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## THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF GOD-TALK

### I

There are certain primary religious beliefs which are basic to a whole religious *Weltanschauung*, for they are the cornerstone of the whole edifice.<sup>1</sup> If these beliefs are unintelligible, incoherent, irrational or false the whole way-of-life, centering around them, is 'a house of cards'. Certain segments of it may still be seen to have a value when viewed from some other perspective, but if these primary religious beliefs are faulted, the religious *Weltanschauung* itself has been undermined. If it has been undermined and if people recognise that it has been undermined and still go around believing in it, accepting and acting in accordance with its tenets, they are then being very irrational. And while in humility we should recognise that we all suffer from propensities to irrationality and perhaps in some spheres of our life can't help being irrational, it is a propensity we should resist, for to be irrational is to do something we ought not to do.

I greatly admire Wittgenstein and Austin, but I remain unconvinced that we can have no theses in philosophy. I shall here introduce a whopping thesis of my own, namely that the Christian *Weltanschauung* is irrational because the primary religious beliefs it enshrines are, depending on how they are taken, either absurdly false or in an important sense unintelligible. Some primary beliefs of Christianity—at least until Tillich and his under-study Bishop Robinson hove into sight—have been that God exists, that there is for man the possibility of a blessed after-life, that God created and sustains the world, that God loves and protects his children and that in him can be found the ultimate ground of right and wrong. These are some of the primary beliefs or articles of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it seems to me that they are all either false or in an important sense unintelligible. But perhaps I am deluded, puffed up, as Bultmann would have it, by sin and pride.<sup>2</sup>

Let us look into the grounds for claiming that these primary Judeo-Christian beliefs are either false or in an important way unintelligible. Consider the cornerstone of them all 'God exists' or 'There is a God'.

<sup>1</sup> This has been powerfully argued by I. M. Crombie in his 'The Possibility of Theological Statements', *Faith and Logic*, Basil Mitchell (ed.) (London: 1957), pp. 31-48.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'What Sense Is There to Speak of God?', *The Christian Scholar*, vol. XLIII No. 3 (Fall, 1960), pp. 66-7.

Carnap long ago pointed out that on the one hand 'God' is sometimes used mythologically or anthropomorphically and on the other 'God' is sometimes used metaphysically or theologically.<sup>1</sup> Carnap is making an important point here, though I do not like the last two labels, for many modern sophisticated Christians, who reject an anthropomorphic God, also reject metaphysics and natural theology. But terminology apart, Carnap's basic point is sound enough. Within Christianity and Judaism there is an anthropomorphic and a non-anthropomorphic concept of God. 'God', on its anthropomorphic or mythological use, denotes some kind of incredibly powerful physical being. Such a use of 'God' is indeed meaningful. Taking an essentially Carnapian line here, Paul Edwards confidently asserts that when most people think of God in this anthropomorphic way they vaguely think of him 'as possessing some kind of rather large body'.<sup>2</sup> It is extremely doubtful whether many Christians or Jews—even the rustic materialists Flaubert describes—are quite that crude. But whether any or many people so conceive God is a sociological point; the important conceptual point is that anyone who did believe in such an anthropomorphic deity would be holding an intelligible belief which is manifestly absurd and false. Here Tillich and Robinson, with their strictures against such a supernaturalism, are in perfectly good order. But a non-anthropomorphic God—the God which seems to be the God of traditional Christianity—does not topple so easily. Yet when we reflect on this conception, we very soon begin to have philosophical cramps. When 'God' is construed non-anthropomorphically there *seems*, at least, to be no way of showing that 'There is a God' or that 'God exists' is either true or false. Because of this philosophical difficulties arise about the very intelligibility of such a concept of God or of the string of words 'There is a God'.

However, we should say straight off, that there are some senses of 'intelligible' according to which 'God' is perfectly intelligible even when used non-anthropomorphically. 'God exists' or 'There is a God', unlike 'Irglig exists' or 'There is a Trig', are perfectly familiar word-strings to native speakers of English, for they have been part of the corpus of English for a long time. Cognate expressions have been part of French, Swedish, German, Spanish, etc. Viewed both diachronically and synchronically they are, and have been, and no doubt will continue to be, a part of the language. In this way they are perfectly intelligible.

We should also note (and this is but a corollary of the above) that 'God' has a role in the language; 'God' has a fixed syntax. We have *some* understanding of 'God created the world' or 'A mighty fortress is my God' but none of 'A God fortress is my coat' or 'Created God world the'. 'God' is not used as a verb or as an adverb, conjunction or preposition. 'Jack God

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Carnap, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language', *Logical Positivism*, A. J. Ayer (ed.) (Glencoe, Illinois: 1959), pp. 60–81.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Edwards, 'Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York: 1961), p. 242.

Jill God down the hill to fetch a pail of Jesus' or 'The Yankees God the Tigers in ten innings' are so deviant as not to be intelligible. 'God' does not take just any word slot in the English language, thus it is evident that there is a sense of 'intelligible' in which plain God-talk is perfectly intelligible. We can make inferences from 'God created the world'. 'If God created the world', the world is not uncreated, the world just didn't happen to come into being, and the world did not exist before God. Moreover, if God created the world, God is not, as he would be in Spinoza's, Hegel's or Tillich's conceptual system, dependent on or identical with, the world or some part of the world. That these sentences and many more like them stand in such deductive relations shows quite unequivocally that we have *some understanding* of them.<sup>1</sup>

Yet to be intelligible in *this sense* is hardly enough to satisfy the philosopher who believes that the sentences expressing such primary religious beliefs are unintelligible. Still, the above remarks about linguistic regularities have the merit of bringing to the fore that the philosopher who finds such discourse unintelligible has a rather special sense of 'unintelligible' in mind. And it puts the onus on the philosopher to show in what relevant sense or senses such discourse is unintelligible.

By now I have stirred up enough difficulties to be in the midst of critical philosophical questions. First we should note that the facts of usage that we have just alluded to do not provide us with an adequate criterion of significance for such religious utterances, for the very same criterion would sanction the most obvious sorts of gibberish. Words like 'entelechy', 'Spiritual Cybernetics', 'infraconsciousness' and the like also would have to be said to be intelligible. 'The Absolute is in a dialectical process of transmutation', 'Consciousness is transcendently present in infraconsciousness', 'Nothing noughts itself' would all, on the same grounds, count as intelligible utterances. Inferences of the same sort can be drawn from them, so that their irregularity is not such as to establish their utter unintelligibility. (Ziff has shown in his *Semantical Analysis* that not all or even most deviant utterances are unintelligible. When some philosopher says of a strange utterance, e.g. 'He cultivates weeds': 'That's odd!' the proper reply should be 'So what?') Yet if we keep to such a grammarian's criterion of intelligibility, we will be committed to accepting as intelligible utterances which are plainly

<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that the making of such inferences from 'God created the world' establishes nothing about 'God', for we also can make inference from 'Irglig created the world' or 'A Trig created the world'. The deductive relationships are determined, not by 'God' or 'Irglig' or 'A Trig', but by the meanings of the rest of the words in the sentence. On the contrary, it shows something about 'God' and 'Irglig', namely that they are words that could properly take that place in such a sentence, for 'In created the world' or 'Yellow created the world' or 'Very created the world' are not intelligible. We understand that 'God' is a certain word which has a proper place in certain sentences. That 'X created the world', as far as usage goes, takes some values rather than others shows that 'created the world' is in some sense an intelligible expression and that 'God' is one of the admissible values for the variable 'X'.

recognisable intuitively to be unintelligible, e.g. 'Consciousness is in a dialectical process of transmutation'.

There is a point to this reply. Yet it will at best only dispose of the claim that an utterance is intelligible if inferences can be made from it. Against my argument in the previous paragraph one can counterargue that my examples of unintelligible utterances were not firmly a part of the corpus of English while 'God exists' or 'There is a God in heaven' plainly are. We have learned from Wittgenstein, it will be continued, that where there is an ongoing activity with its attendant linguistic forms, we can have no good grounds for claiming that utterances which are a standard part of these linguistic forms are unintelligible. But actual first-order religious discourse is such an attendant discourse while my other examples are not.

There is a further related point that needs to be frankly and carefully faced. If we depart from a grammarian's criterion of intelligibility/unintelligibility, we immediately run athwart the problems Passmore presses on Hume and the logical empiricists. Hume and the logical empiricists are in effect saying that some words have *no right* to be in the language. They indeed are an established part of the language, but they are unintelligible all the same; 'they take part in sentences and win a place in dictionaries, nevertheless they have not satisfied the minimal entrance requirement for being intelligible expressions.'<sup>1</sup> Passmore pertinently asks: what *right* has a philosopher, or for that matter anyone else, to set up an entrance examination for meaningful or intelligible expressions and demand certain minimal entrance requirements? Will it not always be the case, Passmore continues to query, that there the philosopher is simply laying it down quite arbitrarily that he will refuse the title 'intelligible' to any term that does not meet his stipulated requirements? But others can make their stipulations too. Such a positivistic approach is arbitrary.

A challenge like Passmore's is a formidable one, and, if my claims concerning religion are to be sustained, I must meet it. Such general attitudes as Passmore's concerning the intelligibility of God-talk have had in recent years some powerful statements. Before taking to my own keenly disputed ground, I should carefully examine whether it is really necessary for me to do so. Perhaps God-talk in all important senses is perfectly intelligible, and if we will but free ourselves from philosophical prejudices concerning it, this can be seen to be so. It behooves me to look into these claims.

## II

A very strong case is made for taking an attitude like Passmore's in Paul Ziff's essay 'About "God"'.<sup>2</sup> It has been subjected to very searching

<sup>1</sup> John Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning*, (London: 1961), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ziff, 'About "God"', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York: 1961), pp. 195-202.

criticisms particularly by Hick, Clarke, Hoffman, Schmidt and Edwards, and Ziff has been staunchly defended by Glickman.<sup>1</sup> By sifting out some of the issues here, we can get to the heart of the matter concerning the intelligibility of 'God exists' and sentences expressing the primary beliefs of Judaism and Christianity.

Ziff thinks 'God exists', as now conceived by the plain man, is perfectly intelligible but, he adds we now have very good grounds for asserting that such a God does not exist. That is to say, we have very strong grounds for asserting that there is no such being as Ziff describes in his essay and labels 'God'. But, he allows, there are now many different conceptions of God and there can be many new ones. That the old questions about God's existence should always have been answered negatively proves nothing about tomorrow. About tomorrow's questions one can only remain blank.

Like Edwards, Hoffman and others, I find much to take exception to in Ziff's last remarks. Given Ziff's conception of a plain man's concept of God, there are indeed good reasons for claiming that such a God does not exist. But Ziff's reason for such a claim, namely that a belief in God's omnipotence is not compatible with physics, is not a sufficiently adequate reason for asserting the non-existence of God. Believers could, and many would, reply that God, being God, could always perform a miracle. To make his case here convincing, Ziff, perhaps by using an argument like Hume's or Nowell-Smith's, would have to give good grounds for claiming that miracles are either in some way impossible or that they never have occurred or that they could ever occur is highly improbable.<sup>2</sup> That Ziff does not do. I think he could defend such a claim, but simply to make reference to physics in the way he does is superficial and unconvincing and rightly brings forth criticisms on this score by such different philosophers as Hoffman and Edwards, on the one hand, and Father Clarke on the other.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The articles by Hick, Clarke, Schmidt and Edwards all occur in *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York: 1961). The articles by Hoffman and Glickman appear in *Sophia*. Robert Hoffman, 'Professor Ziff's Resurrection of the Plain Man's Concept of God', *Sophia*, vol. II No. 2 (July, 1963) and Jack Glickman, 'Hoffman on Ziff "About 'God' "', *Sophia*, vol. IV No. 3 (October 1965).

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind Hume's argument in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X Pts. 1-11 and P. H. Nowell-Smith, 'Miracles', *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (ed.) (London: 1955), pp. 243-253. But to see that things are not all that obviously settled here, see C. D. Broad, 'Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles', in Alexander Sesonske and Noel Fleming, *Human Understanding: Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume*, (Belmont, California, 1965) and chapter two of Ninian Smart, *Philosophers and Religious Truth*, (London, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> It might be objected that the burden of proof should not be on Ziff to show that there are no miracles. The burden of proof is the other way. Among other things 'miracle' must be made understandable. What could it mean to say 'the laws of physics were suspended' or that 'something occurred which was contrary to natural regularities'? These are indeed obscure notions, but it isn't plainly evident that the concept of a miracle is unintelligible and simply to assume that there can be no miracles is to ignore the obvious theological counter move that it is natural for a theologian to make when Ziff makes such a claim. It is this that keeps his argument here from being air tight. See here the references in footnote 9 to Broad and Smart and perhaps most important of all R. F. Holland ('The Miraculous' in *Religion and Understanding*, D. Z. Phillips, ed. Oxford, 1967.)

I do not wish or need here to defend, or even to further consider, this side of Ziff's argument. What is relevant for my purposes are Ziff's arguments for the *intelligibility* of 'God exists'. But before stating Ziff's actual analysis, I would like to quote a warning he gives about analyses like mine. Its force, I should add, holds independently of the validity of Ziff's own attempt to show that 'God exists' is intelligible. It is a bold and rather arrogant utterance, but it needs to be pondered and I would suggest that as you follow my argument you keep it in mind and ask yourself if the shoe doesn't fit Nielsen's foot and maybe Flew's, Hoffman's and Edward's too? Ziff's remark is this:

'It is an extraordinary fact that in rightly opposing obscurantism contemporary philosophers have often become obscurantists: that it is in a good cause is hardly an excuse. To put the point bluntly, the utterances that contemporary philosophers, e.g. logical positivists, so-called "ordinary language philosophers", and others say are devoid of significance are not devoid of significance. The utterances they say are incomprehensible are not incomprehensible. It is too bad that they are not right for then there would be nothing to be alarmed about. But the danger of philosophical rubbish is that it is comprehensible and incomprehensibly contagious. Metaphysicians and theologians are generally no harder to understand than poets or novelists. There is as much philosophical rubbish in Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard as there is in Hegel and Heidegger. The difference between a work of metaphysics and *Finnegans Wake* is that what is said in the former is likely to be false when interesting and platitudinous when true, whereas such questions are not likely to arise in connection with the latter.'<sup>1</sup>

This warning firmly in mind, now let us consider Ziff's arguments concerning the intelligibility of 'God exists'. Ziff first argues that 'God', as it is used in sentences and utterances in religious discourse, is a noun of a distinctive sort; to be more specific still, it is a proper noun, i.e. a proper name. Yet it is not a name like yours and mine, but like 'Caesar' or 'Pegasus'. The reason that it is not a name like yours and mine is that 'God', according to Ziff, can only be introduced into a particular discourse by 'intralinguistic means'. There is no way of simply ostensively teaching what 'God' refers to. Thus there is no extralinguistic means of introducing 'God' into the discourse. One cannot point to God, but one can point to Hans or Hildegard and so introduce 'Hans' or 'Hildegard' into the discourse. 'God', however, must be introduced into the discourse by intralinguistic means. This is done by associating the name with certain expressions in the language. Since these expressions will have certain conditions associated with them, derivatively the name also will have certain conditions associated with it.

One might already challenge Ziff on two counts. First, many plain people and some theologians speak of an apprehension of God, of a direct awareness of God, of a beatific vision and the like. They might even argue that in the

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ziff, *Semantical Analysis*, (Ithaca, New York, 1960), p. 197.

last analysis this would be the only way we could understand what the word 'God' really means. I think there are plenty of counters to this claim, counters of the sort C. B. Martin has gone over so carefully. Still it is not self-evidently clear that we cannot introduce the term 'God' extra-linguistically.

On Ziff's behalf it should be replied that there is no reason to think that Ziff thought it was. It is reasonable to conclude that he recognised that one cannot argue on all fronts at once and that Ziff chose not to do battle on this one. Moreover, what it would be like to teach the term 'God' ostensibly, where 'God' is used non-anthropomorphically, in the way one would teach someone the referent of a proper name, is, to put it conservatively, not at all clear. More generally, what it would be like in any way to ostensibly define or to teach 'God' is thoroughly mystifying.

The second way one could challenge Ziff here is to take the line that someone like Geach or Kenney would surely take and challenge Ziff's claim that 'God' is a name. 'God', Geach would argue, is not a name but is really a definite description. God is 'the maker of the world', 'the ruler of the Universe'. Yet this seems to me to be neither decisive nor, for that matter, very important, for after all Ziff does argue that 'God', unlike 'Hans', can only be introduced into the language 'by means of descriptions'. To understand 'God' is to understand these descriptions, to fail to understand the relevant descriptions is to fail to understand 'God'. Perhaps it is best to say, as Father Clarke does, that in the case of the very unique word 'God', the two functions are indissolubly combined. It functions primarily as a description, 'but since one of the notes of the description is that it can be verified by only one referent ("God" means "the one infinite Creator of all things")', this particular descriptive term can also be, and traditionally has been, used as a direct form of address or as a proper name'.<sup>1</sup> Clarke's claim here seems reasonable to me, but perhaps it is too quick and too superficial. But I mention these issues, only to put them aside, for whether 'God' is a proper name or a definite description, it remains the case, on Ziff's analysis, that 'God' can only be understood if certain descriptions can be understood, i.e. are genuine descriptions.

I shall henceforth, for convenience only, talk about 'God' as if 'God' were a name. The set of conditions we associate with the name determines our conception of the referent of the name. We can introduce 'Wittgenstein' intralinguistically by specifying certain conditions, 'The author of *The Blue and Brown Books*', 'the unwitting founder of the two most influential types of analytic philosophy', 'the philosopher most adored by Norman Malcolm' and so on. To understand what one is talking about when one uses a name, one must be able at least in principle to specify the relevant set of conditions

<sup>1</sup> W. Norris Clarke, 'On Professors Ziff, Niebuhr and Tillich', *Religious Experience and Truth*, (Sidney Hook, ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 224.

associated with the name; if the alleged word is a genuine name, actually has such a role in the language, it must be possible to specify such a relevant set of conditions associated with the name.<sup>1</sup>

To find out if anything is actually named by the name—whether the name actually has a referent—we must determine whether anything or anyone satisfies the conditions of the set. Ziff argues that to establish that ‘God exists’ is intelligible, we must show that the conditions associated with the name are intelligible and that the set of conditions is consistent. This, for Ziff, is necessary and sufficient to establish the intelligibility of ‘God exists’. Unlike a large and influential group of philosophers, he does not think the question whether anything or anyone could satisfy the set of conditions has anything to do with whether either ‘God exists’ or ‘God’ is intelligible.

However, we cannot let this pass so easily, for Hoffman’s criticisms of Ziff on this point forcefully bring out very clearly the controversial status of Ziff’s claim. (What is involved will be brought to the fore in a few paragraphs.)

To answer our question concerning the intelligibility of ‘God’, we must first determine what the conditions associated with ‘God’ are. Here Ziff tells us we must consider the plain man’s concept of God and not confuse it with ‘the excubant theologian’s febrile concept’. (Given the obscurities of Tillich and Robinson one can well understand why Ziff approaches his subject matter in this way.) But at different times and different places there are different plain men with different conceptions of God, and different men, even when members of particular denominations, may have different conceptions of God at different periods in their lives. To make his subject matter manageable, Ziff settles on a particular conception of God, though, if his analysis is to have a tolerable degree of relevance, it will have to be a conception that is held by a considerable number of plain Jews and plain Christians.

As we follow through Ziff’s analysis, it is fairly evident that this is, in the main at least, true of his conception of God.

Ziff points out that ‘God’ has associated with it both problematic and unproblematic conditions. That the unproblematic conditions are satisfied or satisfiable, is, according to Ziff, fairly obvious. The unproblematic ones are ‘being a being, a force, a person, a father, a son, a creator, spatio-temporal, crucified, just, good, merciful, powerful, wise, and so forth’.<sup>2</sup> The problematic conditions are ‘being omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, creator of the world, a non-spatiotemporal being, a spirit, the cause of itself, and so forth’. Ziff thinks that if anyone were to maintain that such a traditional

<sup>1</sup> Note that while the jargon is different we seem not to be so very far from Russell’s theory of descriptions here.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ziff, ‘About “God”’, *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 198.



conception of God is unintelligible, he would argue that these problematic conditions are unintelligible.

To say that these conditions are unintelligible, is to say we cannot understand them. But in reflecting on this, we must not forget that understanding and hence intelligibility *admits of degrees*. We have, Ziff argued, some understanding of these conditions, and hence, though 'God exists' may be mysterious, as it most certainly should be, it still need not be completely unintelligible.

Ziff argues for this point in a way similar to the way in which I have already shown that 'God' has a fixed syntax. We understand all of the following:

- (1) If God is omnipotent there is nothing he cannot do owing to lack of power.
- (2) If something is the cause of itself then we cannot succeed in finding another cause for it.
- (3) If something is the Creator of the world then prior to its act of creation the world did not exist.

Ziff argues that the fact that we can make such inferences indicates that we have some understanding of the conditions involved.<sup>1</sup>

Ziff realises that many philosophers, particularly those who take some form of the verifiability principle seriously, might still not be satisfied. They would argue that these conditions are, in spite of such inference patterns, unintelligible, because 'it is evidently difficult to establish whether or not any of them are, in fact, satisfied'.<sup>2</sup> But Ziff does not think this is a good reason for saying the conditions are unintelligible, for 'understanding a condition is one thing; knowing how to establish that it is satisfied is another'.<sup>3</sup> I say to my wife, 'I'll stick my tongue out at Rusk on condition that you will do it'. I can understand the condition and what will satisfy it. But consider 'I agree to take a swim in the East River on the condition that the last man ever to live, were he alive now, would approve of it'. Ziff remarks of such a sentence 'There is still no difficulty in understanding the condition and yet I have no idea how actually to establish that such a condition is satisfied'.<sup>4</sup> What this should teach us, Ziff argues, is that we should not, in talking about what makes a sentence intelligible, stress verification. Positivists, Ziff believes, have lead us down the garden path here.

To accept Ziff's point here and to reject what is more or less a verificationist approach, affects in a radical way our conception of what it is proper to say about large issues. While, for example, Ziff admits that to speak of 'a spirit' or of '*creation ex nihilo*' is indeed difficult, he does not think it is impossible. In fact he thinks these old conundrums can be solved. They do not exhibit the unintelligibility or incoherence of God-talk.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ziff, 'About "God"', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

At this point in his argument Ziff is certainly, to put it conservatively, making it very easy for himself, while evading, by the simple expedient of dogmatic declamation, what many would take to be crucial problems about God-talk. How are these old problems to be solved? Are they genuine problems at all? Or are they muddles felt as problems? Why is it that there is no serious question concerning the intelligibility of these conceptions? We need here something more than oracular *ex cathedra* remarks from Ziff. We need something more than the striking of a posture. Ziff simply declaims, for our trusting acceptance, that difficulties concerning Spirit and creation *ex nihilo* only show that the concept of God is a difficult one. They do not point toward its *unintelligibility*. Well, *perhaps* Ziff is right here, but since he offers no argument for his rather extraordinary claim, he gives us no reason for thinking he is right. What conditions are we to associate with being a spirit, a non-spatiotemporal entity, a creator *ex nihilo*? What principles of individuation can we utilise here? How do we identify such beings? Perhaps such 'questions' have answers, that is, perhaps they are genuine questions, but we very much need to be shown how and not be put off with the remark that these are old questions.

Similarly there is the problem of the consistency or compatibility of the conditions associated with 'God'. How can something be a being and at the same time be non-spatiotemporal? Worse still, how can something be a spatiotemporal being and a non-spatiotemporal being, a son and the cause of itself, a person and an unlimited being? These surely look not merely like paradoxes, but like flat contradictions. One cannot say without being thoroughly evasive (as Ziff is on this issue) that 'Such problems . . . are readily dealt with in obvious ways: contradiction can always be avoided by an appropriate and judicious feat of logistic legerdemain; conditions can always be weakened, modified, and so made compatible. This game has been played for over a thousand years.'<sup>1</sup>

Against such a boast, it needs to be pointed out that many theologians have come to feel that the conflicts here are such that all the predications involved in the statement of such conditions should be understood in some non-literal way. Taken as they ordinarily would be taken, we have a tissue of contradictions and absurdities. Of course we can always modify or weaken our conditions, we can always stretch our terms, but then we are no longer talking about the same God or using the terms with the same meaning. (Recall here that if Ziff is right, we have and can have no extralinguistic understanding of 'God' and thus we cannot use that as a check on whether we are still talking about the same God or the same reality.) To alter the meaning of these terms does not help at all to make intelligible the plain man's concept of God that Ziff was supposed to be talking about. Ziff's

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ziff, 'About "God"', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 200.

talk of 'logistic legerdemain' is but a fancy name for changing the subject. To reason in the way Ziff does is not to show that the set of conditions are mutually consistent; it is simply to rationalise and be evasive. Perhaps these conditions can be shown to be mutually consistent, but on face value they appear to be inconsistent and Ziff has not begun to show that they are consistent. Since they most certainly appear to be mutually inconsistent, we have a very good reason, quite apart from any commitment to verificationism, for believing that such a plain man's concept of God is unintelligible. (Of course to be unintelligible in this way, it must be intelligible in the trivial way that any self-contradictory expression or statement is intelligible.)

So far Ziff's case for the intelligibility of 'God exists' does not look very good. Yet I think the impression I have given may be misleading. Certainly Ziff needs, if his argument is to be philosophically air tight, to make out a case for the exceptional claims he makes and not just to bluster his way past difficulties. But it needs to be remembered that his short essay is a very methodological one. He is, I believe, in effect trying to suggest that most analytic philosophers have gone at the analysis of God-talk in the wrong way. He is trying to suggest a new approach to the subject and in such a programmatic essay he could hardly be expected to consider all the problems. It should be further noted in this vein that Ziff's sins are sins of omission. They weaken but do not constitute a death blow to his defence of the intelligibility of a plain man's account of 'God exists'. But Ziff's own argued claims have been subjected to trenchant criticisms which, if correct, would utterly invalidate his argument. I shall now turn to them.

### III

For anyone deeply influenced by empiricism there is a very natural counter to make against Ziff. This is exemplified in some of Robert Hoffman's arguments against Ziff's account.<sup>1</sup> Hoffman makes what in effect is a verificationist argument against Ziff and I too would like to press some form of this argument. But it seems to me that Glickman is perfectly correct in contending that Hoffman simply assumes this criterion of meaningfulness or intelligibility and thus does not meet Ziff's challenge, for Ziff does not assume such a criterion and, as we have seen, he gives us some reason to be wary of it. That is, Hoffman begs the central question with Ziff.

However, in reading this exchange it becomes apparent that the central issue is the matter of accepting one rather than another of two very fundamental criteria of intelligibility. (I do not deny there could be other alternatives.) It is also true that Hoffman's account clearly falls foul of Passmore's

<sup>1</sup> Here I shall not consider all of Hoffman's arguments for it seems to me that they have been clearly refuted by Glickman. See Robert Hoffman, 'Professor Ziff's Resurrection of the Plain Man's Conception of God', *Sophia*, Vol. II No. 2 (July 1963), pp. 1-4 and Jack Glickman, 'Hoffman on Ziff's "About God"', *Sophia*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (October, 1965), pp. 33-39.

strictures about a philosopher setting up special entrance requirements for what counts as a meaningful or intelligible expression. Yet there is merit in having these conflicting underlying assumptions clearly brought to the fore.

Hoffman argues that Ziff has not shown that it is mistaken to believe that questions concerning the intelligibility of 'God' are logically tied to questions concerning what would *in principle* satisfy the conditions for the use of 'God'. One of Ziff's problematic conditions is that of being omnipotent. But some would argue, as Ziff is perfectly aware, that 'being omnipotent' is not itself an intelligible expression. In this, Ziff believes, they are deluded, for even if we do not know what would establish the truth or falsity of 'being omnipotent', still we understand that condition. Ziff writes 'that a certain being did not perform a certain task could not in itself establish that the being was not omnipotent, no matter what the task was. Again, that the being performed the task would not establish its omnipotence, and again that no matter what the task was'.<sup>1</sup> To this Hoffman quite understandably responds:

But surely unless we can establish, though not necessarily conclusively, whether or not the being is omnipotent by ascertaining whether or not it performs or fails to perform certain acts, considered severally or jointly, we cannot establish it at all. For if the allegedly non-analytic assertions (A) that a certain being is omnipotent and (B) that the being is not omnipotent, are equally compatible with the performance or non-performance of any act(s) by that being, then the assertions are *meaningless*, for they are *compatible with any state of affairs whatever*.<sup>2</sup>

Such an assertion clearly commits Hoffman to some version of empiricism or the verifiability theory of meaning. If we give a charitable interpretation to his remarks, we should take him as giving us to understand that if a putative factual assertion and its denial are equally compatible with all logically conceivable states of affairs, then they are both without factual content. That is to say, if it is logically impossible to confirm or disconfirm them to the slightest degree then they are devoid of factual intelligibility. Yet since they allegedly are factual statements they must then in this crucial way be meaningless, i.e. devoid of factual content.

But, as Glickman points out, Hoffman gives us no reason at all to accept this very philosophical and controversial litmus paper test (criterion) for a meaningful assertion or a meaningful factual statement. Ziff would not accept it, so Hoffman has not refuted Ziff but merely begged the issue with Ziff. To complete his argument against Ziff here Hoffman would have to

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ziff, 'About "God"', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> This, of course, does not mean that Hoffman is not making a correct claim about meaning. Later I shall argue that with suitable qualifications such a claim ought to be made. But without such an argument he has not refuted Ziff.

give adequate grounds for his claim that Ziff *should* accept such a controversial criterion of meaning or criterion of factual intelligibility.

Hoffman also argues that Ziff in effect confuses verifiability (confirmability/disconfirmability) in principle with verifiability (confirmability/disconfirmability) in practice or in fact. Ziff rightly argues that he can understand certain conditions, e.g. 'what the last man ever to live, were he alive now, would approve' without having any idea of how to actually establish that such a condition is satisfied. But, Hoffman argues, it is not whether we actually know how to satisfy a given condition that is crucial to the question of intelligibility, but whether it is in principle empirically satisfiable, i.e. whether it is *logically possible* to state (to describe) what one would have to observe or fail to observe for the conditions to be satisfied. If a condition is unsatisfiable in *this sense*, then Hoffman claims it is unintelligible.

Glickman in turn points out that Hoffman (1) does not explain what he means by 'satisfiable in principle' and (2) 'he leaves us to guess . . . why he believes satisfiability in principle is a necessary condition of intelligibility'.<sup>1</sup> It does not seem to me, given the context of the dispute, that what is intended by 'satisfiable in principle' should be such a mystery. Presumably condition *x* is satisfiable in principle if it is logically possible to state what would, to any degree at all, count as evidence for or against *x*.<sup>2</sup> But this brings us back to some empiricist condition for meaningfulness (or for factual intelligibility or cognitive intelligibility). Since this is so, Glickman's second point mentioned above effectively reduces to that consideration. Glickman

<sup>1</sup> Jack Glickman, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Someone might object that unless what is meant by 'logically possible' here can be specified independently of the notion of 'in principle', we do not have an adequate understanding of that claim. An analysis of 'logically possible' would indeed be very difficult but that is true for many other working terms, including 'true'. But this, as we have learned from Moore, does not mean that we do not know the meaning of the term in question or that we cannot satisfactorily operate with it. We can translate into the concrete and in that way specify what we mean here. Consider the following sentences: (1) 'A married man is a husband.' (2) 'Johnson eats faster than Fullbright.' (3) 'Johnson sleeps faster than Fullbright.' and (4) 'Johnson carried the statue of Liberty to Vietnam in the palm of his hand.' Anyone who understands English knows no question of (1)'s confirmability or disconfirmability can arise. There is a *conceptual ban* on verifying (1). Thus it plainly is not even verifiable in principle. (2), by contrast plainly is, for we can describe its truth conditions; the same holds for such an absurdity as (4). Moreover (2) and (4) are such that there is plainly no conceptual ban on looking for evidence for their truth or falsity as there is in looking for evidence for the truth or falsity of (1). (3), by contrast, is *not* such that one plainly exhibits one's failure to understand English if one looks for evidence for its truth or falsity. It is correct to say we do not know what (if anything) would count for its truth or falsity and thus we do not know or have grounds for believing it is verifiable (testable). It is not even clear whether it has a use (except as a philosophical example) in the language and if it has no use, no intelligible question can possibly arise about verifying it, and thus it is not verifiable in principle for it makes no sense to try to verify it. But since it is not *crystal clear* that (3) has no use, we cannot be confident that there is a conceptual ban on looking for evidence for its truth or falsity. But such indeterminate cases, including more obvious ones like 'He sees with his eyes', do not mean that the distinction is unworkable or inadequate. It only means that sometimes we do not know how to apply it or even whether to apply it. For further argument in that area see my 'God and Verification Again', *Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. XI, No. 2(1965).

indeed exaggerates his point when he says Hoffman's 'whole argument rests on this assumption', but certainly the central segments of it do. And Glickman is perfectly justified in saying that Hoffman does nothing at all to justify that assumption. Though to say this is, of course, not to say that some such an assumption is not *justifiable*. But certainly in view of the chequered history of the verifiability criterion of meaning, it needs a very considerable and careful justification.

I shall not try here to give a full scale justification for making this assumption, though I shall show (1) how considerations involving it can hardly be avoided in carefully reflecting on God-talk, and (2) I shall give some considerations which should make it evident that its employment in such contexts need not be the imposition of an empiricist dogma. I am going to do this in an indirect manner. I shall first consider some other arguments against Ziff—arguments which in my opinion do draw blood. I shall then proceed to show how some of them can at least be partly countered. The unfolding of the argument here will lead us to see both how an argument of Ziff's type cannot be decisive for questions about whether God-talk is coherent, and how considerations arising from this discussion naturally push us back to a reconsideration of the plausibility of using the verifiability principle in such contexts.

#### IV

Such very different philosophers as John Hick and Paul Edwards deploy some arguments against Ziff that, at the very least, raise serious questions concerning the viability of his analysis.

Let us consider one of Hick's arguments. Ziff distinguishes between problematic conditions and unproblematic conditions. Hick argues that Ziff's unproblematic conditions, *when associated with the word 'God'*, are just as problematic as his problematic conditions.<sup>1</sup> What Ziff's argument actually shows is that 'Father', 'person', 'force', 'good', 'loving', 'just' are in certain contexts expressive of unproblematic conditions because these terms have an established or primary use in secular contexts. Hick argues that it is critical to stress 'secular contexts', for it is here that they have their ordinary use. But 'they have been adopted by religion and given a secondary use'. However, with the terms expressive of Ziff's problematic conditions, Hick continues, the situation is quite different since '. . . "Spirit", "omnipotent", "omniscient" have no familiar established use in the language of everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> While they indeed occasionally occur in secular discourse, they do not have an established use there; rather they were 'originally

<sup>1</sup> John Hick, 'Meaning and Truth in Theology', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

formed for theological purposes'. It is there that they are at home; it is there that they have their primary use. Hick stresses that the really crucial thing to see is that both what Ziff calls the 'unproblematic conditions' as well as the admittedly problematic ones, become problematic when applied to God.

'Certainly we know what we mean when we say of a fellow human being that he has a loving disposition. But what does "loving" mean when it is transferred to a Being who is defined, *inter alia*, as having no body, so that he cannot be thought of as performing any actions? What is disembodied love, and how can we ever ascertain that it exists?'<sup>1</sup>

When used in secular discourses, 'loving' has a firm foundation but when used in certain key religious discourses, it is quite unclear what, if anything, is meant. Some native speakers do not understand, or at least *feel* they do not understand, its use in a religious context and many religious believers think that its use is somehow stretched or analogical or symbolic or linked with experiences that can be interpreted in conflicting ways. We cannot, Hick argues, take the term, in such contexts, as expressive of unproblematic conditions.

Ziff might reply that he only intended by his unexplicated term of art 'unproblematic conditions' to signify that 'loving' and terms like it, by contrast with 'omnipotent' and terms like it, are terms that sometimes have a settled application and in such contexts typically give rise to no conceptual confusion. But Hick is surely right in pointing out that in the linguistic environment of first-order God-talk all of these terms have a usage which does provoke dispute and conceptual confusion. Whether it is correct to say, as Hick does, that their 'original use' was secular is much more disputable, for after all, who knows and how could we even tell, what was their original use? It is not even evident that their use in religious contexts is secondary. 'Triangle' in 'marriage triangle' is secondary to the primary use of 'triangle' in geometry. We readily grasp the meaning of the former by making an immediate connection with our understanding of the latter. In that way the former is parasitical on the latter. This *may* be true of 'loving' in secular contexts and religious contexts; but we should not simply assume that this is so; we need an argument to establish that it is. It is also disputable, though some philosophers blithely assume this, that ordinary use is only secular use. Whether this is so or not certainly seems to depend on *whose* ordinary language it is and when and where the sentences are (were) uttered. In certain environments the religious use might occur just as frequently and seem just as natural.

Yet these criticisms of Hick's critique of Ziff, even if perfectly correct, are trifling criticisms, dialectical diversions, that do not touch the nerve

<sup>1</sup> John Hick, 'Meaning and Truth in Theology', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 205.

of Hick's argument, which is (to put it in my own way) that for native and/or fluent speakers of all ideological convictions there is a massive agreement about how to correctly apply 'loving' in secular contexts but that in a Christian or Jewish religious context 'loving' is a dispute engendering term. Some feel they can make nothing of its religious use at all. Thus in such contexts it is a problematic condition in the sense that people do not agree that they understand its employment there.

Paul Edwards, in effect, develops and qualifies Hick's argument by pointing out that if 'God' is construed anthropomorphically, indeed 'loving' is used with some intelligibility, for given such an anthropomorphic employment of 'God', we have somewhere in the background a picture of God as in some mysterious way having a body. This makes it possible to conceptualise him as acting in the world and to think of him as loving. But, I should add, religious reflection cannot tolerate such a picture. For a long time Jews and Christians have regarded it as gross blasphemy to think of God 'as possessing some kind of rather large body'.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in the very first order God-talk itself. It could only be a joke to ask how tall God is, how much he weighs or where he comes to an end. A whole range of conditions associated with something said to possess some kind of gigantic body are not associated with 'God' as the plain man uses that term. God, and this is what Wittgenstein would call 'a grammatical remark', could not be any kind of material object, no matter how huge, for this would limit him and subject him to the conditions of change and corruption; only a completely disembodied Creator could be an object *worthy* of worship.<sup>2</sup>

It may well be that when the engine isn't idling, when people are praying or worshipping, their childhood pictorial images of God as a material being unwittingly reassert themselves and in that way 'loving' comes to have an application when applied to God. But to reflective religious consciousness, he is 'Pure Spirit' and 'disembodied mind'; but then, given their use of 'God' as a 'Pure Spirit', we cannot understand what it would be for such a being to act and thus to be living, merciful or just, for these predicates apply to things that *a person does*. But we have no understanding of 'a person' without 'a body' and it is only persons that in the last analysis can act or do things. We have no understanding of 'disembodied action' or 'bodiless doing' and thus no understanding of 'a loving but bodiless being'.

Moreover, we must ask, as Edwards does, 'What would it be like to be, say, just, without a body? To be just, a person has to *act* justly—he has to behave in certain ways . . . [this] is a simple empirical truth about what we mean by "just"'.<sup>3</sup> No sense has been given to what it would be like to act

<sup>1</sup> Paul Edwards, 'Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.), p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> For a justification of that claim see J. N. Findlay, 'Can God's Existence Be Disproved?', *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (ed.) (New York, 1955), pp. 47–56.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 243.



or behave in the required way without a body. Being good and being loving are on Ziff's account supposedly unproblematic conditions, but, it is evident from the above, that they are problematic when applied to a 'disembodied being' or 'Pure Spirit'. In fact 'problematic' seems too weak a word, for we have no more understanding of what is meant here than we have when we say 'a Plymouth talks faster than a Ford'; 'Plymouth talks' has no use in the language.<sup>1</sup>

To Edward's point it might be countered that he, like Hoffman, is implicitly relying on the verifiability principle. 'God's actions', 'God's love', are not like 'Plymouth talks' or 'Johnson sleeps faster than Pearson'. They are established bits of ordinary usage; they have a use in the language. When Edwards asks us, so the objection would run, what it would be like to be just or loving without a body, he is *not* pointing to a misuse of terms as in 'sleeps faster' but he is in effect calling to our attention that we do not know what we would have to observe or fail to observe for it to be true or false, or even probable true or false that *x* was disembodied and *x* acted lovingly or justly. But Ziff would not accept the verifiability criterion as a test for intelligibility. Again the crucial question has been begged.

It is certainly natural to ask at this point: when, with a concrete issue like this, one reflects on what nonsense one talks without assuming this principle, doesn't it become evident that one, with suitable restrictions, ought to accept it? As an argument, this of course is question-begging and thus no decent argument at all, for to establish that this is 'nonsense' is just what is at issue. But surely many people—and I am among them—can make nothing of 'disembodied action'. Religious people, or at least those who reflect, are themselves perplexed about it. To those who think they can understand it, it is well to ask them, in a concrete way, for the truth conditions of their claims. If they can give none, we have good grounds for being sceptical that they, their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, understand what they are saying.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The contention here is *not* that we typically apply 'loving' or 'just' only to embodied agents (assuming that is not a pleonasm). Rather the claim is that 'being just' or 'being loving' is something that someone does. It is applied to actions. The claim I am making is that 'bodiless action' is without factual intelligibility. There is nothing that counts for or against the truth of 'There was bodiless action in Haiti'. It might be argued that God can act justly or lovingly without a body because he can act through (by means of) other persons with bodies, e.g. 'Gustavus Adolphus' justice shows God's handwork'. But this won't help for we still do not understand 'he can act', i.e. 'God acts though bodiless' in the above sentence.

<sup>2</sup> On reading this in an earlier draft, Hoffman wrote to me: 'So the verifiability criterion of meaningfulness returns in formal dress. It couldn't get itself accepted to the philosophical banquet table when dressed as "confirmation or disconfirmation", but in the more formal attire of "truth conditions" it's legitimate enough to get in the back way.' But, in arguing, as I did and as Edwards did, from cases where it is plain—even without invoking the verifiability criterion—that the word strings in question (e.g. 'bodiless action') are meaningless, and then in showing that statements involving, directly or indirectly, a notion of bodiless action are meaningless *because* unverifiable, I provided indirect support (vindication) for such a criterion. I didn't simply assume it. Moreover, I asserted in the very next paragraph that what I said at that point was still 'fundamentally question-begging'.

This consideration, which I admit is still ultimately fundamentally question-begging, gains in an indirect way added force when we recall that 'God's acts' and 'God's love' could have a use through an ancient concept of God in which God is thought to have a body. (Recall Moses' encounters with God on Mount Sinai.) This use is still lurking, though officially rejected, in the background of our present use (a kind of cultural lag in language). When religious believers are not reflecting but simply using God-talk, it comes to be their active use. 'God', as a name, as Ziff himself nicely puts it, 'is a fixed point in a turning world. But as the world turns, our conception of that which is named by a name may change'.<sup>1</sup> Yet the associations, the usages that developed around the earlier conceptions may linger on when they have long since ceased to be apposite and thus we can come to have the illusion of understanding when in reality we have no understanding. This, if correct, does not show that 'God's acts', 'God's love' are unintelligible: it only explains how, if we have good grounds for thinking that they are unintelligible, it could remain true that so many, in spite of their perplexities concerning them, continue to believe they are intelligible. But this account surely shows that being just or being loving are, in such linguistic environments, problematic conditions whose very intelligibility is in serious doubt.

Ziff anticipates these difficulties, but what he says about the above problem is inadequate. Edwards is quite justified in remarking:

'Ziff does not show himself the least bit aware of the seriousness of this problem. He merely assures us that "the condition of being a non-spatiotemporal being can be viewed as a result of an abstraction from the condition of being a spatiotemporal being"'. This dark saying he elaborates by pointing to the "ease of such abstraction" which is "testified to by the fact that plain people sometimes say they find it difficult to keep body and soul together"'. This is merely an irresponsible play on words, since there is not the least reason to suppose that anybody who has the occasion to complain that "he cannot keep his body and soul together" is in any way trying to assert the existence of an entity that does not occupy space or is in any sense nontemporal.'<sup>2</sup>

Edwards also raises pertinent points about Ziff's problematic conditions. Ziff argues, as we have seen, that we have some understanding of them, e.g. 'I know that if something is the creator of the world, then prior to its act of creation the world did not exist'. We could not make such inferences without some understanding of the conditions involved. To this Edwards replies:

'Surely this argument is fallacious. There are any number of sentences which in the opinion of practically everybody, atheist or believer, positivist or metaphysician, are meaningless, but which can at the same time be used as premises of valid deductions. From "the Absolute is lazy" it follows that the Absolute is not

<sup>1</sup> Paul Ziff, 'About "God"', *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sidney Hook (ed.) (New York, 1961), p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Edwards, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

industrious; from "Box sleeps more rapidly than Cox" it follows that Cox sleeps more slowly than Box; from "everything has increased tenfold in size since yesterday", it follows that my right hand is ten times as large as it was yesterday (which in this context is also meaningless); etc., etc. From "there is a being that created the universe out of nothing", it certainly follows that "there was a time when the universe did not exist". But this would have any tendency to show that the former sentence is intelligible only if it is granted that its consequence is intelligible, which is one of the main points of issue.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty, Edwards argues, lies in Ziff's slippery phrase 'some understanding'. We, unlike a person who has no knowledge of English, have some understanding of 'The Absolute is lazy', but, Edwards adds, 'this means no more than that I am familiar with certain rules of substitution governing the relative employment of the words "lazy" and "industrious"'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense I understand 'The universe has a Creator', but, Edwards rightly replies, to point to such an understanding is to point to something that 'is trivial and irrelevant. Nobody who has seriously discussed the question as to whether we understand "problematic" theological sentences has used "understand" and related terms like "intelligible" or "meaningful" in this sense.'<sup>3</sup>

We have now come around full circle. Edwards surely is making an important point here, but Ziff has an important Moorean counter, viz. he admitted and stressed that the concept of God, even his plain man's concept of God, was a difficult one; and he also stressed that 'understanding admits of degrees'.<sup>1</sup> He was only concerned to show that we have *some* understanding of 'God' and 'God exists' and Edwards concedes he has done that. Thus Ziff surely has shown that it is not correct to assert that 'God exists' is utterly unintelligible. Ziff could further claim that he has in effect brought to the surface the fact that when philosophers claim that 'God' and 'God exists' or 'There is a God' are unintelligible or meaningless they have something very special in mind; they have a special and idiosyncratic criterion of intelligibility or meaning in mind; and here Passmore's nagging question again becomes pertinent: why accept this philosophical entrance requirement?

I think, however, that reflection on Edward's arguments against Ziff will give us part of the reason why it is at least tempting to set up and accept such philosophical entrance requirements. 'God is our loving Father', 'God's acts are just', 'God is the creator of the world and the Father of all mankind' are first-order religious utterances—live bits of God-talk. Yet, where God is *not* thought to have a body, we can make nothing of such sentences. That is, we have no idea of whether they are used to make true or false statements. If this in turn forces us back to anthropomorphism, we must remember that a God with a body would be a religiously inadequate conception of

<sup>1</sup> Paul Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

God from the point of view of what has become the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Even reflective religious men are frequently perplexed by such religious utterances: that is, they are puzzled by 'God is our loving Father' and not just by the theological *analyses* of such utterances. Many of them come to be overwhelmed, as was Kierkegaard and Pascal, by doubt. It isn't that the man in the circle of faith knows what he means, though he may not know the proper *analysis* of what he means, while the secularist does not understand such utterances. Both can make the inferences Ziff alludes to; both know how to *use* God-talk; yet both may find its very first-order use thoroughly perplexing. We are supposed to understand what it is to talk of something beyond the universe. Yet many a believer and non-believer alike feel often, without being able to say exactly why, that such word-strings are without cognitive significance. We are here, as Wittgenstein once put it, thrusting against the boundaries of our language. The sceptic draws attention to the fact that such discourse utilizes terms like 'persons' and 'acts' which are common to more mundane contexts, but that in the religious contexts they function in a different way and that their very use in such religious contexts is thoroughly perplexing to believer and unbeliever alike. In Ziff's terminology 'being an act' and 'being a person' are in this linguistic environment problematic. No one, not even the man of faith, seems to know what he is asserting when he employs them to make what he alleges to be statements. Thus in a very natural way—independently of some disputable philosophical criterion of meaning—questions concerning their intelligibility naturally arise—questions that will not be stilled by noting and even taking to heart the facts of usage noted by Ziff.

Philosophers observe that Jews and Christians are, in virtue of being Jews and Christians, committed to such putative statements as 'We have a loving Father who created us all and who looks over us as an omnipotent, omniscient and just judge', 'In the last judgement God will judge the acts of man'. These are putative statements, allegedly bits of fact-stating discourse; the philosopher then reflects on what sort of criterion we in fact normally employ for deciding whether a statement really is a factual statement; he notes that those statements which have an unquestioned status as factual statements or factual assertions are all at least confirmable or disconfirmable in principle. But when he examines religious utterances of the type I have just quoted, he notes that they are not, as they are now typically used, confirmable or disconfirmable even in principle. They parade as factual statements, but actually do not function in this very crucial sense, like statements that would, with no question at all, pass muster as statements of fact.

Noting these linguistic facts, a philosopher can suggest, as a criterion for factual intelligibility, confirmability/disconfirmability in principle. This is

not an arbitrary suggestion and it would, if adopted, not be an arbitrary entrance requirement, for it makes explicit the procedures which are actually employed in deciding whether a statement is indeed factual. It makes explicit an implicit practice. Moreover, there is a rational point to setting up such a requirement, given the truth of what I have just asserted. The point is this: if we have such a requirement, it can be used in deciding on borderline and disputed cases. Where certain utterances are allegedly bits of fact-stating discourse yet function in a radically different way from our paradigms of fact-stating discourse, we have good grounds for questioning their factual intelligibility. My criterion makes explicit just what it is that makes a bit of discourse fact-stating discourse.

Using such a criterion, the religious utterances we have just discussed can be seen to be devoid of factual intelligibility, where God is *not* thought to have a body. Similar things should be said for the other central claims of non-anthropomorphic theism. By now it is evident that I, like Hoffman and Edwards, have operated with a fundamentally empiricist requirement in talking of the intelligibility of such religious discourse. But I have tried to give some justification for using such a criterion. I have tried to show how it states in capsule form and generalises a method that is repeatedly used in practice by reflective men when they try to decide whether a given use of language makes a factual claim, i.e. makes a claim about what there is.