

ONE

Unicorns, Numbers and God

- 1 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

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

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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 the points of view of others?
- d) Are the beliefs of our parents and those beliefs with which we have been brought up necessarily right?

TWO

What is Truth?

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