

"CHRISTIAN POSITIVISM" AND THE APPEAL TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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I

IN *Language and Christian Belief*¹ John Wilson wishes to be a thorough empiricist in religion and at the same time wants to defend theistic claims. In doing this, he attempts to utilize the techniques of linguistic philosophy to clarify the foundations of Christian faith. Key theistic statements, like "God made the heavens and the earth," "God loves man," "Jesus is the Son of God," and, finally, "God exists," are interpreted by Wilson to be straightforward, empirical assertions that are in principle decisively falsifiable as well as verifiable.

Wilson will have none of the Braithwaitian program, which construes religious utterances as expressions of intention rather than as statements of fact. Wilson does not deny that religious discourse does have non-informative uses, but, he claims, such discourse would not have the important and distinctive character it has if the "good news" of the Gospel were not also fac-

tually informative (p. 6). "The man Jesus was crucified in Palestine during the reign of Tiberius" or "Brethren, let us love one another" would not "have any peculiarly religious interest unless backed by a number of assertions about the supernatural."

Yet Wilson, as an empiricist, does not wish to take the non-empiricist line usually taken by orthodox theologians. He would not assent to their claim that utterances like "There is a God" or "God created the heavens and the earth" are so used that in stating contexts they are genuinely informative statements of fact, though they are not even in principle verifiable or falsifiable. Wilson rejects this on the traditional positivist or empiricist grounds that, if "a statement's truth is consistent with any evidence that might be forthcoming, it cannot be at all informative" (p. 8). Religious believers, Wilson argues, "should be anxious rather than unwilling to make it clear what would decisively falsify the statements [the theistic statements] since their informativeness corresponds to their falsifiability" (p. 9). "God exists" must, if religious discourse is to keep its present use and point, be a statement of fact; but if "God exists" is logically exempt from all possibility that there might be decisive evidence against it, it cannot be informative (p. xii). If it does not exclude anything, it is untestable; if this were so, we literally could not understand what we are to assert or deny. If this were true, it would not

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make sense to say "God exists" is a factual assertion. To be a bit of factual discourse, a statement, Wilson argues, must be directly or indirectly *decisively* falsifiable in principle. Wilson will not even take the more modest empiricist formulation, advanced by John Hick, and claim that theistic utterances of this sort are empirical assertions which are verifiable in principle but are not falsifiable. If theistic, and specifically Christian, discourse is to make sense, "God exists" must be understood as a factual statement, and factual statements, on Wilson's reading, must be decisively falsifiable.

Wilson is not happy with the by now typical remark that there is no conflict between science and religion. He does not believe that a conflict is necessary, but since both religion and science make factual and thus falsifiable statements, a tension naturally develops. The problem cannot be reasonably overcome by talking of different modes of discourse (p. 55). But the tension between science and religion can be overcome by "providing religious statements with a proper method of verification: A method which will stand up to scientific standards, without involving itself in the physical sciences" (p. 65).

Thus the crucial problem in the philosophy of religion is—as Wilson sees it—the problem of providing a clear demonstration of how religious statements are to be empirically tested. The major hurdle is this: while these central theistic utterances are factual and thus verifiable and falsifiable, they are verifiable and falsifiable in a *special way*, namely, by the occurrence or non-occurrence of the "experience of the *supernatural*" (p. 60; italics mine). Wilson asserts that we have no way of testing our theistic statements "unless we

have ourselves previously had experience of the supernatural" (p. 40). This experience, Wilson admits, is a very "special type of experience" (p. 60); yet it is by this experience alone that theistic assertions are ultimately verifiable (p. 14). "The statement 'God exists' . . . must be based on certain experiences: Experiences which justify the belief that God exists and that we have acquaintance with him" (p. 49). In prayer, worship, confession, etc., we have certain experiences which confirm our claim that there is a God. In such activities we are directly acquainted with him. There "we may find that we are meeting something that we should want to call, and could sensibly call, God . . ." (p. 41); and, for Christians, at least, it is by following Jesus' injunctions that we are led to have these experiences (p. 49).

II

Wilson's case against a view like Braithwaite's is a good one; it is at least reasonable to insist on a logical link between a statement's being factual and its being verifiable or falsifiable in some sense. But, in the fashion of some of the *earliest* phases of logical positivism, Wilson makes far too extreme a claim when he contends that to be a meaningful factual statement, the statement must be decisively falsifiable. The work of Carnap and Hempel should have dispelled these illusions by now. Rather than argue this well-worn point, I would prefer to undertake the more important task of showing that Wilson's well-meaning effort to be an empirist in religion winds up in a complete failure. I wish to show that he has not at all shown that theistic utterances are statements of fact that are verifiable and falsifiable in principle.

Wilson starts by saying that he is going to assume "that there is such a thing as religious experience" (p. 16). In the sense in which he assumes that there are such experiences, this assumption is perfectly in order, for Wilson is not assuming that because we have such experiences they are experiences of *God* or the supernatural. He clearly sees that to do that would be to beg the very point at issue. Although we can say that religious experience is genuine, in the sense that there are modes of human behavior that can be correctly called religious, the fact that there are these forms of behavior does not establish that religious experience is an experience of the supernatural.

Consider: "People have religious experiences but there is no God." This statement is neither self-contradictory nor logically odd. But that people have religious experiences is beyond reasonable doubt. In this sense religious experiences are indeed genuine. The genuineness of these experiences is compatible with the truth of the above statement. But if this statement is true, then there is *another* important sense in which religious experiences are not genuine. We may have feelings of dependence and contingency—we may *feel* to the full our "nothingness" as we stand in fear, fascination, awe, and dread before what we take to be our Creator; and we might have all these feelings even though there is in fact no Creator, no God. If it were true that there is no God, it would still remain the case that the experience itself would be genuine enough even though there would be nothing beyond the experience itself. The person in question might believe and feel that there was, but that is a different matter. The believer might have the overwhelming impression that

God is someone Wholly Other upon whom he is completely dependent, but it still might be true that there is no such being. Just as people with a certain amount of alcohol in their veins sometimes claim that they see pink elephants even though there are no pink elephants, so people may have the feeling that there is a mysterious Wholly Other when such a being is merely a projection of their own hopes and fears.

Wilson rightly enough assumes that people have religious experiences. He then tries to establish that there is an objective supernatural reality to which these experiences attest by showing that the appropriate theistic utterances make statements that are objective, testable (falsifiable) statements of "supernatural fact." But he does not try to deny what is manifestly the case, namely, that religious experience has been interpreted in different ways both by certain world religions and by secularists. Wilson is fully aware that he must make out a case for religious experiences unambiguously and decisively pointing to the supernatural.

To accomplish this end, Wilson sets out to show that theistic assertions satisfy the minimum necessary conditions for something's being an empirical assertion (p. 17). This leads him to say that the test procedures need not be universally adopted, but the tests must involve something that we see; and it is essential, if theistic sentences are to have the requisite sort of meaning, that we can predict that, if we do such-and-such, then we will have certain quite definite experiences (p. 19). In this sense religious experiences are corrigible, and certain sincerely alleged religious experiences may turn out not to be veridical if certain definite experiences do not occur (p. 20). Thus

"There is a God" or "A supernatural reality is undeniable" are *not* incorrigible claims. They are not mysteries forever beyond the pale of public validation. Thus Wilson is *not* claiming that the religious believer has privileged access to the supernatural or that he has "self-authenticating experiences." Theistic claims, he would have us believe, are publicly verifiable *at least* to a limited public, for example, "the religious groups who use the same verification-system for their assertions" (p. 24). Wilson goes on to say:

Does this mean that religious assertions cannot be understood by those who have no religious experiences? The answer to this depends upon what is to count as understanding. In what seems to me the most important sense, religious assertions can be understood. Believers can define the terms of such assertions in terms of actual or potential experiences for the benefit of non-believers, just as a man with normal eyesight can explain the meaning of "table" in terms of visual experiences to a blind man. An unbeliever can know what "God" means, just as a blind man can know what "table" means; that is, both can know how and when to use these words, what conditions must be satisfied before they can be used correctly. But in what is also an important sense, a man who has not had or cannot have any kind of experience of the *type* relevant to an assertion cannot understand the assertion [p. 25].

Explaining the word "God" to a non-believer is not like explaining the word "table" to a man with normal sight; it is instead like explaining "see" to the congenitally blind or "tone" to those who have always been tone deaf.

Philosophers from the general philosophical tradition with which Wilson associates himself have advanced the following standard objection to arguments of Wilson's sort. We can account for the experiences Wilson avers to in purely secular terms, and since we

ought not to multiply concepts beyond necessity, "There is a God" is a hypothesis we can well do without. "The data of religious experience . . . can quite satisfactorily be explained within a naturalistic view of the world."² We are helpless infants for a long time, and during that period we are totally dependent on our parents for our very lives. Small wonder that we develop *feelings* of absolute dependence—come to feel, as Kierkegaard perceptively put it, that "Deep within every man lies the dread of being alone, forgotten by God, overlooked among the tremendous household of millions upon millions." That we should have a dread of being alone, that we should feel weak and dependent, is utterly understandable. But it can readily be explained by reference to what we have learned from psychology about the nature of human nature. Most people are bombarded with religious talk from cradle to grave. As Feigl remarks:

It is perfectly natural that in moments of stress or despair later in life we should turn to some super-father or super-mother; and that quite generally we should tend to cling to some form of authority in whatever in the given culture facilitates such projection.³

These and myriad other considerations give force to a naturalistic interpretation of religious experience. Furthermore, there is no need to say that the naturalist commits the fallacy of attempting to refute the truth-claim of a belief by appealing to its origin. Surely validity is independent of origin; but no genetic fallacy is involved in such a naturalistic interpretation. Instead, the naturalist is claiming that a statement like "People have feelings of absolute dependence" is evidence for "Men have a long period of infantilization" rather than "Men encounter a

Divine Existence" or "There is a God." The naturalist would go on to argue that we should not multiply entities beyond need; on grounds of simplicity and coherence with established knowledge, the naturalistic hypothesis is more tenable. We can apply Occam's razor and on sound methodological grounds rule out the "theistic hypothesis."

Given his initial assumptions, Wilson cannot with justice reply that Christianity is one way of interpreting the facts and naturalism another and that there are no possible experiences which would validate (confirm) one interpretation as correct and invalidate (disconfirm) the other. To maintain with any plausibility his claim that key theistic utterances are verifiable and falsifiable in principle, Wilson must specify what it would be like for something to falsify the naturalistic interpretation. Since he speaks in terms of decisive verification and falsification, I have put the difficulty in this strong form; but a similar difficulty would still remain if Wilson's thesis were put in a weaker form. We could then ask: What possible or conceivable experiences would count for the "theistic hypothesis" and count against the "naturalistic hypothesis"? Unless we can answer that question, both the theistic and naturalistic statements must be classified as pseudo-factual statements or reclassified as linguistic segments that do not even purport to serve fact-stating purposes. Wilson, to my mind, quite properly rejects this last alternative as not squaring with the way we actually speak when we speak religiously. If we reject the latter alternative (as we already have in discussing Braithwaitianism) and then reclassify religious statements as pseudo-factual statements (statements purporting to be factual but not

actually functioning as factual statements), this still does not mean that religious statements are meaningless—surely they have some use in the language—but it does mean that key theistic utterances cannot have the logical status that Wilson claims they have; that is, they cannot be used to make "supernaturalistic factual statements" capable of verification and falsification or even confirmation and disconfirmation.⁴

III

What arguments does Wilson have against such standard objections? They seem to me very few and very ineffective, but let us examine the case he can make.

In chapter v of *Language and Christian Belief* he argues that it is a mistake to identify "empirical" with "derivable from sense-experience." Naturalism and positivism make just this mistake, for they claim that factual statements must be ultimately verifiable by *sense* experience. But if the only possible kind of verification is verification by the five senses, then, Wilson argues, "we should feel justified in saying that scientific verification, in this sense, had no connection with religious statements at all" (p. 59). Wilson instead wants to link "empirical" with "derivable from any type of experience" (p. 59). He is claiming that a method of verification can be set up for "a special type of experience, namely religious experience or experience of the supernatural" (p. 59). But here Wilson is setting up a straw man in so construing his naturalistic opponents. He makes the same mistake that Ewing and Stace made long ago. Carnap, Ayer, Hempel, Feigl, Pap, Bergmann, or Rynin are not claiming that all empiri-

cal statements must be ultimately verifiable by sense experience. They have quite explicitly denied this. Feigl (mistakenly, I believe) does not even demand public verification; but it is more typical of such positivist thinkers only to claim that, for X to be a factual or empirical statement, some publicly identifiable experience of some type must, directly or indirectly, count for X's being true. They are asking about religious claims: What conceivable experience of *any sort* would count for the theistic hypothesis that X is an experience of the supernatural rather than for the non-theistic hypothesis that X is simply an experience of anxiety caused by one's early Oedipal conflicts?

Having disposed of this straw man, we can again ask what positive account can Wilson give which would show that there is some verifiable difference between the theist's claim and the naturalist's claim? What would give empirical status to the claim that religious experience, when it is genuine, is experience of the supernatural? Wilson argues that "religious assertions refer to potential experiences, experiences which are actual within certain groups" (p. 27). But this, of course, does not establish that they are experiences of the supernatural or of God, as Wilson himself admits in an earlier part of *Language and Christian Belief* (p. 16). The existence of such experiences seems perfectly compatible with both the theist's and the naturalist's claims. What conceivable experiences of any type would count as evidence for one and not for the other?

We need to show how some of the experiences could be veridical (actually experiences of the supernatural) and some not. Within religious talk itself we would need to be able to show which

statements make a "supernaturalistic factual claim." Only such statements make a claim which can in the appropriate sense be veridical.

Wilson argues correctly that within a given religion believers do accept certain experiences as veridical and others as non-veridical. But this only seems to carry us to the promised land. There are different criteria for "truth" or "being veridical" that apply to different modes of discourse.⁵ To establish his case, Wilson must show that religious utterances are veridical in the same way that statements of fact are veridical. If I report that I, an indisputably mortal man, experience that I can be both mortal and God, my experience cannot in the proper sense be veridical, for certain analytic connections, resting on conventions about the use of words, makes it self-contradictory to say "X is mortal and X is God." "God is non-mortal" and "God is eternal" are analytic and their contradictories are self-contradictory and in *that sense* non-veridical. But such statements and such distinctions between veridical and non-veridical turn on linguistic conventions and not on the correct assertion of how the world goes. The situation is still different in morality. As Mayo, Toulmin, and others have shown, *moral* statements can be correctly said to be true or false and still not have the same logical status as factual statements or analytic statements. "Truth" has distinct criteria of application in different areas of discourse; so even if we accept Wilson's claim that within religious discourse we distinguish between genuine (veridical) and spurious (non-veridical) experiences, it would not establish that religious claims are correctly expressible as factual statements.

What, then, would establish that

"There is a God in heaven" is sufficiently like "There are grouse in Kent county" so that we would be warranted in saying the former as well as the latter is typically used as a fact-stating sentence? Wilson makes a few remarks, in chapter vii of *Language and Christian Belief*, that might be construed as helping his cause. If we say "There is a God in heaven" or "There is a telephone in the next room" [for those who like chicken scratches: $(\exists x) (Gx \cdot Hx)$ or $(\exists x) (Tx \cdot Rx)$], we *test* the latter claim by carrying out the following operations: A normal observer under standard conditions looks in the next room, and if he sees a telephone, we then have some confirmation of our existential statement (i.e., "There is a telephone in the next room"). That is to say, a test of our existential statement is the following hypothetical statement: "If under standard conditions a normal observer looks into the next room, he will see a telephone." The confirmation of this last statement gives support to the existential statement. As criticisms of phenomenalism have made clear, neither the hypothetical statement nor any conjunction of similar hypothetical statements is formally equivalent to the existential statement; but if we are prepared to assert the existential statement, we must also be prepared to assert the hypothetical statement. Furthermore, there is nothing mysterious about "normal observers" or "standard conditions." These phrases can be elucidated by essentially the same techniques as we used above. If X is a normal observer and if X goes through the same visual operations that most people do, then X will see what they see. "Telephone" and "next room" can be handled in the same way. To verify a statement, we indicate certain

distinctive operations that could be carried out. We say that the statement in question is verifiable in principle if it can be reformulated in terms of a conditional statement, the antecedent stating a set of conceivable but distinctive operations and the consequent stating a set of definite experiential results.

Wilson has no difficulty stating the operations to be expressed by the antecedent in either a single conditional sentence or in a conjunction of conditional sentences. And certainly the most doctrinaire atheist could come to *know how* to pray, *how* to read the Gospel, *how* to worship, *how* to behave toward his neighbors and the like (p. 52). This *knowledge how* poses no intellectual problem here. As Wilson says, the Gospels supply us with the know-how here. The trouble maker is the consequent in our conditional sentence. If we carry out the operations stated in the antecedent, we will, Wilson claims, "come to have experiences of an unambiguous and unique character" (p. 52). In enjoining us to follow him, in teaching us how to seek and how to pray, Jesus teaches us how to have a direct acquaintance with God (p. 51). If we do these things, we will have such a direct experiential acquaintance. We do indeed learn to talk about these experiences in theistic terms; but others learn or relearn, after just those operations, to talk about these same experiences in secular terms. It is not correct to say, as Wilson does, that "obviously it would be impossible" to describe these experiences in other than theistic terms, for whatever is actual is possible, and they have, in fact, been described in non-theistic terms (pp. 52-53).

Wilson might say, by way of defense, that the non-theistic descriptions are not so adequate, do not really adequate-

ly characterize the nature of the experiences. But this would assume that it was intelligible, in some sense, to compare the experience with the description of it and see whether they properly match. Unless a picture theory of meaning could be resurrected, this seems to me an unintelligible request; more centrally, here, what criteria of adequacy could Wilson invoke to make out his claim? If he identifies the meaning of a factual claim with its method of verification, then how can he even distinguish his theistic description from the non-theistic one?⁶

To say, as Wilson does, that we can give the unbeliever who has not had the appropriate experience some sense of what "God" means by translating "God" into "the almighty and perfect Being who presides over the universe" is completely pointless, for the unbeliever will be just as puzzled about what it is to experience "a perfect Being who presides over the universe." What must he not experience in order to know that there is not such an X? He will be just as much at a loss over this as he will be over what could possibly count as experiencing God or the supernatural. In both cases we can know how to carry out the operations, go through the motions. We may in a quiet hour say: "My Lord and My God help me" and kneel and make the sign of the cross. We may then experience a sense of relief or come to *feel* that we are not alone in a barren and cold universe. In short, we may feel to the full our "creatureliness." But how are we to know whether these experiential results—these feelings—either point or fail to point to the reality of God or the supernatural? The naturalist and secularist assert that these feelings do not point to this reality, and the theist as-

serts they do; but what could possibly establish with even the slightest probability that what one said was false and what the other said was true? I cannot see that Wilson has given us any answer at all to this question.

IV

Wilson will not take the fideist out, that is to say, he will not claim that, unless one approaches the experience as a believer, one cannot properly comprehend religious experience. And he does not wish to say that religious experience somehow, immediately and intuitively, carries its own guaranty that there is a supernatural reality. As we have seen, Wilson does claim that the public verifiability may be limited to those religious groups who use the same verification system (p. 24). But he believes and asserts that everyone is "capable of religious experience" (p. 29). If we will sincerely carry out the operations specified by Jesus, we can come to have experiences of God which are expressible in true statements. But then we are back to our original difficulties about what is to count or fail to count as an experience of the presence of God.

In spite of his declaration that everyone can have the experience of the supernatural, Wilson makes use of the kind of argument made by those people who argue that religious experience is self-authenticating and is in some way limited to the faithful. The man who honestly carries out the operations fully and sincerely and yet fails to obtain an experience of God is like a man who has been blind from birth or like a man who is tone deaf and consequently cannot understand and appreciate music. As some men are blind, color-blind, or aesthetically blind, so—Wilson argues—some men are "God-blind." We can,

of course, give a man who has been blind from birth *some sense* of the use of the words "red" or "green" or even "colored." He can learn that it makes sense to ask of anything that he touches, "What color is it?" And he will come to recognize that there are a limited number of responses that we can properly give. He will learn not to wear a yellow tie with a gray suit, or red socks with a green tie, and so on. But in another perfectly plain sense he does not know what "red" is. He is unable to visualize the color; he has no experience of colors. Similarly, a man might be "God-blind"; he could carry out all the operations, he could learn how to talk to and about God, but he would have no idea of what it would be like to directly experience the supernatural.

There is, however, an important disanalogy between being blind or color-blind and being "God-blind." There are objective tests recognizable by all parties as to what counts as being blind, color-blind, and tone deaf; but being "God-blind" is not something for which there are agreed-on tests; what is more, we do not even know how to start setting up such tests. Not properly understanding what "God" or "the supernatural" mean, we hardly know what is to count as "being God-blind" or "being blind to the supernatural." Again we are back where we started.

V

At this point Wilson could invoke his analogy with "aesthetic experience" (pp. 26-27). We cannot make scientific tests for aesthetic experience either, and, while there are scientific tests for being tone deaf, there are no such tests for aesthetic insensibility. Yet the man who prefers Edgar Guest to W. H. Auden after a comparable exposure is

aesthetically blind. If we say, "Beethoven's *Eroica* is noble, dramatic, and powerful," we have made a statement which—according to Wilson—is verifiable in principle. We are "entitled to assume that if you make the appropriate tests you will have certain experiences" (p. 26).

This will not do, for a statement expressive of an aesthetic experience is not just a statement about what experiences we would have if we did certain things. It may well be true that aesthetic experiences, like religious ones, form a unique class of experiences not to be reduced to any other type of experience, but this does not establish that utterances expressive of these experiences are used to make empirical statements. Wilson recognizes that aesthetic experiences and the utterances expressive of them form a unique type of experience and sentence, but he simply *assumes* that such utterances are used to make empirical statements with their own distinctive method of verification. He then argues that religious experience and the utterances expressive of that experience are in a quite parallel position to aesthetic experiences and utterances (p. 26). Since aesthetic statements are corrigible empirical statements, why are not the parallel religious statements empirical statements that are either true or false? But the rub is that we do not regard aesthetic statements, any more than we regard moral statements, as factual statements. The work of Moore, if not of Hume, should have established this point, and the later work of analytical philosophers has given strong support here to Hume and Moore. While there is a method of validation and (if you will) a sense in which we can verify normative claims, normative utterances are not themselves statements of fact.⁷

Normative claims are not assertions about what is the case but evaluations and/or prescriptions to *do* so-and-so or *take* such-and-such an attitude. We have come to see the importance of the tautology that an evaluation is an evaluation and a description is a description. The discourse associated with one cannot be reduced to or replace the discourse associated with the other. "Beethoven's *Eroica* is noble, dramatic, and powerful" is not a factual statement asserting that, if we do such-and-such, we will have certain experiences of a distinctive type; it is rather an evaluation of the *Third Symphony*. Wilson can thus get little help from his parallel between religious utterances and aesthetic ones; and, if he extends it to the full, he will end up denying what he has so unequivocally affirmed, namely, that certain central theistic statements are statements of fact that are capable of being made as unambiguously verifiable as other factual assertions.

VI

This completes my case against Wilson's claim that certain theistic utterances are used to make factual assertions that are verifiable and falsifiable either directly or indirectly. Wilson has made no case at all for this, and he has not met the traditional difficulties connected with such a view; that is to say, he has given no grounds for believing that the religionist could "put forward a clear and unanimous programme, describing some approved method of obtaining the experiences which are relevant to the key assertions of their faith" (pp. 30-31). We have not the slightest idea of what it would be like for these utterances to be used so as to make either true or false assertions of "supernatural fact." In short, we do not understand what could count as a

"supernatural fact."

There is, of course, much more to be said on the issue of the factual status of theistic utterances; here I have only tried to show that appeals to religious experience do not show how key theistic claims like "There is a God" and "God created the heavens and the earth" are factual.

If someone were to attempt to go beyond Wilson's simple positivism or empiricism, while retaining the claim that these theistic statements are factual, he might argue that Wilson's failure stems from what is essentially an "immodest empiricism," that is, in effect, a carry-over from the *earliest* phases of logical positivism. Phenomenalism has never been carried through; and even with a "physicalist language," as the basic observation language, Ramsey and Braithwaite (among others) have conclusively refuted the claim that statements about theoretical entities (neutrinos, protons, electrons, and the like) are translatable into statements about observations. An empiricist or positivist program tried to show how any factual statement was in principle translatable into an "empiricist language," that is, into an ideal language containing the usual logical terms and some finite set of observation terms. But "modest empiricists," like Hempel, Carnap, and Scheffler, now frankly concede that this program gives only a sufficient condition for factual meaningfulness. In the sciences, including well-established parts of physics, there abound, in Scheffler's words, "theoretical terms" which are "generally resistant to a straightforward empiricist interpretation."⁸

It has been argued that to say "Electrons (protons, neutrinos) are real" is to say nothing more than a certain concept occurs in an established physical

theory. After all, there is no kind of sophisticated looking and seeing whether there are electrons, protons, and the like. Wilson's strict empiricism works well enough when we are asking whether certain microscopic crystals are real or whether cells or bacteria are real. There we can plausibly set up a method of verification. But what have we to show for a neutrino or an electron? We cannot see a neutrino, and what counts as producing an electron consists in electron-microscope photographs, cloud-chamber pictures of X-ray tracks, audible clicks from a Geiger counter, etc. As one writer puts it:

If we ask a physicist to show us an electron he shows us pictures of white (or colored) lines on a black background and calls these pictures electron tracks. The physicist will say that he cannot show us single electrons, only streams of electrons, and will in fact show us not streams of anything, but just streams. It may be true that nowhere in the world can we find a single locust, that locusts are found only in swarms, but a swarm of locusts is specifically a swarm of *locusts*. The physicist tells us that he can distinguish one electron from another and in support of this he shows us pictures which he calls "streams of particules," and so on, but it is not the contents of the streams by which these pictures differ.⁹

The use of such a theoretical concept somehow enables us to make certain predictions with great accuracy, but we do not assume that someday we might isolate an electron like we might isolate a virus. In fact, we have no conception at all of something isolable that is simply there to be seen with a powerful electron microscope. Convention looms large here. As Robert Oppenheimer observes, we require "a tradition, a culture, a background, even to come to these things, even to define them, even to know the means by which they can be found. It depends on where you are, what you are, how you talk."¹⁰ Oppenheimer goes on to observe: "The deep

things in physics . . . are not things you can tell about unless you are talking to someone who has lived a long time acquiring the tradition."¹¹ To know what to look for, to understand what it is that you are supposed to see, requires some rather complicated scientific acculturation. It is not like looking for a purple man or even the Abominable Snow Man. Indeed, the physicists show us something with their electron microscopes, but, as J. J. C. Smart has aptly observed, "the trouble about this is the apparent arbitrariness of the collection of procedures which count as 'producing' an entity or 'something to show' for it."¹² It is even possible to be skeptical about seeing a large molecule in an electron microscope. Like the religious skeptic, the "scientific skeptic" might say: "All I see are dark patches on that screen"; without some physical theory, or at least an understanding of the electron microscope, there is no way of intelligibly interpreting such experiences. But if a child or a savage who had seen lumps of sugar were to look through a microscope magnifying the sugar lumps, he could tell that he is seeing a piece of sugar without knowing anything of optics or of the theory of the microscope. But this is not the case with molecules or what shows for the fundamental particles of physical theory. Basic theoretical terms do not admit of translation into observational terms any more than moral terms do; but the theoretical terms, in the context of a complicated physical theory, enable us to interpret certain very unfamiliar experiences. Again, as Smart puts it:

Since "electron" etc. get their meaning from the part they play in theory, we cannot say that it is only a contingent fact that those conditions hold which make it physically impossible for us to see them. In the case of a

proton it is particularly obvious that however microscopic we were we could never see a proton. Protons explain seeing: They therefore cannot themselves be seen. For would one see a proton by means of a further proton? Furthermore, if protons could be seen we could never see anything else: They would get in the way of whatever else we wanted to see. The whole conception of "seeing a proton" is self-contradictory. "Proton" gets its meaning from the part the word plays in prevailing theory, and this theory in turn rules out the possibility of protons being seen by anything, however microscopic.¹³

We could always assert what counts as showing for these fundamental particles without asserting that there are electrons, neutrinos, protons, and the like.

If we still say that there are really electrons, protons, and the like—that in Max Born's terms, these ultimate particles are "the fundamental stuff of the world" and not just convenient or pragmatically useful ways of talking—do we not then have factual statements, viz., "There are electrons," that are *not* verifiable? Well, they are not translatable without remainder into an "empiricist language," and *in that sense* they are *not* verifiable; but in the context of a whole physical theory there are certain experiences, formulatable in observation sentences, which count for and against them, and *in that sense* they remain verifiable and falsifiable.

With the above in mind, consider again empiricism in religion. A more modest empiricist than Wilson might argue that in *that last sense* theistic statements are also verifiable and falsifiable. Developing Wilson's arguments just a little more and loosening up on his criterion of "informative meaning," we could say that in the context of the whole Christian religion there are certain experiences that show or count for "There is a God" and certain experiences that count against it. "There is a

God" is not translatable into "an empiricist language," but in the context of Christian belief it helps us *interpret* our experiences. The logic of "God" is parallel to the logic of theoretical terms in physics.

To pursue this topic fully would be to write another essay; but I would like to indicate how this "out," that Wilson might avail himself of if he relents in his severe positivism, is also beset with difficulties.

(1) Wittgenstein and Ryle have certainly taught us the mistake of taking all but logical terms to have the logic of names. We need not at all assume that because "proton," "neutrino," and "electron" have a use in the language of physical theory that they must have a denotation. We need not construe such words as referring expressions standing for something in the world. This being so, the parallel with "God," which is a referring expression, is weakened. (2) There is no need to treat "There are protons," etc., as factual statements. It can reasonably be argued that such statements are not intended as formulations of belief or fact but are employed (when they are employed at all) as mechanical devices for co-ordinating or generating bona fide assertions. Again we have learned a lesson from Wittgenstein: Language does not function in the simple ways described in the earlier positivist literature. (Yet it needs to be said that I have not shown that such utterances are not used in stating contexts to make factual statements. Only if we take factual statements to mean, as Wilson does, statements that are translatable without remainder into conditional statements whose antecedent states certain operations and whose consequent states certain specific expected experiential results can I legitimately claim

to have shown that such statements are *not* factual.) (3) A science like physics in which these theoretical terms have a clearly established role does finally set up conditions under which its factual claims will be accepted or rejected. If a certain factual claim distant from the experimental periphery has a great deal of experimental evidence counting against it, it will finally be abandoned. To count as scientific, a factual statement must function this way. As a scientific claim, it is held by its users in a tentative fashion. It is not an article of faith, taken in a completely non-tentative way. But the Christian is unwilling or unable to say, or to say clearly, under what conditions he would abandon his faith. (To say that one would take "There is a God" and "God loves man" to be falsified if one saw "suffering which was utterly, eternally, and irredeemably pointless" is dramatic but far too vague; for we do not know what is to count as suffering which is "utterly, eternally, and irredeemably pointless.") The above considerations again count against an extended parallel between the logic of "God" and the logic of "proton." (4) Finally, and most fundamentally, to treat "There is a God" as a high-level hypothesis used to interpret our experience but capable of modification and eventual abandonment, if certain events take place, is to misconstrue radically the way such sentences function in our language.

The force of this last point might be seen from reflecting on a way in which Wilson might respond to Point 3 above. *Wilson might say*: "Point 3 only shows that religionists need to carry out my programme of clarification and 'rational reconstruction.' Religious statements have not been so construed in the past, but your remarks in Point 3 in effect indicate that there is no reason why reli-

gious discourse could not come to function in the way I proposed. After all, religious concepts have been constantly changing." Wilson might then go on to say (as he actually has) that the task before us is "to put forward a clear and unanimous programme, describing some approved method of obtaining the experiences which are relevant to our key assertions of faith" (pp. 30-31). Knowledge of the supernatural is indeed difficult to obtain. At present, religion is in a similar position to psychology "before the introduction of scientific method and theorizing." But as our understanding develops, our conceptions of God will change. We should and eventually will come to hold religious beliefs tentatively and recognize that they have the hypothetical status of all hypotheses. We must recognize, Wilson continues, that at present, religion is a "sort of backward science, still in its infancy . . ." (p. 61).

These last claims of Wilson's are not made in irony but are made in a quite straightforward manner. If Wilson is right, our objections in Point 3 pose no difficulty at all. But religious claims, as they actually function in our lives or as they might be conceived to come to function and still do the distinctive jobs that religious utterances have done, do not and could not function in this way. To conceive of religion in such a way is, in D. D. Evans' terms, "positivist Christianity" at its worst.¹⁴ In trying valiantly but vainly to make God-talk intelligible to people of an empirical temperament, Wilson has altered in a very radical way the very language game in which God-talk is at home. The Oxford theologian Evans is quite correct in asserting that "Christianity includes and stresses the element of mystery which Wilson strives to eliminate."¹⁵ Theistic claims cannot be held

as conditional factual claims about what we would experience if we did certain things. Religious claims are not held on an on-trial basis. If we follow out the parallel between basic theistic statements and theoretical statements in physics and if we stress that religion at present is a kind of "backward science . . . perhaps hardly deserving to be categorized under the heading of 'science' at all," we will be pressed into saying, if we are consistent, that religious beliefs are unconfirmed, provisional and very tentative, highly speculative hypotheses warranting at best nothing more than a provisional and tentative adherence. But, as Alasdair MacIntyre correctly observes: "Such adherence is completely uncharacteristic of religious belief. A God who could be believed in in this way would not be the God of Christian theism. For part of the content of Christian belief is that a decisive adherence has to be given to God. So that to hold Christian belief as a hypothesis would be to render it no longer Christian belief."¹⁶ Wilson has

not described the logic of Christian discourse; instead he has (in effect) proposed a new kind of very tentative, very speculative belief as a "rational reconstruction" of Christianity; and an analysis of Christian belief, carried out in accordance with a more "modest empiricism" and stressing the analogy between "Electrons exist" and "God exists," is heir to these same ills.

As we established earlier, Wilson has not shown how theistic claims can be falsifiable or verifiable; and the best face that we can put on the attempt at a modification of his view carried out in this section is this: If we *extend* and *alter* Wilson's arguments in the way I have in the last part of this essay, then we might, just might, *if* we accept a certain very controversial interpretation of theoretical statements in physics, give *some sense* to theistic claims, *re-interpreted* as exceedingly odd, entirely speculative hypotheses. But even here this claim is shrouded in vagueness and, where intelligible, utterly fantastic.

NOTES

1. John Wilson, *Language and Christian Belief* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1958).

2. Herbert Feigl, "Empiricism versus Theology," in *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. A. Pap and P. Edwards (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), p. 534.

3. *Ibid.*

4. I have tried to develop such an account of certain key theistic utterances in my "On Speaking of God," *Theoria*, forthcoming.

5. Paul Schmidt argues this point well in his *Religious Knowledge* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1961), pp. 48-49.

6. Wilson's exact position is not clear on this point, but this is also the way D. D. Evans reads him. See D. D. Evans, "Three Philosophers Analyze Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, XIII (January, 1960), 137-48.

7. This has been ably argued by Kurt Baier in his *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1956), chap. ii.

8. Israel Scheffler, "Theoretical Terms and a Modest Empiricism," *Philosophy of Science*, ed. S. Morgenbesser and A. Danto (New York: World Publishing Co., 1960), p. 172.

9. R. L. Goodstein, "Language and Experience," *Philosophy of Science*, ed. S. Morgenbesser and A. Danto (New York: World Publishing Co., 1960), p. 99.

10. Robert Oppenheimer, "Tradition and Discovery," *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*, No. 8 (1959), X, 5.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

12. J. J. C. Smart, "The Reality of Theoretical Entities," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (May, 1956), XXXIV, 3.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

14. D. D. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

16. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Logical Status of Religious Belief," in *Metaphysical Beliefs*, ed. S. Toulmin *et al.* (London: S.C.M. Press, Ltd., 1957), p. 181.