Can Religious Differences Be Understood? v 2.4

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1 Introduction

Communication requires common ground. We have to share words and an understanding of what the words mean. The latter requires some shared understanding of how we get along in the world. For most communication, further common ground is required. If you tell me to pick up some eggs from the store, I have to understand not only what eggs and stores are, but what kind of eggs you mean. I have to understand your request as something I should do. I have to understand whether you mean now, next time I go to the store, or in the near future otherwise. If you say "Pizza is good," I have to understand the unstated "Not all pizza is good," but more than just "A few particular pizzas are good." I have to grasp you mean good to eat and not good in a moral sense. If I take you to be saying all round foods are morally virtuous, communication has failed. Communication failed because we lack a common understanding of what things are pizzas and what things can be morally virtuous. These are of course simple examples, and I've only pointed out a few commonalities required. More complicated communication happens all the time, and an exhaustive list of commonalities required is unlikely to be possible, but if it is possible, it would be prohibitively long.

Communication of disagreement requires common ground as well. There are different ways to be in disagreement. The usual cases are successfully communicated matters of fact or judgment. If you point to a pizza and say its radius is six inches, I can easily respond that

the radius is eight inches. If you say the pizza is tasty, I can say that it is not. In both cases we have successfully communicated disagreement. In these usual disagreements regarding matters of fact, one considers the other to be in error.

If we go beyond cases of successfully communicated matters of fact or judgment, we find cases of disagreement that are harder to understand. In *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein considers disagreements in which we don't just say someone is in error. He considers someone supposing all our calculations are uncertain and unreliable. He says "perhaps we would say he was crazy. But can we say he is in error? Does he not just react differently? We rely on calculations, he doesn't; we are sure, he isn't" (§217). We would probably ask for him to clarify further. If he digs his heels into the ground then we conclude he's crazy or has a different understanding of how to get about the world. Regardless, the disagreement runs deeper than a disagreement regarding whether nine times twelve is one hundred and eight or one hundred and twenty. In that case both people are engaging in calculation with a common understanding of the rules and goals. Another odd case Wittgenstein presents is one in which someone were to believe they lived in a radically different place and time than they do. Regarding this person Wittgenstein says, "I should not call this a *mistake*, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one" (§70–75). This suggests that a different sort of disagreement is involved. There are at least two senses in which someone can be mistaken. The first is that they are simply incorrect. In this sense, both the calculation-denier and the man who believed he lived somewhere else are indeed mistaken. The second sense is being committed to a certain project or understanding and within the bounds given by the project or understanding, being in error. If you're playing chess (and trying to win) and you make a bad move, then you made a mistake. If you're not trying to win and instead just moving pieces around randomly on your turns, then a bad move is not a mistake in the second sense.[1]

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1. For further discussion of this, see J. David Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Velleman argues further that if you're not trying to win the game, then you're in fact not playing. This links up to the debate of internalism and externalism regarding reasons for action. The first kind of mistake in speaking fails at internal objects.

The possible complications in disagreements give us occasion to turn to several cases that will be useful in further exploring disagreements. Consider the following cases:

Case 1: Absurd statement. Alva says "The world came into being ten minutes ago." We may take his statement at face value or not. If we do take his statement at face value, he is clearly saying something wrong. There is a proposition he is expressing, and we understand its truth conditions, and the truth conditions are false, according to our beliefs. We then disagree with Alva. We probably also have a rather different picture of the world. What would it take for someone to believe the world came into being ten minutes ago? Alva must believe that all of the evidence that the world is older is deceptive. Those indications are widespread, including our shared memories of the past and physical evidence of an older world. The disagreement then runs far deeper than just the age of the world. The disagreement extends to some rather basic modes of how we come to know things in the world.

We may also not take Alva to be literally expressing the proposition that the world came into being ten minutes ago. If Alva is already established as a smart, though perhaps quirky, person, then we may assume that he is expressing some other proposition in an obscure way. If so, there is a failure in communication. Even if we don't have any background information on Alva, or even if he's normally not very smart, he may still be at least intending to express something correct. It's just that we don't understand what he is saying. Perhaps he is trying to say that news grows old very quickly in our current culture. He may also be expressing something silly, but also non-literal. He may also not be expressing anything. In this case he is making sounds that match those of a sentence in English that could mean something, but does not mean anything. If we take him to be deranged, we would assume this. Perhaps he is very drunk—too drunk to think any coherent thoughts—and just says the sentence. Then we cannot disagree with him since he isn't thinking anything to disagree with. There is no attempt to communicate.

The second fails only at external objects.

Case 2: Category Error. Betha says "Six is more lavender than eight." Like Alva, Betha says something apparently absurd. Unlike Alva, she cannot be interpreted literally. Understanding her as expressing something literally simply does not work. She may be intending to say something but failing to communicate. She may also not be saying anything. These options are similar to those in Alva's case.

Case 3: Regular Disagreement. Kai says "The capital of Russia is St. Petersburg." in response to someone asking what the capital of Russia is. We know the capital of Russia is Moscow, so we disagree with Kai. If we ask him to explain his answer, he'll describe what a capital of a country is and that Russia's is St. Petersburg. He's clearly using words in the usual way. So, we have a disagreement. The disagreement need not run very deep. For Kai, the capital of Russia is not relevant to his life outside of being asked a trivia question. He could agree with us on everything else and just have forgotten which city is Russia's capital.

Case 4: Deeper Disagreement. Delilah says "The world came into being six thousand years ago." Delilah is saying something similar to what Alva is saying, but she says the world is a bit older. I assume we think the world is still quite a bit older than Delilah does. Let's assume she does mean the world came into being six thousand years ago. Then we disagree with her. Some of the same deeper disagreements we have with Alva we also have with Delilah. Delilah must have some other way to treat the physical evidence of an older universe. She also must not accept the word of the usual scientific authorities on the matter. Unlike Alva, she can accept our shared memories. Because of this, she isn't so far removed from our basic understanding of how the world works. We can agree about most things that come up in daily life while disagreeing about things that come up in special scientific, philosophical, or religious contexts.

Case 5: Radical Translation. Epsilon says something a monolingual English speaker cannot even begin to understand. No amount of attempts to translate succeed.[2] He is in

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2. This is similar to the attempts at translation Quine discusses in "Ontological Relativity". Quine argues that we have to assume someone goes about the world in mostly the same way we do in order to start translating. However, if they go about things differently enough, these assumptions will be thwarted.

some ways similar to Betha. Neither can be understood. However, while we have to infer Betha is using words in a peculiar way or not saying anything, Epsilon can be reasonably assumed to be saying something, just in a language we cannot understand.

Case 6: Communication Failure via Jargon. Edy says, "For any complex number x and integer n it holds that $(i\cos(x) + \sin(x))^n = i\cos(nx) + i\sin(nx)$." If we are not familiar with complex analysis, then we don't understand what Edy is saying. But, we do recognize that she is saying something meaningful. Like with Betha, the communication fails. Unlike Betha, we know there is some meaning to the words spoken. The problem is just the language used is too technical.

Case 7: Knowing Communication Failure. Zeke says "The world is literally part of God and ultimately spiritual." I assume we don't think the same. This case is similar to case 6 inasmuch as we know Zeke is probably saying something literally meaningful, but we cannot figure out what the meaning is. But, with Edy we have an idea of how to come to know what the meaning is. With Zeke, we don't have a clear conception of how to acquire an understanding of what he means. Another difference between Edy and Zeke is with Edy we cannot begin to agree or disagree. Based on her familiarity with the technical language, we might assume she knows what she's talking about and go along with it.[3] With Zeke, we know we at least probably disagree, even if we are not entirely clear what the disagreement is. The disagreement likely runs deeper than the proposition in question alone.

Cases 1, 3, and 4 all present different instances of disagreement. The cases 2, 5, and 6 present failures in communication. Because we cannot even have an understanding of what Betha and Epsilon are saying, we cannot disagree in the sense of thinking what they are saying is false. Because we cannot presently understand what Edy is saying, we also cannot disagree in the sense of thinking what they are saying is false. Disagreement occurs only when communication is successful in the first place. Case 7 is harder to classify. Successful communication requires substantial agreement, so since the communication is not entirely

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3. It may be worth noting that Edy's statement is in fact false. But without familiarity with the subject matter, it's not at all clear that it's false.

successful, whether we disagree with Zeke is less clear. On the one hand, we do understand he is saying something meaningful and that we don't believe what he is saying. On the other hand, we don't know what he is saying. So, we know a disagreement exists between us and Zeke, but we do not know what the disagreement is.

One may say we do know what the disagreement with Zeke is. He thinks the world is part of God, and we think the world is not part of God. The problem is that for us, the world not being part of God has no clear meaning besides Zeke is wrong. Contrast Kai saying the capital of Russia is St. Petersburg. We know what that means, and we know what we mean when we say the capital of Russia is not St. Petersburg beyond that Kai is wrong. We may in other contexts say that the capital of Russia is not St. Petersburg. Besides in conversations with people like Zeke, We would not say that the world is not part of God.

Case 1 could be a disagreement or a failure in communication depending on whether Alva is judged to be communicating that the world came into being ten minutes ago or not. Determining whether Case 1 is a case of failure in communication or disagreement is more difficult than it may at first seem. In order for communication to be successful, his claim must be given serious consideration. To take him at his word that the world began ten minutes ago would require understanding the possibility of the world in fact beginning ten minutes ago. That is, understanding Alva to be saying that the world began ten minutes ago would require the possibility of doubting the world is older. Wittgenstein points out that reasonable people don't have certain doubts. Some suppositions cannot be given any serious consideration (§220–226). If we cannot seriously consider Alva's claim that the world came into being ten minutes ago, then we do not take the meaning seriously. Since we are not seriously considering the meaning of the claim, communication is not occurring.

One may worry that some failures in communication are in fact agreements. For example, perhaps by "Six is more lavender than eight," Betha just means six is less than eight. Then we seem to agree with her. This agreement is agreement of beliefs. The disagreement is disagreement of word use. We agree that six is less than eight, but we disagree that saying

"Six is more lavender than eight" expresses a truth. Thus failures in communication of this kind are disagreements over whether a string of words expresses a truth and a failure to communicate meaning.

Language barriers are generally similar to case 5. If someone tells me that two plus three is five in a language I don't have any understanding of, then I do not agree that the words they speak express the truth and meaning is not communicated. However, I do not disagree as I do not think the words don't express a truth. I just cannot make any judgment regarding whether the words express a truth.

These worries elucidate the two points at which there may be agreement or disagreement. When someone says S and means M, we can disagree about whether M is true, and we can disagree about whether S expresses M. The sorts of disagreement exemplified by cases 3 and 4 involve disagreement about M but agreement that S expresses M. In case 1, if we take Alva literally, then we agree S expresses M but disagree about M. If we think he is saying something true in an odd way, we disagree S expresses M but in fact agree about M. If he, like Betha, is not even saying anything, then we don't think there's an M in the first place to disagree with. Then we neither agree nor disagree. We further disagree that S expresses an M. Case 5, along with other language barrier cases, subvert this model. We can agree Epsilon is saying something M that is true. We also can believe that S expresses M despite not knowing the content of M. In this sense, cases 2 and 5 are in fact quite different. We think Betha isn't expressing any meaning, but we think Epsilon is. While there is a failure to communicate with Epsilon, it's not attributable to any disagreement. So, the following options exist:

case	M	S expresses M	agreement/disagreement	success/failure in communication
basic agreement	agree	agree	agreement	success
agreement with failure in communication	agree	disagree	agreement	failure
basic disagreement	disagree	agree	disagreement	success
disagreement with failure in communication	disagree	disagree	disagreement	failure
nonsense	none	N/A	none	failure
language barrier	agree	agree	agreement	failure

In case 1, we must figure out whether the communication with Alva is a case of agree-

ment with failure in communication or basic disagreement. In case 7 we must figure out whether our communication with Zeke is a case of disagreement with failure in communication, nonsense, or some sort of middle option. This set of categories still leaves open the categorization of how deeply rooted a belief is. Our disagreements with Kai and Delilah are different from each other, but the difference is not captured here. A third input is needed that captures how deep the disagreement goes. With Kai, the disagreement is rather shallow. By that I mean his thinking that the capital of Russia is St. Petersburg doesn't really affect any other thoughts. The disagreement with Delilah is deeper inasmuch as our disagreement about the age of the world requires a disagreement about how we come to know things. If we take Alva literally, our disagreement with him is deeper still as we have to disagree about very common ways we come to know things. And based on those, we have to disagree about further, rather common matters. For example, if Alva promised yesterday he would buy me lunch today, but he thinks the world came into being ten minutes ago, he must also think he did not promise anything yesterday.

Religious disagreements often are more difficult to categorize. The difficulty with case 7 already suggests this. In some cases understanding why two people appear to disagree is difficult. They may be disagreeing or failing to communicate. The difficulties come from multiple angles. Religious beliefs are often fundamental, and so likely to be deeper. One may have some reasons for their religious orientation, but often the reasons were only found for the sake of strengthening existing beliefs. (One might call these reasons rationalizations.) The sources of the beliefs are often not very clear. The use of the words can also be hard to discern. If someone says, "Gods do not exist," they might mean no omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent beings exist. They might also mean no rational beings are causally responsible for the universe's existence. In either case they could be open to extremely powerful beings that some people would call gods. They might also mean that no supernatural beings described by any past or present religion exist. There are further options. That even a simple statement like "Gods do not exist" can be reasonably understood in so many ways

leads to difficulty in communication. The beliefs themselves can also seem far-fetched if one has limited experience with them. If someone has never heard any claims regarding the supernatural, she will probably be confused by such a claim since her understanding of the world has no place for it. Likewise, if someone is raised in a very monocultural and very religious community, doubts about her religious beliefs may be so close to a main pillar of her understanding of the world that the doubts are incomprehensible. These are of course extreme cases of naturalism and religiosity.[4] People with moderate degrees of religiosity or naturalism are far more likely to be able to communicate with each other. That there is fruitful discussion across (ir)religious divides shows there are cases of successfully communicated disagreement regarding religious matters. The project here is elucidating the important differences between the extreme and moderate cases that lead to the disagreements being successfully communicated or not.

Let us consider extreme and moderate[5] religiosity and naturalism further. By "extreme" I do not simply mean that the beliefs are held with a very high credence level. I also do not mean that the beliefs are very important to the person. I do mean the at least that the belief is very difficult to doubt. This difficulty need not be the result of a particularly high level of credence or confidence. It may instead be the result of not comprehending alternatives. Consider a case of an extreme monotheist. She may say she sees everything by God as everyone everyone else sees things by light.[6] Children who grow up in monocul-

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4. Religious naturalism does exist, but it is not particularly relevant here. It is religious in the sense of being reverent rather than in the sense of involving positive beliefs regarding the supernatural.

5. I mean nothing evaluative or normative in my use of "extreme" and "moderate". No choice of words that captures the idea seems to entirely avoid potential evaluative connotations. This may reflect that many people simply do place some value on extremity or moderateness of belief. In light of this, I simply disclaim any normative evaluation here.

6. Statements along these lines are said by various extreme theists. As far as I know, the first explicit statement of this sort of attitude is from C.S. Lewis's *The Weight of Glory*: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else" (140). Lewis says this at the end of describing how with Christianity he can understand science, art, morality, and other religions. He argues that the scientific point of view lacks any foundation, so it fails to explain science, art, morality, and religion (139–140). That he engages with the scientific point of view and appears to understand what people with the scientific point of view are saying indicates he is a moderate Christian. Consider also G.K. Chesterton's statement in *Orthodoxy* that "a man is not really convinced of a philosophic theory when he finds that something proves it. He is only really convinced when he finds that everything proves it" (51). Chesterton's really convinced man is perhaps somewhere between Lewis and my extreme monotheist. That

turally religious communities often express confusion when presented with other religions or irreligion. Some people deny the possibility of atheism, asserting instead that atheists do believe in God but hate him.[7] Each of these cases are extreme because there is a major obstacle to the possibility of communication with people who disagree.

Someone with a moderate belief does not have these kinds of obstacles to communicating disagreement. Unlike an extreme theist who never heard of atheism, a moderate theist can understand what someone means by "I do not believe in gods." Unlike an extreme theist who believes atheists are in fact misotheists, a moderate theist comprehends the possibility of not believing in gods. For the sake of further understanding the distinction between extreme and moderate, consider also the extreme and moderate atheists. Someone who grows up in a community with no concept of deities may find the concept incomprehensible when she finally encounters a concept of deities. She is an extreme atheist. Consider someone who thinks religious beliefs are all akin to mental disturbance. She may believe people who otherwise get around fine in the world compartmentalize their religious beliefs. This enables her to consider religious beliefs insane while also considering religious people generally sane.[8] Her dismissal of religious beliefs is characteristic of extreme irreligion. The moderate atheist is unlike these two extreme cases. The moderate atheist can consider theistic beliefs sane. She can also make sense of theistic language.

In this paper, I explore the connection extreme and moderate beliefs have with successful and failed communication of disagreement within the domain of religion. The purpose of this exploration is to understand which religious disagreements are understandable and how the understandable disagreements are understandable. I will do this primarily by expanding on Wittgenstein's "On Certainty". In that text he provides ways of understanding deep disagreements. I then need to expand his work into the domain of religion. First I explain how

he moved from one position to the other indicates an ability to communicate with both sides. That he sees everything as proving his theory suggests an inability to doubt the theory.

7. Consider from the Bible, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Mt. 12:30) where "me" refers to Christ.

8. For an example of this, see William Saleton, *Science, Religion, and Compartmentalization*, 2014.

doubt is important for moderateness in belief. Then I explain how doubt is found in action. This will create apparent problems for atheism, so I then turn to how we can still understand atheism.[9] Finally I consider the knowledge claims of religion. In that consideration I also consider disagreements among the religious as they pose further questions. Through all of this, how religious disagreements can be understood becomes clear.

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9. Naturalism and irreligion have basically the same apparent problems atheism has. I give only atheism a treatment as the others easily follow. Likewise, throughout the paper I often handle only the theist. I leave out the obvious inferences to the religious.