USE OF THESES

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WHY DO RELIGIOUS TEXTS NEED TO BE INTERPRETED?

by

Graham Kerrison

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[Signature]

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INTRODUCTION

There are few realms of discourse which could
claim to rival the language of religion for the extent of
its diversity from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the
King James version, both the Old Testament and the New
Testament can be justifiably viewed as classical works in
English literature - though perhaps the individual books
vary considerably in this respect. Few would question the
sheer beauty of the language in the Latin Mass or The
Book of Common Prayer. Yet in recent times the Church has
yielded to the pressure of what might be called its
survival instincts, with the result that paperback Bibles
are appearing in journalistic prose, the Mass is now said
in the vernacular and the Book of Common Prayer is the
subject of much criticism. The honourable desire to
find more intelligible forms of expression seems certain
to relegate some of the most beautiful literature of
Christendom to the top shelves of our libraries to
collect dust for ever.

What began as the religion of a motley collection
of uneducated men became the intellectual pride of
mediaeval scholasticism. Like sugar-cane in a mill, it
seems that religion has been sapped of its sweetness by
centuries of intellectual labour and now the roughage is being returned to the masses to see if they have any use for it.

Caricatures are necessarily crude but through their distortion they often reveal otherwise neglected facts. Of course it is misleading to suggest that Christianity has been, in different periods, the exclusive possession of certain groups of intellectually similar people. But it is a fact that throughout the history of Christianity there has been an ever widening gulf between the God of the scholar's intellectual pursuit and the God to whom the peasant bends his knees.

Now, even this has changed. Not only has the theologian been attacked on his own ground but the peasant has learned to read and write. Where once, the pulpit could easily outwit the pews, now the preacher struggles to communicate with the people almost fearing lest they understand what he is saying. It is now a matter of convention never to assent to anything without a critical appraisal of it; so what is the man of faith to do? How can the preacher cope with his new congregations? Is some form of schizophrenia necessary to enable the man with a critical mind to participate genuinely in the
Christian religion?

This is the sort of context within which the philosopher of religion must deal with his subject. The religious cry out for a language which they can understand. The philosophical world almost defies the philosopher of religion to restore any life to the roughage of his inheritance with the modern tools of his trade. If it is the case that only fools rush in where angels fear to tread, perhaps I should have borrowed a title from the monk Guanilo: On behalf of the Fool.

Like all language, religious texts need to be interpreted because each distinct use to which language is put has characteristics of its own which dictate the general approach that needs to be adopted if the language is to fulfil its function properly. Perhaps this can be illustrated by appealing to the difference that one would expect in an historical account of an incident such as the murder of Thomas A'Beckett, and a dramatic account of the same incident as it may be found in, say, T.S.Eliot's Murder in a Cathedral. Historical language and dramatic language are two different media, and therefore one has different expectations of each.
The major sections of this thesis are devoted to an elucidation of some of the peculiarities that belong to the concept of God. It should be obvious that I cannot hope to deal with all types of religious utterances here. Since the concept of God is so central to all religious discourse, I have chosen it for detailed analysis in the hope that it will throw some light on a special group of utterances, namely, those which are about God, those which are addressed to God, and those which are claimed to have been made by God.

Those who hope that this thesis will attempt to remove some of the many difficulties involved in expressing the message and doctrines of Christianity in a more intelligible language, will be very disappointed. That is a task which, in some respects needs to be done - but I think its importance has been overestimated. Moreover, this task is what I would call 'translation', not 'interpretation'. Translation from one idiom to another can only be achieved after a certain interpretational approach has been adopted. The most we can hope for here, is to indicate some of the factors that must be considered in developing such an approach.
CHAPTER 1

GOD AND SUPERLATIVE CONCEPTS

I. The Concept of God

II. Measurement Predicates and Superlative Concepts

III. Non-Measurement Predicates and Superlative Concepts
The literature of Christianity contains innumerable instances of sentences that seem to be propositional in form, asserting something about God. In general, things about which assertions are made must be identifiable as exemplifying a particular concept. Here the word "concept" is used to represent a set of predicates which serve to govern a class. There seems no justification for excluding any set of predicates from being a concept on the grounds that it would be impossible for any object to fall under that concept. Such an observation can only be made after the set of predicates has been considered as a concept. According to this view, "square circles", "fatherless numbers" and "shapeless stones" are concepts which, for different reasons in each case, govern necessarily empty classes. What is important is that the members of the set of predicates which constitute a concept should be severally intelligible. Unless the thing about which an assertion is being made is thus identifiable, nothing is being asserted at all.

If the sentences which appear to be assertions about God are indeed such, it must be possible to formulate a concept of God. The mainstream of Christian
tradition has always regarded these sentences as propositional and, correspondingly, has considered it possible to formulate a concept of God. Among the many formulations we find "the creator of the universe", "the necessary existent", "the most worthy object of our worship" and so on. In order to be able to establish a propositional theology, that is, to be able to make assertions about God, one of these concepts must be such that it does not govern a class which is necessarily empty. Orthodox theology has set itself a more difficult task, namely, that of establishing that the concept of God governs a class which necessarily has one and only one member. Part of the thesis to be argued here is that this is an unnecessarily strong claim, as well as being a claim which is impossible to establish.

Let us examine a concept traditionally acknowledged by Christian theology: God is "a being greater than which cannot be conceived". This concept received its classical formulation as an integral part of St. Anselm's so-called ontological argument in the Proslogion.\(^{(1)}\) As has been pointed out, however, it is

\(^{(1)}\) Proslogion, Ch. 2, p. 7. (Page references to St. Anselm: Basic Writings, Open Court Publishing Company, 1962.)
a concept which was in use at least as early as Augustine(1)
and I assume it to be currently acceptable to theologians.

It is not intended here to participate in a
full-scale discussion of the ontological argument as such.
Our concern is solely with the concept of God used by
Anselm, and although it has some direct bearing on the
ontological argument, it is intended here to confine the
discussion to the task in hand. For the sake of brevity
it seems reasonable to express the concept "a being greater
than which cannot be conceived" as "the greatest conceivable
being".

II

Concepts involving predicates expressed in the
superlative degree have some peculiarities which deserve
detailed consideration. Consider the following concepts :

(A) "The tallest building(s) in Sydney"
(B) "The greatest prime number"
    "The greatest natural number"
(C) "The heaviest unicorn"
    "The biggest square-circle"

(A) "The tallest building(s) in Sydney" is an

(1) In a footnote to his article "Anselm's Ontological
Arguments" (Philosophical Review, Vol. LXIX, 1960),
Professor Malcolm gives the references to where
Augustine says that God is a being "quo esse aut
cogitari melius nihil possit".
ambiguous concept which governs a class which may or may not have members according to the sense that is given to the concept. The concept "building(s) in Sydney" governs a class which has a finite set of members and each member has a height which is measurable. Thus, of any two members, it may be asserted that either they are as tall as each other or that one is taller than the other.

(i) If "the tallest building(s) in Sydney" is taken to refer to any building which is such that no other building is taller than it, then the class governed by the concept will have at least one member, but may have numerous members. Hence the need for the plural number.

(ii) If, however, "the tallest building(s) in Sydney" is taken to refer to the building which is taller than every other building in Sydney, then "the tallest building(s) in Sydney" would govern a class which has at most, one member, but may have no members. In this sense the plural number is not needed.

To use Frege's terminology, the concept "the tallest building(s) in Sydney" has sense. If we take the sense as in (i), it also has reference. If we take the sense as in (ii), it may fail to have reference.

(1) See Frege: On Sense and Reference, esp. p. 58 (Geach and Black: Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege).
"The greatest prime number" poses a different problem. Prima facie, it appears to be an intelligible concept. We know what the conditions are for a number to be a prime, and we know what it is for one prime to be greater than another prime. The ambiguity that arose in (A) does not arise here because it does not make sense to say of two primes that they are equally large or that they have the same numerical value. If X and Y are numbers which share precisely the same mathematical properties, that is, neither has a property not shared by the other, then they are identical. Thus, whether we take "the greatest prime number" to refer to (i) the prime number which is such that every natural number greater than it is non-prime, or, (ii) the prime number which is greater than every other prime number, it governs a class which has at most one member.

Euclid's proof that there are an infinite number of primes clearly establishes that for any given prime, there is another prime greater than it. (1) This establishes the fact that "the greatest prime number" governs a class which is necessarily empty. Or, to use Frege's terminology again, the concept has sense, but no reference.

(1) See, for example, G. H. Hardy & E. M. Wright: An Introduction to the Theory of Numbers, O.U.P., 1956, p. 12.
"The greatest natural number" seems to be slightly different but a closer examination shows that these are not logical differences. We know what it is for a number to be a natural number, and for any two natural numbers we know what it is for one to be greater than the other. Thus it would seem that "the greatest natural number" refers to the natural number which is greater than every other natural number. Since the definition of a natural number involves the notion of succession and of an infinite series, the idea of one natural number being greater than every other natural is immediately recognizable as self-contradictory. But this does not constitute a logical difference between "the greatest prime number" and "the greatest natural number". They are both concepts which are intelligible, which have sense, and the only difference is in the ease with which they can be seen to have no reference.

(C) The concepts considered in (A) and (B) were such that they governed sets which were sub-sets of a wider set, which in (A) had a finite number of members, and in (B) had an infinite number of members. The concepts now to be considered are not of this kind. "The heaviest unicorn" and "the biggest square-circle", if they are sub-sets at all, are sub-sets of sets which have no members.
"Unicorn" governs a class which is contingently empty. "Square-circle" governs a class which is necessarily empty. It seems a little odd to speak of sub-sets of empty sets. But if it is possible to speak of such sub-sets, then every sub-set of any given empty set (or for that matter of every empty set) will be identical. That is, a predicate ceases to operate when it qualifies an empty set. By that, I mean that it is not possible to distinguish between the class governed by "the biggest square-circle" and the class governed by "the smallest square-circle", though they are, of course, different concepts.

The superlatives used in the above examples are, I take it, paradigmatic instances of the superlative use of predicates which are essentially expressions of some unit of measure. By this I mean that when something is said to be taller than, heavier than, larger than or more expensive than something else, it is intelligible to ask "By how much", and reasonable to expect the answer in terms of units of measure. There are some cases such as "louder than" (sound) or "brighter than" (light) which do not permit a ready-reckoned numerical answer but this is only a technical matter. There are meters for measuring the volume of sound and the intensity of light, and a person who works regularly with such instruments may
develop a capacity to give approximate measurements for sound or light just as the average man can estimate approximate measurements in length and weight.

These measurement-predicates, as we shall call them, have one important common characteristic. Of the positive, comparative and superlative degrees for each predicate, the comparative degree is somehow the basic operator from which the other two degrees derive their significance. If I say that my cousin Mary is a tall girl, this presupposes that I know what it means to say that A is taller than B. To be a tall X, means to be taller than most other X's. In other words, the significant use of the positive degree presupposes an understanding of the way the comparative degree operates. It is obvious that the superlative degree depends similarly on the comparative degree.

The primacy of the comparative degree manifests itself in a number of ways. In principle it is possible to operate with the comparative degree of any measurement predicate without any presuppositions about the scale and/or unit of measurement concerned. It is possible to say that A is heavier than B without any presuppositions about scales or units of weight. Similarly with
temperature and length. The scale of measurement for a particular property can only be derived after the criteria of comparison have been established.

If a predicate is such that the comparative may be used without any presuppositions about the positive (or superlative) degree, then it must also be possible to establish when this predicate is applicable to two or more things in the same degree. To say that X is taller than Y presupposes that one knows what it would be like for X and Y to be equally tall. It is one of the oddities of standard English grammar books that they do not include an equality degree in their list of degrees of comparison. The measurement predicates are in fact isolated by the recognition of certain properties which are open to tests of equality and which are expressible in terms of equality and comparison. The possibility of deriving an interval scale, or even an ordinal scale, for the measurement of a particular property is dependent on the recognition of these characteristics. (1)

(1) I use the terms "interval scale" and "ordinal scale" in the standard sense such as is given by S. S. Stevens in On the Theory of Scales and Measurements, (Published in Philosophy of Science, ed. A. Danto & S. Morgenbesser, Meridian Books).
Consider now the following propositions in which the comparative degree of some non-measurement predicates is used. By "non-measurement predictae" I mean predicates which are of properties which are not able to be measured on an ordinal scale, despite the fact that, as in these examples, they admit at least some uses of the comparative degree. Some people would insist that all predicates which admit the use of the comparative degree are predicates of properties which may at least be measured on an ordinal scale. I hope to show that the group of predicates which I call "non-measurement predicates" are evidence of the falsity of this claim.

(X) A Ferrari is more elegant than a Mini-Minor.
(Y) John is more honest than Dick.
(Z) Jane is more musical than Mary.

These examples appear to be successful uses of the comparative degree of each predicate respectively. Any or all of them may be false, but I assume that they are significant propositions. There are some important distinctions which need to be made between the modus
operands of non-measurement predicates and measurement predicates. Unlike measurement predicates, non-measurement predicates do not give primacy to the comparative degree. On the contrary, the positive degree seems to have primacy. To say that A is more elegant than, or more honest than, or more musical than B, and so on, presupposes that one knows what it means to say that A is elegant, or honest, or musical, and so on. This is an assertion that needs some support and it is surprisingly difficult to state its grounds precisely.

"Elegance" seems to be what Wittgenstein would call a family-resemblance concept. (1) That is, the various characteristics which enable us to call different objects elegant, are seldom the same in any two instances. Even when such uses as "an elegant mathematical proof" or "an elegant literary style" are considered as analogical uses, and when the predicate is restricted in its literal sense to the description of physical shapes, it is still not possible to state the sufficient conditions for elegance. Family resemblance concepts are such that even if it were possible to state some of the necessary conditions for their applicability, these conditions

(1) See Philosophical Investigations, para. 66 f.
would be so generalised that they would not serve to
distinguish the range of applicability for one particular
concept from that of many other concepts. That is, there
are many family-resemblance concepts which have the same
necessary conditions for their applicability.

One feature of family-resemblance concepts is
the difficulty in establishing equality criteria for such
predicates. Because the elegant-making characteristics
for different objects vary so much, it is difficult to
compare their degrees of elegance. How does one compare
the elegance of a piece of Scandinavian cutlery with that
of a motor-car?

Another respect in which "elegance" differs
from the measurement predicates is seen in the difficulty
involved in specifying a class of objects, all of whose
members may be compared with each other with respect to
their elegance. In the case of measurement predicates
this is relatively easy. Anything that may be properly
called a sound is either louder than, softer than, or as
loud as, anything else that may be called a sound. Every
object which has length is longer than, equally as long
as, or shorter than, every other object which has length.
Every object which has weight is either heavier than, as
heavy as, or lighter than every other object which has
weight.

Even within the restricted use of "elegant" as a description of physical shapes, difficulties arise concerning the range of applicability. It is not the case that the comparative degree of "elegant" can be used to express a relation between any two physical shapes. For example, it seems to me that geometric forms such as squares, spheres, equilateral triangles and the like, are not the sort of things to which elegance is applicable. They are neither elegant nor inelegant - but that is not the same as water being neither hot nor cold. Squares, spheres, equilateral triangles and the like, cannot even be said to be more or less elegant than anything else. Moreover, it is not the case that all objects which may be properly described as elegant, are either more elegant than, as elegant as, or less elegant than, every other object which may be properly described as elegant. This point of difference between measurement predicates and non-measurement predicates is crucial to our argument, but it will not be fully explained until a little later.

The primacy of the positive degree of non-measurement predicates in contrast to the comparative degree of measurement predicates is exemplified by the way
in which these predicates are used in the positive degree. In the case of measurement predicates, the positive degree requires the imposition of some class restriction which will indicate some limits within which the particular use of the predicate is being made. Only thus, is the positive degree of measurement predicates intelligible. For example, when I say that my cousin Mary is tall, I mean that for a girl of her age, she is taller than most other girls of that age. When I say that today is a cold day, I mean that compared with most days in this part of the world, today is colder than usual. Of course, compared with places in the Antarctic, this is a warm climate.

In the case of elegance, however, no such class restriction is necessary for the positive degree. If something is elegant, it is not just elegant—compared-with-most-other-things-of-that-kind. Sometimes when we hear sentences like "That is an elegant typewriter" - we raise no objection despite the fact that it is quite inelegant. We let it pass because it does seem more elegant than most typewriters. There is a temptation to accept this use of the word because of the family-resemblance nature of the concept. What it is that makes an Ikebana arrangement elegant, is so different from what makes a
Ferrari elegant, that there is a prima facie case for considering elegant as a class-relative predicate.

The incorrectness of such a view, however, can be demonstrated easily. I can correctly say that my cousin Mary is a tall girl, if she is seven years old and taller than most other seven year old girls. If I re-group the classification and speak of all the people in a particular room, it may no longer be the case that Mary is tall compared with the rest of the members of the new class. That is, she is not a tall member of the group of people in the room. This does not seem to be the case with predicates like elegant. If an Ikebana arrangement is elegant, or if a piece of pottery is elegant, or if a Ferrari is elegant, it makes no difference if these objects are re-grouped in any new class. They will still be elegant. Elegance is not a class-relative concept. Of course, the overall effect of a room crammed with floral arrangements, furniture, jewellery, pottery, motor-cars and so on, may be ghastly even though each individual object in it is a paradigm of elegance. But in such a case it is not the elegance of any of the individual objects which is in question. Rather it is the appearance of the room. If an object is elegant, per se, then I
take it that its elegance cannot be dissolved by altering the context.

Perhaps one of the most important distinctions between measurement and non-measurement predicates is apparent in the different ways in which these predicates must be taught. Whereas the measurement predicates are open to precise definition, the non-measurement predicates must be taught by the use of paradigmatic instances. Of course the standard difficulties about ostensive definition apply here. Having shown a person several quite distinct examples of things that are properly called elegant, there is no guarantee that he will be able to proceed with the successful re-application of the term.

This distinction may be further illustrated by noting the correlative distinction that obtains between the abstract nouns belonging to each group. Properties such as length, temperature and weight are open to precise definition, whereas elegance, honesty and bravery are not. Furthermore, the relation between these abstract nouns and the positive degree of the corresponding adjectives, differs according to the type of predicate involved. That a certain thing has length, does not entail that it is long, whereas anything that can be said to have elegance, is elegant. A man who has a reputation for his honesty, is
honest. A person whose acts reveal bravery, is brave, and so on.

I have attempted to show some of the distinctions between what I have called measurement predicates and non-measurement predicates. My reluctance to identify the latter class of predicates with those which predicate properties that may be measured on an ordinal scale, was not without reason. They have much in common, but are not identical. Ordinal scales serve more as a means of grading than as an indication of what is usually called measurement. Certainly, the grading is according to a linear relationship criterion, but as Stevens points out, great caution must be exercised in the use that is made of ordinal scales. (1) Nevertheless, various pragmatic advantages are persuasive enough to justify their retention for particular purposes.

The important point is that measurement on an ordinal scale is a grading procedure, whereas not all grading procedures are the same as ordinal scale measurement. If, say, eggs are graded according to size, then the resulting grades, say, small, medium, large and extra-large, will constitute an ordinal scale. However,

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(1) S. S. Stevens: op. cit., p. 145.
when a wool-classer classifies wool into various grades, the resulting grades do not constitute an ordinal scale. The relationship between the grades is not a linear relationship, because wool is not classified according to any one property or group of properties. Certain sub-sections of wool grades may constitute an ordinal scale. For example, if wool for use in fine worsteds is generally classed as Super, then Super X, Super XX, Super XXX and Super XXXX, would represent an ordinal scale. However, the relationship between these classes and those which are suitable for, say, knitwear or for manufacturing blankets, need not be a linear relation.

If it is possible to say of Super Class wool that it is better than all other wools, then this is not so much an indication of the various properties of the wool itself. It is more a reflection of the attitudes of the wool growers and buyers. It brings a higher price; it is more difficult to produce; it is in high demand and so on. If it so happens that wool classes can be ordered in such a way that fluctuations in the price of wool do not alter the relative prices of each grade of wool, then that order would constitute an ordinal scale. But it must be stressed that this would be an ordinal
scale of the commercial value of the respective classes of wool. It would not constitute an ordinal scale of wool-quality.

Yet, despite the absence of a genuine overall ordinal scale of wool-quality, the use of the comparative degree is not completely prohibited. What must be understood, however, is that when these comparisons are being made outside of one particular range of classes which genuinely constitute an ordinal scale, all such uses of the comparison must be accompanied by a proviso such as, "for these particular (specified) purposes". For each distinctly different use to which wool may be put, it is possible to derive a new scale, although in some cases the scales may coincide. For the comparative degree to be intelligible when used of wool classes, it is a pre-requisite that the context be clearly defined and the provisos explicitly clear.

This case is not strictly analogous with elegance, honesty, bravery and so on, but there are some useful similarities. When we say that A is more elegant than B, such a comparison is not accompanied by the proviso, "for these particular (specified) purposes". But it must be accompanied by some implicit provisos
because elegance is not, strictly speaking, a property which can be measured on an ordinal scale. An ordinal scale may be derived according to which objects of a particular kind can be graded according to their elegance.(1) In this way the relative elegance of different pieces of cutlery may be indicated. Similarly, the relative elegance of other objects such as sculptures may be indicated on another ordinal scale; but it would be a mistake to compare one of the pieces of cutlery with one of the pieces of sculpture on the basis of their positions on their respective scales. The scales need not necessarily coincide.

The comparative degree of predicates such as elegant are used in ordinary language with a certain amount of success, but it must always be remembered that there are implicit provisos that limit the conclusions which may be drawn from such comparisons. In the case of elegance the provisos will be something like, "on the condition that the two things are sufficiently similar in kind".

(1) "First prize", "Second prize", "Third prize" etc. in a competition is an example of such a scale.
There are pragmatic grounds for accepting the comparative degree of such predicates in certain contexts, but it must be quite clear that there is no single scale covering all the uses of the predicate. For our purposes this places one particular restriction of the predicate, namely, that even greater care will have to be exercised in the use of the superlative degree.

The only instances when the superlative degree of such predicates can have an intelligible use is when adequate conditions are attached to indicate that the predicate is being used with respect to a particular range of comparisons that may properly be said to constitute an ordinal scale. A concept such as "the highest quality wool" fails to be intelligible unless the criteria of comparison are specified. If it is stated that this is judged on the wool prices at a particular series of wool sales, then it is intelligible and it succeeds in its reference. In another context it would be intelligible to say, "Of all the wool in this shed, for the purpose of manufacturing fine worsted, this is the highest quality wool."

Similar conditions are necessary if the concept "the most elegant X" is to be intelligible and if it is to succeed in its reference. This can be done by specifying
a particular class of objects which are possible candidates for "X". (1) For example, "the most elegant table-knife I have ever seen" is intelligible but it is very dubious whether the same could be said of "the most elegant thing I have ever seen". This latter concept is very deceiving because it appears to have the same form as "the most elegant table-knife I have ever seen".

"The most honest man I have ever met" is a concept which provides similar difficulties. What criteria of comparison can be used for such a phrase? It suggests that all other men I have met are, in some sense, less honest than this man. Is this because they have committed some distinctly dishonest acts or is it because they have never had occasion to display their honesty in such an honourable manner? How does one compare the widow's mite with the philanthropist's fortune?

What is important to note here, is that the failure of these superlative expressions lies not in their failure to have reference but in their failure to be

(1) It is not necessary that the objects being compared be all of the same kind, say, table-knives; but they must fulfil the above mentioned condition, namely, that they are the sorts of things whose elegance can be compared.
intelligible. This distinguishes them from concepts like
"the greatest prime number", although there are some
important points of comparison. "The tallest building(s)
in Sydney" is intelligible and it was shown that it may
succeed in its reference. If the concept is allowed to
operate in an infinite set such as "the tallest conceivable
building"(1), it will fail to have reference although it
will still be intelligible. The similarity between this
sort of concept and concepts like "the highest quality
wool", "the most honest man I have ever met" and "the
most elegant thing I have ever seen", is that both classes
of concepts are successful under certain restrictions,
and both fail when these restrictions are lifted. But
neither the type of restriction, nor the type of failure,
is the same in each case. The restriction that must be
imposed on the latter group, that is, on the non-
measurement predicates, is not a matter of limiting the
size of the sets over which they can operate, but rather
it is a matter of limiting the number of different senses
with which the predicate can operate at one time. The
concept "the highest quality wool" has many different

(1) By this I do not mean Frank Lloyd Wright's mile high
dream. Rather it means the logical inconceivability
of a taller building.
senses according to the provisos which may be invoked. It can be based on the commercial value of wool or on any of the various production needs. Without specifying which proviso is being used, the concept is unintelligible because all the different senses can only be assumed to be operating simultaneously. The failure that arises if this restriction is not observed, is that the concept becomes unintelligible, not that it fails to have reference.

Without embarking on a detailed discussion of the attributes of God, there seem to be adequate grounds for declaring Anselm's concept of God unintelligible. Within certain limited contexts it is intelligible to say that A is wiser than, or more knowledgeable (in specific respects) than, or more praiseworthy (on particular grounds) than B, and so on. But in the case of God all these specifications are removed and the predicates are allowed to operate with all their different senses simultaneously. The result is that the criteria of comparison become confused and the superlative expression becomes unintelligible.
CHAPTER 2

GOD AND PROPOSITIONAL FUNCTIONS

IV. The Via Negationis

V. Existential Propositions

VI. Ambiguities in the use of the word 'God'
Despite the fact that the superlative expressions of measurement and non-measurement predicates fail in different respects, they both share the same characteristic of having a limited number of successful uses. Although there is no such thing as the greatest prime number, it is quite correct to say of any prime that it is not the greatest prime number. This is made possible by Euclid's proof that there are an infinite number of primes, since in that proof it is shown that for every prime, there is at least one greater prime. Since the concept has sense but not reference, it is quite intelligible to say of any particular number that it cannot be the referent of that concept.

The superlative expressions of non-measurement predicates have similar negative uses. If a particular sample of wool can be shown to be inferior to some other wool on a particular ground, say, for the purpose of manufacturing worsted, it is not the highest quality wool. If some wool is produced which is superior to all other worsted wool it is still not the highest quality worsted that is conceivable. It is always logically possible that wool with a longer and finer fibre will be produced.
Since some purposes require wool with a short fibre and some require a long fibre, it is logically impossible that wool can be produced which will be the highest quality wool for every known purpose. All the superlative expressions which were shown above to be unintelligible have similar negative uses.

This leads us to consider the *via negationis* of classical theology from a new angle. "A being greater than which cannot be conceived" has been shown to be unintelligible, but, as with the previous examples, it has some negative uses. Of any particular being whose excellence makes it a candidate for membership of such a class, it can always be said that it could, conceivably, have been more excellent. There are no grounds for supposing that there is a limit to the possible magnitude of wisdom or benevolence or knowledge that a being may have. In general, the *via negationis* implies that God is unknowable or ineffable, because any being that can be known cannot be God, since it is logically possible that there is a more excellent being than every known being.

There is a significant difference between the *via negationis* suggested here and that of classical theology. In the classical theory the *via negationis* allows only that
certain things can be negated of God. \(^{(1)}\) God is not weak in any sense, nor is he evil in any sense, and so on. The via negationis in its most developed form is the procedure whereby a range of predicates is excluded from possible applicability to God. This exclusion is based on the belief that their inclusion would give rise to inconsistencies within the concept of God. If God could be evil, then he would not be perfectly good. But if God is not perfectly good, then it would be logically possible for something to be superior in goodness to God - and this latter possibility is contradictory to the primitive Christian notion of God. This is the very thing which Anselm was trying to exclude when he formulated his concept of God. Anything which can be predicated of God must not allow the possibility of something else being superior to God in any respect.

The classical theory of negative theology was designed to cope with the ineffability of God. By negating various things of God it was thought that although nothing could be known of God, some sort of direction could be

\(^{(1)}\) The best known sources of this doctrine in orthodox theology are in Dionysius (De Caeslesti Hierarchia, 2) and Boethius (De Trinitate, 2).
given to indicate the conceptual whereabouts, as it were, of this unknowable being. It is something like one of those children's games where "A" thinks of an object in the room and the others, who are to guess what "A" is thinking of, as in questions designed to limit the range of possibilities. The fact that the guessers in the game often succeed, may suggest that the \textit{via negationis} is in some way helpful in our appreciation of the nature of God, if only by narrowing down the range of possibilities.

To use the game as a model, however, is very misleading. The rules of the game are such that the guessers know quite a lot about the object before they start asking their questions. It is in the room. There are only a finite number of possibilities. It is the sort of thing which "A" can describe. It has a definite spatial position and so on. In the case of God none of these things are known. Nothing is known, for God is ineffable. The deficiency of the game-model becomes apparent when one tries to construct a game in which "A" has to think of something which is ineffable or unknowable and others have to ask questions which will limit the range of possibilities. In such a game, however, the questions and answers would not contribute in any way to
the specific demarcation of the category to which the thing belongs.

I do not wish to embark on a detailed discussion of negation, types and meaninglessness here, but since I make certain presuppositions about them it seems necessary to make some brief remarks. When a predicate is negated of a subject, something must be previously known about the subject if the negation is to be significant. It was in dealing with this sort of problem that Arthur Pap distinguished between 'limited negation' and 'unlimited negation'. (1) Limited negation is when "not-(S is P)" is logically equivalent to "S is non-P" where "non-P" is equivalent to the disjunction of all other members of the predicate family to which P belongs. (2) That is, to deny that a particular telephone is black is the same as asserting that it is some colour other than black. Unlimited negation is when "not-(S is P)" is not equivalent to "S is non-P". To deny that the number five is blue is not the same as asserting that it is some colour other than blue.

(1) A. Pap: Types and Meaninglessness, Mind, Jan. 1960, p. 41f.
(2) ibid., p. 53.
For the *via negationis* to be a conceptual aid in appreciating the nature of God, the negation concerned would have to be a limited negation. If it were an unlimited negation it would not add any specificity to the concept of God. Yet to know that it is a limited negation requires a knowledge of the sort of being that God is, knowledge of God's *type* — and this is precluded by the ineffability of God. The doctrine of ineffability is such that both "God is good" and "God is not good" are inadmissable. It is not just that we do not know whether or not God is good. Rather, God is such that he is not the sort of being of which it can ever be known whether or not he is good.

The schoolmen, operating with a logic that was dominated by the Law of the Excluded Middle, did not know how to cope with this problem properly. For them, statements like "God is good" and "God is evil" had to be either true or false. Under such circumstances it is not difficult to see why they opted in favour of the truth of the former and the falsity of the latter. The schoolmen realized that this stood in need of qualification if the doctrine of ineffability was to be retained. Thus they said that goodness is predicated of God analogically.
He is not good in the same way that Gandhi was good. Nor is he good in the same way that certain legal codes are good. In fact we do not know exactly what it means to say that God is good, for God is unknowable. But this much we do know. Within the framework of our language, the distinctions that are made between things that are good and those that are evil, are such that God must belong somewhere in the former group, even though it is not possible to specify the nature of his goodness. This is the briefest way I can summarize the classical doctrines of ineffability, via negationis and analogical predication.

In the classical system the doctrine of analogical predication is a sort of buffer between the doctrine of ineffability and the via negationis. It allows for the fact that we cannot know precisely what it means to predicate something of God while at the same time it grants a licence to make assertions which seem to be given some sort of a priori status in relation to God.

The via negationis which is suggested here serves a purpose similar to that of the classical theory but it is quite different in form. The doctrine suggested here is that there can be no object which satisfies the conditions of Anselm's concept of God. To put it another way, of every object which is a possible object of our knowledge,
it is possible to say that it is not "a being greater than which cannot be conceived". This follows from the conclusion reached previously that this concept is logically unintelligible. Since it is an unintelligible concept there is no object falling under it which is a possible object of our knowledge; for if there were such an object, the concept would not be unintelligible. Thus, it is not just that the phrase "a being greater than which cannot be conceived" may be used negatively in some instances. Rather, in the sense just prescribed, it must be used negatively of all things. Here the words "thing" and "object" are being used in a common-sense manner, applying to the things of the physical world. The next section dealing with existential propositions will examine this more carefully.

At first sight there may seem to be something paradoxical about saying that an unintelligible expression can be (meaningfully) negated of something. If it is not possible to predicate the expression of anything because it is unintelligible, it may be expected that its unintelligibility would also prevent the possibility of meaningfully negating that expression of anything. But that is not the case.
With concepts such as "the greatest prime number" or "the tallest conceivable building", that is, concepts which have sense but not reference, we see a similar situation. These concepts cannot be affirmed of anything, yet they can be used negatively. "x is the greatest prime number" and "x is the tallest conceivable building" are both propositional functions which are necessarily false for all values of x. It is not possible for a value to be found for x which would make either of them into a true proposition. It is possible, however, to use these concepts in negative assertions that are true. In fact, "x is not the greatest prime number" and "x is not the tallest conceivable building" are both necessarily true for all values of x.\(^{(1)}\)

The fact that these concepts which have sense but not reference behave in this way is, of course, no guarantee that unintelligible concepts behave similarly. It has already been shown that propositional functions like "x is the most elegant thing I have ever seen" and "x is the highest quality wool" are unintelligible. The

\(^{(1)}\) We should, of course, discuss the criterion of significance here but since that is more related to the doctrine of types I shall leave it open - especially since it does not affect the argument here.
unintelligibility of a concept means that it cannot be affirmed of, or predicated of anything, for it is not clear what such an affirmation could mean. When that same concept is negated of something, however, it operates in a manner something like the following: Whatever the concept means this particular thing does not fall under it. "x is not the most elegant thing I have ever seen" and "x is not the highest quality wool" are propositional functions which may be true for certain values of x. For example, there are many pieces of sculpture which, if they were a value for x, would render the former of these true. If the function is altered slightly to "x is not the most elegant thing conceivable" then it would be true for all values of x.

The propositional function "x is the greatest conceivable being" behaves similarly. Since the concept "the greatest conceivable being" is unintelligible, the affirmative propositional function is likewise unintelligible. The negative propositional function "x is not the greatest conceivable being" is, however, true for at least some values of x, and is indeed true for all known possible values of x. To say it is true for all possible values of x would, perhaps, be prejudging the issue which is to
be discussed in section VI.

V

The need for a discussion of existential propositions should be apparent. Assertions about something seem to presuppose that the thing concerned exists. At least, there are oddities in the view that assertions can be made about things which do not exist. For what can such assertions be about? Most of the recent literature on this subject has been related directly or indirectly to Russell's analysis of existence. The literature is so vast that I do not intend to embark on a full-scale evaluation of the debate here. Rather I will be much less ambitious and confine myself to some particular comments made by Russell in the hope that it will throw some light on the particular problem that concerns us here.

In his Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy Russell raises the problem of existence in the chapter on propositional functions.

We say an argument "satisfies a function fx if fa is true; this is the same sense in which the roots of an equation are said to satisfy the equation. Now if fx is sometimes true, we may say that there are x's for which it is true, or we may say "arguments satisfying fx exist". This is the fundamental meaning of the word "existence". (1)

(1) Bertrand Russell: Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, p. 164.
For Russell, a proposition is "primarily a form of words which expresses what is either true or false". (1) A propositional function is "an expression containing one or more undetermined constituents such that, when values are assigned to these constituents, the expression becomes a proposition". (2) Russell makes the important distinction that propositions are either true or false, whereas propositional functions are never true or false, but "sometimes true" or "always true". (3) He later qualifies this by raising the question of significance, but since that belongs more to the theory of types we shall not pursue it further here.

G. E. Moore points out that these views of Russell led him to say on another occasion that "Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function". (4) Moore rightly criticizes this view but, on analysis, his criticism is chiefly directed at the way Russell expressed

(1) ibid., p. 155.
(2) ibid., p. 156.
(3) ibid., p. 157.
himself. It does not deny that there is some truth in what Russell was trying to say. Russell's point is that existence is not a property that is predicated of things (particulars); it is something that is said of indefinite descriptions in a propositional function when there are values which satisfy the variables (indefinite descriptions) in the function. In more formal terms this may be expressed by saying that the existence of an entity gives the licence to quantify over a variable in a propositional function when that entity is a legitimate value of the variable concerned. That is, the fact that there is a man who has eleven fingers would provide the licence to quantify over the variable \( x \) in the function \( Fx \) if \( F \) is the function "\( \ldots \) is a man and has eleven fingers". \( \forall x, Fx \) is the same as saying that "(\( x \) is a man and has eleven fingers) is sometimes true". These are different ways of saying that such a man as is described by the indefinite description in the propositional function, exists.

But why do Moore and Russell, not to mention Kant, deny that existence is a predicate? "Tame tigers exist" and "Men with eleven fingers exist" seem to be intelligible and significant propositions. But "tame
tigers" and "men" are indefinite descriptions and the above sentences are not propositions at all, but are, at most, propositional functions. Furthermore, they are only intelligible as propositional functions if they are interpreted properly, that is, as meaning "(x is a man and has eleven fingers) is sometimes true" and "(x is a tame tiger) is sometimes true". If the indefinite descriptions in such propositional functions are replaced by definite descriptions Russell claims that the result is not a proposition at all but "a mere noise or shape, devoid of significance". (1)

It is possible to demonstrate that existence is not a property which is predicated of things by appealing to the nature of propositional functions - but in a way that apparently did not occur to Russell or Moore. Russell's definition of a propositional function is such that any property which can be predicated of things (particulars), can be predicated by means of a propositional function. If "red" is such a property then "x is red" is the sort of thing which is either always true or sometimes true according to Russell's account. That is, the sort of things

(1) cp. cit., p. 165.
of which "red" can be predicated are possible values for the variable in the propositional function "x is red". For Russell, all properties (p) that can be predicated of things can be incorporated in a propositional function "x is (p)".

If existence is a property which can be predicated of things, then it must also be able to be incorporated in a propositional function such as "x exists". Now, if "x exists" is a propositional function then it is the sort of thing which is either always true or sometimes true. (1) Let Ex be the propositional function "x exists". If Ex is sometimes true then it must be possible to quantify over the variable x. That is, \(\exists x. Ex\) is an existential statement. But it is clear that this means that there is an x such that x exists, or there is an x such that there is an x. This is clearly tautologous. If Ex is accepted as a propositional function then we have an existential statement \(\exists x. Ex\) which is necessarily true. But this transgresses the accepted canons of logic which say that all existential statements are contingent.

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(1) We shall discuss later Russell's apparent disinterest in propositional functions that are always false. However "x exists" certainly is not always false so we can defer this matter until later.
This leaves us with two alternatives: to deny that "x exists" is a propositional function (and thus to deny that existence is a property which is predicated of things) or else to propose sweeping changes in the laws of logic. Either course is possible but there are strong reasons for choosing the former. Any changes in the laws of logic in order to cope with this problem would detract from their simplicity and would render them less versatile for ambiguities would arise concerning the notion of existence.

I think Russell was correct in this part of his analysis of existence. It is not a property which can be predicated of things. But Russell's views are not consistent about this for he seems to want to have it both ways. He says:

"I met a unicorn" or "I met a sea-serpent" is a perfectly significant assertion, if we know what it would be like to be a unicorn or a sea-serpent, that is, what is the definition of these fabulous monsters. (1)

This amounts to saying that "x is a unicorn" and "x is a sea-serpent" are both propositional functions if we know what it would be like to be such an x. That is, so

(1) op. cit., p. 168.
long as they are intelligible, then they pass as propositional functions. But in criticizing Meinong\(^{(1)}\), Russell opposes in general any view which attributes some sort of logical being or logical existence to these fantasies.

Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features. To say that unicorns have an existence in heraldry, or in literature, or in imagination is a most pitiful and paltry evasion. What exists in heraldry is not an animal, made of flesh and blood, moving and breathing of its own initiative. What exists is a picture, or a description in words. A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains and square circles.\(^{(2)}\)

Nothing could be more correct than Russell's objection to a view which attributes the same ontological status to unicorns and golden mountains as it does to horses and snow-capped mountains. But Russell's apparent common-sense attitude is deeply engrained with the view that existence is a property belonging to such things as horses and snow-capped mountains but not to unicorns or golden mountains. This, however, is the very view he is

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\(^{(1)}\) ibid., p. 169.

\(^{(2)}\) ibid., p. 169-170.
trying to prove false. A robust sense of reality must
not be allowed to conflict with the rigidity of the laws
of logic.

The difference between horses and unicorns is
not that the former exist while the latter do not. They
both exist in that it is possible to quantify over the
variables in the propositional functions "x is a horse"
and "x is a unicorn". The difference, which is vast, is
that they have entirely different logical powers. Horses
are the sort of thing that can be sat upon, that can be
ridden across the countryside, that can be photographed,
that need food and water and so on. Unicorns do not
have these logical powers at all. They occur in stories
and are included in Coats-of-Arms and so on. Nobody who
knows what a unicorn is, will mistake it for a horse.
If the view is to be maintained that existence is not a
property which is predicated of things, then I think
Russell is wrong in holding his common-sense view that
horses exist whereas unicorns do not. Assertions about
horses and unicorns reveal that they differ with respect
to properties which may be predicated of things. But
Russell wishes to deny that existence is such a property.
One thing that is puzzling about Russell's treatment of propositional functions is his apparent disinterest in the possibility that a propositional function may be false in all cases: that is, every possible value for \( x \) renders it false. There are grounds for believing that Russell's disinterest in propositional functions that are always false may have contributed to some errors in his analysis of existence.

"\( x \) is a square circle" is a propositional function which is always false. Furthermore, it is necessarily false for all values of \( x \). That is, it is not possible for a geometric figure to be simultaneously square and round.

"\( x \) is a unicorn" is another propositional function which Russell regards as being always false. According to Russell it is just a fact that there are no unicorns. But this is certainly not a propositional function which is necessarily false in all cases. It is contingently false. There is nothing self-contradictory or logically impossible about a unicorn. What Russell does in this case is to treat the function as elliptical and to understand its expansion as "\( x \) is a unicorn and lives in a paddock (which may be given a specific
geographical location) and eats grass etc." In short, he expands it to mean "$x$ is a unicorn and has logical powers resembling those of a horse", for indeed Russell regards the logical powers of a horse as paradigmatic of the logical powers of any existent animal. Interpreted thus, "$x$ is a unicorn" is certainly a function which is always false, but still contingently so.

My point is that it only makes sense to say of a propositional function that it is contingently false in all cases if the function is interpreted elliptically. Furthermore the expansion of the ellipsis is achieved by imputing a particular set of logical powers to the concept involved in the propositional function. By imputing a set of logical powers which normally belong to objects of the physical world, mythical objects and the like are automatically excluded from the range of objects which may be said to exist. But the demand that existent things conform to the standards of the physical world is an *ad hoc* demand on the laws of logic.

If Russell is going to insist that only things which have the same logical powers or ontological status as objects of the material world can be said to exist, then his formal use of the existential quantifier "$\exists x$"
in relation to propositional functions cannot be taken as a sign of the existence of such things.

The quantifier " $\exists x$" is devoid of all significance except when it is actually quantifying over the variable in a propositional function. Now, "$Fx$" is not a propositional function, but rather a symbol used to represent a propositional function. Similarly, $\exists x.Fx$ is not a proposition but a symbolized representation of one type of proposition. The fact that all existential propositions can be symbolized thus, is no guarantee that $\exists x$ means there is a common ontological status or set of logical powers in which all possible subjects of existential propositions share. The common form of existential propositions no more suggests such a common set of properties than the common form of propositional functions ($Fx$) suggests that all possible variables in such functions share in a common set of predicates.

When used in the formula $\exists x.Fx$, the existential quantifier simply means that there is something that will satisfy the variable in the function $Fx$, that is, will have the logical powers that belong to the function and the ontological status of the sort of things that have those logical powers. The quantifier $\exists x$ does not
signify that the things that satisfy the variables in all propositional functions have the same specific ontological status. It is merely a formal device to acknowledge that there is something which satisfies the function over which it is operating. Apart from this formal significance it says nothing at all about what it means to exist, for that is learned not from the quantifier but from the function. The propositional function itself must be the guide to the logical powers or the ontological status of the objects that satisfy it. If the function is not at all specific then it must be treated as elliptical, but the fact that the thing exists is no indication of the way the ellipsis is to be expanded.

I not only respect, but sympathize with Russell's demand for a "robust sense of reality" in these matters, but he has to make up his mind which language he is playing when he uses the word "exist" or any of its cognates. His robust sense of reality fits in well with the language game of ordinary language, but it is inconsistent with his use of the word in the formal logical sense.

Russell's inconsistency may be illustrated by an analogous example from mathematics. The common-sense view of the man in the street is that the propositional
function "x = √-1" is false in all cases, because the man in the street is familiar with only rational numbers. The mathematician, however, knows that there is an complex number which will solve this equation. That is, the function is not false in all cases.

Russell has arbitrarily restricted the domain of the variable in existential propositions to the world of material objects. There is nothing wrong with such a restriction if it is admitted as arbitrary and if there is no accompanying legislation to prohibit others from choosing a wider domain, for the existential quantifier will certainly operate over variables in a much wider domain.

"x is a fairy" is an intelligible propositional function. "∃x(x is a fairy)" is an existential proposition asserting that there is such a thing that satisfies the function ".....is a fairy". Of course there is such a thing. Mind you, it is in no position to accept or reject on invitation from me to dinner next week; but perhaps it could entertain such an idea if the invitation were from Peter Pan or Wendy.
Previously it was demonstrated that the concept "a being greater than which cannot be conceived" is unintelligible. What it would be like to be such a being, cannot be imagined. An affirmative propositional function predicating this concept of something is unintelligible, but a negative propositional function denying this concept of something is intelligible.\(^{(1)}\)

That an affirmative propositional function is unintelligible (in the specific sense described here), is not a sufficient proof that there is no possible value that would satisfy the function; but it is proof that objects which may be given an adequate definite description or which fall under an intelligible concept are excluded from being possible values for that function.

We must now consider the question raised at the conclusion of section IV, namely, for what values of \(x\) the propositional function "\(x\) is not the greatest conceivable being" is true.

In this propositional function it seems that

\(^{(1)}\) See above, p. 36.
there can be no restriction on the type or category of the possible values for $x$. Since the concept "the greatest conceivable being" is logically unintelligible it is not possible to say anything about the type or category of the members of the class which it governs. Thus, in the negative function "$x$ is not the greatest conceivable being", anything is a possible value for $x$. In other words, the negation will be an unlimited negation.\(^{(1)}\) Consequently, when substitutions for $x$ make the function into a true proposition, it is vacuously true. That is, it contributes no further information about the thing concerned. This will become clearer with the examples that will follow.

To say that "anything" is a possible value for $x$, needs some clarification. In this context what does "anything" mean? The only sort of thing which is not a possible value for $x$ is the sort of thing which would satisfy the variable in a propositional function which is necessarily false in all cases. This is, prima facie, an extremely strange way to state the case, for there are, of course, no things which will ever satisfy such a function. Hence no class of things is being excluded.

\(^{(1)}\) See above, p. 31.
But I state it this way to emphasize the fact that the range of possible values for \( x \) includes all the possible things which satisfy the variables in every possible function which will admit the existential quantifier. In this group of functions I include not only those which Russell says are sometimes true but also those which he says are false in all cases but which I have pointed out to be contingently false. (1)

"\( x \) is an angel" is a propositional function which Russell would say is always false, but if it is false it is only contingently false. In fact, according to my interpretation, it is sometimes true. That is, 

\[ \exists x (x \text{ is an angel}) \]

is admissable. The Bible records many stories of angels. Just what sort of a being an angel is, is another matter. It is extremely doubtful, for example, whether an angel would drink beer, but not because all angels are teetotallers. Rather, there is no reason to suppose that angels drink anything that humans drink. However, according to the account given in section \( \text{v} \), angels are possible values for variables in existential propositions, and therefore they are possible values for

(1) See above, p. 45.
the variable in "x is not the greatest conceivable being".

"The angel Gabrielle is not the greatest conceivable being" is an intelligible proposition. In fact, it is a true proposition, for there is nothing about the angel Gabrielle which excludes the possibility of a more superior angel. Thus, since a more superior angel is logically possible, the angel Gabrielle is not the greatest conceivable angel, and therefore is not the greatest conceivable being. Likewise, the number five is not the greatest conceivable number and therefore is not the greatest conceivable being. It should be noticed that these true propositions (the angel Gabrielle is not the greatest conceivable being, and the number five is not the greatest conceivable being) are vacuously true. They make no contribution towards any further knowledge of the angel Gabrielle or the number five.

The negative propositional function "x is not the greatest conceivable being" is only significant as a conclusion to an argument of the kind, x is not the greatest conceivable X, and is therefore not the greatest conceivable being. If there is any class of things (X) such that x is a member but not the greatest conceivable member of X, then x is not the greatest conceivable being. But
for every x, there is at least one X such that x is not the greatest conceivable member of X.

This is an extremely general claim which probably needs more justification than I am offering here, but prima facie there seems to be a good case for it. The concept "the tallest building in Sydney" has been shown to have both sense and reference, whereas "the tallest conceivable building" has sense but not reference. If, however, a concept is formed such as "the tallest conceivable building of all the buildings in Sydney", it is a very odd concept. If it has any reference at all, the referent will be identical with that of "the tallest building of all the buildings in Sydney". In other words, the word "conceivable" contributes nothing to the concept. It is possible to find a number of examples of concepts of the form "the greatest conceivable x" which succeed in having reference. Some of these concepts are conspicuously odd. "The greatest conceivable prime less than 100" is one of these. Others, however, are not obviously odd. The school boy who tells his mother that he gained "the highest possible (conceivable) place in the class" is not likely to be chided for his unintelligibility. What is common to all these concepts, however, is the fact that the word "conceivable" is unnecessary. The greatest conceivable
prime less than one hundred is identical with the greatest prime less than one hundred, and the highest conceivable place in the class is identical with the highest place in the class.

When the word conceivable is conjoined with a predicate in the superlative degree, it is usually taken to imply that the class governed by that concept extends infinitely in the direction indicated by the superlative. If it does not extend infinitely in the direction indicated by the superlative, then there is no justification for the use of the word "conceivable". "The smallest (in numerical value) conceivable integer" is a case in point. In other words, properly used, a concept in which the superlative degree of a predicate is conjoined with the word "conceivable", a fortiori has no referent.

On this basis it seems reasonable to say that every intelligible use of "the greatest conceivable....." fails to have a referent. That is, for every x, there will be a class of which x is a member but not the greatest conceivable member. Consequently, (x)(x is not the greatest conceivable being) is true.

If we consider the case where God is substituted as a value for x, difficulties are immediately apparent.
"God is not the greatest conceivable being" conflicts not only with Anselm's concept of God but with the primitive notion of God which seems to be essential to Christianity. A God which has logically conceivable superiors is not an adequate God for a monotheistic system.

Two alternative conclusions can be drawn from this situation: the argument thus far could be erroneous, or, God is not the sort of thing which is a possible value for x. Neither of these alternatives is very appealing. I am committed to the argument thus far; and if God is not a possible value for x then God is not a possible value for the variable in any existential proposition. (1) These difficulties suggest a need for an examination of the way in which the word "God" is used.

It will be remembered that the truth of "This particular x is not the greatest conceivable x" depended on being able to show the truth (in every case) of "This particular x is not the greatest conceivable x". The angel Gabrielle is not the greatest conceivable angel; the number five is not the greatest conceivable number; the river Ganges is not the greatest conceivable river and

(1) See above, p. 51, 52.
If a similar approach is adopted in the case of God, then perhaps arguments could be made both for and against a claim that God (the God of Christianity as referred to in the Old and New Testaments) is not the greatest conceivable god. For example, the traditional argument based on the problem of evil suggests that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent god could have created a vastly superior world compared with the world supposedly created by the God of Christianity. But I have no desire to become involved with that argument here. However, the very suggestion that God may not be the greatest conceivable god reveals one of the difficulties that is at the core of the problem. It is that the word "God" is used ambiguously.

In Christian literature the word "God" is used more often than not, as a proper name. "And God spoke to Moses saying.....". "I believe in God.....". This use of the word seems to constitute a major proportion of its uses but there are contexts in which the word is used not as a proper name but as a synonym for a number of indefinite descriptions. Perhaps these two distinct uses can be best characterised as the God of religion...
and the God of Theology. These contexts are by no means mutually exclusive and it is this factor which gives rise to the ambiguity of the word.

The members of a religious community, the believers, the faithful, are the ones who use the word "God" primarily as a proper name. There seems no need here to enter into the lengthy philosophical debate that has centred around the nature of proper names. The religious have used the word more or less in accordance with the simple school grammar book account of proper names. I can refer to a particular composer as the greatest master of contrapuntal style, or as the man who composed forty-eight preludes and fugues for the well-tempered clavier chord to prove the versatility of that instrument, or as the man who walked two hundred miles to listen to the organist Dietrich Buxtehude. Or I could call him by his "proper name", Johann Sebastian Bach.

In this sense, a proper name is not in itself descriptive. But since it is the proper name of an individual or of a particular, it presupposes that those who use it as a proper name have some common set of definite descriptions with which they refer to the same
individual. That is, a proper name, in the sense that
"God" is used as a proper name or in the sense in which
a schoolboy is taught that "London", "Johann Sebastian
Bach" and "Hyde Park" are proper names, is a kind of
short-hand or abbreviation for any definite description
that refers uniquely to the individual for which the
word is a proper name. A proper name must have one and
only one referent and it must be possible to identify
that referent by at least one definite description.

Since a proper name is an abbreviated way of
referring to an individual, it has no significance unless
there is a definite description by means of which reference
can be made to the same individual. If there is no such
definite description, it cannot be known what the proper
name names, for a proper name is not itself descriptive.
It is possible to form a description which includes the
same words as the proper name. "Johann Sebastian Bach"
is the proper name for the man who as a baby was baptized
on such-and-such a date, in such-and-such a place, as
Johann Sebastian Bach.

In the language of the religious, "God" is the
proper name for the individual who may be described in
any of the following ways: "the one who led the Israelites
out of Egypt", "the one who created the universe" or "the one who spoke to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus". It is essential to the way the religious use the word "God" to consider these expressions as definite descriptions which have a common referent. More will be said of this later.

The word "God" is not used in the language of theology as a proper name. As in religion it is used as an abbreviation, or as a piece of short-hand, but its cash value is not a definite description but an indefinite description. When a theologian speaks of God as "a being greater than which cannot be conceived", he means that whatever falls under that concept is a divine being which will be referred to as God. What the theologian tries to do is to indicate as many indefinite descriptions as possible which will only be satisfied by the divine being. The fact that all the indefinite descriptions of divine beings govern classes which the theologians consider to have one and only one member, each class having the same member, is not tantamount to saying that the description is a definite description.

The number seven may be referred to by the definite description, "the prime number greater than 5
but less than 11" or by the indefinite description, "a prime number greater than 5 but less than 11". The latter description, however, is still an indefinite description.

The name "Sir Robert Menzies" is a proper name since it refers to an individual which can be described by numerous definite descriptions such as "the man who founded the Australian Liberal Party" or "the man who has recently been succeeded as Prime Minister of Australia by Mr. Holt." However, it also happens to be a fact that Sir Robert Menzies is the name of the only person who satisfies the indefinite description "a Prime Minister of Australia who has served in that office for more than fifteen consecutive years". Thus there is no reason for supposing that a proper name cannot be the name of the individual referred to by some definite description and the individual referred to by an indefinite description. But unless it is possible to establish the identity of these individuals it is confusing and ambiguous to refer to them by the same word. This is basically the difficulty with the word "God".
CHAPTER 3

GOD AND LANGUAGE GAMES

VII. Language Games

VIII. Religion as a Language Game

IX. Theology as a Language Game
There is something inevitably crude about most attempts to re-hash the work of a great philosopher and to use the same material for a purpose never envisaged by him. Yet it can be even more disastrous to attempt an independent account of a subject which has already been explored by genius. Apart from his typically elusive style, Wittgenstein's account of language-games is such that I shall not attempt to improve upon it. What follows, however, is a collection and exposition of Wittgenstein's own remarks on the topic which are otherwise scattered and known only to those who are well versed in his writings. No claim is made here for any originality in this section. This account of Wittgenstein's work is included here because the present investigation has reached a stage where it seems necessary to give some general account of language. Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game provides an excellent approach to this subject.

The first and perhaps the most important point to grasp concerning Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game is that he uses the term to embrace "the
whole process of using words". (7)(1) 'Words' are not limited to the vocables of a language but include the whole range of media by which men communicate with each other - actions, gestures, intonation and so on. The term 'language-game' is "meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity or a form of life". (23) People do things with language; they use it when they are doing a variety of things and consequently the language they use is related in an important way to the context in which it is used.

In trying to expound his notion of a language-game Wittgenstein is quite aware of the fact that he fails to say what is common to all these activities - what makes them into language or parts of a language. This is precisely for the reason that "these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all - but they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all

1. I shall include references to Philosophical Investigations in the text. A plain number (7) refers to the paragraph number in Part I. Part II references will be by page numbers (p. 227).
It is here that Wittgenstein introduces his now hackneyed notion of 'family resemblance'. (66, 67)

Every activity that passes as a language-game has something in common with at least one other language-game (probably with many others) but there is no such thing as the essence of a language-game.

Wittgenstein not only develops the notion of a language-game as the basis for a philosophy of language; he also uses this same notion as the key to unlock the mystery of what it is that philosophy is really about. As early as the Tractatus, Wittgenstein had set himself in opposition to the traditional view that philosophy was a sort of super-science whose doctrines provided a synthesis of all other sciences. "Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations". (1)

The notion of a language-game seems to throw more light on this problem than any other single notion. This is because, as Wittgenstein set about demonstrating what he understood philosophy to be, he relied on the idea of a language-game as a basic tool in the process

(1) Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.112.
of clarification. Concepts can only be analysed by observing them in use. This is largely what is meant by the word 'meaning'. "The meaning of a word is its use in language". (43) But to understand the use of a word in a language is not just a matter of grammar, syntax and lexicography. One must understand the whole language-game.

When philosophers use a word - 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' - and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? - What we do is to bring the words back from their metaphysical to their everyday usage". (115)

Wittgenstein realized that for many a philosopher this idea of philosophy seemed to destroy all that was great and important in philosophy. But Wittgenstein's view of high-sounding theories is that they are "nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand". (118)

"Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is". (124) One can imagine an objection to the effect that at least philosophy offers
the laws of logic as a tool for this investigation, as a foundation on which the study of language can be built. But here we see the conflict developing between the approach which says "This is how it has to be!" and the approach which says "But this is how it is!" (112, 113) "The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystaline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement)" (107)

This demand for a perfect order, a precise exactness in language, was the motivation behind the Tractatus. By the time of the Investigations Wittgenstein's view on this matter had changed. "We see that what we call 'sentence' and 'language' have not the formal unity that I imagined, but are families of structures more or less related to one another. - But what becomes of logic now? Its rigour seems to be giving way here. But in that case doesn't logic altogether disappear? For how can it lose its rigour?" (108)

In face of this situation the notion of a language-game provides something of a way out. There is

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1. 'Genauer' would be better translated as 'accurately' instead of 'narrowly'. 
not one language-game but many. Hence, there is not one universal set of rules governing all language but a number of different sets of rules. The difficulty is in identifying the game that is being played and the rules by which it is played. One may expect that the natural thing for Wittgenstein to do would be to press for some sort of observation procedure. Observe the game; listen to the language; watch what happens - and the rules will become manifest. But it is not as simple as that.

It is, of course, imaginable that two people belonging to a tribe unacquainted with games should sit at a chess-board and go through the moves of a game of chess; and even with all the appropriate mental accompaniments. And if we were to see it we should say they were playing chess. But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a game - say into yells and stamping of feet. And now suppose those two people to yell and stamp instead of playing the form of chess that we are used to; and this in such a way that their procedure is translatable by suitable rules into a game of chess. Should we still be inclined to say they were playing a game? What right would one have to say so? (200)

Wittgenstein rightly points out that there is great difficulty in determining whether an action is or is not in accordance with a rule. A multiplicity of actions can be manifestations of acting in accordance with the one rule. Indeed, it is possible to show how
every action is in accordance with some interpretation of a rule. "But if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here". (201)

Once it is allowed that a rule can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, it seems as though the notion of a rule and its relation to the game are in jeopardy. But this is not the way games are played. In all games some things are in accordance with the rules and some things are in conflict with the rules. Rules cannot be interpreted according to the whims and fancies of the player. There are paradigmatic instances of what is called "obeying the rule" and "going against the rule". "And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately' : otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it". (202)

Wittgenstein is here laying the foundations for a frontal attack on the idea of a private language, that is, a language that is logically impossible for anyone other than the user to understand. Language, for Wittgenstein, is a public activity and, as such,
there must be agreement in the way it is used. (242) This does not constitute a retreat from his former claim that language is not all one game. There are many language-games, but each must be identifiable by some consistency. Thus, despite the difficulties of knowing whether or not a particular action is in accordance with the rules, if one understands the language a pattern must be discernible by observing the game. To see the game being played, is to see the rules made manifest.

In this sense, to do philosophy is to observe, or at least to observe and to report or describe. "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything". (126) This is not to belittle the role of philosophy, for Wittgenstein clearly envisaged that if philosophy is done in the right manner, if the observing is accurate and if the describing is precise, then "everything is open to view and there is nothing to explain". (126) It is not the philosopher's role to legislate - though his task is to do with rules. "It is the business of philosophy, not to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to make it possible for us to get a clear view of the
state of mathematics that troubles us: the state of affairs before the contradiction is resolved". (125)
The problems arise when we believe we have established the rules for a game, but when obeyed, things never work out as we had assumed. "We are therefore as it were entangled in our own rules. It is this entanglement in our rules that we want to understand". (125)

A major step towards the solution of this problem is in the realization of the variety of independent language-games and sets of rules that may be found. The temptation to synthesize these into one game must be resisted at all costs. "Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language - as it were first approximations ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities but also of dissimilarities". (130)
In the Introduction reference was made to the particular classes of religious expressions that concern us here. First, there are the statements which have the form of being about God. These are primarily accounts or reports of God's activities. Secondly, there are the utterances that are addressed to God. These form a major part of the liturgy, of the acts of worship. Thirdly, there are the utterances which are claimed to have been made by God. The whole of the scriptures is regarded in one sense to be The Word of God. In more specific instances we have reports of what God said to the prophets and to men like St. Paul. What sort of a language-game is it that involves these types of utterances? What can an examination of this language-game tell us about religion - about those who worship and that which is worshipped.

Prima facie, there is nothing extraordinary about a complex language-game of this type. It is relatively simple to construct a model. The 'private' or 'corporate' in the army plays some sort of game like this with the Battalion Commander whom they seldom, if ever, see. There are all sorts of stories in circulation
about the Battalion Commander. Some testify to his heroism as a younger man. Others tell of how he once saved a whole Company by destroying an enemy stronghold single handed. Others tell of his wrath towards disobedient insubordinates. Others tell of his immense concern for the welfare of his Battalion. But many of them have never seen him. However, they send messages to him. These messages include reports about the platoon's welfare, a progress account of the battle, information about the enemy, perhaps even an apology for not being able to do all that had been asked, and requests of various kinds for artillery support, better intelligence information and more ammunition.

Then there are the messages received from the Battalion Commander. These include orders to be obeyed, guidance and advice about how best to accomplish the task in hand, and perhaps an attempt to cheer up the disconsolate and improve the morale with a guarantee of all the support that can be mustered.

The soldier's relationship to his Battalion Commander is thus one which involves him in a language-game which has some points of comparison with the language of religion. Undoubtedly there are many other
language-games having components which are about 'X', addressed to 'X' and spoken by 'X'. The natural conclusion that one is likely to draw from all this is that in all language-games of this type, the 'X' will be a person. There are many things about which one speaks, and perhaps even to which one speaks, but it seems that only a person can be the initiator of language, only a person can do the speaking - and therefore 'X' must be a person.

We may be tempted to say that various animals can also communicate in this way. My dog has an uncanny ability to let me know when he wants to go outside or to remind me that I have not fed him. Is this a way of speaking to me? When a housewife whose washing is nearly dry on the line sees dark storm clouds approaching and feels the cold damp wind increasing, she responds by taking the clothes off the line. Is it possible to say that the signs of the forthcoming storm told her to take in the washing?

The notion of communication certainly may be extended to include such situations, but this is not the way the word is usually used. Normally it is reserved for situations where there is at least the possibility
of genuine two-way communication. A tape-recorder can play a recording which provides me with considerable information, but there is no sense in which it can be said that the tape-recorder and I communicate with each other. Communication which is the purpose of language, is an activity between persons.

This is another instance of touching upon an important philosophical issue yet not wishing to become involved in its intricacies. The concept of a person is itself as problematic as the whole topic being dealt with here and it would be all out of proportion if an attempt were made here to give an analysis of it. But for our purposes a detailed analysis is not necessary. What matters is that there seems to be ample evidence to suggest that Christians believe God to be a person; their language confirms this view and their behaviour towards God in general is of the same order as their behaviour towards persons. Whatever else can be said about persons, Strawson seems to have common sense on his side when he takes the view that 'person', as it is used in ordinary language, is a primitive concept. (1) The man in the street has no

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(1) P. F. Strawson: Individuals, Chap. 3.
difficulty in using the word. A person is a particular, an individual — and whether or not one knows how to apply this word correctly is purely a matter of understanding the language.

Perhaps I have been unnecessarily verbose in coming to the point. There is little ground for argument about the claim that the God of Christianity (the God about whom they speak, to whom they address their prayers, and by whom the commandments are believed to have been uttered) is regarded by Christians as a person. Indeed it is essential to the Christian religion that God is a person. This is straightforward enough but the difficulties arise when an attempt is made to give some kind of account of what is special about this particular person. It is clear that Christians believe God to be quite different from the Battalion Commander. God is not just any old person.

When a private or a corporal is first introduced to his Battalion Commander, he also adopts the view that the Battalion Commander is not just any old person. He is the Battalion Commander which means that he is to be treated with some sort of deference (if not respect) and his wishes are regarded as commands. Of course if the same private or corporal had come
across the Battalion Commander in a situation where his name and superior rank were not known, they may well have told him what to do with his wishes. But then, if the Battalion Commander is really worth his salt, it may be that the private or corporal will recognize his abilities and leadership qualities and have a similar respect for his suggestions even though they are not aware of his rank. Primarily it is the rank and office of Battalion Commander that commands respect. The bearer of that office is automatically the bearer of authority. But the person who bears that office may be worthy or may be unworthy of the office. He may be one whose person would command the same respect whether or not he had such a high rank.

In the case of God this distinction does not hold. The rank and office of God as it were, what it is to be God, carry the implication that the bearer of that office will automatically be the bearer of great authority. But it is not possible to question whether or not the bearer of that office is worthy of the respect that the office commands. This runs counter to the primitive notion of what it is to be God. God is not an office to which a person is appointed. If a person is not worthy of the office, then that person is
not God and never was God, even though some people may have believed him to be God.

This primitive respect for the infallibility of God is especially manifest in revealed religions where the believer's attitude towards God develops in a sort of snowballing fashion. New revelations can do nothing but add to God's greatness. He is the norm by which all judgments are made and never the object of a judgment. There is not even the logical possibility of a revelation which could reveal imperfections of any kind in God. In this respect religion is unassailable. The only thing that can count as a revelation is one which 'glorifies' God. Had Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal backfired, it seems almost certain that Elijah would have been dismissed as a false prophet. The system works almost in accordance with the old proverb: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating". There are numerous instances in the Old and New Testaments which suggest that the only way to judge a man who claims to be an agent of the Lord is by the fruits of his labours, not by his credentials. In other words, whatever confirms the might of the Lord is acceptable.

St. Augustine went so far as to say that these
a priori criteria must be applied to all interpretations of the scriptures. "Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought". (1) Throughout this work, St. Augustine develops a methodological approach to the interpretation of the scriptures, which is based on an a priori primitive notion of what God is like and what should be expected in a revelation of him.

The whole fabric of religious discourse, that is, the language men actually use in their public and private worship, is designed to give impetus to this snowballing process. The language that is about God provides evidence for belief in God. No particular revelation is essential. That is, its disproof would not spell disaster for religion. Rather, the worst that could happen is that the religion would have to adjust some of its beliefs. The language that is claimed to be by God, the commandments and the covenant, the promises and the chastisements, is included in the total language-game to give authority to the requirements of the game.

(1) St. Augustine: *On Christian Doctrine*, Bk. I, Ch. 30:40.
The liturgical language addressed to God, the confessions, the petitions and supplications, the praise and the thanksgiving are external manifestations of the response which religious people make to God. All these are interrelated and each is ineffective without the others.

Together these elements form a language-game which is primarily an affirmation of a particular point of view held by believers about the origin and destiny of life. It provides a framework within which they are able to still their fears, bolster their hopes and comfort their disappointments. Consequently a metaphysic of God is not of great importance in the practice of religion. What sort of being God is, is irrelevant so long as the total fabric fulfils its function, that is, satisfies the believer's need for some sort of overall explanation of life. But of course it will satisfy this need since this is one of the criteria by which material is admitted or rejected as a revelation.

One final point about the language-game of religion is that it has no scope for proofs or disproofs of the existence of God. The existence of God is a presupposition for those who play this language-game. Either you play the game or you do not play the game.
Certain things may count as evidence to persuade people to play this game or to dissuade them from playing. The range of possible evidence of this sort is tremendous: historical events, personal experiences, conceptual analyses and so on. This evidence may even affect the way in which one plays the game. But since God is an essential presupposition to the game, proofs or disproofs of his existence have no place for the committed players.

The language-game of theology is considerably different from that of religion despite their close relationship. Perhaps I define theology a little too narrowly, but I do not wish to include here those disciplines which are more correctly called "Biblical Theology" or "Pastoral Theology". There are a variety of such disciplines which are comprised mainly of systematic studies of various elements in the practice of religion. They are a natural means of providing an element of consistency in religion. However, I reserve the word 'Theology' here for that branch of theology which is more properly called "Philosophical Theology". Perhaps it is only a branch of philosophical theology. Theology,
as I intend to use the word, is a matter of conceptual analysis; the concepts analysed in theology are the concept of God and those concepts which have a direct bearing on the analysis of the concept of God and on man's relationship to God.

There is a sense in which theology is not a genuine language-game. Indeed, this is true of all conceptual analyses. Wittgenstein seemed to restrict the range of language-games to those natural activities by means of which men communicate with each other. Conceptual analysis is not such an activity. It is a device by means of which various steps in another language-game can be clarified. Conceptual analysis, and hence theology, is a language-game about a language-game.

It is for this reason that many people claim that a competent theologian must be a person who has participated actively in the language-game of religion. That is, he must be a religious man. There are, of course, advantages in approaching a task in conceptual analysis with a detached calmness, but these are probably outweighed by the thorough knowledge of the language-game concerned which can only be gained by
participating in the game.

There is nothing unusual in this requirement. An aesthetician who is not at home in the world of the arts is not likely to be very successful. Likewise, a philosopher of mathematics needs to have an adequate knowledge of mathematics. Perhaps philosophical theology is a case where a genuinely religious man may have difficulty in not being partisan. Be that as it may, it seems not unreasonable to demand that a theologian should at least have an acute sensitivity for the subtleties and nuances of the language of religion. This calls for a close association with the language of religion - not just with the academic language of theology, but with the language-game of religion as it is played in churches and synagogues, in mosques and in private places.

If theology is primarily an instrument for the clarification of the language-game of religion, its most important task is to provide an analysis of the concepts which are presupposed by the religious. This is why I have excluded from our consideration here, such studies as Biblical Theology and Pastoral Theology. They may develop in detail some particular aspects of the concept of God, but in order to be able to do this
they make a fundamental presupposition which is characteristic of the language-game of religion: they presuppose in its most primitive form the concept of God. The chief concern of theology is with this primitive concept of God, as presupposed by the religious believers and in the ancillary branches of theology.

The concept discussed in Chapter I is a prime example of a formal attempt to formulate the primitive concept of God presupposed by religious men. "A being greater than which cannot be conceived" is an entirely unspecific concept. It says a lot without saying anything. It is an attempt to formulate an unassailable concept of God, for religion is based on the belief in such a God. Anselm believed his concept of God to be proof against all possible objections. Conceptually, he believed that his formulation could not be surpassed and furthermore, he thought that it was impossible for empirical evidence to count against God. God is, by definition, a being greater than which cannot be conceived, and therefore a being of which no faults can possibly be found.

The distinction between definitions and
under the concept "God" in the language-game of theology, to what avail is this if God has an ontological status comparable with that of fictional persons? This is a possibility that must be considered, for according to our analysis of existence, to say that something 'exists' does not restrict that thing to any particular class of entities. If some things are more 'real' than others, it is not because they exist. Existence is not a property that can be predicated of things. Rather, to say that something exists, is to indicate a certain logical property in relation to the use of variables in propositional functions.

In the case of God this issue is complicated by the fact that Anselm's concept of God, which I take to be acceptable to believers in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is logically unintelligible. The religious protagonist may hurriedly declare that there must be some fault in Anselm's formulation of the concept. The antagonist, on the other hand, may see this as grounds for declaring that the whole of theology is founded on an unintelligible concept. In Section XI I hope to show that the latter is the case, but that this gives no cause for the antagonist to rejoice.
CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

X. Interpretations

XI. Some Concluding Remarks
The discussion thus far has been an elucidation of some of the characteristics peculiar to the concept of God. This has been for the purpose of indicating some of the problems that are involved in the interpretation of language that is about God, addressed to God, or claimed to have been made by God. An interpretation of a particular statement is not simply a restatement of it in a different terminology. Before proceeding with some positive suggestions about the interpretation of these religious utterances, it may be helpful to consider in a little more detail just what is meant by an act of interpretation.

The word "interpretation" has a common usage in a wide variety of distinctly different contexts. When a judge hands down a decision of the court, for example, it is based on an interpretation of the law. Music critics speak of an artist's interpretation of a particular work. In the physical sciences as well as in the social sciences, one hears about the interpretation of data. Students of literature spend laborious hours compiling interpretations of obscure passages. Philosophers speak of different interpretations of Aristotle.
But not only is there a variety of contexts in which we speak of interpretations; it seems that in many of these different contexts the actual function of interpretation is unique to its own particular context. By this, I mean that it is difficult to determine what is the relation between the various activities that are called interpretations. An historian's interpretation of a certain sequence of events seems to bear little relation to a pianist's interpretation of a Beethoven Sonata, while neither of these seems to be related in any way to a theologian's interpretation of a particular parable or a punter's interpretation of next Saturday's Form Guide. Each person seems to be involved in distinctly different types of activity, though each is described as an act of interpretation.

It is true that the historian, the pianist, the theologian and the punter are all involved in interpreting something. There is a temptation, however, to identify the end product of their labours - the history book, the performance, the biblical commentary and the wager - with the interpretation which they make of their respective data. This is the mistake which makes it look as if all these different activities are somehow the same type of activity, namely, interpretations. That this is
a mistake, is more evident in some instances than in others. Clearly the punter's wager is not identified with his interpretation of the data. Rather, the wager is based on his interpretation of the data. Likewise the history book and the biblical commentary are based on interpretations of the available data. They display the interpretation on which they are based. In the case of a musical performance the distinction is not so clearly marked. We do speak of a performance as an interpretation - but this is because of the difficulties involved in making a physical distinction between the two. The pianist's performance of a work is based on an interpretation of the score, an interpretation which reflects his whole attitude to the work on the basis of the harmonies involved and the structure of the form together, perhaps, with some knowledge of the occasional background of the music.

An interpretation of something is the very foundation on which all the performative work of the translation and articulation is based. The historian translates his data, the letters and reports, the newspaper cuttings and personal anecdotes, into history on the basis of his interpretation of the data. The theologian translates a parable into the language of
today, and the pianist translates the musical score into musical sounds - both on the basis of their interpretations of the data. To interpret data is to adopt an attitude towards it, which attitude largely determines the sort of language-game one is prepared to play with that data.

One only has to watch the contrasting faces of the successful and unsuccessful punters at the end of the last race, to realize that considerably different interpretations of the same data are possible. These differences are reflected in the different end products which are based on the interpretations.

Clearly, however, the interpreter does not have unlimited freedom in his right to interpret the data before him. Some interpretations are said to be better than others. This suggests that there are definite criteria for comparing different interpretations.

In the case of the punter it would, at a first glance, appear easy. The one who chooses the greatest number of winners from a particular Form Guide may be said to have given the best interpretation of the data concerned. If, however, it is then revealed that the punter had in fact made his choice for each race on the basis of his favourite colours, it would mean that
although he had got the best results he had not interpreted anything. Perhaps this is being a little too strong. There may be a punter who believes that horses whose jockeys wear a particular colour always do well, but this is unlikely. The colour punter is more likely to be a person who has decided not to attempt an interpretation of the data in the form-guide. Instead, he has decided to trust his luck with his favourite colours.

What sort of norms do competent music critics use when they assess a pianist's interpretation of a Beethoven Sonata? Somehow the interpretation that is imposed on the work must be appropriate to the internal structure of the work. There seems to be a shape or form in Beethoven's music which is characteristic of his style and which more or less dictates the shape or form of the expression required. But there is considerable flexibility at this point and the most competent authorities will still differ as to what is appropriate in particular cases.

The nature of interpretation is such that evaluation will always be difficult and disputable. If it were possible to derive a law which would accurately and consistently choose the winner of a race, then the
punter would no longer be interpreting the data concerned. He would be applying a formulae. If there were rigid rules governing the expression to be used in a Beethoven Sonata, then the pianist would no longer be interpreting the work. He would be following the rules. The concept of interpretation demands at least the possibility of flexibility.

Interpretation is essentially a personal act. It is something which each individual must do for himself. Often the actual act of interpretation is presupposed in everyday things. If we have a newspaper which we believe to be very reliable in a certain kind of news, then we spend little or no time interpreting that news in the daily paper. We accept it as a reliable factual account. In other less common cases, however, each individual must interpret things for himself. He must assess the data and shape his own attitude towards it. Religious texts are certainly one type of language which every person must interpret for himself. Section XI will indicate why this is so, and outline some of the alternative interpretations that are possible.
In this concluding section I must attempt to draw some of the threads together. At the outset the aim was to consider some of the factors which influence the attitude we are to adopt towards, or the interpretation we are to make of the language and literature of religion. Towards this end we considered in detail Anselm's concept of God, the *via negationis*, and what it means to say that something exists. The ambiguities in the use of the word 'God' gave rise to a discussion of the differences between the language-games of religion and theology. Theology, it seems, has a central concept which is unintelligible, but part of the task in this section will be to show that this is not sufficient reason for debunking theology entirely. In developing some alternative approaches to the problem of interpretation it will be seen that whatever pathway is followed, the language and literature of religion needs to be interpreted by each person individually. Nobody can do this for another person.

This latter point is quite straightforward. The subject matter of religious language is always related to the reader. The stories of ancient Israel
and of Jesus are not like ordinary stories. They are not fiction; nor are they just historical accounts of something that happened a long time ago. They are stories recorded with the specific intention of having a direct influence on the religious life of all those who might read or hear them. To use the terminology of contemporary German theologians, they are not just *geschichte*; they are *heilsgeschichte*. These stories which are the source material of our religion, are the *heilsgeschichte*, the salvation-history, of the early Jewish and Christian people. They record what those early people believed to be incidents through which God's redeeming grace may be seen.

As such these stories are also the salvation-history, the *heilsgeschichte*, of present-day believers in the Jewish and Christian faiths. We who believe, believe in the same God as did Abraham and Isaac. We may not believe the same things as they did, but we believe in the same God. For this reason the salvation-history of the Israelites and of the early Church, the Old Testament and the New Testament, is our salvation-history as well. At least this is how religious believers behave towards the scriptures. They too see in them evidence of God's redeeming grace and they accept them as their own
personal heils geschichte, as part of the history of their own salvation. Within the context of Christianity, this decision to accept the scriptures in this way is an essential part of the religious development of a person.

This was one of the main issues of protest at the time of the Reformation, although it was not long before Protestantism's obsession with the scriptures brought about a distortion of the original views of movement. The tendency within the Protestant churches has been to elevate the scriptures to a status where it becomes sacrilegious even to contemplate making a decision about whether or not there is something holy and sacred about them, whether or not they are to be accepted as a means of the revelation of God.

The interpretation of the scriptures depends primarily on an awareness of some definite attitude being adopted towards them. Nobody can be instructed to believe the scriptures. If a person cannot see in the scriptures anything of personal religious importance, then he cannot commence to interpret them - at least not as scripture. They are just another group of stories. The scriptures can only be offered to people so that
they may see through them, not only the heilsgeschichte of an earlier people, but also their own personal heilsgeschichte. This is the foundation of biblical interpretation - to be able to see for one's self the religious significance of the literature, rather than be told that it is of religious significance.

The literature of theology is not in this same category. It is not anybody's heilsgeschichte. Rather it is an analysis of the key concepts used in the language of religion. Our analysis of the concept of God, (1) however, suggested that it was an unintelligible concept. If this analysis is correct then consideration must be given to the general repercussions this has for theology and religion. If the concept of God is unintelligible, does this imply that religion is an irrational activity?

In answer to this I find some sympathy with Professor Hare's contribution to the University discussion on "Theology and Falsification". (2) Hare does not argue his case well but the notion of an inexplicable

(1) See Chap. 1.
(2) Reprinted in Flew & MacIntyre (eds.): New Essays in Philosophical Theology.
blik is to the point. He uses the case of an Oxford undergraduate who is convinced that all the dons want to murder him. No amount of evidence to the contrary will change his mind. Such a primitive attitude, Hare calls a blik. In this case the student's blik is quite irrational. Hare argues that it is through different bliks of this kind that we come to have different attitudes towards life and the world. This seems to be his way of resolving the dilemma in Professor John Wisdom's famous parable of the invisible gardener. (1)

In the same University discussion, however, Basil Mitchell offers a more attractive solution than Hare's. He tells another parable about a resistance-worker in an occupied country who meets a Stranger who impresses him deeply. The Stranger claims to be a fellow resistance-worker. Some evidence supports this. Other evidence seems incompatible with it. This is where Mitchell's account seems preferable to Hare's. Mitchell's resistance-worker is not irrational in his behaviour. There is evidence for and against the Stranger and he commits himself one way or the other,

whereas Hare's student is quite irrational in his belief that the don's want to murder him. Yet both these accounts allow for the possibility of one person having a quite different attitude to something, compared with another person.

It is not that religion is irrational or contrary to all that is rational. The difficulty is that a religious outlook on life is an extremely primitive thing. By that I mean that it is not influenced by great quantities of evidence. (Evidence may, of course, affect the substance of one's beliefs, but that is a different matter). A religious attitude is something which people either have, or do not have. It is not something that can be taught, though it may be induced. Converts are seldom won by rational argument. Rather, they see in religion the possibility of fulfilling something they feel as a primitive need. In other words, religion is a neurosis, to use Freud's terminology. It is a compulsive behaviour pattern directed towards establishing emotional security in the believer.

The obvious question that arises out of this discussion is that of the existence of God. Does God exist or does he not exist? According to our analysis
of existence in Section V there is no ground for saying that God does not exist. The unintelligibility of the concept of God clouds the issue since it cannot be known what it is like for God to exist. This follows from the fact that the meaning of the existential quantifier must be derived from the function over which it quantifies, and if the function is unintelligible, then so too is the notion of existence in relation to God. But that does not establish God's non-existence. Nor does the Hare-Mitchell-Freud view establish God's non-existence. Rather, it suggests that God is some sort of mental construct whose ontological status may be compared with fictional characters. At least, this is the conclusion that Freud draws.

Certainly there are some characteristics which God shares with fictional characters. God cannot be confined to any particular space; He cannot be touched; He cannot be seen and so on. Insofar as God is not like ordinary humans, he is like a fictional character. But there the comparison ends. Men do not behave towards fictional characters in anything like the way they behave towards God. They make sacrifices of time and energy and money for the sake of God. Believers are prepared to orientate their whole lives around the demands and
commands of their God. This is not the way one behaves towards a fictional character. God is believed to be a being who is directly concerned with the believers' lives. Insofar as he is a dominant force in their lives, God is a real being.

Some may protest on Freud's behalf that this is the very thing that Freud meant when he said that religion is a neurosis; namely, that the believer attributes an unwarranted ontological reality to the mental construct which is the centre of his neurosis. In other words, God is a fiction, but the religious person behaves towards him as though he were more than a fiction.

The religious person behaves in this way, however, because to him God is not a fictional character. He is real. He is a dominating force in his life. He is his personal God. What more is required of God to be able to call him real? Here we run out of explanations. To the believer there is nothing more real. To the unbeliever it is unintelligible.

This view of God will be considered by many to be an effrontery to Christianity. This is because it is the tendency of institutionalized religion to deprive the individual of his right and responsibility to discover God for himself. Institutionalized religions present
God as something of a fait accompli. This can never be so, for the only God that there is, is the God in whom people believe. Professor Paul Tillich, who has been one of the dominant figures in the so-called New Reformation, has continually attacked the view that religion, and hence theology, can be taught as a body of doctrine. In an address to a gathering of clergy, he once put it this way:

"The question cannot be how do we communicate the gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method. To communicate the gospel means putting it before the people so that they are able to decide for or against it. The Christian gospel is a matter of decision; it is to be accepted or rejected. All that we who communicate the gospel can do is to make possible a genuine decision. We all know the pain we suffer when we meet people who reject the gospel... or meet other people who are not able to make a genuine decision about it since the gospel was never properly communicated to them. Another experience, which is but slightly less painful, is to meet those who have accepted it without ever having been able to make a decision about it because it never was a matter of doubt. It came to them as a matter of habit, custom or social conduct. This the gospel can never be. True communication of the gospel means making possible a definite decision for or against it." (1)

The decision of which Tillich speaks is not the same as that for which Billy Graham calls - although they are obviously related. The decision of which Tillich

(1) Reprinted in Union Theological Seminary Review, 1950
speaks is more an acknowledgement that one is able to see in the literature of Christianity, in the scriptures, the revelation of God's redeeming grace. That is, it is an acknowledgement that one accepts this as one's own heilsgeschichte, as part of the history of one's own salvation.

Within this context the existence of God is not a problem. For the believer, God is the presupposition of his whole belief. Because he believes in God, he participates in the religion. For the theologian, there is little point in pursuing the issue of the existence of God. Since the concept of God is unintelligible, he does not even know what it means to say that God exists. For the non-believer, all he can say is that he, as an individual, has no God.

It should be clear that some avenues of interpretation lie open to me; others do not. Clearly, the fundamentalist view that the scriptures are an accurate record of the activities of a God who is a super-human, super-clever being, is not open to me. My doctrine of God is such that he is discovered through the scriptures, rather than being the originator of the scriptures - though there is a sense in which God
(other people's God) is that too. The authority of God is something which each individual believer must grant to his God. The authority of God is a consequence of belief, not a cause of it.

Perhaps the most fruitful avenue for me to take is to view the entire scriptures as a series of parables. They are comprised of stories of men who had found their God and worship him. Nations and individuals shared their belief in God with each other as a means of spiritual support. The stories have been selected not because they are of events that actually happened (though many of them did happen) but because they are instructive in some way about the relationship between men and God. Some may be more helpful to me; others may be more helpful to somebody else. But in any event, they are a means of revelation. Whether or not it is a matter of coincidence that large numbers of people find the same literature the most helpful means of this kind, is something that will have to be discussed at another time. It may well be that too much importance is placed on the possession of a common source of revelation for this is one of the greatest barriers between the religions of the world. It is also one of the reasons why many people belong to no religion.
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