

Implicaturism: A New View of the Pragmatics of Religious Language

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The view of religious faith and language that I will introduce is compatible with both theological realism and anti-realism (a distinction concerning the metaphysical dimension of religious belief), on the one hand, and with both theological cognitivism and non-cognitivism (a distinction concerning the semantic dimension of religious language), on the other. Thus, the view to be presented attempts to take into account the actual diversity of philosophical background assumptions concerning religious faith. Accordingly, I pay attention to the existing use of religious language rather than recommend what religious beliefs or related metaphysical views people should have. Instead of making any such recommendations, I will suggest a way to think about the role or function of philosophical assumptions associated with religious faith that dovetails with the experience and religious practice of many people, modern Westerners included, who have a skeptical or indifferent attitude towards organized religions and their doctrines but who nevertheless sometimes pray, meditate, or read spiritual texts.

I call this new view of religious belief and language ‘implicaturism’, from ‘implicature’, a term coined by Paul Grice. Grice developed a theory of what he called conversational implicature to help sort out the truth-conditions of a sentence from other conclusions we might draw from its assertion. These other conclusions Grice called implicatures. (Grice 1991, 24-26, 86, 118 and 229-230.) Grice’s argument suggests that the sentence meaning of an utterance may be only the tip of the iceberg: what is conveyed may depend on a complex network of conventions governing how people expect each other to behave, and how much information they expect them to convey for a given purpose. Thus, ‘implicature’ is a technical term for certain kinds of conclusions that are drawn from statements without those conclusions being logical implications or entailments.

A statement is an implicature for another statement if the truth of the former suggests the truth of the latter, but does not require it. For instance, ‘John ate some apples’ has the implicature ‘John did not eat every apple’ and ‘Mary had a baby and got married’ strongly suggests that Mary had the baby before the wedding. ‘John painted the house red’, for its part, suggests that he put the paint on the exterior surface although he could also have painted the house red on the inside. Other than factual statements also have implicatures; for instance, ‘Watch out for traffic!’ has the implicature ‘There are vehicles around’. In general, an implicature is a conclusion that can be drawn from a sentence but does not figure into the truth-condition of that sentence. Note that if the utterances of religious language are non-cognitive, they do not have truth-conditions and thus do not require the truth of any sentence. However, non-cognitive expressions can also have implicatures. For example, an intercessory prayer may have the implicature that the person mentioned in the prayer is in distress.

One can test whether or not a conclusion is a conversational implicature of the sentence simply by cancelling that conclusion—by stating its negation. If the negation contradicts the sentence or is logically incompatible with it, then the conclusion is part of the truth-condition or the meaning of the sentence; if not, then the conclusion is an implicature. Grice pointed out that if the conclusion is part of the meaning, then it cannot be cancelled by some further elaboration by the speaker. Take, for example, the following conversation:

- Lisa was seriously ill and the doctors considered her recovery doubtful. It was in the hands of God; Lisa’s recovery was a miracle.
- Thus, God exists.
- No, what I said is a figure of speech.

Because in this case the existence of God can be cancelled without a contradiction of the opinion of the first speaker, it is an implicature.

In what follows, I try to defend the case for implicaturism (the view that the sentence ‘God exists’ is an implicature) by means of examples. The point of this argument is to show that not all elementary sentences have as their truth-condition the existence of the particular beings (particulars) mentioned in the sentence. If a sentence is non-cognitive or is a tautology or a contradiction, it lacks truth-conditions. If a fictional sentence has truth-value, which is, however, controversial, its truth-condition is other than the existence of the particular being mentioned in it.

One can ask whether the existence of God is the truth-condition of the sentence ‘God has created the world’. The answer is: not on its own, but it is the condition of the truth-value and thus of the cognitivity of the sentence in question. Thus, the existence of God is a necessary, but not a sufficient, truth-condition of the sentence ‘God has created the world’. In other words, the truth of the sentence ‘God exists’ is the cognitivity-condition of the God-talk, thus the condition on which the sentences speaking of God could be true or false. The truth-conditions of the sentence ‘God has created the world’ are a) God exists (or has existed), b) God has created, c) God has created the world, and d) the world exists or has existed.

If a sentence expresses the truth-condition of another sentence, it also expresses the condition of its cognitivity—or does it? We can answer this by means of the next example. The truth-conditions of the sentence ‘Bill is already a big boy’ are a) Bill exists, b) Bill is a boy, and c) Bill is already a big boy. Of these only a) is the cognitivity-condition of the sentence ‘Bill is already a big boy’. Thus, even if a sentence expresses the truth-condition of another sentence, it does not necessarily express its cognitivity-condition. On the other hand, if a sentence expresses the cognitivity-condition of another sentence, it necessarily expresses its truth-condition as well.

What if Bill exists, but she is a girl (who thus has a boy’s name)? We can imagine a discussion that accords with this assumption:

- We have a really nice kid next door, Bill, who truly loves playing.
- How old is that kid?
- 5 years.
- Then Bill is a big boy.
- Not a big boy but a big girl: her real name is Billie.

The existence of Bill alias Billie is not the truth-condition of the sentence ‘Bill is a big boy’ because the sentence ‘Bill is a big boy’ is false. Instead, the existence of Bill alias Billie is the condition of the falsity of the sentence ‘Bill is a big boy’, thus its falsity-maker. It can also be said that the existence of Bill alias Billie is the condition of the truth-value of the sentence ‘Bill is a big boy’ (in this case the condition of falsity).

The truth-conditions of the sentence ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’, for its part, are a) Sherlock Holmes exists and b) Sherlock Holmes is a detective. Is it true that Sherlock Holmes is a detective? This question might be answered in the negative on the grounds that Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character. On the other hand, the question can also be answered affirmatively if it is added that Sherlock Holmes exists as a fictional character or in the mind. For example, Terence Parsons maintains that ‘Sherlock Holmes is a detective’ can be true without ‘Holmes existing’ being true (Parsons 2000, 41). So far, all of our examples have been synthetic statements. Let us next consider an example of an analytic statement. The truth-condition of the sentence ‘All bachelors are unmarried men’ is that, by linguistic convention, a bachelor is an unmarried man (i.e., ‘bachelor’ is defined as ‘unmarried man’), not that bachelors exist or that there is at least one bachelor. Thus, the sentence ‘All bachelors are unmarried men’ is true regardless of whether any bachelors exist. On these grounds, the truth of an existential presupposition is not the truth-condition of the sentences of a fictional realm (or hypothetical or counterfactual statements) or analytic statements. Thus, if the God-talk is considered fictional, or non-factual, its truth-condition is not the truth of the theistic presupposition, namely the claim that God exists. This shows that the sentence ‘God exists’ is not a necessary presupposition of God-talk, but that it can be an implicature, a kind of pragmatic conclusion of the God-talk. Note that metaphorical expressions, such as “man is a wolf to man”, “repetition is the mother of learning”, or “I read him like an open book”, can also be factual. Thus, figurative speech is not necessarily non-factual or non-cognitive.

An implicature is thus a consequence that comes into effect through a language-game. This means that implicatures cannot be derived from the syntactic and lexical form of the sentence alone; to infer the implicated or indirect information, features of the context of the utterance must be invoked. Thus, our beliefs and background assumptions constitute the basis for implicatures. Consequently, implicatures are refutable or they disappear in suitable contexts, under suitable background assumptions. Laurence Horn nicely defines an implicature as “a component of speaker meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant in a speaker’s utterance without being part of what is said” (Horn 2004, 3).

In the view of religious faith and language, implicaturism denotes the claim that God or some other supernatural being exists as a pragmatic conclusion of an expression used in religious practice, not a basis or presupposition of religious practice. Thus, the same expressions could be used in religious worship without associating them with theistic or other existential implicatures, thus without the actual or dispositional belief in God, spirits, angels, etc. If they were used in this

manner, they would have other than cognitive meaning; perhaps emotive or symbolic meaning. In a religious context claims of the form ‘*X* exists’ (e.g. ‘God exists’) or ‘There are *Xs*’ (e.g. ‘There are divine laws’) are conclusions that are based on prayers and worship expressions (such as ‘Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name’, ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’, ‘May the Lord bless us and keep us’) and their related background assumptions. The fact that the claim ‘God exists’ is an implicature of one or more religious expressions does not mean that the belief in God presupposes a belief in theological doctrines such as the atonement, or the Trinity, or justification by faith. On the contrary, one can believe in God and at the same time disbelieve religious doctrines. Deism, the view that God created the world but does not interact with it, represents this possibility. Equally, a person can participate in religious worship and genuinely practice religion without first forming the belief that God exists.

This view does not contradict the fact that many religious traditions require their adherents to believe certain things, the reality of God, for example. Thus, the theistic claim ‘God exists’ is an implicature, not a necessary background assumption of religious practice, and religious practice is not based on rational grounds, evidence, or rational inferences. According to implicaturism, the theistic claim ‘God exists’ is thus a possible conclusion, not a premise, of inferences that are based on prayers and cultic-ritual expressions. This way of reasoning is not deductive, but abductive. It is an inference from consequences to a possible cause or explanation or an inference from a conclusion to its premises. This kind of inference is logically invalid, in that the conclusion ‘God exists’ is not a logical consequence of its supposed premise: the religious expression. Existential claims in religion (‘God exists’ or ‘Angels exist’ as examples) are thus some sort of *a posteriori* formulations of reasons or explanations for religious behavior and related expressions, not their prior presuppositions.

Implicaturism is the view that religious practice does not require the belief in the existence of God. Rather, the belief in God’s existence may or may not follow from religious practice. According to a competing view, which can be called presuppositionism, the cognitive meaningfulness of expressions used in religious practice requires the acceptance of the theistic presupposition or the proposition that God exists, or at the very least, the cognitive meaningfulness of God-talk requires that the existence of God is considered possible. The existence of God is thus part of the truth-condition of God-talk. Implicaturism does not rule out this possibility, but says that religious practice comes first and that the cognitive justification of religion may come later or not at all. In view of this, implicaturism and presuppositionism can

agree on the significance of the existence of God for the cognitive meaning of God-talk. However, they disagree on the role of the proposition 'God exists' in religious practice. Implicaturism emphasizes that religious practice does not necessarily involve cognitive beliefs. According to presuppositionism, religious practice is pointless if it does not involve cognitive beliefs.

In what follows, I specify and give additional reasons for implicaturism. Many people may especially doubt the idea that religious practice is groundless and that the practice of monotheistic religions is not based on the God-hypothesis. I want to allay this doubt.

As it pertains to the traditional views of religious faith, implicaturism is related to fideism rather than to theism or atheism. However, implicaturism differs from fideism in maintaining that religious beliefs are dependent on other beliefs that one holds and on one's world-view. This dependence is not logical-conceptual and does not result from the fact that the point of religious practice is necessarily dependent on the truth of metaphysical claims such as 'God exists' (Phillips 2004, 59, 62, 65, 69 and 73). Instead, religious beliefs are dependent on other beliefs because central religious practices, such as prayer and worship, are intentional and directed toward an object (e.g. God, a saint, an ancestor) and because the thoughts about this intentional object convey different pragmatic conclusions or implicatures depending on their semantic context and on the other beliefs that one holds. For theists and atheists, the sentence 'God exists' is an implicature of expressions used in Jewish, Christian, or Islamic religious practice. But this sentence is different for people who are non-theists and thus do not share theistic or atheistic background assumptions. Theists consider the sentence 'God exists' to be true, whereas atheists consider it false. Implicatures are thus propositions that can be believed in or not to be believed in. Non-theists dismiss the idea that religious practice necessitates a metaphysical view of reality. For this reason, they maintain that the philosophical question of the existence of God misses the point of religion.

According to implicaturism, the relationship between the verbal expressions used in religious practice (thanking, praying, praising) and the sentence 'God exists' is looser than a logical or conceptual relation. Thus, the sentence 'God exists' does not carry its meaning with it, independent of context and background beliefs (Phillips 2004, 67). For this reason, implicaturism argues that what varies with one's religious beliefs and practices is what language additionally conveys. In addition, religious practices (as well as many other practices such as entering a room through a door, elementary arithmetic, and embroidery) exist before and independently of any

rational justification or explanation. I said above that implicaturism fits better with fideism than with theism or atheism. Contrary to the view of many theists, religious practice is, according to implicaturism, independent of the presupposition that God exists. By no means does this indicate that a theistic belief in the existence of God is necessarily flawed. Instead, implicaturism says that the claim of the existence of God is a kind of pragmatic conclusion, not a presupposition of faith. Thus, practice comes first, and the justification of practice may come later or not at all. Accordingly, some expressions can be used in religious worship with or without associating them with the theistic or other existential implicature, thus with or without the actual or dispositional belief in God, spirits, angels, etc. Equally, one can perform calculations without first presupposing that numbers exist, and even if one denies the real existence of numbers (in a Platonic realm of forms, for example), one can still perform calculations. However, although religious practices are devoid of rational justification, religious rituals and practices may have various grounds: psychological, social, or historical, among others.

We can distinguish between A, B and C types of implicaturism. In the A case, an expression (for instance, ‘Watch out for traffic!’) occurs in a situation where the related existential implicature (‘There are vehicles around’) is known or supposed to be true. In the B case, an expression occurs in a situation where the existential implicature related to that expression is known or supposed to be—*simpliciter* or without additional qualifications—false. Type B is common in humor and joking: for example, warning a hiker in the wilderness against vehicle traffic might be humorous. In type C, an expression is used as a figure of speech or as a turn of phrase without necessarily presupposing that it is related to an implicature concerning the existence of a particular being (such as God). These sayings or phrases are proverbs (‘man decides, God provides’) and witty remarks (‘God did not create haste’), but also swearing and nonsense rhymes (‘Ring a Ring o’ Roses’). Negative theology that recommends us to use religious language for denying rather than admitting can be, to some extent, paralleled to type B. Non-cognitivism and metaphorical interpretation of religious language and non-cognitivism are typical of type C. In the C case, one could say, for example, ‘man decides, God provides’ thereby implying that, regardless of human intentions, unexpected things happen in life. If we interpret God-phrases metaphorically (poetically, symbolically) or non-cognitively, the point of God-talk does not necessarily require the existence of God.

A sentence is said to have cognitive meaning when it has truth-value, in other words, when it can be either true or false. Cognitively meaningful expressions are used to inform, to state a fact, or to

refer to an entity, a property, or a state of affairs. Such expressions can be either true or false. An expression is either meaningless or non-cognitive when it lacks truth-value. However, a cognitively meaningless expression can have moral, emotional, or aesthetic meaning. The expressions of liturgical language are largely non-cognitive, already based on their grammatical form, for many liturgical expressions are imperative sentences, requests or commands, or interjections, which are devoid of truth-value. However, as we have seen, these non-cognitive expressions can also have cognitive implicatures, such as 'God exists'. Accordingly, regarding requests and commands we ask whether they are good, valid or effective, not whether they are true. Theological non-cognitivism entails the notion that also the declarative sentence 'God exists' is non-cognitive and not susceptible to assessment in terms of its truth or falsity. Theological cognitivism, in turn, is the view that religious language, and the sentence 'God exists' in particular, is cognitively meaningful.

It is debatable whether or not the sentence 'God exists' is part of religious language. In the light of implicaturism, we have some reason to think that the sentence 'God exists' is not part of religious language. Rather than regarding it as a religious expression, one can consider the proposition 'God exists' as a presupposition (background assumption) that must be true in order for the expressions of religious language to be cognitive and thus have truth-value. Similarly, the sentence 'Bill is already a big boy' has a truth-value only if there is a being called Bill. If Bill does not exist, 'Bill is a big boy' lacks truth-value. Some scholars have argued that the theistic presupposition is not an essential part of Christian religion, but a philosophical doctrine which originated in Europe during the seventeenth century. As regards the Christian concept of God, its traditional horizon of interpretation (and thus the context of its implicatures) is the doctrine of Trinity, not Enlightenment theism (see on this discussion, Koistinen 2000, 24-26). Accordingly, the indicative sentence 'God exists' is a possible implicature of the expressions used in Christian religion rather than a necessary presupposition of Christianity.

One key idea of Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is that religious practice is the context in which religious beliefs and assumptions become meaningful (Phillips 2004, 69). This does not mean that non-believers cannot understand religion or that religion cannot be criticized from outside. What it does mean is that the criticism of religion can also touch things that the believers themselves do not necessarily admit or recognize in their religion. Thus, religious expressions and practices can have different implicatures depending on one's background beliefs and

interpretative tradition, among other things. The criticism of religion is often targeted at these implicatures ('God exists', 'humans have a soul', 'there are divine laws', for example).

Although many liturgical expressions lack truth-value because they are not declarative sentences but requests, petitions, or entreaties in the imperative, they can also have cognitive implicatures. Thus, implicaturism rejects the non-cognitivist assumption that religious language is necessarily devoid of cognitive content. Again, implicaturism is a liberal view of religious faith because, according to it, faith in the sense of genuine, not feigned, prayer and worship is compatible with various world-views and metaphysical opinions, including atheism. Consequently, there are theistic (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islam), atheistic (e.g. various forms of Buddhism as well as Jainism), and non-theistic religions (e.g. Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto), and there is theistic, atheistic, and non-theistic prayer and worship. Atheistic and non-theistic prayer and worship can also include god-talk, thus words and expressions that mention god or the divine. Needless to say, atheistic and non-theistic god-talk does not convey the belief in the existence of God.

Although prayer is an intentional action, the practice of it does not by itself necessarily require a theistic belief. One can pray to God non-theistically by interpreting 'God' as nature, life itself, or as a poetic embodiment of unfulfilled longing, for example. The term 'God' also appears as a figure of speech when something extraordinary or improbable has taken place. In such situation, one can say, 'It was a miracle of God'. According to Gareth Moore, "To say that God brought it about is not to say that somebody brought it about. God does what *nobody* does; God causes what *nothing* causes" (Moore 1988, 223). Thus, according to Moore, the expression 'a miracle of God' is used when something has happened that lacks a cause, reason, or an agent. The flexibility of the meaning of 'God' is a manifestation of the general fact that linguistic expressions are prone to being interpreted and reinterpreted in diverse ways. Accordingly, we can interpret religious practices and expressions in various ways and we can draw different conclusions from them depending on our world-view, philosophical beliefs, and metaphysical background assumptions. Hence, there are no intrinsically theistic religions but religious traditions that can be interpreted theistically or in other ways.

Although it may sound counterintuitive, religious beliefs and practices may also have the sentence 'God does not exist' as their implicature. At face value, 'God does not exist' is, for many, an implicature that is associated with unbelief. However, a religious believer can also draw the conclusion that God does not exist. This is possible because various implicatures can be inferred

from an utterance, depending on its conversational or semantic context. For instance, a believer who is attracted by the ideas of negative theology and is familiar with the writings of such mystics as Meister Eckhart can draw from cultic language the conclusion that the God of theology (or philosophy) does not exist. Similarly, a post-Christian believer who is fascinated by the ideas of Don Cupitt, John Spong, Richard Holloway, Lloyd Geering, or Karen Armstrong, among others, can infer from religious expressions, supplemented by suitable background assumptions, that God does not exist. This might be further illustrated by the following analogy, which, like analogies in general, has its limitations: Children are discussing their heroes. One asks another:

– Who would win a fight: Hulk (*the comic character*) or Hulk Hogan (*the wrestling legend*)?

The other answers:

– I believe that Hulk would win, but he does not exist.

To be sure, there is no logical barrier preventing a fictional character from being an intentional object, although even a child would know that the being in question does not exist in reality. Equally, an atheist practitioner of religion (for instance, a Buddhist) could praise God, for example, as an inspiring symbol or ‘skilful means’ to spiritual development while at the same time believing that there is no such thing as a God who is independent from human thinking.

Undoubtedly, one can participate in religious practice without actively thinking that God exists. One can also engage in a religious practice and at the same time believe that there is no God. Many people doubt, however, that one could be a religious believer and simultaneously believe that there is no God. That this is possible is shown by the following. One can be a Buddhist believer and believe that there is no God. One can also be a Christian, Jewish, or Muslim adherent of the tradition of negative or mystical theology and deny the received view of God. In addition, one can be an atheist and consider religious language important and meaningful in a non-cognitive sense, i.e., morally, emotionally, or aesthetic-spiritually. All of these cases suggest that the theistic claim ‘God exists’ is not a presupposition but an implicature of religious practice and related expressions, thus a conclusion, the inference of which is dependent on other beliefs that one has, on one’s culture, and on other contextual factors.

According to implicaturism, the use of religious language in prayer or worship may have the sentence ‘God exists’ as its pragmatic conclusion, but despite this conclusion many, perhaps most expressions used in religious practice are non-cognitive because their function is other than to

present factual claims: they pray to, praise, and worship God. Some secularized people who rarely participate in religious services may be even more familiar with implicatures (the sentence ‘God exists’ in particular) related to religious practice than with religious practice itself. One of the strengths of implicaturism is that it explains why so many people are indifferent to the rationalistic attempts to prove the existence of God. For many people, religious practice or worship comes first, and the justification of practice may come later or not at all.

I have introduced implicaturism as a contribution to the study of the nature of religious language. It is essential to note that implicaturism is a view of the pragmatics of religious language, not a philosophical world-view or a semantic view of the relationship between religious expressions and the reality represented by them.

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