The Limitations of Language Analysis In Religion

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IT HAS been a bit over a century and a half since Frederick Schleiermacher delivered himself of some **Addresses on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers,** in which he accused some very sophisticated and literate people of insensitivity to the authentic source and meaning of religious discourse. His criticism was not against the techniques of rational inference and evaluation, but against those who misconstrued the origin and thrust of religious conceptions as rational explanations. Today the explicit despisers of religion are more inclined to take seriously Schleiermacher's suggestion that the true origin of religious discourse is the effort to express that which rises from man's feelings or affections, and to turn it against any religious claim to cognitive significance. I am not here concerned with historical ironies nor with Schleiermacher's point of view, but with a style of critique which, like his, takes issue with a primary grappling point rather than the technique of a prominent philosophical-theological style. I undertake this criticism with a certain reluctance, both because it will be evident that I have no very clear notion or a more appropriate philosophical alternative and also because some of the handiest examples of the limits of language analysis which show a need for a new approach are the materials on this topic which I have written over the past several years.

"Language Analysis in Religion" is not a label which implies a specific approach, perspective or point of view. Every comprehensive philosophical consideration of religious thinking includes comment if not explicit and detailed analysis of lingustic issues. The styles and assumptions of language analysis are as disputable as anything else in philosophy. Even a superficial canvass of the names of those who have provided insightful comment and criticism concerning religious language, names such as: Aquinas, Scotus, Kant, Urban, Cassirer, Pierce, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Morris, Korzybski, Ryle, Ramsey, Wisdom, Flew, Barth, Heidegger, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, Tillich, Buber, suggests that a common interest in religious language does not mean common agreement on anything. Since I do not wish to declare war on the history of western philosophy, let me identify briefly three characteristic styles of language analysis which shall be the objects of our consideration. First we shall mention some of those who are concerned to analyze religious language with emphasis upon the evolution of symbolic forms. Secondly, we shall consider those whose analyses identify characteristic functions of religious discourse and describe the patterns, rules or logic of each. Thirdly, we shall give consideration to a special group of the functional analysts who characteristically employ the "paradigm case" or "disclosure model" to reveal specific features of religious discourse.

Religion and Symbolic Forms:

The Relevance of Obscurity

The characteristic assumption or point of view which identifies this first approach is the notion that religious discourse is founded on or necessarily

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employs pre-discursive, non-descriptive symbolic processes laden with emotional values. We have in mind the writings of such persons as Cassirer, Langer, Elaide, Van der Leeuw and Tillich. A typical claim is that religious discourse must assert or reestablish some framework of sacred, mythical conception which forms the content of religious meanings and provides a non-propositional style of comprehension and justification. There are very important differences among the views of the persons mentioned, but also a kind of "family resemblance" among them. All hold that authentic religious language at critical points is necessarily symbolic rather than signific, imaginal rather than precisely referential, presentational rather than discursive, and deeply infused with the passion of the subject rather than interchangeable, objective or operational. From this point of view an effort to interpret religious statements without adopting the perspective or style of consciousness which gives rise to statements of this sort is bound to fail miserably. It would be analogous to an evaluation of a symphony by a careful analysis of the program notes. Yet to grant wholeheartedly the perspective demanded seems also to involve a concession which yields all hope of real clarity and precision in analysis.

The familiar interpretations offered by Tillich may illustrate. He interprets the symbol as participating in that to which it points, and the religious symboy as one which participates in the ultimacy of the object of ultimate concern. This leads him to say:

> This which is the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely. Therefore no finite reality can express it directly and properly. Religiously speaking, God transcends his own name.[1]

Some few mystics reaching this point have the graciousness to continue their contemplations in silence, but not Christian theologians. Having asserted that nothing more may be said properly, they say more. Clarity, definition, precision, rational control are features of discourse rather than of presentational images which tend instead to fluidity, ambiguity, open-endedness, fertile association. To yield the point that the understanding of religious language demands the adoption of the passionate, indirect, imaginative, symbolic, mythical consciousness out of which this language arises is to yield the possibility of establishing precise, definitive criteria of adequacy not already governed by the perspective adopted. Yet to refuse to yield may be to refuse to listen to what religious discourse expresses. Mircea Eliade puts the point this way:

> There is no other way of understanding a foreign mental universe than to place oneself **inside** it, at its very center, in order to progress from there to all the values it possesses.[2]

Yet Eliade, for all his intimidating sophistication about archaic religions, also testifies to the consequence of this immersion when he concludes that what we loose in the achievement of modern notions of geometric space, homogenious time and uniform natural law is our authentic humanity.

> For nonreligious man, all vital experiences—whether sex or eating, work or play—have been desacralized. This means that all these physiological acts are deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimension.[3]

Such a claim obviously plays on an ambiguity in the word "human" and overlooks or plays down the humanity expressed in technology, because the criteria for humanity have been derived

[1] Paul Tillich, *Dynamic of Faith* (Harper: New York,1957) p. 44.

[2] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (Harper: New York, 1957), p. 165.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

from the perspective of the "foreign mental universe" in which technology played no part.

Now all of us, I suppose, can appreciate well enough what Eliade wants, and even perhaps agree on its desirability as a mode for the understanding of religious discourse. Only the sympathetic ear can hear. But the issue points to an inherent limitation in this style of analysis. The interpretation of religious language as a unique, non-discursive symbolic form which one must adopt to understand and understand to evaluate has as its corollary that the understanding can never be discursively definitive, precise, direct or proper. And this is to say that the only applicable criteria of symbolic adequacy are internal, the criteria which a system of imaginative interpretation sets for itself. There is an internal tension between the desire to understand fully and the desire to understand clearly. Obscurity becomes a criterion of adequacy.

Functional Analysis I: Categories for the Confusion of Tongues

A particular style of philosophic investigation, which has become increasingly characteristic of British and some American philosophy under the influence of the later Wittgenstein, proceeds in terms of a functional analysis of language uses. When applied to the religious uses of language the emphasis has shifted from the application of an external criterion of meaning to a consideration and description of the actual rules, objects and procedures of the language-games we play. In American thought particularly this emphasis upon language-in-use has merged with already established traditions deriving from pragmatic philosophies and the social sciences to produce a blending of semantic, logical and social-psychological descriptions of language strata, patterns and purposes.

The characteristic view with which we are here concerned holds that the philosophic task in religion is an attempt to clarify what religious statements mean by the elucidation of the rules which do in fact govern the symbols used in a religious context, including the purposes for which the symbols are employed, the ways in which the symbols are used to refer to or stand for something, the ways the symbols are related to each other, and the rules which govern their applicability, justification or truth.[4] I wish to identify two types of functional analysis for separate consideration. Both are descriptive and classificatory. Both presuppose ongoing, identifiable language-using communities which establish and maintain the conventions of linguistic use, and both hold that we can clarify the meaning and value of statements by understanding the governing conventions more clearly. Type I Functional Analysis throws the emphasis upon interpreting the **varieties** of religious discourse in terms of variations in characteristic uses of language. Type II Functional Analysis puts the emphasis on the meticulous clarification of critically important statements in actual religious discourse, often offering fascinating analogues or parables in elucidation and simplification of relevant issues. Recent examples of the broader Type I analysis (which is the one to concern us first) are Hutchinson's **Language and Faith,** Ferre's **Language, Logic and God,** Dilley's **Metaphysics and Religious Language,** and my own dissertation and papers concerned with the functions of religious language.

Some of the chapter titles of Ferre's book will suggest the strategy involved. He describes successively: The Logic of Analogy, The Logic of Obedience, and The Logic of Encounter, suggesting that significant theological differ-

[4] Cf. Bowman L. Clarke, "Linguistic Analysis and the Philosophy of Religion," *The Monist,* (Vol. 47, No. 3), Spring 1963.

ences can be traced in the different rules and criticisms which apply when religious language is being used analogically to suggest the description of something, imperatively to demand obedience to an ultimate authority, or expressively to articulate the response to a personal encounter.[5]

The characteristic assumptions or perspective of this style of approach are: 1) that the adequacy of religious language must be measured against the criteria implicit in what it is trying to say and do rather than against criteria appropriate to some other use, and 2) that when these implicit criteria have been flushed out, exposed and balanced against the criteria of other uses, we shall be in a better position to adopt the most adequate perspective and employ its conventions. Functional analysis intends to provide a descriptive basis for at least methodological evaluation and validation of religious discourse.

The inherent limitations in this style of analysis seem to become more apparent with its relative success. When the analysis of language disclosed only two main uses—referential and emotive—a wider view of human interests could always validate the importance of emotive religious language. Man's vital interests could not be contained within the severe limits of purely referential meanings. However as we have come to see that religious language has many uses and modes, and that persons whose intelligence and integrity cannot be challenged without bringing our own into question really intend to go on with most of these different uses even after analysis, it has become increasingly unreasonable to hope that clarity will bring agreement or that functional analysis will make it possible to measure the truth of religious statements. Functional analysis is a strategy for talking about talking, and in one sense the farther we proceed with such analysis the farther we are from saying anything revelantly or vitally religious. Such talk, of course, has its own function—among other things to provide unlimited employment for philosophic interests, but it is perhaps our most concrete example of infinite regress to engage in the invention of meta-meta-meta-language for the discussion and elucidation of each previous assertion. Functional analysis of this sort displays the varieties of religious discourse in clarified, stylized patterns with the assumptions exposed, the internal criteria exemplified and obvious incoherence criticized. Its limitations arise from its intent to **describe** the uses, rules and conventions in order to interpret and **judge** the meaning. It can render judgment only when it can apply wider conventions, and these often turn out to be as much in dispute as the differences they are supposed to resolve. There is an internal tension between the intent to describe and the intent to interpret, and the descriptive categories don't come out labelled "true" and "false."

Functional Analysis II: The Parable of the Gnat and the Camel

Functional Analysis Type II shares most basic assumptions with Type I but proceeds more selectively. This approach is taken by many contemporary proponents and opponents of Christian theological discourse and is perhaps characteristic of most of those who wish to use "Language Analysis" as a descriptive title for their philosophic work. It pervades British philosophy and is illustrated in the collections of essays edited by Flew, MacIntyre, Mitchell, Martin and work of Ian Ramsey. A characteristic procedure is to "adopt" some crucial religious statement (usually a statement concerning the existence of God) as an example of the important use of religious language, and then to subject the

[5] Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (Harper: New York, 1961), Ch. 6-8.

statement to excruciating development, analysis, criticism, re-formulation and evaluation. The procedure as such seems common both to those who profess and those who reject the statements in question. Flew and MacIntyre's, **New Essays in Philosophical Theology,** provides us with a particularly convenient example because it exemplifies something of the cumulative criticism and response which this philosophic style provides, and because certain of the articles indicate precisely the kind of inner tensions with which I am primarily concerned.

In one of a series of discussions Antony Flew borrows an illustration from John Wisdom's earlier essay called, "Gods," and develops it into a criterion of theological falsification, under which he holds that the statement, "God exists," asserts nothing unless it is falsifiable. This calls forth several responses. R. M. Hare challenges the application of the criterion by asserting that the statement "God exists" expresses a **blick** (attitude, perspective, orienting view point) and is meaningful even though not falsifiable by any particular state of affairs. Ian Crombie responds by indicating that the assertion "God exists" is in principle falsifiable by the existence of evil, but actually cannot be decisively falsified in present human existence because of our limited perspective. The positive justification for the statement rests on the logical possibility of accepting the authority of Jesus Christ as God and the claim to this as a fact of history. A fourth view in this tradition emerges in J. N. Findley's "Ontological Disproof of the Existence of God." The argument is delicate and meticulous, but perhaps I may caricature it briefly for our purposes here. He holds that an adequate idea of God asserts that God must necessarily exist. But logically necessary propositions assert nothing except linguistic rules. Therefore the "necessity" of the existence of God means that the proposition asserting it has no existential reference, and must be rejected on grounds of self-contradiction.

I do not imagine that I have presented any of these arguments adequately, but they are familiar, readily available, and more interesting in the original anyway. Our purpose here is to see them as strategies or styles rather than to dispute with them. We wish to explore the limitations inherent in the style, and these four give us significantly transparent opportunities to expose the intentions and the inner tensions of the strategy. Surveying these four arguments from this perspective they express respectively: 1) concern for a criterion of meaning that relates to criteria accepted outside of religion such as in logic or science (Flew); 2) concern for the unique orientational, attitudinal or presuppositional function characteristic of religious discourse (Hare); 3) concern to explore the freedom for faith which is granted by a logical possibility (e.g., the possibility of an authoritative revelation) (Crombie); and 4) concern for an adequate concept of God, logically possible, religiously relevant and necessary for significant commitment (Findlay). I believe it can go without argument that these are indeed important religious concerns. The limitations arise from two specific features. First, these concerns work against each other, and secondly, there is no commonly accepted network of procedures by which we can rank these concerns. The result of this unrecognized competition is that analysis tends to atomize its object into further, further and further distinctions, none of which seems to bring us closer to a resolution. Our intentions are divided against themselves. To illustrate: Flew's concern for a widely acceptable criterion of meaning works

[6] Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

against Hare's concern for the unique position and status of the religious assertion (**blick**). Hare's concern for the presuppositional function of religious discourse works against Crombie's desire to give wider expression to the content of a revelation that is logically possible, to listen to and interpret its "stories." Crombie's desire to turn logical possibility into acceptance of revelation on historical authority works against both Flew's concern for more widely acceptable criteria and also against Findlay's concern to be shown that a particular religious assertion is necessary, adequate and relevant. And Findlay's concern for the ontological necessity of God works against Flew's concern for God's falsifiability. It is not merely that different men have different interests. In some sense all of these men have all of these interests. Nor is it merely that different interests are at stake, but that they tend to compete with each other for supremacy, and all of them are characteristically exemplified among the proponents of this style of functional analysis. An inherent limitation in this paradigmatic style of analysis is that it divides its subject into atomized units each governed by different competing interests and then tres to draw conclusions applying to religion or religious language as a whole. There are other important accidental limitations, such as virtual illiteracy about the wider possibilities of religion beyond the confines of Anglican theology among some otherwise informed philosophers, the absence of serious consideration of the carefully reformulated ideas of God so that contemporary philosophy is pitted against medieval theology, and the notion that it is somehow beneath the dignity of a philosopher to concern himself with mere facts. But these are limitations we can reasonably expect continued conversation to reduce. The limitations which seem more basic are inherent in the assumption that by clarifying the uses of language in typical religious situations we can judge the truth of religious statements generally. Language analysis alone cannot tell us whether a statement is religious or crucially important to religion. That takes a knowledge of social-historical facts and perhaps something of the sensitivity implied in the first style of language analysis considered. The relevance and significance of a religious symbol is notoriously subject to change even while or because it is being analyzed. Language analysis under this procedure reveals various ways of understanding "truth" as well as various meanings for the idea of God, and discovers that the criteria by which it would settle argument seem often to resemble the theological faith-commitments which they propose to justify or refute. The criteria of truth or understanding are as much in dispute as the "truths" claimed or implied in typical religious statement. There is an internal tension between the desire to apply "standard" criteria of truth and meaning and the desire to elucidate a uniquely religious paradigm case, and upon analysis tensions begin to appear among the "standard" criteria. This pattern of philosophical analysis is excellent for straining out gnats, but seems occasionally unable to prevent the swallowing of camels.

I have tried to illustrate inherent limitations in three prominent styles of language analysis in religion—the tension between clarity and comprehension in dealing with symbolic forms, the tension between description and judgment in Type I Functional Analysis, and the tensions among various vital philosophic interests in paradigm case analysis. Nothing here should be interpreted as casting doubt on the fruitfulness, productive insight or further clarification to be sought through these styles of language analysis. A microscope has its limits, but it still displays things that would not other-

wise be seen. Certainly nothing shown here will settle any issue in dispute in or among any of these approaches. If, however, these limitations are fairly described and are in fact inherent in the prominent styles of language analysis in religion, then we have shown that no universal philosophic salvation is to be expected from such patterns of analysis. Perhaps we have done more. If the tensions which create or reflect the inherent limits of each style of analysis have been identified accurately, then we have an indication of what must be done to proceed to the next stage of understanding. If the tension between clarity and comprehension is critical, then we must seek to devise means for more appropriate translations, shifting of perspectives and confrontation with the living instances of religious discourse such as we are beginning to develop in phenomenological and existential philosophy and psychology . One can then view these approaches in correlation with and supplement to language analysis. If the tension between description and judgment limits functional analysis we may be thrust, as the social sciences have been in dealing with the same tension, to more explicit consideration of the actual communities of discourse and involvement to discover the conventions to which we adhere together in spite of other differences among us. Language analysis, rather than isolating the proper domain of philosophy, ultimately demands that philosophy be brought into ever closer relations and mutual support with the social and natural sciences. If the tensions between precision and generality and among various vital philosophic interests restrict the possibilites of paradigm case analysis for settling issues, perhaps this knowledge opens the way to more informed identification and discussion of the range and ranking of philosophic interests.

Is the case for a reasonable solution of these disputes or resolution of these tensions entirely hopeless? I don't know. I find impressive the suggestion of John Wilson in his book, **Philosophy and Religion.**[7] that we need constantly to expose and clarify the network of common assumptions and verifying conditions on which we actually rely for our fundamental judgments of value. I believe that this is what is involved in the three problem areas identified above. In terms of an adequate analysis of religious language I don't believe we yet know clearly enough even what a rational resolution of the tensions would be. The network of verifying criteria is as much in dispute and as saturated with internal tension as any of the purported facts to be established under these criteria. In a recent article on "The Philosophical Analysis of Theological Statements" the author described four characteristics of such analysis and concluded:

> If the foregoing foundation is established I believe a comprehensively accurate and adequate analysis of the meanings of theological statements can be carried out with sufficient elaboration in given cases.[8]

In my own view, either the foundation which he has described must be something on the order of a phenomenological analysis of the meaning of life, which would take all our living it out to be "comprehensively accurate and adequate" or the author is unaware of the inherent limitations and inner tensions implicit in his criteria of adequate linguistic analysis. On the other hand, this somewhat restrained view of the probability of philosophic success and agreement does not give any special license to irrational alternatives. In the first place, I have been con-

[7] John Wilson, *Philosophy and Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[8] John Riser, "The Philosophical Analysis of Theological Statements," *The Monist,* (Vol. 47, No. 3), Spring 1963.

cerned to affirm the significance and value of language analysis in religion within its limitations, and this is a rational process of a high order. And secondly, perhaps rationality may be understood as the unending quest for more widely shared networks of common assumptions and verifying procedures to which language analysis in religion has already contributed greatly and may be expected to contribute still more. On this view, to expose the limits of language analysis is to identify significant opportunties for further rational inquiry.