PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

WEEK 11 – DAY 1: RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE
FINAL EXAM

• 12/10 Tuesday: 1:45-3:45pm
• 3 Short Answer Questions
• 1 Long Form Question
• 10 multiple choice questions from past 2 quizzes.

• Last Class (Next Monday):
  • Wrap up the course.
  • Help you prepare for the last question.
  • Help you prepare for the multiple choice
  • AND get a chance to earn bonus points towards Final Exam.
MEANINGFUL LIFE

Based on our discussions thus far, what does it mean to live a meaningful life?

1. **Meaningful Activity**
   - Doing activities that you find *important* or *give you joy*.
   - Feeling that your *actions matter*.

2. **Having a Sense of Purpose within Life** (knowing what to do with yourself).

What have we been doing the past few days, and even during the entire course, that is related to the question?

3. **Experiencing a life that is Full of Meaning**.
LIVING A MEANINGFUL LIFE

How do you experience the world?

"It's sunny outside."
How do you experience the world?

“The sun sliced through the windshield, sealing me in light. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth on my eyelids.

“Sunlight traveled a long distance to reach this planet; an infinitesimal portion of that sunlight was enough to warm my eyelids.

“I was moved.

“That something as insignificant as an eyelid had its place in the workings on the universe, that the cosmic order did not overlook this momentary fact.” – Haruki Murakami

Does poetic language make the experience more meaningful?

How might a religious person describe this experience?
SPIRITUAL/RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

How might a religious/spiritual person interpret and describe some of the events in the movie *Joe vs. the Volcano*?

- "God gave them purpose."
- "They were saved by grace."
- "God saved them."
- "God loved them."
- "Joe found God."
- They have good Karma.
- They are more connected to Spirit.
- They were more in flow with the Tao.
- They are closer to escaping the Wheel of Samsara

*Is this language “meaningful” or is it false and “meaningless”?*
PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE: (FROM THE SECULAR PERSPECTIVE)

Meaningless

1. Doesn’t make any claim that can be true or false.
   • “It snowed in Dallas last summer.”
   • “Blue running was tall.”

2. Emotive rather than informative
   • “Ouch!” – expression of one’s feelings.

3. Just be “empty talk” – gibberish with no usefulness.
   • Simply linguistic ritual.
Two Types of Language

• Cognitive Language:
  • Conveys facts; things we can be cognizant of.

• Non-Cognitive Language:
  • Conveys information that is not factual – emotional expressions and metaphysical claims.
## WHAT GOOD IS NON-COGNITIVE LANGUAGE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Cognitive</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- God is all powerful</td>
<td>• Badgers have black and white fur.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- God is all knowing</td>
<td>• The Earth revolves around the sun.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- God is all loving</td>
<td>• The Golden State Warriors are leading their division.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- We are all connected</td>
<td>• Your professor is wearing brown shoes.</td>
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<td>- We are all one</td>
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<td>- Jesus gave sight to the blind.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- My soul was saved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Everything is spirit.</td>
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<td>- You are a spiritual being.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Buddha was the light of the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- We are all beings of pure light.</td>
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Group Discussion Question

Describe why religious language can be problematic. How does Paul Tillich address this through his distinction between symbolism and literalism?
RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE?

Paul Tillich: (1886-1965)
German-American Philosopher & Theologian

Two Types of Language:

1) Literal:
   • The primary meaning, factual

2) Symbolic/Figurative:
   • Representation pointing to something beyond the literal meaning.

Religious Language as Symbolic
To understand his point,
let's take a closer look at what symbolic means?

(Next few slides are setting up Tillich's point.)
LITERAL VS. SYMBOLIC

What does each of these symbols stand for? Why do you think they have taken on the meanings they have?

justice

love

luck
LITERAL VS. SYMBOLIC
“Having a heavy heart.”

(Picture says a thousand words)
SYMBOLS IN LITERATURE AND ART
Why Ever Communicate Symbolically?
(Why use non-cognitive language?)

At Least 4 Reasons

1. To make something more memorable.

2. To speak more powerfully to our emotions and imagination (the other half of our brain).

“Having a heavy heart.”
2. SPEAKING TO OUR EMOTIONS & IMAGINATION

Antonio Damasio (Neurologist)
Emotions play a key role in our decision making.

George Lakoff (Philosopher/Linguist)
All cognition, reasoning, is embodied.
2. SPEAKING TO OUR EMOTIONS & IMAGINATION

Damasio: IOWA Gambling Task

Results:
Unconscious measurements show higher stress levels over “bad” decks after 10 trials. Person tends towards “good” decks after 40-50 trials, even though they have no conscious reasoning to do so.
2. SPEAKING TO OUR EMOTIONS & IMAGINATION

Lakoff - Embodied Reasoning

- Participants holding warm as opposed to cold cups of coffee were more likely to judge a person as trustworthy after only a brief interaction.

- *Unfamiliar Currencies*: Those who held heavier clipboards judged currencies to be more valuable.
2. SPEAKING TO OUR EMOTIONS & IMAGINATION

Special Symbolic Language - *Metaphor*

- The brain is an awesome computer.
- John is a good catch!
- You are an angel.
- This business is a gold mine
- Life is like a box of chocolates.

Our language frames our experience, and can expand or limit what we think is possible.
Why Ever Communicate Symbolically?
(Why use non-cognitive language?)

At Least 4 Reasons

1. To make something more memorable.

2. To speak more powerfully to our emotions and imagination (the other half of our brain).

3. To suggest layers of meaning that a simple, literal statement could never convey.
   - Some knowledge can best (most correctly) be presented symbolically.
   - Language is limited. Some knowledge can only be presented symbolically.
     - Needed to explain something to someone with no experience. Examples?
3. MEANING BEYOND LITERAL LANGUAGE
Why Ever Communicate Symbolically?  
*(Why use non-cognitive language?*)

**At Least 4 Reasons**

1. To make something more memorable.

2. To speak more powerfully to our emotions and imagination *(the other half of our brain)*.

3. To suggest layers of meaning that a simple, literal statement could never convey.
   - Some knowledge can best (most correctly) be presented symbolically.
   - Language is limited.

4. There is no such thing as non-symbolic communication(?)
   - Just levels of symbolic communication.
4. ALL COMMUNICATION SYMBOLIC?

How often are we literal anyway?

“Can you pass the salt shaker?”

“Having a heavy heart.”
4. ALL COMMUNICATION SYMBOLIC?

Lakoff – Embodied Reason

• Embodied Metaphors for Thinking (as movement):
  • My mind is “wandering.”
  • How did you “reach that conclusion?”
  • I’m “stuck” or “lost”
  • I’ve “found” my answer

• Embodied Metaphors for Thinking (as perceiving):
  • I “see” what you are saying.
  • New facts are “coming to light” regarding our situation.
  • You’ll “get the picture” sooner or later.

• Question: Why is this important to notice?
  • Logic based off of language, and language is based on embodied existence.
  • Our language frames our experience, and can expand or limit what we think is possible.
4. ALL COMMUNICATION SYMBOLIC?

Word are Just Symbols Too

- “Fire truck”
- “Blue”
- “Table”
- “God”
- “Spirit”
- “Nirvana”
4. ALL COMMUNICATION SYMBOLIC?

All other Means of Communication is Symbolic
4. ALL COMMUNICATION SYMBOLIC?

The Common Mistake

• We mistake reality for the words we use to point to it.

• For the religious, this causes misunderstandings of teachings.

• For the non-religious, this makes religious teachings seem incorrect or meaningless.

But if our words are just fingers pointing to the moon, we must be aware of the limitations of thinking with our fingers.