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God and Verification

GEORGE I. MAVRODES

IN A RECENT PAPER in this journal Professor Kai Nielsen has criticized John Hick's attempt to show that Christian theological statements, e.g., about the existence of God, are meaningful as straightforward assertions of fact.¹ Hick accepts the doctrine that such an assertion of fact must be verifiable in principle, and he argues that these statements about God could conceivably be verified, at least posthumously by experiences in the resurrection life. Hick gives as examples of such possible verifying experiences the discovery that God's purpose for ourselves is being fulfilled, and an experience of communion with God through Christ. Nielsen's criticism, in effect, is based on the claim that Hick's descriptions of these alleged possible verifying experiences are not themselves meaningful. For, he says, we cannot understand expressions such as "the divine purpose for man," "Christ," "the Son of God," etc., unless we already understand what it is for there to be a God who created man with a purpose, a God to whom Jesus might bear a special relation, etc. But it is just the claim that there is such a God whose meaningfulness is in doubt. And that meaningfulness cannot be validated by reference to descriptions whose own intelligibility depends upon the assumption that talk about God's existence is meaningful. Nielsen therefore concludes that Hick's attempt to show the meaningfulness of talk about God has failed.

From this alleged failure, and his belief that all other such attempts have also failed, Nielsen goes on to conclude that probably all first-order talk about God is incoherent and conceptually confused. And he suggests that this is perhaps the most serious intellectual issue which faces contemporary theism.

I am afraid that Nielsen is unduly optimistic about theism. If this were indeed its most serious intellectual challenge, then theism would be in a powerful position. For the challenge itself is so muddled that theologians, as well as religious laymen, might reasonably be excused from responding to it until philosophers have formulated it in some more coherent terms. It is the confusion in the challenge itself which I wish to discuss here.

I

The first, and perhaps the most fundamental, failure of clarity concerns the term "verification" (and its complement, "falsification"). Nielsen writes

1. *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (1963), no. 4, 271-81.

as if we all understand perfectly well what it is for any assertion to be verified or verifiable, and that now all we need to do is to determine whether Hick or someone else has described something which would verify some statement about God. But Nielsen gives us no account at all of what he means by verification, or any account of the logical (or other) relations which must obtain between the statement to be verified and the statement, description, or state of affairs which is supposed to verify it. But without clarity at this point it is impossible to carry on a discussion about verification profitably.

In this respect contemporary discussions of meaningfulness based upon verifiability compare very unfavourably with those of the logical positivists. The positivists were generally enemies of God-talk and made no bones about it. They thought it was meaningless because it was not verifiable. But at least they tried to say precisely what they meant by "verifiability." They laid a criterion on the line where it could be examined. And therefore a reasonably clear discussion could ensue about whether verifiability had the significance attributed to it, and whether God-statements, and other types of statements, did or did not meet the criterion.

The results of these discussions were largely disappointing to the positivists. Early formulations of the verifiability criterion did seem to exclude God-statements. But they also excluded such commonplace scientific and ordinary life statements as "All of John's children have measles" or "Some marsupials are carnivorous." These too turned out to be "unverifiable" and therefore "meaningless." So if religious statements were also "meaningless" they were at least in good company.

Most positivists thought that the exclusion of statements actually used in scientific discourse was an intolerable consequence for any criterion of meaning. It was not hard to amend the first attempts in such a way as to include statements of the types given above. But some of these amendments still could not handle such a simple scientific hypothesis as "Some poisons have no antidote." And so finally more sophisticated versions of the verifiability criterion appeared, such as those in the first and second editions of A. J. Ayers' *Language, Truth, and Logic*.

These criteria did, indeed, include every scientific statement within their scope. But it was soon shown that these criteria included *all other statements* within their scope just as well as they did scientific statements. Theological statements satisfied them perfectly well, and were validated as "verifiable" and hence "meaningful." In fact, it was shown that these criteria would be satisfied by any indicative sentence whatever, and that they would validate as "verifiable" and "meaningful" such non-theological nonsense as "The absolute is lazy" and "The square root of three is tired." They were completely useless as touchstones for distinguishing the meaningful from the meaningless. *And no more satisfactory criteria have been proposed.* They all either include everything, or else they exclude many

perfectly ordinary statements. And in either case there is nothing for the theologian to fear from them.²

There are two surprising things about this. One is the fact of the very failure itself, the failure of such an extraordinary amount of philosophical thought to draw a viable distinction between religious talk and scientific talk on the basis of verifiability. This failure makes it seem probable to me that verifiability does not actually play the role which these philosophers wanted to assign to it (in common life, in science, or in religion), and that it cannot provide a base for a distinction between the cognitively meaningful and the cognitively meaningless. I shall try to argue further for this conclusion in the second part of this paper.

The second surprise is that philosophers of religion continue to talk about "verifiability" as if it were a perfectly clear notion with no problems, a notion which we could use to identify "unintelligibility" and "conceptual confusion" in religious discourse. But if there is ever to be a philosophical application of Jesus' statement about the beam in one's own eye that application must surely be here. I therefore agree that philosophers should be welcomed to the theological arena. But a theologian (or a layman) will be well advised to respond to challenges pertaining to the verifiability of his talk as follows:

I welcome your interest, and I respect your concern for clarity and intelligibility. Therefore please tell me just what you mean by "verifiability." Exactly what is it, and how are we to determine whether any given statement or sentence is or is not verifiable? If you present me with a clear account of verifiability then we can investigate the question of whether my talk satisfies it. But I warn you that I shall also apply your account to some other kinds of talk, perhaps even your own, and shall see if you are satisfied with the results of it there. On the other hand, if you cannot provide me with a clear account of verifiability, then I do not see how we can pursue a profitable discussion along these lines. If I should try to respond to your challenge one confusion would compound another.

II

Nielsen complains that Hick's description of possible verifying experiences for, for example, "There is a God" cannot be understood unless we already understand the statement (or sentence) which is to be verified. But if its

2. Since these failings have been discussed at length elsewhere, I do not repeat the arguments here. There is a discussion of some early formulations of the verifiability criterion in A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (2nd ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1946), pp. 35-9. It also includes the criticism of Ayer's own first formulation of the criterion (pp. 11-13). The fundamental criticism of Ayer's second criterion (p. 13) is made by Alonzo Church in a review of Ayer's second edition in *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 14 (1949), 52-3. A concise account of the history and tribulations of this criterion is given in Carl Hempel "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning," in Leonard Linsky, *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1952), pp. 163-85. Hempel's own attempt to reformulate the criterion allows meaning to any indicative sentence, just as did Ayer's formulations.

cognitive meaningfulness is in doubt, then so also must we doubt the meaningfulness of the descriptions of the allegedly conceivable verifying experiences. Hick's procedure is circular. It is an attempt to pull ourselves up by our theological bootstraps, and so must fail.

I am not concerned here to defend Hick. Since he, too, proceeds without a clear account of verifiability, it will not be surprising if his response is confused. What I do want to argue is that the attempt to use verifiability as a criterion or condition of cognitive meaningfulness itself involves the very type of circularity of which Nielsen accuses Hick. The demand that we should show that our talk is meaningful by showing that it is verifiable is itself a challenge to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. The confusion in the response is the mirror image of the confusion in the challenge.

In arguing this point I shall assume that any account of verification which is to be provided by these philosophers will have something to do with the truth (or a justified belief in the truth) of the statement to be verified. That is, whatever statement, experience, or state of affairs verifies the statement p will have to be somehow relevant to the truth of p or to the justification of our belief that p is true. Let us call such a statement, experience, or state of affairs E .

Now, I am apparently asked to determine (or to show) that some statement p is meaningful by determining (or showing) that there is a conceivable E which would verify it. Suppose someone proposes an E for this purpose. How can I determine whether E would, in fact, verify p ? I suppose that what I must do is to try the thought experiment of assuming that E is true and then asking myself whether, given that assumption, the following statement is true:

(1) E verifies that p .

Clearly, however, the truth of a statement having the form of (1) is in part a function of what is filled in for p . An experiment which would verify the special theory of relativity probably would not verify the Mendelian theory of inheritance. For it is unlikely that a single experiment will have the required type and degree of relevance to the truth of both of these diverse theories. And it certainly seems that if I do not understand what the Mendelian theory is (i.e., if I do not understand what assertions are made by the sentences used to express the theory), then I am in no position to decide whether a given E verifies it.

When I attempt a response to a challenge such as that of Nielsen I am, however, in an even worse position. For in this case I am presumed to be in doubt not only as to just *what* assertion is made by p but also as to whether *any* assertion is made by it. I am not supposed to know that p is cognitively meaningful at all *until after I have determined (or shown) that (1) is true*. And so far as I can see that is an impossible task.

This impossibility is not merely contingent. The verifiability approach to the determination of meaningfulness requires us to do something which is

necessarily impossible. And this impossibility has nothing *special* to do with theology or religion. No matter what is the content of *p* I cannot determine the truth of (1) before I have determined what is the meaning of *p* and, *a fortiori*, that *p* is meaningful.

This point can be put in a way which parallels Nielsen's critique of Hick and shows the isomorphism of their confusion. Statement (1), since it includes *p*, will be unintelligible to someone who does not understand *p*. Consequently, if anyone is inclined to think that *p* is cognitively meaningless, he will also be equally inclined to think that (1) is meaningless.³ The verifiability approach, then, requires us to determine the meaningfulness of a disputed statement by determining the truth of another statement which cannot be understood until the meaning of the disputed statement is understood. But we are supposed to determine the truth of the second statement *before* we are entitled to understand the first one at all. This is, of course, a necessarily impossible task. It is not the subject matter, theological or otherwise, which renders it impossible. Rather, the impossibility is due to the stipulated structure of the task itself. The challenge is itself circular, and it is not surprising that a circular challenge should provoke a circular and fallacious response.

We cannot, then, discover that a given statement or sentence is verifiable in principle *before* we understand what assertion is being expressed in it. And therefore we cannot make verifiability a criterion for determining, in disputed cases, whether the given statement or sentence is cognitively meaningful. That puts the cart before the horse.

I conclude, therefore, that theologians have no logical reason to be troubled by the current state of the philosophical challenge to the meaningfulness of God-talk. Perhaps at a later time some philosopher will formulate such a challenge in some coherent way. But until then theologians will probably be justified in devoting the major part of their attention to the more substantive problems of their discipline.

3. Cf. "The Michelson-Morley experiment verified that the square root of three is tired." Is that conceivably true (and only contingently false)? Does not the failure of "The square root of three is tired" infect the entire statement?