

Hick and Process Philosophy on the Reality of God

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Due, in large measure, to Wittgenstein's liberating insight into "language-games," we are now more careful of propositions that are deceptively similar in construction but are meaningful only in different domains and by different rules. Pre-Wittgensteinian naivete dealt with "God loves the world" in a manner similar to the way it dealt with "Jose loves Maria." The qualifications of the *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae*, of course, invited caution, but it was left to the era commenced by *Philosophical Investigations* to realize that two different language-games held different rubrics for these two assertions. The question, of course, then becomes inevitable: "What kind of a language-game is involved in religious statements?" A simple solution would be to draw the line between a *cognitive* and a *non-cognitive* use of language and while statements about Pedro loving Maria would be cognitive, similar statements about God loving the world would be otherwise. Although I think Wisdom cannot justly be made to share the same bed as Professor Ayer's and Professor Randall's, I think that the terms he uses in "Gods" lends support to what Van der Veken and I take to be Flew's misreading of his position. Wisdom claims that the discussion between the two travelers is no longer "about facts." This kind of language, however, is unfortunate, although I do not think it necessary to read Wisdom as Flew does.

It is my position in this paper that initial divergences and presuppositions notwithstanding, Hick's theory of *faith as interpretation* and the proposal from process philosophy to treat statements about God as *expressive*, belonging to the realm of a *model logic* can support an insistence on the *fact-asserting* character of the propositions of religion. I had one occasion to ask Prof. Santiago Sia, an acknowledged Hartshorne

scholar, what he thought of John Hick; his only reservation about Hick's theory was that it worked with a "traditional" conceptuality of God - a theory of God as an entity, separate and substantially complete apart from the world. I will try to show that one can accept Hick's theory of "interpretative voluntariness" within a process scheme.

Hick's Theory of Faith as Interpretation

Every act of cognition is, for Hick, an act of interpretation. To see, in other words, is always to *see as*. The object-pole of the interpretative act is *significance*. This way it can be said that all interpretation — and consequently, all knowing — yields significance. Whatever is perceived is perceived because it is significant. That which is non-significant (in the sense of being confusing, unintelligible and meaninglessly inchoate) would be imperceptible. This is an analytic proposition.

There are three levels of significance: the natural or the *physical* level, the *social* or the *ethical* level, and the *religious* level. Hick consistently maintains that interpretation occurs on all three levels. I see trees, mountains, the green fields and the blue *sky* all around me — or do I? There is then the choice between the positions of what, for convenience's sake, we will call "realism" and "solipsism." There are, to be sure, reasons I can adduce for a realistic position: I can reach out and touch the flowers, and assure myself that they are indeed "there." I can ask others whether they see what I see, and many times will get an affirmative response. It is not too difficult to see, however, that the reasons I adduce do not constitute irrefutable "proof," for hallucinations, misperceptions, deception, lies, etc. are all possibilities. It is these possibilities that lead the solipsist to his lonely post. The important point is that every interpretation allows for a margin of freedom. I have reasons for a realistic stance, but never an incontrovertible proof. This is the mystery of human cognition that Hick calls *cognitive freedom* and *epistemic distance*. Obviously, the same thing is true on the ethical and social level. The abortion debate holds out two different interpretations: the interpretation of the "pro-lifers" which holds abortion to be immoral, and the interpretation of the "pro-choicers" which holds abortion to be a perfectly acceptable choice. There are, on the one hand, those who recognize in abortion a reprehensible immoral act; others do not see anything wrong. Once more, there are reasons for either position — and once more, no final clincher that would make it clear that only one position is acceptable. The religious man is therefore one

who, looking at the vast panorama of reality, interprets all that is as a product of the Divine will and of Divine benevolence; the atheist denies any such dimension as a result of his evaluation. Once more, there will be arguments for God's existence, just as there will be arguments against it; and once more, it is not reasonable to demand a final proof that would quiet all dissent. For the believer, then, the world is significant as "God's creation" or "God's handiwork;" for the unbeliever there can be nothing more said than an expression of awe over an incredible combination of events of "chance."

Is the difference between the world of the believer and that of the unbeliever *subjective*? Certainly, the "realist" has no doubts that the world is really "out there." The pro-lifer is convinced that the abortion is fraught with the character of immorality and this, for him, has to do not really with the way he looks at things but with the way things are. Hick then insists that the propositions of belief are "cognitive" uses of language, i.e., they are fact-asserting. To say that "God exists" is not to speak of one's dispositions, but to assert the reality of God. "In other words, Christian language, as the actual speech of a living community, presupposes the extra-linguistic reality of God."

A Process Approach to God

I will start with the programmatic question for any philosophy of God. *Does God exist?* It is argued that this question arises out of suppositions that can be contested. In the first chapters of one of Ayn Rand's books, the reader is hounded by the provocative question: "Does John Galt exist?" Obviously, what is asked about is the existence or the non-existence of an entity, a person, called John Galt. Similarly when one asks whether mermaids exist, one asks whether there are in fact in the world entities called mermaids. In the formal language of logic this would then be asking the truth-value of the expression: "There is an x , such that the x is a mermaid." But "mermaid" is only one among an infinite number of things that could be in that place, hence we can say that the basic function is: "There is an x , such that the x is F ." Is God one of the F 's that can occupy that place in the logical function? It is my position that if one should eagerly answer in the affirmative, one would be confronted by the very awkward fact that the verification of whether God exists or not calls for procedures and for a grammar in no way related to the verification of the existence of other entities that might be substituted for F .

When three justices of a collegiate court are given the records of the case to read, together with the briefs of the opposing parties, it often happens that two of the justices conclude that the accused is guilty, while one holds him to be not guilty. What happens here is certainly not that some evidence was available to the two justices that was not available to the third. The records and arguments studied by the three was exactly the same. They differed in what, in law, we call their "appreciation" of the evidence. To say that the accused is guilty is to evaluate the evidence in one way; to say that he is not guilty is to evaluate the very same evidence in another way. Let me point out very clearly, however, that "guilty" and "not guilty" are not meant to be expressions of subjective states or attitudes or dispositions of the justices. Rather they are pronouncements as to what each justice takes to be an objective quality or modifier of the accused. It seems naive then to suppose that the question about God is a question similar to all others asking about the existence of entities. John Wisdom has suggested that it is a question of a different type. It is a question of how I evaluate the world and its processes and events.

The proposition "God exists" is then, in Van der Veken's terms, a "model proposition" belonging to the logic of interpretative language, language which expresses a certain outlook on reality. To assert the existence of God is to express one's "model" of the universe. To see the universe AS divine and worshipful. This brings me to a point on epistemology that Wittgenstein and Hick have stressed: seeing is always *seeing as*; cognition is always interpretation. By its very nature, interpretation is never compelled. There may be reasons for one interpretation rather than another, but there is never conclusive evidence that would exclude all others. The world is, in its entirety, a "presentation," a "symbol" that is ambiguous in that it is susceptible of various interpretations one of which is expressed in the proposition: "God exists."

Taking a cue from Ian Ramsey, we can go so far as to say that "God" is an integrator-word. It is the term that captures the convictions of the world's great religions, though often expressed in mythical and metaphysically inadequate language. What does the word "God" integrate? How do we, believers, see the universe that allows us to exclaim in faith "God exists?" We see the universe as marked by *order* and *intelligence*, *ethical demand*, *love* and concern. The events that present themselves are many and varied, for while we are witnesses to heroic expression of love and concern, we also experience frustration at the senselessness of so much brutality. This panorama, however, the believer *sees as*

touched by the finger of Divinity. There are enough reasons, in other words, for the believer to conceive of Reality as *worshipful and divine*. Returning to my earlier proposal to treat the word "God" as an integrator concept, we can say that it integrates the convictions of believers that actuality is grounded (= "Creator of heaven and earth"), that the universe is marked by order (= the Nous), that there is universal sympathetic feeling (= the Omnibenevolence of God).

Is it that the believer is insensitive to the pain and the anguish that make life miserable for many? The majesty of a scenic volcano spells death and disaster during an eruption of cataclysmic proportions. The hand of man can be that of the Good Samaritan that soothes and consoles, but it can also be the hand of Cain raised in murder. *Naming*, however, or *seeing as*, always involves *subordinating* some elements to the overall picture. While fully cognizant of the ambivalence of the universe, the believer interprets the scene as "orderly, intelligent, harmonious, ethically demanding and compassionate." There is, Hick reminds us, an "epistemic distance" between the evidence and the interpretation. The *very* ambivalence of the picture is what makes the interpretation a choice - not a guess, I must insist, for we have reasons, many good, for our choice, but never compelled by the evidence. Traditional theology taught the relation between the virtues of faith, hope and love. I think that even philosophically, there is much to support this position. Faith is interpreting the world as "worshipful and divine;" but precisely because of the ambiguity of the picture we get, it is also the hope that order, goodness, justice and compassion will be its ultimate character; it is to hope that love will prevail and it is an invitation to love in return.

We now turn to an important concept in process philosophy that always figures in discussions on God. This is the concept of creativity which, we are warned, should not be identified with God. Of creativity, Hartshorne says:

creativity is not an actual entity or agent which does things: it is the common property or generic name for all the doings. When Whitehead says that creativity in general is wider than God, he is simply pointing out, as I take it, that not all decisions are God's self-decisions... Creativity is thus, I suggest, the abstraction which leaves out of account the duality of decisions as self-made and made by others.

Creativity is sheer on-goingness; it is what we might call "ultimate reality," for all that is arises from creativity. Van der Veken calls it

substantial activity. It is not something behind the evolution of the species, nor some power behind the explosions of supernovae; it is not distinct from the germination of seeds and the conception of a person. Creativity is *general activity*; as such, it is all-encompassing. Being all-encompassing, it is absurd to ask what causes creativity itself for whatever is or may be is comprehended by creativity. It is important that the process concept of "creativity" be set apart from Bergson's "elan vital," for it is not some "other thing" empowering all others. Creativity is in the workings of things and in the processes that characterize geological, biological and human existence. For this reason then it can neither be a pure abstraction. Van der Veken suggests that we think of "creativity" as analogous to Heidegger's Being (*Sein*), neither a thing nor a mere thought, but that which allows beings to be.

That the all-inclusive is not good enough to be God has been one of Van der Veken's key points, for within it are included the suffering of the victims of Pinatubo, the grief and the tears of widows and orphans the world over and the pain of betrayal. What then is the relation between God and creativity?

God is not the world; He is not all-encompassing reality, but a valuation of the world. As the first modifier of creativity, God provides directions of beauty, harmony and truth. Creativity by itself is value-neutral, but creativity that brings forth the true, the good and the beautiful is on-goingness that has been "lured" by God, persuaded by God. That there are Mother Theresas in the world, that there are bursts of genius in the least expected places, that the world around us can be resplendent in beauty — all this is creativity modified by the Worshipful, the Divine. Beholding all this, the believer, echoing Wisdom's traveler, says: "God is at work here." The power of God, then, is not the power of one who determines up to the last detail. The metaphors of process philosophy are suggestive: God is the Fellow-Traveler who promises to be with his people forever. Jesus is, for process thinkers, "the brief Galilean vision" — a privileged encounter with the Worshipful, the Holy, the Divine, and the Good. I think too that a look at the person of Jesus will do a lot to aid us in the proposal of a new conceptuality of God. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find a Coercive Taskmaster who imperiously sets till the last detail all that must be done and all that must come to pass. What we see, rather, in "the brief Galilean vision" is one who attracts to goodness, one who calls to holiness, one who invites to love. I also wish to point out that Whitehead's insistence that creativity and God be distinguished (that the metaphysical absolute be distinguished from the religious absolute) has

important consequences for our social involvement and commitment. To identify all that is with God — which is the consequence of a metaphysics that unqualifiedly holds God to be *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* — is, in a rather scandalous way, to justify and to legitimize the status quo. But to maintain with Whitehead that God draws on-goingness to values that he holds forth is to open the door to the realization that God draws us from slavery to freedom, identifying himself with the aspirations of his people to be truly free!

Using very rich metaphors, Whitehead speaks of God in relation to creativity as “the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness.” God does not impose; he attracts. God does not determine; he offers goals.

God then is the religious qualification of reality, an interpretation of the “principle of concretion” by which bare creativity gives rise to definiteness. Because the believer experiences the immense beauty, the gentle compassion and the thoughtful order that result from the concretion of process, he speaks of the principle of concretion as God. Van der Veken then says: God is rather the religious qualification of reality, a definite manner in which to interpret or to impart a specific (i.e., religious) meaning to the ‘principle of concretion.’ In other words, God is a religious name, that believers give intuitively to the all-encompassing process on the basis of particular experiences of a certain manner, which allows them to see and interpret that all-encompassing process (reality; ‘substantial activity’) in a specific, religious way. In this sense God is a ‘category of meaning’ and not just a category of being.

What then, is God? He is “that Instance at the ground of our being that seems directed towards beauty, goodness and harmony and that lures us in this same direction.” God is not outside reality — because this obviously makes no logical sense at all; neither is he to be identified with each and every instance of creativity, for there is so much that is ungodly and unholy. God is that in reality that explains why we can take comfort in a universe that, despite all its ambiguity, holds out the promise of being protective, comforting and meaningful!

Rapprochement

“God exists” — this proposition, for Hick, is the expression of an interpretation. But then, every act of cognition is interpretative. What is more, Hick insists that it is a factual proposition: it presupposes the “extra-linguistic” reality of God.

Van der Veken, enunciating one position of process philosophy, agrees that "seeing" is "seeing as," and that the proposition about God's existence is a proposition that belongs to the realm of evaluation. It is the pronouncement one makes upon evaluating "all the facts that are in."

My position is that the "extra-linguistic reality of God" need not be the reality of a "being among beings." The process understanding of God and of what is meant by the proposition: "God exists" - rather provides us with an alternative proposal on how to deal with the "reality" of God. The God of process philosophers, after all, is as *real* as the God affirmed in classical philosophy, as *personal* as the Father of Jesus, the Christ, the "brief Galilean vision." What I discussed under the heading of process philosophy provides us with a way of understanding the, extra-linguistic reality that Hick insists we affirm when we interpret the world as "God's world" - this time, of course, no longer in the sense of a world determined to its last detail by an omnipotent autocrat, but a world constantly lured to heights of order and beauty, depths of compassion, goodness and intelligence, by the Unsurpassable Poet of the World, the Fellow-Sufferer who understands.

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