ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Arguments From Perfections

1. Introductory remarks

This paper is not a direct discussion of the concept of perfection. Rather it raises a problem of arguing and drawing conclusions from the concept of perfection in inter-religious discourse.

The way we argue depends, of course, on the mode of reference we are using. In religious discourse we often do not argue and draw conclusions from the concept of God, but from the singular perfections like ultimate goodness, absolute love, greatest wisdom, etc. These descriptions are referring under certain conditions to God, despite the fact that "God" does not have the same meaning as "ultimate goodness".

This form of discourse has become normal in inter-religious debates, where a rigid concept of God (whatever is meant by this) is often replaced by its more flexible referential descriptions. Some philosophical theologians too, see good reasons for the flexible talk about God: "Conceptual frameworks come and go. This does not mean that we should not try to understand the very meaning of the God of Israel and the God of Jesus, but that we have to look for another conceptuality, one that will take into account all that know about the world in which we live." (Van der Vekken 1992: 163).

The strategy ables to overcome cultural differences and build up the models of inter-religious discourse in which the univocal use of "God" has been substituted by equivocal and analogous uses of the concepts of good, love and wisdom.

There are however problematic cases, if we have to presuppose, that some particular culture or religious group is lacking the concept of certain perfection or even several of them. Semantic investigations have established a provisional set of human concepts, expressed as identifiable words in all languages. This set, which includes close to sixty elements, provides a trans-cultural framework for analysing meanings across languages and cultures in the form of trans-cultural metalanguage. According to the linguistical investigations, certain tribes of Papuas do not have the concept of love (Wierzbika 1995: 210).

This fact, stated by linguists as an empirical one, creates a theoretical problem: Which forms of argumentative discourse are effective, when speaking with

Papuas about God as ultimate love? The concept of "God" itself is of course not universal, but can inter-religious argumentation be construed in trans-cultural metalanguage if there is no place for the concepts of divine perfections like love, wisdom etc?

2. The concept of perfections and conceptual framework

Good arguments usually convince. At least, they convince those of us, who can understand how the argument works. It is also widely assumed that if the logic of the arguments is the same, the argument which uses commonly understandable and univocal concepts is more convincing than the one which uses non-understandable and equivocal concepts. For instance, the missionaries who work with primitives know well, that preaching in the name of ultimate love is normally much more effective than giving arguments from the concepts of primal cause or first mover. For, to provide effective arguments they need to have rely on suitable conceptual framework.

Now, what are the common concepts for all mankind? According to linguistic semantics, in particular to the so-called Goddard's and Wierzbicka's "NSM" school of semantics (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994) there exists pretty clear answer to this question, namely, in the form of the set of universal human concepts. The set of universal human concepts has been established on the basis of cross-linguistic investigations and contains several substantives (I, you, someone/person, something/thing, people, body), determines (this, the same, other), quantifiers (one two, many, all, some) mental predicates (think, know, feel want, see, hear) etc. As to the attributes: "Good", "bad", "big", "small" are universal, but for instance "love", "wisdom" are not universal concepts for the mankind. According to the Wierzbicka, there are some tribes, where arguments from "love" are non-understandable. Just because they do not have corresponding concept in their tribal language.

How, then, the missionary could tell something about Jesus as a Perfect Love? Non telling about the love would badly harm the very understanding what Christian God is? In the Biblical parables love is the most central and highly important topic. It is also true that the most effective inter-religious arguments will take their start from "love".

3. Prof. Wierzbicka's parable explication project

Prof. Wierzbicka's project offers the solution in the use of universal human concepts. For the Biblical parable of the Lost Sheep (Lost Son, Lost coin) in which

the idea of love is the central, she proposes following explanations in the set of universal human concepts:
God wants to do good things for all people
all people can line with God
God wants this
God does many things because of this
sometimes a person doesn't want to live with God
because this person wants to do bad things
this is bad for this person
if you don't want to live with God
because you want to do bad things
this is bad for you
God wants you to think something like this:
"I don't want to do bad things any more2
"I want to live with God"
God does many thing because of this… (Wierzbicka 1997: 18)

Wierzbicka seems to think, that her explanation of the Lost Sheep in the terms of universal human concepts refers to God of Love in principle in the same way as the original parable does. (Wierzbicka 1997: 18). She rejects the view that metaphorical expressions could not be paraphrased and her own project is aiming to provide Christian missionaries with many other universalised parables, which, however, turn out to be strikingly sketchy and similar to each other. Let us ask: Can good inter-religious arguments be construed by such highly artificial explanations of the parables? Could any better understanding of what God of Love really mean be achieved by the tribesmen by using them? I really doubt on this. Moreover, I feel that there is something very odd in Wierzbicka's idea of the set of universal human concepts. The practising missionaries will probably tell more, why Wierzbika's arguments do not work in practice.
I will limit my criticism with philosophical objections. In what wollows I hope to show why I would prefer to call Wierzbicka's project rather Frankenstanian Project: Despite the good intentions it has, it lacks to recognise the essential way humans are having their life. In the rest of my paper I will express my criticism in detail and draw an alternalive approach for arguments from perfections.

4. Methodological background
Why, it can be asked, is Wierzbicka so certain that the concept "love" is not the

universal concept? Of course, linguistical investigation have proved that certain cultures are lacking this concept, what simply means the empirically stated fact, that particular culture X does not have the corresponding expression as identifiable word in their vocabulary. But does this empirically stated fact means the same as that the culture X is lacking the very idea of love? And in order to explain tribesmen what God means by love, one has to use Wierzbicka's translations? I really doubt on this.
Moreover, what would be the point to recognise this strange tribesmen as the humans and not human-like robots or human-like lions? Just think on different forms, love is manifesting itself and how trhese manifestations are related to the human's everyday life. Imagine the relations between mother and her child, the feelings between young man and woman; and the mixture of love and pain you feel when someone, very close friend of yours is suddenly dead? Could you say that nothing like this never happens in culture X. Could you imagine that the members of X culture never will have same sort of feelings we call "love"? Or that they have feelings, thoughts and ideas, but are never conscious about them. If so, how do you know that this culture X is human culture?

What I mean by this question, of course, is not, that the tribesmen are not always kind or friendly, or that they never prefer wise acts to silly deeds. Certainly, there exist some unfriendly cultures, where love is out of everyday life. I like'd to stress only, that it is very odd indeed to imagine the human race who does not posess the *slightest idea* what love and wisdom are. Because the manifestations of love are so widely universal for humans, and because their form of life is so different from ours, we would be quite uncertain about how to interpret their social practices. Even if a tribesman is turning to us by using plain English expressions, we would not be able to decide whether he is intending the same thing as we normally intend by using these expressions or not. George Pitcher has a nice comment on Wittgensteins' "If the lion could speak, we would not understand him". He explains:
"Suppose a lion says: "It is now three o'clock" but without at a clock his wrist-watch-and we may imagine that it would be merely a stroke of luck if he should say this when it actually is three o'clock. Or suppose he says: "Goodness, it is three o'clock; I must hurry to make that appointment", but that he continues to lie there, yawing, making no effort to move, as lions are wont to do. In these circumstances – assuming that the lions general behaviour is in every respect exactly like that of an ordinary lion, save for his amazing ability to utter English

sentences – we could not say that he has asserted or stated that it is three o'clock, even though he uttered suitable words. We could not tell what, if anything, he has asserted, for the modes of behaviour into which his use of words is woven are too radically different from our own. We could not understand him, since he does not share the relevant forms of life with us" (Pitcher 1965: 243).

In which sense, then, are the members of the culture X more humans than just human like lions or marionettes? If they do not posses the slightest idea that love is, could we not say that their life is too different from ours? (Raukas 1996: 39).

5. An Augustinian model

Why should we not admit that culture X has indeed the concepts of love and wisdom? It is more realistic to admit that form of live manifest these things and at least sometimes they express love in their everyday practices. This is precisely what Wierzbicka's investigation *indirectly denies*. Of course, she is probably admitting that the absent of the certain concepts in vocabulary does not make Papuas non-humans. But she is denying (at least indirectly) their conceptual consciousness about love.

Why are some linguists so reluctant to embrace these conclusions? They fear, I believe, that if the concepts and ideas are not equated with easily identifiable linguistical expressions, they can discover by empirical methods, then they will loose any possibility to see how these concepts and ideas work in human mind. As a philosophical background knowledge about language-world connection, such linguists are having an old fashioned Augustinian idea. They tend to think, as Wittgenstein puts it in his *Philosophical Investigations*, that "the individual expression in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands." (Wittgenstein 1953: 1.)

Let us consider for the moment that there are some other concepts the human culture X does not have in their vocabulary. What about the ideas of "nonsense" or "criticism"? The linguist who follows her augustinian based empirical methods is probably telling us that the culture X does not have the slightest idea that "nonsense" and "criticism" are. Just because the culture X is lacking certain easily identifiable words in their vocabulary. Therefore, all our argumentative attempts which are based on the understanding of nonsense, should be explicated *via* the set of universal human concepts, similar to Wierzbicka's Biblical parable explications.

But is this really way out of difficulty? If the life of those members of culture X is like our life in many ways, then we are admitting not only that they are human beings, but also that in their natural behaviour they express their desires, feelings and thoughts just as we do. Wierzbicka ignores the diverse ways in which the language of the tribe does enter the lives of people.

6. An alternative approach to the problem

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein describes two men working with building stones. One of them shouts orders, the other reacts to the orders. Wittgenstein says this might be not only the language but the entire language of the tribe.

To understand what Wittgenstein means by "entire language" I turn to fine example, given by Malcolm in his "Language Game" (Malcolm 1995: 179). I hope that this example explicates my claim that "love", "nonsense" and "criticism" can be seen in the language of culture X, just because they are humans and their natural behaviour is similar to ours. Not because linguistical investigations have proved that there are (or are not) linguistical expressions in the vocabulary of their tribe.

"Let us suppose that a worker is building a wall. Only slabs are used in walls: beams are used only in roofs. We may even suppose that beams physically *cannot* be used in walls because of their shape. Now this builder, at work on a wall, calls out to his helper "Beam". The helper looks at him in astonishment – then bursts into laughter. The startled builder looks at the helper, then at the wall, then back at helper with grin of embarrassment. He slaps himself on the head, and then calls out "Slab". The chuckling helper brings him a slab. Cannot we say that the builder's original call, "Beam", was, in that situation, *nonsense*, and that first the helper and then the builder perceived that it was nonsense?" (Malcolm1995: 179).

Likewise with love. It is true, that the tribesmen do not have in their vocabulary explicit words for love. However, only blind and dumb cannot see and hear the natural way love is manifested in their everyday life.

7. Concluding remarks

In conclusion I will sum up main points of my criticism. I discussed two different approaches to the inter-religious (inter-cultural) discourse. First, I tackled Prof. Wierzbicka's highly optimistic project to translate Biblical parables into the trans-cultural language which contains only universal concepts. Most of what I said in my paper about this project was critical and challenges Wierzbicka's basic idea. I

claim that Wierzbicka's inter-religious discourse lacks (beside its theological and philosophical point) its argumentative force. Firstly, because her model interprets the empirical facts of linguistic by too simplified philosophical (Augustinian) theory of language and how the words could have their meanings in language.
Secondly, the phrasal equivalents to "God", "love" and "wisdom" in the set of universal human concepts are greatly equivocal. An alternative (I believe – more natural) approach takes its start from the wittgensteinian idea according to which speaking a language is participating in a very complicated rule covered social activity. I will argue that referential practice do not necessarily presuppose the use of universal concepts, but necessarily assumes certain common practices. If we have good reasons to presuppose that different cultures are not too far from ours – in the sense that in their natural behaviour they express their desires, feelings and thoughts just as we do – arguing from perfections, like love, do not necessarily imply equivocation, which would undermine our normal argumentative models.

I had originally intended that I would be able to say more about wittgensteinian-type arguments from perfections. However in the process of working out the paper I changed my mind and merely called to your attention the way how good arguments could not be stated.

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