The Fading Smile of the Cosmic Cat

Some scholarly arguments against classical theism reflect and reinforce the commonplace arguments which are heard wherever amateur critics of Christian belief foregather. One of these is the argument which I shall call the argument from the fading Cheshire cat.

In *Honest to God* Robinson quotes Bonhoeffer and Julian Huxley as witnesses to the opinion that the explanation of things natural by science renders classical theism unnecessary.[1] In his letter of 8 June 1944, Bonhoeffer had written that the discovery of 'laws by which the world lives and manages in science, social and political affairs, art, ethics, and religion' has taught man 'to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis.'[2] Huxley contributed the opinion that 'the God hypothesis is no longer of any pragmatic value for the interpretation and comprehension of nature,' and it was noted that, 'operationally, God is beginning to resemble not a ruler but the last fading smile of a cosmic Cheshire cat.' Bonhoeffer believed that this societal conclusion, the culmination of an important movement which had begun about the thirteenth century, had driven God from the realm of objectively thinkable realities into the refuge of human subjective consciousness.[3] Harvey Cox's claim that religion has been 'privatized' by the inroads of a successful secular interpretation of nature is clearly related.[4] What these criticisms of traditional theism have in common is the assumption that God is supposed to have 'pragmatic value' for the task of 'comprehending nature' (Huxley), that he is a 'working hypothesis' by which men might manage their affairs (Bonhoeffer). It is assumed that theology advanced – and the church accepted – the 'God hypothesis' in the absence of sufficient scientific knowledge, and that the discovery of certain laws of nature provides a new pragmatic hypothesis which replaces the old. Mascall has noted that this argument pervades contemporary theological debate.[5]

What I shall try to show is that this argument against theism, in so far as

1. Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest To God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), pp. 36–38.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, translated by Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.C.M. Press, 1953), p. 106.
3. Cf. *ibid.* See also the letter of 30 June 1944.
4. Cf. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 2.
5. Cf. E. L. Mascall, *The Secularization of Christianity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 190–212. Mascall believes that it is the proposed closing of the causal noose around events which had always been attributed directly to God which threatens theology. Thus, he emphasizes the indeterminacy which exists at each nexus of natural events.

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it pretends to refute theism on intellectual grounds, is illegitimate. If it is intended only as a statement about the psychology of contemporary man, if it claims only to describe what modern men want to believe, regardless of the evidence, it is, of course, irrefutable. It was Bishop Pike who pointed out that the Vincentian Canon, according to one possible interpretation, is merely an elaboration of the saying *Vox populi, vox dei.*[6] If the argument from the fading smile of the cosmic cat is but the exposition of a certain contemporary mindset, it is merely a secular application of the same maxim which Pike finds so inadequate.

If we assume, however, that the argument has been advanced, albeit in some unrefined form, as a rational criticism of traditional theism, it is open to certain serious objections. The claim that the popular view that God should have pragmatic value (as an hypothesis which explains the operation of the world) is derived from Christian theism is based on either accidental ignorance or deliberate misunderstanding of traditional theology. That view is really a derivative of the 'process' type of understanding of the relation between God and the world, for it is this type of thought which frequently suggests that God and creation are part of the same unity, which unity can either be understood empirically by science or interpreted spiritually by religious faith. It is a very widespread view. I recently received a letter from a prominent churchwoman in which it was stated that the purpose of a certain conference was 'to take a look at some of the aspects of the world around us, to try to discover God in it. ...' It can be predicted with some certainty that the participants, no matter how much they contemplate the world around them, will not discover God in it. That they will fail will hardly surprise a traditional theist, for Christian theism has never suggested that God was present in the world in such a way that he could be ferreted out and made to give an operational account of events human, psychological, or scientific.

It must, of course, be admitted that Christians and other believers in God have frequently claimed that certain aspects of nature, notably its reliability, are just such qualities as one would expect to find in a world which is the creature of a God who is at least rational. 'While the earth remaineth,' the Book of Genesis affirms, 'seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease.' From this primitive reflection to Newtonian physics is a straight and continuous line of development. But this reliability in nature has not generally been taken by classical theology as an indication that God exists. There is no famous argument from the reliability of nature. It was a commonplace of nineteenth-century thought that any world as carefully synchronized, interrelated, and arranged as Mr. Darwin and Herr von Humboldt claimed ours to be must certainly have been created by a God. But that is poetry and not theology. The reliability which contemporary scientific endeavour assumes, though it is just such reliability as

6. Cf. James A. Pike, *A Time for Christian Candor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 31.

traditional theists would expect to find, is not necessarily supernatural.[7] The cyclical, constant, reliable elements in nature, when examined at any point, are but links in a chain of causality which may be pursued into the past until interest fails or until the increasing complexity of the factors involved becomes exhausting, and which our general trust in the reliability of nature projects into a future which as yet does not exist. Unless I have misunderstood him entirely, it was St. Thomas Aquinas' idea that pursuing this fascinating chain of causality, whatever else might be discovered, would never lead us to God.[8] The argument that there is no Creator because nature displays a describable regularity is as fallacious as the argument that this unmistakable reliability ineluctably indicates his existence. The face of the smiling Cheshire cat is not the face of God. It is the enigmatic mask of human ignorance, which lures an ever-advancing human scientific enterprise, and human intellect will always chase and catch the cat.

Something must also be said of Bonhoeffer's conclusion that the explanation of certain natural phenomena by science leaves as the subject of theology only the 'inner' life of man – such questions as that of guilt,[9] such 'privatized' interpretations as individuals may adduce for themselves. The belief that giving over to science the task of explaining natural phenomena left theology with only psychological grounds goes back at least to Schleiermacher,[10] and it was the basis of his conviction that religion had to do primarily with feeling and not with rational human experience. Schleiermacher was the first great theologian to misunderstand so completely the ground of theology that he could react as though the fading cosmic cat might in fact be the fading face of God. His solution was to abandon the natural world to science, and to attempt to establish theology securely in the realm of human feeling. Given his presuppositions, the solution has a certain brilliance.

What Schleiermacher and Bonhoeffer have in common is the certainty that, once the rational explanation of the natural world is given over to science, there remains for theology only the realm of feeling. Schleiermacher believed that this was a sufficient basis for theology, but Bonhoeffer, Cox, and Robin-

7. Whitehead's astute and all too frequently ignored observation that science rests on an antecedent faith in the reliability of nature must be mentioned here. Cf. *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), p. 19.

8. It seems to me that the first 'way,' set forth classically in the *Summa Theologiae*, is an almost entirely negative argument. It is a statement about what one cannot find out from nature, and as such it, like the others, attempts not to 'prove' God, but to establish the existence of a question.

9. The Letters of 30 April, 8 June, and 30 June 1944 contain penetrating criticisms of attempts to found theology on the inner world of human feeling.

10. The opening chapters of Schleiermacher's *Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* have as a major thesis the idea that theology must abandon the objective world to science and establish itself securely on the basis of human feeling. This was almost certainly Schleiermacher's response to the successes of eighteenth-century science, and it presupposes the misunderstanding that the God of classical theology 'explained' the world.

son have wisely rejected it. They do, however, share the Schleiermacherian belief that the human person, having once applied his reason to the solution of problems in the natural world, is left as an essential self consisting entirely of 'privatized views,' problems such as guilt. What we see here is the surfacing of the modern assumption that man is basically non-rational, that the only important and human thing about personality is feeling, and that there is no genuinely significant intellectual facet of human experience which might direct us to God, not as the solution to personal guilt or fear, but as the postulate of reason. Bonhoeffer and Schleiermacher both believed that, once the rational faculty of man is given over to the study of the rational world, there remains only the inner world of feeling. Traditional theology would teach that there remains a world which is above all else rational, and whose rationality is sufficient to show on a purely intellectual basis the reasonableness of belief in God. God is first an intellectual question, and it is appropriate that he be sought by human reason in an intellectual age.[11] I should admit that in a post-Freudian world, in which reason is debased and emotion and feeling glorified, this criticism is radical, but it is not possible for the opponents of theism to prove that man's rational faculties must perforce be limited to the consideration of natural phenomena.

Finally I would refer to Bonhoeffer's use of the adjective 'important,' in his claim that man can solve all 'important' questions without raising the problem of God. The judgment, which Bonhoeffer seems to accept, that only questions about the natural world are important, must rest upon one of two assumptions, and it is with the truth or falsity of these assumptions that the theistic case stands or falls. It may be that these theologians are right; that questions about God are not important; that theology is a synonym for mummery, and faith a flight from reality into illusion. But better reasons than those upon which the argument from the fading smile of the cosmic cat depends must be adduced before anti-theism can be believed. And it may be that St. Paul's analysis, given in Romans 1, is correct:

> When they knew God, they glorified him not as God,
> and were not thankful.
> Professing themselves wise, they became fools ...
> They changed the glory of an uncorruptible God into
> an image like a corruptible man.

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11. In November 1968 there appeared on the notice board of one of the greatest North American universities an advertisement for a society which claimed to free its members from linear thinking, the erroneous belief that causes have discernible effects. Moloch, to employ the figure which Chesterton used so tellingly in *The Everlasting Man*, is eating his own children.