

Antony Flew – Parable of the jungle

“Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, ‘Some gardener must tend this plot.’ The other disagrees, ‘There is no gardener.’ So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. ‘But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.’ So they set up a barbed-wire fenced. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the believer is not convinced. ‘But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensitive to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.’ At last the Sceptic despairs, ‘but what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?’”

Flew says the original assertion that a gardener exists has been so qualified by the end of the exchange that nothing remains of it. A “qualified” claim is one that’s partly taken back; for example, “Jack said he loved his girlfriend more than he’d ever loved any woman. Then he qualified his statement: ‘Except my mother, of course.’”

R.M Hare – Parable of the lunatic

“A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. [A “don” is a tutor at a British university.] His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, ‘You see, he doesn’t really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?’ But the lunatic replies, ‘Yes, but that was only is diabolical cunning; he’s really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it, I tell you.’ However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same.”

What does this have to do with religious belief? Hare says religious people have a religious *blik*. Once you accept the religious *blik*, you have a brand-new way of looking at the world. Your frame of reference is radically altered, and with it, your evidentiary standards. Suddenly all sorts of things that previously did not count as evidence for God begin to count. Your evidentiary filter becomes much more porous. The existence of God becomes so obvious that nothing can falsify it.

Basil Mitchell – Parable of the Partisan and the stranger

Mitchell emphasizes that religion is a matter of relationship, rather than intellectual conviction. He illustrates this in his parable of the Stranger:

“In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger’s sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

“They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, ‘He is on our side.’

“Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, ‘He is on our side.’ He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, ‘The Stranger knows best.’ Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say, ‘Well, what would he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?’ But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, ‘Well, if that’s what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better.’”

What does this parable mean?

According to Mitchell, statements like “The Stranger is on our side” or “God loves us” are genuine assertions, in that they can be falsified. But, given the partisan’s experience of the stranger, “The Stranger is on our side” is not obviously false. The partisan has reasons to believe it; the partisan has met the stranger and been impressed by him. When the partisan asks the stranger for help and doesn’t receive any help, the partisan is not logically compelled to say “The Stranger is not on our side.” The partisan can say instead “The Stranger is on our side but he has reasons for withholding help.” In other words, the partisan can give the Stranger the benefit of the doubt – just as you would give the benefit of the doubt to a friend. The real question is: “How long can he uphold [this position] without its becoming just silly?” How many times must you give a friend the benefit of the doubt? Mitchell’s answer: “I don’t think one can say in advance.”

Tasks

Summarise all the parables

What do you think they are saying?