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Logical Analysis, Theological Positivism, and Metaphysics

C. DOUGLAS JAY

A S the prospect for mankind becomes increasingly uncertain, some who are concerned about the fate of modern philosophy have been led to inquire into the possible relation between the "abolition of man" in common life and the rejection of metaphysics in academic life.[1] This is not to say that the contemporary revolution in philosophy is responsible for the present crisis in human affairs, for that would imply that philosophic theory has exercised a far greater influence on the general public than it ever has. But it is arguable that the increasing loss of freedom and of such social virtues as tolerance is the effect not simply of a particular school of philosophy but of the widespread scepticism as to the power of the mind to know reality, which characterizes the modern world. This general scepticism has been promoted to some extent by positivistic trends in philosophic schools, but it may be equally true that the schools have reflected the general ethos. At any rate, it appears that many of those whose business it is to deal with ideas at the popular level—journalists, social workers and the products of teachers' colleges, for example—simply assume that in matters of religion and morals there is no fundamental encounter with reality, and that the question of a truth claim does not arise. Since metaphysics involves a robust belief that truth can be known about realities which transcend mundane experience, and since belief in human freedom also assumes that man can come to terms with the real, it may not be accidental that the denial of metaphysics has coincided with an age which is progressively denying human freedom.

It may not be accidental either that a theological movement which shares this scepticism about man's ability to treat ultimate questions has also coincided with the denial of metaphysics. If we cannot say anything significant or meaningful about the transcendent, the only way to avoid complete agnosticism is for the transcendent to reveal itself in some way distinctly different from our own forms of thought. It is shown to be different by the fact that the faith which alone can receive revelation is dependent upon a confession of our utter incompetence in the face of ultimate questions. "The negative point of contact," writes Brunner, "is a consciousness of vital need . . . " "But faith is certain that revelation alone enables us rightly to apprehend that need, that vital incapacity, which is the presupposition of faith; and that thereby revelation itself begets its own presupposition in the

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1. Cf. N. A. Scott, "Poetry and the Crisis of Metaphysics," in *The Christian Scholar*, vol. 36, No. 4, Dec. 1953.

crucial sense."[2] This leaves us of course without any real point of contact between the mind to which faith in revelation has been given and the mind to which it has not. Thus we have a theological positivism as a counterpart of philosophical positivism; on this account, revelation is *sui generis*—no philosophical enquiry can be strictly relevant to it, for reason and revelation cannot meet. Indeed, there can be no analogies between revelation and any form of thought and experience. Man's duty, as Barth interprets it, is not to seek truth but to render obedience.

It is not surprising that some "crisis theologians" actually welcome the philosophical attack upon metaphysics on the ground that it frees theology from the danger of invasion by philosophical speculation, and that it may lead man to that confession of incapacity which Brunner has declared to be the precondition of faith. This welcoming of philosophical scepticism as an ally of faith is not without precedent; even David Hume contended that "to be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian."[3] One finds an echo of this in the Foreword of the recent Canadian publication *The Light and the Flame* where, after a description of the abdication of the attempt to answer ultimate questions on the part of much contemporary philosophy, it is affirmed that this opens the door to theology to treat such questions: "Philosophy's necessity is theology's opportunity."[4] Again, in a recent collection of essays by scholars who have in common an indebtedness to the philosophy of analysis and a concern for theological questions, Thomas McPherson contends that positivists may be the enemies of theology but the friends of religion. "By showing, in their own way, the absurdity of what theologians try to utter, positivists have helped to suggest that religion belongs to the sphere of the unutterable." By clarifying its true nature, positivists have "done a service to religion."[5]

It is important to note, however, that the contemporary philosophical position we have to consider is no longer accurately described as logical positivism but rather as logical analysis (or logical empiricism or linguistic analysis), and that both positions differ from the empiricism of Hume. Hume represents the first stage of the modern empiricist challenge to religious belief. Here the attack was directed in the main against natural or rational theology. Hume reasoned that arguments which start from an empirical premise can yield only a probable conclusion and therefore God's necessary existence cannot be proved. Natural theology is thus a mistake; the Christian cannot *prove* his faith—and many have welcomed Hume's own conclusion that religion finds its "best and most solid foundation in faith and divine revelation."

The next phase of empiricism, represented by the logical positivists, was

2. *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 20.
3. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. K. Smith, 1947, p. 228.
4. R. C. Chalmers and J. A. Irving (eds.), p. xi.
5. "Religion as the Inexpressible," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 141.

more radical. The function of philosophy is here interpreted to be not that of distinguishing true assertions from false ones, but meaningful assertions from meaningless ones. According to their verification principle, a statement is literally meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. We are restricted by this principle to two kinds of assertions: to be meaningful, either they must be matter-of-fact sentences such as those of science and common sense which can be verified by ordinary sense perception, or they must be mere tautologies which cannot be confuted by experience. All other assertions are dismissed as nonsense; that is, they cannot be verified by appeal to sense experience and are therefore without significance. Obviously, this will include all statements of metaphysics, ethics or theology. Logical positivists thus challenged not the arguments by which religious beliefs were supported but their very claim to significance. No statement about either the existence or the non-existence of God could be meaningful because it lacks "literal" or "factual" meaning.

It became apparent, however, that the methodological principle of logical positivism itself could not be defended on this basis, and that the meaning of "meaning" had been too arbitrarily restricted. Thus a third stage of empiricism has emerged, in which propositions are no longer simply classified as meaningful or meaningless, but are classified into different categories according to their particular logical form. Instead of ruling out theological propositions *a priori* as meaningless, the logical analyst asks, "What is the logic of theological statements?" or "What is the function of God-propositions?"

It is important that philosophers of religion today recognize that they now have to contend not with logical positivism but with this later development, lest they be as wide of the mark as Joad's *Critique of Logical Positivism* now is. The contemporary philosopher defines his task as that of neutral analysis. He is willing to concede meaning to sentences which do not state facts—moral judgments, for instance. If they are not statements of fact, he will try to show what kind of statements they are. The result of this philosophy, as Wittgenstein has said, "is not a number of 'philosophical propositions,' but to make propositions clear."[6]

Let us grant at once that the philosophy of analysis has had real utility for the study of religion. It has clarified our understanding of the profound logical differences between the scientific and the religious uses of language; and the Christian philosopher and theologian will ignore these differences at his peril. The Christian may learn from Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind*, for instance, to expect Christian language to display a logical complexity appropriate to its theme. Contemporary philosophers have changed the emphasis from epistemology to semantics. Instead of asking, "How can we know and how can our knowledge be validated?" they ask, "How is it possible to express what we know, and to what extent is our knowledge

6. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Kegan Paul, London, 1922, p. 77.

limited by our means of expression?"[7] As Professor Urban has suggested, it is another way of stating the Kantian problem.

Our language, made to deal with the material world, the world of phenomena, has constantly been extended for discourse about the noumenal. Kant asked the question whether knowledge in this sphere is possible. He might just as well have asked whether discourse about such objects is meaningful or intelligible.[8]

The philosophical emphasis on semantics has compelled theologians to reckon seriously with the general problem of language as a vehicle of knowledge, and the particular problem of how finite man can talk about the infinite and transcendent God. Theologians have traditionally dealt with the problem by resorting to analogy. We say that God is personal, that He is like a father who loves his children. When the philosophical analyst examines this analogy, however, as do Antony Flew and Ian Crombie in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*,[9] he exposes the dangers of analogical thinking. When he asks how facts of evil are compatible with belief in God's fatherly love, we qualify the analogy by saying that God's love is not a merely human love, or that it is inscrutable. But this is to "erode" the analogy as Flew puts it. When confronted with apparently contradictory evidence, the Christian modifies his analogies but allegedly does not admit that any evidence can finally falsify his belief. But if theological doctrines cannot be discounted by any evidence whatever, if they cannot be tested by any generally accepted procedure, the philosophical analyst wants to know how they can be accepted as assertions about reality. Are they not rather expressions of attitude, for instance?

The theologian of course cannot yield at this point. He may agree with Ryle that theological assertions are characterized by a different, more complex logic than scientific assertions, but he insists that they refer to a reality "behind the scenes." The theologian is inescapably committed to the crucial metaphysical position that though religious language uses analogies from the spatio-temporal realm, there must be situations not restricted to the spatio-temporal elements they contain. If this claim that there are facts besides what is observed (seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelt) is to be expressed, however, it will require language that from the standpoint of perception is logically odd and complex. The theologian ought to learn this lesson from the logical analyst, that if he is to claim that certain situations are not exhausted by what is perceived—and that these are the characteristically religious situations—the language in which he expresses this claim will be characterized by logical improprieties as compared with perceptual language. And if theological statements really are odd and complex in this sense, it may be that an analysis that is geared to straight-

7. *Vide* W. G. Pollard, "An Inquiry into the Status of Non-Conceptual Experience," *The Christian Scholar*, vol. 38, No. 1, March 1955.
8. *Language and Reality* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1939), p. 15.
9. Pp. 96ff. Cf. A. MacIntyre, *Metaphysical Beliefs*, pp. 181 ff.

forward sense assertion can never do justice to them, especially to their claim to assert something about transcendent reality. As Basil Mitchell has observed, "an analysis tailor-made to current philosophical fashions may prove dangerously constricting. In the interests of logical classification the Faith may be drastically distorted."[10]

The logical analyst will likely object here that we are still confusing him with the logical positivist. He admits that logical positivism had a metaphysic; but he himself claims to approach theological assertions with no such bias but with only a method of analysis, and is quite prepared to grant that they may be meaningful. But does he grant that theological sentences are able to be not only meaningful but *true*? For the theologian and the metaphysician this is the crux of the matter; and we must ask with Michael Foster, "Unless modern philosophers concede this also, are they so far removed from Logical Positivism as they claim to be?"[11] And indeed, can the philosophy of analysis avoid metaphysical assumptions any more than any other philosophy? Some of its advocates contend that their method leads to poetry and what Professor John Irving has defined as "syntactical mysticism.[12]" Is not this itself a metaphysical position?[13] It may be that there is no single metaphysic assumed by philosophers of analysis; the contributors to *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* seem to demonstrate that the method is compatible with a number of basic positions. We have conceded that it may have a creative relation to the Christian faith. But we must continue to be wary of anything approaching an alliance with a reductive type of philosophy which rules out metaphysics, if our contention above is valid that theology cannot avoid concern with metaphysical questions. If metaphysical utterance is rendered meaningless because it cannot be verified so must theological utterance, if it purports to say something about reality. In spite of their claims to neutrality, it appears that in the main the philosophers of analysis in effect rule out the possibility of language bearing any valid transcendental reference. And this affects biblical religion and theology as radically as it affects metaphysics.

We dare to suggest then that there is something radically wrong with the logical analysts' interpretation of language. They have rightly warned of the dangers of an analogical use of language; but is such a use not inescapable in the end? Croce, writing in 1901 before Russell's *Principia Mathematica*, declared that all language is metaphorical, or none is.[14] Croce was no more a religious philosopher than are most philosophers of analysis, but he points to their fundamental error about the nature of language itself

10. "Modern Philosophy and Theology," *The Socratic* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1952), pp. 9–10.
11. *Mystery and Philosophy* (SCM, London, 1957), p. 15n.
12. J. A. Irving, "Logical Analysis and Mysticism" in *The Light and the Flame*, p. 104.
13. Cf. Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 630; "The theory of meaning which denies meaning to metaphysical propositions is itself a metaphysic."
14. Indeed, as Urban, Cassirer and Emmet have pointed out, symbol and analogy are indispensable even in scientific constructions.

which is crucial for Christian thinkers; for this theory of language fails to explain the kind of experience that to the Christian is of central importance.

Urban contends that the rejection of metaphysics by modern philosophy was brought on by an increasing literalism, a failure to recognize the inevitably metaphorical character of all language, and that metaphysical statements in particular cannot be reduced to literal truth.[15] Though the logical analysts do not rule out metaphysical statements *a priori* as did the logical positivists, they still try to analyse them in literal terms. Urban maintains that the solution is rather to recognize the metaphorical character of metaphysical and religious utterance, and upholds the "root metaphor theory of metaphysics." On this account there is a fundamental type of metaphor that is taken from the "primary and irreducible domains" of experience. Metaphysics may take as its fundamental category such a concept as "life" or "mind," but these terms will be used metaphorically. This view of the nature of language is radically opposed to that of contemporary linguistic analysts; and if language is metaphorical to anything like the extent that it suggests, religious statements must be analysed on a basis very different from that provided by modern philosophic techniques. And this would be so, not just because of the peculiar character of religious language but because all language as such resists reduction to a purely literal meaning, or to purely univocal discourse. Professor Geddes MacGregor has compared language with music. No one doubts that there is such a thing as musical analysis; but no one suggests that music can be interpreted by any sort of mathematical analysis. Music is more susceptible to mathematical treatment than is any living language; but its meaning will always transcend such an analysis. Similarly, while language has its grammar and its logic, there is in language "a fundamentally unanalysable element" as Professor MacGregor puts it. "Language reveals, and at the same time partially conceals, a life that lies beyond it."[16] In similar vein, Urban declares that

myth is indispensable from the standpoint of expression and intelligibility. Myth is dramatic language and only dramatic language is ultimately intelligible . . . it was precisely the recognition on the part of Plato that cosmologically significant propositions could not be expressed in mathematical-logical language, which led him to resort to the dramatic language of myth. It was not that this language is an imperfect pre-scientific form, to be abandoned for the mathematical-logical; it was rather a clear recognition of the essential limitations of the latter.[17]

Myth, metaphor and analogy are not literally true, and therefore cannot stand the test of the logical analyst. But this is not to say that they are untrue. The language of theology does not have literal significance for it

15. *Op. cit.,* p. 721.
16. "The Nature of Religious Utterance," in *The Christian Scholar,* vol. 38, No. 3, p. 174.
17. *Op. cit.,* p. 593.

retains the fundamentally dramatic character of religious language;[18] but it does not follow that it has no significance at all, as a vehicle of truth. The philosophy of analysis tends to assume that all thinking consists in solving problems; but as Michael Foster maintains "there is another kind of thinking which depends on the revealing of a mystery."[19] And if reality reveals itself in unique dramatic manifestations, how else can this truth be communicated but through dramatic language, the language of indirect communication?

Although the language of philosophy will never be the same as the language of theology, philosophy must "find language adequate for the expression of all forms of experience," as Urban puts it.[20] Nor can theologians afford to neglect the human word any more than the divine word; they must be concerned with the problem of the validity of religious and theological language, with its capacity to express in some way the truth about our relation to a reality beyond ourselves which ultimately concerns us. And if Urban is right in saying that "the problems of the philosophy of language culminate in the problem of the language of metaphysics . . . The meaningfulness of the other languages always depends upon the meaningfulness of metaphysical language . . ."[21] then in respect of its language, the possibility of theology is bound up with the possibility of metaphysics. It may be possible for art and science to go on doing their work without raising metaphysical questions, but it is not possible for theology.[22]

The theological positivist may object at this point that religious language is altogether different from any other language, that the language of revelation must be meaningless to the philosopher or to anyone except through a special miracle of grace. We have agreed that it may be logically more complex; but we must now add that it is not *altogether* different from other language. Theologians as well as philosophers of analysis have misunderstood the nature of religious language and language in general. As Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, religious language uses familiar words with familiar meanings put to a special use, but with no merely private significance. "A special miracle of grace might be bound up with finding biblical assertions acceptable or important . . . but could not be involved in finding them meaningful."[23]

Further, we reiterate that the question of the meaningfulness of language

18. Otherwise, as Urban points out, "theology would lose its touch with religion" (*ibid.*, p. 576). And again, "Even where, as in theology, [religious] language approaches the logical character of science and the abstractness of metaphysics, it must still retain its poetic elements. God may be a logician . . . but his relation to the universe and to man can never be expressed in a merely . . . logical form. It is for this reason that theology, which seeks to systematize these relations must, in its reasoning, as well as in its descriptions, be dramatic in character; otherwise it could not communicate its meanings" (*ibid.*, pp. 581–582).

19. *Mystery and Philosophy*, p. 18 *et passim.*
20. *Op. cit.*, p. 627.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 629–630.
22. *Vide* D. Emmet, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
23. *Metaphysical Beliefs*, p. 176.

must never be divorced from the question of the relation of language to reality. We venture to suggest that both theological positivists and logical analysts have tended to become so preoccupied with explicating the meaning of words—divine and human—that they have neglected the fundamental question of the relation of words to the reality of which they originally purport to speak. Our contention is that when this question is raised, it is discovered that the only adequate words are fundamentally analogical, and that the philosophy of analysis fails to do justice to analogical language even though it may concede that it belongs to a separate category.

The philosophy of analysis will, however, continue to serve theology in forcing it to reckon with both the importance of analogy in religious language, and the dangers that beset its use. It will caution theologians to reflect on their grounds for using a particular analogy, and on the way it is used; a scriptural image cannot be removed from context without changing its significance, for instance. Further, no one image or analogy will ever be sufficient of itself; as Basil Mitchell has suggested, "it may be that a number are needed, each inadequate in a different way."[24] The theologian must remember, however, that he cannot avoid the dangers of analogical language by trying to translate metaphors into univocal language on the supposition that this is more accurate knowledge. Religious knowledge can never have this kind of lucidity; but taken as a whole, it may represent more truth about reality than any other kind.

24. *The Socratic,* p. 10.