Linguistic Analysis and Theology

According to Frederick Ferré, developments in "contemporary linguistic philosophy" fall into two more or less distinct phases: a first phase characterized by *"verificational* analysis", and a more recent phase in which, following the lead especially of the later Wittgenstein, the emphasis has been on *"functional* analysis».[1] In the earlier period, which was dominated by the logical positivists and their so-called verification principle, the question was whether religious or theological statements make sense, and the positivists gave an unqualifiedly negative answer to this question.[2] By their account, all statements that meaningfully assert a claim to truth fall into one or the other of two logical types: (1) the nonexistential tautologies of formal logic and mathematics, whose truth, so far as they are true, is a function entirely of the meanings assigned to their terms; and (2) putative assertions of facts that are verified, if at all, by ordinary experience. Since religious or theological statements, like metaphysical statements generally, fall into neither of these types, they can only be cognitively meaningless, whatever "emotive" or other kind of meaning may be legitimately claimed for them.

Subsequent discussion, particularly of the verification principle, has made clear that the typical verificational analysis of religious or theological statements was based less on a careful analysis of the actual uses of religious and theological language than on certain a priori assumptions. Recognizing this, later linguistic philosophers have tended to proceed more cautiously. Instead of asking whether religious or theological statements make sense, they have attempted to determine what sense they at least seem to make in the context in which they are actually used. Thus the typical functional analysis of religious or theological statements seeks to analyze the use or function of such statements in actual religious or theological speech.

Assuming this account of developments in recent linguistic philosophy, I take "linguistic analysis" to mean, broadly, both so-called verificational and so-called functional analysis and, strictly, functional analysis alone. Accordingly, the scope of this essay in its broadest reaches is both types of analysis in their bearing on theology, while its stricter focus is on the significance for theology solely of the functional type of analysis.

1.

Decisive for the whole more recent phase of developments was a shift from *verification* to *falsification* as a criterion of the meaning and truth of properly cognitive statements. There were various reasons for this shift, but most fundamental, probably, was the growing recognition that it is not so much verification as falsification by which science in general proceeds. As easy as it is to falsify empirical generalizations, it is notoriously difficult (indeed, strictly speaking, impossible) to verify them. Consequently, it is widely recognized that scientific statements,

[1] F. Terré, Language, Logic, and God (1961), pp. 8, 58.
[2] See especially A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth, and Logic (²1946).

which consist essentially of just such generalizations, can be said to have been verified only in the sense that they have not as yet been falsified. One verifies them only by earnestly trying to falsify them – that being the precise purpose of experiments – and then failing in the attempt. But because scientific statements are widely assumed to be the paradigm case of meaningful existential statements, there is also widespread agreement among philosophers that the necessary condition of the meaning of any existential statement is that it be falsifiable in this way. If it is a meaningful existential statement at all, there must be some at least conceivable conditions under which it would be false.

With this shift to falsification as the criterion of cognitive meaning and truth, the linguistic analysis of religious or theological statements took the form of the problem of "theology and falsification". This problem was acutely posed and explored in a now-classic discussion under that heading initiated by *Antony Flew* in a short paper first published, together with comparably short papers by R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell and a response by Flew, in 1950–51. Since 1955, when this "Theology and Falsification" debate was republished in the volume, New Essays in Philosophical Theology, it has tended to become the point of departure for most discussions falling within the scope of this essay. Without attempting an extended analysis and interpretation of this debate and of the positions represented in it, I wish to indicate what I take to be its significance for our present topic.

The debate was provoked by Flew's claim that religious or theological statements are doubtfully meaningful, much less true, because, while they are clearly intended to be existential assertions, they are not open to factual or empirical falsification. Such statements look straightforward enough, but, since no fact is allowed to falsify them, they are not really straightforward at all. As Flew put it, "If there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion."[3]

Clearly, Flew's basic assumption was that, if religious or theological statements are meaningful existential assertions at all, they must be factual assertions – i.e., assertions that at least in principle are falsifiable because there are at least conceivable facts that could count against them. But, while Flew's inference from this assumption, together with his finding that religious or theological statements are not thus falsifiable, was that such statements are not really assertions at all, his two theistic respondents, who naturally differed with him in affirming the theism he rejected, nevertheless agreed with him in making the same basic assumption. They, too, assumed that the only meaningful existential assertions are factual assertions, the difference between their two positions being that, while one denied that theistic claims are assertions at all, being, rather, expressions of a *"blik"*, or a basic attitude toward life and experience, the other allowed that theistic claims are factual assertions that, at least in principle, can be falsified and, therefore, are meaningful, whether or not they are also true. These two positions have since been characterized as respectively the "left-wing" and the "right-wing" responses to Flew's challenge. Together with Flew, Hare and Mitchell, who originally for-

[3] A. Flew & A. Macintyre (eds.), New Essays in Philosophical Theology (1955), p. 98.

mulated them, accepted the assumption that, if existential assertion there be at all, it is and must be a factual assertion, which is therefore open to factual falsification.

2.

It is just this assumption, however, that other philosophical theologians are unwilling to grant. Broadly speaking, one can say that there are two main groups who have publicly criticized it as mistaken. On the one hand, there is the group of linguistic philosophers who have been characterized by one of their critics as "Wittgensteinian fideists", and of whom for the purposes of our discussion here I shall take *D. Z. Phillips* to be representative.[4] On the other hand, there is a much less well-defined group of philosophers whose background and interests are shaped less by linguistic analysis than by certain forms of revisionary metaphysics, and among whom I would want to count myself. Since these two groups not only differ in their general philosophical positions but also have their own ways of criticizing the basic assumption of the theology and falsification debate, I shall proceed by first making my own criticism of it and then try to indicate where the crucial differences lie as between my own position and that of Phillips.

Not the least striking thing about the theology and falsification debate is that all three of the positions taken in it agree in admitting that religious or theological statements do not in fact function as straightforward assertions. For Flew, of course, this is conclusive proof that the statements in question are, in his phrase, "degenerate assertions". But this, clearly, is a conclusion warranted, not solely by his observation of how religious or theological statements are actually used, but by that observation together with his assumption that all meaningful assertions are factual assertions that are factually falsifiable. But Hare, also, allows that religious or theological statements do not actually function as factual assertions, since, on his view, they do not function as assertions at all but serve, instead, to express the "blik" of the religious believer. And so, too, with Mitchell, who argues that, even though religious or theological statements are factually falsifiable, they cannot be conclusively falsified, at least not within the bounds of our experience in this life. Thus, like Flew and Hare, he admits that religious or theological statements are not, in fact, used as straightforward factual assertions.

But to anyone such as myself who accepts Wittgenstein's advice, "Don't judge, but look", i.e., don't judge how language ought to be used, but look to see how it actually is used, this admission that religious or theological statements do not function as ordinary factual assertions is a good reason for doubting that they have to be that kind of assertions. Moreover, the tacit assumption that the only meaningful assertions are factual is, on the face of it, open to challenge.

To begin with, there is the assertion of this assumption itself, which, clearly, is not factual at all, even though it is presumably taken to be meaningful. But, beyond this obvious dialectical point, there is evidently a whole class of assertions that intend, as merely mathematical and logical assertions hardly do, to assert something about existence, and thus are existential assertions, but nevertheless

[4] See K. Nielsen, Wittgensteinian Fideism: Philosophy 42 (1967), pp. 191–209.

are not factual. I refer to the class of strictly *metaphysical* assertions, the chief defining characteristic of which is that, while they assert something to be existentially the case, they neither are nor could be factually falsifiable.

Consider, for example, "The universe exists", which evidently intends to assert something about existence. What sense could it make to regard it as factual? If by "universe" one means, as one should, "everything there is", then the universe, by definition, is unique; for if it includes everything there is, there can be no possibility of anything outside or alongside it. But in that case "The universe exists" could not possibly be factually falsified. For if there cannot be even the possibility of a fact that would not be included in the universe – that being the very meaning of "universe" – then any even conceivable fact could only verify the assertion that the universe exists, and no fact, not even a conceivable fact, could ever falsify it.

If this reasoning is sound, it is evident not only that the class of factual assertions is smaller than the class of meaningful assertions but that it is also smaller than the class of meaningful existential assertions. But, then, the fact admitted by all the participants in the theology and falsification debate, that religious or theological statements do not actually function as straightforward factual assertions, assumes a very different significance. So far from being evidence that religious statements are meaningless (Flew), or, although meaningful, incapable of being conclusively falsified (Mitchell), or, finally, not even assertions but, rather, expressions of a "blik" (Hare), it can be taken as signifying that religious statements are indeed assertions, and existential assertions at that, even though they are not factual assertions. One may claim, instead, that they are strictly metaphysical assertions, which, like "The universe exists", neither are nor could be factually falsifiable but are meaningful and true because, or insofar as, every fact, even every conceivable fact, does and must verify them, and no fact, not even a conceivable fact, could ever falsify them.

The issues here are complex, and we must take pains not to oversimplify them. Specifically, we must avoid countering the usual claim that all religious assertions, if assertions at all, are and must be factual with the extreme contrary claim that no religious assertion is a factual assertion. Clearly, all the assertions with which religion or faith most immediately has to do are and must be factual assertions, even if of an extraordinary kind. Were this not so, it would be impossible to maintain, as the Christian witness certainly does, that both our creation by God and our redemption by him are precisely facts, in that they are free acts on God's part that he in no way needs to perform simply in order to be himself. But while, for this reason, some religious statements are and must be factual, the foundational religious statements, such as, for example, "God exists", neither are nor could be merely factual but must be strictly metaphysical. How could "God exists" ever be factually falsified if, by the very definition of "God", any fact, even a merely conceivable fact, could only be a creature of God and hence evidence of its truth? If "God exists" is capable of being a true assertion at all, it is necessarily true, no fact whatever being able to falsify it, any fact whatever serving only to verify it.

The point, in other words, is that theism's foundational assertion of the exist-

ence of God is an answer, not to the ontic question, "What are the facts?", but to the ontological question, "What is it to be a fact?". This is true, at any rate, of the radical theism necessarily presupposed by the Christian witness. For the whole point of such theism is that the very meaning of "fact", and hence any fact and all facts, involve the necessary existence of God as radically other and more than anything merely factual.

<h2 style="text-align:center">3.</h2>

So much, then, for how I myself, together with certain other metaphysically inclined philosophers, would criticize the basic assumption of the whole theology and falsification debate. The other main way of criticizing it is well represented in the writings of D. Z. Phillips, who likewise argues that it is a logical blunder to suppose that "God exists" is a merely factual assertion that could conceivably be factually false. As he himself puts it, "the idea of God is such that the possibility of the non-existence of God is logically precluded". "God's existence is not *contingent*", because "*it makes no sense* to say that God might not exist".[5]

Phillips supports this conclusion by appealing, on the one hand, to how the assertion, "God exists", actually functions in the *religious context*, which is not at all as a merely factual or contingent assertion, and, on the other hand, to the general philosophical principle that "the way in which we decide whether something exists or not . . . varies systematically with the context in question".[6]

"To understand the significance of the distinction between the real and the unreal", he argues, "one must take account of the context in which the distinction is made. One can say *within* any such context, whether it be science or religion, 'This is the rule which *must* be observed, this is the meaning which a word *must* have if it is to belong to this conceptual family.' But when philosophers say 'This is the meaning which a word *must have*' without specifying any context, they are guilty of arbitrary linguistic legislation. The 'must' is not a logical 'must', but simply the 'must' of their own preferences, of the 'must' of one context which they have elevated, consciously or unconsciously, to be a standard for all others."[7] From all of which Phillips concludes: "the whole conception, then, of religion standing in need of justification is confused"; "the criteria of the meaningfulness of religious concepts are to be found within religion itself"; "there is no question of a *general* justification of religious belief, of giving religion a 'sound foundation' ".[8]

The similarities between this position and my own will be clear enough. Phillips and I both reject the assumption that the only meaningful assertions are factual assertions by pointing out that the religious statement, "God exists", neither does nor could function as a factual assertion and by reminding ourselves and others that it is philosophically arbitrary – "arbitrary linguistic legislation" Phillips calls it – to make the criteria of meaning appropriate to factual assertions the only criteria of meaning there are. To this extent, Phillips and I are in agreement that "there is no question of a *general* justification of religious belief". Yet, despite this considerable agreement, I am not prepared to join Phillips in withdrawing the

[5] D. Z. Phillips, The Concept of Prayer (1966), p. 14.
[6] Ibid., p. 22.
[7] Ibid., p. 9 f.
[8] Ibid., pp. 10, 12, 27.

claims of religion altogether from what he calls "a general justification". In fact, this phrase seems to me sufficiently ambiguous that one needs to clarify, as I do not see Phillips doing, two quite different senses in which it can be understood.

It is one thing to insist, with the positivists and their neopositivist successors, that religious or theological statements conform to the criteria appropriate to straightforward factual assertions; and I entirely share Phillips' judgment that the demand for a general justification of religious statements in this sense is misplaced and, therefore, may be dismissed. But it is quite another thing to insist that religious or theological statements must conform to generally accessible criteria of meaning and truth – even though very different criteria from those appropriate to ordinary factual assertions – if they are to be allowed the general validity that they commonly claim. In this second, very different sense, I, at least, should regard the demand for a general justification of religious statements as entirely in order and would feel obliged to meet it.

In other words, while I quite agree with Phillips that it is poor philosophical procedure to ignore actual use in trying to determine proper use, I cannot agree with him and a number of other Wittgensteinian philosophers that actual use alone is a sufficient warrant for inferring proper use. Norman Malcolm, for instance, defends the essential validity of Anselm's ontological argument by appealing to the witness to God typical of the Jewish and Christian religions. "In those complex systems of thought, those 'language-games', God has the status of a necessary being. Who can doubt that? Here we must say with Wittgenstein, 'This language-game is played!' I believe we may rightly take the existence of those religious systems of thought in which God figures as a necessary being to be a disproof of the dogma, affirmed by Hume and others, that no existential proposition can be necessary."[9] As sympathetic as I am with Malcolm's point, I can only think that to challenge a dogma is one thing, to disprove it, something else. The existence of the Christian witness to God certainly challenges the reigning dogma that the only meaningful existential assertions have to be factual. But to disprove that dogma requires considerably more than merely appealing to the existence of that Christian witness. There remains as a question for further philosophical discussion, whether the assertion of God's necessary existence, which is certainly essential to this witness, is, after all, meaningful, or whether it is merely confused or self-contradictory – in which case, what would be disproved would not be modern linguistic dogma but the validity of the Christian witness.

Consequently, as different as my position is from that of the positivists, or of their verificationist or falsificationist successors among my contemporaries (I am thinking especially of Flew and Kai Nielsen), I agree with them against Phillips and Malcolm that the philosopher both can and must ask whether the *actual* uses of language he observes are *also proper* uses. On my view of philosophy, there is a constant *interplay* between determining *what seems to be meant* (because it is actually said) in the various fields of human discourse and determining *what properly can be meant* in those fields (whatever may be said). To presume to determine

[9] N. Malcolm, Anselm's Ontological Arguments: The Philosophical Review 69 (1960), p. 56.

the second except on the basis of the most generous and fair-minded attempt to determine the first is, indeed, arbitrary and, therefore, poor philosophical procedure. But it is equally poor philosophy to suppose that what seems to be meant properly can be meant for no other reason than that it is actually said. The same human being who is capable of speaking sense is, by that very capacity, also capable of speaking nonsense. And because this is so, philosophy has and must have a critical, legislative, as well as an analytic, descriptive function.

Against Phillips, then, I should to this extent defend the demand for a *general justification* of religious or theological statements. And this I would do, first of all and most fundamentally, because it is characteristic of religious and theological statements that they tacitly or openly claim to be the kind of statements that need to be generally justified, i.e., they claim to be existential assertions or truth-claims. Accordingly, however generously one may construe the notion of "truth", one can hardly deny that religious or theological statements tacitly or openly presuppose certain criteria of truth, whereby true religious or theological statements may be distinguished from false ones. Moreover, as "context-dependent", and even sui generis, as these criteria may be, they still must be in some respect distinguishable from the assertions of whose truth or falsity they are the criteria, since that demand is analytic, given the meaning of "criteria" and of "assertions".

But this first and most basic reason for demanding that religious or theological statements be justified is reinforced by two further reasons. First, there is a conflict both within and between particular religious traditions as regards their respective assertions or truth-claims, such that, on the face of it, not all of these claims can be true. Second, religion itself and as such is also, on the face of it, an option, since there are nonreligious ways of believing that are incompatible with religious ones but also claim to be true. In short, religious or theological truth-claims are controversial not only in principle but also in fact – and that doubly. Consequently, my position is that there must be a general justification of religious or theological claims and that there cannot be any such justification unless there can be (1) a justification of religion as such as true; and (2) a justification of any and all particular religious claims as true.

But, then, I can only conclude that Phillips and those who share his general position quite fail to meet the demand for a justification of religious or theological statements. For instead of a justification of religion in general, they simply refer us to the fact that religion exists, or, better, religions exist, and that they consist in beliefs that logically cannot be justified in the way in which scientific beliefs, say, can. And instead of a justification of particular religious claims, they simply refer us to other particular religious claims as providing the only justification that can be given for them. I do not see, then, that Phillips has any right to continue to say of religious or theological statements that they are true. Given no more of an account of their logic than he gives, this is just what they cannot be said to be; for they are, at best, expressions of belief, whose truth, if any, it is impossible to determine. In this sense, Phillips' position is indeed a form of fideism: as a matter of fact, it is as pure a form of fideism as one is likely to find.

It is not hard to imagine Phillips' reply to this criticism. He would no doubt think me caught in "a deep philosophical prejudice" and see in what I have said "the craving for generality, the insistence that what constitutes an intelligible move in one context must constitute an intelligible move in all contexts".[10] But, clearly, this reply will no longer do. For I have not in the least said or implied that the general criteria necessary for distinguishing the truth of religion as such must be the same criteria also appropriate, say, to science; nor have I in any way said or implied that the criteria for distinguishing between particular religious claims must be those whereby we distinguish between particular scientific claims. As a matter of fact, I have expressly stated my agreement with Phillips that the criteria relevant to the justification of religion are in both respects radically different from those relevant to the justification of science. The point, however, is that, on my position, that very difference is a completely general difference, in the sense that it is a difference manifesting itself in human experience as such, in the experience of every man and woman, not only in the experience of those who are religious in a certain way or happen to be engaged in a particular scientific inquiry. This ought to indicate clearly enough that the demand for a general justification of religion is not necessarily, but only contingently, the positivistic or neopositivistic demand that religion be justified by scientific criteria.

But, then, it ought also to be clear why, in rejecting this positivistic demand, one need not join Phillips in rejecting the demand for a general justification of religious or theological statements as such – just as, conversely, in rejecting his position as incapable of showing that and how religious or theological statements are meaningful and true, one is not driven to embrace the verificationist demand of the older positivism or the falsificationist demand of contemporary neopositivists.

This is what I should wish to say, then, concerning the general topic, "linguistic analysis and theology": Such analysis has shown that, formally speaking, there are three basic positions: (1) that religious or theological statements are existential assertions and, therefore, factual assertions; (2) that religious or theological statements are not factual assertions and, therefore, also are not existential assertions; and (3) that religious or theological statements are existential assertions, although the foundational statements among them neither are nor could be factual assertions. The third position, which I agree in holding with certain functional analysts, contradicts the basic assumption underlying both of the other two, that, if religious or theological statements are existential assertions at all, they can only be factual assertions. But this is simply to say that it challenges the analysis most generally accepted at the present time of what is to count as a meaningful existential assertion. The issue remains, however, whether this challenge is to be backed up by providing another, generally acceptable analysis of the meaning and truth of existential assertions. With respect to this theologically critical issue, linguistic analysis as such, including even recent functional analysis, does not appear to be of much help.

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[10] D. Z. Phillips, Faith and Philosophical Enquiry (1971), p. 87.