GOD, DISEMBODIED EXISTENCE AND INCOHERENCE

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I

Wittgensteinians have argued that the logic of God-talk is *sui generis*, that religion is autonomous, that religious discourse has its own determinate logic and that it is in order as it is such that the only legitimate task of the philosopher or logician in the domain of religion is to give a perspicuous representation of the logic of this discourse. Religion and fundamental religious doctrines are not and cannot be the legitimate object of the philosopher's criticism. His task is descriptive and elucidatory, not critical. If we understand the relationship between the forms of language, the modes of discourse, and the forms of life, we will come to see that there can be no sensible claim that central religious beliefs, or the core strands of religious discourse, are unintelligible, contradictory, incoherent or even irrational. Such discourse, as an ongoing part of a form of life, must be in order as it is. It is one of our givens and there is no legitimate philosophical ground in accordance with which it could be assessed. And there are no criteria of rationality or reasonableness external to a particular religion in accordance with which religion or even a particular religion could be legitimately assessed. To think that we could apply to religion as a whole such categories of criticism as 'unintelligible', incoherent', 'coherent', 'contradictory', 'irrational' or even 'false' or 'unfounded' is an utter confusion.

   This Wittgensteinian account of the logic of religion has had in recent years some interesting and indeed significant statements from Hughes, Malcolm, Rhees, Winch and Phillips.[1] Adel Daher has cut through much of the detail of this discussion and in a series of powerful arguments has shown that such a Wittgensteinian account is not just mistaken in this or that detail, but is fundamentally mistaken.[2] An important feature of his account, unlike many of my own earlier criticisms of this Wittgensteinian turn, is that it does not, at least in any obvious way, presuppose the acceptance of any form of verificationism.[3] I shall here reformulate some of the most crucial arguments in his account, critically inspect them, and then draw out some of the wider implications of his account.

However, as one important preliminary, let me first draw attention to a distinctive feature, relevant to Daher's account, in the logic of God-talk. Believers speak—and rightly so—of God's incomprehensibility. Anything which will count as the God of Judaeo-Christianity must be mysterious. A God that could be fully understood, fully compreheneded, would not be the God of Judaeo-Christianity. The faith of Christians and Jews concerns a mystery; God is a transcendent being, in principle beyond the grasp of human understanding. As St. Augustine has put it: "What, then, are we to say of God? If you have understood what you are trying to say, it is not God. If you have been able to understand it, it is something other than God that you have understood." Yet most theologians and most religious believers have recognized that such a remark must be qualified or taken as in some way hyperbolic, for God cannot be utterly incomprehensible.

It cannot be that we do not understand anything about God at all for then the word would be meaningless and there would be nothing to believe or disbelieve or take on faith and no revelation would even be possible. It is a plain tautology and an important one not to forget, given certain theological impulses, perhaps answering to religious needs, that we cannot understand what we cannot understand. If there is to be God-talk at all (and there is), *in some sense* and to some degree, we must understand what we are talking about when we speak of God. Murdith McLean makes a balanced statement of what needs to be said in the context of such remarks about the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of God, when he remarks that while God remains essentially mysterious and incomprehensible "God cannot be *completely* incomprehensible (a point of which some theologians need to be reminded). If he is genuinely beyond *all* understanding, then the game is over before it has begun."[4]

It is a common point of departure between the Wittgensteinians I mentioned above, on the one hand, and Daher and myself, on the other, that God is taken to be a reality which is in this extensive, but less than complete, way incomprehensible and beyond our understanding. The Wittgensteinians conclude nothing sceptical from this, but take it as a feature of the language game we play with 'God', while Daher and I argue that if one inspects the kind and indeed, as well, the degree of incomprehensibility built into this first-order God-talk, it can be shown that such talk is actually so incoherent as to make religious belief of a Jewish or Christian sort irrational.

II

It is important in sorting this out to try to ascertain what is being counted as 'incoherence'. Daher remarks that "incoherence arises if one entertains a belief which implies two incompatible propositions." More specifically and strikingly, he goes on to observe that "incoherence arises . . . when the speaker of a certain language knowingly or unknowingly violates the rules of this language in such a way that he uses, say, two terms a and b to describe a certain state of affairs s where a, as it is ordinarily used, implies x and b, as it is ordinarily used, implies y, and where x and y are logically incompatible." Christians speak of God in personal terms; indeed He is (at least on many accounts) in some sense a person and thus an individual, albeit an infinite one; but when the Christian goes on to say that this individual is immaterial, then incoherence, so Daher avers, results. The reason is quite simply that since 'individual', as it is ordinarily used, implies 'identifiable', and 'immaterial', as it is ordinarily used, implies 'unidentifiable', the belief that something E is both an individual and immaterial would entail two incompatible propositions, namely 'E is identifiable' and 'E is not identifiable'. Such an argument, recalling that a non-anthropomorphic God is allegedly immaterial and non-identifiable, shows that the concept of God is incoherent.

As we have learned from Quine, there are various ways of manoeuvering around such difficulties, but I think in this case they can all be shown to have equally untoward consequences. We could say that 'individual' means something partially different when applied to God, such that 'individual' in the

context of God-talk does not imply 'identifiable'. Moreover, the term need not be simply used equivocally either, for analogical uses of language are pervasive in human discourse and not just in talk of God. But just what does it mean to speak of an individual who is not even in principle identifiable? And what does it mean to speak of a person who is not identifiable even in principle? When the engine is not idling, as in praying to God, in praising God, and in singing of God, 'God' is used in such a way that His identification is assumed. But when the context become philosophically reflective and the engine is idling, this use of language is said to be metaphorical. But then what is it a metaphor of, such that God could be said in some extended but still not utterly equivocal sense to be an individual or a person? If we are being anthropomorphic, it is evident enough what use is involved here. But with the incomprehensible 'utterly other' God of mature Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we have abandoned anthropomorphism. But then just what use or what meaning does this talk have?

'God', it might be said, denotes an individual which it is not just contingently impossible to identify but logically and theoretically impossible to identify. But why then use 'individual' in an extended sense because God is a person. But this is no help because 'immaterial person' or 'bodiless person' has the same problems as 'immaterial individual'.

It could in turn be responded by a Wittgensteinian that 'individual' and 'person' has just the use it has in such reflective religious contexts. But it is precisely these contexts—in reality philosophical contexts—which aroused Wittgenstein's deep and sustained suspicion. In such 'reflectively religious contexts' the engine is idling. The situation is typically philosophical with no established language game embedded in a form of life. It is just in such contexts where Wittgenstein thought we could justifiably speak of 'disguised nonsense' and 'a house of cards'. We have no established or on-going form of life here which would make possible that 'agreement in judgments' which Wittgensteinians believe is essential for the very possibility of intelligible discourse. Thus, even on very Wittgensteinian grounds, such a rebuttal to Daher cannot be sustained.

III

There is another objection which in effect emerges from Michael Durrant's perceptive and carefully argued *The Logical Status of 'God'*[5]. What it does is in effect to plausibily attack

some of the presuppositions made by Daher. If these presuppositions are unjustified, then Daher's argument is not the conclusive sort he seeks.

First, Durrant argues that for many actual occurrences of 'God' in religious discourse, "'God' does not have the status of a proper name . . ."[6] ('Almighty and Everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels . . .' is just one of many examples.) That we repeatedly use personal pronouns in God-Talk does not show that 'God' is a proper name, for, as Durrant points out, personal pronouns are used quite intelligibly with descriptions as well in which no proper names are used, e.g. 'Man, thou hast gone astray following thine own whims and desires. . .' If 'God' were a proper name such that God could intelligibly be said to be a person, we could be brought into a position, vis-à-vis God, where we could properly say 'That is God' as we might say 'That is a stork' or 'That is pine honey'. But, Durrant claims, "one can never be brought into a situation in which it is proper to say 'That is God'." God, as Kierkegaard quipped, is not a great green bird, such that we could point to God and say 'There God is' or ask meaningfully, 'What is God?'. 'God' is not a name such that in some suitable situation, now or 'here-after', we could be brought face-to-face with the bearer of that name and some day be told 'That x is God'. Moreover, if 'God' were a proper name, it should be at least in principle possible to specify the bearer of than name. But this is impossible. God is not in any *genus* and as Aristotle argues in his *Posterior Analytics* it is not the case that there is a class of things which simply *are*.

> to say that A is a person is not to say what A is, i.e. to allocate A to a certain class, but to allocate A to a category. It is to attribute a status to A where we already know the answer to the 'What is A?' question. In short, it allocates a status to an individual which *already* falls under a species and indicates to us what can be sensibly predicated of such an individual. It does not and cannot answer the question, 'What is A?' where 'A' is the proper name of an individual . . .[7]

It may well be, as Durrant points out, perfectly innocuous in certain contexts to say that God is a person or to address Him as if He were a person, but 'God' cannot be the name of a person for then 'God' must also denote some reality previously

identified. But it is just this identification which we cannot make, for such an infinite and transcendent reality. If 'God' were the name of an individual—a person—such that we could answer 'Who is God?' or 'What is God?' or 'Where is God?,' we would, as Daher stresses, have to have some principle of identity for that individual so that we could recognize Him. But we have no such principle of identity.

Durrant in effect agrees with Daher that if God were an individual and a person, then God would have to have a spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal location or at least be dependent for His identity upon reference to a spatio-temporal framework. Moreover, they both agree that the God of developed Judaeo-Christianity could be none of these things. Daher concludes from this that we have good reason to believe that this developed conception of God is incoherent. Durrant more cautiously concludes that God is not an individual, even (*pace* I.C. Crombie) as infinite individual.

Here, I think, we can see in operation Quine's lesson (and indeed Waismann's as well) about how difficult, if not impossible, it is to get decisive arguments of the sort Daher tries to make. It is only in conjunction with several other arguments, similarly indecisive, that together the combined weight of these arguments begins to make a telling but no doubt, even taken together, never itself a decisive argument in a certain direction. If we conclude with Durrant that 'God' is not a proper name, a common name or any kind of referring expression such that God could be an individual, then we must ask what other logical status 'God' has.

Durrant does just that and after carefully examining other alternatives, such as construing 'God' as a general term like 'man', a definite description, a substantial general term (Geach's sense), or a descriptive predicable term, he conclude that all these readings of 'God', lead to incoherences and that, if we try, as religiously we need to, to construe God as a unified conception, we should conclude that the logic of 'God' is an inconsistent one. There is, he concludes, no available scheme which will enable us to make sense of God-talk.[8]

So while we may be justified, and indeed would be justified, if Durrant's core arguments about God and proper names are sound, in rejecting Daher's arguments on the grounds that they rest on unjustifiable presuppositions, we would, in rejecting these presuppositions made by Daher and many others as well, be led by other avenues similarly to conclude that God-talk,

where non-anthropomorphic, is incoherent. Daher, in other words, made a purely technical error which could be easily corrected while still keeping the underlying thrust of his arguments. Moreover (as Durrant recognizes), there is a good bit of theological talk about God, and perhaps some religious talk as well, which does operate on the mistaken assumption that God is a proper name and that God is an individual and in some sense a person or personal. Against these conceptions Daher's arguments appear at least to be compelling.[9]

IV

I have tried to exhibit some of the shifts which could be made to show how a claim, which, if taken in a straightforward way, would be incoherent, can be read in a different way in order to avoid the incoherence. I have indicated how three ways in which we might be tempted to go, all have consequences which would in one way or another be unacceptable and indeed particularly troublesome to philosophers of a Wittgensteinian orientation.

Alternatively, it might be said that talk of God as an individual or as a person is metaphorical talk for the non-metaphorical claim that God is a personal reality or that God is personal. But once again we have something whose very meaning, hardly established in any form of life, is so problematical that there is no understanding of what is being said. To say 'Mary is personal' is to say something such as 'Mary makes personal remarks. She doesn't have the usual tact or reserve which enables the standard patterns of social distance between persons to obtain'. But surely nothing remotely like that is meant or intended by 'God is personal'. But then what is intended? It appears at least as if nothing intelligible or comprehensible is intended. Similarly, while we understand 'Jones has some personal property', 'Jones had a personal exchange with Mary', 'That is his personal way of responding', no established use exists for 'God is a personal reality' or 'To believe in God is to believe that the universe is personal', or 'God is the recognition that the universe is not utterly impersonal'. Such talk has no fixed role in the religious stream of life, but only in apologetics and/or theology, but there, on good Wittgensteinian grounds, we should be suspicious about the intelligibility of such talk.

It could be replied that on Daher's own account there is no clear division between religious talk and theological talk. More

importantly and more generally, since God-talk is not supposed to be pellucid, given that it is about a mystery (a partially incomprehensible transcendent reality), to point out that the sentences 'God is personal' or 'God is a personal reality' are radically unclear and even problematical in their meaning, is only to point out that they are bits of religious discourse. Given that the subject of this discourse is an incomprehensible mystery, this is just what is to be expected. From Aristotle we should remember that a subject matter and a form of discourse can only attain the clarity appropriate to that domain of discourse. Given that we are talking about a mysterious, transcendent, ultimate reality, we cannot reasonably expect clarity or unproblematic straightforward utterances. That our talk is problematical does not establish that it is unintelligible, incoherent or meaningless. (However, we should also not forget Ayer's old point that we do not have to be fat to drive fat oxen to market.)

The above response is fair enough. What I think is required here is judgement and such judgements are, of course, very fallible. What seems to me to cut strongly in Daher's favour is that such claims (putative claims) as 'God is personal reality', whatever their exact logical status, are supposed by the theologians who utter them to be true. But we have no idea at all what, even with the slightest degree of probability, would or could count toward establishing or disestablishing them. They supposedly are truth-claims, but it is a very odd kind of 'truth-claim' indeed when we can say nothing about what would tend to count for their being true or false.

To the response that this is verificationism and indeed something Daher tries not to utilize, it should be responded that, if it is, it is of the innocuous sort defended by Richard Rorty.[10] It does not commit one to any of the more controversial doctrines of logical empiricism or even pragmatism. Surely, 'isms' aside, it is very questionable to claim that p is a truth-claim or has truth-conditions if we cannot indicate anything determinate about what it claims, so that it would at least to some faint degree be reasonable to assert p is a very questionable 'truth-claim' at best. (But would not the Wittgensteinian again respond: this shows how very elusive religious discourse is? But, in response to that response, how elusive can a discourse be before it should be thought to be a mystifying 'house of cards'?)

There is another line of attack that might be taken in trying to vindicate the coherence of God-talk against Daher's challenge. Daher, it could be pointed out, takes it as safe to assume that if x is immaterial then x cannot be identified and that this holds for all values of x where 'immaterial' takes as its opposite 'being physical', including, of course, 'having a body'. But, it might be queried, how can we be so confident that an immaterial reality could not be identified, particularly if that immaterial reality, being God, is the only immaterial reality or the only immaterial reality of its kind. (Recall here the Wittgensteinian stress, Daher discusses at the very beginning of his essay, that God is a different *kind* of reality than any finite reality.)

The grounds for confidence in the line that Daher takes are the following. In identifying organisms other than persons bodily criteria are used. And, when in identifying persons we use bodily criteria and memory, the bodily criteria are more fundamental. (This clearly comes out when the two criteria conflict.) Without specifying a body, we cannot even use the criterion of memory to identify a person. No matter how many Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde 'switches' we have over space and/or over time, we still need a body to establish that, if this can be done at all, Dr. Jekyll is indeed Mr. Hyde. If at this moment I were to disappear entirely and seconds later in Nepal a person looking not at all like me, but with memories which we would be strongly tempted to say were my memories, should quite mysteriously pop into existence, even if we wanted to say that this person was Nielsen, we should still have to appeal to bodily criteria to identify *any* person at all.

The language games we actually play in making identifications all pervasively use bodily criteria and any other tests require the assumption of bodily criteria. It might be replied that God-talk is the exception. In speaking of God we are talking about a *sui-generis* reality of which, by definition, there could not be more than one such reality. But, given the breakdown of the ontological argument, and with it the breakdown of the claim that 'There is a God' is analytic, there can be no purely 'conceptual identification' of God. (Indeed, *pace* Hartshorne and Plantinga, we do not even understand what such an indentification would be like.) Perhaps it is fair enough to reply that God cannot be identified in the normal way with

the moral assumptions holding; but then some directions need to be given for how it is possible to identify God in some non-normal way so that we can know or even have the slightest reason for believing that it is God we are talking to or about when we pray, worship or even wonder about His reality. But we have no intelligible directions here for a non-Zeus-like God. It is only because the Zeus-like God hovers in the background that some of us sometimes are under the illusion we do.

It still might be responded, as R. G. Swinburne has, that the claim that there are disembodied persons other than God is an intelligible though perhaps false claim and that these persons can be identified.[11] Thus we cannot so easily assume, as Daher does, that if God is immaterial then God is not identifiable. I shall return to this argument after I have deployed several other arguments of Daher's against the coherence of such talk of disembodied existence.

VI

Daher gives other illustrations of what he argues is the incoherence of God-talk. It is incoherent to claim, as religious people do, that God is loving and God is utterly immaterial. In developing an argument for this Daher claims:

> The two propositions 'God is loving' and 'God is immaterial' do not appear to be contradictory until one starts examining the rules governing the linguistic use of both 'loving' and 'immaterial'. For when one does that, one immediately recognizes that 'loving' can be used only when certain *behavioural checks* are applied to the individual judged to be loving. But these behavioural checks cannot be applied unless the individual who is being judged is in possession of a body. The use of 'immaterial', however, excludes any reference to bodies and hence the application of any behavioural checks. Therefore, there seems to be some incoherence involved in entertaining the belief that God is loving and God is immaterial.[12]

Again there could be a certain conceptual shuffling to avoid the charge of incoherence. It could be claimed that it is not true that the application of 'loving' in all contexts, in all language games, requires such behavioural checks "applied to the individual judged to be loving." Indeed, in the very language games we play with God, this is not so. 'Loving' is analogically

stretched in such contexts.

However, the 'analogical stretch' should not be so extreme as to make the term 'loving' utterly equivocal. Unless 'loving' in the two contexts is to be like 'fast' in 'He made the sail fast' and 'He ran fast'—in which case there is no point in using it in characteristic Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God-talk in the first place—'loving' must, in both religious and non-religious predication, be about something that has important features in common; there must be some common signification even though the context of use is different. Daher's point is that if in the religious predications there is no behaviour, nothing recognizable that could be done, which could count as loving and failing to love, then there is no common signification. Without any common signification and with 'love' being clearly at home in the secular contexts, the situation is as follows. We have only *the word* in common between the religious and the non-religious uses. In the non-religious uses the term has the constraints Daher specifies. With no common signification (common meaning) the term 'love' need not have those constraints in the religious contexts. But then it is no longer clear that we are talking about something which is recognizably similar to what in non-religious contexts, with an established if still somewhat puzzling use, we are talking about when we use the word 'love'. Indeed, without such a common signification, we have, in talking of God's love, in effect misled people into thinking we are talking about something that bears some resemblance—though, of course, in other respects is different—to what we are talking about when we speak of human love. But without a common signification, we cannot be talking about that—there could be no relevant respect in which the two things resemble each other. Thus it is unclear what we are talking about in religious contexts such that we could understand the difference between 'God loves humankind' and its denial and, in addition, understand its relevance to 'love' as we understand it.

VII

Daher gives some further related arguments to exhibit the incoherence of non-anthropomorphic God-talk. He argues that Judaeo-Christian-Islamic strands of discourse, central to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, commit us, on the one hand, to saying that God is absolutely immutable, immaterial and in some theological traditions even to saying that God is a simple

substance, "which means that there are no relations in God and consequently that God is without parts." On the other hand, we think of God as creating, judging, talking, guiding and the like. But to try to put these two very different clusters of attributes together leads to a series of fundamental incoherences or what appear at least to be such incoherences. God cannot, logically cannot, on the one hand, be a simple substance and absolutely unchangeable and, on the other hand, act, for acting requires movement and consequently temporal succession. Moreover, if God is a simple substance there can be no differentiation in His acts. But, if this is so, it is impossible intelligibly to speak of His performing different actions. But we do speak of God as performing different actions, so once again given that God is construed as a simple substance, there is incoherence in our very conception of God. Finally, God's very immateriality, which is perhaps more theologically central than His immutability and absolute simplicity, makes incoherent the ascription of actions to Him, such as judging, punishing, creating, loving and the like, for the very application of action words presuppose the concurrence of bodily movements. X cannot punish Y without acting in some way or other to mete out the punishment in question. This involves doing something, not just thinking about it, and this in turn involves some kind of bodily movement. One cannot punish someone simply by just entertaining—keeping it quite to oneself—the idea of punishing him. But, as Daher observes, "when it comes to God there is no possibility at all of distinguishing between God's thinking about punishing B and God's punishment of B." We say (1) 'God is immaterial' and (2) 'God acts' and (3)—a specification of (2)—'God punishes, judges, loves, protects His creation', but the truth of (1) is incompatible with the truth of (2) and (3) and thus there is incoherence in the very concept of a non-anthropomorphic God.

Again defensive manoevres can be made here to preserve coherence. It could be said that when we speak of God's judging, punishing, talking and creating, we speak metaphorically, the literal attributions, capable of giving us truth-claims, are of God's immutability, simplicity and immateriality. This is, of course, a very questionable claim because these more abstract predications carry with them much more contestable theological freight—freight which not all Moslems, Christians and Jews would accept, while the other more concrete attributions are

incontestably a part of every major Islamic, Christian and Jewish tradition. But, this not inconsiderable objection aside, it is crucial to ask: if they are metaphorical uses of language what are they metaphors of? What we actually talking about when we speak of God's various acts? What is the creation-myth a myth of? And why use such terms, if they do not suggest something at least remotely similar to what they normally suggest? And if they do, can we be at all confident that there still is not a similar logical conflict between whatever 'God's acts' picks out and God's immateriality? What could be even remotely similar to 'an act', as we understand it, and still not involve the movement of parts, the making of bodily movements.

VIII

There are a number of arguments in Terence Penelhum's sophisticated and important works on the logic and epistemology of Judaeo-Christian discourse, which, if correct, would count as crucial counters undermining Daher's account and indeed part of some rather similar accounts of my own.[13] It is my belief that, significant as they are, Penelhum's most central claims to rescue the intelligibility and coherence of non-anthropomorphic God-talk will not stand up under careful inspection. Here I limit myself to those considerations which most directly conflict with Daher's arguments.

In his *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, Penelhum argues that if we could show that it makes sense to speak of a disembodied agent persisting through time we could then give sense to such an agent acting on the world, including acting lovingly.[14] Penelhum does not now think that this former notion of his is intelligible, but R. G. Swinburne, building on Penelhum's arguments and criticizing them in a quite different way than I would, has argued plausibly that this puzzle of Penelhum's can be solved and that with his own argument, when taken in conjunction with Penelhum's treatment of talk of disembodied agency, we have succeeded in making sense, where Daher thought we could not.[15] Thus, if Penelhum's account is right where Swinburne thinks it is, and if Swinburne is right in his own argumentation against Penelhum, we have been able to show how we could make sense where Daher thought our talk was incoherent.

However, while I can understand Penelhum's wish to be latitudianarian concerning what it makes sense to say, it seems

to me that he is mistaken in what he says about 'disembodied action'. (This is, as well, a key part of Penelhum's account which Swinburne accepts as crucial for his own vindication of the coherence of 'disembodied agency'.) Penelhum contends that even if, as it most certainly appears to be the case, it is not just *in fact* impossible but *in principle* impossible to perceive in any way disembodied persons such that we could be aware of their presence or they could be aware of each other's presence, that this would *not* make talk of such realities incoherent, even though "we would never be in a position to make a true statement about the present state of any disembodied being . . ."[16] To establish that such talk lacked sense, he argues, we would have to lean on some "principle according to which one can only understand a statement, even if it contains familiar words, if one knows how one would discover whether it is true."[17] This he takes to be a very problematic principle. Stated in just that way Penelhum's remark is, of course, safe enough, but it is clear from his remarks in that context about 'some principle' and 'principles that yield this result are readily to hand', that he means to cover a family of principles of that type and he means to rule them all out. But if the principle reads: 'We can only understand a putative statement as a statement of fact if we can understand what counts for or against its truth', Penelhum's time is not so easy. Suppose he says that the proposition 'Hans, though disembodied, loves Erika', like the proposition 'God loves His creation', is supposed to be a true or false claim, but that it is logically impossible for him or anyone else to have *any understanding at all* of what it is for it to be true, *probably* true or even *possibly* true. But that is to give to understand that neither the user nor the hearer of such an utterance understands what it is supposed to assert. To respond, 'No, they both assert exactly what they say' is merely to utter a verbal formula. Without knowing their truth-conditions, we do not know what we really are asserting. We have verbal formulae with no way of knowing whether and how they actually are to be applied to the world, for we have no idea what must transpire for anything to count for or against their truth. Moreover, it is not just that he does not understand the analysis of it; much more importantly he does not understand it as a truth or even as a falsehood *sans phrase*. I cannot understand something to be a 'candidate truth' unless I understand its truth-conditions. '*P* may be true, but even *in*

principle we could never find out anything at all about the likelihood of its being true' is without sense, for if *per impossible*, this condition obtained then there could be no occasions on which one could assert 'P is probably true', or even 'Perhaps P is true'. Even the 'perhaps' is at home only if 'probably' is at home, so that we could give 'perhaps' some content and contrast. In sum, it makes no sense to say something is true or even *may* be true unless we have at least some understanding of what it is for it to be true.

Pehelhum makes the following comment on such principles as are involved in the above argument:

> The plausibility of any one of them is no greater than that of flat assertion that any particular statement ruled out by it is unintelligible. Even if this were not so, the plausibility of the principle would certainly be affected by any decisions that we would come to independently regarding statements that would be ruled out by it.[18]

But Penelhum's first statement is false. If we have a principle which covers a myriad of different instances and gives a powerful explanatory account of why they are as they are, we would, when faced with an anomalous instance or even a cluster of such instances, try (as Stephen Toulmin puts it) 'to save appearances' and account for the anomaly without abandoning the principle. And this is exactly what it is reasonable to do in the present case. For a host of diverse cases where we can unproblematically say of utterances that they make a true or a false statement, we can say something determinate about what counts for or against their truth. This indeed is true for at least all unproblematic ascriptions of truth where putatively factual matters are at issue. Faced with a few anomalies, such as disembodied-existence-utterances (already admittedly puzzling on their own account), which do not fit this pattern, it is far more plausible to hold to the principle which would justify classifying them as incoherent or devoid of factual significance or content, rather than to abandon the principle. Only if we could produce hosts of diverse sentence types with familiar words in standard grammatical forms, whose meaning, quite apart from some theoretical stance, is admittedly unproblematic and whose truth-conditions are such a mystery, would we be justified in rejecting such a principle and claiming coherence for disembodied-existence-talk.

Finally, in this connection, though it is true, as my above argument in effect confirms, that the independent judgements we come to about the intelligibility of such sentences do (or at least should) affect our assessment of the principle, this does not justify by-passing it as Penelhum does. Understandably enough, he would like to avoid such considerations, but he cannot, for we cannot gain a foothold with 'Hans is a disembodied lover' or 'God loves the world', until we can have some idea of what it *means* to say that they are true or false. This is the foothold Penelhum's discourse needs for the rest to get off the ground. If there is no *possible* ascertainment of truth, then there is no understanding of a candidate truth-claim as a truth-claim. The trouble—though no doubt not the only trouble—with disembodied-existence-talk is that is appears at least to be incapable of meeting that condition, and we are thus justified in thinking it incoherent.

However, let me put these considerations aside and consider Penelhum's more specific arguments, for it might be thought (mistakenly I believe) that all factual claims need not meet these requirements or (more plainly) that Penelhum's specific claims actually do. My argument in this section shall be that there are specific grounds, independent of such verificationist considerations, for thinking Penelhum's arguments are unsound.

One general point first. It seems at first blush as if Penelhum has common sense on his side in this dispute. There is nothing deviant in much of the talk about disembodied agency. 'Father is looking down on us from heaven', 'Her spirit lives on', 'Man's soul shall not perish' are ordinary uses of language. They present us with no deviations from linguistic regularities and when we read or hear stories (e.g. Faulkner's "Pantaloon in Black") and fables in which such talk occurs, we have no trouble in following them. Moreover, on the surface at least, it surely is quite in order to say, as Penelhum does in *Religion and Rationality*, that it "looks coherent enough" to say that "disembodied survivors might have mental lives. They might, that is, think, imagine, dream or have feelings."[19] And indeed, he claims, they might act as well. It is Penelhum's contention that there is nothing incoherent in such talk, if we can make sense of disembodied, non-physical entities persisting through time.[20]

What is being missed here by Penelhum is a point ably made by Robert Coburn about *pictorial* meaning.[21] There are

utterances which have familiar words in them and are in a standard grammatical form which we understand in the sense that (a) certain images are suggested when they are uttered, (b) we know how to make statements by using these words with *other* words or in *other* combinations in grammatically similar sentences and (c) we know how to employ these sentences in stories and yet, though (a), (b), (c) obtain, these utterances are incoherent and unintelligible. Coburn has in mind utterances such as 'Turner sleeps faster than Mulroney', 'Colours speak faster than the speed of light', 'There is a perpetual motion machine in Venice', or 'There is a time machine at the University of Salzburg'. Note that these plainly incoherent utterances meet conditions (a), (b), and (c) listed above. Moreover, they use familiar words and are in standard grammatical form.

That strange utterances have a certain familiar ring, that we find them 'saying' things that seem absurd and/or fantastic, that we think all the same we understand them, though we are puzzled about *what* they claim, is no assurance that they make sense—that they are not incoherent in just the sense specified by Daher.

Penelhum (and Swinburne and J. L. Mackie as well) is far too permissive here; he allows the fact that many strange utterances have such a pictorial meaning to 'solve' questions of intelligibility for him just at the point where he should be probing. Penelhum speaks as if it were only fantastic but not a puzzle about what, if anything, more than the pictorial, could be meant by speaking of 'spirits occupying physical objects' or 'spirits occupying the bodies of embodied persons for a short period.'[22] Yet what, if anything, could be meant by a reality which is *not* physical *occupying* anything is far from clear. How could something which is non-physical literally be in anything? And if this is a metaphor, how do we cash this metaphor in so that we can know what, if anything, is being said here?[23] We have a 'picture' and grammatical propriety, but little, if anything, more. However difficult it is to draw, in a non-question begging way, a distinction between grammatical intelligibility and factual intelligibility, between something's going together grammatically and its making sense, there is such a distinction there to be drawn.[24]

Daher argues that in order to speak, as we need to in speaking of God, of a being's being loving, that being must have a body, for 'loving' can only be intelligibly used where there are some behavioural checks. Penelhum thinks this is a far too stringent

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requirement for there is, as he sees the matter, no overriding difficulty in speaking coherently of disembodied agency or in speaking of a disembodied agent having feelings or perceiving things. Since Penelhum agrees that God is a disembodied being and that it makes sense to speak of God's acts and of God's love, he must agree that it makes sense to speak of a disembodied agent loving. In talking of disembodied agency or of disembodied beings having feelings, Penelhum does not talk of love but presumably his account of feelings and agency can be extended to cover that, if that account itself is a sound one. I shall argue that it is not.

I shall first turn to his discussion of disembodied agency and action. Penelhum makes a useful and plausible move in trying to attach sense to these notions when he contends that to give sense to the notion of a disembodied being doing something, we should try to give sense to his willing something, where 'Jones to will x' is roughly equivalent to 'Jones privately urging something to happen he wants to happen, even though it cannot pay heed to him.'[25] To give this concrete application, to bring out how we might come to speak of a 'disembodied doing', imagine psychokinetic experiments in which dice are shaken and thrown by machines, and the subjects are told to will a certain score, say double six. Suppose further (and this is surely an empirical possibility) that the results are statistically significant. "If they are," Penelhum remarks, "this suggests a mysterious power that some people have to affect the course of nature by willing . . ."[26] This sort of willing, he further remarks, is familiar. We understand such talk even though what is involved is very puzzling. Moreover, *such* a willing is itself an action.

> To discover that dice will fall double-six because we will for double-six is to discover that when I do this action, certain natural results will follow. It is like finding out that when the magician says 'Abracadabra, let x happen' x does happen.[27]

Perhaps, Penelhum speculates, this will give us the analogue we need with embodied agency to give sense to 'disembodied agency'. Moreover, it may well be the case, as Penelhum further claims (following Danto's well-known and important analysis), that there are *basic actions*: that is to say, actions which are such that there is no other action which a person has to do in

order to do that action, e.g. raising one's arm as distinct from picking up a hammer by raising one's arm. Furthermore, it *may* even be true for a basic action that we cannot cite a description of how to do it because there is nothing to do first. Since it is a basic action we can do it just by trying. For a disembodied being, Penelhum argues, a basic action would be just such a mental act of willing as that characterized above when we spoke of affecting the throw of the dice by willing. When we speak of a disembodied agent acting, it is this sort of thing that we have in mind. The act, that we can conceive of a disembodied agent doing, is not unlike, to put it at its most simple, my making the pencil on the desk move by my wanting it to move and willing it to move. I require (*if* we put questions about the micro-movements of brain-processes aside) no physical movements at all for that, so if I, an embodied agent, can be intelligibly said to do it, why cannot a disembodied agent be said to do it? In both instances we resist such talk because there is something occult or magical about what we claim could happen, but, for all of that, it appears to be intelligible enough.

I think that such talk of such powers is intelligible enough for embodied agents, but not for disembodied ones. I stand in a spatial relation to the pencil I will to move and I can see it move. But there is a considerable disanalogy here between an embodied agent and our putative disembodied agent. When we follow this out, Penelhum's case can be seen to be spoiled. But Penelhum thinks there is no such considerable disanalogy, for he believes he can discern a sense in which we could coherently, though perhaps falsely, claim that disembodied beings can see. I think that he is only caught up with certain pictures—certain 'pictorial meanings'—and that his claim cannot be sustained.

His claim is that 'see' can be intelligibly ascribed to a 'person without any body at all', if it makes sense to speak of such a person at all. Penelhum recognizes that the burden is on him "to give some account of what it is to see when one cannot look at what one sees, walk up to what one sees, or avoid colliding with it."[28] What we must do, Penelhum claims, to define or delineate what it is for a disembodied being to see, is to give an account "of his having certain visual experiences." This seems to me an unfortunate start for we are trying here to elucidate what in this context is already obscure with something still more obscure. 'See' is a plain English word with a reasonably determinate logic. 'Visual experience' is a

psychologist's and philosopher's term of art. If it is just a pretentious way of talking about 'seeing', then no advantage is gained at all by using it. If it is to include in addition such things as the images we have when we are going under ether, then that needs explaining and the limits of what we are talking about need delineating.

The need for characterization of 'visual field' or the wisdom of just dropping it and using 'see' instead, comes out in the following:

> A disembodied person might have a visual field in which the objects set before him were arranged in the pattern in which they would be arranged for a normal observer in optimum circumstances receiving those objects from a particular position in space.[29]

What are we to plug in for 'visual field' here? Does it mean that the disembodied person might see the objects set before him? Or does it mean he would have images of them or take note of them? But if the last, what is intended by 'take note of' in this context? We are left in a sea of obscurity without being helped to understand in what sense, if any, a disembodied person could be said to see.

Perhaps Penelhum is only talking about 'seeing' in some straightforward sense, for he takes the following as an alternative statement of the above remarks in which he used 'visual field'. For 'a disembodied person' it "might look to him as though there were objects before him which looked to him as they would look to a normal observer under optimum circumstances from a certain position."[30] Penelhum sees, as he remarks, "no difficulty" in saying this. But if there were no difficulty in saying this and things like this, then there would be no problem and no need for the kind of analysis which Penelhum gives. But, on the contrary, it is just about such talk that there are perplexities, precisely for the reasons of alteration of the sense of such predicates in such contexts. Indeed it was such perplexities that set Penelhum's problem initially. What is it for something to look a certain way to you when you have no eyes or other sensory apparatus, have no spatial-temporal location so you can move about in space, indeed occupy no space, so you can look at something from a certain position and the like? It is highly unclear if anything at all can be meant.

It looks as if we only have pictoral meaning here. At least we cannot start out under the assumptions Penelhum makes unless we want to beg the crucial issues at the outset. Penelhum remarks himself that he can "attach no sense to the notion of seeing from no point of view, or seeing non-perspectively."[31] It isn't a matter, as Penelhum thinks, of pedantically denying that disembodied people see objects, but of trying to understand what, if anything at all, it could *mean* to say that they saw them or failed to see them.

These difficulties are compounded when Penelhum tries to give sense to a disembodied person, having visual experiences, being in space, but not filling or occupying any part of it.[32] He must, that is, be *somewhere* in space, though he *fills no space*. But here again language is at best idling; indeed it is probably the case that the remark is incoherent in just the way Daher specifies. Note that we are trying to say that x is in space yet x does not fill any part of space, and this surely looks as if it were the contradiction, x is in space but x is not in space. What is it to be in space and not fill any part of space? If the pickle is in the bottle, it fills part of the space of the bottle. If there is music in the house the sound waves and the like fill part of the space of the house. With Penelhum's talk, language, as is so frequently the case with philosophers, has gone on a holiday.

It could be responded that the Wittgensteinian remark of mine is out of place here, for Penelhum must surely be using his terms metaphorically or analogically. Well, if he is, then the burden is on him to cash in his metaphors, to explain what it could *mean* for something to be in space and not fill any part of space, for an x to be at a place without being in that place, for an x to fill space in a 'non-normal way' such that x's filling space does not preclude anything else from filling just that space at the same time, and for a disembodied x—by definition not filling space—to occupy physical objects. Such talk has every appearance, to put it minimally, of plain incoherence. Until (if indeed that can be done) some elucidation can be given of it to 'save appearances', without becoming entrapped in still further incoherences, we have very strong reasons for believing that no intelligible content has been attached to a disembodied person seeing anything. Thus no intelligible content has been given to a disembodied being acting or being an agent even in the attenuated and occult way in which Penelhum believes sense can be given to that talk.

X

I do not for a moment think I have exhausted the lines of rebuttal that might be articulated to try to meet Daher's arguments about the incoherence of God-talk, but I have trotted out the most evident ones and have tried to show how they are wanting. If my arguments have been even near to their mark, Daher's arguments are very crucial arguments and, indeed, humanly important ones as well. There is a challenge there for theology, and indeed even for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which is yet unmet. Centrally, if God is conceived of as an infinite individual, immaterial, personal and yet transcendent to the world, then such a conception of God is incoherent, for at the very least there cannot possibly be an immaterial individual or an immaterial individual being. Daher's charge of incoherence can, of course, be avoided if God is not conceived as a personal, immaterial being or individual of any kind. Yet Daher's conception in some form at least seems to be a mainline Judaeo-Christian conception. Reductionist conceptions of God, such as—to take a very simple one—' To talk of God is to talk of love', surely escape Daher's criticisms, but, while these conceptions are intelligible enough, they are plainly inadequate on other accounts, not the least of which is that they make 'God' into a label for an utterly secular reality, and religion indeed becomes, if such a conception is accepted, morality touched with emotion.[33]

There are, as we have seen in discussing Durrant, non-reductionist accounts and non-anthropomorphic accounts which also, at least in part, escape Daher's strictures. If 'God' is *not* conceived of as a name or any kind of referring expression denoting an individual, infinite or otherwise, but as an abbreviated definite description, a distinctive sort of descriptive predicable term, or (in the sense Geach has articulated in his *Reference and Generality*) a substantial general term, then some of Daher's criticisms do not apply, though Daher's key point about God as an immaterial agent still applies in full force and it alone seems to be sufficient to establish incoherence. But, even without that criticism, as Michael Durrant's careful assessments of such alternative conceptions bring out, the coherence of these alternative formulations are also very much in question. On either alternative 'God' seems at least to be a term with an incoherent logic.

It is repeatedly said of accounts such as Daher's and the one I have given here, that they are too woodenly literal in the way they look at religious discourse. By blinkering ourselves in the way such analyses do, we miss what is significant in God-talk. There are, as a reading of Joyce, Yeats, Woolf or Thomas will make evident, many metaphorical utterances whose import strikes us but whose truth-conditions are elusive.

I would respond that, even here, when we carefully reflect on such discourse, we are usually not utterly at sea and, where we are, they are not utterances or sentences whose import strikes us—indeed they seem quite senseless to us—though we are often prepared, where this is only our own impression, to admit that we did not get the point and that others have or at least may have.[34] That is to say, we *assume*, often reasonably enough, that someone knows what she is talking about when such sentences are employed or utterances uttered. Surely it is insane *hubris* for a person to assume that what he does not or even cannot understand is therefore something which is not understandable. But if others do understand them then they understand them in the way we understand the utterances we understand. And where we or others have got the point or have some at least hazy grasp of the point of these metaphorical utterances, we are also not utterly at loss about *what* is said—about truth-conditions—either.

Unlike the remarks of poets and novelists, Christianity purports to provide us (as Alistair Kee not atypically put it) with "The definitive revelation of the way, the truth and the life for men."[35] And Judaism and Islam make similar claims. Surely—indeed truistically—we should not be woodenly literal and indeed we should be sensitive to the problems as to what a literal/non-literal distinction would come to with such an elusive discourse—discourse meant to give us some gleanings about what is said to be an Ultimate Mystery. But granting all this, it is still essential not to forget that our talk cannot be, as we say in Section 1 and as Murdith McLean has well argued, utterly incomprehensible. Literal or not, analogical or not, it cannot be so structured, if religion is to make sense, that we can have no idea at all, for central strands of doctrine, of what could possibly be a true religious claim.[36] But it appears at least, for non-anthropomorphic God-talk, that this is exactly the predicament in which we find ourselves.

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 7-17.

10 Richard Rorty, "Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments," *Nous*, Vol. V, No. 1 (February 1971), pp. 3-15. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1979), p. 384. See also my "On Refusing to Play the Sceptic's Game," *Dialogue* (September 1972).

[11] R. G. Swinburne, "The Argument From Design—A Defense," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 8 (1972), pp. 195-98. See also R. G. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1979), pp. 133-151.

[12] Adel Daher, *op. cit.*

[13] Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970), *Religion and Rationality* (New York: Random House 1971), and *Problems of Religious Knowledge* (London: Macmillan 1971). The books of my own, some of whose central arguments would be undermined if the main thrust of Penelhum's account is correct, are listed in footnote three. See, as well, my *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Promethus Books 1985).

[14] Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, Chapters 2 and 3.

[15] R. G. Swinburne, "The Argument From Design: A Defense," pp. 195-98.

[16] Terence Penelhum, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality*, p. 337.

[20] Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, p. 44.

[21] Robert Coburn, "A Budget of Theological Puzzles," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. XI (April 1963), pp. 89-90.

[22] Terence Penelhum, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

[23] Martin Hollis in his important "Reasons and Ritual," in *Rationality*, ed. by B. R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1970), pp. 222-224 and pp. 236-238, shows how essential it is that we can cash in such metaphors.

[24] Robert Hoffman, "On Being Mindful of 'God': Reply to Kai Nielsen," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1970), p. 290.

[25] Terence Penelhum, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] I have attempted to show this in my "Language and the Concept of God," *Question 2* (January 1969).

[34] There are matters of degree here. Martin Hollis is right in claiming that only a rash man would claim to know what Shelley's 'Life like a dome of many-coloured glass stains, the white radiance of eternity', means. Yet we are not *utterly* at a loss here. It is not like music, and where we are rather much at a loss to say what some such sentence means, we would also resist the claim that it said anything which could be true or false. See Martin Hollis, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

[35] Alistair Kee, *The Way of Transcendence* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Limited 1971), p. 28.

[36] Murdith McLean, *op. cit.*, pp. 213–25.