

Theistic Verification

By "theistic verification" is meant the provision of significant reasons for holding that a statement about the nature, existence, or activity of God is "true" in the sense that it corresponds to what in fact is the case at the appropriate level or mode of reality. In this paper, however, I shall not attempt to offer reasons why specific theistic claims may be judged to be true or to provide phenomenological and psychological accounts of how in practice people both give and maintain their assents to theistic claims. My concern, rather, is to look at the logically antecedent question of the rationally proper method for theistic verification and at some of the implications of that method for our understanding of claims about a "living God." Accordingly, what I offer is a philosophical, not a phenomenological, investigation of the basis of belief in God in terms of three questions:

1. Why is theistic verification important?
2. What is involved in the verification of claims about God?
3. What does theistic verification indicate about the status of claims about the activity of a living God in nature and in history?

Why Is Theistic Verification Important?

The notion of "verification" is today regarded with some suspicion because of the way in which it was used—or abused—by the logical positivists. This philosophical movement asserted, through its so-called verification principle, that only those synthetic statements whose truth can be empirically tested according to the methods of natural science should be regarded as factually meaningful. All other synthetic statements, including

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those of metaphysics and theology, should be eliminated as meaningless, nonsensical, or merely emotive. Logical positivism, however, is now generally recognized to be basically defective. There seems to be something wrong with a principle of meaning which condemns as meaningless many things which people say and which are commonly understood to be meaningful, including the statement of the principle itself. Furthermore, even if the kind of factual statement that is found in the natural sciences is essentially characterized by being *empirically* verifiable, this provides no good grounds for presupposing that *all* factual statements must necessarily have the same character: there may be other kinds of factual statement whose truth cannot be appropriately tested by the methods of the natural sciences.

Logical positivism has given way to linguistic analysis, a version of language philosophy which has a much more open attitude to language. The linguistic analyst does not try to lay down a priori canons of meaningfulness but seeks, rather, to examine language as it is used in order to discover the different jobs that it fulfills and their particular characteristics. This means, however, that many linguistic analysts consider that it is not their function to judge whether a particular statement is true or false other than by showing that it does or does not cohere with and perhaps is implied by other elements in the relevant language-game. Accordingly, the only revisionary activity which they consider permissible is that of ending the puzzles which occur when alien terms are mistakenly introduced into a language-game or when the terms used in a particular language-game are themselves misunderstood. Thus, in the case of theology, many linguistic analysts consider that it is neither their duty nor within their competence as analysts to decide if a particular statement about God is true or false in the sense of corresponding to reality. All that they are prepared to do is to describe how that statement does or does not fit in with the theistic language-game, what are the rules which are generally observed in that language-game, where the language-game is commonly played, and why certain conflicts, due to misunderstandings of the terms and rules of the game, have arisen in it.

This approach to the language of theology has considerable appeal for many modern theologians since it has certain parallels with what they understand to be their function. It seems to offer, for instance, a philosophical imprimatur to the claim that

theology is an autonomous discipline having its own rules, which can only be understood in terms of the actual practice of theology. Again, the slogan "Don't ask for meaning, ask for use" can be used by the radical theologian as support for his view that what is essential in religion is not thought but deeds, not words but practice.

I do not want to minimize the value of linguistic analysis for theology. It has made an important contribution to theological self-understanding by helping the theologian to recognize something of the complex content and status of theological statements. Nevertheless, when we have understood the meaning of a statement about God, appreciated its place in the theistic language-game, ironed out any apparent inconsistencies in its contents, and seen how it is related to the practical affairs of daily life, there still remains the crucial question "Is it true; and how can we know that it is true?"—that is, the question "How can we be reasonably sure that what this statement tells us corresponds to what in fact is the case?" Some theologians and philosophers argue that this is an improper question, but I cannot agree with them. If, then, as extreme Wittgensteinians may hold, the philosopher's task is not to prove the truth of statements but to describe language-games, then I am basically not a philosopher. If the theologian tells me that I will only "know" the truth of this particular theistic statement—or of all—when I am converted to the circle of faith to which it belongs, then I am basically not a theologian. What I am, perhaps, is a rather skeptical ordinary person who, from the point of view of puzzled common sense, responds to these claims of the philosopher and theologian by saying: "O.K. You have told me that this particular statement about God is part and parcel of this particular language-game or circle of faith and cannot be understood and tested apart from it. I am prepared to accept your claim for the moment. But tell me, in that case, why should I accept that this particular language-game or circle of faith reports what is in fact the case? How can I know that your theistic statements correspond to some aspect of reality and are not fictional constructions reporting what you would like to be the case but in fact is not the case? How do I know that your statements about God are like statements about Richard Nixon or gravity or the

Prince of Wales and not like statements about Humpty Dumpty, unicorns, or the present King of France? To put it bluntly, is what you tell me about God fact or fiction, true or false, and how can I test which it is?"

Although no conclusive answer to this question may be obtainable, the question as such seems to me to be a legitimate one. Consequently, while recognizing the unsatisfactoriness of the logical positivists' position, we should not overlook the importance of the basic concern behind their assertion of the verification principle, namely, the concern that if a factual claim is made, it should be open to some kind of appropriate testing procedure which may reasonably be expected to be fairly generally regarded as significant. For theistic statements this means that statements about God, either individually or in terms of the theistic language-game as such, should have some kind of testing procedure which nonbelievers as well as believers can reasonably be expected to accept as significantly indicating whether statements about God do or do not in fact correspond to what is the case at the relevant—and recognized—level of reality.

Besides this argument from the nature of factual claims as such, there are three other good reasons why we should regard the question of theistic verification as important.

First, whether we prefer to define the essence of man in terms of his rationality or of his responsibility, Locke's claim that a man should regulate his assent according to the logically antecedent reasons which support it seems to me to be valid. This does not imply that we should not commit ourselves beyond what we can directly prove but suggests that we should only commit ourselves where and as far as it seems reasonable to do so in the circumstances. Only so can the leap of faith be prevented from becoming the descent into credulity. We recognize this already in many fields. For instance, we refuse to regard the politician's assertion that Mr. Wilson has saved this country from ruin as anything but political propaganda which is to be contemptuously ignored unless he provides us with evidence which indicates that his claim is a significant judgment. Similarly, it seems to me, we do not act as responsible persons if we fail to treat with contempt the utterances of the preacher, philosopher, or theologian who talks about God but will not or cannot provide reasons why we should take

his statements seriously. Investigation of theistic verification is thus important because it indicates the rational, as opposed to the psychological, possibility of claims about and faith in God.

Second, investigation of what is considered to be appropriate evidence for a factual claim may, perhaps paradoxically, lead us to revise our understanding of the meaning and status of that claim. At first sight logical positivists may appear to have confused the question of meaning with the question of truth when they suggested that the way a statement is verified shows us its proper meaning. Reflection, however, suggests that in practice the two are reciprocally related. On the one hand, the meaning of P, if known, governs the way in which P can appropriately be verified—the length of a piece of string is to be measured with a ruler and not with a watch. On the other hand, there are cases where the precise meaning of a statement is not clear, even to the person who makes it. For example, a person may make a statement about man being “free,” although he is not at all sure what can be legitimately inferred from it and yet consider that, in some appropriate way, his statement is true. This, it seems, is frequently the case with many of our statements about God. In such situations, one potentially profitable way of trying to discern both the content and the logical status of the statement is by examining the reasons which have led to the statement being made in the first place and the reasons which later may be offered in defense of its truth. For example, if the evidence offered for the claim that “The Lord is . . . my salvation” (Ps. 27:1) is not only that of the stories of Joseph, the Exodus, and the defeat of Ben-hadad but also that of the stories of Jeremiah, the Exile, and the death of Jesus, it will be clear that this claim about the “saving Lordship” of God must not be understood in terms of straightforward physical and political protection.

At this point there arises one of the initial difficulties for theistic verification which can be summed up as the question “Who decides what is the appropriate evidence for a particular theistic claim?” If we leave it to the believer, we may find that he accepts as appropriate only evidence which supports his existing understanding of his belief—the Psalmist for example may allow only stories like those of Joseph, the Exodus, and Ben-hadad. If another person, Justus, claims that stories like those of Jeremiah, the Exile, and the Crucifixion must be regarded

as evidence, the Psalmist may retort that they do not offer appropriate evidence for his belief but, rather, awkward facts which he must try to show to be compatible with his belief. As for the combination of the stories of Joseph, the Exodus, Ben-hadad, Jeremiah, the Exile, and the Crucifixion, this may be regarded by both the Psalmist and Justus not as evidence for their beliefs about the saving Lordship of God but as evidence for a third belief which also uses the words “Lord” and “salvation” but gives to each of them a content which is different from, though at points overlapping, the contents given to them by the Psalmist and Justus. The outsider may feel that the solution is simple: here we have three different kinds of belief, to be called beliefs in saving Lordship 1, 2, and 3, where “saving Lordship 1” is to be understood in terms of the stories of Joseph, the Exodus, and Ben-hadad; “saving Lordship 2” in terms of the stories of Jeremiah, the Exile, and the Crucifixion; and “saving Lordship 3” in terms of all six stories. In fact, however, such a neat analysis fails to appreciate the messy and confused reasoning out of which religious beliefs arise and develop. I cannot do more here than suggest that theistic verification and theistic belief interact in a way something like this:

1. evidence a, b, c leads to belief that God is x, y;
2. the claim that God is x, y is, perhaps for some intuitive reasons, felt to be backed by evidence a, b, j, k;
3. but evidence a, b, j, k indicates that God is x, y, z;
4. the claim that God is x, y, z is considered to imply that God is also t;
5. but if God is t, then it seems that a is not suitable evidence about him;
6. but if the evidence for God is now held to be b, j, k, this suggests that God is x, z, t and w;
7. and so on . . .

If this seems appallingly messy and unreasonable, consider what happens as we go from the God of the tribe of Israel, to the God of Jeremiah, to the God of Paul, to the God of John, to the God of Augustine or Aquinas or Calvin or Wesley or of twentieth-century liberal Protestantism! Alternatively, consider the continual struggle between the believers, theologians, and philosophers who see their task as that of analyzing and expressing what is believed about God, and the prophets, theologians, and philosophers who see their task also as involving the attempt

to correct, reform, or develop beliefs about God on the basis of what existing beliefs imply and what other evidence indicates. An examination of theistic verification may only make us aware of the bog of confusion on which theistic belief stands, but, on the other hand, I think—and hope—that it may also help us to appreciate where there are paths through the bog and where there are unavoidable difficulties to be overcome. The examination of theistic verification, that is, may not reveal the impossibility of coming to any rational agreement about theistic claims but may help us to grasp both the logical status and the proper content of statements about God.

Third, the need for theistic verification can be defended on the grounds that we live in a world where there is no clear way of choosing between the divergent theologies and ideologies which are confidently and sincerely held by different people. To say that a person must follow whichever "ism" or "ology" happens to grip him seems to me to be either advocating anarchy or betraying the cause of truth. It may be that ultimately there is no way of rationally deciding between different positions, but I am not convinced that this has yet been shown or perhaps ever can be shown—for those that attempt to argue for such skepticism suppose that others will agree with their arguments. In terms of Christian theology, are we unable to escape a situation in which the Barthian and the neo-Barthian radicals endlessly shout at each other but get no further because each side is confident they "know" the truth of what the unverifiable word of God is for today—and on this basis condemn the other side? We may not ever be able to find a universally acceptable and completely conclusive mode of theistic verification—for all truth-tests are relative to the individuals offering and accepting them—but the widespread uncertainty about the nature of ultimate reality which exists today demands that we must try. The search for reasons for belief may be the expression of doubt, but it is "doubt" and not "faith" that characterizes much of contemporary life.

For these reasons, the basic concerns of old-fashioned apologetic theology are probably more important than is currently appreciated. Two things, however, should be born in mind before we proceed to look at the character of theistic verification. First, as Renford Bambrough has affirmed in *Reason, Truth and God*, theistic statements contain factual claims of some kind,

One result of linguistic analyses of theistic statements has been the disclosure of the nonfactual elements in such statements—the attitudinal, perspectival, ethical, personal-encounter, historical, self-reflective, and performative elements. Nevertheless, when it comes to the crunch, the believer defends the validity of his perspective, attitude, ethical views, historical insight, or self-understanding not in terms of a claim about their having a self-validating character but in terms of a factual claim about "so and so being the case," usually expressed as a claim about the existence and nature of God. I do not pretend to understand the precise relationship between the factual and the other elements in theistic statements—it is a relationship, for instance, which apparently commits the naturalistic fallacy since in it ethical values are derived from factual assertions—but I claim both that theistic statements cannot legitimately be reduced wholly to nonfactual statements and that it is the validity of the factual element by which, in the end, all the other elements stand or fall. Nevertheless, although here we are concerned primarily with the factual element in theistic statements, it should be remembered that it is not a straightforwardly factual element but one which is intrinsically connected with other elements and can only be adequately understood when all its connections are taken into account. Second, it should be noted that what is meant by "verification" is "the appropriate truth-test for the matter in hand." Although theology must find ways of verifying its claims about God if it wants them to be taken seriously, it does not follow that the logical positivists were correct in restricting the notion of verification to what they considered to be the empirical procedures of the natural sciences. Consequently, the demand for verification leaves open the question of the proper logical status of theistic facts and their appropriate testing-procedures and does not predetermine what is meant when it is claimed that they are held "by faith." A great deal of the failure of eighteenth-century attempts to produce satisfactory theistic verification, for example, was due to two mistaken presuppositions, first, that theistic claims are basically similar to empirical claims and, therefore, to be verified similarly, and secondly, that legitimate belief is the acceptance of demonstrative proofs. The determination of the proper character of theistic verification, in contrast, must be relevant to the specific logical status of claims about God and so both

initially recognize and, in course of its analysis, define the particular nature of theistic "faith."

Having thus tried to show the legitimacy and value of investigations into the nature of theistic verification and made some preliminary comments, we now are to look at what is actually involved in theistic verification.

What Is Involved in the Verification of Claims About God?

The most conclusive kind of verification is that based on immediate experience—for instance, if it is said that there is a tiger under the table or that Pope Paul is sitting on the back row or that our neighbor has fallen asleep, we know roughly what kind of experiences will conclusively verify or falsify the claim. There are problems even here—how do we know it is Pope Paul and not an impostor that we see and speak to? that our neighbor is asleep and not merely thinking with his eyes closed?—but these seem fairly easy to overcome. Is there any similarly effective way of appealing to direct experience—either of ourselves or through the trustworthy reports of others—to verify or falsify claims about the nature and existence of God? Billy Graham, for example, if I remember the story correctly, is supposed to have replied to the "death of God" theologians by announcing that "God isn't dead, I spoke to him this morning." More significantly, perhaps, certain theologians have argued that claims about the existence and nature of God are primarily confirmed by various personal or moral or mystical experiences in which we find ourselves directly aware of a transcendent "Thou" or "Supreme Reality." Unfortunately, although there is no need to doubt the genuineness of the basic experience, there is considerable doubt about the justifiability of the theistic significance given to these experiences. While the theistic believer apprehends his experience in terms of a theistic frame of reference, it seems that others, who are not theists, have similar basic experiences but do not find any intrinsic need to introduce the notion of God in order to apprehend and understand them. In the end the significance attributed to religious experiences seems to reflect rather than to confirm existing beliefs. Thus there is no satisfactory kind of fundamental theistic verification here; we must look elsewhere. Appeal to the data of religious experience may confirm theistic claims

only by presupposing the general validity of using a theistic frame of reference to interpret such data, and this validity cannot be derived simply from the data of the experience as such.

The basic problem with the verification of statements about God is that although, as has already been maintained, there is an essential *factual* element in such statements, the kind of "fact" that we meet here is peculiar. This is not simply to remind us that what the word "God" refers to is not directly observable by physical sense-experience or that God is vastly bigger than anything else we have to deal with. The problem that we face when we turn to "God" is that if it is true that he exists, then everything that is the case and everything that could in fact ever have been or be the case must be compatible with his existence and—if the notion of Creator, as it seems to be, be part of the essence of being God—dependent upon his existence. In other words, it is either necessarily true of all really possible reality, including whatever is actual, that God exists, or it is necessarily false.

The delineation of this point is an important contribution of recent work on the ontological argument to our understanding of theism. As I have argued elsewhere (cf. *Religious Studies* for October, 1968, and *Anselmiana Analecta*, I), I do not agree that the ontological argument, in any form, demonstrates that God actually exists. What it does do, especially through the so-called second form of the proof, is to remind us of the oddity of God's existence—an oddity expressed in the phrase "necessary existence" where this refers to a mode of existence that is ontologically independent of all else, omnitolerant of all really possible reality, and so on. A similar insight is also involved in the more significant forms of the cosmological argument. This argument avoids contradicting its major premise, *viz.*, that everything has a cause, if it is seen to presuppose the possibility that something may exist for which the causal nexus does not hold and so would exist whatever else does or does not happen to exist. What this means is that *either* the whole of reality is through and through and inescapably theistically grounded *or* it is as absolutely nontheistic. It further means that theistic arguments such as the teleological and moral arguments, while they may allow that God could possibly have chosen to produce a different natural or moral order, are committed to holding that any

natural or moral order which could in fact be part of reality must have a theistic ground.

There are two points in what has just been said that perhaps need to be expounded a little more fully. The first is what is meant by the phrase "really possible" in a statement such as "if God exists, then his existence must be compatible with all really possible as well as with all actual states of affairs." The point here is this: all facts are clearly compatible with all other actual facts. The fact that you are now reading this paragraph is compatible with the composition of the moon, the birthday of David Hume, and the color of John Wesley's horse. It is not, however, compatible with all possible facts, for if some things had been or now were the case, which possibly could have been the case, you would not now be reading this paragraph—for instance, if you were now running for a bus, if Arthur Pailin (my father) had died in 1934 (over a year before I was born), if a car had run out of control and killed me before I had written this paragraph, if a solar explosion had destroyed the earth two months ago. Now, the game of historical "if" is a fascinating but generally a pointless one. In the case of theism, though, it reminds us that whatever in nature or in history might have happened, God would still exist. Not everything that is conceivable as possible, however, may be really possible, because while we or, more likely, God may be able to imagine a state of affairs which is not compatible with or dependent upon the existence of God, such a state of affairs could never have occurred or ever occur if in fact it is true that God exists. The class of what is conceivably possible may thus contain more than, though including all of, the class of the really possible. The existence of God, if he exists, is compatible only with all that is really possible, and one consequence of his existence may be the distinction between the conceivably possible and the really possible. God's mode of existence, nevertheless, is unique because anything other than God can only exist because certain real possibilities have been actualized and not others. Secondly, if God's mode of existence is this "necessary mode of existence" and if, as then seems likely, he is the creative ground of all else, there is a good case for arguing that it is God who delimits the class of the really possible. If this is so, it seems that what is an a posteriori fact for God, being the consequence of his choice, is a necessary fact about reality

for us. It is, to use a personalistic way of talking about the activity of God, as if God designs the hutch in which we, like rabbits, find ourselves. All that happens, all that can happen to us, and all that we can do is limited by the shape, extent, and possibilities of that hutch. The shape, extent, and possibilities are thus necessary facts of existence so far as we are concerned. At the same time, God may not forever choose to maintain this particular hutch; if he so chooses he may alter its design and so vary the necessary facts of the structure of our being as we find it.

The question now arises, if this is the mode of existence which is appropriate to God, how can we try to verify claims about him? It seems clear, for a start, that straightforward empirical methods of verification and falsification will not be appropriate. For example, if we want to test whether a solution is acidic, we add blue litmus to it, knowing that the blue litmus will turn red if acid is present and stay blue if it is not. If it turns red we have then verified the claim that acid is present, if it remains blue we have falsified that claim. If, however, no solution on Mars were ever acidic, all litmus on Mars would always be blue; alternatively, if every solution of Mars were acidic, litmus on Mars would always be red. If either of these possibilities happened to be the case on Mars, no Martian would know that litmus was an indicator; he would know litmus only as a solution which was constantly of one color. Similarly, in the case of God, there is no "indicator" which we can use to make empirical tests to show God's presence or absence, because his existence is either totally compatible or totally incompatible with all really possible states of affairs. God, that is, is not a fact among other facts whose presence or absence in a given situation can be verified or falsified by particular empirical tests. He is an essential component either of all situations or of none—absolutely. Therefore, demands that factual claims about God should be empirically verifiable or falsifiable can be ruled out on the grounds that they are logically incompatible with the proper nature of God.

The problem facing theistic verification, then, is the problem of establishing, when all states of affairs or none are compatible with the existence of God, *first*, what significant characteristics of reality are specified when it is claimed that reality as a whole is theistic rather than nontheistic, and, *second*, how the

presence or absence of those significant characteristics in reality can be determined. We may, in terms of our earlier example, compare it to the problem facing an earthman who wants to explain to a Martian that it is significant to say that a solution is acidic when all the solutions that the Martian knows are acidic—except that in this case all the solutions that the earthman would know would also be acidic. If, however, all known and knowable solutions are acidic, is it significant or pleonastic to describe them as acidic? It is significant only if it tells us something about a state of affairs other than what is contained in a straightforward statement of its being a state of affairs. Thus the predicate “is acidic” will be significant if it tells us or reminds us of something that is not already directly affirmed in the predicate “is a solution” or if it provides an explanation of some characteristic of solutions which is not accounted for simply by the fact that they are solutions.

A different example may throw a bit more light on this problem. Of all politicians, surprising as it may seem, it can be predicated “is a human being.” To say of this or that politician “he is a human being” may, however, be regarded as tautologous, analytic, or trivial. Since this is something that all politicians are, what is the point of saying it? This is a case, though, where an apparently tautologous predicate—or something akin to it—may in fact have considerable significance. For instance, since he is a human being, a politician is likely to be open to persuasion, fallible, able to do only one job at a time—the kind of thing that we express when we say of someone “he’s only human,” a truism but sometimes a useful one. At any rate, as the British Foreign Office is rumoured to have reminded itself in the past few years, “He is a human being, so while there is death, there’s hope!” While, then, it is true of every politician that he is a human being, it may still be significant to say so. The crucial question for theistic verification is thus: What is it that we can say of all reality that is significant and, furthermore, can be regarded as showing that “God exists” or, what amounts to nearly the same thing, that “Reality has a theistic ground”? It may seem that characteristics like unity, intelligibility, purposiveness, rationality, openness to moral advance, as contrasted with the characteristics of an aimless, random, chaotic pluralism, are what would indicate to us that reality is “theistic.” These are, in fact, the kind of criteria that have an intuitive appeal

for me. The establishment of the validity of such criteria, however, raises certain fundamental problems which I do not pretend to be able to solve. I will try to suggest what some of these problems are as simply as I can.

First, as was indicated in the earlier discussion of the importance of verification, the relationship between beliefs about the nature of God and the appropriate evidence for their validity is reciprocal in a somewhat messy way. Theistic verification would be relatively straightforward if we could start with an unchallengeable understanding of what is meant by God. Then we could argue on these lines: God’s nature is x, y, z ; a being with nature x, y, z would presumably create a universe with characteristics a, b, c ; the universe has (or has not) characteristics a, b, c ; therefore, it is likely to be (or likely not to be) theistic—though not necessarily theistic, since a quite different ground of reality might also produce a universe with these characteristics. This, for instance, is how we would probably proceed if we wanted to argue that El Greco painted this painting or that the structure of Methodism is according to the mind of Christ. In the case of God, however, man does not in principle have a prior knowledge of the nature of God on the basis of which he can then look at reality to see if it shows signs of being produced by God. This kind of pattern is more typical of arguments which justify atheism than of arguments for theism. What happens in theism, rather, is that man finds himself in an intellectual spiral in which some elements or characteristics of reality are considered in some way to disclose the nature and existence of God and other parts of reality are then examined to see whether they correspond to, modify, or deny the nature and existence of God thus disclosed. For example, on the one hand, we may see the intelligibility of reality (if such can be discerned) as indicating the existence of God as a mind which governs the structure of all things; on the other hand, on the grounds that the existence of such a God implies that reality is intelligible, we may try to discern intelligibility in the universe as proof that such a God does exist. This is clearly a circular kind of reasoning, but it need not be a vicious circle. It is probably the only kind of reasoning that is possible at this basic level of understanding. The most that we seem able to do is to show that the interactions of our developing understanding

of reality and the actual character of reality produce a coherent and comprehensive pattern.

Theistic reasoning, however, is not a circle but a "spiral"—that is, it is a circular kind of reasoning which is open to change. This seems to be what happens in practice with theistic understanding once the existence of a God has been accepted. Earlier I caricatured the reciprocal relationship between evidence and beliefs that may be involved in such reasoning. Perhaps a little more light can now be thrown on what happens in such reasoning and, incidentally, on the relationship between a priori and a posteriori conceptions of God.

A major objection to the kind of natural theology that is here being investigated is that it is claimed to be impossible ever to infer the nature of God from the evidence provided by our experience of the character of the world since God is essentially utterly other than this world. For example, from the evidence of this world as we know it from our experience we may be able to claim that a God exists who is very powerful and very clever, but we cannot claim that the evidence shows us that he is perfect in power and wisdom. Nevertheless, the perfection of God is regarded by most theists as the essential characteristic of any adequate conception of God. To meet this problem of the inadequacy of a posteriori reasoning, Anselm, Leibniz and others have argued that all appropriate reasoning about God must be basically a priori—only so can our thought adequately represent its object. We start, in that case, by assuming that "if God exists, he exists as a perfect being" and proceed, through some kind of intuitive understanding of what perfection means in this context, to work out the nature of God—and, if the ontological argument is valid, the existence of God—by pure thought without reference to the character of the world as we experience it. Such a priori reasoning, however, presupposes that we know what perfection must mean in the case of God, and this claim is difficult to substantiate. It is questionable if we should be so confident about the competence of our rational powers. Furthermore, if such an a priori concept of God were developed, it is questionable if we could show that reality in fact cohered with it. Leibniz himself did not try to do this: his famous theodicy was based on the a priori judgment that since the world was created by God, it must be the best possible world even though a posteriori evidence may suggest to us that it is a

defective product. Consequently, if, as I think is the case, the ontological argument does not demonstrate the existence of God, a priori reasoning offers us an interesting intellectual exercise but one which mainly tells us about the way our mind works when we consider what it might be like to be perfect.

These criticisms of a priori reasoning about the nature of God, though, do not mean that there is no place for it in attempts to produce theistic verification. What, it seems to me, happens when we try to grasp the nature of God as the ground of reality is that certain aspects of reality suggest to us that God is to be thought of, say, as knowing and as moral. We then develop these notions according to what we consider to be the standard of perfection since we regard God as essentially perfect—perhaps because of intuitive reasons or because our primary understanding of God is influenced by the worshiping activity of religion. We next compare our developed notion of God with reality in order to see whether they cohere or whether reality indicates that our notion should be modified or repudiated. Thus, through the interaction of the apparent evidence of the world and a priori reasoning about what seems inescapably to be the case with God, if there is such a being, our understanding of the nature and existence of God develops in a spiral way. We find, that is, that our understanding of God's nature is confirmed or corrected by its correspondence with an ability to explain the nature of reality, while the nature of reality is itself regarded as indicating what God is like! This procedure, however, may not be totally unlike what scientists do when they develop fundamental theories: the character of a specific part of reality suggests in some way a particular hypothesis about it, and this hypothesis is then tested and modified by further investigations of that part of reality. The trouble with the theologian, however, is that he is usually also a believer. As such, he is committed to his basic understanding of God and consequently less ready to modify or correct it—preferring, it seems, to bypass conflicting evidence on the grounds that the ways of God are sometimes unfathomable for men, rather than to allow that evidence to modify his beliefs.

This brings us to the problem of evil. From what has been said so far it might appear that reality generally seems to conform to one consistent pattern—theistic or nontheistic. Notoriously, however, this is far from the case. The character of

reality appears to be as mixed as the contents of a church rummage sale. There are bits which indicate an underlying creative purpose and others which suggest an underlying destructive sadism; from some points of view reality appears to fit together as a unity while from others it appears to be a random pluralism; sometimes it seems to be a moral order, at other times to be neutral or hostile to moral values. How, then, do we decide which evidence, which set of characteristics, gives us the clue to the authentic meaning of the whole? With diversely constituted bodies like the Methodist Conference, we can, in the end, always take a vote. The vote will reveal, after the confusing babble of debate and murmurs from the floor, what actually is the opinion of the majority. In the case of reality, however, we cannot move that the vote be now taken—for one thing we are not in a position to count the hands or even to find a manageable representative sample and count those hands; for another, what we are looking for is not a majority but unanimity, that is, for a pattern which is true of *all* reality, whatever *prima facie* diversity it may suggest. What I suspect happens is that, for some reason or other, we are attracted by certain elements in reality and see them as clues to the meaning of the whole. We then try to fit all the other elements into the pattern indicated by these clues. The material which we cannot easily fit in constitutes the problem of evil—it is in fact the counterevidence to our case. Whether we consider that the counterevidence overrules the theistic case or is only an annoyance—a bit of the puzzle which so far we have not satisfactorily solved—is one basic difference between the theist and the non-theist. Here, however, we cannot go further into the methodological issues raised by the problem of evil. I hope, though, that this discussion has indicated the messy character of the reasoning involved in theistic verification.

A second basic problem for theistic verification can be summed up by the slogan "Theology is anthropology." The use of this slogan does not imply that all talk about God is to be understood wholly and without remainder as man talking about himself—as, for instance, when my daughter tells me that her teddy bear would like an ice cream, she is really indicating what she would like. Although there is a self-reflective element in theology, since in theology man is trying to understand his place in the whole scheme of things, the primary function of

my use of the slogan "Theology is anthropology" is to remind us that all our thought about God is *our* thought and, therefore, controlled by what we are and what we are capable of understanding. If the theist is prepared to grant this, then he can reply to the charge that in theology man is only projecting his own self onto the universe, not by denying the charge completely but by allowing that there is force in it and then arguing that it is all that we can do if we are to understand God and the fundamental structure of things. Although this seems to me the most satisfactory reply to the charge, it does mean that we may have no very effective answer to the skeptic who, rather like Hume's Demea, insists that God must be utterly other than man and then, like Philo, points out that if this is the case, we have no way of understanding him! All we can do is to try to show that from our human position certain things seem to make some sort of sense and then to hold that, since nothing better is available, we are probably justified in giving our assent to what our understanding suggests to us. Since, that is, there is no other hole to go to, perhaps we ought not to abandon or utterly despise the hole we are in.

At the same time, we should not forget the anthropological qualifications of our theology—and, consequently, appreciate further the difficulties of finding convincing modes of theistic verification. These qualifications are basically twofold. First, we are unable to think of God except by some kind of analogy with ourselves. Peter Bertocci has recently claimed (in a paper printed in *Talk of God*) that we should not be too skeptical of the legitimacy of thinking of God in a human, personalistic manner. At any rate, to think of him in nonpersonal ways seems to be less adequate, and it is difficult to see how we could talk significantly of God as suprapersonal, although apparently some theologians think that they can. At best, it seems to me, we are restricted to using eminently personal language of God. As Peter Browne argued at length in the first half of the eighteenth century, if God reveals himself to us, he must do it in terms of our natural understanding and experience because there is no other way by which we could grasp that revelation. Thus, when we engage in theistic verification we must qualify our confidence in any conclusions which we think that we have reached with the proviso that they are in terms of our thought and, in particular, in terms of the values which seem to us to

be significant and intuitively self-validating. We may be quite sophisticated in our thinking and, in terms of notions like dipolar panentheism, produce concepts of God that avoid the antinomies which undermine traditional ways of understanding the nature of God. Nevertheless, we can never escape the limitations illustrated by Xenophon's comment on the red-haired god of the Thracians and by Voltaire's story of the mole and cockchafer. Secondly, we must recognize that we are unable to grasp anything about God except insofar as he is related to us. Time and time again theologians have pointed out that all that we can perceive is God-in-his-relation-to-us-and-to-his-world, not God as he is in himself. Frequently, however, they have also tacitly assumed that what we may thus discover about God is a fairly accurate sample of his whole nature. Can we be confident about this assumption? A prisoner who sees his warden only when he is on duty, not when he is drunk at a party or shouting at a football match, will only have a seriously distorted view of what the warden is really like. What he will know, though, is how the warden presents himself when on duty and, consequently, how he, as a prisoner, should relate himself to the warden. Perhaps, then, we should recognize that the conclusions of theistic verification, if we ever get any which we can trust, only indicate to us how we should relate ourselves to God and, consequently, conduct ourselves in this world. They provide us, that is, not with any sure indication of God's own nature but only with a regulative and, hopefully, valid understanding of our relation to God and of his to us.

How, then, may we sum up this brief and confused examination of theistic verification? It suggests, I think, that claims about God are primarily claims about how we should understand the ground of reality and, therefore, are to be treated as some type of metaphysical claim. They affirm that reality is most adequately understood—or, at least, that our place in it and understanding of it makes most apparent sense—if we regard it as consequent, for example, upon the activity of a creative, purposive, value-seeking, moral mind. Thus, in terms of Wisdom's story of the explorers in his essay *Gods*, the problem for the theist is not primarily that of discovering the gardener but rather that of discovering whether there is a garden and, if so, what are the rules and values which determine its nature. There are, however, three basic characteristics of theistic veri-

fication which cast doubt on our ability to bring it to a successful conclusion. The first is the "necessary" character of theistic facts—they refer, that is, to the whole of reality as actual and as really possible, including ourselves. Consequently, it is difficult to see how we can establish significant procedures to discern them. Secondly, all theistic statements are unavoidably "anthropological." Although they tell us how we understand ourselves and our world, is our way of understanding adequate to the task of understanding "God"? It is not easy to be confident about our rational abilities at this point. Thirdly, theistic verification, in view of the mixed state of the evidence provided by reality, seems to me to reflect Anselm's "Credo ut intelligam." Neither the scientist nor the theologian infers his initial theory from all the facts. What happens, rather, is that some of the facts give him a clue—as I. T. Ramsey puts it "The light dawns," "the penny drops"—and then, on the basis of this clue, a confused, messy, but perhaps fruitful interaction of evidence and belief, of thought and experience, of doubt and understanding occurs, out of which a more adequate, a firmer, and hopefully a clearer understanding of God emerges. Can we, however, step from saying "The world seems to me as if there were a God of this kind" to saying "The world shows that there is a God of this kind"—and does it matter if we cannot legitimately make that jump? The answer to both questions is "probably not." Alternatively, of course, we may start with a "credo," look at reality, and decide that this credo does not help us to understand reality but is utterly contradicted by it. Then we become either nonbelievers or credulous fideists.

To sum up in one long sentence: Although I believe theistic verification is essential if theism is to be taken seriously, I consider that it is difficult because of the "necessary" character of basic theistic claims, the "anthropological" character of all our understanding of God, and the need to start with some kind of "credo" in which we select one part of the world and use it as a clue to grasp the whole meaning of existence.

What Does Theistic Verification Indicate?

If, in spite of the difficulties I have referred to, we can establish some kind of theistic verification, we may be able to argue,

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from our conclusion that reality is basically theistic, that its theistic ground is to be regarded most adequately in terms of creative, rational, and moral personal activity and so, in some significant way, as "living." We may further consider that we are justified in claiming that God not only determines the structure of reality and is totally aware of what occurs in it but also, perhaps in terms of a Whiteheadian notion of initial conceptual aims, constantly influences the processes of reality according to some values and end. A concept of a constantly creative and active God may thus be producible by a developed kind of theistic verification, although we may legitimately suspect that sometimes in such arguments our critical judgment is overwhelmed by the exuberance of our own thought and that consequently we fail to pay close attention to what in fact can reasonably be verified. Nevertheless, insofar as the notion of a living God means that God is to be thought of in terms of personal activity rather than as an unchanging principle—that is, as a God who does things rather than as a deistic first principle—theistic verification may be able to justify in general terms belief in a living God.

Many believers, though, want to go considerably further in their theistic claims than a general affirmation that a God exists who purposes, knows, and acts—they want also to be able to talk about specific events or series of events in which we can see specific purposes of God specifically fulfilled through the agency, perhaps *inter alia*, of God. For example, they may make such diverse statements as that

God raised up John and Charles Wesley to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land;

God produced a calm at Dunkirk so that the British Army could be saved from capture;

God brought about the advance of the church in the first four centuries;

Secularization and man's increasing sense of autonomy are current expressions of the will of God.

Such claims, although not necessarily these particular ones, are traditionally part of the essence of Christian belief. Deism, for

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instance, is condemned primarily on the grounds that it treats God as a being who initially constructed the world but, having once made it, does not interfere with it. Christian theism, in contrast, affirms that God not only creates and sustains but also providentially intervenes in natural processes and historical events. These affirmations are particularly seen in its doctrine of the Holy Spirit—which is significantly one of the least developed of Christian doctrines—and in the apparent intention behind intercessory prayer, whatever sophisticated interpretations are now offered for such activity in order to avoid problematic assumptions about the direct activity of God. Thus faith is seen not just as a "right understanding" through which the believer achieves harmony with the ultimate nature and purpose of things but also as a trust in a God who gets involved when necessary. Luther, for example, speaks of God as one who will

help us clear from all the ill
That hath us now o'ertaken

and Wesley writes in his Journal that "God was pleased to pour out his Spirit this year, on every part both of England and Ireland: perhaps in a manner we have never seen before" and "I observed God is reviving his work in Kingswood." The questions that now face us are "Can such claims about God's activity be verified and, if so, how?" and "What does their method of verification suggest about their status?"

A preliminary point, however, needs to be made. It is that the basic nature of God as indicated by the ontological argument does not show that God can only justifiably be thought of as acting in a universal manner. Just as a general can order that a particular unit should undertake a specific task as well as laying down general orders which everybody in his army must obey, so God, while determining the structure of all reality, is not prevented in principle from having and executing particular providences. At the same time, the view that God is essentially perfect raises certain questions about the propriety of speaking of him as "living," where the quality of living is understood to include the activity of choosing to do particular things. For instance, the question may arise, Does being "perfect" imply that God will respond to each situation in an absolutely predictable manner? In other words, Is a being that is essentially

“perfect” free to choose its response to each situation that arises, or does its perfection automatically determine its response? A thermostatic regulator, for example, may respond to all changes of temperature by adjusting a heating and cooling system so that it maintains a temperature of 70°. Its responses vary according to circumstances, but they are utterly predictable, and we would not want to say that the responses of the machine show that it is living. Similarly, if God is held always to respond to each situation by seeking to secure the maximum increase in value, can we say that he is living, where life, for us, involves not only an awareness of our circumstances but also a freedom to respond to them in different ways? I am not sure about the answer to this question, although I suspect that the problem is largely a verbal one and that its solution will thus be found through closer examination of the terms involved. The problem does, however, further indicate the peculiarity of the concept of living when used as a predicate of God. The problem that we are to tackle, though, presupposes that it does make sense to talk about the particular acts of a perfect God. This problem arises from the fact that while God’s general nature may be discerned from the general structure of reality, it seems far more difficult to discover what, if anything, happens as an effect of his particular activity.

Apart from some cases of miracles, which have too many problems of their own to provide us with viable counter-instances, cases where it is claimed that God is actually at work are clearly cases where he is not the only agent present. For example, in the case of the raising up of John and Charles Wesley for a specific task, the influence of their mother and their personal character must be taken into account. Similarly, the climatic conditions at the time of Dunkirk, the state of society in the first four centuries of this era, and the natural development of thought should not be ignored when we consider claims about divine activity at Dunkirk, in promoting the church, and in the advance of secularization and the autonomy of man. What the verification of claims about divine activity requires are some positive grounds for holding that these events would not have occurred as they did without some special intervention by God. In what follows we must bear in mind that all theistic arguments at this point are likely to suffer in practice from the messy, circular, and confused reasoning which we

have already indicated even though they may be neatly schematized in principle.

Historical investigations are always problematic because we can never go back to the original situation to make experiments. Nevertheless, in the case of historical questions about whether so-and-so was involved in producing a certain situation, there is a fairly clear procedure for testing the claim that he was. Take, for example, the question “Was S significantly involved in producing event E?” where S could be John Wesley and E the state of industrial relations in Kingswood in 1790; or S could be Robert South’s sermon on the necessity of believing in mysteries, and E could be Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Failing any direct confession by the participants of who was involved—and it is the lack of this, at least in a trustworthy form, which creates the problem—we may proceed as follows:

- a) we examine event E and the known participants in E to see if they adequately explain E;
- b) if they do not, then we isolate the inexplicable elements and ask what kind of agent is likely to have produced this effect;
- c) we judge, if the characteristics of the unknown agent are characteristics known to be enjoyed by S, if they are sufficiently definitive to make it unlikely that any other agent than S would have them, and if there are no other characteristics of S which make it unlikely that he contributed to producing E, that it is more or less probable that S was significantly involved in producing E.

When, however, we try to apply this historical (and scientific) procedure to claims about God’s natural or historical activity we run into considerable difficulties.

In the first place, the methodological presuppositions of historical (and scientific) explanation generally rule out in principle any reference to supernatural forces. The validity of this methodological attitude may be questioned, but the historian and scientist will probably reply that the best way to convince him of his error is to show him cases where it cannot be doubted that God is at work; until this happens, he sees no need to alter his methodological attitude even though there are numerous events

which are both surprising and, as yet, inexplicable. This is a fair retort, and I do not know of a convincing response to it either by meeting its request or by showing its intrinsic unsatisfactoriness. Ecclesiastical historians in practice now seem increasingly prepared to seek historical respectability at the cost of leaving supernatural forces out of their understanding of events. Are they being false to what they are talking about, or does their "secular" approach really correspond to reality—and cast doubt upon all claims about God's particular acts in history? It is a moot and crucial question for theistic understanding.

Secondly, where attempts are made to attribute certain events to a special activity of God, examination of different studies of these events suggests that the divine element may be an interpretation imposed upon the events by the interpreter on the basis of his own faith rather than an understanding demanded by the evidence itself. Take, for example, studies of the Reformation—where and in what ways different people openly or tacitly, consider that they perceive the work of God in those events seems to be determined by their existing belief or unbelief. Inspection of the records of the events themselves is unable to produce any way of judging satisfactorily between the interpretations. Was, for instance, Luther inspired by God, the devil, or his guts? A debate between Gordon Rupp, Newman, and John Osborne on this point could be fun, but it might well produce more heat than light! At the same time, we must remember what was pointed out earlier, namely, that certain events do in fact act as "disclosure situations" which evoke an initial theistic credo. While, however, the credo may be verifiable, its truth does not necessarily depend upon the truth of the claim that God was actually directly at work in the events evoking the credo.

Thirdly, a large moral problem is raised by claims that this and that success is due to divine initiative. For example, if we claim that God produced a calm at Dunkirk, why did he allow a storm after D-Day? If Wesley was snatched as a brand from the burning, why not Hus? If God raised up John and Charles Wesley, why did he allow the church to get into such a mess in the first place? If he prospered the church in the first four centuries, why not now? So we could go on—at enormous length. Like Job we may reply that we do not know since we cannot fathom God's purposes. This is quite fair—but in that case, are

we justified in claiming that *any* events are God's responsibility? If some of his actions are unfathomable, are we deluding ourselves when we consider that we can understand—and so recognize—others of them? Here we confront a form of the problem of evil which throws into serious doubt the justifiability of any claim to perceive the acts of God in history or in nature.

Finally, many attempts to attribute particular events or trends in history to the purposes and agency of God appear on later reflection to be the result of theological opportunism. It is very tempting to attribute what seems now to be a powerful and growing movement to the inspiration of the spirit of God, but the passing of time often shows how mistaken such judgments were. This kind of theological opportunism seems especially prevalent at present. At times from my English standpoint it seems as if every popular movement in the U.S.A. is, in its turn, baptized by some theologian as the current activity of God—the attack on communism, the growth of church attendance, secularization and economic progress, black power, radical protest, and so on. Will there now be a flurry of books about the spirit of God now calling man into outer space? Sometimes the baptism may be justified—but it is only justified if careful examination shows that the movement is really in harmony with the nature and purposes of God, and this is only possible on the basis of an existing understanding of God, though perhaps an understanding modified by the character of the affairs in which it seeks to discern God's presence or absence. Vigor and growth and even apparent creativity, for instance, are probably not sufficient signs of divine involvement, otherwise we will be in danger of having to regard both Fascism in the 1930s and the "permissive society" of the 1960s as instances of divine activity.

What, then, is the status of claims about particular divine acts? On the one hand, they cannot be ruled out as a priori impossible. If theism is not completely wrong in its understanding of God, it is quite feasible to consider that God is not completely passive in his relation to events. On the other hand, there does not at present seem to be any way of satisfactorily verifying the claim that God has acted or is acting in this or that specific event. What apparently happens is that the believer, both on the basis of existing beliefs about God and in response to disclosures evoked by the events, ascribes certain events to God's special agency on the grounds that if he were a being with the nature

of the God he believes to exist, these would be the types of thing that he probably would do. These claims, however, are inferences from and applications of theistic belief rather than contributions to or justifications of such belief. The theistic interpretation of events, then, is the result of belief in God being applied to events rather than being inescapably demanded by those events. Whether or not such applications are justified is questionable. Their validity, at any rate, presupposes the validity of the faith they apply. Consequently, when believers talk about the work of God here or there, we should not understand them to be making claims which we can verify by direct investigations of those events. What they are doing, rather, is showing how they consider that their belief in God may have practical implications but, in doing this, they provide a theistic interpretation of what everybody agrees to have happened. Whether or not others accept the interpretation as valid probably depends in the end upon whether or not they share the faith which produces it. It is a case where the "credo" determines the "intelligam" and cannot be justified by what is thereby considered to be "understood," although it is some event or events which, justifiably or not, starts the theistic interpretation of events by evoking an initial theistic credo.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have briefly looked at some of the reasons why theistic verification is important and some of the problems involved in it. It may seem to some that what I have done is to show that reason is my real god and that belief in the God of theistic religion is only an application of this primary belief. If this is so, all I can say is that this is the way I find myself and I think I would betray myself to pretend that at present I were any different.

What the investigation of theistic verification seems to me to indicate is that belief in God is primarily a metaphysical understanding of the basic nature of reality, an understanding which in the end may have to be accepted as true simply because it offers a more comprehensive and coherent account than any other. Any attempts to determine the nature of God and to verify claims about him, however, must take into account three characteristics of theistic thought: first, that so far as the reality

in which we find ourselves is concerned, God is a necessary fact; second, all theology is anthropologically oriented; third, all theistic investigations begin from a credo which gives the initial insight into how reality is to be understood. It is then by the interaction of belief and evidence that theistic understanding develops—in what must be described as a messy and confused way. Finally, while claims about particular activity of the living God are in principle possible, in practice they seem to be the result of the application of theistic belief to events rather than of the discernment of characteristics in events which demonstrably require theistic explanation.

In the end, then, because of the intrinsic problems that beset theistic verification, it seems that what the believer holds about God should be understood as, at best, a claim that reality makes more sense if regarded in this way than in any other. This suggests that the theist is one who chooses to look at the world as if there is a God underlying it. Logically I think that this is so—and, at such fundamental levels, I doubt whether we can reasonably expect anything else. In practice, though, the believer does not exist in such a tentative manner. He approaches the world as the handiwork of God and finds his faith pragmatically confirmed as, here and now, it provides significant and effective depth, direction, and integration to his life. The value of these pragmatic considerations, however, cannot be taken up here although they seem to me to be very important.

In a humble, inquiring spirit I present this paper, and if others share my difficulties, they may also share with me in Anselm's prayer:

And come thou now, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek thee, where and how it may find thee. . . . For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe,—that unless I believed, I should not understand.

Perhaps also we should remember with joy the words of Ambrose, "non in dialectica complacuit Deo salvum facere populum suum."