Schubert Ogden on Truth, Meaningfulness, and Religious Language

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I wish to discuss some problems arising in Schubert Ogden's view of religious language. These problems can be appreciated only by grasping several of his key definitions, and thus section I is largely expository. Section II draws together several of Ogden's claims about language and faith. In so doing it shows an inconsistency, suggesting that his theory of religious language is incomplete. In the final section I discuss three problems with Ogden's understanding of necessary assertion, truth, and meaningfulness.

I.

For Ogden, theology is a methodical attempt to bring together the meaning of the Christian witness of faith and the truth about human existence, evaluating carefully the question whether the former expresses the latter.¹ He writes:

Properly understood, the task of Christian theology is the fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence. Consequently, to achieve this task, theological reflection is required to pursue two essential ends: (1) to see to the appropriateness of its assertions, in the sense of their congruence in meaning with the Christian witness of faith; and (2) to see to the understandability of its assertions, in the sense of their meaning.

and truth in terms of the conditions established with existence as such.  

The Christian witness to which he refers includes biblical, historical, and contemporary expressions of faith; "the level of concepts and symbols which comes to exist insofar as Christians undertake somehow to formulate and express their faith in Jesus as the Christ." Theology is a critical reflection on the Christian witness, and as such is an attempt to vindicate the truth claims found therein.

Relying on some distinctions formulated by Stephen Toulmin, Ogden suggests that to say \( p \) is true is to "commend it as worthy of being believed or accepted." "Truth" is an evaluative term, much like "good" or "beautiful." It does "not merely express a subjective preference, but has the force of claiming objective worth--specifically, of assessing a given assertion as in itself deserving of credence." To assert that a proposition is true is to assert (at least minimally) that it is valuable to believe the proposition. Finally, the meaning of the term "truth" remains constant, but the criteria for truth vary from case to case, or "field" to "field." Thus to discover whether \( p \) is true, one must first discover the field of discourse to which \( p \) belongs and then whether utterances in that field can be said to be true or false.

For Ogden, the statements of the Christian witness and theology can be true. In other words, theological statements are in a field of discourse such that truth can be predicated of its members. Consider, for example, some comments about "myth":

'Myth' may be defined by means of three closely related statements. First, 'myth' refers to a certain language or form of speaking which, like other languages, functions to

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7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 112.
represent (to re-present, to present again) some field of human experience in a particular way. Second, the field of experience that the language of myth represents is our original internal awareness of our selves and the world as included in the circumambient reality within which all things come to be, are what they are, and pass away. Third, the particular way in which the language of myth represents this awareness is in terms and categories based in our derived external perception of reality as the object of our ordinary experience.

The influence of Bultmann is obvious; demythologizing is a program to be followed. That is, "to claim that a given mythical assertion is true, although not literally so, is to commit oneself to state the meaning of the assertion at some point in non-mythical terms." Ogden's criterion for the truth of myth is that "... mythical assertions are true insofar as they so explicate our unforfeitable assurance that life is worth while that the understanding of faith they represent cannot be falsified by the essential conditions of life itself" [italics his]. Thus a myth is true only if it is unfalsified by and explicative of faith understood as "the confidence or assurance that life as such is worth living." Two notions remain in need of explanation. First, in discussing experience Ogden distinguishes three levels. Consider three senses of the term "empirical." First is the logical positivist's limited notion of the empirical as the data of the five physical senses. Second is the empirical which, following existentialist philosophy, includes the nonsensuous. "It is defined by the understanding that sense perception is neither the only nor even the primary mode of experience, but is rather derived from a still more elemental awareness both of ourselves and of the world around us." Third is the sense of empirical deriving

9. Ibid., p. 104.
13. Ibid., p. 114.
from Whiteheadian philosophy, which allows not only for a sense of ourselves and other creatures, but a sense of worth, the Whole, or, in Whitehead’s terms, “the sense of Deity” or “the intuition of holiness.” Whitehead’s empiricism is quite broad, but, according to Ogden, it allows for both a successful empirical theology and for the meaningfulness of religious utterance.

The last notion is metaphysics. Metaphysics is a “distinct field of inquiry, whose task it is to raise to the level of reflective self-consciousness the fundamental assertions that must somehow be made by each of us and that none of us can meaningfully deny.” Metaphysical claims, if they are to be meaningful, are subject to two demands: that they are logically consistent (both with themselves and with others) and that they apply “through our human experience.”

There are two types of metaphysical statement, contingent and necessary. Both, however, are existential. The criterion of truth for metaphysical statements is that “Those statements are true metaphysically which I could not avoid believing to be true, at least implicitly, if I were to believe or exist at all, or alternatively, they are the statements which would necessarily apply through any of my experiences, even my merely conceivable experiences, provided only that such an experience was sufficiently reflected upon.” Necessary metaphysical statements are “utterly positive and non-exclusive in their applications through experience.” Contingent metaphysical statements are not. “I exist,” for example, need not be part of God’s experience, when it is said of some human being. What makes “I exist” true is the contingent state of affairs that I exist. Thus contingent metaphysical statements must be believed by some believer, that is, by some human believer, if true at all, but not by all believers. Necessary metaphysical statements must be believed by all believers, viz., human and divine. Necessary metaphysical statements are unfalsifiable by experience.

Drawing together the claims about metaphysical assertions and experience, Ogden suggest that all metaphysical statements are empirical and therefore existential, although not in the positivist sense. The test for meaningfulness is an empirical test, but of course "empirical" is to

15. Ibid., pp. 79, 80, 85.
be taken in the widest possible way. Necessary metaphysical assertions are verified by all experience, but cannot be falsified by any.

II.
How does Ogden understand religious language? For Ogden, the complex experience of existence—of myself, others, and the whole—is the experience out of which all religious language arises and in terms of which it must be understood. In this sense all religious language, including the word ‘God,’ is existential language, the language in which we express and refer to our own existence as selves related to others and to the whole.19

Religious assertions, then, are existential, but it is only the most fundamental which cannot be falsified. "Whatever must be said of its grammar, the logic of 'the religious hypothesis'... is the logic of existential assertions—the most fundamental of which neither are nor could be merely factual" [italics his].20

The most fundamental religious statements, on this account, are metaphysical. What of religious assertions which are not metaphysical? If there are factual religious assertions, surely they are falsifiable. While he claims that "the foundational statements of religion, or, at any rate, of Christianity, logically cannot be factually falsified,"21 this claim "emphatically does not settle as it might be supposed to, the basic issue of falsification and belief, so far, at least, as specifically Christian belief is concerned."22 It seems, then, that some statements of Christian witness are factually falsifiable.

Recall the three senses of "empirical" noted above. I suggest that corresponding to these are three kinds of statements: the factual, the contingent existential, and the necessary existential. The first are on the level of science, the second on the level of nonsensuous experience,

22. Ibid.
related to worldly creatures, and the third on the level of nonsensuous experience, but related to God. On Ogden's view, these three levels of language each have their own test of meaningfulness. For the factual, he admits a positivistic type of falsifiability. The contingent existential assertions, corresponding to nonsensuous experience, are in principle falsifiable by conceivable, nonsensuous experience. These statements include claims about one's existence and the world as we are related to it, and are falsifiable in the face of those contingent "facts." (I might, after all, not have come into existence.) Necessary existential claims, being utterly positive, are open to neither sort of falsification, but, according to Ogden, are falsifiable nonetheless. How can this be? He writes:

Despite Flew's assumption . . . that the falsifiability of this assertion [that God exists] and its empirical falsifiability are simply the same, there is an important difference between them. The assertion that God is real, though not, on my view, even in principle empirically falsifiable, is not, for all of that, beyond the possibility of being false. For, were the many thinkers correct who profess to find the very idea of God incoherent, the assertion of God's reality would be not only falsifiable but false, and necessarily false at that. That is, it could not not be false--even though obviously, that kind of falsity would be something quite different from the merely empirical kind.23

Such assertions, if true, are necessarily true, and verified by all experience. But, according to Ogden, they could be false. This is supposed to be the case since the foundational assertions of Christianity may simply be confused or self-contradictory. This kind of falsification is the only kind applicable to metaphysical, noncontingent assertions. (By way of critical note, one must say that this is indeed an odd use of "falsifiable." The claim that necessary truths could be false seems confused unless, perhaps, Ogden wants to make a distinction between what is as a matter of fact really necessary and what merely appears, epistemically, to be necessary.)

Accordingly, whenever one shows a particular assertion to be meaningful, one also shows it to be true. The very nature of such metaphysical assertions is to be verified by all experience. Thus "in

the case of theological assertions which in their logic are metaphysical . . ., to establish their meaning by reference to experience is equivalent to establishing their truth; for either they can be shown to refer through all possible experience, or else they are doubtfully meaningful as metaphysical assertions.24 Such statements are verified by all experience, falsified by none. To be meaningful, in their case, is to be empirically unfalsifiable. But to be true as necessary assertions is to be compatible with all experience. If meaningful (not self-contradictory), then true. If true at all, then necessarily true.

How should we understand Ogden's theory of religious language? He suggests that there is a continuum from faith to theology. At the highest end of the continuum one has theological reflection--critical reflection on the witness of faith and human existence. At the other end one has the faith of humankind, where "faith" is to be understood as (a Heideggerian type of) existential self-understanding. Ogden's suggested continuum can be used to draw together all the pieces of the picture.

"Faith," "witness," and "theology" are all "understandings," yet each is on a different level so far as reflection is concerned. Theology is objective knowledge (in the existential sense, which can be accounted for, according to Ogden, under both kinds of nonsensuous experience). Witness is proclamation on a less reflective level, the mythical expression of the existential understanding of the believer.25

In connection with Ogden's use of "faith" some confusion appears. Consider these comments:

I should agree immediately that there is something profoundly mistaken in supposing that faith itself either must or could be directly verified . . . . [Where the question of rationally justifying faith] does properly arise is at the level of thought and speech through which the existential understanding of faith is theologically explicated--provided, of course, that such thought and speech are held to have some genuine cognitive import.26

25. There are several varieties of witness, the most concrete being parables, but this is not germane to the argument. Cf. some comments on parables by Whitehead, cited by Ogden in The Reality of God and Other Essays, p. 81.
Here we are told that faith is not a witness or proclamation itself, but rather that which is being explicated by such witness. Further:

Even though faith itself is a strictly existential phenomenon, the witness of faith, in the sense of the actual life of the believer in loving service, perforce takes place in nature and history and therefore has its necessary empirical aspect. If one is to love his neighbour as himself by serving him in his actual needs and above all, by explicitly confronting him with the decision of faith, one must always risk some empirical understanding of his actual historical situation in its limitations and opportunities for relevant action.  

Here again, faith is the life of the believer, the existential situation, and Ogden clearly distinguishes it from the empirical outworkings of the existential situation. The latter is a form of witness which is empirically falsifiable. "Beyond . . . existential claims, there are . . . all the other utterances in Scripture and tradition that are not only properly factual but also subject to empirical falsification" [italics mine]. These include not only utterances found in the history of Christianity, but those described as part of "the actual life of the believer." The utterances in the actual life of the believer "are not quite so adventitious to this [Christian] witness" as are the biblical and historical ones. We are told further that "since the Christian life, like human life otherwise, is quite impossible without making or implying such claims, Christian belief, at least, has a necessary, if only indirect, relation even to empirical falsification" [italics mine].

Thus there is faith itself which underlies the proclamation witness of faith, and it is the proclamation of faith, not faith itself, which is falsifiable. But faith is, contrary to this claim, proclamational. Ogden writes:

Faith as such is obviously the extreme contrast to objectifying knowledge . . . and this is true, even though, as itself a type of understanding, faith is quite distinct from immediate

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 43.
feeling and somehow identical with the other points lying closer to the opposite end of the continuum. Insofar as it is conscious—and it is doubtful whether one can really speak of an "unconscious faith"—it is already explicit as some form of belief, although such belief represents the maximum of personal concern and involvement [italics mine].

If faith is both a strictly existential phenomenon and yet identical with the other points along the continuum, that is, forms of witness and perhaps theology itself, it appears that Ogden is inconsistent. On the one hand he describes a continuum from existential self-understanding (nonproclamational) to witness (unrefined proclamation about the self-understanding) to theology (highly reflective proclamation, accounting both for witness and the self-understanding). On the other hand he describes the same continuum as containing, at its lower end, faith as some sort of witness, i.e., as some sort of proclamation. The continuum appears to be entirely constructed of forms of (verbal) proclamation (including faith), and yet Ogden denies that faith is proclamation.

Perhaps faith as proclamation is to be understood as statements correlated to beliefs about concern and involvement. Ogden's claims about the necessary empirical connections among Christian life, action, and faith, support the interpretation that faith cannot be merely an existential phenomenon; that it must result not only in existentially falsifiable claims, but in empirically falsifiable claims as well. That faith is not unconscious indicates that it is involved with believing propositions which objectively describe reality, propositions that have empirical import as opposed to mere existential import. Yet Ogden denies that the empirical utterances resulting as the believer's life is lived are truly religious. I fail to see how this claim can be successfully made, given his other remarks. One possibility is to suggest that every utterance of the believer is to be demythologized. But then what is the force of the "necessary" in "necessary if only indirect relation to empirical falsification," and why are the utterances which result from the believer's life not quite so adventitious to the Christian witness as the biblical or historical ones? Several of Ogden's comments suggest a special role for these empirical assertions, yet he denies that they are truly religious.

In summary, Ogden believes that the foundational religious assertions are metaphysical only. That is, they are neither empirically nor existentially falsifiable, but are open only to the "falsifiability" of self-contradiction. Since they are necessary truths, showing them to be meaningful is identical to showing them to be true. To show one to be false is to show it to be self-contradictory, and thus both meaningless and necessarily false. Other religious claims, those of the Christian witness, are existentially falsifiable. In other words, since the world and the creatures it contains could have been different, claims about the world and other creatures are meaningful. They are ultimately meaningful, however, only as demythologized, since in their mythical form they appear to be open to empirical falsification. Faith, as existential self-understanding, underlies all these proclamations, the major differences between witness and theology being that theology reflects not only on faith but also on witness, and that the foundational theological assertions are necessary as well as existential. The final category, that of the witness of faith or faith as expressed in the life of the believer, does not fit well into Ogden's description of the continuum from faith to theology. While Ogden denies the possibility of empirically falsifiable religious assertions, some of his comments suggest that the expressions of faith in the life of the believer ought to be considered as empirically falsifiable. Perhaps the continuum ought to be modified to account for this matter. Perhaps there is an additional class of religious utterances on the lowest level of the continuum, which would then go from empirically falsifiable to existentially falsifiable to unfalsifiable or necessary statements. These last statements have a twofold criterion of meaningfulness (and thus truth); they are verified by all experience and falsifiable only in the special sense of being open to the test of self-contradiction. Such a reconstruction turns the continuum into a continuum of assertions under which lies existential self-understanding. The original model would have to place life itself on a continuum along with language. This is a continuum which does justice neither to language nor to Ogden's own claims.

III.
The confusion surrounding the continuum from faith to theology can perhaps be cleared up by Ogden either by further explanation and exposition or by some modification of the notions involved. I will not say anything further about it here. Rather, I turn my attention to three other problems, all of which stand independently of the confusion in his general theory. The first deals with the necessary metaphysical claims, the second with truth and meaningfulness, and the third with
the criterion of truth.

For Ogden, "God exists" is a foundational religious assertion. It is what I have labeled a "necessary existential claim." As a necessary existential claim, it is verified by all experience and falsified by none. In other words, any state of affairs shows the assertion to be true. If so, the existence of evil must not only be compatible with "God exists" but show it to be true. On a traditional view of God, the existence of evil, or at least the existence of so much seemingly gratuitous evil, counts against the claim that "God exists," not for it. But then Ogden is not a traditional theologian. Perhaps his view of God as process allows him to take evil as support for the assertion that God exists. If so, this criticism comes to no more than noting that the process God is less than satisfying to those who do not think evil should count in favor of God's existence.33

The second problem is perhaps more substantial. Normally the notion of justifying a belief is connected to showing the proposition believed to be true. In Ogden's case, this connection is stronger than one might suspect. Recall that on the level of necessary statements, showing $p$ to be meaningful is identical to showing $p$ to be true. Ogden would not disagree, I think, with the further claim that on this level, to justify $p$ one need only show $p$ to be meaningful. Thus in this limited case, the notion of truth is collapsed into the notion of meaningfulness. That is, the criterion of truth is the same as the criterion of meaningfulness. This is to be expected. Something unexpected, however, is that the same claim is true on the lower levels, the levels of contingent metaphysical assertions, mythical assertions, and empirical assertions.

Ogden's definition of truth as "worthy of being believed" or "deserving credence" sounds very much like a judgment one might make in attempting to justify a belief. In attempting to justify a religious belief to another person, am I not, in part, recommending that belief to her? At least that is the goal. In Ogden's program, when one justifies a theological assertion, one has two ends: to check the assertion's appropriateness vis à vis its meaning and the Christian witness, and to check on its understandability vis à vis its meaning and truth. One is attempting to make religious belief meaningful and hence acceptable.

But to check on its meaning is to do no more than to show that it is existentially falsifiable. Once \( p \) is shown to be meaningful in this way, has one justified the belief? I think Ogden's answer must be "yes." If so, isn't he committed to recommending \( p \) for belief? And if he is so committed, how is showing \( p \) meaningful different from showing \( p \) true? It looks as if what should probably be true only of necessary assertions is true also of assertions on the lower levels of the continuum, viz., that if an assertion is meaningful it is true. This is, at best, a curious result. There are at least two ways around it. One is to deny that truth is to be defined as "worthy of belief." The second is to deny that showing \( p \) to be justified is identical with showing \( p \) to be meaningful. I will not comment on the second of these. I will suggest, however, one reason, related to the third problem, to opt for the first.

The third problem is perhaps best exemplified by considering Ogden's statement of the criterion for the truth of myths. Mythical assertions are true "insofar as they so explicate our unforfeitable assurance that life is worth while that the understanding of faith they represent cannot be falsified by the essential conditions of life itself" [italics his].34 My concern is with the force of "cannot be falsified." The criteria for truth are to vary field to field. There is to be a different criterion for each class of statements. But if the criterion for mythical truth is any indication, that claim must be false on Ogden's own grounds. The criterion for the truth of myth reads as if mythical assertions, to put it simply, must correspond to the facts about life. Couldn't a similar claim be made about an empirical assertion? For example, couldn't I suggest the following: scientific assertions are true insofar as they so explicate our beliefs about the external world that the understanding of the external world they represent cannot be falsified by the essential facts of the external world itself? Isn't the criterion of truth really more basic than either of these two suggested criteria; isn't it just that any statement \( p \) is true, so long as it explicates our belief that \( p \), such that the understanding of \( p \) it represents cannot be falsified by the fact that \( p \)?

Perhaps Ogden might reply that "cannot be falsified" should be interpreted in a stronger sense than I have allowed here. It seems open to suggest that mythical assertions cannot be falsified by any state of affairs. But this leads to a dilemma. That is, either "cannot be falsified" means that mythical assertions, to be true, must be necessary assertions (which contradicts Ogden's claims about existential

falsification), or "cannot be falsified" means "must correspond to the facts", in which case the distinction between the criteria for truth and the meaning of truth is blurred (which indicates the necessity for a modification of Ogden's views on truth).

The force of these last two criticisms, along with the confusion noted in section II, is to suggest that there are some fundamental issues with which Professor Ogden needs to deal. His notions of truth, falsification, justification, and meaning, when taken together against the background of his general theory of religious language, lead to subtle incoherencies.