ONE Unicorns, Numbers and God

- a) I believe in God.
 b) I do not believe in God.
- 2 a) I believe in unicorns.b) I do not believe in unicorns.

We all know what a unicorn is. If we met one walking down our local High Street we would recognise it. We might, of course, have some doubts as to whether it was a real unicorn. We might well suspect that it was a trick of some sort, and might imagine that what we saw was a horse with a spiral horn somehow grafted onto its forehead. However, there would be tests that we could apply, and these might well include finding out where the animal came from. It may well be that we think that meeting a unicorn is so unlikely that no tests would satisfy us. In this case we would be sceptical about the possibility of unicorns. We would agree about what a unicorn would be like, but we would simply deny that there were such animals!

Imagine that you have a friend who is useless at mathematics. As soon as he sees a mathematical symbol, his mind goes blank. He has no notion of the basic elements of mathematics, although he is otherwise intelligent. Imagine that you try to explain to him what a prime number is. You might say: 'A prime number is any whole number that is divisible by itself and one and by no other number.' You might go on to give examples and to tell him that the numbers 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19 and so on are prime numbers. The person to

whom you are explaining might, however, not be able to make anything of all this talk – to him, prime numbers are simply not real. They are a curious idea used by mathematicians – they are simply irrelevant and make no sense to him. Finally, he might say to you: 'You say prime numbers are real and that they exist. All right, show me one.' You will probably be puzzled by this. You can't put him in a car and drive him to see the prime number 23. Prime numbers certainly exist, but you cannot go to visit them. The prime number 23, or any other prime number, is not sitting in a particular place. The very fact that he asks you to show him a prime number means that he has not understood what a prime number is.

We understand what unicorns are and most of us accept that they do not exist. We understand what prime numbers are and most of us accept that prime numbers exist – albeit in a different way to unicorns. We understand that trees, love, atoms and evil exist – but in different ways. What, however, does it mean to talk of God existing?

The word 'God' has been the most fought-over and debated word in the history of ideas. For centuries it dominated the thought of the most intelligent people on this planet. Even today, talk about God is guaranteed to raise the passions. Religion is an emotive subject, and around the world families and communities are divided from each other because of different religious beliefs. All too often these beliefs are passionately held, yet all too rarely do those holding the beliefs stop to think about what it is that they believe.

Even within a particular community people will differ about what the word 'God' means. Many people have a somewhat childish idea of God, seeing Him as an old man with a white beard sitting somewhere above the clouds. If we talk to someone else about God, we will normally find considerable differences between the two of us, and examining these differences with an open mind can help each of us to be clear about what we do and do not believe.

Philosophy is partly concerned with a search for truth and understanding. This book takes the search seriously. There is no hidden agenda, no attempt to provide you with the 'right' answer. Rather, the aim is to help you, the reader, to think through what God means

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and then to go on to explore the consequences of holding this view. Whatever view you hold is going to be fraught with difficulties and complications. Some people are nervous of philosophy because they do not think it is right to think about or to examine their faith. However, most religions make a claim to truth, and so this claim should be taken seriously. Any religion that seeks truth should not be frightened of the search for greater understanding. Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it this way: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity and end by loving himself better than all.'

If we refuse to seek the truth, if we retreat behind our own certainties because we are frightened that they cannot bear examination, then we are likely to become increasingly intolerant of others. In a world where there are many different religious systems, the search for truth and understanding must be a worthy one. In previous centuries, religious wars were used by one religious grouping to impose their beliefs on others. Human beings should have moved beyond that stage now, although, sadly, this is not the case. We should be able to sit down with friends who have different religious beliefs and reason our way towards greater mutual understanding.

The chapters that follow look at three different ideas of what it means to talk about God. All these ideas are persuasive, all are influential. Some have an ancient history, others have their roots in the past but have been more recently brought up to date. All are credible, all suffer from disadvantages. In exploring these different ideas of God we will be exploring the very heart of religion and, by so doing, we may be able to come closer to the goal of our own search for ultimate truth.

Questions for consideration

- a) What does it mean to say that God exists? Is God more like a spirit, a person, a prime number, an idea in people's minds or none of these?
- b) If religious believers hold fast to certain beliefs, does it matter if

these are true?

- c) Can it ever be right to believe in a particular way of looking at the world and not to think about one's beliefs or not to listen to
- d) Are the beliefs of our parents and those beliefs with which we have been brought up necessarily right?

One way of learning to swim is to be thrown into the deep end! We are going straight into a discussion which is probably going to be at the heart of philosophy and theology in the next century, yet few people are aware of the issues. It really revolves around the question Pontius Pilate asked Jesus during his trial: 'What is truth?' (cf. my book *What is truth?*, University of New South Wales, 1999). This is tremendously important, particularly when we start to consider what it means to say that a religious or a moral claim is true.

To understand the issues, we are going to have to think about how language is used. We learn language at our parents' knees. Very young children have an innate ability to master language. This mastery is one of the key elements in human development. Early man developed an ability to wield tools, but as the first inarticulate grunts developed into a means of communication, so it became possible for individuals to co-operate towards some common end. Language is a public affair. It is the way in which we communicate ideas, aspirations, truths, objectives and insights. We use language to tell others of our needs, feelings and intentions.

Language is not static, it is developing all the time. New words are introduced and the meanings of old words change. The meaning of the term a 'gay young man' a hundred years ago was entirely different to what it is today. Even 30 years ago, a billion in Britain meant a million million. Today Britain has adopted the United States convention and a billion means a thousand million – a substantial difference. Terms like 'genetic engineering', 'embryo research', 'laptop computer', 'mobile telephone', 'charged particles', 'acid rain' or

'video recorder' simply did not exist until recently, as the ideas they represented were not there to be expressed. Language is rich and it is dynamic. It expresses truth and also, of course, falsity. However, what does it mean for language to express truth? Take a simple statement like 'Murder is wrong.' What does it mean to say that this statement is true? Most people would probably agree with this claim, but that does not mean that we understand what would be necessary to make the statement true.

There are two basic theories of truth, or ways of understanding truth:

The correspondence theory of truth

The correspondence theory of truth maintains that a statement is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs which it attempts to describe. Thus 'The dog sits on the bench' is true iff (this means 'if and only if') what I am referring to is a dog and it is sitting on the bench. Truth does not depend on language and the society in which we live. Someone who holds to a correspondence theory of truth is today called a *realist*.

Realists maintain that language captures reality, it does not create reality. Language attempts to stretch out to a reality that is external to us and tries to express this reality accurately. Sometime we make errors – for instance, people once believed that the world was flat. This view was mistaken, those who hold to the correspondence theory will maintain, because the world is *not* flat. The error lay in people thinking that the claim to flatness correctly represented the world, when it did not.

The realist will maintain that a statement is either true or false. This is to affirm bivalence. Bivalence means that the truth or falsity of a statement does not depend on evidence. Evidence will help us to decide whether a statement is true or not, but truth does not depend on evidence. Take the statements 'Caesar ate an apple on the morning he landed in Britain' or 'There is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe.' Realists maintain that these statements are either

true or they are false. Certainly there may be no evidence of their truth or falsity, but this does not maintain there is not a truth at stake.

To talk of truth is to claim that language correctly corresponds to the reality that lies beyond it. On this basis, the statement 'I am sitting on a chair' is true if and only if what I am sitting on is a chair. This seems obvious, but it need not be. In some societies, they may have no idea of chairs, they may never sit down. We could easily imagine the society of ancient Rome where everyone lay down to have meals and the alternatives were between standing and lying down. If someone from such a society were shown a chair she would not know what it was, and might instead regard it as a thing which one stands on in order to make oneself higher, in other words a form of pedestal. Truth, it might be claimed, is expressed in language and language is used in different ways in different societies. It is this claim that leads on to the alternative conception of truth.

The coherence theory of truth

The coherence theory of truth maintains that a statement is true if it coheres with other true statements. Someone who holds a coherence theory of truth is today called an *anti-realist*. Imagine a jigsaw. One piece of a jigsaw belongs or is correct only if it fits in with other pieces. Jigsaw pieces are not isolated, they are part of a dynamic whole. All the definitions in a dictionary are in fact circular, since they are all expressed in words, and each of those words is defined by other words. There is no word that cannot be defined using other words.

The coherence theory of truth says that the same sort of principle applies to language. Language is the jigsaw into which words and expressions have to fit. A word that does not fit in does not make any sense. The statement about the world being flat, the anti-realist claims, would once have been true because it formed an integral part of the way in which the world was then seen. It was once true, but is so no longer.

According to this theory a statement is true if it coheres or fits in

with other statements considered to be true within a particular form of life. Take the case of morality. If you are a Roman Catholic, then the statement 'artificial birth control is wrong' will be true for you. (You may not, of course, choose to obey this moral rule, but it is nevertheless a rule which forms part of the Catholic way of life.) Similarly, it is true that you have a duty to go to Mass on Sunday and on Holy Days of obligation. If you are a Hindu, it is true that you must respect cows. If you are a Muslim, then it is true that you have an obligation to pray facing towards Mecca and, and so far as this is possible, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during your lifetime. For a Muslim it is true that a man may have four wives but for a Christian it is true that only one is allowed.

What makes these statements true is that they are part of or fit in with a particular form of life. Within the Catholic, Hindu or Islamic worlds, within their different forms of life, these statements are true. On this basis, there can be different truths in different communities. Truth is not absolute, it is relative. Truth in one culture may be different from truth in another.

Take the example of two posts with another post joining them across the top. In a society where football is played, this might be considered a goalpost. What makes this arrangement a goalpost is how the society uses the term, and the use it has for the idea of goalposts. In a society which does not play football, the same arrangement might be correctly termed 'washing-line'. In another society it might be called 'execution place' – because it is the place from which people are hung by ropes suspended from the crossbar. Whether it is goalpost, washing-line or execution place depends on the society in which it is used.

The anti-realists hold that truth is relative to the form of life or the community in which the truth claims are made or expressed. Within a particular form of life, within a particular society, something may be true which is not true elsewhere. Anti-realists deny bivalence (this was defined earlier in this chapter), since they claim that some statements are neither true nor false – they just have no content. It is neither true nor false for a tribe of Amazonian Indians who have

never seen an outsider before, that the three poles referred to above are a goal. The idea of goalposts has simply no meaning for them, and the question of truth or falsity does not, therefore, arise.

If we consider the moral arena, the issue may be clearer. Take the following statements:

- 1 Sex before marriage is wrong.
- 2 Homosexuality is wrong.
- 3 Killing your parents is wrong.

The realist will maintain that these statements are either true or false and that their truth or falsity does not depend on the society in which they are expressed. Beyond any of our earthly societies, they might perhaps claim, there is a transcendental realm of value which makes moral statements either true or false. If they do not correspond, they are false. The realist will claim that the moral values of different societies are right or wrong to the extent that they correspond to some ultimate value. This ultimate value may be found

- in the will of God who has laid down absolute moral rules, or
- in something like Plato's Forms which exist beyond time and space and which represent the perfect ideas of truth, justice, the good, etc., and to which our moral claims need to conform if they are to be true.

The anti-realist will reply, 'Oh no, this is not the case at all. Within some societies sex before marriage, homosexuality and killing your parents is wrong, but in other societies these may be right. There are no absolutes. There is no independent standard or vantage point from which or by which we can judge moral norms. Morality evolves to meet the needs of society and in different societies there may be different moralities. A hundred years ago sex before marriage was wrong. Today, in the Western world, it is morally acceptable between two people who love each other and who are in a long-

term relationship. In some African societies, sex before marriage is the accepted norm.'

If there are disagreements about morality between different societies, the realist will claim that one society is right and the others are wrong, as there can be only one truth. The anti-realist will say that there is no single truth – within each society there are true and valid positions, and you cannot judge the morality of one society by the ideas of another.

Truth about the future

Someone can be a realist about some things and an anti-realist about others. For instance, someone can be a realist about morality but an anti-realist about the future. Take the statement 'Judith will have 14 children' made about a girl who is presently aged 19 and who is biologically capable of having children if the circumstances are right:

1 The realist about the future will maintain that it is either true or false *now* that Judith will have 14 children, even if we do not know which is the case. Somehow, the realist will maintain, there exists a fact 'out there' to which the statement 'Judith will have 14 children' corresponds. We may not have the evidence to tell whether or not this statement is true, but lack of evidence does not prevent the realist saying that the statement is either true or false.

2 The anti-realist will simply deny that there is any truth to be known, since there is no fact 'out there' and there is no evidence that could count for or against the statement about the number of children that Judith will eventually have. The statement is neither true nor false.

Making sense of mistakes

The issue of how the realist and the anti-realist make sense of mistakes is important. Both realist and anti-realist recognise that mistakes can be made, but their understanding is different:

1 The realist will seek to justify the truth of a statement by establishing its correspondence with the independent reality to which it is held to relate. A statement will be false if it fails to correspond to the reality that lies beyond language. Even when the realist has exhausted *all* available verification conditions, she will still say, 'But I could still be wrong.' Truth, for the realist, transcends (or goes beyond) the verification conditions that are or could be available and a *global mistake* is always possible. A global mistake is a total mistake, a mistake made even after every available or possible checking procedure has been correctly carried out.

2 The anti-realist will seek to establish the truth of a statement by determining whether it coheres or fits in with other true statements – whether, in other words, it fits in with the jigsaw which is the form of life of the particular society.

For the anti-realist, a statement is false if it fails to cohere with other true statements within a particular society. The anti-realist checks whether the statement does correctly cohere by applying verification procedures to test the statement against other statements accepted as true within the society concerned.

Once the anti-realist has exhausted all the possible or available checks (the conditions or tests that would verify whether the statement fits into the jigsaw), then the statement is simply held to be true. To continue to say, 'Well, we have exhausted the checks – we have used every means to ensure that the statement does cohere with other true statements – but are we *sure* it is true?' simply does not make sense, since truth *is* coherence with other true statements in a particular society or form of life.

A global mistake is, for the anti-realist, impossible. Once we are certain, by applying all the available or possible checking procedures (there is a difference to explore here), that the statement does cohere with other true statements, then the statement in question is simply true.

The difference between realist and anti-realist can be illustrated by the belief in a flat earth which we have used as an example. If we had lived a thousand years ago, all the tests that would have been available would have served to demonstrate that the world was flat. Everyone would have agreed and the evidence would have been overwhelming. The anti-realist would have maintained that in the society in which people were then living it was true to say that the world was flat. The realist, whilst accepting that all the available evidence pointed in this direction, would still have said, 'But I could still be wrong.' The eventual discovery that the earth was in fact round would, for the realist, have shown that the original claim that the earth was flat was an error, a mistake. It was not correct because the statement did not correspond to the state of the world.

Summary

There are two different ways of looking at what it means to say that a statement is true:

1 The realist claims that a statement is true because it corresponds to a state of affairs that is independent of language and of the society in which we live. To say that a statement is true is to claim that it correctly refers beyond itself.

2 The anti-realist claims that a statement is true because it coheres with other true statements within a particular society or form of life. To say that a statement is true is to claim that it fits in or coheres with other statements.

When we come to apply this to God, we shall see that the realist maintains that the statement 'God exists' is true because it corresponds or refers to the God who created and sustains the universe. The anti-realist, on the other hand, will claim that 'God exists' is true because the statement coheres or fits in with other statements made by religious believers. As we shall see, the two positions are very different!

Questions for consideration

- a) What would one do to establish whether it is true to say 'Thou shalt not steal?' Do you think the truth of this statement depends on the society in which one lives?
- b) Are you a realist or an anti-realist about the future? Why?
- c) What is bivalence?
- d) If all the possible checks have been carried out to ensure that a statement is true, is it still possible that the statement could never-theless be false? Give examples.