GOD-TALK

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Anthony Ralls in a perceptive article argues clearly and to my mind persuasively that the existence of God is a presupposition of Christianity as traditionally conceived and that 'God' is "a shorthand for a logically individuating description which must be satisfied if the expression 'God' is to be correctly used on any given occasion." (1) He also claims with considerable plausibility that 'meeting God' has an idiosyncratic use. God is not an entity given in experience; "we can know only the activity or effects of God, not God himself." (p.8) Thus we cannot meet God as we might meet Grace Kelly or the Abominable Snowman. The expression 'meeting God' is "made available for use as a diploma to be conferred on any peculiarly significant experiences of his effects."

So far so good. This is admirably straightforward stuff. Unfortunately, however, all does not end well, for in the final and crucial part of Ralls' essay we find not the longed for moment of truth but a batch of dark sayings. The dark sayings occur (pp. 10-11) at a juncture that is crucial to his elucidation of 'God' or 'God exists'. God, Ralls has argued, is said to be a unique being with unique properties. We are told that to "perceive that God exists, is to perceive that it is as the result of God's activity that certain things take place." (p.10) Ralls points out, explaining the obscure with the obscure, that to make the claim quoted above is to claim "to perceive that the proper description of certain sensible events involves the makeing of statements which presuppose the existence of a suprasensible cause." (p. 10)

Ralls is aware of the peculiarity and the obscurity of this claim. He tries in his concluding paragraphs to clarify it. He first remarks that "to perceive the existence of something is not necessarily to perceive that thing." 'To perceive' sometimes means 'To become aware of' as I might become aware that the woods are on fire simply by seeing black smoke billowing above the trees. God's existence, Ralls argues, is perceived in two ways: 1) God's existence is perceived in everything that happens; and 2) God's existence is perceived in certain distinc-

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(1) "Ontological Presupposition in Religion", **Sophia**, April, 1964, p. 8. Subsequent page references are to this article.

tive particular occurrences. If it were argued, Ralls continues, that God's existence could only be perceived in the first way or if it were argued that God's existence could only be perceived in the second way, the concept of God would be vacuous, but if He could be perceived in both ways the concept **may** not be vacuous. The core of his argument is this: God exists "is to be justified, insofar as a form of description which is appropriate to certain favourable events — the basis of revelation — is perceived to be appropriate to all events." The parting of the Red Sea or the disappearance of Jesus from his grave leads one to be aware of a being whom one then perceives to be not only the supra-sensible cause of these extra-ordinary events but the supra-sensible cause of all events.

There are too many putatively factual claims here that are in reality devoid of factual intelligibility and all the standard difficulties about a "supra-sensible cause" remain. It is indeed true that to perceive the existence of something is not necessarily to perceive that thing. I see smoke but not the fire, I hear the thunder but do not see the lightning, but I have none the less become aware that there is a fire and that there have been lightning flashes. In these cases there is something I **could** directly perceive (i.e. the fire and the lightning) but in fact did not, which enables me to make this claim. When speaking of God, however, there is, as Ralls insists, no direct perceiving or encountering God. It is not the case that there is a God whom I might directly perceive (look at, smell, taste, feel, encounter) but did not; and it is not the case that there have been other situations of this type in which God has been directly perceived when events of this type have been perceived . Thus in the case of God we have no grounds for asserting that we have perceived the existence of something without perceiving that thing. If we say the causal relation is unique here and as such is different, for the cause is a **supra-sensible cause,** we are, by appealing to such a concept, lifting ourselves up by our own bootstraps for the concept of a supra-sensible cause is at least as problematical as the concept of God. After all, what could be meant by a supra-sensible cause or a transcendent cause? To give an adequate elucidation of 'cause' is no mean task, but one thing is clear: when we are talking of events, to say that X is the cause of Y is to give one to understand that events of type Y occur when and only when events of type X occur. But we could (logically could) know that such a relation obtained and thus that a causal relation obtained only if events of type X and Y could be independently observed so that we could see if they were in constant conjunction. Where it is logically impossible to make such an observation we cannot say that such a relation obtains or fails to obtain. But if X is supra-sensible

or transcendent, as God must be, X could not, even in principle, be directly perceived, and if X could not — logically could not — be directly perceived X could not be indirectly perceived either, for 'indirectly' could not make a non-vacuous contrast here. In short 'a supra-sensible cause' or 'a transcendent cause' appears to be very much like a 'round square' or, if this is too strong, at least like 'a democratic carrot'. These phrases have not been given a use; they have no established role in a language-game.

If what I have said about 'supra-sensible cause' is essentially correct, Ralls' attempt to elucidate God-talk fails. On Ralls' analysis, to say that God's existence is perceived in everything that happens is to say that God is the cause of everything that happens. But since 'cause' here is elliptical for 'supra-sensible cause' we must conclude that 'God is the cause of everything that happens' is devoid of truth-value and thus of factual significance since at least one of its constituent terms, i.e. 'cause' (meaning here 'supra-sensible cause'), has no use. But if that statement is devoid of factual significance so too must 'God's existence is perceived in everything' be devoid of such significance.

Yet even if I am wrong and even if, as Geach believes, such a Humean conception of causality, as I in effect relied on, is thoroughly myth-eaten, there are, I am sorry to say, further logically independent difficulties in Ralls' account. If everything we could (logically could) perceive shows that God exists and nothing could conceivably show that God does not exist then 'perceiving God to exist' is devoid of factual or descriptive content, for a descriptive word or phrase not only means what it does but also excludes what it does not mean, and a descriptive sentence not only describes a state of affairs but excludes contradictory states of affairs. But given the condition Ralls sets up no perceiving **could possibly** count as **not** perceiving God, so 'perceiving God', without a non-vacuous contrast, is devoid of descriptive or factual significance. To say that God is not only perceived in everything that exists but is perceived in special circumstances as well, does not show that 'God is perceived in everything that happens' is non-vacuous, for we still do not know what it would be like **not** to perceive God. To say that in **another sense** of 'perceive' than that used in 'God is perceived in everything', God is perceived in particular occurrences but not in other occurrences does not establish the factual intelligibility of 'God is perceived in everything'. Only by trading on the above equivocal use of 'perceived' can we make it appear that 'God is perceived in everything' has a non-vacuous contrast.

Finally what could be meant by 'God is perceived in particular occurrences'? What particular occurrences would instantiate this? The Red Sea parts and the Israelites walk through it and then it closes over the pursuing Egyptians: does this show "God's hand"? Does this count as perceiving God in a particular event? All the old difficulties are here! The non-believer could admit he had no explanation for the Red Sea so parting and closing. He might even admit, though what exactly this could mean is not clear, that it was scientifically inexplicable and still say that he does not understand how in perceiving these bizarre but still perfectly non-supra-sensible series of events he was or could be perceiving God. Since God is transcendent to the cosmos, since God is something that is not even in principle to be seen or encountered or even spatially related to the universe, the occurrences of events of the Red Sea type could not be all that is meant by talking of the existence of God. We again do not know what would, or even in principle could, count for or against 'Particular occurrence X points to the existence of an infinite, personal, transcendent idividual', or 'Particular occurrence X points toward another particular that is **in principle** unobservable'. There is nothing that even in principle could confirm or disconfirm the assertion or denial of these **putative** factual assertions. But this makes them devoid of the factual intelligibility that Ralls rightly demands of them. If p and not-p are equally compatible with any and every conceived state-of-affairs then p and not-p are both devoid of factual content or significance. But both, 'Particular occurrences X point toward an infinite particular that is in principle unobservable', and the denial of this putative factual statement are equally compatible with any conceivable state-of-affairs. Since this is so, we have not succeeded in showing how either the statement or its denial could have the factual intelligibility or content that they must have in order to show how they can give factual content to 'God exists'. But if 'God exists' is not intelligible in this way, it lacks the logical status it must have if it is to fill Christian expectations. If it does not have this status Christianity will have lost the kind of support which enables the believer to assert with justification that Christianity is something more than a morally significant myth.

These are all old points and they involve arguable, though perhaps perfectly sound, presuppositions. The subtlety of Ralls' analysis, until we come to his last two pages, would lead one to suspect that he had some way around these well-known difficulties, but so far as I have been able to discern he does not at all meet them or show us that they are in reality spurious difficulties. Perhaps Ralls does not wish to deny that these are

crippling difficulties, for at one point he confesses that he does not find 'God exists' "wholly intelligible", Yet, it could and has been argued, that this no impediment to belief, for the God of Christianity and Judaism is by definition a mystery. It nonetheless remains the case that the kind of difficulties I have been raising about 'God exists' seem to deprive it of **all** factual intelligibility, but this is just the sort of intelligibility it must have if, as Ralls avers, 'God exists' is a crucial ontological presupposition of Christianity.

Perhaps Ralls can show us a way out of the dark woods or show that these rather standard difficulties I have raised are only conceptual confusions on my part. That there be some surcease to what may be my conceptual malaise is not important (except to me); but others, faced with claims bearing a family resemblance to Ralls' claims, have raised similar objections and are thus perhaps gripped by a similar disquietude. If Ralls can be our Virgil, I, and I suspect others as well, will be extremely grateful.