

# Summary of *Words and Images*

E. L. Mascall

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Other volumes in this exploration of apologetics have discussed the problem of meaning in theology. In the last thirty years or so, a distressingly large part of the academic world has fallen for the argument that words and language are essentially devoid of any meaning except possibly the sexist, racist, and patriarchal meanings assigned to them by the dominant culture. One might inquire that if words have no meaning, then how are we supposed to understand that argument?

Unfortunately, the rot goes back farther than the 1980's. Fr. Mascall prepared the current work in the mid-1950's to answer similar charges that went farther back. He wished to answer the claim that it was utterly impossible to discuss theology or metaphysics because all statements about these subjects are totally meaningless. This assertion will seem absurd to the average person, but please stay with the discussion.

The first chapter addresses the question directly: "Is Theological Discourse Possible?" Fr. Mascall then refers to the argument advanced by Prof. A. J. Ayer in his book *Language, Truth, and Logic* from 1936. The book was reissued in 1946 with the arguments slightly modified.

Prof. Ayer stated a "verification principle" (*Mascall, pg. 3*) which claimed that the question we must ask "about any putative statement of fact is ... Would any observations be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood?" (*pg. 3*) Prof. Ayer then claimed that since we cannot use our senses to experience religious beings, statements about them cannot be assessed as true or false and thus lose all of their meaning. Another way to describe it is that if God cannot be understood, we cannot expect any statement about him to contain meaning.

Fr. Mascall then points out various problems in Prof. Ayer's arguments. He notes that the verification principle could just as easily be considered the same kind of meaningless statement as has been discussed since it does not clearly fit into the categories of meaningful statements that Prof. Ayer has recognized. Fr. Mascall then accuses Prof. Ayer of assuming the truth of the thesis which is being proved in the argument. (*pg. 8*) This is commonly known as circular reasoning. Fr. Mascall also jumps on Prof. Ayer's modifications to the verification principle in Ayer's second edition as an admission that Ayer had made serious errors in his original work. (*pg. 9*) Fr. Mascall finally offers his conclusion that the proper way to define meaningfulness is "not sense verification but by intelligibility,..." (*pg. 13*)

The second half of the chapter reviews a debate over whether God's existence can ever be proven through sense experience. Numerous thinkers illustrate their cases

with parables of the "invisible gardener," (pg. 16) the person who is convinced that "all dons (professors) want to murder him," (pg. 18) and the "Stranger" in a wartime resistance movement. (pg. 20-21)

The second chapter moves into a more highly philosophical realm when it talks about sense-experience. Fr. Mascall examines the attitude of Prof. Ayer and the Scottish philosopher David Hume that the only meaningful truths concern sense-experience or logic. (pg. 29) Fr. Mascall concludes that arguments about the reality of sense-experience from John Locke can be criticized because of their subjectivity. (pg. 32)

Fr. Mascall argues against those who posit that things exist only because we perceive them. The universe exists whether or not we perceive it. (pg. 35) In fact, some things may exist whether or not they can be perceived by the senses. (pg. 37) This can be expressed in terms of the old question: if no one sees the tree fall, did it truly fall? Fr. Mascall clearly says that yes, it did.

This ties in with the argument in the second part of the chapter devoted to mysticism. Mystical knowledge may be totally inaccessible to our senses, but most world religions acknowledge its existence and reality. One problem concerning mysticism is that such knowledge can only be described using everyday language which cannot do justice to it.

The next chapter reviews yet another academic approach to separating God from religion. Fr. Mascall reviews the arguments of R. B. Braithwaite, whose entire position can be put this way: we have no way to know if religion is true or not, but the Biblical stories need not be true to be followed as examples of good and moral behavior. In fact, it works better if the stories are not factual because, according to Braithwaite, "The religious man may interpret the stories in the way which assists him best in carrying out the behaviour policies of his religion." (Mascall pg. 57)

Fr. Mascall makes a number of responses to this argument, but the most effective is that believing in Christianity requires belief in the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth. (pg. 60) Braithwaite's belief in morality without any concrete religion behind it leads to a "Christianity without God." (pg. 62) As Fr. Mascall closes the chapter, "If you start where he starts, you are likely to end where he ends." (pg. 62)

The fourth chapter is a brief excursion into the subject of how we know anything. Fr. Mascall insists that his position goes against all the philosophers who see the intellect as only a reasoning facility. Instead, it must also apprehend or perceive the physical world. He quotes a German theologian who uses the terms *ratio* to refer to the perceptive function and *intellectus* to describe the reasoning or contemplating activity. This distinction matters because the sense-perception lobby seems not to realize that the mind operates both as *ratio* and *intellectus*. The rest of the section

treats on perception vs. reality using examples like a lady's muff vs. a black cat. It gets very philosophical in such thin air; take oxygen with you when you read this.

Why does this matter? "It is not, however, Christian theology alone that is at stake here, but any belief in the existence of real objects outside our minds...." (*pg. 71*) If you look at the argument of the sense-experience believers, there is no obvious way to go from believing in sensations to believing in physical reality. Many philosophers struggled with the issue. Fr. Mascall describes the struggles of Descartes and Bertrand Russell. Does anything matter?

Fr. Mascall finishes the chapter by discussing the differences between puzzles, problems, and mysteries. A puzzle is a pretend or invalid problem. A problem is "a question which does not evaporate on linguistic analysis and which we cease to ask only when we have discovered the answer." (*pg. 71*) As you might have guessed, a mystery is a much deeper and more complex concept. As Fr. Mascall puts it, "A mystery is not in itself a question demanding an answer, but an object inviting contemplation." (*pg. 78*) The depths of a mystery become clear the further we dive into them. Much of Christianity falls into the mystery category.

This discussion matters because, according to Fr. Mascall, God can only be approached by the mind using both *ratio* and *intellectus*. We must perceive Him as well as reason about him. Even if our view of Him is "through a glass darkly," it is the only view we get. And this is why the sense-experience view cannot be correct.

In the fifth chapter, Fr. Mascall discusses the theory of communication as it relates to theology. He spends much of the chapter analyzing and disagreeing with the theory that communication is merely a process of coding our thoughts into words and decoding them back into thoughts at the receiving end. One major problem is that people never use the same words in exactly the same way or understand the same meanings. Another complication is that "linguistic techniques take extremely different forms according to their subject-matter and their particular function." (*pg. 92-93*) To carry this point further, each field must create the mode of communication that works best for it. Theology's communication style will differ from other fields since it deals with transcendent mysteries.

Theological writing often uses contradictory analogies to convey different aspects of the same truth. Fr. Mascall cites examples regarding: 1) the view that the book of Hebrews claims that the Christian priesthood ended with the Ascension because Christ sits in Heaven like a king instead of standing like a priest, and 2) how the Atonement is often described as being like: (*pg. 97*)

- \* Paying a bankrupt person's debt.
- \* Delivering a nation from an invading army.
- \* Healing a hereditary disease.

And yet, while all of these descriptions convey some part of the truth, none is complete. But that is all right, because all of the analogies help the hearer understand more of the overall truth.

Another critical point (*pg. 99*) is that not all communication occurs through language. Fr. Mascall claims G. K. Chesterton's support for this theory in Chesterton's claim that "Language is not a scientific thing at all but wholly an artistic thing...." (*Mascall, pg. 100*) Words will never reproduce all the complexity of the world.

Fr. Mascall then examines the theory of analogy as used by Middle Age Scholastic philosophers. It helps us to understand that even if God "passeth all understanding," we can use words and ideas to understand him in part, if not completely. Besides, we must be able to know God before we can talk about Him. (*pg. 103*)

The chapter finishes with a short discussion of how images function in theology. Almost everyone would agree that nonverbal communication conveys enormous amounts of information without using words. Some images, like a particular national flag, convey a message within the bounds of a specific civilization. Others communicate more universal concepts, often in terms of basic human emotions like love or hope.

Why does this matter? Because Jesus used parables and images as his most common teaching tool throughout His ministry. We must understand how images communicate if we are to understand His teaching.

Most fortunately, Fr. Mascall has briefly summarized his work in the final chapter. He wished to "provid[e] a rational justification for the activities of thinking and talking about God...." (*pg. 121*) He had to find his way past the extremists who would deny any validity to theological discussion. He then argued against those whose idea of knowledge was only intellectual; he rebutted that true knowledge required "penetration beneath the phenomenal level." (*pg. 122*)

The best summary of all this is that theological discourse is "rational conversation, albeit rational conversation of a unique type which has its own peculiar method and discipline." (*pg. 122*) It has meaning, even if imperfect and often communicated through means besides words. The concluding chapter wraps with an amusing discussion of how the word "in" can be used to illustrate the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity. It reminds the reader of the way that Pres. Clinton expounded on the meaning of the word "is."

This is one of the more esoteric books in the curriculum. It is not exactly aimed at apologetics. But if we cannot talk about God, how can we defend Him or argue for His existence? Fr. Mascall uses his understanding and wit to liven up the

philosophy. It would help if he would not throw untranslated Latin passages at the reader. They tend to restrict the use of the book to the serious university student, if not the professional scholar. Nonetheless, the discussions presented here are definitely worth our consideration.