**‘The only way in which meaningful statements can be made about God is using the via negativa.’ Discuss**

It can be debatable as to whether there is actually any point in trying to debate what God is like. As Bertrand Russell voiced in his radio debate with Copleston in January 1948, can we actually communicate anything meaningful about God when we use human vocabulary? That was an implication of what he said rather than what he said, but ok

Some things do seem simply unexplainable by the use of words; emotions for example are particularly difficult to explain. After all, how can I begin to convey my emotions after viewing some of Doisneau’s photography, or how can I begin to explain how shocked I am at how young John Everett Millais was when he painted ‘Pizarro Seizing the Inca of Peru’ considering the sheer amount of technique that he must have put into at only at the age of 16. But a lot of the time people still try to make an attempt at communicating such things- so it would seem that after all there is a benefit/ value from trying to do so. There must therefore be some kinds of language that provides a better solution to communicate the very difficult things, with one of the most difficult concepts to talk about being God.

Some people make very good use of trying to talk to others about their beliefs/ understanding of God; for example in Islam there are 99 names assigned to Allah, ‘The Guardian’, ‘The Provider’, ‘The Sublime,’ just being a few of the names bestowed to him. Also, in Christianity people attempt to explain more supernatural concepts related to God like the afterlife, so it would seem that we can make meaningful statements about God, contrary to what Russell may have asserted in his radio debate. Well, we say things, although whether there is any meaningful content to what we say remains an issue perhaps. In the introduction, try to show that you understand what the question means as well as how you intend to answer it – so for this one, introduce the via negativa at the beginning so that we know you’re going to write about that, rather than just ‘my religious language essay’.

Throughout, I reason and argue that the via negativa does make meaningful statements about God that better the other methods available to us to convey religious language about God such as myth, symbol and analogy.

Some people would be of the view that the only effective way to speak of God would be to talk of him in negative terms, which is a concept known as the via negativa or the apophatic way. The via negativa provides a way of talking about God without tainting him with the qualities associated with humanity, thus showing how separate he is from us. We can describe God therefore with words like ‘transcendent’, ‘infinite’, and ‘immense’, helping us to establish what God is not rather than making aimless statements over what we think he is like. The apophatic way also is advantageous in the sense that it maintains the mysterious nature of God, something which further shows how differing God is from humanity.

People who support the via negativa would say that descriptions which try and subscribe positive attributes to God are actually incredibly misleading, because ultimately in making them we associate very human concepts with God. For example, if we stated that ‘God is good’, using a positive description, we are beginning to associate God with our own goodness- which is ultimately a damaged and an impermanent thing. One man who was keen to support the via negativa was Mark Vernon in a Guardian article published in 2006. Vernon said; ‘So, the way all good theology proceeds is by saying what God is not.’ On reading Vernon’s article, he points out a very key advantage to using the via negativa over explaining God in positive, more comprehensible terms. He stresses to me that instead of us shaping our own version of God with the use of positive description, with the use of the apophatic way we are able to find God. There seems a key difference between shaping something to your own opinion and chiseling something away to gain an insight to its true roots. Good stuff

One of the earliest pioneers of the via negativa was Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite who believed that the only way in which we could talk truthfully about God was by using the via negativa due to God being ultimately beyond human imagination and understanding. Similar to a point I have made already what a copycat he was ☺, Pseudo-Dionysus thought that through the realisation of the limitations of humanity we could make true spiritual progress. The apophatic way was perfect then, because it made people do just this. He said that until people could accept this, they would end up getting God completely wrong and conclude with a concept of God that was far smaller than the reality. This kind of thinking went onto deeply influence Thomas Aquinas in the later stages of his life, to such an extent that he put down his pen, ceasing to continue his writings and claimed that he could not continue with his life’s work, saying; ‘all I have written seems like straw.’ Good

The Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides tried to give an example in order to explain how useful the via negativa was. He spoke of a ship and tried to illustrate how people could find out the attributes associated with a ship by using terms of negative description just like the via negativa. However to counteract this example, it came to mind that there are some things that we may be very negative about, for example, I may know exactly what I don’t want to do at university. But unlike Moses Maimonides may suggest, this doesn’t give me a positive outcome that tells me what I do want to do, in fact I may be utterly clueless over the course I’d like to study at university, if I want to go onto further education at all. I suppose so, it only reduces the number of possibilities by a very little, so it doesn’t help very much Thus, we may be fully aware of what God is not, but still be none the wiser as to what he really is like.

However, Brian Davies keenly points out in critique of Maimonides thinking that deciding all the various things that something isn’t gives us no indication as to what this thing actually is, thinking that I have shared with Davies in contemplation over the negativity surrounding the apophatic way. Davies writes; ‘...it is simply unreasonable to say that someone who has all the negations mentioned in it ‘has almost arrived at the concept of a “ship” ’. He could equally well be thinking of a wardrobe.’ (*An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*) I think that an even harsher criticism to Maimonides way of getting to the correct answer is that when we try to arrive at the answer to something by a process of elimination, we need to know all the various possibilities of what this thing can be, before we even begin to eliminate certain things. Therefore for someone who has no knowledge whatsoever of God, it can become very difficult to begin to eliminate the things that God is not. Hence for some people it can become very difficult to make meaningful statements about God in conjunction with the apophatic way. good

The benefits from using the via negativa within religions other than Christianity such as Buddhism are undeniable; so many concepts vital to Buddhism are extremely obscure and intangible. Take an example like nirvana- the via negativa offers a way of describing nirvana that goes far beyond everyday experiences and everyday life, just like the nature of nirvana. In Udana 80, nirvana is described in a manner representative of the via negativa successfully; ‘But because there is an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded, therefore there is an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded.’ Or are they even concepts at all? Someone like Flew might argue that they are non-assertions, they sound as if they’re saying something but they’re actually just empty words

However the greatest benefit to the via negativa as a method of making meaningful statements about God is yet to be described. There are various other ways in which we can try and make significant statements about God, such as symbolism which is often used to describe people’s relationships with God, for example, ‘God is my rock.’ Analogy is also used in the two main types that Thomas Aquinas suggested and myth also offers an alternate way to try and make meaningful statements about God. Unlike the via negativa though, these three methods of making noteworthy points about God are all open up to individual interpretation, with this individual interpretation being essential to us gaining some form of meaning to these methods. With the apophatic way being unopen to interpretation, the via negativa can therefore work within varying cultures and varying times in history, passing from culture to culture and generation to generation without us having to deduce some greater meaning from statements derived from the via negativa.

Despite it being a criticism to other ways of making meaningful statements about God that these methods are open to large amounts of interpretation that’s quite a cumbersome phrase!, it can also seem a positive. Often in life those things that mean most to us are things that we have worked out for ourselves which we take time dwelling upon. We often tend to put our own spin on things, take for example modern art. Some people love the fact that often the art isn’t just revealing a message to you; they appreciate how you have to decipher a message for yourself. These kinds of people could be compared to the kind of people that prefer myth, analogy and symbolism over the use of the via negativa. Whilst those who prefer the use of the via negativa over these other methods could be compared to those people who find the subjectivity of modern artwork of no gain to their lives. When something like myth, analogy or symbolism can convey meaning to you individually it can be a lot more poignant I don’t think you use that word in quite the way it’s meant to be used than just establishing what God is not. If we are aware of how marvelous God is, we are more aware of his unique nature than if we simply knowing what he is not.

The use of myth at conveying religious ideas can be beneficial as it can describes stories/ metaphors that may not be entirely historically accurate but which would otherwise be very difficult to express in other ways. Thus, the use of myth allows us to picture very abstract images within our minds, something which the via negativa is far less capable of. Some myths (aetiological myths) in the Bible offer an insight into some of the bewildering features of the world around us, again something the via negativa is far from capable of.

However, often people are said to ‘demythologise’ the Bible, which entails finding true meanings amongst the extrapolations of myths. This would suggest then that myths in the Bible are very much like fictional stories- they are padded out with great description that isn’t entirely true, but there is always some kind of underlying meaning/ moral to the story which we benefit from in our reading. However, how far the interpretation of myths goes is largely argued- more conservative Christians say that in the Bible there are some central beliefs that are intended to be taken literally and not just interpreted as myth and discarded slightly. The fact that people debate over the lengths to which we should interpret myths literally or not makes it difficult to use myth universally amongst people- we are never quite sure how far people will go in their individual interpretation. Yet again, the main advantage to the apophatic way in contrast to other methods stands out.

Aquinas divided analogy into two forms when he related it to religion. The first form was analogy of attribution in which there was a causal relationship between the two things being described. For example, you could use ‘God is loving’ and ‘God is powerful’ as examples of this type of analogy. They both mean that God is the cause of love and God is the cause of power. The other analogy that Aquinas described was that of proportionality. This kind of analogy is formed of words that relate to objects that are different in proportion. For example, when we relate the word ‘loving’ to God it has a different meaning to when we relate the same word to ourselves. Aquinas said that we needed to recognize how God’s love was on a much greater scale than our own, hence it means something different.

But analogy is plagued with problems. Firstly, if we approach analogies with this Thomist doctrine in mind, we have to try and translate the analogies into one kind of language that makes the analogies actually mean something. This can be very difficult as it follows on from us always having prior knowledge of something. For example, we have to know how God’s authority relates to human authority before we can begin to understand at all. This would suggest that there is just a suspected prior knowledge when it comes to analogy; therefore people may rely on other means of making statements about God to educate them prior to them trying to understand analogies about God. This makes analogies less useful for quick understanding and people who are beginning to seek an understanding of God.

Nevertheless, analogies can be beneficial after use of the via negativa/ myth/ symbol because they help to generate a picture in our minds and can link ideas together with conclusions which can make these ideas about God deeper rooted into our minds.

The thing is, Aquinas ended up saying how all what he had written was like straw on realisation that God can’t be completely understood. If all which Aquinas had written was like straw, should we take his views on analogy to be nothing more than speculation about how to better understand a being that we’re never going to fully understand? Yes! It seems incredibly odd to adopt a Thomist view towards understanding analogy when we know that even by adopting this in attempt to better grasp God’s nature; we will never fully comprehend God. Thus, there must be other ways of attempting to make better sense of analogy other than trying to sort analogies out into the two categories that Aquinas suggested.

Finally I come onto the topic of the use of symbols in religious language. Language, when used symbolically, intends to refer to something often in a figurative way, to describe people’s relationship with God and to further understand God. John Macquarrie (*Principles of Christian Theology*) explains the purpose of symbolic language, saying; ‘When, however, we speak of ‘symbolic language’, we generally have a fairly definite kind of language in mind, a kind in which the words are not understood in their direct or proper reference but in which they, so to speak, bounce off that…. To which the speaker wishes to refer.’

The key issue with the use of symbols in language generally is that symbols are so easily misunderstood. If you think about when you may say something figuratively, like ‘If this train gets any later, I’ll murder the train driver.’ Of course, you only mean this figuratively in a metaphorical manner, you don’t actually mean that you’ll do this. However, someone may interpret you as speaking very literally and take action to get you away from the late arriving train and the helpless train driver who has had to drive the train.

The use of symbolic religious language can also be critiqued as it may only be understood by those in a certain community as only they have been exposed to certain beliefs, so only they can gain the true meaning of a symbol.

It would be wise to note the two remaining criticisms surrounding the via negativa, despite the large benefit to it compared to these other methods of conveying religious language.

Primarily, in the Bible there is a large use of positive description. With the Bible being regarded as the word of God, it would make sense to some people that we can describe God in positive terms, because if it is done in the Bible it must ne the correct and appropriate thing to do. I think one could equally say that it’s debatable over who contributed to the Bible and to it being the word of God. This also doesn’t stop atheists or agnostics discussing God using religious language, as they would be free to use these forms of religious language as using them would have no implication on how God viewed them.

Lastly, Anthony Flew gave some of the strongest critique to the via negativa. Flew, (writing in his essay *Theology and Falsification*), arguing that when we describe God in negative terms, by prescribing God as being ‘invisible’, ‘incorporeal’ and so on, there becomes little difference between our definition of God and a definition of nothingness.

I can accept what Flew is saying, but cannot accept that any of the other methods available to people to discuss God provide a better basis upon which we can talk of him, with certainty that what we are saying is helping us find God rather than fashioning and shaping God to our own desires.

Ultimately, the via negativa is not without criticisms and flaws that discourage us from its use. However, if it is used wisely, it can help us to find God, rather than causing us to shape out a God to our own desires and expectations through the use of positive description. I respect that the apophatic way cannot alone help us make profound statements about God, its use needs to be monitored, as when we excessively use the via negativa, we might as well be making statements about nothing at all, as Flew said, we end up arguing God out of existence by ‘a thousand qualifications.’ However, with monitored use we can make good use of the via negativa in defining some of God’s most crucial traits- his transcendence for example.

The via negativa provides a solid base upon which we can primarily discuss God and then bring in other forms of religious language. All the forms of religious discussed have their negatives, but the via negativa makes the most meaningful statements about God and provides the pathway upon which other meaningful statements about God can be made using the different forms of religious language.

Well you’ve certainly put everything into this essay! It’s useful for revision purposes to go over everything like this, but of course in an exam you’d have to be a lot more selective.

In your conclusion I’m not sure if you agree with Flew or not.

Very good effort – now we need to work on being selective in choosing the best material to address the specific question

AO1 – 16

AO2 – L5 there is argument there and you do make a good effort to provide evaluative comment the whole way through

**How fair is the claim that religious language is meaningless?**

Religious language is, as one may deduce, language used in the context of religion so for instance the statement ‘God is all-loving’ is an example of religious language. Over the years some philosophers, such as members of the Vienna Circle as well as A. J. Ayer and Antony Flew, have challenged the use of religious language on the premise of it being meaningless. Try to get an idea of what you’re going to be arguing introduced around here – there’s a lot of description before you tell us (although you do at least tell us in the opening paragraph). The Vienna Circle was a group of thinkers inspired by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in particular his Tractatus. They believed in the ideas of Auguste Comte who stated that theological interpretations belonged in the past, namely to an age in which God was used as an explanation for anything and everything that science was incapable of defining. Expanding on this idea members of the Vienna Circle advocated that empirical evidence is key to understanding what is and what is not meaningful and following through with this they came to the conclusion that religious language is meaningless. A. J. Ayer introduced the verifiability theory of meaning in his book Language, Truth and Logic – this is a way of testing whether there is any point in talking about a certain statements or not, while Anthony Flew also objected to the belief that religious language possesses some sort of meaning. In his most famous article Theory and Falsification the philosopher put forth the idea that a statement should be falsifiable rather than verifiable to posses some sort of meaning and as religious language does not part the test of the so-called falsification principle it is seen by Flew to be meaningless. Of course there are many who objected to the presented beliefs, most notably R. M Hare and John Hick, and below I plan to expand on the views of both parties. I myself find the arguments of those claiming religious language to be meaningless somewhat more convincing, however at the same time I acknowledge that something that has no meaning for me may posses a great deal of meaning for another individual. I find fairness to be too subjective a criterion to be used as that what I deem fair others may (and do) perceive in a very different key. Yes, it’s a subjective judgement, but all of the questions you’re asked will want a subjective judgement – you could say the same thing about anything you’re asked, in ethics too. Not sure what you think a better question would look like.

A. J. Ayer’s verifiability theory of meaning, also known as the theory of verificationism, states that synthetic statements, i.e. statements about reality, can only be considered to be meaningful if they can be verified through empirical evidence, that is evidence readily available to out five senses. Logical positivists believe that only our experience can be used as a criterion of the meaningfulness of statements, so if it is impossible to test the truthfulness of a statement by means of our senses we can conclude that the statement is void of any meaning (as long as it is not an analytic statement, however it is argued that statements that use religious language are all synthetic). So according to the adherents of Ayer’s ideas we can only know the meaning of a statement if we know the conditions under which the statement is true or false. Seeing as statements that use religious language are outside this category Ayer and logical positivists conclude that these statements are completely and utterly meaningless. I doubt the reader will be surprised to find out that a number of objections have been raised to the verification principle. Given that the reader is me, no, not in the least surprised. Perhaps the main of these and at the same time that which I find most convincing is the fact the principle goes against its own premise and is unverifiable. After all, the verificationism theory cannot be verified by means of empirical evidence so it is not a meaningful synthetic statement. Some argue that the theory consists of an analytic statement and it provides the word ‘meaningful’ with a new definition, however it is just as reasonable for us to disagree with this definition as to accept it. Another weakness of this idea is the fact that it is based on the belief that all synthetic statements have to be empirically verifiable. After all most, if not all, historical statements cannot be verified through our five senses, so must we dismiss all of them as meaningless? Exactly the same applies to those areas of science in which sense experience plays a rather small role. The logical positivists themselves accepted that this was a problem and although they tried to adapt it to allow for historical and scientific statements to count as meaningful they did not get far at all and in the modern world the theory has little support. I find that logical positivists are guilty of making the assumption that only scientific propositions can accurately describe our world. I strongly disagree with this as for me a piece of art can be as strong, if not stronger, and more helpful in understanding the world than a certain scientific view – for instance, I can use the Guernica to understand the horrors of war and the suffering people endure due to it and I find this visual representation to be most convincing. Good use of example The Christian philosopher John Hick also argued against the verification principle – he claimed that statements about God are eschatologically verifiable, that is these statements will be verified for us in the afterlife. So according to Hick when we die we will know whether God loves us or not and whether we are to be rewarded for leading virtuous lives. While I find the ideas of Ayer and the logical positivists to be completely unconvincing, I do argue against Hick’s theory – firstly because I find his claim of an existing afterlife to be unsound and secondly because even if there is an afterlife there is nothing to prove that the senses we posses in it will be identical to the ones we have now. Ok good

Antony Flew identified the weaknesses of the Ayer’s approach and moulded the verification principle into the falsification principle. Flew believed that for a statement to possess some sort of meaning it has to be falsifiable rather verifiable and tried to prove this by referring to John Wisdom’s parable of the gardener and referencing it to religious belief. The parable consists of two explorers in the jungle stumbling across a clearing in which flowers and weeds grow. One explorer states that the presence of the flowers mean that there is a gardener who comes along and looks after them, while the other disagrees with this and points out the weeds to justify his belief in the non-existence of the gardener. The explorers set out various traps to catch the gardener, but to no avail. However the first explorer refuses to back down on his claim and states that the gardener is invisible, silent, elusive and so on and so forth and these attributes justify why the explorers fail to catch him. In an essay, you can just summarise, you don’t need to retell the whole story Flew finds that a religious person who makes claims about the existence of God is very similar to the believer – when his view are challenged by various happenings that go against God’s supposed nature, such as the existence of evil, the believer refuses to accept that his views are wrong and instead modifies them to suit the problem. Flew claims that in the end due to the amassing number of modifications the original belief is completely altered and thus the claims of religious believer’s die the death of a ‘thousand qualifications’ – in the end what the believer says has no meaning at all. Flew found that for a statement to make sense it must simultaneously assert something and deny the opposite of this assertion and I side with him on as his case is most convincing – for example if I say I am riding a bike I am at the same time stating that I am not riding a horse, moped, etc. Religious believers, however, refuse to rule out any possible state of affairs when talking about God and in this Flew sees their main weakness – for him a claim must at least in principle be falsifiable to make any sense. Objections have been raised to this idea, most notably by such thinkers as R. M Hare and Paul Tillich. So as to counter Flew’s argument Hare put forward a parable of his own – he asks us to imagine a university student obsessed with the belief that all his dons aim to murder him. No matter what happens and however many kind and friendly dons the student meets, he is still convinced that they are all in fact pretending and are after his scalp. Hare calls the student’s unfalsifiable belief a blik and goes on to state that we all possess such bliks with which we look at the world and make judgements about it. Hare states that the belief that everything happens by chance is just as much a blik as the belief that everything is God’s will. So Hare claims that everyone has bliks, that is both atheists and theists, and each find a meaning of their own. I however find Hare’s argument unconvincing – his viewpoint is too relative for my liking and if brought to an extreme can be used to justify anything as Hare does not provide a criterion upon which to judge whether one blik is right and another is wrong, while at the same time stating that this is indeed the case. Tillich’s argument is somewhat different – he believes that religious language should be seen as symbolic rather than as what it literally means. Symbols are neither verifiable nor falsifiable so it is incorrect to pass them through the falsification principle as they do posses a great deal of meaning. Tillich’s case is a strong one and I find it hard to see any weaknesses, however I disagree with his belief that religious language is always symbolic – very often it is used literally and many theist will no doubt side with me on this matter.

Overall, I find the question poised in the title is rather incorrect I’m not entirely sure how the question can be incorrect – you are giving a qualified answer, which is fine – I find religious language to be meaningless and think that Flew built a great case to support this, however for theists religious language will possess some sort of meaning for as long as they use it (which I assume will be forever). From my point of view it is fair to claim that religious language is meaningless, however as I have already mentioned above the judgement criterion is poor – fairness is matter to the individual’s subjective opinion. So I must conclude that the claim that religious language is meaningless is unfair as there are many out there for whom religious language possesses a great deal of meaning.

You’ve made such an effort with this ☺ It’s very thorough – perhaps in too much of a list-like way, rather than as an argument of your own. What I mean is, you’ve listed a lot of content, and then said what you think of each chunk, which is ok, but ideally, you’d have an argument, and use your content in support of what you’re saying, so that the argument drives the answer. It would have been useful to include Wittgenstein in here, especially as you’re concluding the same kind of things that he did. Need now to practise writing more concisely, so that you can get from one end of an essay to the other within the constraints of the clock.

AO1 – 14/15 AO2 – L3/4