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God and Verification Again

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PROFESSOR MAVRODES' criticisms of my "Eschatological Verification" are searching and incisive, but (perhaps failing to note the beam in my own eye) I remain unconvinced.[1] There are three points I wish to make by way of counter-argument.

1. Mavrodes maintains that the most fundamental failure of clarity in my (and for that matter in Hick's) account concerns a failure to be clear about what is meant by "verification." "Nielsen," Mavrodes tells us, "writes as if we all understood perfectly well what it is for an 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."[2]

I did not give an analysis of "verification" or "verifiability," but I protest that I did not need to in order to make the points I made in my essay. Any given philosophical analysis must start somewhere—must assume that we understand the meaning of some terms in order to analyse the meaning of others. I assumed that we have a reasonably decent understanding of "verification" and of what it is for an assertion to be verified or verifiable; and I proceeded to show, in a way that Mavrodes does not assail, that Hick has not shown how a purportedly factual statement like "There is a God" is verifiable in principle. Now Mavrodes calls a plague on both our houses by arguing that it is impossible to carry on such a discussion profitably until we have a more satisfactory account of verification than the one we have at present. I would agree with Mavrodes *if* it were true that we do not understand perfectly well what it is for a factual assertion to be verified or verifiable. For ordinary purposes and for the problems raised by the "Theology and Falsification Issue," we perfectly well understand what it is for a factual assertion to be verified or verifiable. We have clear paradigms of different sorts of verification. We know how to operate with these words though we may not know their correct analysis; when in an ordinary case someone asks us to verify a factual statement we have at least some idea of what is required of us. I am sitting behind a sand dune screened from the sea and my brother-in-law calls out to me, "Let's go swimming!

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It's high tide." I know perfectly well how to verify "It's high tide." Exactly the same thing is true of the following statements: "Many union men will switch their vote this year and vote for Goldwater"; "There is vegetation on Mars," or "People in the great cities generally feel more alienated than do people in Saskatchewan." We understand perfectly well what it is for an assertion that is unequivocally factual to be verified; that is, we know what it would be like to have evidence that counted for or against its truth. Mavrodes has done nothing to show that this is not so. Mavrodes writes as if the concept of verification were entirely unclear, but he presents no evidence for this. He only shows that people who try to use verifiability as a base for a distinction between the cognitively meaningful and the cognitively meaningless get into irresolvable difficulties.

Mavrodes would no doubt protest that I have not given an analysis of what it is to verify a statement, but my point is that I do not need to. As Moore taught us, it is perfectly possible to know the meaning of a word without knowing the proper analysis of it.[3] I may understand perfectly well what is meant by "chair." I can identify chairs; I may know a lot about how they are made and know the uses to which they are put. I may never use "chair" incorrectly, but I still might not be able to give some formula to the effect that x is a chair if and only if y and z. But I know how to use "chair" properly enough, though I cannot *say* very well what "chair" means and I cannot state the necessary and sufficient conditions that must obtain if some artifact is properly to be called "a chair." But a failure to do this would not constitute grounds for denying that I know what chairs are or for denying that I understand the meaning of "chair." Similarly, given our paradigms, we can with good conscience assert that we know how to verify factual statements and that we understand what "to verify factual statements" means.

Mavrodes might reply that knowledge of such paradigms is not enough. The paradigms are themselves different, and in a different situation, perhaps in how we verify that there is a God, we still would not know, given only these paradigms, whether it was logically possible to verify such a statement. Before we can argue, as Hick did, that "There is a God" is verifiable or deny that it is, as I did, we must be much clearer about what counts as verification here.

Why? Let us call the statement to be verified "p" and the statement or state of affairs that verifies p "E." Where E is a statement it must either describe some observable state of affairs or entail some further statement "E" that describes such an observable state of affairs. Why, for the purposes at hand, does this not give us a sufficient account of what it is to verify a statement?

To this it might be replied that if we accept that account of verifiability it is plainly the case that "There is a God" is verifiable. We might try to

3. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 32–59.

say that "There is a God" (p) has factual significance if the statement "There are human beings" (E) has empirical significance; and E has empirical significance, so p must have factual significance. Since E is true, we have some evidence, though of course not conclusive evidence, for p.

Does p really have factual significance? Suppose the sceptic remarks: "As far as I can make out, the only thing you are asserting when you assert p is E. What more are you asserting?" If the theist replies that "the more" is that there are not only human beings but many kinds of contingent beings (F) and that these beings might not have existed (G), the sceptic can ask: "But I still do not see what E, F, and G have to do with God, with the truth of p. What more are you asserting when you assert p than E, F, and G?" If the theist says, "nothing more," then his position is indistinguishable from atheism; if he says, "something more," then he must specify some further statement or state of affairs that would be incompatible with something a non-believer could properly say, but it is just this that he has not done.

Hick, unlike Mavrodes, sees this problem clearly enough and tries to meet it, but, as I argued in "Eschatological Verification," Hick fails, for his possible verifying experiences (a discovery that God's purpose for ourselves is being fulfilled and a communion with God through Christ) already make reference to the very conceptions whose factual intelligibility is in question.[4] Hick is in effect trying to lift himself up by his own bootstraps. But Mavrodes does nothing to take us around the bog. He neither shows us how we could in principle verify p, nor does he show us that we have no clear conception of what it is to verify a factual assertion. He only recounts a by now familiar story concerning the verifiability criterion of meaning, namely, that within natural languages (and that is all that is relevant here) no one has been able to elucidate adequately the exact logical relations between the statement to be verified and the verifying statement or statements. But this, as I have shown, does not at all show that we do not understand what it is to verify a statement, any more than the fact that we do not know how to give an adequate definition or analysis of "chair" shows that we do not perfectly well know what a chair is. That lesson we should have learned from G. E. Moore years ago.

2. Mavrodes misses my intent and misses, I believe, Hick's intent as well. I certainly was not (and I do not believe Hick was either) trying to provide a general criterion of meaning or even a general criterion of cognitive meaning—some touchstone for distinguishing the meaningful or cognitively meaningful from the meaningless or cognitively meaningless. Certainly I

4. I make my intent perfectly plain in "Eschatological Verification" when I remark: "It is indeed true that we, who have been brought up as Christians or in close proximity to Christians, know how to use this discourse. In *that sense* it is sheer nonsense to say Christian chatter is meaningless, but Hick has not shown us how we understand the use of language as a factual or statement-making type of discourse" (p. 277). I would only explicitly state here, what I thought the context would make evident enough, that I am only talking about factual statements.

have never implied, as Mavrodes says I do,[5] that verifiability is "a criterion
or condition of cognitive meaningfulness." Certainly, "How far is the train
station?" "Close the window," "I declare him *persona non grata*," have
cognitive meaning, and yet they are plainly not verifiable: they do not even
purport to be verifiable.[6] Furthermore, it seems to me very questionable that
all ethical statements are verifiable; yet non-verifiability does not divest them
of cognitive meaning. I would argue and did argue that non-verifiability
(logical impossibility of confirmation or disconfirmation) divests a state-
ment of *factual* intelligibility, but that is a different matter.[7] Hick argues
that believers intend "There is a God" and many key religious and theolo-
gical statements to be factual statements; and he also argues, and I argue,
that in order for them to be genuinely factual statements it must be logically
possible, directly or indirectly, to verify (confirm or disconfirm) them. Hick
claims that they are so verifiable; I argue that neither he nor anyone else
has shown this to be so. I further suggested, not that they were meaningless,
but that they were without *factual significance*. I have further agreed with
Hick (and many others) that reasonably orthodox believers *believe* that
they are factual; but I have argued, as they did not, that believers do not
actually use such religious sentences to make factual statements, but—
though unwittingly—they use them to make ideological statements, i.e.,
statements that appear to have factual significance, statements that are
believed by their users to be grand factual claims, but statements which
actually function (though in an essentially surreptitious manner) to recom-
mend that we act in a certain way or take a certain attitude towards life.
They literally are value judgments, but someone who thinks they are some-
thing more, who makes such ideological statements, believes (though mis-
takenly) that the norm involved in any such religious statement has a mas-
sive backing by a mysterious kind of fact asserted by that statement. In
other words the ideologist gains what in reality is simply psychological
reinforcement, but what *he* takes to be additional objective support for
certain of his value judgments by making it appear—though, of course, not
deliberately—that they are a conceptually odd and essentially mysterious
kind of factual statement.[8] But these religious utterances are most surely

    5. Mavrodes, "God and Verification," p. 190.
    6. Many of the points I would make about verification are clearly made by G. J.
Warnock in his masterful essay "Verification and the Use of Language," *Revue
Internationale de Philosophie*, 17–18 (1951), 307–22.
    7. It might be replied that questions, imperatives, and performatives are in a tech-
nical sense cognitively meaningless, for unlike declarative statements they do not make
knowledge claims. By contrast, sentences used to make declarative statements can be
used to state items of knowledge. Because of this, "cognitive" should be identified with
"factual." But why identify "cognitive' with "factual"? Cannot one know that one ought
to help one's parents and that one has a duty to provide for one's children? Certainly
the onus is on the critic to show that "factual" and "cognitive" have the same meaning
or that *only* factual considerations are cognitive considerations. (Again he could stipulate
this, but very similar considerations would become relevant when we ask ourselves
whether we should accept his stipulation.)
    8. This point is rather cryptically expressed here, but I have argued for it in detail
in my "Speaking of God," *Theoria*, 28 (1962), 110–37. A "Moorean approach" might
be taken against me here. Someone might argue that, since it is commonly *believed* by

not devoid of meaning and they are not even devoid of "cognitive meaning," for value judgments are not without cognitive meaning. There is nothing in Mavrodes' arguments to gainsay that.

3. Given that I am *not* using verifiability as an over-all criterion of meaning or of cognitive meaning, Mavrodes' case against me in section II of his essay collapses.

I shall show why Mavrodes' argument does not apply to me or for that matter to Hick. Mavrodes points out, quite correctly, the logical untenability of verificationist attempts to show that some statement p is meaningful by determining that there is some conceivable E, some statement, experience, or state of affairs, which would verify p—would count as evidence for the truth or justified belief of p.[9] Verificationists must claim that I am not supposed to know, on the verifiability criterion, whether p is cognitively meaningful or not until I have verified p, but I cannot, logically cannot, verify p until I know what p asserts. The verifiability criterion puts the cart before the horse and, in effect, unwittingly asks me to do what is logically impossible, for only if p's meaning is already known can we intelligibly ask what would verify p. The verifiability criterion of meaning is logically untenable, for it would require us to do something that is logically impossible. Consider (1) "E verifies that p." As Mavrodes points out, "No matter what . . . 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."[10] But on the verifiability theory of meaning I am not supposed to know or even be able to know whether p is meaningful until after I have determined that (1) is true.

Neither my account nor Hick's is caught up in such a muddle, for we are *not* setting out a general criterion of meaning, but trying to determine whether "There is a God" is used to make a factual statement, and we have assumed what could, of course, be questioned, namely that a statement is a factual statement only if it is logically possible to confirm or disconfirm it. We use verifiability to demarcate *within the class of meaningful sentences* those sentences that are used to make factual statements. Thus where we assume that p has *some meaning* and then say that p is a factual claim only if some E would count as verifying p, we are not pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, not doing anything that is logically inappropriate, but only developing a test to determine whether a purportedly factual statement is indeed factual.

I have not tried to do the impossible, e.g., to discover whether a given

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their users that such God-sentences are used to make factual statements, my theory, which denies that they are actually used by present-day believers to make factual statements, must be wrong. Why must my theory be wrong because of this? Native speakers' linguistic behaviour indeed determines what meaning such sentences have, but their *beliefs about their linguistic bahaviour* are certainly not in such an authoritative position. Native speakers need not be, and normally are not, either linguists or philosophers.

9. Mavrodes, "God and Verification," p. 190.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

statement is verifiable before I have at all understood its meaning; but where p stands for a statement utilizing a linguistic unit that is part of the corpus of some natural language and thus, in one plain sense, meaningful, I have tried to show, by setting out a test, how we can determine whether p actually makes a factual claim by determining whether p is verifiable. "The square root of three is tired" is not part of the corpus of English; we do not understand it. It is not part of some scientific discourse attached to English, and native speakers cannot think of discourses (philosophical or linguistic ones apart) in which it would naturally occur. But "There is a God" plainly is part of the corpus of English, native speakers can paraphrase it, and they can readily think of discourses in which it would naturally occur. But nothing that I said denies the intelligibility of religious utterances. In fact my theory that they are or are very like ideological statements requires that they be meaningful. Yet religious people claim that it is a fact that there is a God, but if it is a fact, then "There is a God" must have factual intelligibility, but if it has factual intelligibility it should be verifiable in principle, but "There is a God" does not appear to be verifiable in principle, and Hick's attempts to show that it is verifiable fail on the very grounds I marked out in "Eschatological Verification." Nothing that Mavrodes has said touches that argument.

I have tried to show how Mavrodes' arguments do not establish that the general conditions for argument concerning the theology and falsification issue are muddled. Religious people, as Hick avers, believe that it is a fact that there is a God.[11] If it is not a fact their faith is in vain; but if it is a fact, then to assert that there is a God is to make a factual statement, but then the statement must be verifiable in principle, i.e., there must be some empirical evidence that would count for or against its truth. But given the way in which "There is a God" is actually used by believers, or at least by many contemporary believers, its truth or falsity seems to be equally compatible with anything and everything that could conceivably occur. But, if this is so, it can hardly be a genuine factual claim. This is the challenge raised by the theology-and-falsification issue and this is the challenge that Hick quite properly tried to meet. Hick failed and Mavrodes has not shown that the challenge itself involves a conceptual muddle. Perhaps someone can show that such religious statements can be verified and thus show that they actually have factual intelligibility, or perhaps someone can show that Hick and I are both mistaken in thinking that a statement, to be factual,

11. In this exchange with Binkley this side of Hick's approach becomes even more evident. See Luther Binkley, "What Characterizes Religious Language?" and John Hick, "Comment," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2 (1962–63), 18–24, and Binkley again in "Reply to Professor Hick's Comment on 'What Characterizes Religious Language?' " and Hick, "Comment on Professor Binkley's Reply," *ibid.*, 228–32. In his final comment Hick even remarks that while "the factual' is wider than "the empirical" (p. 230) he would "define fact in terms of 'making an actual or possible experienceable difference' and wish experience to show what various kinds of facts there are" (p. 230). It was such a position that I was criticizing and I see no reason to retract my criticisms of it.

needs to be verifiable (confirmable or disconfirmable) in principle. Mavrodes has shown neither of these two things, but until either such claim can be made out, I persist in my challenge and persist in my contention that even first-order God-talk is incoherent and conceptually confused.[12]

12. I do not wish to suggest that this is the only reason why I find such talk incoherent and conceptually confused; and I must reiterate that to be incoherent is one thing, to be meaningless or linguistically unintelligible is another. "The square root of three is tired" belongs in the latter class, but certainly not "God made the heavens and the earth." (I am indebted to Professor Kenneth Stern for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.)