They holds that sentences expressing religious belief do not give any information about facts and what so- ever. It is shown by these thinkers that they are used to generate or vent some emotions, or to recommend a specific way of life etc. R.M.Hare, R.B.Braithwaite and H.H.Price are the leading authors present a radically new and interesting view of religious belief in the sense that they defend the meaning of the theological assertions by showing that this meaning does not necessarily presuppose the actual existence of the object of religious faith i.e. God.

R.B.Braithwaite's Ethical Approach to Theological Assertions :

R.B.Braithwaite provided a defense to the statements of faith that was provided to the ethical statements by most thinkers of analytical trend.

The Logical Positivists and latter thinkers had to face the problem of explaining the meaning of moral judgment. Moral judgments such as-- ' Truth is a great virtue', don't state any matter of fact. Although the structure of the sentence is just like a statement and it seems that something is stated in them but on examining them it does not become clear what they state indeed. Such judgments don't state anything about the subject term. It is not clear what –'Truth is a great virtue' states about the term 'Truth'. 'Truth' is not an object in the sense a person or a physical thing is an object. The predicate term 'great virtue' also does not indicate about any event or happening. Thus it is not clear from this sentence what does it refer to. Verifiability Theory of Meaning adopted by logical Positivists fail to give any explanation of the meaning of such judgments. It is not easy to declare moral judgments as nonsense as it was in the case of Metaphysical statements. Metaphysical statements were not directly related to human life. So it was not difficult for the Logical Positivists to declare them meaningless. But morality is something that is indispensable for the individuals as well as for human society. A. J. Ayer, in his 'Language Truth and Logic' had to assign emotive meaning to these judgments. He held that in Moral Judgments the speaker expresses his liking or disliking about some action. In the judgment –'Truth is a great virtue', the speaker expresses his approval or liking about the acts of truthfulness. Thus he assigns an emotive meaning to it.

R.M.Hare latter developed his 'Prescriptive Theory' of Moral Judgment by modifying Ayer's view. He tried to explain that in Moral Judgment the speaker expresses his approval or disapproval regarding certain actions but for so doing he has definite reasons: it ids not merely a matter of his liking or disliking. This view was widely accepted by the thinkers of the Analytical school and it became customary to argue that Moral judgment don't describe anything; they only prescribe certain course of actions. In other words, Moral judgments perform a different function in language. These judgments recommend certain action for the people but don't stat any matter of fact at all. R.B. Braithwaite also adopt this view regarding Moral Judgment and

defend the meaning of Theological Assertion also on the same line of argument.

In his essay 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief,'12 he clearly argued that these statements don't state any facts. But that doesn't mean that they are meaningless. He holds that theological assertions do not refer to any reality here or here-after. They only recommend an ethics where 'God' is used only as a subject term in some stories through which this ethical lesson is delivered. The gist of his view can be presented as follows:

Religious assertions have the function similar to that of moral judgments. As moral judgments don't state any matter of fact; they only prescribe something that is to be done; theological assertions also prescribe a way of life. Such prescriptions are given in the form of some stories (Braithwaite call them stories) to make it easily acceptable and internalisable by the people. This is the function of the subject of such stories. They don't actually mean to refer to any real thing or person. The actual meaning of the story lies in what message it delivers and for so doing it is not necessary that the story be a description of any actual event. In the light of 'Use Theory of Meaning' given in the latter philosophy of Wittgenstein, he tries to show that these statements manifest the believer's adherence to a specific code of conduct or a way of life. Similarly the actual meaning of theological assertions, which are presented in the form of some stories, are intended to recommend a way of life and they are not intend to assert the reality of the story.

Although theological assertions have the function similar to that of Moral Judgment they are different from one another in many important respects. Two very important differences are put forth by Braithwaite:

1.   Religious principle tend to change internally and not only external. A difference between religious and purely moral principles is that , the conduct preached by the religion concerns not only external but also internal behavior. The conversion involved in accepting a religion is a conversion, not only that you should behave towards your neighbor as if you loved him as yourself: it requires that you should love him as yourself.

2.   The resolution proclaimed by a religious assertion may be taken as referring to inner life as well as to outward conduct. And the superiority of religious conviction over the mere adoption of a moral code in securing conformity to the code arises from a religious conviction changing what the religious man wants. It may be hard enough to love your enemy, but once you have succeeded in doing so it is easy to behave lovingly towards him. But if you continue to hate him, it requires a heroic perseverance continually to behave as if you loved him. Resolutions to feel, even if they are only partly fulfilled, are powerful reinforcements of resolutions to act .

Moral Judgments are given directly and the message they deliver is grasped by the people in the single sentence. When somebody says-- "Truth is a great virtue", the judgment clearly states what sort of conduct is to be followed. It means that one should not tell lies or cheat others. The recommendation is clearly and directly given in the judgment. Theological Assertions, on the other hand, do not give the imperative or the instruction directly in this way. Statements of faith express the religious believer's commitment and recommendation to a particular way of life. When a religious believer says-- "God is our heavenly father", he intends to recommend a particular way of life; a code of conduct but that cannot be conceived if this assertion is given in

this single sentence. What is recommended in this sentence is not clear if we try to understand the sentence it in its isolation. The recommendation or the imperative contained in it can be grasped only if it is understood in connection to the body of other statements of which it is a part. This assertion is a part of the Christian theological belief system in which many other assertions form a body of statements. When we see this statement in relation to other statements of New Testament then only it becomes clear that a way of life of love is recommended in this sentence. As it is supposed that the children of a father should behave with each with love and not with enmity, all human beings are supposed to behave with each other with love only. But this recommendation becomes clear only we read the whole passage of New Testament where it is stated.

Braithwaite points out that another important difference between a Moral Judgment and Theological Assertions lies in the fact that the message is delivered directly the former whereas the latter always delivers the message through a story. 'Love is a great human quality', is a Moral Judgment and the message contained in the sentence is directly given. 'God is our heavenly father' does not convey any direct message about what is to be done. But when we read the stories of the acts of Jesus Christ in New Testament it becomes amply clear the life of love alone is worth accepting. The stories of the acts of Jesus who lovingly talked and cured a leper who was thrown away by his family members, the story about his saving a lone helpless who was women condemned to be killed by stoning and many such stories arouse within us the feeling of respect for the acts of selfless service and the great importance of love becomes quite clear to us. Through these stories the message of the greatness of love is very powerfully conveyed even to the most illiterate people. This is the big difference, according to Braithwaite, between Moral Judgments and Theological Assertions.

Braithwaite thinks that every religion prescribes a particular way of life and that is the sole purpose of that religion. The prescribed or the recommended way of life is encoded in the specific stories of a religion. As it is stated in the above paragraph the story makes a very powerful appeal for the specific way of life and it is easily internalized by the people. Whether the characters of the story are real historical persons or not is immaterial. If the recommended code of conducted is accepted by the people the purpose of the story is fulfilled. If the story is true to the facts but fails to convey the message of a desirable code of conduct then it is all useless. The story of Jesus or Buddha gives people a clear and powerful message to lead life according to a particular code; to lead a life of love and compassion. These stories make people adopt the specific way of life. The purpose of these religious stories is to make people believe in the value of the recommended way of life and not make them believe that such people actually existed in history. This is a point of great importance that Braithwaite brings to our notice. Religion is for making us believe in the greatness of a particular way of life and not for making us believe that such and such persons existed once upon a time. Religious belief is a belief in a way of life and not a belief in the existence of some person. Braithwaite very convincingly argues in support of this view which is presented in he following paragraph.

Braithwaite argues that in order to understand the meaning of the statements of what a religious person believes, we should try to see what he does. Only by observing what the believer does, we can come to know what he actually believes. What a person says about his belief can't be

sufficient ground to accept that he actually believes what he says. Noticing what he does indeed is the only ground to ascertain what he actually believes. What a person believes is not a matter of verification of certain hidden internal reality. If at all it is a matter of verification, it should be verified by the actual behavior of the believer. If a religious person believes that God loves us as the father loves His children, then the only test that he so believes is to see if he actually regards everyone as his own brothers and sisters and behave with them lovingly. Believing only that some two thousands year ego a person called Jesus was born and he said and did so many good and miraculous things is not the sign of being a believing in Christianity. If love for all does not manifest in his behavior then whatever he claims to believe, stands falsified. Belief necessarily manifests in the believer's life and that is the only way to know what a person actually believes.

Ordinarily it is thought that someone believes in something that is why he behaves in a certain way. Braithwaite argues that it is to put the cart before the horse. Someone behaves in a particular way because he believes in it. In Braithwaite's view, therefore, what the believers believes can be ascertained by noticing the way of his life. In this respect statements of faith and ethical statements are quite similar. Braithwaite, therefore, holds that the meaning of Theological assertion lies the recommendation given in them and can be conceived only by its connection to the body of other assertions; and they do not mean to refer to any matter of fact to here or here-after. Once, we understand what recommendations are given in theological assertions we understand completely what they actually mean and for this it is not necessary to believe in the existence of any supernatural reality.

In nut shell, on Braithwaite's account of the meaning of Theological Assertions the term like 'God' does not create any problem in understanding their meaning because that is used only to facilitate the process of conveying the code of conduct for religious life. This could be noticed clearly in Buddhism where there is no belief in any creator God yet the message of compassionate way of life is clearly conveyed through the stories of Buddha's life (not only of present but also of past). Buddha himself never promoted any metaphysical speculations and declined to answer questions regarding self and God etc.

Braithwaite has mentioned Buddhism in his essay to compare it with Christianity on the ground that the two religions recommend almost the same code of conduct for human life yet the two are acknowledged to be different because of the different stories which prescribe the code. The former conveys the message of compassion through the story of the life of Buddha and the latter does the same through the story of the life of Jesus. No matters of fact are required, in Braithwaite's view, for understanding the meaning of Theology.

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