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Some recent Philosophical Theology

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The lack of interest shown by conservative Evangelicals in the philosophy of religion is perhaps not hard to understand. A number of factors have contributed to this — a distrust of apologetics as a method of presenting the faith, a belief in the unhelpfulness or impossibility of constructing a natural theology, and a suspicion — or more than a suspicion — that the sort of philosophy done in this country at present (generally called 'analytic' philosophy) makes any positive link-up between theology and philosophy impossible. This article is an attempt to remedy the neglect by showing that philosophy as such is *not* dangerous, and that the problems Evangelicals have regarded as lying in the wasteland between the two disciplines have an intrinsic and obvious importance.

LOGICAL POSITIVISM AND ITS AFTERMATH

Since the 1930s, philosophical theology in this country has taken the form of an elucidation and discussion of what are in fact a number of standard responses to one problem, that of justifying theological utterances in the face of the critique of logical positivism. Positivism is a science-inspired thesis about meaning, and claims that utterances or expressions that are neither truths of logic (and hence true in virtue of the meanings of the constituent terms of the utterance) nor descriptions of empirical, and hence verifiable or falsifiable, states of affairs, are literally meaningless. Clearly, theological utterances, along with utterances in morals, for example, are candidates for the positivist's axe, since it is obvious that they are not covertly tautologous expressions such as 'blue socks are blue', nor do they describe states of affairs that are conclusively verifiable by sense experience, such as 'the fireplace is made of Westmorland stone'.

How then is religious language to be saved? One obvious move is to deny that such language *describes* anything, and hence that it is mistaken to call religious statements 'true' or 'false'. Instead, religious utterances are said to express the utterer's intention to lead a certain sort of life (Braithwaite),[1] or his point of view (Hare).[2] Another approach has been to admit the force of verificationism, but to save the descriptive nature of religious language by making use of the notion of 'eschatological verification' (Hick, Crombie);[3] the idea that though the states of affairs that religious language purports to describe cannot be conclusively verified here and now, this will be possible 'at the end'. Yet another way is to claim

that religious assertions are complementary to other sorts of assertions, such as the assertions of natural science; both describe the same phenomenon — an event or situation — but from differing points of view, each viewpoint being irreducible, and autonomous, having its own criteria of meaning and truth. Thus an experience could be described in terms of neurophysiological events, or as a 'conversion', the one description complementing the other, and neither being 'better' or 'more basic' than the other (Mackay).[4]

Students of the philosophy of religion will be familiar with work done along these lines; the issues raised are important and troublesome. Yet it would be a mistake to think that philosophy and theology must always be suspicious of each other. To show how philosophy has been used to the advantage of our understanding of revealed truth and not merely destructively or as a tool of Christian apologetics, I want to discuss two recent books, *Sense, Nonsense and Christianity* by Dr Hugo Meynell,[5] and *The Logic of Self-Involvement* by Dr Donald Evans.[6]

'SENSE, NONSENSE AND CHRISTIANITY'

The author's aim in *Sense, Nonsense and Christianity* is to illuminate the logical status of traditional Christian belief by setting it off against the various *reductionist* theologies that have cropped up in the history of the church as attempts to reduce or translate the apostolic preaching of the cross into terms beloved by the philosophical fashions of the day. These attempts to *reduce* the doctrines of historic Christianity (from Hegel to Schleiermacher to Bultmann, and including the Robinsons and van Burens) have one feature in common, namely, the conviction that the truth or falsity of the propositions of Scripture is irrelevant to their value; the message of Scripture is 'a more or less dispensable means to, or oblique expression of *present* religious experience or moral behaviour or existential self-understanding' (p. 136).

A clear and instructive discussion of reductionism in theology prepares the way for Meynell's own contribution, which is an attempt to answer the question, *If the mysteries of the Christian faith are not to be reduced in any of the historically-famous ways, for the reasons given, what states of affairs can be said to validate the faith, and, more weakly, what states of affairs are compatible with the faith?* Note that, while this question is verificationist *in tone*, it is vastly different from the positivist's questions. The point is not: 'Do theological utterances meet with the requirements of the verification principle?'; but *assuming* their meaningfulness, and acknowledging their ultimate mysteriousness the question now is: 'In virtue of what facts are they true?' ('facts' here are to be understood as 'states of affairs that are taken to validate'). For the reformed Christian these facts will be identical with the statements of Scripture; for the Roman Catholic the range of facts will be wider. We can now go on to ask how different the biblical account would have to be for a particular statement or a particular claim to be invalidated. Thus the verification principle becomes *internalized*, and becomes a tool for a rigorous examination of the faith in the light of the statements of Scripture.

Because religious mysteries *are* mysteries they have a character all of their own; they differ from those states of affairs that can be 'immediately and fully explained . . . and from sheer nonsense' (p. 170). Meynell goes on to suggest an application of this to various doctrines, for example to Christology, inspiration and miracles. What facts would be inconsistent with our belief in the inspiration of Scripture? *i.e.* What states of affairs would invalidate such a belief? Here one could quarrel with Meynell's view that 'It is clearly not of importance for the traditional Christian faith that all the stories (*i.e.* biblical stories), which take a historical form should be an accurate record of fact' but only those 'on which the Church's doctrine explicitly lays weight' (p. 181). Yet it is certainly the case that certain historical events are more crucial than others for the validation of the faith; certain are necessary, *e.g.* the resurrection of Christ; certain are only peripheral, *e.g.* the fact that Balaam's ass spoke. However, even from this the value of Meynell's thesis is clear, for he does not ask a general question about the relationship between our belief in God and our experience of the world (as Professor Flew does, for example).[7] Instead Meynell asks a series of particular questions modelled on this but differing significantly in so far as radically different canons of validity and invalidity are assumed — in the one case sense experience, in the other the assertions of Scripture.

What value has all this? First, it provides a sharp reminder that if our faith is not to be *reductionist* in character there must be certain states of affairs that would invalidate it. A faith that is compatible with any conceivable states of affairs (for example compatible with *anything* having happened in history) or that indulges in 'conversion by definition' ('humanists are *really* Christians') is a faith that has reduced the propositions of Scripture to the worship of one or more values — intellectual idolatry. Second, from a methodological point of view, it forces us to look at Scripture positively; it calls us to re-examine the biblical foundations of our faith, challenging us to show what cash-value the utterances of dogmatics have when looked at from the point of view of their biblical basis. And in doing this, we are only carrying forward an approach that is essentially biblical and apostolic, for when Paul wrote 'If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain . . . if Christ be not raised, . . . ye are yet in your sins' (1 Cor. 15: 14-17), he was indicating a state of affairs the absence of which would have invalidated faith, one which would have *made a difference*, and a crucial difference, to the validity of the gospel message. (Compare, in a similar way, the tests laid down for discerning false prophets, Deuteronomy 13: 1-3.)

'THE LOGIC OF SELF-INVOLVEMENT'

Dr Donald Evan's book, *The Logic of Self-Involvement*, is of a very different character. He treats religious language (in this case, the language of Scripture itself, as opposed to confessional or credal utterances) in a way exactly parallel to that in which R. M. Hare or Professor Nowell Smith[8] have dealt with the language of moral discourse; he looks, that is, at the uses to which religious language is put in the context in which it was uttered. Thus, in a specifically biblical context he tries to see what, if any, are the logical peculiarities of classes of biblical statements. Since this procedure is parasitic upon Scripture, it is quite compatible with believing acceptance of its statements, even though in practice what Evans himself has to say may be thought to be inconsistent with this underlying theoretical principle.

Evans takes as his starting-point some work of the late J. L. Austin[9] on what Austin called *performative utterances*. Austin is the first to have made clear that the logical status of expressions of the form 'I promise to do so and so' is markedly different from that of ordinary statements having a straight descriptive character, such as, 'Jones built the house'. At first sight, 'I promise to do so and so' may seem like a description of something, my promise perhaps, or my intention to promise. But it is in fact a verbal action — hence the label *performative*. In the appropriate circumstances (for example, the speaker must not be joking or saying the words in his sleep) *the saying* is *the doing*. When I say, 'I promise', I do not describe anything; I act. In saying, I do. This is one example of a whole class of expressions which Evans dubs 'self-involving', for unlike 'Jones built the house', such expressions carry definite implications for the speaker's future behaviour and beliefs.

In part I of *The Logic of Self-Involvement* Evans is concerned to map out — in some detail — the concept of a self-involving utterance. This preliminary study, which is heavily indebted to Austin's pioneering work, enables us to classify with precision the various ways in which language may involve a spectator in something more than a bare assent to a factual state of affairs (p. 34). In part II of the book Evans applies this notion to the language of Scripture, particularly those statements that are concerned with creation.

The discussion throughout is long and involved, and it is impossible to give an adequate summary of the detail, or of the numerous insights Evans brings out. A few examples must suffice to show the detail, and the relevance of this work to biblical studies. In the first, largely philosophical, half Evans follows Austin in classifying performatives into (1) *Constatives*. These are performative utterances of which it is possible to ask, 'Is this true or false?' Examples would be, 'I warn you that Brown is dangerous', 'I report that business is expanding' where 'Brown is dangerous' and 'business is expanding' are the descriptive and hence fact-stating components of larger self-involving utterances. (2) *Commissives*. These cannot be true or false, only fulfilled or unfulfilled, *e.g.* 'I promise to return the books tomorrow'. Commissives are especially important in Evans' subsequent application of this analysis to religious language. (3) *Exercitives*, used in the exercise of authority, as in, 'I appoint you Governor of Kenya'. (4) *Behabitives*,

used to imply certain attitudes, as in 'I apologise for my behaviour'.

It is the purpose of these apparently trivial distinctions to be used to illuminate features of language that have been overlooked, and so (for Austin at least) to correct philosophical errors that have arisen due to a neglect of their special logical character. Evans works over this ground very thoroughly in the first part of the book, as did Austin himself in his posthumously-published lectures *How to Do Things with Words*. But how can this help in our understanding of Scripture?

Consider the utterance, 'God is my Creator', as a type of a certain class of statements in Scripture. On the face of things it is on a par with 'Lee is my hairdresser', or 'Edwards is my solicitor', and so on. But uttered in the appropriate circumstances, this is not *just* the recognition of a certain objective state of affairs. The utterance has important implications. For example, it shows that the speaker acknowledges the Lordship of God, and consequently sees himself as a creature of God, and a steward of God's gifts, and this in turn has implications for his attitudes and conduct in many concrete situations of his life and witness. In this way, the speaker is involved or 'caught up' in the utterance. 'In the biblical context, if I say "God is my Creator", I acknowledge my status as God's obedient servant and possession, I acknowledge my role as God's steward and worshipper, I acknowledge God's gift of existence, and I acknowledge God's self-commitment to me. This act of acknowledgement includes both Behabitive and Commissive elements' (p. 158).

For another illustration, take expressions such as 'God reveals His glory in His creation'. In these expressions the speaker not only commits himself and expresses a certain attitude, but also passes a verdict coinciding with the verdict of Scripture. 'In saying, "God reveals His glory in His creation", I do not merely assent to a flat statement of fact, I express an attitude which involves an onlook. This expression of onlook includes not only Behabitive and Commissive elements, but also a Verdictive element. In deciding *to* glorify, I decide *that* He is glorious. My utterance is an unofficial Verdictive; it is an agreement with what I take to be an official Verdictive: the verdict of God Himself, expressed by men of religious authority' (p. 197).

A last example: according to Scripture, to know God is to acknowledge Him; this knowledge is a form of action. 'When a man "knows" God, he acknowledges Him; and when God "knows" a man, He acknowledges the man'. So a man can be bidden to 'know the Lord' ((Jer. 31: 34). (Compare Calvin in the *Institutes*, I, 2: 'We cannot with propriety say there is any knowledge of God where there is no religion or piety.') Thus, 'I know the Lord' is not like 'I know the milkman' or 'I know my twelve times table'; to know the Lord entails other conduct of a certain specific sort.

These are just a few instances of the insights in this book. Perhaps they are insights that tend to confirm our previous reading of Scripture, but this is no bad thing. In any event, they are the product of the use of the findings of modern philosophical research in the illumination of the logical structure of biblical language; not to *reduce* the statements of Scripture, to devalue them, but to illustrate their unique character.

Analytic philosophy *as such* is not anti-religious; it can be used constructively and painstakingly. When it is done in this way and in this temper, it can be a useful help to theology and to our understanding of revealed truth, as it can be also to politics or to natural science.

Notes

1 R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empirical View of the Nature of Religious Belief.* (Eddington Memorial Lecture. CUP, 1955.)

2 R. M. Hare, 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by A. MacIntyre and A. G. N. Flew. (SCM, 1955.)

3 John Hick, 'Theology and Verification' in *Theology Today*, XVII, 1, April 1960. I. M. Crombie, 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.

4 D. M. Mackay, 'Divine Activity in a Scientific World' in *Faith and Thought*, Vol. 91, No. 2.

5 Sheed and Ward, 1964.

6 SCM, 1964.

7 A. G. N. Flew, 'Theology and Falsification' in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.

8 In *The Language of Morals* (OUP. 1952) and *Ethics* (Pelican, 1954).

9 See his posthumously published lectures, *How To Do Things With Words* (OUP, 1963).