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The Falsification Debate

The Falsification Debate is known as the University Debate that took place at Oxford University. The primary issue was over justified beliefs within Religious Epistemology. This particular debate had a really profound effect, influencing different various philosophical camps such as Reformed Epistemologists, Wittsteinians and Evidentialists. Particularly, there were three philosophers named Anthony Flew, R.M. Hare and Basil Mitchell who each provided different parables to illustrate their different epistemological viewpoints. I find that Hare's views are the most interesting due to his out-of-the box approach which deserves more thought on my behalf to really decide if it is a worthy approach.

The first of the three philosophers to articulate his viewpoints was Anthony Flew. Flew created the parable of the Invisible Man that is representative of God. It starts off by having two explorers who were hiking through some kind of jungle and eventually come upon an area where there was a clearing that had been made into a garden. It appeared that someone apparently put forth effort to clear the area and took the time to plant the garden. One person concluded that there must be a Gardener. The other did not believe there was a Gardener. So they conducted a test to see if in fact there was a Gardener. After conducting a myriad of tests they never detected a Gardener. The one who initially believed there was a Gardener stated that the Gardener is actually invisible and never can be convinced otherwise, even after all of the elaborate tests to detect an actual Gardener.

Flew's parable points out that what begins as a definite proposition with respect to the individual asserting that there is a Gardener slowly turns into an indefinite proposition. The more

the individual puts certain conditions or qualifications regarding the Gardener's actual existence, the more it loses its truth value, rendering it un-falsifiable. Thus the assertion dies the death of a thousand qualifications, according to Flew. This parable is equivalent to such theological utterances like, "God love us and has a plan for us." These assertions look like they are indeed assertions, but when pressed on certain issues like the problem of evil the believer will often put various qualifications which, according to Flew, is a fatal flaw and becomes meaningless.

Next comes R.M. Hare who adds his own parable regarding a lunatic who is convinced that all dons are out to murder him/her. The lunatic's friend attempts to introduce various dons to the lunatic, who are all mildly mannered and are cordial to the lunatic. After each visit the friend tries to convince the lunatic that dons are not all bad and are not out to murder him. However, the lunatic believes that they are just putting up a front and are on their best behavior, and will murder him when he puts his guard down. Therefore, no amount of evidence will convince the lunatic otherwise.

Interestingly, Hare begins by first agreeing with Flew's assessment with respect to the Falsification debate. In fact, Hare goes as far as to say that Flew is victorious with respect to religious propositions. However, the lunatic's assertions that are like unto a person's religious assertions that aren't really proposition or even an expression, but is instead a blick. According to Hare, blicks are different from propositions and expressions because they operate on a different set of meanings than do assertions or propositions. Blicks give people the condition wherein people can even begin to make propositions. Blicks are created to widen the way we familiarize the way we look at the world so we can make propositions like "God made the world." This is related somewhat to Plantinga wanting to widen the way we define properly basic beliefs.

However, one can object by saying blicks are not proper basic beliefs, because beliefs can be falsifiable and blicks are not because they help orientate the way we see things. Hare's way of looking at blicks is reminiscent also of D.Z. Phillips and Wittsteinians who try to point out that religious believers mean something entirely different when they use the same kind of language, and blicks are like unto practices instead of beliefs. Hare's new definition was to avoid misusing other commonly used terms that have a particular sets of meanings. Therefore, the blick emancipates the lunatic because the lunatic just has a different way of orientating his views. Moreover, it isn't like the lunatic isn't aware that others like his friend draw different conclusions. Particularly, the lunatic sees dons as bad and are plotting to murder him and his friend's blick is that dons are good and are not trying to murder his friend.

The final parable is by Basil Mitchell who makes some general remarks dealing with Flew's comments. Namely, Flew's characterization with respect to the problem of pain and evil are odd, as Mitchell puts it. According to Mitchell's estimation Flew doesn't accurately reflect the theologian's or believers viewpoints regarding the problem of pain or evil. Furthermore, Mitchell states that the problem of pain/evil does in fact create major difficulty on behalf of a theologian or believer, and pain or evil does count against Christian doctrine. However, according to Mitchell the problem of pain/evil doesn't decisively count against the theologian because of the theologian's faith in God is what matters. Mitchell does appear to account for the fact that theologians' trust in God is in fact a logical, which isn't meant to be negative because the theologian isn't neutral in his/her stance regarding their trust of faith in God. The faithful believer does differ with respect to the un-believer or the outside observer regarding attitudinal differences. Unlike the outside observer the believer moves forward in faith despite the seeming incongruent realities like that of pain or evil.

Mitchell illustrates this by inserting a parable that takes place in a faraway country that finds itself amid war. It highlights two individuals where the first individual is a resistance member to the current governmental administration. This partisan meets a stranger who impresses him because the stranger claims and identifies himself as the head of the actual resistance party. The stranger encourages the partisan not to lose trust and faith in the stranger no matter what happens. The partisan is convinced the stranger is the leader of the resistance party and decides to trust and believe in the stranger no matter what the stranger does.

Later, the partisan sees the stranger dressed as a police guard and is found rounding up those who belong to the resistance. This causes the believer's friends to question whether or not the stranger is really on their side. Mitchell concludes that the believer can do one of two things. One, the stranger is still on his side but for whatever reason sees fit not to help in such an obvious way. Two, the believer concludes the stranger is not on their side. Mitchell articulates that if the believer chooses the first choice then the believer is looked upon as being insane, which is representative of the religious believer who appears to seldom dislodge his or her trust or faith in God or God's will. However, Mitchell states that his parable differs from Hare's because, according to Mitchell, the believer does indeed experience and acknowledge when there is actual conflict, and even with counter prevailing evidence the believer deliberately chooses to still believe despite the evidence. Whereas, according to Mitchell, Hare's blicks do not allow for the person to choose or admit when his or her blicks are wrong.

My personal feeling is that Flew is correct regarding his assessment that religious beliefs are not real propositions, but I differ with Flew because I, like Hare, believe that religious beliefs are not really propositions but are instead blicks or are just practices that orient our lives to give meaning and purpose. I believe that we all have them and we cannot get away from not having

them. I think that Mitchell is correct with respect that believers, despite counter evidence, still maintain a trust in God like the partisan in the parable. However, I don't think Mitchell fully grasps the point what blicks are intended for – they purposely deny being a proposition and mean something totally different which I attempted to outline above. I also do believe that people can choose their personal core blicks, once we realize that we all have them.