

DID LEWIS CARROLL WRITE *GENESIS*?

Adam Morton

Does belief in God make sense?

One of the themes of our culture was until recently a never-ending dispute between atheists, believers in Christianity and related religions, and agnostics. Each side busily came up with empirical evidence and abstract argument to confound the others. The main war was between the believers and the atheists, of course, with the agnostics quietly sceptical that human reason was capable of resolving such questions as the existence of God and the fate of human individuals after their deaths.

These disputes are now much less dramatic. One reason is that neither believers nor atheists have much hope any more of finding the magic argument that will convert the opposition. To that extent the agnostics have won. Another reason is that some of the passion has gone out of the dispute as believers no longer see non-believers as awful people set on undermining the moral fabric of society and non-believers no longer see believers as wishful romantics who cannot appreciate the force of scientific progress. The schoolteacher and the *curé* can now be friends. But there is a third reason too. There is now a fourth position, which first emerged with the logical positivism of the inter-war years.

Positivism

With the work of logical positivists, such as Schlick and Carnap, philosophy came upon a new strategy. One did not argue that a view that one opposed was false, but that it was unintelligible. Faced with the believer and the atheist locked in bitter dispute, the positivist calmly says "God exists, God doesn't exist; either makes as much sense to me - that is, no sense at all - as the other. There is really nothing intelligible there to argue about." And of course the suggestion is not just that the positivist herself is too thick to understand what the fuss is all about, but that there is objectively no meaning to be had in theological disputes. "God made the

world and loves the human race" means just as much or as little as "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe." Except that Lewis Carroll was having fun, while serious believers and atheists have deceived themselves into thinking that they are engaged in some deeply serious enterprise. (Things somewhat like this were said long before logical positivism. One can find similar views in the British empiricists and in Kant. But never so clearly and so explicitly.)

I think the positivists were right about religion. I think that claims about the existence of God, and simple-minded denials of those claims, lack meaning. That is not to say that I think that logical positivism is true. It tried to distinguish sense from nonsense, which is admirable, and pointed out how much more nonsense we produce than we realise, which is a step towards intellectual sanity for the whole culture. But its criteria of meaningfulness were wrong, and its diagnoses of how we come to produce so much nonsense were superficial.

According to the very crudest form of logical positivism a proposition (that is, anything someone says or believes) is meaningful if there could be experiences which would either show it to be true or refute it. This is impossibly strong: it makes most of science meaningless. So there are milder versions, requiring in various ways that in order to be meaningful a proposition must be something we could, eventually and in principle, find evidence for or against. This is usually called 'verificationism'.

Although positivism is dead, verificationist ideas are still very influential in philosophy. One reason they are is that we are still up to our ears in nonsense. Now it is art criticism, popular psychology and sociology, and the pronouncements of politicians, rather than the debates of theologians and metaphysicians, that surround us with nonsense. ('Pseuds' corner' stuff, bullshit, what the Germans call

quatsch.) And one of the tasks of philosophy is to find ways of separating the linguistic sheep from the linguistic goats: diagnosing misuses of language and distinguishing them from honest meaningful speech. The reason positivism is dead is not that we have abandoned this project, but that we no longer think there is an easy or mechanical way of accomplishing it.

One misuse of language is particularly important here, because it connects with issues about whether the idea of God is intelligible, and because one very natural way of diagnosing what goes wrong is directly at odds with verificationism. It is best introduced with some examples.

Mad Explanations

Nancy the numerologist: Nancy has an accident and writes off her new Volkswagen. She replaces it with a new Peugeot, which explodes when she tries to start it. Then she gets an Austin, which is squashed flat by a tank when she runs out of petrol and abandons it on Salisbury Plain. When her friends console her on her bad luck she has a startling reply. "It wasn't really bad luck, but a deep universal pattern. You see, the deaths of the cars happened on the 22nd of February, the 16th of March, and the 1st of May. Now the Volkswagen was my first car ever and the first prime number is 2, so it isn't surprising that the accident happened in the second month of the year, and 'V' is the 22nd letter of the alphabet so of course February 22 was the day. Similarly 'P' for Peugeot is the 16th letter and that car died on the 16th of the 3rd month, since the second prime is three. And since the third prime is five my Austin went the way of all cars on the first of the fifth. My present car is a Mercedes, and I expect it to go on the 13th of July. It's a Friday, by the way."

Gilbert the gambler: Gilbert inspects a new pound coin and assures himself that it is fair. He then sees it tossed. It



Lewis Carroll did not intend that his Jabberwock should be taken as a real creature. (From original illustration by John Tenniel, 1865).

comes down Heads, Tails, Tails, Heads, Heads, Heads, Heads. "That's funny" he thinks. "First one head, then two tails, then four heads. My father's father had one son, who had two sons, one of whom, me, has four sons. If I watch this coin I'll learn something about how many boys there will be in the next generation."

Claims like those of Nancy and Gilbert would naturally be taken as signs of madness. Nancy's claim might not have been mad had she lived in mediæval times. And Gilbert's, while pretty crazy even as it is, becomes outright lunacy if he does indeed accept that the coin is unbiased, that whether it comes down heads or tails on any given toss is a matter of pure chance.

Before we had a worked-out idea of randomness it would have been slightly less insane.

In saying that these claims would be mad I mean that a person making them is losing touch with the shared network of beliefs that enables us to understand one another and describe a common reality. Faced with Nancy or Gilbert I would not be sure that I knew what they were trying to say, how what they were saying was supposed to relate to anything I or other members of our culture believe, or how it was supposed to explain anything. If forced to choose between "true" and "false" I would opt for saying that Nancy or Gilbert's claims are false, as they do not seem to

describe the world as it is. But I would much prefer to say "I don't understand it well enough to stick the labels on." In short, I would say that their claims were unintelligible.

The Unintelligibility of God-talk

It is this kind of unintelligibility that I take most God-talk to have. It usually frustrates one's attempts to understand it by claiming to give explanations of things that either have other and better explanations or which can have no explanations at all. Many of these difficulties come from something intrinsic to the idea of God, the way it combines the ideas of personhood, eternity, and power. That is, God is supposed to have three distinct kinds of attribute. (a) He is to be a person with some of the same attributes as human minds, so he has knowledge of particular facts, and emotions such as love towards particular creatures. (b) He is to be outside time, so that he does not change or even reflect the changes in other things. (c) He is the cause of the way things are, and in some way his existence explains otherwise mysterious facts about the course of events. But it is hard to understand how (a), (b) and (c) can all be applied together.

The most obvious tension is between (a) and (b). How can a being that is outside time have knowledge and experience emotions? If I know that my car keys are lying on my desk it is either because I can see them there, in which case my perception of them has changed my beliefs about them, or because I have used reason and memory to deduce their position from other remembered facts, in which case reason and memory have caused a change in what I know. In either case, my knowledge is based on the fact that changes in me can be caused by my interaction with the world. But God does not change, so he does not reason or perceive. So how can he know anything? Similar problems arise with emotions such as love. They also arise with more abstract attributes such as consciousness: believers take God to be consciously aware of their thoughts and acts, carelessly forgetting that they also think of God as something that cannot have a stream of consciousness, cannot remember, and cannot anticipate. Does this really make any sense at all?

Perhaps it does, if 'person', 'knowledge', 'love', and 'consciousness' are being used in a slightly metaphorical sense: not quite what they mean when applied to us, but something somehow similar. To find out if this is so, we

would have to look at the way God's personhood is used: the explanations it gives and the understanding it brings. People appeal to God as a person to explain things that cannot be explained in scientific terms and to give explanations that carry emotional or moral satisfaction. Imagine another case.

Barry the believer: Barry has five children. One after another they die. The first after a fall, the second in a car accident, the third from meningitis, the fourth from leukaemia, and the fifth from suicide in despair over the deaths of her siblings. Barry is tormented by the pointlessness of his children's lives and deaths. He asks himself why they died. He talks to his parish priest, who persuades him that there is an explanation for the five innocent deaths: the will of God. God has a design for the world, down to the smallest detail, and it requires some things which seem to us awful. Barry finds this comforting. Now he can see his children's deaths as happening for a reason. He feels that in some way he knows why they died.

One thing that enters immediately here is the problem of evil, the fact that if a superhuman person intends the deaths of children and their parents' heartbreak then that person seems to be as awful as the events he intends. But that is not my concern here. I am concerned to ask whether the priest has provided Barry with an intelligible explanation of why his children died.

There is clearly a lot wrong with it as an explanation. It is, in fact, a lot like Nancy's and Gilbert's 'explanations' of the fates of their cars and their family histories. The explanation tells us no more about the death of each child than we know from a scientific explanation of each of the deaths. It represents them as being related, though; it sees a pattern where science sees none. Does this make sense? Not really: for it is part of the scientific explanation that the deaths *are* independent of one another, like the falls of Gilbert's coin. If there is a pattern here deeper than science can discern, then the scientific explanations are wrong rather than incomplete.

It is essential to understand the role that the idea of chance or randomness plays here. If a fair coin is tossed a number of times each toss is independent of the previous ones. There may be subtle and complex factors determining in each case whether it falls heads or tails - the movement of objects in the environment, the exact trajectory of the tossing hand - though this will not be the case with all ran-

dom sequences. But there will be no connections between one toss and another. Or, to put it another way, all conditional sentences of the form 'if this toss had been tails that one would have been heads' are false. The point is that the understanding of the world that we have allows us to say that some events are *not* caused by some others. If there is any significance to the pattern of Gilbert's coins then mechanics is wrong. Similarly, if there are connections between prime numbers and apparently unrelated car-deaths then all of physics is wrong, and if there is any explanation of why all of Barry's children died then medicine and physics are both wrong. Sometimes when we don't have an explanation we have a good reason for thinking that there is no explanation.

This idea, that when one can explain enough about the world one can see that some things just do not have explanations, is an integral part of our view of the world. It follows from beliefs that everyone must have, or risk excluding themselves from the linguistic community. This gives another way of saying what it is about Nancy's, Gilbert's, and Barry's assertions that makes it hard to take them as meaningful. Each of them seems to be trying to explain a pattern that, if some pretty basic assumptions about the world are right, cannot have any explanation at all. And so one might take each of them to be challenging those basic physical assumptions. But they are not doing that, either: they want to have their cake and eat it, to believe things incompatible with the standard explanations of events while yet seeming to hold the beliefs which underlie those standard explanations. In the case of Nancy and Gilbert this is due to madness, stupidity, or confusion. In the case of religious believers it is often due to a kind of self-deception. Whatever the cause, the result is the same: we cannot really understand what they say.

Conceptual Zig-Zagging

Why then do claims about God *seem* to make sense? After all, you can translate them from one language into another, see which ones are blatantly contradictory or not, and work them into serious discussions with the outward form of real discourse. The answer is that there are different ways in which language can have or lack meaning. Two of them might be called the story-telling way and the explanation-giving way. Words have the story-telling kind of meaning when we can use them to make patterns which have the kind of coherence that stories

do, describing real or imaginary situations and happenings as they could be imagined to happen, using words consistently. Note that outright nonsense, for example the works of Edward Lear or Lewis Carroll, can have story-telling meaning. Words have the explanation-giving kind of meaning, on the other hand, when we can use them to make explanations: answers to 'why' questions that fit standards we evolve of how such questions are to be answered. Note that some claims have explanation-giving meaning even though they give bad explanations. A proposition lacks explanation-giving meaning not when we cannot give good explanations of events by using it, but when any attempt to use it as part of an explanation conflicts with the explanations one makes of other things.

Explanation-giving meaning depends much more on what else you believe, and what else you take to be meaningful, than story-telling meaning does. For the kind of understanding it depends on amounts to fitting the claim in question into a network of other beliefs, either as augmenting them or as a replacement for some of them. (This is the reason why an emphasis on explanation-giving meaning is opposed to verificationism: since the explanatory role of each of our beliefs depends on its links with other things we believe it cannot be got from the conditions under which it, all by itself, might be confirmed or



Do claims about demons make sense? (A Demon, from Sir John Harington, Metamorphosis of Ajax. 1596)

refuted.) Paradoxically, the greatest obstacle to understanding can come with claims that are presented as consistent with existing beliefs. Gilbert or Barry, for example, are not proposing to throw out all of physics and medicine, or even to change them at all. They are allowing that the usual laws of nature hold, even though they leave no room for the kind of explanation they are trying to give. So we must conclude that we do not know what they are really trying to say.

If story-telling meaning alone is present, we can have a strong illusion of understanding what is said. In fact, there is built into our religious traditions a pretty explicit strategy for using story-telling meaning to give the impression of explanation-meaning. I call it conceptual zig-zagging. It begins with the stories children are told about God. These have both story-telling meaning and explanation-giving meaning given a child's other beliefs. The child then conceives of God as simply a very powerful and very benevolent person, who has knowledge and emotions in just the way people do and who made the world in much the way that people make houses. Then as one grows up one learns that very little of this can be true, so while the story part stays much the same the explanation part gets much more subtle. God moves out of space and time; his creation of the world doesn't occur at any real moment or use any real materials; his states of mind are only analogous to human knowledge and human emo-

tions. But the explanations that the weakened and mystified theory is used to make - why awful things happen to people, why we should be kind to one another and not fear death - remain roughly the same. As this happens explanation-giving meaning becomes more and more eroded. But believers hide this fact from themselves by zig-zagging: when their hold on what it is they believe begins to fail they zig over to the story part, with the childish conception that goes with it, and when this is challenged as obviously false and inconsistent with the world as grown-ups know it to be, they zag back to the sophisticated picture in which God is beyond space and time and his power and his love are merely metaphorical.

Conceptual zig-zagging is found in science too. The most important example arises when we try to understand the subatomic world. We start with a commonsense conception of medium-sized objects occupying definite locations in space and interacting in familiar ways, and then we develop theories of things which are also physical objects but unimaginally smaller. Then it turns out that they do not occupy space and interact just as familiar objects do, and the analogy cannot be taken literally. Atoms are not really miniature solar systems. So here again we zig-zag: when the abstract theory needs bolstering with intuition we zig over to the simple-minded picture of little things in space, and when the limitations of this appear we zag back to a very abstract

theory, understandable only in terms of its mathematical apparatus.

But there is a difference between theology and atomic physics, of course. Conceptual zig-zagging in physics gives one an intuitive picture of an essentially unpicturable theory, but the picture is not needed in order to use the theory to explain events at the subatomic level and elsewhere. Atomic physics works without the zags back to the naive picture; theology does not.

The result of all that I have been saying is a picture of the misuse of language in some ways like that of logical positivism: language can often be doing less work than it seems, and when this is so the best strategy is not to worry whether what is said is true or false but to ask whether, given what one believes and one's style of explaining the world, it is capable of being understood. There is one point, though, on which the position I have been describing is very different from that of logical positivism. According to positivism when a proposition lacks meaning the whole topic is confused: there is nothing there to understand. But on the view I have been describing this is not so. There may well be facts about the ultimate origin of the universe, about human immortality, and about the relations between human strivings and basic physical law. But we have not yet found a way of saying anything meaningful about them.

Adam Morton is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bristol

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