

# TRUTH-CONDITIONS AND NECESSARY EXISTENCE

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## I

MY objectives are twofold. I want first to show (mainly following John Hick) that there is a conception of necessary existence or *aseity*, distinct from a conception of 'logically necessary being', which is at least *prima facie* plausible and second to show, with respect to this specific conception, that there are relevant questions about stating truth-conditions which are unsatisfied and perhaps even in principle unsatisfiable, and that these are questions which must be met before such a *prima facie* plausible conception can be taken to give us the basis of a satisfactory theological elucidation of what it is to speak of God. I shall argue that it is doubtful whether these questions about truth-conditions can be met.

I should add that my arguments in the second half of this essay have a certain 'empiricist ring' and that arguments of this general sort are, of course, challengable and indeed have been challenged. I have tried to provide a general account and defense of such an approach in my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1971), my *Scepticism* (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1973) and in my *Reason and Practice* (New York, Harper and Row, 1971), chapters 21 and 31-36 and I will not repeat those arguments here. What I shall do, however, without relying on arguments contained in those books, is (1) to raise specific considerations to show why there is a problem about truth-conditions and identification which such a conception of necessary existence does not resolve in the way a conception of logically necessary existence perhaps would, were it coherent, and (2) show that it must do so to be a viable account of God. With (2) I shall be going against the stream, for it is often (perhaps usually) thought now, though Hick to his credit does not think so, that with such an account of necessary existence we legitimately can bypass such allegedly empiricist considerations.

One further preliminary. I referred initially to this account of *aseity* or necessary existence simply as 'a *prima facie* plausible account', not only because I think that the considerations I shall raise in Section III of this essay show it in fact to be an unsatisfactory account but also because of the more direct, quite different and unfortunately overlooked arguments made by Stuart R. Brown, *Do Religious Claims Make Sense?* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1969), pp. 153-6 and by Colin Lyas, 'On the Coherence of Christian Atheism', *Philosophy*, vol. XLV (January 1970), pp. 13-17, which raise penetrating and perhaps even reasonably decisive arguments against the utilisation of such a conception of necessary existence, if it is (as it is) to give us some understanding of a God who is a 'being than which a greater cannot be conceived'. Perhaps, after all, such a being could intelligibly be said to be a being who could annihilate himself, if he chose to do so, and perhaps it is even religiously appropriate for him to do so. Such remarks are usually thought to be absurd, exhibiting an evident failure to understand the grammar of 'God'. But Brown and Lyas both have deployed careful arguments to show that they are not absurd at all. Be that as it may, my own target and method of attack in this essay will be a different one and my account (which in no way depends on the viability of their account) is not one with which Brown at least would have much sympathy.

## II

Powerful arguments have been deployed against Malcolm's, Hartshorne's, and Plantinga's attempts to show that there are or can be existential statements—statements asserting the existence of something—which are logically true or true *a priori*. If these arguments are correct, it is nonsense to claim that there could be something such that if its existence is logically possible, then it exists. If this is so, it appears to be a field day for Findlay and his ontological disproof of the existence of God; that is, it looks as if Findlay's argument is correct: a religiously adequate conception of God is that of a logically necessary being, and the conception of a logically necessary being is a self-contradictory conception. However, this short way with God or God-talk will not work. What we must do is challenge Findlay's premise that the only adequate object of a

religious attitude or of a theistic religious attitude would be a logically necessary being. That is to say, we should challenge the claim that God is properly conceived as a *logically* necessary being.

Hick proceeds to do this with vigor and I would like initially to follow out his argument here.<sup>1</sup> He first argues that it is a mistake to think that what is allegedly signified by a self-contradictory concept—a logically necessary being—could possibly be an adequate or an appropriate object of a religious attitude. Findlay should carefully note exactly what he is saying: surely it is perplexing—to put it conservatively—to claim that what is purportedly signified by a self-contradictory conception is an *adequate* object of a religious attitude. What is referred to by a self-contradictory conception (even if we can intelligibly speak this way) could not be an *adequate* object of a religious attitude. If we recognize that a logically necessary being is a contradiction in terms we should also recognise that it could not possibly be an adequate object of a religious attitude. It would on the 'contrary be an unqualifiedly inadequate object of worship'.<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that Hick is right here. We must reject Findlay's claim that a God adequate for religious purposes must be conceived in such a way that 'God exists' is a logically necessary or *a priori* truth.

Yet we appear at least to get in trouble if we do this. We *seem* to be rejecting the God of the Bible. The biblical writers and orthodox Jews, Christians and Moslems conceive of God as the Lord of all. He is taken to be incomparable, eternal, unlimited—wholly necessary in every conceivable way. Even Neo-Thomist philosophers such as Father Copleston conceive of God as a being whose non-existence is inconceivable.

We must, however, beware of the construal that most philosophers are prone to put on 'conceivable'. We must avoid simply importing into a *religious* context the use of 'conceivable' that is typical in logic, where '*x* is conceivable' comes to mean '*x* is not self-contradictory' or more liberally '*x* is not self-contradictory or *x* is semantically deviant, e.g. not like "is or

<sup>1</sup> John Hick, 'God and Necessary Being', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVIII (1961), pp. 725-34, and 'Necessary Being', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. XIV (1961), pp. 353-69.

<sup>2</sup> John Hick, 'God and Necessary Being', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVIII (1961), p. 728.

red" or "Jones is a natural number"'. The same thing must be said of 'necessary'. To say that there is no sense of 'necessary' or none that has been coherently explained apart from the logical necessity of statements is simply false. As Peter Geach has remarked, even a superficial acquaintance with modal logic will show how mistaken it is to treat 'necessary' in such a univocal way. And modal logic apart: to say that 'necessary' can only refer to 'logical necessity is equivalent to saying that whatever cannot be so, *logically* cannot be so—e.g. that since I cannot speak Russian my speaking Russian is logically impossible'.<sup>1</sup>

There is a further point to be made here. Hick points out that for the biblical writers it is indeed true that the existence of God was not regarded as something open to question. They conceived of God as sheer given reality—a reality of which these biblical writers were as vividly aware, or thought they were as vividly aware, as they were of their own physical environment.<sup>2</sup> God as a Holy Will, as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, is the maker and ruler of the Universe. He is the sole rightful sovereign of men and angels. He is the ultimate reality and determining power of everything other than himself. His creatures—as Job came to see—have no standing except as the objects of his grace.

Yet if this is said, does this not imply that they, after all, conceived of God as a logically necessary being—as a being whose non-existence is logically inconceivable? Hick's reply here is significant.

But, it might be said, was it not to the biblical writers inconceivable that God should *not* exist, or that he should cease to exist, or should lose his divine powers and virtues? Would it not be inconceivable to them that God might one day go out of existence, or cease to be good and become evil? And does not this attitude involve an implicit belief that God exists necessarily and possesses his divine characteristics in some necessary manner? The answer, I think, is that it was to the biblical writers psychologically inconceivable—as we say colloquially, unthinkable—that God might not exist, or that his nature might undergo radical change. They were so vividly conscious of God that they were unable to doubt his reality, and they were so firmly reliant upon his integrity and faithfulness that

<sup>1</sup> In his essay on Aquinas in G. E. M. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: 1961), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> John Hick, 'God and Necessary Being', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVIII (1961), p. 728. See also in criticism here Adel Daher, 'God and Factual Necessity', *Religious Studies*, vol. 6 (March 1970).

they could not contemplate his becoming other than they knew him to be. They would have allowed as a verbal concession only that there might possibly be no God; for they were convinced that they were at many times directly aware of his presence and of his dealings with them. But the question whether the non-existence of God is *logically* inconceivable, or *logically* impossible, is a purely philosophical puzzle which could not be answered by the prophets and apostles out of their own first-hand religious experience. This does not, of course, represent any special limitation of the biblical figures. The logical concept of necessary being cannot be given in religious experience. It is an object of philosophical thought and not of religious experience. It is a product—as Findlay argues, a malformed product—of reflection. A religious person's reply to the question, Is God's existence logically necessary? will be determined by his view of the nature of logical necessity; and this view is not part of his religion but part of his system of logic, if he has one. The biblical writers, in point of fact, display no view of the nature of logical necessity, and would probably have regarded the topic as purely academic and of no religious significance. It cannot reasonably be claimed, then, that logically necessary existence was part of their conception of the adequate object of human worship.<sup>1</sup>

In fine, they thought it was unthinkable, impossible, inconceivable that there be no God: his reality is manifest; he is inescapable; his existence is quite necessary. But there is no reason to believe that he was conceived of as being a *logically* necessary being; there is no reason to believe that his non-existence was taken by these writers to be *logically* inconceivable. Moreover, if some few did so reason they would have been in error, as Malcolm's critics have made apparent. But here their error would be an error in logic: an error in philosophical theology which blurs their *characterisation* of their religious response. But they need not fall into this error for they could, still without committing such a philosophical blunder, take God's existence to be necessary, for they could take the necessity of Divine Existence to be a brute factual necessity.

Hick also claims, again with considerable plausibility, that both Anselm and Aquinas thought of God as having factual necessity rather than as having a logically necessary existence.<sup>2</sup> I shall not pursue this historical point here. Yet it should be apparent by now that *if* their conceptions of necessary being are to be viable, they cannot have had in mind the malformed conception of a logically necessary being.

Findlay and Malcolm would be abusing language and

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, p. 729.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 729-31.

obscuring the issue if they were to persist in their claim that such a *factual* necessity is not enough because a being with only factual necessity would *merely happen* to exist and a fully adequate object of a religious attitude could not *just happen* to exist. The following considerations establish this. Findlay and Malcolm present us with a dilemma: 'Either God's existence is logically necessary or He merely happens to exist'. But in pointing out that one half of the dichotomy is self-contradictory Findlay has in effect removed the dichotomy. If all objects are said to be either round squares or non-round squares and it is found out that there, logically speaking, can be no round squares, then it is pointless to go around characterizing all objects as non-round squares, for 'non-round squares' can have no intelligible opposite. Having concluded, as Findlay has, that 'the notion of necessary existence has no meaning, to continue to speak of things merely happening to exist, as though this stood in contrast with some other mode of existing, no longer has any validity'.<sup>1</sup>

To this, it can well be countered, that there is a non-vacuous contrast between things that just happen to exist and things which exist necessarily. So, 'contingent existence' is not, after all, pleonastic. This is true but since '*logically* necessary existence' is self-contradictory the contrast between 'existing necessarily' and 'just happening to exist' will have to be drawn *within the class of realities* that, as a matter of *logical* possibility, might not exist now or might never have existed. (Malcolm is right in claiming that if God does not exist now, he never existed and He never will come to exist. That is God by definition is eternal, but that does not make God's existence logically necessary.)<sup>2</sup>

Hick tries to spell out more fully what is meant by a 'factually necessary being'. It is not enough to contrast transient existence with eternal existence and to identify divine necessity with the latter. Something might exist eternally simply because it in fact was never destroyed, though at all times it could be destroyed. An eternal being need not be indestructible or the source of all power. (Of course, if it were in fact destroyed it would not be

<sup>1</sup> John Hick, 'God and Necessary Being', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVIII (1961), p. 731.

<sup>2</sup> This has been convincingly argued by P. T. Brown, 'Professor Malcolm on Anselm's Ontological Arguments', *Analysis* (1961).

eternal.) But God—as the ultimate Lord of all—is not capable of being destroyed or of being created. It is further, Hick argues, true that God is ‘. . . incorruptible, in the sense of being incapable of either ceasing to exist or of ceasing to possess divine characteristics’.<sup>1</sup>

God—Hick’s factually necessary being—is ‘an incorruptible and indestructible being without beginning or end.’<sup>2</sup> These are but aspects of a ‘more fundamental characteristic which the Scholastics termed *aseity* (‘self-existence’). The core notion of *aseity* is that of completely independent being. Each item in the universe depends upon some factor or factors beyond itself; not even all incorruptible and indestructible beings have this *aseity*. Aquinas thought human souls, angels and the heavenly bodies were incorruptible and indestructible, except by an act of God. They are eternal and necessary beings, but they lack *aseity*. ‘Only God exists in total non-dependence; he alone exists absolutely as sheer unconditioned self-existent being.’<sup>3</sup> God has unlimited superiority over all other beings; he is, by definition, the greatest possible being—a being in whom absolute trust may be placed. All other realities depend on him and he in turn depends on no other reality; nothing can threaten his non-existence, everything else depends on him; there are no sufficient conditions for his existence.

In short, ‘What may properly be meant. . . by the statement that God is, or has necessary existence as distinguished from contingent existence is that God is without beginning or end and without origin, cause or ground of any kind whatsoever. He is as ‘the ultimate reality’, ‘unconditioned, absolute, unlimited being’.<sup>4</sup> Yet ‘that God is, is *not* a logically necessary truth; for no matter of fact can be logically necessary. *The reality of God is sheer datum*’, though unlike *other* necessary beings, God is the sole self-existent being: that is the sole totally unlimited, totally independent being. God, Hick avers, ‘is an utterly unique datum’.<sup>5</sup>

The existence of God cannot be causally explained since a self-existent being must be uncaused and therefore ‘not susceptible to the causal type of explanation’. Bertrand Russell’s

<sup>1</sup> John Hick, ‘God and Necessary Being’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVIII, (1961), p. 731.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 733.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 732.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

question—who created God?—can only be a joke or a failure to understand what is meant by ‘God’. We can best define ‘God’ as follows:

God is an eternal, incorruptible, indestructible reality who creates all beings other than himself and is not and cannot be dependent on or created by anything else.<sup>1</sup>

Such a reality has both necessary being and *aseity*; that is, it always will be, always was and, as a sheer matter of fact, cannot nor could not nor will not be able not to be.

Such a concept of God as self-existent necessary being is—Hick argues—perfectly intelligible; it is indeed a mysterious, awe-inspiring notion, but a God who is not mysterious or awe-inspiring would not be the God of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition. But the important thing to see here, Hick argues, is that such a concept is perfectly intelligible. Given, Hick continues, that God as necessary being is an intelligible concept, the crucial question remains: ‘Is there a being or a reality to which this concept applies?’ To ask this question is, in effect, to concede that ‘God exists’ is intelligible and to ask how can we know or have grounds for believing that God exists. Can we by religious experience or through Revelation come in some way to confirm or render credible the claim that God exists; or can we in some way and in some sense prove, after the fashion of the cosmological argument or the argument from design, that God exists? Or is it the case, as Hick himself thinks, that we must accept divine existence solely on *faith*? Knowing what it *means* to say ‘There is a God’, I can have *faith* in God and accept it on *faith* that God exists.

### III

I, however, obstinately remain stuck several steps back, for I am not convinced that Hick or anyone else has been able to show how the concept of a factually necessary, self-existent being is intelligible where that concept is interpreted as Hick interprets it or where it is interpreted so that we can continue to conceive of God as transcendent to the cosmos; that is where

<sup>1</sup> John Hick, ‘God and Necessary Being’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVIII (1961), p. 733.



'God' refers to something in some way 'over and above the universe'. But surely the onus is now on me to show that this is so.

First—and this will surely support Hick—we can and should make the Ziffian point that we have *some* understanding of the conditions that Hick associates with the word 'God'. These conditions may indeed be problematic, but it still remains true that we have some understanding of them. If God is the sole independent, unlimited eternal being there cannot be two Gods—a God of good and a God of evil—and God could not cease to be or come to be or be created and the like. But similar linguistic manoeuvres can be made with 'The Absolute is unfaithful' or 'Ziff heard a picture'. If Ziff heard a picture, then Ziff heard something and Ziff could at that time hear and the like. If the Absolute is unfaithful it is not to be trusted, not to be confided in and perhaps it should be divorced from the contingent. But 'The Absolute is unfaithful' or 'Ziff heard a picture' are surely, except as metaphors, nonsense. That we can make *such* moves with 'God' does not show that such word-strings as 'God is the sole independent, totally unlimited, eternal being' are not nonsensical or incoherent uses of language.

What more do we need to establish the intelligibility of such uses of language? Giving up anything like the ontological argument and with it giving up any attempt to make a purely *conceptual identification* of God, we need some *empirical anchorage* for our term. We need, as Hick himself on other occasions has stressed, some way of showing what would *in principle* satisfy the conditions he associates with the term 'God'. Now, as Kierkegaard quipped, we cannot expect God to be a Great Green Bird. Paul Edwards to the contrary notwithstanding, we do not conceive of God as a Being with some kind of huge body.<sup>1</sup> A God that could be observed, that could be seen or apprehended in any literal way, would not be the God of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. Yet in our very first-order religious discourse, we sometimes talk of *seeing* God, of apprehending God, of an awareness of God, of the experience of God, of living in the presence of God and the like. Our God-talk even allows us to speak or rather sing of seeing the face of

<sup>1</sup> Paul Edwards, 'Some Notes on Anthropomorphic Theology', in *Religious Experience and Truth*, Sydney Hook (ed.), (New York: 1961), p. 242.

the invisible God. Yet we must be careful not to rule out metaphor in an arbitrary and insensitive manner. But we must also not forget that genuine metaphors can—to use a metaphor myself—be cashed in; that is, to use another, they can in principle be redeemed in the sound currency of straightforward assertion.

Searching for this empirical anchorage for 'God', we need to ask what sort of a thing or being or reality or force we are talking about when we speak of something as the sole, independent, totally unlimited, eternal being? Hick speaks of it as *sheer datum* and as a *unique datum*. But what would it be like to experience or fail to experience or in any way encounter this Being—this sheer datum? A unique datum or even any old datum at all is in virtue of the very meaning of 'datum' something that could be encountered, that could be identified. Yet what criteria do I use in order to decide whether I or others did or did not correctly identify that putative datum? What would even in principle count as experiencing or failing to experience, encountering or failing to encounter, an eternal, utterly unbounded, indestructible, immaterial reality, who creates all other realities but is itself uncreated and is in no way dependent on anything else? What would have to be the case, what would we have to experience now or in the future, in this life or in the next, in order for us to have any grounds at all for asserting rather than denying or denying rather than asserting that there is such a reality?

Hick himself avers that we should, for the sake of clarity, set out 'God exists' in a Russellian way, i.e. 'There is one (and only one) X such that X is omniscient, omnipotent, etc.' Now, to put it in a Peircean way, what *conceivable experiential* states of affairs, events, actions, occurrences and the like would lend even the *slightest* probability to the claim that there is one (and only one) X such that X is eternal, uncreated, incorruptible, indestructible, immaterial, unlimited and a totally independent creator of all other realities? If (as Hick himself believes) the above phrases are so put together that they can be used to make what is purportedly a factual statement and if it and its denial are both equally compatible with *all conceivable experiential* states of affairs, then the putative statement and its denial are both without factual content, without factual significance.

However, as Hick is most rightly concerned to uphold, 'God exists' is *thought* by the believer to be a factual statement—to have factual significance. All reasonably orthodox believers believe that it is a fact that God exists. But if 'There is a God' is compatible with anything and everything that we might conceivably experience now or hereafter, 'There is a God' is without factual meaning—it is devoid of factual content or significance. Yet for Hick and for believers generally 'There is a God' must have factual content.

The above point is indeed an old point, but, old or not, it seems to me to be well taken.<sup>1</sup> And here Hick, though not Ziff, agrees with me, for he argues for a kind of 'eschatological verification' which will, he believes, give the necessary empirical anchorage to God-talk such that it will enable us to establish that 'There is a God' and the like have factual significance.<sup>2</sup>

Once we construe 'God' as a factually necessary being after the manner of Hick, or for that matter after the manner of Aquinas, we are led, if we are clear-headed, quite inexorably to what has been called Flew's challenge or rather misleadingly 'the theology and falsification issue'. If with Malcolm and Findlay we stay with a *logically* necessary being, we can avoid Flew's challenge, but only at the cost of making 'There is a God' self-contradictory. To make out a case for 'God exists' being an intelligible factual statement and for Divine Existence being necessary, though factually necessary, we are led to a consideration of the theology and falsification issue and to the noetic claims of religious experience. But there again, as is well known, we face a host of standard difficulties, difficulties that cannot be avoided by utilising the concept of *aseity*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I have argued this and have generally elucidated and criticised Ziff's account in my 'The Intelligibility of God-talk', *Religious Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1970). See as well Robert Hoffman, 'On Being Mindful of "God": Reply to Kai Nielsen', *Religious Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1970).

<sup>2</sup> Hick develops this in his 'Theology and Verification' reprinted in John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: 1964), pp. 253-74. I have criticised Hick's account in my 'Eschatological Verification', *The Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. XVII (October 1963). Hick has replied to this in the second edition of his *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: 1966), pp. 196-9 and I have in turn responded in my *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*, pp. 71-9.

<sup>3</sup> I have argued against specifically Neo-Thomistic conceptions and utilizations of *aseity* in my 'God, Necessity and Falsifiability' in *Traces of God in a Secular Culture*, George F. McLean (ed.) (New York: Alba House, 1973), pp. 271-304.