

I: Faith and Reason

1: Introduction

What this work is about

Can any argument establish the truth of the proposition that God exists? Most contemporary philosophers think not, and many offer criticisms of the classical arguments for the existence of God. Are these criticisms cogent or can they be rebutted? If they can be rebutted, can one say anything more about God than that he exists? Language is used in peculiar ways in talk about God. How can these unusual uses of words be meaningful?

If God is an omnipotent and all-good creator of the universe, how can human persons be free and why is there evil in the world? If God is an infinite being, is not the created universe reduced to nothing? If God is unchangeable, how can there be creativity and novelty within the created universe? Are miracles and divine revelation possible? Are the paradoxical teachings of Christian faith logically coherent? Even if doctrines such as the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Eucharist are not sheer nonsense, why should a reasonable person choose to believe them?

The present work is intended to clarify these questions and to propose answers to them. The questions I investigate here make up a subject matter which has been treated by some English-speaking philosophers in recent years under the heading “philosophical theology.” However, I use this expression to designate a special *part* of philosophy of religion—the part indicated by the questions listed in the first paragraph above. “Philosophy of religion” I take to be a wider expression which designates all philosophical questions pertaining to religion, including those of philosophical theology and those listed in the second paragraph above, and also including many other questions often

treated by continental European thinkers but generally not discussed by English-speaking philosophers.

Philosophy of religion does not presuppose religious faith. It is concerned with matters religious, but it does not take for granted the truth of any religious belief. However, persons working in the field of philosophy of religion ordinarily have beliefs of their own. The rationality of a philosopher is not the neutral rationality of a computer.

Readers of the present work will be aware that its author is a believing Christian. Readers of any work in philosophy of religion written by a person who is an agnostic or an atheist usually are aware of the faith-position of the author. A philosopher, whether believer or nonbeliever, can deal philosophically with topics which also concern him precisely insofar as he is a religious believer, an agnostic, or an atheist. Everyone has beliefs before he begins philosophizing. A philosopher's antecedent beliefs suggest what ground he will try to defend and how he will try to defend it. The essential characteristic of a philosophical approach is that the defense be rational; a philosopher tries to avoid begging questions in favor of his own beliefs.

A major concern throughout this work is to develop a position which integrates what is sound in classical theism with important insights and concerns of what is called "the new theism." Classical theism, the set of positions and approaches common among Christians and Jews until the nineteenth century, stressed the separation between God and creation. The new theism is more interested in the relationship between them. Classical theism, stressing divine transcendence, also emphasized God's changelessness. The new theists argue that an immanent God, who cares about creation and who gives it real importance, must work and suffer along with his creatures. In short, classical theists held that God is an absolute being, perfect in himself, while new theists are more interested in God as a person to whom human persons can relate.

From the point of view of Christian faith perhaps the only final resolution of the tensions between classical theism and the new theism is a further refinement of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Philosophy of religion must leave the working out of such a final resolution to theologians who work in the light of Christian faith. But philosophy of religion can make a contribution of its own. Many classical theories of talk about God were best suited to clarifying the meaning of language used to talk about God in his transcendence; many contemporary theories, naturally enough, fit better with the new theism. Philosophy of religion can try to work out a more adequate logic of God-talk. A more adequate logic must distinguish nonrelational from relational predication about God.

I try to clarify this problem and to contribute to its solution, not by examining and criticizing various classical and contemporary theories of talk

about God, but by articulating a view which I think is adequate both for metaphysics and for religion. I hold that the God of the philosophers and the God of faith are not two gods but one God, talked of in distinct but compatible ways. In talk about God, abstract metaphysical expressions and metaphorical, anthropomorphic expressions both have a role to play. I think that many philosophers who were classical theists tended to be overly ambitious and confident about the ability of man to talk about God as he is in himself, while many philosophers who might be called “new theists” too easily assume that relational predications concerning God must either tell what he is in himself or express only a special way of looking at the world of experience. My view is that the new theism contains much that is important and suggestive, but that it is ultimately irreconcilable with traditional Jewish and Christian faith. However, I do not think it possible to go back to the philosophy developed by classical theists in previous centuries; a Jewish or Christian philosopher who holds to the essential tradition of his faith must take the new theism into account and try to go beyond it.

The following brief outline might be helpful in grasping the structure of this work as a whole.

The first part, including this chapter and the next two chapters, is mainly concerned with the relationship between faith and reason. In the latter part of this chapter I try to clarify how faith and reason are related to each other in my own thinking. Chapter two provides an example of the interplay between reason and faith in a child’s learning about God. Chapter three considers a number of positions which, if sound, would rule out any philosophical attempt to establish the truth of the proposition that God exists. I try to show that these positions are not sound.

In the second part, chapters four and five, I present an argument for the proposition that there is an uncaused entity. In several respects the argument is new, but it falls into a class of arguments usually called “cosmological” by philosophers. Arguments of this sort proceed from the existence of some aspect of the cosmos—the world of experience—to the conclusion that an uncaused cause exists. In my view an argument for the existence of an uncaused entity plays a double role in philosophical theology. An argument is essential to establish the conclusion that God exists; to establish this conclusion is useful, not so much to prove it to persons who do not accept it as to establish a real *referent* for the beliefs of those who do accept it. At the same time an argument showing that God exists provides a principle for making *sense* of talk about God; the ways in which language is used in the argument can be clarified and adapted for further talk about God.

The third part, chapters six to thirteen, considers objections philosophers are likely to make to the argument presented in the second part. If these objections are successful, then the argument fails to prove its point. Major

modern philosophers, especially Hume, Kant, and Hegel, criticize classical examples of cosmological argumentation. I try to rebut such criticisms, both as they are found in the writings of the major philosophers, and also as they are reformulated today. During the twentieth century, moreover, several new philosophical methods sharing certain common features have emerged, and these methods sometimes are assigned the task of excluding as impossible the development of any philosophical theory, including one such as I am proposing. To exploit these methods to exclude theories obviously is to give them a theoretical task. I call such exploitation of these methods “post-hegelian relativism” and try to show that no form of this relativism presents an insurmountable obstacle to the sort of argument presented in part two.

In the fourth part, chapters fourteen to seventeen, I try to show how talk about God has sense. Here I reflect upon the argument presented in the second part. My view is that the *meaning*—not only the reference—of other God-talk *depends upon* some sort of reasoning to the existence of God. I do not mean that the argument must be articulated formally; I mean that God-talk logically originates in such a context, and always must be tied back to it. Once its sense is initiated, God-talk of course goes on to statements beyond the conclusion that God exists.

In the fifth part, chapters eighteen to twenty-one, I examine several problems in philosophy of religion which are probably more important to anyone who is not a philosopher than are the more technical problems of philosophical theology considered in previous chapters. The problems examined in part five are related to the humanistic concern to protect freedom and other human values against any possible threat from religious belief. Thus, these problems are about compatibility—for example: How can man be free if God causes everything? My way of dealing with such problems, in general, is to try to show that one who takes a consistent position should not be troubled by them. For instance, nothing we can learn about God by rational argumentation alone gives us any reason to expect that there should not be evil in the world; however, religious faith, if it is consistent, not only generates but also resolves the problem of evil.

The sixth part, chapters twenty-two to twenty-five, considers further problems related to the meaningfulness of religious faith. Some of these problems are quite general: How can talk about miracles and revelation, which underlies all specific Christian doctrines, be understood? There also are specific questions about the coherence of some major Christian doctrines. And, finally, there is the question of the existential meaningfulness of faith: What point might there be in believing Christian doctrines even if they are not nonsensical or necessarily false?

Readers who are not familiar with the history of modern philosophy and with the major trends in contemporary philosophy may find the third part

especially difficult. Although this part is essential to the philosophical defense of the argument presented in the second part, the remainder of the work can be understood by someone who ignores the third part.

Some readers may feel that I pay too much attention to problems about the meaningfulness of religious language and too little attention to questions about its truth. However, language, including the language of faith, cannot express truth unless it has meaning. Moreover, the question of the truth of the teachings proper to Christian faith—or any other purportedly revealed faith—cannot be settled without consideration of questions belonging to the field of history. Thus, philosophical theology concentrates on problems of meaning. Even the argument of part two and the treatment of objections to it are mainly directed to a problem of meaning: Is there anything beyond human thought to which religious language refers?

Moreover, confusion of language used in speaking about God and in formulating tenets of religious faith causes many people to have serious problems in accepting what such language is intended to express. This content, if true, is of the highest importance; if it is not true, it is important that we not believe it. Therefore, any contribution to getting rid of misunderstandings which interfere with the use of religious language is important.

I think that religious language is multiform, not uniform. To adopt Wittgenstein's expression, religious language is not one language game but many distinct games. I do not think that all difficulties of faith are caused by linguistic confusions, but I do think that many of them are either caused or aggravated by such confusions. I hope the present work will help to show the butterfly of faith the way out of the chrysalis of linguistic confusion.

Faith, reason, and philosophy of religion

As suggested already, I do not think a philosopher's personal faith can be left behind when he moves onto the field where the combats of philosophy of religion are fought. For this very reason I believe that readers of works in this field are entitled to a clear statement of the author's understanding of the roles which faith and reason play in his own thinking.

In the first place, I do not think that philosophy of religion is irrelevant to religious faith. I have explained already why I think the philosophical clarification of the meaning of religious language and its many forms is important for theological progress and for removing obstacles to faith. I also think that any community of faith which is not a ghetto of obscurantism must have among its members some persons who can meet nonbelieving philosophers on their own ground. Otherwise, what assurance is there that the faith of the community can stand rational examination even by one who shares this faith?

In the second place, I do not think it is the philosopher's business, even in philosophy of religion, to be edifying. Someone has said that no treatise on God is sound unless it makes the reader get out of his chair and get down on his knees. I think this objective is too ambitious for philosophy; a philosophy which seeks to achieve it is likely to become ideological in its effort to be prophetic. It seems to me enough for a philosophical work on God to untie some of the bonds which keep the reader so firmly in his chair that he could not possibly get out of it.

I do think it is legitimate for the philosopher to argue for positions which he would hold on faith even apart from the argument. However, I do not think it legitimate for the philosopher to commend what he believes to readers *because* he believes it, or even precisely because he thinks it true. I try to avoid such commending in this work. I try to argue for what I think true to the extent, and only to the extent, that I think its truth can be established by arguments which deserve to be accepted by any reasonable person. If there is something wrong with my arguments, I am ready to be shown what is wrong with them. There is no point in trying to defend one's positions with unsound arguments.

Moreover, if my positions themselves are indefensible or false, I am ready to be shown this too. Frankly, I do not expect anyone to show that these positions are indefensible or false; if I expected that, I could not hold them and would not defend them. However, the thinking presented in this work has developed as I have wrestled with arguments which challenge what I believe.

I have always wished to test what I believe, to make sure that it can survive critical scrutiny in the full light of rational reflection. Long before I first heard of Socrates and his dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living, I troubled the teacher of my First Communion class and irritated the other children in it by insisting that I could not see how anyone could fit into the small dimensions of the Communion bread. Since I began studying philosophy twenty-five years ago, I have altered and refined my beliefs on many points. I do not expect this process to stop short of senility or death whichever comes first.

Since I do not ask readers to grant tenets of religious faith as grounds for the arguments in this book, when it is necessary to refer to religious beliefs I use the third person and the past tense. For example, "Christians believed that. . .," not "I believe that. . .," and still less "It is true that. . . ." Lest anyone be misled by the fact that I refer to propositions of Christian faith in the course of philosophical arguments without affirming them, I perhaps should make it clear here that I personally believe what the Roman Catholic Church believes and teaches. I make no reservations, but I do point out that most Catholics believe a great deal which the Church does not

believe and teach, and I am not bound to agree with them in these extra beliefs.

If anyone thinks that an author's philosophical integrity is called into question by an affirmation of faith such as I make, I suggest that he ask himself whether the faith-positions of authors who wholly reject religious faith—whether the rejection is stated explicitly or not—put *their* integrity and objectivity in question. If anyone is really neutral on the matters treated in this book, is his thought likely to be worth considering seriously? If anyone claims to be strictly impartial, should a reader believe such a claim? And if no claim to neutrality should be accepted, is it fair to assume that only those who reject religious faith can be objective? Such an assumption would prejudice the whole discussion from the outset. I suspect some such assumption as this often is made by persons who feel it is necessary to protect reason against faith.

However, it seems to me that a philosopher who is also a religious believer should not feel it necessary to protect either faith or reason against the other, while a philosopher who is not a religious believer should have enough confidence in reason that he will not try to exclude from the philosophical arena those who openly avow their religious faith. Both the religious believer and the nonbeliever should be more firmly committed to truth than to their beliefs, because beliefs should be held only insofar as they are thought to be true.

An interesting exchange between two contemporary philosophers clarifies the point I am making. Antony Flew argues in an article, "The Presumption of Atheism," that in philosophical theology the presumption should be on the side of nonbelief. The burden of proof should be on the theist, Flew thinks, because the theist asserts propositions which are not evident. Flew points out that theists used to admit as much; Thomas Aquinas, for example, proposed five ways of proving the existence of God.¹

Donald Evans, in response to Flew, points out that a theist should not be expected to give up his faith as a condition for engaging in arguments in philosophical theology. Evans makes an important distinction between a "procedural presumption" and a "personal presumption." The believer cannot take his faith-positions for granted in the argument without begging the questions he ought to treat philosophically. However, a believer need not deny the faith-positions which he forebears to assert and puts in question for the sake of argument.²

Flew comments on Evans's response, accepting Evans's distinction between procedural and personal presumptions. But Flew adds a further important clarification. If a person is to be reasonable, he must have reasons for believing what he does. If a believer enters into philosophical argument, he should not simply play a game, without any personal commitments. The

game should be for keeps. A responsible person must be ready to accept the outcome required by reasons. He need not concede the role of judge to an adversary in argument, but he should play this role himself. One who argues philosophically commits himself to forego beliefs which he comes to realize cannot be sustained by reason.³

I think Flew and Evans both make some good points, and their exchange suggests several other related points which are worth making.

First, in the issue whether an uncaused entity exists or not, the procedural presumption is initially in favor of the person who doubts its existence. That there is such an entity is not obvious, either in the way that "This is a printed page" or in the way that "Two and two equals four" is obvious. Thus in this case there is a presumption in favor of atheism; it is unreasonable to posit entities arbitrarily.

However, it is worth noticing that once a plausible argument is proposed leading to the conclusion that there is an uncaused entity, the presumption shifts. It is unreasonable to reject the conclusion of a plausible argument unless one can show that the premises are false or the reasoning fallacious. Some critics of arguments for the existence of God write as though mere speculation that there might be a fallacy in the argument—even without a clear showing that there is one—suffices to maintain the presumption on the side of atheism.⁴ This position seems to me dogmatic.

Second, if one can establish that there is a God, and the issue is about some other problem in philosophy of religion, the presumption is not necessarily in favor of the nonbeliever. For example, if a believer and a nonbeliever both admit that there are certain extraordinary phenomena, and if the believer wishes to explain these phenomena as miraculous, while the nonbeliever wishes to explain the same set of facts naturalistically, both parties to the dispute are offering hypotheses. Both hypotheses deserve to be judged by the rules of inductive logic; to establish a presumption in favor of either side, without grounding that presumption in a previously established principle, is simply dogmatic.⁵

Similarly, when we find language being used by many people in a way they think expresses important truths, there is a presumption in favor of the meaningfulness of such language. A nonbeliever can put forward reasons for thinking that various samples of religious discourse are nevertheless meaningless. His argument can shift the presumption. If the arguments pointing to meaninglessness are plausibly answered, however, the presumption once more is with the meaningfulness of the language in question. If anyone assumes that language which is actually used is meaningless until its coherence can be *demonstrated*, it is fair to ask him to demonstrate the coherence of *any* interesting philosophical or theological statement—for instance, his own statement of his position.

Where it is a question of the personal presumption, rather than the procedural assumption, Flew is correct, I think, in holding that one must take philosophical argument seriously. The believer and the nonbeliever must play for keeps. However, the personal presumptions of the believer and the nonbeliever differ. Flew seems not to notice this, perhaps because he thinks of philosophy too much on the model of an adversary procedure such as a legal trial rather than as a common effort of reasonable men to draw nearer to the truth.

It is reasonable for each person to continue to believe what he already does believe, unless he finds good reasons for altering his belief. The personal presumption of the believer does not allow him to ignore arguments against what he believes. However, it is not unreasonable for a believer to continue to believe what he cannot prove, so long as no weighty reasons are given for changing.

If anyone denies this, either he assumes *a priori* that religious faith as such is irrational or he condemns most human convictions. The *a priori* assumption against the rationality of religious faith would be in line with the personal presumption which is reasonable for a nonbeliever, but he cannot reasonably expect his personal presumption to be shared by a believer. (Perhaps Flew in responding to Evans overlooks the relativity of the reasonableness of personal presumptions.) A general position against the reasonableness of continuing to believe what one believes, even though one cannot support it with direct reasons, would condemn most human convictions as unreasonable, for most human convictions are based on authorities of one sort or another. A child believes his parents and teachers; an adult believes scientists, experts, historians, journalists, and so on. For only a few beliefs does anyone have good reasons which he can produce on demand, and no one can produce good reasons for all his beliefs.

If I know and trust a person and if he tells me something which he is in a better position than I to know, then I have a reason to believe him. In fact, it would be irrational to doubt what he says unless I have good reasons for thinking it false; still, I may not have any reasons other than my faith in the person for assenting to the truth of what he says.

Someone might ask what a person who shares my position would do if he encountered an apparently cogent argument against something he believed. This question is legitimate; moreover, it is important.

My answer is that in such cases—they do occur—I proceed with a threefold inquiry. First, is the argument really cogent? Second, is its conclusion really incompatible with what I believe? Third, is what I think I believe what I really believe? The third point requires explanation. No Christian holds his own current grasp of faith to be the sole norm of faith. Some Christians who encounter difficulties go back to the Bible and study it prayerfully. Roman

Catholics can do that too. But they also investigate what *the Church* believes and teaches. In this investigation one must interpret documents. In doing so one need not be simpleminded. The proper strategy is not to twist the language to fit one's wishes, but to recognize the considerable openness inherent in Catholic faith and to make the most of this openness in a creative way. If the argument which started the process of reflection going really does cogently demonstrate a truth incompatible with what one thought one believed, one must refine and develop one's faith to make room for this truth.

My method of dealing with an apparently cogent argument against something I hold on faith might seem evasive. It might be compared unfavorably with the rational procedure of natural science, in which one imagines the investigator giving up his theory the moment he encounters a fact which falsifies it. This model is much too simple even for the rationality of the experimental scientist, however, for a theory is much more frequently refined than given up when the facts seem to falsify it. Moreover, anomalies abound, and a scientist does not give up his theory in the face of them, so long as it holds together fairly well and there is no better alternative theory at hand.

Single bits of evidence against a complex theory, single arguments—or even many arguments—against a system of belief do not automatically render one's confidence in the theory or system of belief irrational. Religious faith is in many ways less vulnerable than any scientific theory. Doctrines which believers themselves do not claim to comprehend are not easily falsified; moral precepts which are coherent with a fundamental worldview and a basic commitment are not easily shown irrational. Certain historical facts are relevant to Christian faith, but historical-critical scholarship hardly seems to offer any plausible reasons for denying the essential facts, except to the extent that such scholarship proceeds upon assumptions—for example, the exclusion of miracles—which believers need not accept. It must be admitted that a religious faith can box itself in by too many overly specific commitments; some forms of fundamentalism make this mistake. However, traditional Jewish and Christian faith on the whole avoided unnecessary commitments, and adherents of these rather flexible systems have a great deal of room for maneuver when they encounter difficulties.

One final point. Readers will observe that I am more indebted to Thomas Aquinas than to any other previous thinker. This observation, together with the fact that I profess the Roman Catholic faith, might lead some readers to the mistaken conclusion that the philosophy I present is simply a variety of thomism. I have drawn much from Thomas's thought. However, I do not regard myself as a thomist. I do not assume anything true because Thomas holds it. I use him much as many empiricists use Hume—to the extent that his thought seems sound and that it can stand on its own philosophical feet.

It might be helpful to warn readers familiar with Thomas's thought of

important points on which I do not agree with him. Thomas sometimes treats being (*esse*) as if it were an essential nature. "Ipsum esse subsistens" serves as a quasi-definition of God in attempts to demonstrate properties such as omnipotence.⁶ I do not think this procedure correct. I also think that Thomas follows Aristotle too far. I do not think one can argue to an unmoved mover and legitimately call it "God." I do not think Aristotle's theory of substance is altogether sound, especially not in application to the human person. I do not think the human soul should be considered an aristotelian substantial form.⁷ Moreover, I do not think the philosophical arguments Thomas uses to try to show that there is knowledge and freedom in God are sound.

I also pick up a number of hints from Thomas which I carry much further than he might have wished. Among these are the descriptive metaphysics of the four orders in chapter fourteen, the way of negation in chapter fifteen, the doctrine of relational predication in chapter seventeen, and the theory of divine inefficiency in chapter twenty-one. The position I take on a Christian's hope in chapter twenty-five goes well beyond anything Thomas says.

There are still some followers of Thomas Aquinas—as there are followers of Wittgenstein and of Marx—who think that their school has a corner on truth. But none of the scholasticisms seems to me to be so final as members of the various schools think. At the same time many who reflect upon the plurality of philosophies and the conflicts among them are quick to reduce every philosophic effort to a mere point of view, a personal option. Such pluralism really is a form of dogmatism—a relativistic dogmatism which makes an absolute of a sceptical rejection of absolute truth. I do not think the problems about which philosophers disagree can be swept away so easily. Some apparent disagreements can be dissolved, but real disagreements can be overcome only by a sincere effort to uncover the mistakes made by either or both sides.

As inquiry goes on, every person must take responsibility for his own beliefs. No philosophical authority can arbitrate the differences among all beliefs. Only a position identical with philosophy itself could play such a role. But philosophy is not a position, it is a quest; it is the persistence of reason. A man cannot escape the responsibility, imposed upon him by the fact that he has a rational mind, of deciding for himself what he ought to believe and of criticizing his own beliefs. This responsibility is to truth, not to any position, not to other men. The more perfectly this responsibility is fulfilled, the more probably will consensus be achieved.

2: A Child Learns to Talk about God

Preliminary remarks

In his “Lectures on Religious Belief” Wittgenstein remarks that “God” is one of the earliest words learned by children. He recalls learning it in connection with certain religious objects. Asked whether he then knew the meaning of the word, Wittgenstein answers that he would say:

“Yes and no. I did learn what it didn’t mean. I made myself understand. I could answer questions, understand questions when they were put in different ways—and in that sense could be said to understand.”¹

Reading this description, I ask myself whether it corresponds to my own memories of learning to talk about God and find that it does not.

Undoubtedly, everyone’s experience differs. However, I recall my childhood rather clearly and find it easy to reconstruct conversations and thinking which occurred in a more diffuse form around the time I was five years old. I decided to include some of this reconstruction here, as an example of *a* way in which a child *can* learn to talk about God. I omit from the example many memories of the use of the word “God” in specifically religious contexts, because although the word picks up important aspects of its meaning in such contexts, I do not think these aspects of the meaning of “God” could stand alone, while those aspects of the meaning which I include in the example can stand alone.²

My learning to talk about God involved an interplay of faith and reason. I first began to understand “God,” as I recall, when the word was used in answers to questions I asked about the movement of heavenly bodies. I

accepted the truth of the answers on faith; my mother answered my questions in light of her own religious faith. But reflection upon initial answers led to further questions, and these to further answers. At each stage reason suggested questions to which faith supplied answers.

This interplay, established early in childhood, perhaps explains the genesis of my view of the relationship between faith and reason, outlined in chapter one. The example of a child's learning to talk about God also will be put to use in chapter three.

One striking difference between Wittgenstein's childhood experience and mine is pointed up by his explanation of the remark quoted above:

If the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of. One said, had to say, that one *believed* in the existence, and if one did not believe, this was regarded as something bad. Normally if I did not believe in the existence of something no one would think there was anything wrong in this.³

I never felt I had to say I "believed" in the existence of God; I always thought I *knew* that God exists, and I was unaware that this knowledge was a product of an interplay of faith and reason. I cannot recall any situation which could have suggested to me that not believing in God would be something bad until I learned in school about the existence of atheists and agnostics. I remember that when I first learned of such persons, I was puzzled by *their* existence, for it seemed strange to me that anyone could doubt or deny something so elementary as that God exists.

Because the following example involves reconstruction and is intended as illustration rather than as autobiography, I cast it in the form of a third-person narrative.

The example

It was summer and the ground was warm. The moon had not yet risen; the sky was clear and very black. A little boy lay on the grass in front of his home and gazed up at the stars. He was watching for shooting stars. Earlier in the summer the whole family had watched fireworks set off to celebrate July the Fourth by people from the city. Now there were only shooting stars, but they were not too bad. In between watching shooting stars he scanned the sky, making out the constellations he knew.

A few days later, after dinner, he was standing by the side door of the house, looking at the sunset. "Look, Mama, how pretty the sun is!"

"Yes, the sun is going down, and it is a beautiful sunset this evening." The little boy gazed at the horizon as the edge of the sun sank below it. He thought about the shooting stars.

“Mama, what makes the sun go down?”

“Why, God makes the sun go down.”

“But the sun is very big. Why doesn’t it fall fast like a shooting star?”

“God doesn’t let it fall fast. The shooting stars fall fast but they get all burned up, like the cinders in the fireplace. God wants to keep the sun, so it can come up tomorrow. So he doesn’t let it fall fast.”

“God must be very big and strong.”

“Oh, he is. He is much bigger and stronger than you can imagine.”

“Is he bigger and stronger than Daddy?”

“Yes,” she laughed, “much bigger and stronger than Daddy.”

“Some God!”

Daddy brought home a dozen doughnuts. Each member of the family was entitled to two of them. The little boy took two doughnuts and put them on the table at his place. Finally it was time to eat them. “If we are very careful when we eat the doughnuts to save the holes in the middle,” one of the older children teased, “Daddy can take them back and get free doughnuts.”

The little boy knew what “free” meant. He began to eat his first doughnut very carefully. Soon there was only a thin ring of crust left. He was quite pleased with himself. “Here is a hole!”

“Oh, no. You have to eat *all* of the doughnut and save the hole. You haven’t eaten it all yet.”

The little boy ate carefully, but as he finished the last of the doughnut, the hole was all gone too. He took his second doughnut and tried again.

“You have to be more careful. You weren’t careful enough last time, and you lost the hole.”

He ate very, very carefully. But as he finished the doughnut the hole vanished with it. He was frustrated. “When you eat *all* of the doughnut, the hole goes away too,” he said with some irritation, realizing he had been kidded. Everyone laughed.

After dinner, the little boy watched the sun go down again. He was thinking about what Mama said about God. “Mama, if God gets tired out, won’t the sun fall down fast like a shooting star, and get burned up like a cinder?”

“God never gets tired out. He doesn’t have to work to make the sun go down the way he wants it to. He just thinks how it should be, and it does what he wants.”

The little boy thought about this for a while. When *he* thought how he wanted something to be, it didn’t get to be that way. And Daddy would talk about how something should be, as when the grass needed to be cut, but then one of the bigger boys had to cut it. If God made things be the way he wanted just by thinking about them, would they stay that way if he went to sleep? “Mama, you remember the hole in the doughnut?”

“Yes,” she laughed, “it went away when you ate the doughnut all up, because there really isn’t anything there.”

“You said God makes things be the way he wants just by thinking about them. When he goes to sleep, why don’t things go away like the hole in the doughnut?”

“Because God doesn’t go to sleep. He doesn’t have a body like we do. We get sleepy because our bodies get tired out. But God doesn’t have a body. He just thinks, so he never gets sleepy.”

“God doesn’t have a body?”

“No, and that is why we can’t see him. But he is right here with us all the time.”

The little boy thought about this for many days. God must be like the wind. You can’t see the wind, but it is there. Even inside the house, if you run fast, you can feel the wind. And if you blow hard on your hand, you can feel the wind you make. God must be like the wind. He is here with us, but he doesn’t have a body, and so we cannot see him.

The little boy went with Mama to stay with Auntie Min. Auntie Min was dying, and Mama had to care for her. Auntie Min did not seem to know the little boy; she used to give him cookies when he came to visit. But now she was in bed and she didn’t seem to know him. She kept talking and singing; sometimes she would cry and scream, and try to get out of bed and fall down. Mama said Auntie Min was dreaming even when she was awake. Finally, one afternoon, Auntie Min was quiet. The little boy was there with Mama when Auntie Min became very still.

Mama went to the dresser and took a mirror. She rubbed it on her dress, and then held it very close to Auntie Min’s face over her nose and mouth. Mama looked at the mirror. “Auntie Min is dead,” Mama said. “She isn’t breathing.”

The priest had been there that morning, but he came back. The doctor came too. Then some men came and they brought some strange things and worked on Auntie Min in her room far into the night. The little boy was supposed to be asleep, but he stayed awake and listened as long as he could. Finally he went to sleep. In the morning he was awake before anyone else and went downstairs to the living room. The furniture had been moved around. In front of the windows was a long thing with a little step in front of it. The little boy stood on the step and looked inside. Auntie Min was there and she seemed to be sleeping peacefully. The little boy touched her. If he could wake her up, perhaps she would be all right now, and she would give him some cookies.

Auntie Min felt cold. She didn’t move at all. She didn’t wake up. The little boy remembered that Mama had said Auntie Min is dead. He knew what

“dead” meant; he had seen plenty of dead flies and dead trees and he once had a pet rabbit which died. Auntie Min was not breathing, Mama had said. God was not there any more. She was cold, like a cinder from the fire which burned in the fireplace yesterday but had been allowed to go out in the evening. God must have stopped thinking about Auntie Min, and she had fallen dead, like a shooting star.

The little boy got out some of his toys and began to play quietly. In a little while one of his other aunts came down and found him playing there. She scolded him and made him go to another room, at the back of the house. Soon Mama came down and began to make some breakfast.

“He was right there in the living room, playing in front of the coffin. I made him go play back here.”

“All right. I’ll tell him not to go in the living room again. He doesn’t understand. Anyway, he didn’t disturb anyone.”

Mama was not angry with the little boy at all. She snuggled him and told him to come and eat some breakfast in the kitchen. The other aunt had left.

“I wasn’t bad, was I Mama? I tried to wake Auntie Min up, but she won’t wake up. Then I remembered you said she was dead.”

“No, you weren’t bad. Never mind.”

“Auntie Min isn’t breathing. She’s cold.”

“That’s what happens when someone dies.”

“God isn’t there. He must have stopped thinking about her and let her fall.”

“Oh, no. God is there. He hasn’t stopped thinking about Auntie Min. She was very sick and she hurt a great deal. So God has taken her to live with him.”

“She lost all her breath.”

“Yes, her body is dead. But she is still alive, with God. We can’t see her, just as we can’t see God. But she is alive with him.”

“She lost all her breath, and it went out into the wind, with God. She is in the wind now?”

“No, she isn’t in the wind.”

“But I thought God is like the wind. You can’t see the wind, but it is there.”

“No, God isn’t like the wind. We can *feel* the wind. We can’t feel God, we can’t see him.”

“Then he isn’t there!”

“He is, but we only know him by thinking, because he doesn’t have a body, and he is not like the wind.”

The little boy thought about this for some time. God is not *there*. He is like the hole in the doughnut. It isn’t there either. If everyone and all the animals and insects and trees and flowers were dead, God would not be there

anymore, just like the hole in the doughnut, which goes away when you eat up the doughnut. "Mama, if everyone and all the animals and insects and trees and flowers were dead, God wouldn't be there anymore, would he?"

"Yes, he would. You know he makes them all be, just by thinking. He makes the sun set and lets the shooting stars fall, just by thinking. A long time ago, there were no people or any living things, but God thought and wanted them, and they came to be. A long, long time ago, long before God made living things, there were no stars, there was no sun. The ground and the sky were not here. But God always was, and he thought of all he wanted to be, and everything started and came to be as he wanted it to be."

"Then God is not like the hole in the doughnut."

"No," she laughed. "The hole in the doughnut isn't really something there. We only think about the hole because the doughnut is there. But the hole doesn't make the doughnut be there. We think of God because we see the stars and sun, and people and living things, and the wind and everything there is. God makes everything be there by thinking of it and wanting it. He is real, and he always was, before anything else came to be, and he will always be."

"Will everything go away, like the hole in the doughnut? Is that what happened to Auntie Min?"

"No," she said gently, seeing how worried the little boy was. "God didn't make things to let them go away. He loves us, and when we die we go to live with him. That is what has happened to Auntie Min."

"Then *where* is she? Where does God live?"

"God doesn't live here or there. He isn't something here or there. He is everywhere, and he is right here with us. But he lives in a different way, a way we don't understand. We can only think of God."

"Auntie Min is living with God?"

"Yes, but in a way we don't understand."

"Is she right here with us too?"

"I think so," she said slowly and thoughtfully. "I don't think Auntie Min is far away from us. But we can be sure she is living with God. She is not sick any more and she is happy now."

3: The Necessity for Reasoning toward God

Introduction

In part two I will try to show how a sound argument can proceed from something in the world of experience and ordinary, nonreligious talk to the conclusion that there is an uncaused entity. But is such an argument necessary? Many thoughtful persons who believe in God think not. There are various versions of the position that argument from the world to God is superfluous and perhaps even dangerous, and there is a vast literature articulating, attacking, and defending this position.

Even if there were cogent reasons for thinking that it is not necessary to reason toward God, the argument developed in part two could be sound and interesting, but it would not be very important. I think that it is necessary to reason from the world toward God. Still, it seems to me that those who hold the opposite view make some points worth considering, and that a brief examination of some of the reasons proposed for this view will throw further light on the relationship between faith and reason. Therefore, although I cannot hope to do full justice to them, I wish to take a quick look at some attempts to articulate and defend the position that reasoning from the world toward God is unnecessary.

This position takes at least four forms: first, that the reality of God is somehow evident, and so there is no need to prove that God exists; second, that the reality of God can only be accepted by a commitment, and that reasoning merely gives this commitment a pseudorational appearance; third, that the reality of God can only be encountered in his free self-revelation, and that any attempt to reason about God is a product of sinful presumption; and

fourth, that the reality of God is obvious to anyone who reflects clear-headedly on what he means by "God," and that reasoning from the world toward God, even if possible, is unnecessarily indirect.

Is the existence of God evident?

To some people it seems evident that God exists. What is puzzling to such persons, as it was to me when I was a child, is that there are people who doubt or deny the existence of God. Thomas Aquinas considers the view that the proposition that God exists is so obvious that its contradictory is simply unthinkable. He begins his criticism of this opinion:

In part, the above opinion arises from the custom by which from their earliest days people are brought up to hear and to call upon the name of God. Custom, and especially custom in a child, comes to have the force of nature. As a result, what the mind is steeped in from childhood it clings to very firmly, as something known naturally and self-evidently.¹

The point Thomas is making can be restated in contemporary terms by saying that the seeming obviousness of the reality of God arises from the fact that belief in God is a product of conditioning; the conviction caused by this conditioning is strong because the conditioning began in early childhood and continued for a long time. The example of the child in chapter two could be used to support this point. The child learns how to use the word "God" by hearing the word used in answer to certain questions which he asks. The meaning of the word is built up from the context in which these questions are asked and answered.

Someone who thinks that the reality of God is obvious might object that although the child learns from others how to use the word "God," he himself must form the idea which the word expresses. The little boy anticipated the answer to the extent that he asked a question; perhaps he only needed help to express his insights. When children ask about various objects—"What is this?"—they often seem only to seek the name; when they are told the word for the object, they seem to be satisfied, although this sort of answer clearly adds nothing to what they already knew about the object itself.

This argument does point to a fact worth noticing. The child is not passive in the learning process. But the manner in which a child learns about God is quite different from the manner in which he learns about objects perceptible to the senses. The existence of the latter is evident. The question a child asks which elicits an answer using the word "God" is not the question "What is this?" asked about an experienced object. The question "Why does such-and-such occur?" is asked with respect to a state of affairs which arouses wonder. (This is not to say that children only learn to use the word "God" in this

way, but they can do so; the child whose experience is described in chapter two did so.)

A "why" question begins from something obvious, but it asks for what is not obvious. Answers to "why" questions need not be—and perhaps never are—self-evident. "Why" questions seek reasons; they are requests for explanations of some sort.² When a child begins asking questions of this kind, we know that the child has begun to reason. Reasoning goes beyond the obvious, points to something not obvious, and asks: "What is the nonobvious factor which explains the given state of affairs?"

A child who learns about God in the way exemplified in chapter two is engaged in a reasoning process. The child's questions reveal that he is "putting two and two together." At the same time the child is being conditioned. The answers he receives to his questions are not the only possible answers. Mother might have said that the sun sets because the earth rotates on its axis; she might have illustrated this answer with a globe and a light bulb. This answer would have led to quite different further questions. Of course, the child might have asked some other question which would have elicited an answer involving the word "God."

In any case the question is likely to be one which presupposes reasoning, not one of the form "What is this?" about something directly experienced. In English the word "God" is not the name of a particular object given in experience, because "God" names an object of worship, and English-speaking people do not usually worship material objects. We may doubt that members of other civilizations who regard particular objects—for example, idols, the sun, and so on—as divine altogether identify the perceptible object with the reality of what they call "God."

Someone who holds that the existence of God is obvious might argue that he "sees" God present in the beauty and goodness of experienced things. The child described in chapter two, it might be argued, really has an experience of God as part of his experience of the beauty of the sunset. One's attention must be called even to what is obvious; thus the fact that children learn from the suggestions of parents and teachers does not eliminate the possibility that the reality of God is evident to all. Parents and teachers themselves learned how to use the word "God," and the language of religion is not a technical language, like that of nuclear physics, but is part of ordinary language. One finds talk about some sort of divinity in every human culture. God is part of the common-sense world. Thus, the argument concludes, the reality of God must be obvious to anyone willing to pay attention to it.

This position has been developed systematically by a number of philosophers who maintain that one can have immediate experience of God, not as part of the world, but as a distinct reality given along with the world of objects. Norman Kemp Smith, for example, holds: "We never experience the

Divine sheerly in and by itself; we experience the Divine solely through and in connection with what is other than the Divine.”³ Smith suggests that we experience God immediately with our experience of the material world much as we experience other minds immediately with our experience of other person’s bodies. Dom Iltyd Trethowan speaks of a *contuition* of God; he maintains that God is immediately experienced along with experiences of moral and existential reality, including in particular one’s sense of one’s own contingency and finitude.⁴

Perhaps John Hick’s development of this approach is the fullest and most plausible. Hick maintains that the natural world is not a set of brute facts, but a world of facts shot through with meanings. The moral order is mediated by the natural world, but the former is not reducible to the latter. One can enter neither the natural world nor the human, moral world without a personal act of interpretation of the given meanings. This interpretative act is not super-added to experience, according to Hick; rather, it is constitutive of experience. In a similar way, there is an encompassing situation of being in the presence of God and belonging within an ongoing divine purpose. This situation is related to the human world as the human world itself is related to the natural world. Thus we experience God by interpreting meanings given with and mediated by other dimensions of significant data, but we do not reason to the existence of God. Hick concludes:

Thus the primary religious perception, or basic act of religious interpretation, is not to be described as either a reasoned conclusion or an unreasoned hunch that there is a God. It is, putatively, an apprehension of the divine presence within the believer’s human experience. It is not an inference to a general truth, but a “divine-human encounter,” a mediated meeting with the living God.⁵

Hick’s conception of access to God by experience, it must be noted, does not rest upon specifically “religious experiences,” such as mystics and some other people claim to have.

However, religious experience also sometimes is alleged to provide immediate evidence of the existence of God. The experiences cited range all the way from the awareness of the presence of God experienced during prayer or a liturgical celebration, through the experience of divine grace some people have when they are converted to Christian faith, to the peculiar experience of mystics such as St. John of the Cross.⁶

But there are serious difficulties involved in any appeal to specifically religious experiences. If one admits the testimony of all who claim to have had mystical experiences, excluding none in advance as false witnesses, mystics disagree about *what* it is that they experience; moreover, many mystics do not claim to experience anything Jews or Christians would call

“God.”⁷ More run-of-the-mill religious experiences which purportedly involve an “encounter with God” also seem questionable if they are offered as instances of immediate evidence of divine reality, for if the analogy with human interpersonal relationships is preserved, then God is reduced to the human level, while if the analogy is not preserved, the meaning of “encounter” becomes obscure.⁸ So far as other religious experiences are concerned, it seems fair to ask whether persons who are not deeply religious, or not religious at all, might not have similar *experiences*, which would be articulated in other ways—for example, by saying that one “has a strange feeling of confronting a great power,” “is aware of having an unusual sense of security and encouragement,” or something of the sort.

In other words, some experiences are called “religious” by those who believe in God and who therefore refer the origin or some aspect of the content of such experience to God. The experiences themselves do not reach the whole reality which these believers themselves would call “God”; the reality adumbrated by such experiences might be merely subjective or it might be an undiscovered natural factor.

A believer who claims to know God directly in religious experiences will be challenged by nonbelievers to show that the content of these so-called religious experiences is not susceptible to psychological or other naturalistic account. Unless it is possible to establish an independent ground for referring such experiences to a reality distinct from the self and the world, the nonbeliever is likely to regard these religious experiences much as healthy persons regard the hallucinations of the mentally ill.⁹

It seems to me that where it is a case of claiming specifically religious experiences as instances of the immediate awareness of God, the objections of nonbelievers against using these experiences *as evidence* are decisive. Nonbelievers can admit the phenomena, yet consistently challenge the believer’s interpretation of the phenomena, for the religious believer brings to his interpretation of the facts a framework of beliefs and expectations. If the believer does not discount this framework, his use of the experience as evidence is question-begging; if he does discount it, the residual experience will not be sufficient to prove that God transcends experience. For example, I sometimes experience the presence of Christ while participating in the Sacrifice of the Mass; however, I can imagine that if I did not believe in Christ’s presence in the Eucharist I might have a very similar experience, but take it to be of *someone else*.

John Hick’s position does not rely upon specifically religious experiences, but I do not think it fares better against sceptical criticism. If awareness of the divine depends upon a voluntary act of interpretation, as Hick maintains, it is hard to understand in what sense this awareness is by acquaintance, or

noninferential knowledge. Hick's problem is to establish that there is a distinct *referent* for his talk about God; he seems to assume that there is a genuine viewpoint from which the world and human life can be *seen as* in the presence of God and under his providence. This assumption is natural enough for a believer, but an unbeliever who does not "see" the religious realities which are taken for granted by a believer is in no position to "see" everything else in their light.¹⁰

If the claim that God can be immediately experienced is not accepted, how can one explain its plausibility to many thoughtful persons? I think the answer is that nonformalized, spontaneous inferences easily lead to the conclusion that there is a possible referent for the word "God," and nonformalized inferences also enter into experience and shape the way one habitually "sees" the world. A brief explanation of these points is necessary.

Informal inference which is not articulate about its own logic often, if not always, precedes logically articulated argument. I imagine that every scientist and philosopher has had the experience of thinking about a problem and reaching a conclusion, only to find it difficult to articulate his reasoning. Students beginning in logic can find a correct solution to many problems, but they often are at a loss to explain how they reached it. Similarly, when beginning logic students sense that an argument is fallacious, they often cannot tell what is wrong with it. Perhaps no one who thinks philosophically about the question of the existence of God initially reaches the conclusion that God exists by a formal argument. Thus, like the child in chapter two, many people who think they *know* that God exists as a matter of immediate evidence perhaps only conclude by a nonformal inference that there is a principle on which the world of experience depends, and learn by faith to identify this principle with the object of worship called "God."¹¹

Informal inference also enters into experience and shapes the way in which one habitually perceives the world. It is notorious that witnesses called to testify in legal cases often state what they *infer* when asked to tell what they *observed*. For example, a witness who observed a defendant receive a telephone call, apparently become angry, hang up the telephone, take a gun from a drawer, and leave the room hastily, might testify (until interrupted by defense counsel): "The defendant became enraged by something which the deceased said to him on the telephone, slammed the phone down, grabbed a gun, and rushed out of the house to kill him." Less dramatically, a policeman observes a person displaying many signs of alcoholic intoxication, perceives a drunk, but might nevertheless be dealing with a diabetic having an insulin reaction. One use of the expression "see *x* as *F*" is in cases in which *x* is interpreted in accord with expectations by nonformal inferences: if *x* has properties *G*, *H*, . . . , then *x* is *F*; *x* has properties *G*, *H*, . . . ; therefore, *x* is

F. This is the pattern of reasoning a physician uses in diagnosing cases of disease which he does not immediately recognize.

It follows that religious believers can have—and should be expected to have—an awareness of God which seems to them direct. Yet this awareness does not show that God's reality is immediately experienced. If, as I am suggesting, the awareness is based upon nonformal inference, it ought to be possible to articulate the inferential pattern and its steps, just as a physician can articulate his diagnosis to a colleague.

Must the existence of God be accepted on faith?

William James holds that the reality of God must be accepted on faith if it is to be accepted at all. James, considering Kant's criticism of classical arguments for the existence of God decisive, regards any attempt to prove that God exists as an unnecessary and futile attempt to endow a nonrational commitment with an aura of rationality. James says:

An intellect perplexed and baffled, yet a trustful sense of presence—such is the situation of the man who is sincere with himself and with the facts, but who remains religious still.¹²

James also maintains that refusal to believe is a self-fulfilling pessimistic expectation, while the will to believe, although not rationally justified in any direct way, is grounded in the hope which it makes possible. If one accepts James's position that one can never be certain that he knows the truth about *anything*, then his theory about the need for faith as a way to God will be more plausible than if one rejects this supposition.¹³

Wittgenstein seems to take a position somewhat similar to James's. Wittgenstein admits that religious beliefs are somehow meaningful, and he does not assert that they are false. But he rejects as ludicrous any attempt to make religious beliefs appear *reasonable*: "If this is religious belief, then it's all superstition."¹⁴

Some followers of Wittgenstein claim to find in his thought the position that religion is a form of life which is self-enclosed. Within the language-game appropriate to a religious form of life the question whether God exists does not come up. As a self-enclosed system, each form of life has its own criteria of rationality and intelligibility. Thus belief—a continuing acceptance of the religious form of life—is necessary and sufficient to settle the question of God's reality.¹⁵

There is a difference of opinion as to whether this position—which has been called "Wittgensteinian fideism"—is a correct interpretation of Wittgenstein's own thought.¹⁶ In any case, the position has been attacked for its

relativistic implications. If each religion is a self-enclosed form of life, then every religious system is equally valid, equally immune from criticism, and equally without reference to anything beyond itself.¹⁷ This lack of transcendent reference is explicit in D. Z. Phillips, a leading Wittgensteinian fideist. He argues that Christians learn in context to forgive, to thank, and to love. In this way “the believer is participating in the reality of God; *this is what we mean by God’s reality*” (italics his).¹⁸ Phillips also maintains that such participation in God’s reality constitutes human immortality, but he holds that neither one who believes in eternal life nor one who disbelieves in it will survive his own death.¹⁹

One might attempt to develop a view more plausible than Phillips’s along lines suggested by Wittgenstein’s remarks. Instead of regarding a religion as a self-enclosed form of life it might be more plausible to think of religion as a universal phenomenon which plays a part in all forms of life. Every culture has some sort of religion; every ordinary language has a word corresponding to “God.” This being so, perhaps Wittgenstein only means to point out that religious language is irreducible to other language-games. Everything talked about in ordinary language has some sort of reality. Thus, God undoubtedly is real. The important point is not to confuse God’s reality, which is unique, with the reality of physical objects, human persons, and so on.²⁰

One answer to this sort of argument for God’s reality is that although religious language is part of ordinary language, God is not part of the common-sense world. Many people today do not regard the reality of God as evident; they either doubt it or deny it. Many people would answer the child’s initial question narrated in chapter two with elements of a scientific worldview instead of with a religious answer. Many critics of religious belief assert that most children believe what their parents believe and that most individuals would believe differently if they had been exposed to a different early training. Moreover, various psychological and sociological explanations of religious belief have been proposed. These suggest that religion might be a widespread illusion, based on such factors as human fear of the power of nature, wonder about unknown forces, projection of human ideals into a “supernatural” being, or projection of an idealization of one’s father.

These attempts to explain religious beliefs and practices have *prima facie* plausibility. The example of a child’s learning to talk about God in chapter two probably is not typical, but I think that most religious believers would admit it as possible. The child began with an anthropomorphic conception of the explanatory factor called “God” because his mother’s initial answer led to such a conception. Even when the child was led beyond anthropomorphism, he still conceived God as a natural cause or force. In identifying God with breath or wind he reached a conception common in many primitive religions. Important psychological factors, relating to fear of death and other emotions,

were involved in the developments by which the child finally came to think of God as a reality unlike human persons yet somehow personal, hidden but powerful, mysterious but loving.

Of course, it is too facile to say that children grow up believing what their parents believe. The fact is that today many persons whose parents were very religious and who were given an extensive religious formation are non-believers. Also, some persons brought up without any religious formation eventually become firm believers. Changes from one mode of religious belief to another also occur. But despite these facts religious belief might be explained psychologically.

Moreover, a psychological explanation of the fact of religious belief does not preclude its being true. A person who has paranoid delusions might also be a victim of genuine persecution. Psychological explanations of religion are devastating only to those who base everything on unsupported belief and incommunicable experience. The religious believer also can point out that there might well be psychological factors to account for unbelief and the efforts of unbelievers to explain away God. For instance, a believer might suggest that those who reject religious faith are trying to reconstruct reality in such a way that an amoral way of life can be rationalized and their responsibility to anyone or anything beyond their own desires negated.

The religious believer can argue that if a mother answers her child's questions about natural phenomena in purely naturalistic terms, she also is conveying belief, not evident truth. People are likely to suppose that the rotation of the earth is evident because they have been taught this explanation of the phenomena from childhood, but the currently accepted explanation of the apparent movements of heavenly bodies is really a conclusion drawn from arguments which few people understand.

The preceding argument tends to show that naturalistic theories which reduce God to some immanent factor are not as plausible—let alone cogent—as they are often thought to be. But a more serious problem remains. How can a person who claims that God is knowable neither by immediate experience nor by argument establish any *possible* referent for "God" as it is used in "I believe that God exists"? Only if the possible reference of the word is somehow established is the believer in a position to tell what he believes in—something or other, not nothing at all—when he says he believes in God.

If "God" did not function as a proper name, the problem would not be acute. But, clearly, in traditional Jewish and Christian belief "God"—or "God the Father Almighty"—does function as a proper name. If the believer did not hold that God is transcendent and unique, he might offer a definite description, much as a child who believes in Santa Claus can give a description to indicate a possible referent for his belief. But, sceptics argue, if the believer proceeds in this way, the result either will be some combination of the

properties of nondivine entities—some of these properties perhaps qualified in logically paradoxical ways—or it will be some entity intelligible but religiously inadequate, because merely immanent.²¹

It seems to me that the problem of the referent of “God” can be solved, but not by one who denies the possibility of arguing to the existence of a principle which can be identified by the believer as identical with that in which he believes. Given an argument that there is an uncaused entity, and given a clarification of “uncaused entity” such that the expression is neither incoherent nor its referent reducible to a merely immanent entity, one is in a position to believe that the uncaused entity is God, and *thus* that God (“God the Father Almighty”) exists.

Those who argue that God can only be approached by faith sometimes point out that philosophic arguments seem worthless in real life. No one was ever converted by a syllogism, so the argument goes. If it is possible to establish the conclusion that God exists by argument, why are arguments so ineffective?

In considering this question it must be noticed that no reasoning process is effective in establishing conviction unless certain conditions are met. First, one who encounters the reasoning process must be willing to ask the necessary questions and to follow the steps in the argument. Children wonder naturally, but such wonder is only one possibility among others for an adult; there are many reasons why an adult might choose *not* to ask questions which would lead to knowledge of the existence of God. Second, effort is needed to understand a reasoning process. Interpretation of the language used can be hard work. A logically tight argument for the existence of God requires language which few people can understand without careful study. The linguistic expressions can be made into material for endless quibbles by anyone who is clever and who does not wish to follow the reasoning to its conclusion. Third, it is not easy to construct a sound argument, plausible to one not already a believer, concluding that God exists. Many attempts to reason toward God fail for the simple reason that they are logically fallacious. Even a person who is willing to follow the argument and who makes the necessary effort to interpret the language in which it is articulated cannot reach the conclusion if the “proof” is fallacious.

One who feels that he has good reasons for disbelieving in God’s reality is unlikely to be easily moved to change his mind by any abstract argument concluding that there is an uncaused entity which could serve as the referent of “God.” Such good reasons are suggested by the following existential questions, some of which I will consider in chapters eighteen to twenty-one. If God exists and is good, why is there so much evil in the world? If God causes everything, how can man be free? If God is unchanging, how can there be room for real development and change in the world? If God destines man

to a supernatural end, does he not expect man to abandon his natural life, with its meaning and values? Isn't belief in God a distraction from one's responsibilities in the human community? Do religious experiences show more than that human persons have certain peculiar characteristics, characteristics which perhaps can be changed, but which in the past have made them posit as a reality the bundle of ideals which define what they themselves would like to be? Perhaps honesty requires men and women to work for such ideals in this world, not to seek them in some other world.

No argument for the *existence* of God can answer these questions. However, it seems to me that a sound argument for the existence of God, while not sufficient, is necessary for a rational response to these questions. The word "God" itself, as well as words such as "good" and "causes" predicated of God, must be clarified if one is to think clearly about the existential questions. I do not think that these words can be clarified except in the context of an argument and reflection upon it along the lines I will undertake in parts two and four.

Is every attempt to reason toward God irreligious?

The third view to be considered is that any reasoning toward God is a form of presumption arising from human arrogance. Many theologians during the past one hundred and fifty years have maintained that the reality of God can be encountered only in God's free revelation of himself. This position considers faith and reason to be contrary to one another.

Søren Kierkegaard, for example, states:

Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.²²

In a similar vein Karl Barth argues that the word "God" in the Creed should not be assumed to have some meaning derived from experience and reflection to which the articles of faith add further information. Of ourselves, Barth claims, we do not know what we mean when we say "God"; our expressions do not reach God who reveals himself, but only some self-made idol.²³

One point to be noticed about Barth's position is that it is not immune from the difficulties of other positions which reject reasoning toward God. If "revelation" is some sort of religious experience which is supposed to make the existence of God evident, then Barth's view is susceptible to the criticisms

proposed above against the position that the existence of God is evident. If "faith" involves reference to God apart from experience, argument, or intelligible description, Barth shares the common lot of fideists.

Barth might say that "God" refers to the one who speaks and is spoken of in the Bible. A sceptic would apply to the God-talk of the Bible itself the same analysis and criticism applied to other instances of such talk. But one need not be a sceptic to challenge positions such as Kierkegaard's and Barth's, for their opinions seem to conflict with the teaching of the Bible itself. St. Paul says:

Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made. (Rom. 1:20)

Barth points out that this statement occurs in a context in which Paul is showing that the truth about God was rendered ineffective, since the pagans fell into idolatry.²⁴ This observation is correct to the extent that Paul is insisting upon the need for faith; Paul's point in the epistle is that no one can be rightly related to God except by God's own saving gifts. But Barth seems to be confused in his reading of the passage in question. Paul wishes to show the shortcomings of the pagans in view of the evidence in creation of the power and deity of the *true* God. It would be absurd to say that pagan idolatry was blameworthy because the pagans grasped *idols* and responded inappropriately to them. Moreover, Paul's formula seems to have been inspired by another passage in the Bible:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge. Not a word nor a discourse whose voice is not heard. Through all the earth their voice resounds and to the ends of the world, their message. (Ps. 19:2-5)

If man cannot learn anything about the true God from the created world, the statements of the Psalm would be pointless.

Much of the point which Kierkegaard, Barth, and others wished to make could be preserved without excluding the possibility of establishing the existence of God by a sound argument. One can hold a Christian position according to which some knowledge about God is possible to human persons through reason, although such knowledge is inadequate for salvation. Without faith, it may be argued, sinful man inevitably falls into many errors about God, similar to the mistakes made by the child whose learning was described in chapter two.

A Christian also can maintain that without divine grace an individual

presented with a sound argument concluding to the existence of God will evade the force of the argument. As Terence Penelhum points out in a discussion of self-deception, the existence of God might be *proved* from a purely cognitive point of view, yet “only people not hindered by their own wilfulness from knowing that God exists” might assent to the conclusion.²⁵ A Christian also can hold that even if a person had all the knowledge reason can give about God and even if he made no mistakes and indulged in no self-deception, still divine revelation and faith would be necessary for salvation, since God’s plan for mankind transcends human understanding.²⁶

A further point, much stressed in contemporary Christian thought, is that commitment to Christ demands much more than merely rational reflection. Thus rational reflection can be admitted as a preliminary to commitment without removing the need for faith. Kierkegaard was in reaction to Hegel. One might suppose that if Kierkegaard with his Socratic temperament were alive today, confronted with widespread misology and with sceptical attacks on the possible *meaningfulness* of religious language, he would admit a legitimate although limited role for reasoning toward God.

All of these points suggest that the exaltation of God’s grace intended by Barth might be achieved without his rejection of reasoning toward God. Indeed, Barth’s objectives might have been better served had he allowed a modest place for reason. Rudolf Bultmann agreed with Barth in rejecting natural theology, but Bultmann proceeded to demythologize Christian doctrine by using existentialist categories to interpret the Gospel in a way acceptable to contemporary man.²⁷ Langdon Gilkey recounts how Bultmann’s development of Barth’s neoorthodoxy had results Barth surely would not have wanted.²⁸ Many of Bultmann’s recent followers reduce the Bible to nothing more than some insights into the complexities and incomprehensibilities of human existence; theology thus becomes a subdivision of anthropology, and the religious ministry becomes a form of psychological guidance and therapy.

Despite the sincerity of the religious concern of Kierkegaard, Barth, and their followers, it seems to me they make a mistake in rejecting all possibility of reasoning from the world toward God. The problem with their position which I have pointed out has been stated more graphically:

Without natural theology the divine message not only remains a foreign body; it remains unintelligible and ceases to be a message. A message which cannot be received, a communication which can never be understood, makes no sense. Likewise a message of and about God makes no sense, if the word ‘God’ can have no meaning for man *as man*. It turns into an enigmatic sign on the wall, which nobody can interpret.²⁹

Is the reality of God evident to reflection?

About nine centuries ago St. Anselm developed an argument—some say two arguments—which seems to show that the reality of God is implied by the very meaning of the word “God.” If Anselm’s approach is correct, the existence of God is evident, not as a matter of experience, but as a matter of insight based upon intellectual reflection. It would follow that reasoning from the world toward God, if possible, is unnecessarily indirect.

Anselm’s argument has fascinated philosophers down through the ages, and has been attacked and defended by some of the greatest of them. Among its critics are St. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. The latter dubbed this form of argumentation “ontological.” A vast body of literature has developed around old and new forms of ontological argument in recent years. I do not consider it necessary to discuss this argument fully here; there are good, up-to-date introductions for interested readers.³⁰

However, because it will be necessary to refer to this argument at several points later on and because my critique of it will be useful as a point of departure for part two, I offer the following, nontechnical version of the type of argument invented by Anselm. My version does not pretend to reconstruct Anselm’s original argument(s).

We think of God, the argument begins, as the Supreme Being. “Supreme Being” means not merely the highest being which happens to exist, but the highest possible being—the Supreme Being is the one to which there cannot possibly be anything superior. (If we imagine a Godless universe, we might suppose that in it among all the finite beings there would happen to be one—perhaps some great man—to whom nothing in the universe happened to be superior. But we still could *think of* a superior being; the great man would only *happen to be* superior to all others, and so he would not be the Supreme Being.)

Now, the argument goes on, if we think of God as the Supreme Being, we also must think of him as really existing. For if we thought of an infinite being, absolutely perfect in every possible way, yet not existing, we could think of a still higher one—namely, one just like it but *also* really existing. An infinite, absolutely perfect, but non-existent being—if, indeed, that makes sense at all—is just not what we think of when we think of God, the *Supreme Being*.

Thus, the argument concludes, since we are not thinking of God at all unless we think of him as the Supreme Being, if we do think of God, then we must think of him as actually existing. If some people—atheists and agnostics—say that they do not think God really exists or are not sure whether he exists, then one of two things must be the case. Either they do not mean

“Supreme Being” when they say “God”; they are denying or doubting the existence of something other than what Jews and Christians believe in when they believe in God. Or atheists and agnostics are confused, for they suppose one can think of a Supreme Being as a merely possible being, or as an idea of something in one’s mind which might or might not really exist.

What is wrong with this argument? A common criticism, which I think is valid so far as it goes, is based upon a distinction between two meanings of “thinking of something as.” In one sense, to think of something as such-and-such (to think of x as F) is to think that *if* x really exists, *then* x must be F . For example, to think of a phoenix as immortal is to think that if a phoenix really exists (were to exist), it is (would be) immortal. In another sense, to think of x as F is to think of something already known to exist, and to believe that this x is F . For example, to think of light as that which moves fastest is to think of the light which we know exists in the physical universe, and to believe that nothing in the universe moves faster than this light does.

Using this distinction, one can see that “thinking of God as the Supreme Being” has two meanings. In one sense, one thinks of God as the Supreme Being when he considers what it would be like for God to exist. Such a being, if there is one, would be Supreme, necessarily so, and thus really existent. But the question remains, Is there a God? In another sense, one thinks of God as a Supreme Being when he takes it for granted that God actually exists, and believes that God, being who he is, *naturally* is the Supreme Being and *of course* cannot help but exist.

In the first sense, it is true, one cannot say “Supreme Being” without including *really existing* in the very meaning of what one is saying. Yet the problem of the referent remains. To what if anything do the honorific titles belong? A sceptic might admit that he understands perfectly well what Anselm *means*, yet still deny that Anselm’s words refer to anything. Anselm and others who regard this sort of argument as sound obviously assume that God really exists. For one who assumes that God really exists, it is not easy to make or to keep clearly in mind the difference between including *really existing* in the meaning of “Supreme Being” and asserting *that there is a Supreme Being*.

W. Donald Hudson sums up this point neatly:

The very meaning of the question ‘Is God an ontological reality?’, or ‘Does God exist objectively?’, implies that it cannot be answered by any analysis of the meaning of the word ‘God’. For *within the meaning of that question* a distinction is drawn between what is being *said* and what, if anything, it is being *said about*.³¹

Being the *Supreme Being*, *necessarily existing*, and so forth might be included

in what is being said when one asks whether God exists. But even after one has spelled out everything one means in asking the question, one is no nearer to answering it.

This distinction between knowing what it would be like for a question to be answered in the affirmative and knowing that the question must be answered in the affirmative will play an important role in the argument set out in part two.