

Introduction

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I

Religion, Reason and Reality

'Religion' is standardly defined either as 'a particular system of faith and worship' or as 'recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship' (OED 1971: II 2481). The focus, that is, may be on religion either as a practice or as a framework of ideas and beliefs, but the two elements are interdependent; faith and worship are unintelligible without some idea of that to which they are directed, and religion's characteristic conceptions are such that certain practices and responses are seen as appropriate—even mandatory. Indeed, it has often been argued that 'religion' derives from *religare* ('to bind'), witnessing through its very etymology to the characteristic religious sense of binding obligation, a duty of 'obedience, reverence and worship', as well as of social bonding. The contemporary notion of religion as a matter of free human choice is of comparatively recent development, strongly influenced by secular pressures; more characteristic of classic religious consciousness is the implicit demand mediated through both Old and New Testaments: 'I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts', 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' (Haggai ii 23; John xv 16).

The form of religion that has most significantly shaped Western culture is that of Christian theism. The reference in the dictionary definition to 'some higher unseen power' is a partial reflection of the characteristic religious denial that all our experience can be wholly understood in terms derived from the physical, temporally structured, universe, and the corresponding affirmation that there is that which transcends the literal application of such categories—to be spoken of only, if at all, by means of images, symbols, narratives, parables, metaphors, models and analogies; to use traditional language, a religion takes the dimension of mystery seriously. A theism is that type of religion which claims that all its images, models, analogies and so on of this transcendent mystery are ultimately reconcilable *both* with each other (God is one) *and* with every feature of human (and non-human) existence (God is Creator). It is for this reason that theisms which, like

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Christianity, include among its dominant images those like that of a loving father find the 'problem of evil' so intractable. A virtually universal characteristic of theism is the practice of worship, directed to this transcendence understood as a unity—referred to in English by the word 'God'. Christian theism is distinguished from other forms by its dominant images and narratives, which are focused in the biblical records.

From Classical times, of course, it has recurrently been objected that any such 'higher unseen power' lacks reality, and one and a half centuries ago Ludwig Feuerbach more specifically argued that the idea of God is a projection of human beings' own ideals for themselves—that far from man being made in God's image, God is made in man's (Feuerbach 1957). The standard *riposte* is that human experience points beyond itself, and that inability to recognize this represents a form of imaginative, intellectual and perhaps moral blindness; God has 'left not himself without witness', though many fall into the category of 'the blind people that have eyes' (Acts xiv 17, Isaiah xliii 8).

The religious scepticism of the Enlightenment which Feuerbach inherited was part of a wider sceptical movement of thought whose problems are notorious. It may be possible to limit evidentially significant experience to a clearly delimited set of 'hard data' commensurate with the categories of contemporary physical science, but this not only removes God (and any objective morality) from view but also other people; the sceptical puzzle of how we can properly ascribe mental functioning and inwardness to others simply on the basis of our own experience has unnervingly close structural similarities with religious scepticism (see Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* 1967). Further, the Enlightenment attempt to displace God while retaining meaning and value in human life now seems distinctly problematic; developments over the last quarter-century have only served to reinforce the interest of the proposal by David Jenkins (now Bishop of Durham) that we should reverse the Feuerbachian analysis: 'The reduction of theology to anthropology was a prelude for reducing anthropology to absurdity. If we have grounds for re-understanding anthropology as theology, we may yet have hope that we can be rescued from the Absurd' (Jenkins 1967: 79). How an individual responds to these claims and counter-claims tends, not unreasonably, to be significantly affected by how far one finds oneself impelled to take seriously intellectual demands and/or aspects of one's own experience that cannot be seriously responded to or expressed in non-religious terms without what seems to be distortion.

To 'find oneself impelled' is a very different matter from making a criterionless choice; coming to terms with one's own experience in this way is more like 'the kind of unmethodical, accumulative procedure by which a mass of sensitive responses are precipitated into a philosophical

belief, . . . a notion embodied in Pascal's *esprit de finesse* or Newman's illative sense' (Quinton 1985: 20–1; for a detailed exploration and analysis of such *finesse* see Warner 1989a). Anthony Quinton's juxtaposition of philosophical belief and Cardinal Newman suggests that what we have here may fall under the categories both of 'reason' and of 'faith', and so indeed it proves. Renford Bambrough's opening paper in this volume is concerned to show that there is no sharp opposition between reason and faith for faith is itself a mode of reason. There are of course traditions which seek to separate them sharply, and the term 'fideism' was coined in the nineteenth century for a form (later, any form) of irrationalism that sets (and upholds) religious faith *against* reason. But such positions are very difficult to render coherent, gaining what measure of currency they have through neglect of the analogies between religious and other forms of belief and by positing an implausibly constricted notion of rationality.

Here, as elsewhere, tidy-looking dichotomies can lead to severe oversimplifications of the complexities of our knowledge, beliefs and understanding. To break their hold on us it is helpful to compare a wide range of particular cases, and this Bambrough sets out to do. To take just one of his examples, faith in one's doctor can be well-grounded and reasonable or the reverse; it would be very odd to retain that faith when shown it was unreasonable by setting faith against reason—the contrast between reason and faith that is plausible here is in fact between two forms of rationality, between one's reasonable confidence in the doctor's judgment and the reasons available to oneself, apart from that judgment, for following the course of action the doctor recommends. As Bambrough points out, this is a 'typical case of trust or confidence being allowed to outweigh what you come to regard as superficial and dangerous grounds', but such a contrast presupposes the falsity in this instance of any analogue of fideism, and helps to broaden our conception of what counts as 'rational' and of how reason may constrain us. Assembly of example after example supports the case for 'counting faith and hope and trust and confidence as rational faculties'.

Further, as Roger Trigg insists in his response to Bambrough's paper, my continuing faith in my doctor as a source of future guidance is not well placed if he or she has died suddenly this morning; not only must the object of my faith be reliable and worthy of trust, but 'whatever I have faith in must exist for my faith to be justified. . . . Faith can persist as long as it is believed that its object is real, but it logically cannot survive an acceptance of its unreality'. In generalizing the case in this way Trigg is criticizing the application to the concept of belief of the influential doctrine of anti-realism which, at least in the forms here considered, has considerable internal difficulties.

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In general terms, realism is the doctrine that that which we encounter exists quite independently of us—although not necessarily in the form that we conceive of it—and that reality (whether physical, temporal, mathematical, mental, moral, religious or whatever) is therefore independent of our conceptions of it. In the words of its most sophisticated critic, Michael Dummett: ‘Realism is a definite doctrine. Its denial, by contrast may take any one of numerous possible forms, each of which is a variety of anti-realism concerning the given subject matter: the colourless term “anti-realism” is apt as a signal that it denotes not a specific philosophical doctrine but the rejection of a doctrine’ (Dummett 1991: 4). Dummett is concerned to undercut the framework of the traditional debates by recasting them in terms of meaning theory; he makes no claim to have resolved any of them, merely to have provided a ‘prolegomenon’, but warns that ‘there is little likelihood of a uniform solution to all of them’ (15). He certainly has no tendency to see the difficulties he has identified in the logical and meaning-theoretical presuppositions of classical realism as undermining traditional belief in God (Dummett 1991: 348–351; see also Dummett 1978: xxxix).

In less cautious hands, however, matters are very different. For Richard Rorty, for example, anti-realism should replace realism globally through a fairly straightforward inversion; we should reject the notion that human experience points beyond itself, drop ‘the very idea that the world or self has an intrinsic nature’ independent of our concepts and languages and, with it, ‘the idea of languages as representations’—mediating an independent reality to us; such notions represent ‘a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation’ whose nature is given by that which is transcendent of us, and should be abandoned (Rorty 1989: 21). With these notions, as Trigg points out, go the traditional ones of truth and rationality as well—which places the status of Rorty’s claims and apparent arguments, as he is well aware, in a somewhat paradoxical light. One is reminded of Dummett’s toying with the Berkeleyan argument ‘that anti-realism is ultimately incoherent but that realism is tenable only on a theistic basis’, a thesis he reluctantly set aside on the ground that he (and by implication we) do not ‘know nearly enough about the question of realism’ (Dummett 1978: xxxix). For Rorty the paradoxes, or apparent paradoxes, are a function of the ways our languages and assumptions have been distorted by our picture of ‘the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not’ which it is the business of reason and method to correct and improve; for ‘it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions’ (Rorty 1980: 12).

This last claim can be illustrated in his own case by the way he is apparently held captive by another picture, that of rational argument requiring 'common commensurating ground' (1980: 364). In theory he is critical of the notion that there is 'no middle ground between matters of taste and matters capable of being settled by a previously storable algorithm' (1980: 336–8), but in urging his case he trades on just such a tidy-looking dichotomy: 'There is no way, as far as I can see, in which to *argue* the issue. . . . There is no "normal" philosophical discourse which provides common commensurating ground. . . . If there is no such common ground, all we can do is to show how the other side looks from our own point of view', and on this basis the only criteria of acceptability are 'agreement' and 'convenience' (1980: 364–5; 1982: xl–xliv). Recognition that 'algorithmic' reason is inadequate to the task of correcting and improving our representations of the world plays a significant role in his rejection of the picture of the 'great mirror', whose development he attributes to the Enlightenment but whose roots are far older; once again, an inadequate conception of reason has had irrationalist consequences. (For fuller discussion see Warner 1989a, esp. 28–30 & 359–364; also 1989b.)

Despite the problems of his position, and his explicitly atheistic stance, Don Cupitt invokes Rorty in support of his own brand of religiously tinged global anti-realism, which is the main target of Roger Trigg's paper. Cupitt proposes a radical revision of the traditional conception of God, and with it of religious belief: for Rorty, as we have seen, we need to abandon 'the very idea that the world or self has an intrinsic nature', they are language-dependent; analogously, Cupitt claims that 'language creates reality', and therefore 'like us, God is made only of words. . . . We can no longer distinguish clearly between the sense in which God creates, the sense in which language does, and the sense in which we do' (Cupitt 1990: ix–x). There is a clear break here with the traditional religious belief that we are created and sustained by God rather than the reverse, and that consequently God's choice is prior to that of his creatures and human creativity dependent on the Creator. This form of anti-realism also subverts the presuppositions both of Feuerbach's analysis and of the Bishop of Durham's counter-proposal; neither the reduction of theology to anthropology nor the re-understanding of anthropology as theology have the consequences anticipated if world and self, God and we, are on the same ontological level; indeed, given the paradoxes inherent in the positions of both Rorty and Cupitt, the prospect held out by David Jenkins of 'rescue from the Absurd' would appear to be a mirage.

Roger Trigg is concerned to show that these paradoxes undermine the possibility of both reason and faith, and point to an underlying incoherence. Beliefs, like emotions and other elements of our mental

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lives, have targets; they are directed towards items which we may misunderstand or which, indeed, may not exist—but when there is such misapprehension recognition of the error standardly modifies the belief or emotion; where it does not do so we have irrationality and neurosis. Except in the special case where a belief is self-directed, there is a clear distinction between the person believing and the item believed, between subject and object. As Bambrough points out in his criticism of William James' 'Will to Believe', while in certain cases the psychological fact that someone believes something will happen may causally influence the course of events in such a way as to render that belief true, this goes no way towards showing that 'faith in a fact' can help create a fact in any more radical sense; my belief in my doctor cannot in any other sense justify that confidence. Trigg argues that global anti-realism of the Rorty/Cupitt brand is irreconcilable with the distinction between subject and object, and hence the recognition that reality is independent of our conceptions of it, that appears to form an essential presupposition of our mental lives when we are not consciously fantasizing. In proposing that we credit their claim that the presuppositions of belief be rejected Rorty and Cupitt undermine their own rhetoric (for on their own terms it can hardly purport to be rational argument): 'There is a distinction between the person with faith and the object of faith. My faith in God must involve trust in someone beyond myself.' And more generally, far from it being the case that language creates reality, 'Language is the tool of our thinking and not its prison'.

II

Logic and Language

A number of responses are no doubt possible to this challenge. One would be to begin to draw distinctions between the ways in which reality is and in which it is not independent of our conceptions of it. Another would be to drop blanket arguments for what I have characterized as 'global anti-realism', and in sober Dummettian style accept that 'there is little likelihood of a uniform solution'—realist or anti-realist—to the full range of metaphysical problems with respect to which these categories have been invoked. But in neither case is there any guarantee that some variant of the radical claims of which Rorty and Cupitt seek to persuade us will emerge from the analysis, either as a general conclusion or more specifically in the case of religion. In the present context a more promising line of approach is opened up by considering the notion of constraining limits which the picture of language as a prison evokes.

Part of the appeal, both of religious fideism and of Cupitt's reinterpretation of the concept of God in terms of the creative powers of language, derives from the traditional insistence that the mystery at the heart of religion transcends all our categories. This mystery is characteristically spoken of not as one item amongst others but as that in which all things, ourselves included, subsist—'in him we live, and move, and have our being' (Acts xvii 28)—and on which all depends; the religious attitude, therefore, tends to go together with a sense of radical contingency, of the need to take seriously the question 'why is there anything rather than nothing?', the rejection of any answer in terms of that about which a similar question could be pressed, and hence a conception of God as that which does not fit into any of our explanatory chains which explain how things are—as radically transcendent, the 'that than which no greater can be conceived' of St Anselm's *Proslogion*.

Those who believe that their experience has given them some immediate (if radically limited) knowledge of God are commonly termed 'mystics', and the types of claim and language made by those whose credit has stood the test of time testifies to the radically anomalous character of that about which they write. Similarly, the term 'mystical' ('*das Mystische*'), is used in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to point in the same direction: 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.' (1961: para. 6.44), and here too the linguistic problem is insisted on: 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. [*Dies zeigt sich.*] They are what is mystical.' (para. 6.522). We are told in the Preface that language has a limit, 'and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense' (1961: 3); nevertheless, notoriously, the penultimate paragraph of the *Tractatus* declares that its own propositions 'are nonsensical' and yet can be used—when 'transcended'—to 'see the world aright' (para. 6.54); it would appear that in its own terms the work exemplifies *das Mystische*.

Whether or not the image of language as a prison is generally helpful, the recurrent sense that it has limits which constrain us but which the religious impulse seeks to transcend is frequently present in the phenomenon of mysticism. Here we find particularly strong resistance to any attempt to reduce the religious mystery to ordinary human categories, like having faith in one's doctor, and yet the wish to use these categories—for they are the only ones we have—to speak of it. This tension is addressed in the discussion between Herbert McCabe and Cyril Barrett on the logic of mysticism. As Barrett points out, it is a mistake to think of mystics as 'a special breed of religious believers' for, at least on the Wittgensteinian analysis, 'anyone who has a religious experience is a mystic' and similarly, while any philosophy of religion

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'must be firmly based on a logic of religious language' it should also recognize 'that religious language is itself mystical, that is, an attempt to express the inexpressible'. This helps to explain why religious discourse generally is notoriously elusive, with the consequent appeal of fideism, irrationalism or simple agnosticism and its apparent openness to the charge of unintelligibility; nevertheless, the issues are particularly sharply focussed in the writings of those whom Barrett terms 'professional mystics'.

The very concept of 'mystical experience', in the narrower sense of the contemplation written of by the Church's 'mystical doctors', appears to bear on the issues both of realism and of the elusiveness of religious language. St John of the Cross, for example, writes of the 'secrecy' and 'indescribability' of mystical contemplation in such a way as to suggest its transcendence of at least the main part of our conceptual apparatus: 'For, as that inward wisdom is so simple, so general and so spiritual that it has not entered into the understanding enwrapped or cloaked in any form or image subject to sense, it follows that sense or imagination (as it has not entered through them nor has taken their form or colour) cannot account for it or imagine it, so as to say anything concerning it'; in some cases the soul may be 'clearly aware that it is experiencing and partaking of that rare and delectable wisdom', but not in all; further, apparent expressions of that experience are for St John no guarantee of its reality. (1978: 'Dark Night of the Soul', 429–30). The discerning spiritual director needs to rely on a complex and overlapping range of indicators: some will relate to the possible contemplative's spiritual history and current disposition, such as general aridity and inability to meditate not brought about by obvious causes; others to apparent effects of the experience, such as detachment, self-denial, humility and, more generally, great tranquillity and virtue; a third set are perhaps best understood as general standing conditions, well summarized by Benjamin Gibbs (1976: 538) 'It is absurd to ascribe mystical contemplation to someone who has not willingly embraced a life of suffering for Christ's sake'.

To say that someone fulfils all these criteria is not to say that he or she is a true contemplative, but there does nevertheless appear to be a conceptual connection between the ascription of the contemplative state and recognition of the fulfilment of these conditions, such that it is necessarily true that the meeting of these criteria affords evidence that an individual is 'experiencing and partaking of that rare and delectable wisdom'. There is a clear analogy here with the notion of a 'criterion' employed by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in its discussion of our ascription of certain mental states and processes, when 'An "inner process" stands in need of outward criteria' (1953: I para. 580; see Kenny 1967: II 258–61); given the close structural similarity noted

above between scepticism about other minds and scepticism about God, it is perhaps hardly surprising to find St John's pattern of thought matching so closely one which Wittgenstein was later to identify as that which was required to meet the sceptical challenge (1953: I paras 354–5).

There remain, however, problems about the God-ward reference integral to St John's analysis, concerning such claims as that in the case of contemplation 'the Holy Spirit infuses it and orders it in the soul . . . without either its knowledge or its understanding' (1978: 'Dark Night of the Soul', 428). The ascription of contemplation could be shown to be false—in technical language it is 'defeasible'—for the evidence affords only a presumption, and even if the presumption is not rebutted it may nevertheless be false, for in the last analysis it is God alone who 'knows the secrets of the heart' (Psalm xlv 21). For St John, in infusing the gift of contemplation God is 'imprinting' his footprints upon the soul, and "'Thy footsteps shall not be known'" (431–2; quoting Psalm lxxvii 19). The reality of a person's state, it would appear, may in this instance be different from what either that person or anyone else believes to be the case on the best evidence available, a claim which is easier to fit into a realist than an anti-realist frame of reference, but in either case it raises problems of intelligibility: as Wittgenstein puts it in his discussion of mental functioning and the law of excluded middle: "God sees—but we don't know." But what does that mean?' (1953: I para. 352) Here we encounter once again the elusive character of religious language.

Barrett's claim that religious language generally 'is itself mystical' follows from the general account of mysticism provided by Herbert McCabe in the paper to which he is responding. McCabe focuses on the account of theology provided in the work of St Thomas Aquinas, one of the classic benchmarks of orthodoxy for the Catholic Church, arguing for a convergence between St Thomas' conception of the divine and that of the mystical to be found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

For St Thomas the key notion for exploring talk about God is that which he refers to as '*esse*', 'to exist' (the infinitive of the verb 'to be'). We grasp the notion of existence not as we do ordinary concepts, discovering through experience which items do and which do not fall under the concept, but through learning to say what is the case; 'we do not have a concept of existence as we have a concept of greenness or prevarication or polar bears'. Standardly, whatever exists does so as some kind of thing—as a polar bear for example—and falls under a specific range of concepts, which preclude it from falling under another set; if a polar bear then neither naturally green nor a dodo. Enquiry about the existence of an item or class of items (for example, dodos) operates by asking whether there is anything which falls under a certain

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concept and hence not under others; 'given the natural world we understand the natures of things by contrast with what they are not'.¹ However when we are considering the existence of the world itself, not when we are considering why it should exist in this way or that but its existence as such, this analysis is impossible. If we press the question 'why is there anything rather than nothing?' it is at once apparent that no answer could be satisfactory couched in terms which enable the same question to be asked of that which the answer posits, in terms which pick out one more item as instantiating a given concept—for why should that item itself exist? Whatever is posited, it clearly cannot be understood as having existence in the ordinary way; in McCabe's formulation: 'the Uncreated exists without *having* existence.'

It is the existence of the world as opposed to the possibility that there might not have been any world at all, the 'gratuitousness of things, that St Thomas calls their *esse*. . . . In thinking of the *esse* of things we are trying to think of them not just in relation to their natural causes but in their relation to a creator'; the grammatical difficulty of the expression (the 'to-be-ness' of things) echoes the difficulty of the thought. Wittgenstein it will be remembered, wrote 'It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.' (1961: para. 6.44), and McCabe suggests that 'he is engaged with the same question as St Thomas is when he speaks of *esse*. As St Thomas distinguishes between the creative act of God (which we do not understand) and natural causality (which we do), between creation and transformation, Wittgenstein distinguishes the mystical from "what can be said".' But at this point, of course, the two diverge. For St Thomas, it is 'the *esse* of things that leads us to speak of God—which, for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, cannot be done', for the relations between concept and object, and between predication and quantification, adumbrated above govern 'what can be said', and beyond that we are left with that which makes itself manifest in our use of language but cannot be described in it—a domain which, as Peter Geach points out in his paper, extends to all language, not just religious discourse. For Wittgenstein, we approach the mystical simply by recognizing the limits of what can be said.

But, McCabe points out, St Thomas does not give up so easily. If both he and Wittgenstein are addressing the same question, then the mystical is not a particular specialized area of theological interest but

¹ The legitimacy of McCabe's appeal to the notion that things have 'natures' is supported by both Durrant and Geach, who are agreed that we cannot 'take it for granted that this medieval stuff has long since been shown worthless by the labours of John Locke'. Geach's fullest defence of this aspect of the Thomist account may be found in Anscombe and Geach 1961: 'Aquinas', sect. 2.

central to the whole biblical tradition which he seeks to understand. St Thomas 'wholeheartedly agrees that we cannot say what God is [in the sense of specifying the Divine nature], and he sets himself the task of understanding how we could speak of what, being the source of *esse* itself, is outside the scope of the world of existents'. This he sees as possible for two reasons: we can understand what God is not (and this may form the basis for positive statements as well as negative), and we can use words to point beyond what we understand them to mean. The second point is illuminated by the common phenomenon of the analogous use of words, when we use a word in different contexts with systematically different senses without simply making puns; much theological language works in this way: both a dog and his master may be faithful, but in different senses appropriate to the nature of each; if God is faithful it must be in a manner appropriate to the divine nature, but since we cannot say what God is (in the sense of specifying his nature) in affirming God's faithfulness we must also admit that we do not know what faithfulness would be in God, we cannot specify the precise sense of the term in this context. Not all religious language works like this, much of scripture uses metaphorical imagery which may be as properly denied as affirmed (God is both a strong rock and not a rock); nevertheless, such non-literal language needs to be underpinned by the analogical if it is to retain referential status, to be more than just 'the art form of a particular culture' (celebrating, perhaps, a 'God made only of words'), but rather to represent 'part of our access to a mystery beyond our understanding which we do not create'. On McCabe's account, in this underpinning we are 'taking language from the familiar context in which we do understand it and using it to point beyond what we understand into the mystery that surrounds and sustains the world we do partially understand'.

Cyril Barrett, accepting the main lines of this account, applies it more specifically to the language of those normally termed 'mystics'. Both Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa offend against the normal logical and linguistic rules in 'trying to express the inexpressible' while maintaining 'epistemic discretion', and Barrett points to the close analogies between the 'learned ignorance' of Nicholas and Wittgenstein's account of the inexpressibility of absolute values in his lecture on ethics. Barrett notes, but does not address, the possibility that this insistence on God as transcendent may be in some tension with those aspects of the biblical tradition that speak of miracles and other forms of divine intervention, and seeks to reinterpret the Scholastic account of theological analogy in terms of modern theory. Instead of the traditional claim that in analogous predication 'words are used with partly the same meaning and partly a different one', with its radically problematic presupposition that the meanings of words can be divided into

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parts, Barrett proposes that when we use a word analogically the *meaning* remains the same but the *sense* is different because the *use* to which it is put varies; we may apply the word 'good' in different senses to all sorts of items—food, equipment, works of art, people, God—but the constant meaning which traverses all its uses is that it is an expression of approval. Not knowing God's nature we do not know the sense of the word 'good' in applying it to him: 'we do not know in what the goodness of God consists. All we know is that he is something to be approved of and is, in some way, the source of every kind of goodness'. In using such terms analogically of God we are 'pushing out beyond the boundaries of language into the unknown. But we are doing so by means of language and of what is known. And we are doing so in order to understand the known better.' Further, 'to press from the known into the unknown via the problematical . . . is a natural tendency in all human beings that are intellectually aware'.

This account is certainly suggestive, representing a significant advance on the older tradition, but nevertheless incorporates more than one problematical element. The notion of 'use', for example, appears to require further analysis if it is to enable us so to differentiate meaning from sense as to account for analogical variation in the senses of words. There is indeed one powerful contemporary tradition, in the formation of which the *Tractatus* played a significant role, which explains meaning in terms of truth conditions—understood as being specifiable without essential reference to the users of words—and thereby makes a sharp distinction between meaning and use (see, for example, Davidson 1967 and 1978); but it has its own internal difficulties and further problems when applied to theology. In any case it is not the approach preferred by Barrett, for whom meaning can be explained by reference to such items as 'expression of approval', which is very difficult to analyse without reference to what users of language do; linguistic expression of approval appears itself to fall into the category of linguistic use, and if this is right the proposed distinction between meaning and sense can only be secured by means of a more fine-grained distinction, or set of distinctions, between different types of use.

Further, to the extent that calling God 'good' signifies approval related to his being 'the source of every kind of goodness', there may be an echo of the difficult doctrine of necessary likeness between a (primary, *per se*) cause and its effect (encapsulated in the Scholastic tag: '*omne agens agit simile sibi*'). But even without this encumbrance—which is not strictly necessary to Barrett's thesis—there is the problem that if God is the source of 'the world of existents' this appears to go beyond the claim that he is 'the source of every kind of goodness': 'I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things' (Isaiah xlv 7). If 'good' is glossed in terms of

that to which we give our approval, then the claim that God is ‘something to be approved of’ is less securely related to the assertion that he is ‘the source of the world of existents’ than to the apparently narrower one that he is ‘the source of every kind of goodness’; yet on the Thomist account given by McCabe and endorsed by Barrett the former assertion is primary. Nevertheless, Barrett’s insistence that we know that God is something to be approved of is far from gratuitous for, as we have seen, it is fundamental to religion that its central focus should be ‘entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship’—and it is difficult to see how one could coherently deny that that which was entitled to one’s obedience, reverence and worship was also entitled to one’s approval.

The incipient tension this seems to suggest between the requirements of philosophy and of religion in what we may say of God is brought into focus in the debate between Michael Durrant and Peter Geach. Both agree that ‘holding God to be transcendent does not mean having to regard the grammar of the word “God” as isolated or unique or inscrutable’, and Durrant’s first move is to bring out the incoherence of the suggestion that the word should be treated as a logically proper name, having reference only but no sense, no describable mode of presentation of that which is referred to: ‘I may only claim that I am pointing towards something in my use of an expression if I can at least offer *some* description of what it is I am pointing towards’. Further, if the claim that God’s nature is inexpressible is interpreted to imply that the word ‘God’ has no sense then we cannot even refer to God in such a way as to be able to ‘claim of *Him* that *He* did certain marvellous acts’. In fact, Durrant and Geach agree, ‘God’ is grammatically a common noun with a sense (Durrant explicating the notion of ‘sense’ as a dimension of meaning given in terms of use). But when Durrant attempts to specify the meaning of the word in terms of its use in practice, he encounters the concern noted by Barrett lest those uses which involve God’s transcendence be incompatible with those which follow biblical tradition in maintaining God’s action in the world; is the word ‘God’ as used by philosopher-theologians such as St Anselm—with his famous formula for God as ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’—compatible with the faith associated with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the biblical Patriarchs?

Durrant considers the thought experiment proposed by Thomas Morris that we should somehow discover ‘a less than Anselmian being, an individual who was very powerful but not strictly omnipotent, very knowledgeable but not literally omniscient and very dependable but not altogether immutable, etc., had created our universe and was responsible for the existence of intelligent life on earth’, and that this individual ‘had been the one to call Abraham out of Ur, to speak to Moses, and to send the prophets’ etc. Should Jews and Christians

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rightly refuse to call him 'God'? If not, this would appear to show that the concept of God explored by the philosophers is not the Judaeo-Christian one. Morris argues that such a being could not be God on the ground that the object of worship in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is understood as the ultimate reality responsible for the existence and activity of everything else, and the being specified could not be this. Durrant objects that the case is, in effect, rigged; that both philosophical and biblical traditions certainly understand God as maximally great or perfect, but that there are very different types of great-making properties. God is conceived in the philosophical tradition represented by St Anselm as immutable, impassible, atemporal and metaphysically simple, but it could be argued that the conception of God as 'a ceaselessly changing, perfectly responsive temporal agent continually interacting with created, temporal beings' is closer to the biblical conception, and that this *could* be the ultimate reality. If the word 'God' is to be shown to have a coherent meaning, the apparent incompatibility between the properties standardly attributed to the God of Anselm and those witnessed to in the Bible—that God is personal, merciful, loving, forgiving, etc.—needs to be overcome. We might argue, for example, that while human persons are certainly not atemporal the concept of the personal in its application to God is that of conscious purposive agency—and it is far less clear that this could not be atemporal. Through such analysis, thinks Durrant, it may be possible to show that the supposed divide between the God of the Philosophers and the God of the Scriptures is a mirage—it has not yet been shown that the traditions are incompatible—but such an endeavour can only be properly conducted on a detailed, case-by-case basis.

Peter Geach is sceptical about the presuppositions of any such endeavour, since the terms in which the divide has been set up are to him suspect. The proposed thought experiment fails because we cannot give a coherent account of how we could ever make the discoveries proposed. Again, like McCabe and Barrett he draws attention to the orthodox insistence that we cannot know God's nature, pointing out that for St Thomas we can only say what God is not; to characterize God as immutable, impassible and atemporal is in each case to say something negative, to say God is metaphysically simple is to deny of him 'that sort of inner distinction or complexity which is to be found in creatures', and 'greatness', understood as 'perfection', is not itself a perfection. Further, St Anselm developed his account out of the biblical tradition, himself writing one of the classic discussions of why God became man, and the scriptures themselves witness to the claims of not only Christian but also pagan philosophers; true knowledge of God, even on Christian terms, is not confined to scriptural revelation. Philosophy as well as Scripture can help show that in some cases *λατρεία* (the

fullness of worship which may be paid to God alone as distinct from *δουλεία*, the reverence permissible to created beings) is misdirected to that which is incompatible with the meaning of the word 'God'; further, to the extent that the proposed idea of a 'ceaselessly changing, perfectly responsive temporal agent continually interacting with created, temporal beings' is incompatible with what philosophy shows could coherently be said of the source of 'the world of existents', any worshipper of such a being is worshipping a false god, a god made in man's image.

Durrant accepts much of this, attempting in further notes to suggest how the debate needs to be modified to take account of Geach's intervention; the discussion exemplifies, indeed, how live philosophical dialectic can clarify difficult issues. It also indicates, however, that such issues interconnect in complex ways, for if we may relate biblical and philosophical traditions to each other in the manner proposed we need to be able to give an account of how we are to understand biblical as well as philosophical talk about God. Both McCabe and Barrett draw a firm distinction between theological discourse, literal though analogical, and the religious language of much of the Bible which is metaphorical or otherwise figurative; but if the identification of the God of the Philosophers with the God of the Scriptures is achieved by reading scriptural figures in terms of the theological analogies which are taken to underpin them, the circularity involved may be felt to trivialize the matter unacceptably.

My own contribution on the proper interpretation of scriptural and liturgical language provides a prolegomenon to the full addressing of this issue. The overall strategy is to attempt to undermine the standard and dangerously tidy-looking dichotomy between theological and religious discourse, while leaving room for the necessary distinctions that provide its motivation, through analysing metaphor itself as a mode of analogical discourse, and through exploring the rules of use employed in the more religiously demanding areas of biblical discourse which enable us to discriminate between acceptable and unacceptable inferences.

Traditionally the Bible was read as scripture as well as literature; this involved interpreting it as to some extent a 'lawless' text, with the inbreaking of the divine Word characteristically being marked by the contravention of human literary and linguistic rules, hence the use of 'dark sayings' in the Gospels and the notion that scripture has multiple senses; St Augustine wrote of its 'salutary obscurity'. Enlightenment theories of language as governed by rules whereby each proposition properly relates the ideas designated in a determinate manner challenged this approach as unintelligible—lawless texts were meaningless—thereby strengthening the tendency to read the Bible

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‘suspiciously’ rather than ‘faithfully’. However I argue that a judicious integration of certain contemporary analyses of language—which relate meaning to use, metaphor to analogy, and inference to context—provides logical space for the phenomena pointed to by the notion of ‘lawlessness’. Since the widespread and normative use of scripture in Christian worship presupposes a ‘faithful’ attitude to the passages employed, these analyses also have a bearing on current controversies concerning attempts to renew the language of worship.

In his reply Peter Lamarque, while broadly sympathetic, raises certain objections to my account which he seeks to modify and extend by pointing to some of the analogies between reading the Bible ‘as literature’ and ‘as scripture’. In criticism, he is concerned lest the emphasis on metaphor take insufficient account of scripture’s cognitive function—its capacity to convey propositions assessable as true or false—and lest the emphasis on context presuppose access to matters which are unavailable to the reader save through strategies of unacceptable circularity; more generally, whether philosophy of language reaches its limits in considering sacred texts, and the attempt to analyse them in terms of the paradigms of secular language is in principle unable to illuminate the putative inbreaking of the divine Word.

In place of my paradigm of the creative metaphor he proposes that of the literary work, not to collapse scripture into literature, but to provide a parallel: ‘just as . . . the aesthetic dimension of a literary work cannot be reduced to any particular feature of the meaning of its component sentences . . . so the scriptural dimension of a sacred text is not itself reducible to naturalized features of its meaning’; literature ‘demands a distinctive mode of response’ defined by ‘the conventions of interpretation and evaluation constitutive of the practice associated with the [literary] institution’; similarly with the reading of a text as ‘authoritative Scripture’. This is not to reduce scriptural language to the art-form of a particular culture or tradition or institution; on the contrary, ‘theological realism, i.e. a commitment to the reality of God and the referential status of religious language (and metaphors), is quite compatible with taking an institutional view of the spiritual dimension of sacred texts’.

I find much of Lamarque’s extension valuable; there is indeed a complex interrelationship between the religious institution which designates texts as scriptural, those texts themselves, and the readers who accept this designation—and this interrelation helps determine what it is to read those texts ‘as scripture’. Indeed, the reciprocity of this relation needs to be taken very seriously; the believing community, in varying degrees, both determines the texts and is determined by them; it not only judges how to read the texts, but also sees itself as under judgment by them—for the scriptures have a crucial role in the regula-

tion and definition of the very faith that informs the canons for reading them. At this level, the potential circularity Lamarque is uneasy about in my account is embedded in the very rules of the institution to which he appeals.

This helps account for a fact whose implications are, I think, far-reaching for the 'institutional' account—that the institution itself is subject to change. Indeed, the still unresolved debate about norms of scriptural interpretation lay at the heart of that institutional division we call the Protestant Reformation; any account of these matters needs to take account not only of the Enlightenment, but also of the Reformation (and Counter-Reformation). Further, the contemporary problems besetting attempts to bring the requirements of worship into conformity with those of biblical criticism reflect fragmentation within the believing community itself. If one simply appeals to institutional norms, one must press the question 'Which institution?', and without something like the set of considerations I advance one may have difficulty in avoiding some form of relativist fideism.

Lamarque is certainly right to insist that any account of scripture which, like mine, gives prominence to the notion of metaphor must take proper account of scripture's cognitive function, but this does not appear to be impossible; live metaphors are not themselves statements, nor can they be reduced to them, but even if—in traditional realist fashion—truths are taken to be statements that correspond to the facts, it does not follow that metaphors cannot communicate such truths. Scripture's cognitive function, indeed, points to a disanalogy between scripture and literature that appears to lend my account some support. Hermeneutics, the theory and practice of interpretation, developed originally in relation to religious and legal texts because here it was particularly important that meaning be correctly interpreted; one's salvation, or at least life and liberty, could be at stake. Many of its established procedures were transferred to literature when this became, for other reasons, the subject of critical scrutiny; this may well have brought about some distortion, hence Lamarque's concern that 'those who come to literature with theories of meaning . . . get led into one form or another of reductionism'; but to use this perception to allow the colour to flow back, as it were, and reduce the importance of the concept of meaning in biblical hermeneutics to the level appropriate in literature would appear to be reading the Bible 'as literature' in a rather strong fashion. To read 'as scripture' we need to take account of the fine-grained 'atomistic' level of meaning relations as well as Lamarque's preferred institutional one.

At either level, of course, one is dealing with human structures, linguistic or institutional, where the divine dimension can only be discerned by the eye of faith. Hence the (Augustinian) insistence of my

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paper that the spiritual state of the reader is relevant to recognizing 'the Word incarnated in the word'; the believer tests the text of scripture against his or her own experience, but in the full knowledge that that testing may be as much a judgment on the believer as on the text. The thought that one could escape circularity here would appear to be a version of what orthodoxy regards as the heresy of Pelagianism; in Christian terms, grace is always needed to break the circle—this, one might say, is one of the institutional norms. No doubt the interpretive paradigms I propose are not specific to religious language but, to quote perhaps the most profound twentieth century student of these matters, 'though religious faith deals with mysteries which are *sui generis*, because God himself is absolutely unique, at the same time we expect religious mysteries to bear some analogy with natural realities, because they are revealed in the stuff of our human experience.' (Austin Farrer 1976: 'Inspiration: Poetical and Divine', 45).

III

The Moral Dimension

Whether morality is to be regarded as simply a 'natural reality', or whether it and religion represent varying forms of the mediation of the transcendental to human experience, is of course controversial. Wittgenstein, it will be remembered, linked the two as being essentially inexpressible—at least with respect to their 'absolute' character. There is a tendency, no doubt with notable exceptions, for those disinclined to take the religious dimension seriously to naturalize moral phenomena, and for the religious to seek to harmonize the two sets of demands. Much philosophical ink has been expended over the former endeavour, but in the present context it is of less interest than the latter.

Religion, as we saw at the start, is a practice with a sense of binding obligation at its heart, a duty of 'obedience, reverence and worship'. Now it is the business of morality to regulate practice, and its obligations also present themselves as binding and as absolute. Given that religion and morality do not appear to be identical, the question arises of the possibility of conflict between them. It is certainly true that individuals and groups have often believed it their religious duty to act in ways that those outside the circle of faith have found morally abhorrent. Similarly, individuals and groups have found themselves morally impelled to act in ways that to the religious are blasphemous. But it remains possible that in such cases some or all the parties are in error. The powers of human self-deception, not least in moral matters, are apparently inexhaustible; the proper authentication and interpretation

of religious experiences and sacred texts are notoriously delicate matters, some aspects of which have already been touched on; and it is even possible, as Geach insists, to worship a false god.

If both religious and moral demands are absolute, some such diagnosis is essential if absurdity is to be avoided. But can it be avoided? The proper test here is to consider what an individual can coherently believe, and this is the subject of the concluding discussion—‘Religion and Ethics’. There would indeed be radical conflict if we believed ourselves to have a clear picture of what God wills and found this in opposition to our moral beliefs. But the central question pressed by both Stewart Sutherland and Phillips Griffiths is: How could we possibly come to have such a clear view of the will of God, apparently arrived at without reference to our moral sensibilities?

Sutherland considers a range of relevant examples, starting with the classic one of Abraham’s projected sacrifice of Isaac—which Kierkegaard (or, more precisely, his *persona* Johannes de Silentio) saw as exemplifying the clash between the realms of the religious and the ethical. He suggests that the fact that we often do find ourselves in dilemmas where a decision is required in advance of certainty is ‘one mark of what it means to talk of the limits of finitude’, but that such dilemmas may be purely moral. To construe those cases which depend on ‘a clash between religious and moral premises’ in the way Kierkegaard proposes, however, is misconceived, for the alleged ‘religious’ premise is always related to a picture of God which itself needs to be justified—and one dimension of this justification needs to be moral. The meaning of the word ‘God’ is such that it is analytically true that if something is the will of God it is morally good—one remembers St Anselm’s ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’ and the dictionary’s claim that religion’s central focus is conceived of as being ‘entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship’. To claim this analytical connection, however, is not to claim that God *as conceived by any particular theology or individual* always wills the good; rather, it is ‘to assert a fundamental belief about the ultimate compatibility and indeed inter-dependence of moral and religious beliefs’. Dilemmas like that of Abraham should not be seen as disputes about the relative priority of the religious and ethical realms, but rather of the options facing the individual ‘in the light of the claim that the decision made should reflect the will of a God who (analytically) wills the good’.

The difficulty of establishing, in any given instance, the truth of the claim that God wills something immoral has affinities with Geach’s claim, with respect to Morris’ thought experiment about a limited god, that we cannot give a coherent account of how we could ever make the discoveries proposed. Phillips Griffiths takes the matter one stage further, pointing to the problems not so much of finding a counter-

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example to the analytical connection between God and goodness proposed by Sutherland, as of discerning what would count as discovering a counter-example. The New Testament claim that 'by faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac' (Hebrews xi 17; see also James ii 21–3) may (perhaps) be read as providing the Christian believer with warrant to regard Abrahamic faith as exemplary, but Kierkegaard's treatment of the Abraham story is so riddled with anachronism as to render the example useless for his purposes; the fact that the God Christians worship is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob does nothing to show that the god of Kierkegaard's fantasy is not a false one. Further, the appearance of a radical conflict between faith and morality in Kierkegaard's account depends on his defective Kantian view of the nature of ethics, whereby to act morally is to act from the conception of abstract rational law as such, as opposed to acting from an interest in anything; since the religious believer acts from an interest in God, this opens up an opposition between religion and morality which Kierkegaard exploits. Kant's account of ethics, however, is not only philosophically problematic but runs counter to a careful reading of the Gospels. Peter Geach writes of ways in which philosophy may mount a legitimate critique of false religion; Phillips Griffiths provides an example where scripture may be used to mount a powerful critique of false philosophy.

Again, the claim that it is analytically true that if something is the will of God it is morally good needs non-linguistic justification if it is to be more than trivial; in Kantian language, the analysis requires an intellectually significant prior synthesis. Sutherland proposes that the claim asserts 'a fundamental belief about the ultimate compatibility and indeed inter-dependence of moral and religious beliefs' which appears to amount, as Phillips Griffiths argues, to the belief that 'if we reflected long and hard and well enough . . . our religious and moral beliefs would then be compatible and interdependent'. But such a belief implies 'that such reflection leads us nearer to the truth; and that the truth is, that what is really the case regarding God's will is compatible with what really is morally good'. And this, of course, is incompatible with global anti-realism.

But not only may religion have a bearing on ethical and metaphysical theory, it may also play a legitimate role in moral judgment. The moral attitude may be inherent in, and hence help constitute, the religious one, but the latter may also illuminate the former; there is the possibility of two-way traffic in the process of reflection adumbrated by Phillips Griffiths. As Sutherland points out: 'what someone might regard as a moral absolute might be modified as a result of growth of religious insight or by a process of reflection on religious teaching.' Here, once again, the tidy Kantian dichotomy—dependent on a particular con-

ception of moral autonomy that so often lies behind debates in this area—is misleading. Kant holds that ‘Even the Holy One of the Gospels must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can recognize Him as such’ (1925: 30). To this it may be objected with Basil Mitchell (1980: 152–3):

It is absurd to suppose that the fisherman of Galilee—when he made the confession: ‘Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God’—had compared Jesus with his ideal of moral perfection (just as it was before any encounter took place) and had satisfied himself that he had, so to speak, achieved the required standard. He had, of course, judged for himself, and in judging he exercised moral insight, but he could not himself have preached the Sermon on the Mount.

Mitchell proposes for an analogy ‘the process by which, as Eliot maintains, a great artist creates the standards by which he is to be judged’, and indeed T. S. Eliot’s own *The Waste Land* provides a case in point; its impact derived in large part from the way it was perceived as at once standing in a positive relation to established ideals and yet enlarging and transforming them in a manner relevant to the readers’ experience. Both in religion and in art, the criteria here are elusive but not beyond reasoned consideration, given a suitably rich conception of reason, and allow for their own self-transcendence in ways that have their own forms of objectivity. But the analogy should not be pressed too far. For the realist strain that runs through religion, brought out in its moral dimension by the claim that what is really the case regarding God’s will is compatible with what really is morally good, points beyond the artistic level. As Herbert McCabe points out in the concluding words of his paper, despite their elusive status such literal yet analogical assertions as that God exists, that God is good, and that God is the creative cause and sustainer of our world witness to the religious conviction

that the riches of religious imagery are more than the art-form of a particular culture (though, of course, they are that) but are part of our access to a mystery beyond our understanding which we do not create, but which rather creates us and our understanding and our whole world.