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Linguistic Analysis and Christian Belief

THE prodigious output of Continental theologians and philosophers, together with the tortuous volumes of their American offspring have for long dominated the theological scene. The most that the Anglo-Saxon has been able to claim was that he was a painstaking Biblical scholar not given to extremes. Certainly the restored emphasis upon the Bible has had a ready welcome in these shores. The hearing of the total Biblical message has been more common. But Biblical theology has two dangers. It talks its own private Biblical language, and it often ignores the legitimate questions of historicity and fact. The dogmatic and philosophical trends on the Continent have had no great influence on Christian thought in this country. *Honest to God* at the popular level revealed both the limited attraction and the general repulsion of existentialism. Existentialism usually founders on questions of historical fact, and flourishes by reducing the ontological to the psychological. But often the results are very illuminating and helpful. It helps a man to locate points in his experience where he may be aware of God; for example the talk about "depth" was a valuable directive to many inquiring minds that read the Bishop's book. But all the time questions of clarity and meaning, and of the factual basis of these things keep nagging the mind. "Is this *all* we mean by God?" Add to this the quite inexcusable obscurity of some theologians' writings, especially when they are trying to be Biblical, and the theological scene becomes a jungle.

Fortunately the inherently empirical bias in our ways of thought are beginning to influence the theological field. It has taken a long time for linguistic analysis to begin to have its much needed influence, but the signs are now becoming encouraging. Professor I. T. Ramsey has established himself as a clear exponent of the logic of religious language and as the dispeller of many unnecessary fogs in the understanding of Christian doctrines. However, two recent books suggest that the breath of fresh air is becoming a cleansing wind. *The Logic of Self-Involvement* by Donald Evans (35/-) and *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* by Paul van Buren (25/-) both published in the Library of Philosophy and Theology by the S.C.M. Press, are in different ways very welcome publica-

tions. Dr. van Buren writes of linguistic analysis (p. 15) "This way of doing philosophy challenges the Christian to think clearly, speak simply, and say what he means without using words in unusual ways, unless he makes it quite clear what he is doing." These are welcome words, especially from someone trained both on the Continent and in the United States. Dr. van Buren takes his lessons from logical empiricists and tries to apply them to making the Gospel intelligible in this increasingly secularized day. Dr. Evans on the other hand is a first-class linguistic philosopher who makes a major contribution to the philosophy of this school before any religious use is made of it. The two books are in a different class, van Buren is a theologian and amateur philosopher, using new tools in evangelism; Evans is the professional philosopher who is also apparently a first rate professional Biblical scholar to judge by the calibre of the theological half of his book. But we shall approach the two works to see them as complementary to one another in revealing the uses of linguistic analysis in the service of contemporary Christian thinking.

In order to appreciate the context in which they are writing it is necessary to recount the emphases that have arisen during the history of analytic philosophy, and which should guide the thinking of the Christian apologist at the present time. In the early part of this century Moore and Russell were concerned with the nature of sense-experience. At the time this was an interest at the opposite pole to the prevailing idealistic philosophy. They may not have solved the problem of how we can know our experience is of something outside us, but they certainly established once again a concern that our thinking should be firmly rooted in the facts of sense-experience. In the 1930's this emphasis came to flower in the form of the Verification Principle which in its pure form insisted that sentences could only be verified if sense-experience was in some way expressed in them. So for example the language of religion was the use of certain words in certain postures in certain buildings. The language of morals was simply the account of particular modes of behaviour with the additional feature of the private opinion of praise or disgust. This emphasis upon the need to have and to recognise a basis in sense-experience remains today, although the extreme position which ruled out any other wording as totally without meaning has faded out. So the first demand of linguistic analysis from the religious writer is for him to locate the basis of his language in sense-data.

As time went on it was realised that languages on different subjects worked in different ways. This was hardly very surprising, but consequently the interest of philosophers was turned to other things. First of all the need to separate out the different universes of discourses, called by philosophers in their more humorous

moments "language games". As they pointed out words in one context could mean something quite different in another, and many unnecessary confusions had arisen in the past by following the implications and associations of a word in one context which strictly speaking were only appropriate in another context. Therefore another point became clear, that the internal logic of any one universe of discourse may be very different from the logic of another. The stress then came to be upon the study of the logical structures of different languages. This facilitated the study of the meanings of words in their varying contexts and uses. One point frequently made was that although sentences may have the same grammatical form their logic may be very different. For example "the house is red", "the child is good" and "God is love" each belong to very different language-games and their structures vary immensely although grammatically they are the same. So the second demand of linguistic philosophy is that the universe of discourse should be clearly marked out and that the structure of its inner logic be displayed and its working explained.

A third point has arisen in recent years so far as the attitude of the linguistic philosopher is concerned. It is now tacitly assumed that each universe of discourse can be studied independently of each other. Hence the description, "language-game". The implication being that as many different games can be played at a sports centre without overlapping or interfering with one another so each universe of discourse is a self-contained unit. It is just precisely in the rejection of this point that the break through in religious apologetics may well lie! A new tolerance has been adopted towards religious language, it is to be studied for its own sake, to make it clear what it is. But this new generosity and good will which treats each language game as self-justifying and autonomous should not be welcomed at the expense of questions of truth and justification in fact. Questions of logic and meaning can be tackled without raising these other questions, but as Dr. Evans says (p. 24) "questions of theological truth are not replaceable by questions concerning the internal logical grammar of Biblical language". The users of other language games, legal, moral or scientific may acquiesce in this philosophical treatment of what they say, but theology inherently claims to express the truth about the way all things ultimately are. Dr. Farrer says in his introduction to the second edition of his monumental defence of theism, *Finite and Infinite*, that "speech is the very form of our linguistic activity, and linguistic activity is but a specialised type of intentional action in general; which as it were attains to explicitness in the spoken mode". Ordinary language of everyday use, quite apart from the specialised language games that grow up out of it, is a

lead into the questions of existence and truth that form the legitimate concern of Christian apologetics.

Analysis demands a rigorous demarcation of universes of discourse. But the apologist after having done the clarification work on his religious language will want to show that the religious attitude, standpoint and language is the most plausible and comprehensive one for man, who is the articulate part of the totality of nature.

Dr. Evans in *The Logic of Self-Involvement* makes a very notable contribution to pure linguistic analysis. He clarifies the logical structure of a large area of ordinary language which is self-involving. He studied under the late Prof. J. L. Austin, one of the most exacting and pedantic of Oxford philosophers. In the first half of the book he shows the ways in which our speech reveals our self-involvement, with people, situations and things, in so far as it is linked with (1) our future actions (Performative language), (2) our attitudes, and (3) our feelings. Performative language, which reveals the speakers self-involvement with his future conduct, may be divided into five categories of which two are of particular importance, Behabitives and Commissives. Examples of the former are "I thank you" or "I apologise for my behaviour". In such statements the speaker implies a self-involving relationship with the person he addresses and that this relationship will be seen in his future behaviour. In a Commissive the speaker may involve himself in much more than a verbal way, for example when he says, "I pledge you my loyalty and support".

Dr. Evans then analyses expressions of feeling, and in particular the behaviour that reveals inner feelings. There are symptoms of feelings, trembling hands; manifestations of feelings, dragging one's feet; expressions of feelings, laughing; and reports of feelings "I felt annoyed". Thirdly he deals with expressions of attitude, and he makes an original contribution to analysis with the idea of "onlooks", as opposed to opinions or views. Unlike these or "outlooks", an onlook involves the idea of commitment. For example "I look on God as an all-knowing Judge to be feared" or "I look on life as a game". These utterances are parabolic and also commissive. To adopt the onlook which says "the world is the creation of God" is to be highly self-involved, with a certain pattern of appropriate behaviour, feelings and attitudes. In particular it involves looking on oneself as God's steward of nature and as the articulate worshipper of God from within nature. To say "God is my Creator", is to acknowledge this role which God has assigned.

In the second part of the book Dr. Evans uses the detailed analysis of the first part to illuminate the Biblical language about Creation. The choice of doctrine is important for it is about the nature of the universe as a whole, its origin in God's power, and

man's place within it. This is of immediate interest to the agnostic for whom the same field of data is available. The Biblical treatment of Creation is the elaboration of the religious onlook on the universe. There are four marks of a religious onlook. First of all it is parabolic in form, and it is meta-physical in nature. The object of the onlook is taken to be more than physical, more than just sense-experience, therefore it is meta-physical. The only way to attempt a description of the meta-physical nature of all things, is by the use of parables in which the unobservable elements, the open texture of all things, are suggested by referring to the attitudes and responses appropriate to them. For example the prodigal son's onlook on his father and his subsequent behaviour is a parabolic way of suggesting the object of the religious onlook. Secondly, the religious onlook is transcendental, it involves the religious man in unlimited trust, awe, humility and submission, in other words in "worship" of the meta-physical. Thirdly, this onlook is believed to approximate to God's onlook and therefore the right onlook. Finally the religious onlook includes a belief that help is given to sustain the attitude and behaviour appropriate, so prayer is natural.

Secular onlooks may be formed from a variety of the paler shades of each of these four points. Or they can in theory be the pure, flat and non-expressive kind in which everything is simply looked on as it is, with the additional but detachable "I'm for it", or "It is important". For example death or sex can be described in flat biological terms (the pure secular onlook) or they can be included in such secular self-involving onlooks as "Death is the mockery of human hopes" or "Sex is a sordid animal urge".

How can we "prove" the plausibility of the religious onlook, or how can we justify it? This is not really in Dr. Evans' field but it is our concern. First of all a man does have onlooks which generate certain feelings, behaviour which is appropriate follows, and performative language does express the self-involving relationship which he has with people, situations and things. Nothing is *necessarily* outside someone's onlook. The clock on the mantelpiece may be linked by many strands of association to its owner and forms part of his onlook on the world, he is self-involved with it. The flat "no-onlook" onlook is a purely theoretical construction. Words are deeds. They commit men and express attitudes. Dr. Farrer would agree. Secondly since some kind of onlook which embraces our utterances, feelings and attitudes is part of being human, therefore that onlook is better which enables human life to be more human. The religious onlook succeeds here. As Dr. Farrer says "It is no trifling difference whether we value our neighbour simply for what he is, or for the relation in which he stands to the will of God," (*The Freedom of the Will* p. 309).

What is a man? He is not reducible to the sense-data we know about him, any more than "I" or my "Self" is reducible to the sense-experiences "I" or the "Self" have. The self is not a logical construction but a meta-physical entity. This is a strong point in the theist's criticism of the reductionism of some logicians. Metaphysics must not be fed into the mill of logic (cf. *Prospect for Metaphysics,* ed. Ramsey, pp. 178-93). The appropriate response to a person which makes him more human comes from recognising the "more-than-sense-data" elements in him. That response can best be described by the New Testament word "agape" which expresses the self-involving nature of the response as well as its unlimited extent. Therefore, thirdly, that onlook which puts man in an ennobling setting expressing that "something extra" about him, and which generates the appropriate attitude to the rest of nature of which he is the articulate part, that onlook, has a strong claim to being justified. Speaking-man is the articulate part of nature, and according to the religious onlook in the Christian doctrine of Creation, he is therefore the steward of nature. Being the steward he is therefore under God and being articulate he is His worshipper "par excellence". The Christian apologist cannot rest content with the separation of the language-games from the man who plays them. The two are one, and the onlook which incorporates other people, nature, and my Self in a humanising way has a strong claim to being the right one. The "something extra" which other people, natural objects and the self have in common is denominated "God" on the logical map. The empirical entities are the occasion of a need to speak of Him, so the demand for sense-data in religious language is met. The nature of God is suggested by parables. These parables encourage the responses to others, to natural objects and to the Self, which do justice to the humanising goal of man's self-involving relationship with the world around him. The onlook which is meta-physical, transcendental, parabolic, authoritative and gracious (the religious onlook) covers these elements and this goal.

Dr. van Buren in *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* takes the next steps following from pure apologetics. He elucidates what compels a Christian to opt for the Christian view. Then he shows how Christian logic works, and finally he explains what the logically odd but distinctively Christian doctrinal statements mean. There is much else of considerable interest in the book, the interpretation of Patristic logic, the attack on the extremist existential theologians for their lack of concern for the historical Jesus, and the critique of orthodox dogmatics, but the avowed concern to use linguistic analysis in making the Gospel intelligible in this secular age is what chiefly concerns us.

Van Buren says Christology, not Theology, should be the

apologist's starting point. He consciously disagrees with the Bishop of Woolwich on this, as well as in his preference for logical analysis to existentialism. Christology contains the two realms of the human and the divine. We know a certain amount about the human Jesus of Nazareth and must start with Him. The most intelligible word with which to describe Jesus is "freedom", He was the Free Man. This idea is easily translated into terms of ordinary human conduct that the agnostic secular man and the Christian "secular" man can agree upon. Freedom is not the consequence of the rather vague idea of "faith", rather it is the meaning of it. Nothing could bind Jesus, physically, economically or intellectually. Whatever happened at Easter it is clear that from the moment the freedom of Jesus became the freedom of the Apostles. Then through the medium of the apostles his freedom became contagious for men of subsequent generations. The Gospel in its secular meaning is a new historical perspective founded upon and governed by the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In the terms of Dr. Evans it is "a new onlook". The historical life of Jesus is the occasion of a man adopting an onlook which imparts to him a freedom similar to that of Jesus.

The historical, or human element of freedom is thus far clear. But the Christian affirms his belief by making some such utterance as "Jesus is Lord" or "Jesus is risen". The word "Jesus" affirms the empirical basis of the disclosure or onlook. The word "is" in this context comes from Jewish and Hebrew language about the End, "the Kingdom *is* at hand". "Lord" or "risen" are words which at least express a total commitment to a perspective reaching out for the divine onlook. So in these typical Christian confessions the empirical and the meta-physical elements of the Christian's freedom are expressed, and these correspond to the human and divine in Christ. In this way analysis makes plain the historical basis of the Gospel and also gives an intelligible secular account of the "divine" element of freedom. The freedom of Christ is worked out in terms of a Christology of call and response.

As well as clarifying the empirical anchorage of religious assertions, the first demand of logical analysis, this example above illustrates the second demand to make plain the structure of the logic of the religious universe of discourse. Religious language is concerned to generate again the moments of insight and commitment that originally gave rise to the religious onlook. That onlook arose from some sense-experience, it was rooted in an empirical situation where the "something-extra" about the object or person involved became apparent. At that moment an onlook something like an undifferentiated theism was adopted. The further Christian historical perspective may have come later. But in each case the

roots were empirical. To generate again the original moment of disclosure, a word which qualifies an appropriate empirical word is brought alongside it. The two words together may fit uneasily, this is deliberate. The example "Jesus is Lord" given by van Buren is an easy one. The two main words are on different planes. The one empirical, the other in the Christian context is metaphysical. Together the words call to mind again for the one who says them seriously a set of historical incidents connected with Jesus, and they awaken the attitude of submission, trust and worship towards the metaphysical, an attitude controlled by that of Jesus. The word "Lord" is an appropriate metaphysical one to cover this attitude. Religious language is not a flat descriptive language although grammatically it may look like it.

Serious as well as amusing errors have been made by ignorance of the logical structure of religious language. Arius, for example, jumped on to the wrong end of a metaphor about sonship and he flew off into heresy. Men still invite the charge of heresy by taking the Virgin Birth as a medical subject and then attributing it to the primitive pious imagination. Instead it should be seen as a means of generating a disclosure around a contemplation of the more-than-human origins of the freedom and life of Jesus. "Eternal fire" is not like an all-night burning fire. The success of preaching hell-fire in a by-gone day came from a true sense of the logic of "eternal fire", it is a way of evoking a sense of the awfulness of separation from the One who is Eternal Life. It is a negative way of expressing the wonder of knowing the God of Love. Arguments on the subject are usually based on the assumption that Hell is an account of a place for which Dante is the chief guide to tourist parties.

Finally, when the basis of doctrines in sense experience and the logical structure of doctrinal language has been made plain, then comes the time for the exposition of doctrines in the light of the insights gained. Existentialism's attractiveness has largely lain in its ability to re-interpret cold doctrinal statements in the living terms of either psychology or sociology. But logical analysis performs the very necessary function of showing that characteristically religious words stand logically *beyond* the areas of these other universes of discourse, and that they are reduced to them at their peril. This in essence was Alasdair MacIntyre's charge of atheism against most modern Protestant theologians, in his article in *Encounter*. Dr. van Buren excels when he is elucidating the meaning of the various Christian doctrines. He is careful to include in his analytic exposition the reformed doctrines of sin, justification and sanctification as well as the catholic doctrines of the Creed.

One example must be sufficient, that of the Trinity. The three

Persons of the Trinity are the Heavenly Father, the Only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit. The ideas of a father and a son are easy to grasp. Perhaps that of spirit is harder but most people think of a controlling attitude behind a person's actions. In each case these empirical terms are qualified by a word or words that generate an insight into the unlimited and metaphysical affirmation that takes its shape in the religious onlook. A father is an over-all figure who presides in a kindly way over the little kingdoms of our families. To confess one's belief in the Heavenly Father is to say you share in the one complete orientation to the whole world which is the divine onlook. To believe in "Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord" is to say that as a son is the image of his father, and perhaps a more intelligible one, so Jesus of Nazareth is the norm for the right response to the Father. His life lived in freedom and love towards men is the pattern for this single orientation to the world. Lastly the spirit of an action is what controls and informs it. To believe in the Holy Spirit is to say that this orientation to the world, this onlook, this historical perspective has grasped you. You are free to acknowledge Jesus as the norm, and to live accordingly.

Altogether the effect of linguistic analysis upon theological thinking can only be for good. There has been too much truth in the saying that "most modern fiction is theology, and most modern theology is fiction." The preacher today knows only too well when he is just talking words and debasing them, but he is not encouraged when he reads many theological books and commentaries. Too often what passes for theology is the history of other people's ideas. Nothing seems to grow up from solid facts in a rational way. Logical empiricism makes the preacher ask, "What situation did this arise out of? Why did this man say this? Why did this Biblical writer write this? What do I want to say? Why am I compelled to say it? How shall I say it?" With the words of Evans, van Buren, Ramsey and others to help one's thinking the preacher knows what questions to ask to get to the heart of each statement. He is better equipped to distinguish different ways of talking. Dr. Evans in particular gives a very helpful analysis of the structure of parables and how they work. Together with the Biblical work of Jeremias on the parables such an analysis puts the preacher much nearer to the mind that created the gospel parables. There is no doubt that parables, and the art of balancing them are an essential part of Christian language. Dr. Farrer's *Saving Belief* is an extended and illuminating exposition of Christian doctrines and the parables that form their language. His chapter in that book on "Sin and Redemption" is a particularly good example of what the mind equipped with the lessons of

analysis can do to expose the heart of traditional language about the atonement.

Linguistic analysis is not opposed to existentialism, only to its sometimes pretentious and meaningless language. But it is an absolutely necessary preliminary to it. In several ways it leads naturally into it with its concern for the contexts, settings and situations out of which religious language arises. The logic of self-involvement should give the necessarily precise framework on which a careful statement of existential self-involvement can be built. What does need doing, and what perhaps only Dr. Evans could do adequately, is to go on from his analysis of the internal logic and meaning of religious language to pure apologetics to justify the truth of the language. A few thoughts in this direction have been at the heart of this article. Someone qualified to do so could explore this wide open field and produce a very persuasive work of philosophical theology.

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