

On Speaking of God

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Leave me, you bugbear! Get away!
I won't die! I must get to land!

-- Peer Gynt

(1)

In his "Gods", John Wisdom asserts, "the existence of God is not an experimental issue in the way it was".¹ Tillich, agreeing, points out "that there is no evidence whatsoever for the assumption that such a being exists". He adds that secular critics have forced us "to reconsider and to restate the meaning of the tremendous word God".² Of late, some English analytic philosophers have been doing just that.³ I shall attempt here to indicate that their analyses have resulted in a quite understandable impasse and I shall sketch an account of a way out of that impasse.

These British philosophers quite rightly believe that the most pressing problem is not the traditional one of proving or giving evidence for whether or not God exists, but of trying to come to understand in what sense or senses we (as Theists, atheists, agnostics or what not) can say that the word 'God' has a use or that sentences like 'There is a God' or 'God loves man and de-

¹ John Wisdom, "Gods" *Logic and Language* (First Series) ed. Antony Flew (Oxford: 1952), p. 187.

² Paul Tillich, "Religion", *Perspectives U.S.A.* No. 15 (Spring 1956), pp. 43-8.

³ Antony Flew and Alasdair Macintyre editors. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: 1955), Basil Mitchell ed. *Faith and Logic* (London: 1957), I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: 1957). E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images* (London: 1957).

signed the world' have a meaning. It seems to me that the logical heart of the matter arises in the "Theology and Falsification" discussion.⁴ Flew initially stated the problem in these terms: theistic sentences like 'God loves us', 'God has a plan for the universe', 'God is the ground of our existence' and 'There is a God' seem like vast cosmological *assertions*, but in their logical behavior they do not operate like assertions. If a person makes an assertion there must be something that could count as establishing the truth or the falsity of that assertion. "An assertion, to be an assertion at all, must claim that things stand thus and thus and not otherwise." If we cannot say what we would take as counting against our claim, such that if this state of affairs did take place it would lead us to withdraw it, our claim cannot count as an assertion at all.⁵ But theists will not allow anything so to count against their basic religious claims. This being so, it is paradoxical to claim that such sentences can be used to make assertions at all. Flew poses this question for the theist: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?"

In reply to this challenge, two general lines of approach have been taken. The first line is best called a non-descriptivist approach. The second more traditional approach will have to do with the umbrella label: 'descriptivism'.

For the non-descriptivists God-sentences are taken as expressions of basic commitments or decisions. As such, they can be neither true nor false and thus the notion of falsifiability cannot even arise. 'God' here is not a name for some Super-Being. It is not, they argue, the name of any kind of being at all. Nor is 'God' a name for "Being as such", even assuming that such a

⁴ Hare, Mitchell and Crombie's arguments are in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Mascall's are in his *Words and Images*, Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: 1955), Nowell-Smith, *Socratic Digest, V*, Horsburgh, "Mr. Hare on Theology and Falsification", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 6 (July, 1956), pp. 256-60, and "Professor Braithwaite and Billy Brown", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 36 (November, 1958), pp. 201-7.

⁵ Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification", *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 106.

phrase makes sense. 'God' is a word used to express what Kierkegaard called "subjective truth", that is to say, it expresses that for which the speaker is willing to live and die. This position has been effectively criticized as an interpretation of how reasonably orthodox believers use God-sentences.⁶ Taken in this non-descriptivist way the sentences cannot be used so as to make religious remarks that will be properly orthodox or practically effective.

The argument against a non-descriptivist theory would go something like this. No reasonable man would deny that God-sentences have emotive, ceremonial, and performative functions. They express attitudes and they evoke reactions. But they are more than expressions of intention associated with a parable, story or myth. They *somehow* purport to make claims about the nature of the universe and how it got to be how it is and what "end" it has. God-sentences are used to make what purport to be statements that are said to be true and false and the word 'God' is a proper name that is said to have some more or less definite denotation. The predications we make of God may be in some complicated sense "analogical" and in saying 'There is an x such that x is God' we may not even be clear about how 'There is' is being used (it may also be functioning analogically) or about the nature of the value of our variable. But we are clear that some "existential" claim is being made and we are clear that our statement cannot be translated without remainder into a practicalistic utterance announcing our intention to adhere to a certain life policy. Furthermore, what would we be praying to and what sense could be given to statements about God's creating and sustaining the world on such an interpretation of God-sentences? Both Bertrand Russell and Father Copleston have no trouble in agreeing that the word 'God' is taken by the faithful to stand for a "supreme personal being -- distinct from the world and creator of the world".⁷ Now the non-descriptivist would certainly be right in

⁶ F. C. Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy* (London: 1956), Chapter VII, and Terence Penelhum, "Faith, Fact and Philosophy", *Toronto Quarterly*, October, 1956.

⁷ Bertrand Russell and F. C. Copleston, "The Existence of God: A Debate" in Bertrand Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian*, (London: 1957), p. 144.

saying that we have no clear sense as to what the key terms mean in the above definition offered by Copleston. We can, however, readily see that any definition of these terms that a non-descriptive theory could offer would of necessity be a low-redefinition, just as to define an M.D. as someone who can administer first aid is a low-redefinition.⁸

The above criticism of non-descriptivist theories needs fuller statement and more subtle qualification. In particular, Braithwaite's rather extreme statement needs to be distinguished from Hare's subtler but vaguer, though *perhaps* more adequate, contentions. But in amplifying and qualifying my criticism I should only be going over ground already ably covered by Passmore, Penelhum, Horsburgh, and Martin on the one hand, and by such orthodox philosopher-theologians as Mascall, Copleston, Crombie, and Hick on the other.⁹ The core of the attack on non-descriptivism in theology is the claim that certain central God-sentences are so used that they cannot *but* be constructed as assertions if our explication intends to explicate the way religious discourse is actually used by orthodox believers when they are making actual claims about God. It is just this sense or senses of God talk that the non-descriptivist presumably sets out to analyze.

The descriptivist analysis is less vulnerable, but it has very severe defects too. The descriptivists have indicated that the orthodox must treat their God-sentences as factual assertions, but they have failed with their meta-theory to explicate how they are intelligible as factual assertions. Mitchell, Crombie, and Hick are the heroes of this descriptivist attempt to meet Flew on this issue of falsification. Mitchell, for example, criticizes the non-descriptivists along lines similar to the criticisms just mentioned. But he then goes on to claim that an intelligible case can be made for saying

⁸ The term 'low-redefinition' is Paul Edwards'. He says, "... we shall refer to a redefinition of a word which includes something but not all of what the ordinary definition includes and which includes nothing else as a 'low redefinition'." Paul Edwards, "Bertrand Russell's Doubts about Induction", *Logic and Language*, (First Series), Antony Flew ed., p. 60.

⁹ J. A. Passmore, "Christianity and Positivism", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 35 (1957), p. 125 ff.

that the theist's sentences are assertions of significant articles of faith that are neither hypotheses nor vacuous formulae. This is in essence Crombie's approach as well though Crombie develops it more fully. The theist, according to Mitchell, does not deny that some facts count against his alleged God-assertions. The fact of pain (for example) counts against the assertion that God loves men. It gives rise to the most "intractable of theological problems -- the problem of evil". The facts of pain count against Christian doctrine, but the Christian will not -- nay cannot -- "allow *anything* to count *decisively* against it". It is also true that certain centrally placed law-like statements in the sciences are not easily upset by evidence that seem to falsify them. As Quine and White have insisted, we frequently modify some other part of our system rather than give up these central assertions, when experimental evidence threatens. In the presence of experimental pressure, however, we must -- and are -- prepared to discard them or so to qualify and modify them that they are really different assertions. In science there is not a single assertion that is permanently immune to the possibility of falsification, though the logic of these assertions is far more complicated than I have indicated here. But all niceties of formulation aside, for something to be a genuine factual assertion something must be capable of showing or counting for it or against it. Both in and out of a scientific context, we must be willing to grant for any genuine factual assertion that it is possible that there could be evidence which if obtained would disconfirm that assertion.

But for the theist "committed by his faith to trust in God" no amount of evidence will *or could* falsify his alleged basic assertions (e.g., 'There is a God', 'God made us and loves us', etc.). Falsifying instances will and must always be rejected as somehow inconclusive. Since this is so it is then absurd to speak of anything's counting against them at all. Any argument or reasoning about whether there is a God or whether God loves man or created the world is all window dressing, for when the chips are down, belief in God or in God's love is a straight matter of faith. The notion of a test or evidence for or against cannot do its usual job here. For the non-Neanderthal theist, 'God exists' or 'God

loves us' is and must be compatible with all possible states of affairs. There is nothing that could possibly count as a disconfirmation of 'God loves us' or 'There is a God'.

It might be said that it is different with 'God loves us' than with 'There is a God' for, as Crombie argues, if we had an experience of "suffering which was utterly, eternally, and irredeemably pointless" then we would indeed have decisive disconfirmation of 'God loves us'.¹⁰ But this, as Crombie is well aware, makes the verification eschatological. We cannot possibly be in a position in this life to see if any suffering is utterly, eternally and irredeemably pointless. In the world to come, however, the whole picture will be revealed and we can confirm or disconfirm our statement. We live now by faith but we can still conceive what it would be like to test our claim, though the test of necessity must come in the "after life". But such eschatological verification suffices, so Crombie and Hick argue, to establish the empirical status of 'God loves us'.

But I do not see how it has. It is very questionable whether 'Man will survive death' is itself an empirical statement. Even assuming 'Man will survive death' is both empirical and true, we certainly would still have qualms over Crombie's original sentence about suffering. Could it really be used to make an empirical statement? If it is a statement, what are its truth conditions? What would we have to see or not see in the "after life" for us to have some basis for saying it is true or false? What possible experiences in the next life would constitute evidence for it? Suppose that upon finding ourselves in "the next life" we saw that all the men we had with the best reasons judged to be good during our earthly sojourn were in pain and under duress and that the Attilas, Caligulas and Hitlers of the world were honored and enjoying themselves; under such conditions we might say there was such pointless suffering as Crombie refers to. Occurrences of this fantastic sort give his utterance sense. And it is under insane conditions of this sort that we could meaningfully

¹⁰ I. M. Crombie, "Theology and Falsification", *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 134.

assert that God does not love us. I suspect that a real “knight of faith” would even under the above conditions still say that *somehow* in this life we had confused things, somehow “mixed the order of incentives”. In His eternal wisdom God saw, as we did not, that the very men we thought were beasts were really the pure of heart and our saints were the real sinners.

But let us assume that we have now succeeded in giving empirical meaning to Crombie’s remark about pointless suffering. Now if such a state of affairs took place, Crombie argues, it would be correct to say ‘God does not love us’. We would have established the empirical-factual status of such an utterance. Still, have we really? Even assuming we can identify a state of affairs in which it would be correct to say ‘Suffering is occurring which is utterly, eternally and irredeemably pointless’ and a state of affairs in which this would not be so, would this tell us that God loved us? Suppose the suffering does not take place. Have we now any better reason to say ‘God loves us’? Yes. We now have *some* reason to believe He doesn’t hate us. (He still might be indifferent or actually hate us.) But still we can now answer our question in the affirmative: there is some presumptive reason for saying ‘God loves us’, namely that the suffering does not occur; and if the suffering does occur, we now have reason to say ‘God does not love us’. This is sufficient to give factual meaning to those utterances.

I think it would indeed be sufficient *provided* we understand what ‘God’ means and *provided* ‘There is a God’ has factual meaning. But if we do not know what could count as a referent for the name ‘God’ or what it would be like for there to be a God, then how could we ever know, in spite of our hypostatized *post mortem* experiences with pointless suffering or the lack thereof, whether *God* does or does not love us? If we don’t know what it means to assert ‘There is a God’ or ‘My Savior liveth’ how can we meaningfully assert or deny ‘God loves us’? But we do not know what can count as a referent for ‘God’ and we do not know what conceivable state of affairs would show for or against there being a Divine Existence.

Still, someone might argue that we *do* indeed know what

would show for or against the existence of God, namely just the suffering we talked about in connection with 'God loves us'. If such suffering actually occurred, then 'There is no God' would have a factual meaning. But would it? Suppose, in the after life, A says he is an atheist and B says he is a Theist. (Hick, like McTaggart, finds such a state of affairs perfectly intelligible.)¹¹ Suppose both A and B agree that the pointless suffering does not occur but A still continues to say 'There is no God' and B continues to say 'There is a God'. In such a situation what *conceivable* observations would count for B's utterances and against A's? If the believer is going to make a case for pointless suffering counting against 'There is a God' then he must show how A and B's statements have a different factual content. But this has not been done and I do not see how it could be done.¹²

If my above argument is correct, it is difficult to see in what sense crucial theistic statements like 'There is a God' or 'God loves us' could be called statements of objective fact. Thus the descriptivist analysis will not do, either.

We have now seen that both the non-descriptive and the descriptive theories about God talk get into insufferable difficulties. It is certainly wrong to say that God-sentences are meaningless, for in some sense we understand them, and even argue about them, but the meta-theories that try to say what they mean seem to end in a bog. We are tempted both to affirm and deny that God-sentences are factual assertions. We are in one of those philosophical binds that Wisdom has described so well where we feel forced both to assert and deny the same claim. There seem conclusive reasons for asserting it and there seem to be equally conclusive reasons for denying it and there seems to be no third way. But perhaps yet there are some still waters. Let us ask anew: What then is the logic of God talk?

¹¹ John Hick, "Theology and Verification", *Theology Today*, vol. XVII (April, 1960), pp. 17-31.

¹² In this connection see Herbert Feigl's remarks in his "Empiricism Versus Theology" in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, P. Edwards and A. Pap editors, pp. 533-5.

(2)

I believe that God talk can best be understood if God-sentences are construed as being very, very like (though not necessarily identical with) what I shall call *ideological sentences* (hereafter as I-sentences). By so construing God talk we can have the best of both worlds. We can bring out the non-descriptive aspect of theistic theological and religious sentences that have not only exercised certain analysts but have also exercised Kierkegaard, and the Tillichs and Barths of the world, and we can also bring out the apparent assertional element so essential for orthodoxy. To make my argument clear, I must first state what I mean by 'an ideological sentence'.

An ideological sentence makes a pseudo-factual statement. It has the grammatical form of an indicative sentence and functions to express a value-judgment. Ideological sentences actually function like normative sentences but they are so stated that they appear to be hypotheses or factual assertions of some type. These I-sentences look like non-normative sentences that are used to make statements asserting something to be the case. In fact they increase the motivational power of some value-judgments for some people by appearing not under their "proper logical flag as a value judgment but in the disguise of a statement of fact".¹³ That is why I said they are pseudo-factual statements. But in their actual use they are *disguised* normative statements. Their primary use or function is to recommend a way of life or to alter attitudes in people, communities, etc. It is important to note the following peculiarities of I-sentences.

1. Statements made by the use of I-sentences cannot be falsified and thus they cannot be confirmed or verified. Evidence which seems incompatible with them is always rejected as non-conclusive. In this respect they are very different from actual empirical hypotheses or laws.
2. In order for them to be effective or to function properly it is essential that they should not be recognized as ideological sentences by their user or hearer.
3. Though the evaluative component is hidden, I-sentences ac-

¹³ Gustav Bergmann, *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*, p. 172.

tually express certain commitments of their users. This can be noted from an examination of the contextual background of their use occurrences and it can be noted by the type of argument that develops when the users of such sentences are pressed to justify the claims they make or rather seem to make when they use these sentences.

4. The user of an I-sentence will resist any translation of it into a non-I normative sentence, or into a sentence used simply to express and/or state preferences or choices.
5. The user will assert that the I-sentence says something more than the normative sentence or preference sentence proposed as a translation, but he will not be able to indicate what this "more" is except to say that in some "mysterious sense" it makes a more objective claim.
6. This "mysterious objective nature" has great psychological value to the users of I-sentences. It enables them to claim a scientific and/or "absolutistic" basis for their ideological claims that seems to free them from "the whims of mortal will".
7. We cannot tell whether a given sentence is an ideological sentence from examining its grammatical structure ("surface grammar") alone but only by examining its use or function ("depth grammar").

My last remark indicates that to speak of an I-sentence, or even of a factual or normative sentence, is an ellipsis. Strictly speaking, there are no factual, normative or ideological sentences; there are only factual, normative and ideological *uses* of these sentences. Many sentences have multiple uses. If someone says, 'Smith is a homosexual', this sentence may be used to 1) make a purely factual claim, 2) make both a factual claim and a moral assessment, and finally 3) it may be used to make an ideological claim. A psychiatrist presenting a case history may simply report that Smith is a homosexual. In such a situation his sentence is functioning purely descriptively. He is simply informing us about Smith. But if a bishop, in reviewing men for admission to the seminary, says, 'We can by no means take Smith. Smith is a homosexual', his last sentence still describes Smith but it also is used to make a moral assessment of Smith. 'Smith is a homosexual' can also have an I-sentence use. The following sort of conversation might take place between Jane and Alice over coffee or at a cocktail party.

- Jane: I wouldn't dream of voting for Smith. Smith is a homosexual.
- Alice (tactlessly): Do you mean he goes out with the boys?
- Jane: Well, not *really*. I mean he is just the homosexual-type.
- Alice: Is he a woman-hater? You know, a latent homosexual.
- Jane: Well, not that either exactly. I mean he just acts like a homosexual.
- Alice: How does he act like a homosexual?
- Jane: Well it's hard to say, precisely. It's a feeling one has about him.
- Alice: Jane, I think you only mean that you don't *like* him.
- Jane: You're right -- I don't really like him, but it's not *just* that. Maybe it's his peculiar walk or the way he holds his cigarette -- or ...

It is clear that Jane is giving Smith a bad moral grade. She is using 'Smith is a homosexual' to express her moral disapprobation of Smith, but it is not at all clear that she is making the factual claim that he is a homosexual. If we impolitely press Jane and say 'You mean you are saying he is a homosexual because he walks the way he does and holds his cigarette in the way he does?' and if Jane then replies, 'Well not just that ...' and is unable or unwilling to say what more leads her to judge that Smith is a homosexual then she is using the sentence ideologically. But to be confident of this we would have to press her, for in addition to her moral assessment it might be that she was simply making an ill-supported and very vague factual claim; but in that event she would admit that her claim was quite doubtful and that it does little more than express her disapproval of Smith plus a vague hunch. But if she continued to assert confidently that Smith was a homosexual, was unable to produce any more concrete evidence, and was unable or unwilling to admit that there was any further "evidence" for it or that her "claim" really needed any further evidence, then she would be using 'Smith is a homosexual' ideologically, for it would now be clear that on her use nothing really counts for or against his being a homosexual. Note, she is not willing to *say* she is just expressing her disapproval of Smith. She insists that her disapproval is linked in a sense she cannot specify with some obscure but in her terms still

objective and compelling claim about Smith. She cannot say what this "claim" is but her failure to be able to say this neither weakens her conviction that her "claim" is somehow true nor leads her to say that it really just expresses a moral conviction on her part. She continues to assert both that she is quite certain her claim is true and that it does not admit of a testable, clear elucidation. One just has to "know it", that's all! This being the case, 'Smith is a homosexual' is here functioning as an I-sentence as well as a moral sentence. In all strictness we ought to say that sentences have moral, factual or ideological functions.

In order to avoid confusion we need to make a similar comment about words. We cannot make exhaustive lists of words that are "just descriptive" and it is questionable if there are any purely evaluative or normative words. As R. M. Hare has remarked, almost any word can come to be used evaluatively.¹⁴ 'Homosexual' clearly is an evaluative term on Jane's use. But it could be used quite neutrally. There are many words like 'bright', 'neurotic', 'occult', 'pink', 'fat', 'foreign' and the like that may be used just descriptively, but in some contexts they have a strong evaluative or normative use. But it is the uses of words and not the words themselves that are normative or descriptive.

"The moral" of the above two paragraphs is that it is not the visual features of words or sentences but the way they operate or function that determines how they are to be classified. We have been concerned to distinguish factual uses, I-uses, and normative uses. It is the function or sense of a sentence that makes it ideological. I shall, however, continue to use the ellipsis, 'I-sentence'.

The following in their normal use occurrences are examples of I-sentences. They are paradigms but here I shall limit myself to a rough indication of why (1) and (3) are clear cases of I-sentences.

- (1) Men were created free though everywhere they are in chains.
- (2) The history of mankind is governed by the iron laws of dialectic.

¹⁴ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, (Oxford: 1952), p. 79.

- (3) Modern man is alienated.
- (4) The self is the bearer of the cross of disvalue.¹⁵
- (5) All men possess an all-pervasive and ineradicable tendency to sin.

From a very superficial point of view (1) sounds like an empirical claim about the social condition of men. But what confirms it? Clearly only a very minute portion of men are "in chains". All right, "in chains" is obviously being used figuratively. Literally (1) means that people are living as slaves or serfs. Well, there are a few slaves yet, but not many and there are some serfs but not many. Well, we did not mean "slaves", literally, but there are many people who are at the mercy of absentee landowners, there are sharecroppers, there are mine workers caught in mine towns, there are (or were) "wage slaves" in the huge industries. They do not control the means of production. They are controlled by their bosses. But it is clear that 1) they are not completely controlled or 2) that they are not everyone. There are always the landowners, the entrepreneurs, the big bosses. Are they in chains? Well, if we say they are, we are now using 'in chains' non-literally. But, of course, (1) doesn't really mean "all men". Perhaps by whittling, qualifying and explaining we could get the final part of (1) reduced to some weakened version where 'Everywhere they are in chains' is falsifiable. It would be a weakened "de-mythologized" version but perhaps it could be done and such a weakened version, succumbing to a thousand qualifications, would no longer be an I-sentence but a quite ordinary empirical claim. Furthermore, we would still have the first part of the sentence, 'Men were created free', to deal with. I think it will be evident that if the last part of (1) makes a disturbance for us, the first part, with those joyous words 'created' and 'free', leads us to a real Armageddon. (1) seems like a grand sociological law but even the above sort of casual inspection indicates that we do not at all know what would make it true or false. (1) has no real scientific status.

¹⁵ This gem is not my own creation but actually occurred in a recent philosophical text.

We do not even understand it in any precise sense. Like Jane with 'Smith is a homosexual', we do not clearly know what we mean to assert. But (1) [and (2) as well] has been a rallying cry for men. It has been the banner of great social movements. It evokes emotion and commitment but its users will not say that (1) is just an expression of their attitudes and their determination to carry out certain policies. It is regarded by them as a "scientific law". It states a basic feature of our world; it is not just a creature of our wishes and imaginations.

(3) 'Modern man is alienated' takes the same type analysis. It could function as just an empirical social psychological generalization. In asserting (3) someone might simply be claiming that statements of the following sort are true. A) Many men work at jobs simply to make money; they are jobs which they do not care for or take any interest or pride in; they simply sell their labor at as high a price as possible to do tasks (in an assembly line for example) they have no stake in, the point of which they often do not see. Such work gives them no sense of craft or accomplishment. Their work consequently gives them no satisfaction; they naturally come to feel that their life in the community is pointless drudgery; they are "left out", disaffected men. B) People move from country to city where the mores and traditions are very different and they, as the mobile family, come to feel uprooted and lack a sense of belonging anywhere. (3) is probably not used so that it is identical with A) and B), for (3) would normally be understood to refer to situations which are much more complex than that, but (3) is often so used that it simply refers to situations of this sort. It functions as a covering sentence for a complex of situations like those referred to by A) and B). And if this is how (3) is being employed then it is reasonable to say that by now 'Modern man is alienated' has become a commonplace, tolerably vague empirical generalization.

(3) might, however, be employed in a less straightforward way.¹⁶ Some might say, "Since Kierkegaard and Kafka, if not since

¹⁶ In the following paragraphs I have in mind a large variety of "philosophical" literature. The following references are particularly illustrative: Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, (New Haven: 1952), pp. 75-7, 125-7, 138-40,

Hegel and the early Marx, it has become apparent that the very condition of man in this absurd world is one of alienation or estrangement". People who chatter in this way tell us that man has become depersonalized; there is a "tragic split in the self": man comes to see himself as both an agent, an actor intervening in the world, and as a thing or object that may be studied with scientific objectivity and that is manipulated by forces outside him. "The self", as Hegel and Feuerbach "discovered", is not just an "I" shaping the world according to its intentions but a "me" whose identity is the creation of others. Such people sometimes argue that it is not just a contingent fact that this is so, but is an "ontological fact", something that will always remain because -- as F. H. Heinemann puts it in his limpid prose -- it has "metaphysical roots". There is an infinite distance between man and his Creator; man's "inescapable aliention" follows "from the structure of the Universe . . .".¹⁷ As Tillich likes to talk, in "man's existential situation" he inevitably experiences "estrangement from his true being". There is the anxiety of emptiness or doubt; man is alienated, he cannot belong, he experiences a sense of distance from his fellows and his community and he finally becomes a stranger even unto himself.

As we read literature which abounds in such verbage, the impression grows that 'Modern man is alienated' is, in effect, used by such people as a grammatical or analytic remark. No effort is made to confirm their claims in the way we might seek to confirm an empirical hypothesis. No statistics are gathered, case histories are not amassed, there is no anxiety over what would naturally be taken to be *prima facie* disconfirming instances. The man who does not show any indication of alienation at all, any indication of estrangement or despair, is readily said to be the man who is really most deeply alienated or depersonalized. Such linguistic

F. H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament*, (Edinburgh: 1952), Chapter X, and some of the philosophical literature discussed by Daniel Bell in his "The 'Rediscovery' of Alienation: Some Notes along the Quest for the Historical Marx", *The Journal of Philosophy*, (November 19, 1959), pp. 993-52.

¹⁷ Heinemann, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-4.

behaviour leads naturally to the assumption that 'Men are all alienated' functions in a logically similar way to 'Men write their own autobiographies'. Both hold in virtue of an implicit rule of language, neither are substantive statements about what reality must be like. (I'm not saying that (3) does so hold in ordinary speech for after all (3) is not a part of ordinary language; I'm only saying it appears to be functioning this way in the writings of some existentialists and in the pellucid prose of Paul Tillich.)

Philosophers who talk in terms of estrangement, alienation, de-personalization, etc. are usually not concerned with questions about the logical status of their remarks, but when they do consider them they repudiate the claim that their remarks are "linguistic" or "grammatical"; they are not, as Heinemann says, talking about the uses of discourse but they are claiming that alienation is an inescapable feature of man's existence as he is thrust out into the world. But to the degree they will not, and cannot, show how their claims could be tested, to the extent that they do not even consider the question of falsification relevant, their use of (3) is ideological. On their use, (3) is not empirical, analytic or just normative. It purports to be a substantive (factual) statement about the condition of man, but it is used in such a way as to indicate that testability is really irrelevant. Thus 'Modern man is alienated' is on such a usage functioning as a pseudo-factual statement; that is to say, it is functioning ideologically.

(3)

I shall now try to show how God-sentences can best be understood if they are construed as being extremely like *I-sentences*. God-sentences in their use-occurrences express basic concerns, but they also *seem* to have factual components. They are necessarily associated with stories (parables, myths), but God-sentences (e.g., 'God is Divine', or 'God made the world', or 'God is in Christ'), unlike assertions, are not falsifiable. The parables help us to understand what we mean when we use such sentences, but, as Crombie points out, we do not know fully what we mean by 'God governs the world' and the like.¹⁸ In using these sentences

¹⁸ I. M. Crombie, *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 128.

we are doing something more than expressing our ultimate concerns, bliks or basic connotations. Orthodox religious people insist on this last point.

For a moment, let us examine the genesis of God talk. Hägerström points out that belief in the Divine, etc. results from the projections of our own feelings of awe, fear, duty or Highest Goodness onto the universe.¹⁹ In attempting to avoid anthropomorphism we cannot locate the Divinity in any determinate object. God finally becomes "Pure Being", the mysterious "ground of the universe". Only in this way can the word 'God' refer to an adequate object of a religious attitude.²⁰ Used in such a manner, 'God' refers to something objective and transcendent; 'God' refers to something "out of our experience" and "beyond human comprehension". But the word 'God' also has a performative and emotive use. We associate God talk with certain actions. To know God is to worship him. And God sentences express and evoke feelings and attitudes. Religious people say one grasps God with the heart. Pascal claims that it is "the heart that is conscious of God not the reason". Without God there is, if Kierkegaard is to be believed, *despair*; and the man who says he does not despair only despairs the more, unconsciously. He cannot escape the Hound of Heaven. God is not observable either directly like yellow or black or indirectly like electricity or an atom. He is not operationally verifiable and the word 'God' does not admit of operational definition. But, on the other hand, religious people will not say that God is *just* a projection of human feelings or wishes. God is not to be classed with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.²¹ Religious people, swinging away from the treatment of God as *just* an expression of a feeling, say, as does Luther, that

¹⁹ Axel Hägerström, "Lectures on So-called Spiritual Religion", *Theoria*, vol. XIV, Part 1 (1948), pp. 28-67.

²⁰ J. M. Findlay's remarks on what kind of being could be the adequate object of a religious attitude are crucial here. See J. M. Findlay, "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, pp. 47-56.

²¹ For an elucidation of the conceptual ambivalence about 'There is no God' in relation to 'There are no Fairies' see B. A. Farrell's excellent essay, "Psychological Theory and Belief in God", *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. XXXVI, (1955), pp. 187-204.

God is *that in which* we place our trust, or, as Tillich, that God is the *object* of our ultimate concern. But here 'object' cannot mean what it usually means. The object of ultimate concern or of a religious attitude can never be an observable thing or an empirically testable state-of-affairs. To think that God is so verifiable (in any sense of 'verifiable') is not to swing far enough toward the objective non-anthropomorphic pole. In order to allay the anxiety that God is tailor-made for the human animal, God-sentences must refer to an "utterly other" referent. The mystic's talk about the "ineffability of God" is quite natural here.

Because of the peculiar kind of language game in which God talk originated and still has its home, the word 'God' has become a name which at one and the same time must refer to that which is "wholly other" and to that which is "within us". God must be "in the heart" to express our religious attitudes but if we make God wholly within, we cut what Hägerström terms, "the life string of Christianity as a positive religion. For that consists in faith in an *objective power*, to which one can turn and from which one can draw strength to attain that which one strives after in one's innermost being; strength to resist temptations and a final hope of blessedness in a future life".²² 'God' refers to that which is *per impossible* -- both within us and utterly beyond us at the same time.

The functions or uses of God-sentences bear the mark of the origins of God-attitudes. God-sentences in their sincere use occurrences not only refer to an alleged being but also express the basic or pervasive concerns or commitments of their users.

God-sentences have uses strikingly like those of I-sentences. Sentences like 'God made man in His image and likeness', 'God created the Universe', 'God is in Christ', etc., etc., have the structure of I-sentences. 1) Viewed superficially, they seem to be used to make assertions; 2) they are not overtly evaluative; 3) in their serious use they express basic commitments; and 4) they are not accepted as being *just* normative or evaluative.

Note how the features characteristic of I-sentences are also

²² Hägerström, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5.

characteristic of God-sentences. To be receptive to an I-sentence involves being emotionally entangled in one way or another with the ideological claim made by the sentence in question. The same is true for those who use God-sentences to make claims about God. Russell and Sartre *vehemently deny* there is a God, Marcel and Barth *passionately affirm* there is a God, and Jaspers and James experience the *torture* of doubt. Pent-up emotional energies go into these claims pro and con. The claims are in some sense normative. They are intimately linked for their users with their sense of security and with their conception of how they think they ought to try to live and die. But they are not *just* moral or normative claims. Theists and atheists alike realize that the sentence, 'I ought to be kind because it is God's will' cannot be translated without remainder into 'I ought to be kind because I ought to'. God-sentences are more than a peculiar kind of value-sentence though they do express values. They make some obscure sort of "claim" or "claims" about the origin, nature and destiny of man and the universe. But for their users there is, and can be, no test procedure for determining whether these alleged assertions are true or false. Theists claim they are true, but they insist or at least admit when pushed that it is not possible to know how they are true except perhaps in the "next life". The non-Neanderthal believer and the non-believer have the same expectations about happenings on earth.

An increasingly large number of the orthodox (except, of course, in official Catholic circles) are coming to agree with Tillich's remark that there is no evidence whatsoever for believing there is a God. God is hidden from us though paradoxically and ambivalently the same orthodoxy claims that He is also experienced immediately or directly with a compelling touch by those who are already *receptive*. But this direct experience in so far as it is understandable at all is primarily a matter of feeling. But we cannot identify God with our feelings. God is our ultimate concern but he is also "the ground of Being", whatever that may mean. The orthodox theist will resist any translation of God-sentences into basic value sentences or sentences expressing picture-preferences. In fact, believers are usually alarmed or scornful at

such moves on the part of philosophers. It seems to arouse their anxieties. Witness the initial orthodox reactions in the United States to Dewey's views, the English reactions to Russell's and Ayer's contentions, and the violent reactions of Swedish theologians to Hägerström's analysis.²³

To sceptical challenges, theists answer that they cannot make the logic of God-talk fully intelligible to the unbeliever any more than the meta-ethicist can make the logic of moral discourse clear to a man who has never experienced pain, joy, remorse, guilt or shame. This, indeed, proves that evaluative language cannot be fully understood by people who do not make or know how to make evaluations. Normative sentences indeed belong to a basically distinct type from factual sentences. But the parallel with moral discourse is not complete or adequate for the point, for the theist is claiming that there is something more involved in God-sentences than an expression of a basic commitment associated with a story. This "more" is something other than an expression of even a crucial evaluation. It is something "more objective", something quite independent of human contrivance. Since such an objective claim is being made for it, why it should not be as fully evident to the detached observer of the actual, as it is to the believer, is difficult to understand, especially since there are no objective ways of detecting when and explaining why a man is "God-blind" as there are for his being blind, color-blind, or tone-deaf. Even a person with no emotional involvements at all could understand the non-evaluative "cosmological" claim made by God talk. If the non-believer knows what it is to make a value-judgment and if he can make the usual empirical discriminations and if he is willing to or has in the past engaged in religious activities (carried out the appropriate operations), I do not see why he could not fully understand God talk.²⁴ He would understand that

²³ For a comment on the Swedish reaction against Hägerström see Theodor Geiger, "Evaluational Nihilism", *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 1, No. 1 (1956), pp. 18-25.

²⁴ Kierkegaard argues that Christ says that anyone can so understand, "... if anyone will follow my teaching, i.e. live according to it, i.e. act according to it, he shall see, etc." Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals*, (A. Dru translator), (New York: 1959), p. 185.

God talk is integrally connected with questions about how we are to live and he could also see that it makes some necessarily partially unintelligible claims about the nature of man and the universe. By suggesting that God-sentences are very, very like I-sentences I can explain the "cosmological" claim involved. But the orthodox religious person will say there is "more" involved. But he is unable to say what more is involved than what I have indicated.

I suspect that the theists want to have their cake and eat it too. They insist on this "more" but cannot explain what it is, even though this "more" is vitally important to them. But if someone is under the sway of an ideology he too will refuse to classify his I-sentences as ideological and will insist that they make some mysterious but crucial and objective claim about the world. Again the parallel is very complete.

The orthodox religious believer will also readily admit that he does not fully understand what he means by 'There is a God', 'God designed the world', or 'God loves us'. But, again, my conception of I-sentences also rationally accounts for the believer's mysterious "something I know not what". There is no reason why talk about what is mysterious should be itself mysterious.

However, I am well aware that my analysis is made in the spectator's language rather than in a participant's language and I realize that the participant's language, with its practical aim and expressive instruments, will be different; but I am giving an explication of God talk, and in this explication I have described these elements too. Descriptions of religious discourse need not be religious any more than accurate descriptions of ideological discourse need be ideological, or emotive discourse emotive. I cannot, of course, reduce the participant's language to the spectator's language. The gap cannot be bridged logically. They have different functions or uses. I cannot get the rich emotive, ceremonial and practicalistic ring of the participant's language in my spectator's language, but I can, and have, made clear the intellectual claim in God talk; I have also made clear why there is such a sharp separation between my "rational reconstruction" of God talk and the participant's actual God talk.

(4)

There remain a few points that I would like to consider in what I fear must be an all too sketchy way.

1. There is an important disanalogy between many I-sentences and theistic sentences that ought to be brought to light.²⁵ I-sentences do a normative job. They reinforce attitudes and/or urge people to assume a certain attitude or line of action. While remaining excessively general and mysterious, they still gain the authority of factual law-like statements for people who are under their sway. I-sentences give a delusive support for the policy or attitude for which the sentence is a vehicle. The policy or attitude in question could, however, be urged and supported without any appeal to ideology. Moral judgments, for example, may on some occasion, seem to gain a greater authority by being tagged to a myth or an ideological claim (as in Plato), but the same moral judgments can independently be reasoned about and sometimes justified on their own account. There is no necessary link between some intelligible expression of attitude or an utterance announcing a policy and an I-sentence that in some circumstance may be used as an illusory support for it. But the normative aspect of certain crucial theistic utterances cannot be intelligibly made without the accompanying assertional claims. The normative aspect of certain Christian utterances is not just moral but is, in addition, an expression of a commitment to a Person, where the very sense of 'Person' involves the very conceptual oddities of theistic belief that we have discussed. 'Men were created free though everywhere they are in chains' and 'All men possess an all-pervasive and ineradicable tendency to sin' can be de-mythologized and the moral judgment implicit in them is intelligible without its delusory ideological support. (This is certainly less obviously true of 'Aryans must inevitably rule the world' and 'The history of mankind is governed by the iron laws of dialectic'.) But if we try to de-mythologize theistic utterances we do not succeed if, à la Braithwaite, we translate them into moral utterances associated with parables which need only be

²⁵ I am indebted to Terence Penelhum here.

entertained, for the non-assertive element does not consist solely in the expression of moral principles, it consists also in an expression of commitment to a "Person". In Christian theism we have a doubly difficult time for the commitment is to a kind of "God-man". If we de-mythologize the ideological utterances we made above we still have an intelligible moral claim, but if we de-mythologize certain central Christian utterances, e.g., 'God is my sword and shield', 'God is my Creator', 'God is eternal', 'There is a God', their meaning will be very different indeed. If 'God' does not refer to a mysterious power or "Being itself", then 'God loves us' is without an appropriate sense in a way that 'Man is alienated' is not, when its ideological support is withdrawn. Indeed as an I-sentence it has a different use than as a non I-sentence, but when functioning in the latter way it still has an appropriate use.

While this disanalogy needs to be pointed out, it is also important to remember that when we have de-mythologized the I-sentence into a straightforward moral judgment, as we can for 'All men are created free and equal', or into a vague empirical generalization, as we can for 'Modern man is alienated', it is by definition no longer ideological. As Kierkegaard called humanism "a vaporised Christianity", a Goethian "culture-consciousness" feeding on "the dregs of Christianity", so a man under the sway of an ideology would surely regard de-mythologized versions of his ideological claims in a like manner.²⁶ They would appear to him as unsupported, diluted dregs of powerful beliefs that are, by contrast, grounded in some mysterious way in the very structure of the universe. Many humanists and some Epiphany Philosophers cut their Scotch [in Kierkegaard's terms, dilute their religion so that it will square with the "modern consciousness"] but in so watering down their beliefs in order to avoid an affront to reason these beliefs come to be something very different from the original strong stuff, as Braithwaite's admirably clear, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief", in effect makes plain. We cannot have an ideology without its accompanying myth or obscurantist claims and we cannot have theism without

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

purportedly existential claims concerning a mysterious something, I know not what.

2. It might be argued that I-sentences do not characterize a use of language and that what I have called an 'I-sentence' is neither more nor less than "a stupid remark of a stubborn man". Putting it that way, it might be felt, involves less twaddle.

A given remark may be both. Certainly this is true for 'Aryans must inevitably rule the world' or 'The self is the bearer of the cross of disvalue'. But I think we need to be a little more hesitant about 'All men were created free and equal' or 'Men possess an all-pervasive and ineradicable tendency to sin'. And do we really want to say that Hegel's remarks about alienation or Kierkegaard's remarks about despair in *Sickness Unto Death* were the stupid remarks of stubborn men? Yet their key remarks often have the logical structure of 'I-sentences'.

Nor is it correct to claim that although some *theologians* may use I-sentences, first-order religious discourse is free from it. I have been concerned here primarily with first-order Christian discourse; indeed, some talk about the use of religious talk may itself be ideological or be correctly likened to ideological uses of language, but I do not claim this here. I have tried to examine religious claims, e.g., 'God loves us', 'God exists', and not just philosophical-theological claims, e.g., "'God exists" or "God loves us" are statements of objective fact' or 'Religious utterances or inscriptions are expressions of intention'. My analysis is an analysis of first-order theistic talk, though I did criticize some other analyses of theistic discourse in the first section of this essay. Sometimes these first order theistic utterances are made in the idiom of plain people and sometimes they are made in the idiom of the theologian, e.g., 'God cannot fail to exist for His existence is necessary' or 'God is known by a direct personal encounter with Him in the Person of Jesus Christ', but in either event they make first-order religious claims. Theologians indeed make second-order statements but they make first-order ones as well. I have tried in this essay to show how certain recent analyses of first-order religious claims have led to an impasse and I have tried

to indicate a way out of this impasse by showing how first-order God talk may be sensibly likened to ideological discourse.²⁷

3. Today a large number of philosophers – – rightly, to my mind – – look with extreme suspicion on wholesale criticism of any entire conceptual area or mode of discourse. Both philosophical critiques and philosophical defenses of science, morality or law as a whole are looked on as the product of philosophical confusion. Wholesale scepticism of inductive inference or of any one area of discourse is taken to be a consequence of pointlessly applying standards that belong in one area to an area where they do not apply. But when philosophers who generally accept this kind of contention turn to religious concepts, it is often felt that religious discourse is in a special position. When we attempt to describe the many religious uses of language we cannot so readily assume that everything in this conceptual area is in order. As Penelhum has well said, “One can hardly say that the status of religious discourse as such is uncontroversial, for there exist many people who disapprove of engaging in it”.²⁸ If we study a collection of essays like those in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, we find, as Penelhum again aptly remarks, “that the description of the religious use of words is not carried on without judgments of its legitimacy”.²⁹ In the above-mentioned collection a dual purpose is often evident. There is the attempt simply to describe the conceptual area in question where it is philosophically perplexing and there is also the attempt to appraise the discourse itself; these purposes frequently seem to conflict and the intent of some of the essays is thus obscured.

In the present essay I have indeed made a judgment as to the legitimacy of theistic talk. I imply that theistic conceptions are

²⁷ I have in mind sentences like the following from Kierkegaard: “There is a God; his will is made known to me in Holy Scripture and in my conscience. This God wishes to intervene in the world.” This is first-order religious talk. I have tried to characterize it without considering whether it is the talk of “plain people” or of the theologian. Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

²⁸ Terence Penelhum, “Logic and Theology”, *The Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. IV (1958), p. 258.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

illegitimate and that it is irrational to use them or to be a theist. I would concede that it is logically possible, though perhaps not psychologically possible, to accept my description of theistic language and reject my evaluation of theism. But while it is logically possible to do this it would be irrational and unreasonable. And what is irrational and unreasonable ought not to be done.

My claim then is that theistic discourse, e.g., Christian, Jewish and Moslem first-order discourse, is itself confused and chaotic. There is, of course, confusion in the various analyses of religious concepts – I only hope I have lessened the confusion rather than added to it. I am claiming, in addition, that both theistic discourse and theism itself are in a state of confusion. The basic intent of this essay is thus both analytical and critical, though the latter is necessarily dependent, for its support or backing, on the accuracy of my analysis of God talk. Obviously, the first philosophical task is to describe accurately those areas of the discourse in question that give rise to philosophical perplexities. I have tried to carry out a portion of that task here, and on the basis of this analysis I have suggested a criticism of theism.

This procedure is open to the just criticism that it proceeds on too slender a descriptive basis. We do indeed need a much more extensive mapping of religious discourse before we can confidently make such large-scale appraisals one way or another. The present essay can hardly be considered as anything more than a tentative study designed to open up a new, or at least a neglected, line of thought. I am only asserting that if it is correct, or even nearly so, then theism would be an irrational belief. It may well be anyway, but I am neither affirming nor denying that here.

It could also be charged that my own second-order account is itself ideological. It could be said that in reading my account one gets the very strong impression that I-sentences are not only hybrids but genuine bastards completely devoid of hybrid vigor. I-sentences provide oomph for those people who can't "take their normative claims straight". Theistic discourse, being very, very like ideological discourse, involves a similar rationalization and a kind of "double think". Just as an end of ideology is a consumma-

tion devoutly to be desired, so the end of theism and Christianity is desirable. But such claims are themselves ideological.

The label and the last statement apart, this is indeed just what I mean to suggest, though I hope by this that I am not indulging in ideology while failing to note the mote in my own eye but in rational, normative criticism. The only deliberate bit of ideology on my part was in choosing the word 'ideology', with its current pejorative connotations, rather than a more neutral label like 'pseudofactual'. My rationale for this was two-fold. First, I did it to dramatize my suggestions. Secondly, and more importantly, it seems to me that 'ideological sentence' most aptly characterizes the use of language I describe here. Our language is often used to make grand "claims" which purport to be factual; these "claims", however, are completely untestable. Sentences so used effectively (though often surreptitiously) reinforce or instill certain attitudes and motivate men to adopt certain policies. They function, as Daniel Bell puts it, as "social levers".³⁰ And for the men under the sway of an ideological claim, that claim has a certainty and an inclusiveness that a mere policy decision or value judgment could never have. But with this certainty goes a corresponding inability to show how it is justified. This, however, will not really disturb "the True Believer" for he is confident that one must "just see", "just understand" or "just feel", perhaps "in one's bones" or "with one's blood", that such law-like statements must be true.³¹ Sentences which function in this complex way I have baptized 'I-

³⁰ Daniel Bell, "The End of Ideology in the West", *Columbia University Forum*, vol. III (Winter, 1960), p. 4.

³¹ I do not claim this is a correct description of the usage of 'ideological'. It has, as Naess and his associates have made clear, an intricate, varied usage. I think my characterization fits some usages but by no means all of them. I am willing to admit that I have persuasively defined 'ideological sentence', although I do deny that my definition is capriciously persuasive. For a description of the uses of 'ideological' and 'ideology' see Arne Naess and associates, *Democracy, Ideology and Objectivity*, (Oslo: 1956), pp. 141-202. For my conception of 'capriciously persuasive' and 'non-capriciously persuasive', persuasive definitions see Charles Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, (New Haven: 1944), p. 270 and Chapter XIII.

sentences', and I have likened certain crucial theistic sentences to them.

There is, of course, much more to be said here, but for now I will remain content to turn objections with the following question: When a Theist uses a God-sentence, what cognitive or intellectual meaning can he assign to it beyond the meaning which I have claimed here by analysing God-sentences after the fashion of I-sentences? Is not the rest sound and fury denoting next to nothing though expressing the deepest and most precious of human concerns?