The "Nature" of God

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TWO recent anthologies of philosophies of religion present interesting contrasts in their organization of materials. One has three listings under "God": (i) the existence of God; (ii) the nature of God; and (iii) contemporary perspectives on God. (Mourant.) The second also has three groups of readings concerning God: (i) the existence of God; (ii) God and Evil; and (iii) God and human freedom. (Bronstein and Schulweis.) The first anthology includes a section on the "nature" of God, the second does not. No justification is given for either procedure.

In a recent paper, I used three undefined terms as a minimum vocabulary, a suggestion borrowed from Betrand Russell, for the purpose of organizing metaphysical categories. I noted that it did not appear feasible to define existence. It was accepted as an indefinable concerning which we stated that: Whatever it may mean "to be, as such," we are presently in no position to say. We can observe how "that which is" enters into the sphere of human awareness and cognitive processes. The proposal made in this paper is that we treat the question of the nature of God in the same way. For reasons to be presented, questions concerning the nature of God do not appear to be subject to serious investigation. We can discover, within limits, where the divine becomes operative in human affairs, and how this functioning may become more effective. "What the divine is" which enters into human experience, does not seem to be answerable at present.

Here we are in agreement with John Calvin and other traditionalists who speak of the "mystery of God" without accepting their reasons for so doing. We agree with Personalistic Theists that the Divine is active without presuming this proves God to be an Agent. We agree with Process metaphysicians that Activity, either propulsive or attractive, fulfills divine functions without either affirming or denying anything further about it.

With this brief introduction, we turn now to the suggestion itself.

I. What is the meaning of "the nature of"?

The word "nature" has a long and complex history whose retelling would serve no useful purpose in this context. We may indicate the way we are using the word by calling attention to the verb "is." It is a symbol used to denote or designate identity or equality. We may say that John is as tall as Jim. Here we are affirming some identity or equality in the case of two persons. Or, we may say "this rose is red." In this case, we are attributing to a given object; namely, a rose, the quality of redness. Given a color, red, we use "is" to indicate that this quality is found in or associated with the rose. I suggest, then, that sentences defining God in which the word "is" normally belongs, are designed to state something about "the nature of God." It is the use of such sentences referring to God which is here questioned.

The difficulties involved in defining "natures" came to my attention some years ago while teaching a course in epistemology. Many of the treatises used focused attention upon "what truth is." A perceptive idealist, H. H. Joachim, entitled his work **The Nature of Truth** (1906). His objective was to discover, in his words, "what truth in its nature is, not by what characteristics in its opposing falsehood we may

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infer its presence." Truth for him was "a significant whole," and a "significant whole is an organized individual experience, self-filling and self-fulfilled." (p. 76). Thirty-three years later, Brand Blanshard published a two-volume work with the same title, dedicated to two former teachers, one of them H. H. Joachim. Blanshard stated specifically that "truth is coherence." (II, 260).

From a different standpoint, H. N. Wieman defined truth as "any specifiable structure pertaining to events and their possibilities. Truth is not knowledge but must be potential knowledge. When specified in relation to actual events determining the structure, the truth becomes known and is called 'knowledge'." (**Source of Human Good,** 1946, p. 164). To "know the truth" means to **represent** in concepts the structure or structures "pertaining to events and their possibilities."

The conclusion reached at least a decade ago after examining somewhat carefully the several attempts to state "what truth is" was that not one, but many of the theories presented could interpret the facts pertaining to our attempts to understand ourselves and our world. Or, to state it more precisely, I learned that I could not falsify any of the more serious theories. Each had cogency, and most of them provided organization and interpretation of the acknowledged facts in the field. It is possible that reality consists in a completed integrated whole definable in categories derived from man's consciousness; it is also possible that whatever is, consists in structures definable in categories derived from man's social existence and/or scientific studies.

For many years, I believed it possible to falsify epistemological and metaphysical theories. The primary instrument used in so doing was Occam's **Law of Parsimony;** namely, that entities—laws, principles, assumptions, etc.—should not be multiplied unnecessarily. This Law presupposes that natural processes are always efficient. By efficient we mean taking the shortest or most direct means. But if natural processes indicate anything, it is prodigality, i.e., extravagance and wastefulness. The principle upon which I relied so heavily in my first formulation of basic assumptions, as long ago as 1930, proved to be but another ontological presupposition whose justification consisted in its usefulness at some stages in scientific and philosophical thinking. We shall return to this later in this paper.

Does the fact that one cannot falsify structural or ontological questions—questions concerning "natures"—**mean that we can answer no questions in the field?** Long before I reached my conclusions, men like Charles S. Pierce had suggested another approach. In a paper entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," published in 1878, Pierce suggested a functional approach. He wrote: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." He insisted that ideas are not "true" in that they **represent** something accurately or correctly. Their significance consists in what they enable us to do. So despite the fact that structural problems in epistemology are still being discussed, I am not convinced this will contribute much to the sum of human knowledge.

This insight has been applied to ontological problems as well. What Collingwood said about problems concerning "Pure Being" may be applicable to our question. He stated that the science of Pure Being should be called ontology, and that "ontology will be my name for a mistake which people have made, Aristotle first and foremost, about metaphysics." (**Essay on Metaphysics,** p. 117). By "ontological problems" I shall mean problems centering in "is" and "has" applied to "what" man, the world and God are. The distinction between "is" and "has" may be important.

"Is" as stated earlier in this paper, indicated identity or equivalence; "has" indicates possession. If "being" **is** person, process, etc., then the predicates and the subject are identical, or in some real sense equivalent. If "being" "has" attributes identifiable as personal, process, etc., a distinction is drawn between some ultimate X and its qualities, characteristics, etc. The doubt expressed above concerning "being in itself" or "reality as such" applies to being and/or reality as bearers of attributes. In other words, whether one adopts a substance or a process metphysics, the first characterized by statements containing "has" and the second by statements containing "is," the conclusions reached differ in no significant respect.

This poses a problem. It is apparently impossible to speak without using "is" and "has." If, as we are proposing, "is" and "has" statements should not be used when discussing the Divine, does this mean that they have no place in religious thinking at all? To this question we now turn.

II. Where do "is' 'and "has" statements apply in Religious Thinking?

We suggested that "is" statements indicate identity or equivalence, and that "has" statements suggest possession. By "identity" or "equivalence" we mean sameness, similarity, etc. We do not mean numerical identity, i.e., this sheet of paper is this sheet of paper. We mean that the several sheets of paper I now hold are alike or the same in some presumably specifiable ways. Where do identity and/or equivalence so defined apply?

It applies, I suggest, at the level of perceptual objects. By "perceptual objects" I mean ideas or concepts derived from and applicable to the objects of ordinary or scientific observation. It is obvious that the several sheets of paper I now hold are alike in several ways. Under normal lighting, all appear to be more or less white. They are approximately the same in length, width and thickness, and have approximately the same tensile strength. This applies to us as persons, to some degree. We are male, white, approximately the same height, weight, etc. **These words are descriptive in character,** and refer to observable facts about us. "Is" statements are relevant at this level.

When we ask ourselves the question is the word "God" a descriptive term, I suggest we would have to say no. "God," for most thinkers, is the name for a non-observable reality. We have used the word "heteroscopic" or inferential cognitive objects when discussing concepts of non-observable objects, entities or events. "Heteroscopic" cognitive objects, etc., are interpretations of observed or at least experienced entities, using "entity" to mean "a thing which has reality and distinctness of being either in fact or for thought." They are normally inferred from consideration of what is or may be observed. By way of example, we may consider organic evolution for a moment. It is the name given to the process or activity whereby more complex forms of life evolved from or succeeded simpler forms. Once we have "named" the process or activity, we have identified it, and normally attribute to it some form of existence, being, or reality of its own. This may be a form of hypostatization, i.e., transforming an activity into an agent or agency.

What meaning can we give to "organic evolution as such" which is subject to verification or justification? It is an observable fact that new and more complex forms of life have appeared. Others may now be appearing and perhaps will appear in the future. It is also evident that certain factors appear to play some role in this process. Changes in temperature, environment, crossbreeding, etc., would be listed here. Granted that changes have and perhaps are now occurring, is there some "agentive function," a term borrowed from Dorothy Lee, operative which is not attributable to the several factors, in-

cluding life, themselves? By "agentive function" we mean relevant activity without committing ourselves to the presence of some Agent who or which is active. Stated more precisely, does "organic evolution" mean anything more than that living matter tends to change; that such changes are furthered or hindered by environmental factors? Is there in fact a "creative Agent" operative, or is this an unnecessary addition to whatever agentive functions are present?

The answer to this question is that I do not know. I have at times been influenced by the Principle of Parsimony to deny the Creative Agent. At other times, I have believed that organic evolution implied the existence of some Agent or Creative Being. I do not see how one can falsify either view. There may be a Creative God using the methods of organic evolution to achieve predetermined goals; or these results may be attributed to the long-continued activity of random factors which normally produce definite results. In other words, the agentive function may be that of some reality other than the several factors observable in living changes; or it may be distributed among the factors themselves.

What does this mean? Merely that when we are dealing with heteroscopic objects we are unable, at present, to falsify any of several possible interpretations of the acknowledged facts. Theistic evolution may be congruent with the facts; or a more complex interpretation of life itself may be congruent with the facts. Or some other interpretation may accord more precisely with what we are here discussing. At the moment, I do not know how we may be certain which of these organizations and interpretations is more believable.

Logically, it does not appear to be consistent to say that the agentive function in organic evolution is both a creative Being with a name, i.e., "God," and at the same time is distributed among the several factors observed to be related to the changes in life denoted by "organic evolution." If this is true, then presumably some choice must be made. Either we accept the view that God is some Creative Agent using the methods of evolution; or we attribute the agentive function to life and environment themselves. But on what basis will we make this choice? In terms of simplicity, i.e., Occam's Principle of Parsimony? But this is itself an ontological presupposition, an affirmation concerning Being, or if one prefers, to states of affairs, situations, etc. But this is our problem: What is the "nature" of Being, Reality, or in terms of our immediate interest, God? If we assume that God is a model of efficiency, taking the shortest and quickest route to desirable or desired ends, we have accepted a solution without proof. The Law of Parsimony is itself subject to question.

What other basis for choice is there if we reject the application of Occam's Razor to questions concerning the nature of God? Some years ago, I sought to resolve the presuppositional dilemma which confronted Collingwood in his **Essay on Metaphysics,** by indicating another form of presuppositional analysis. Collingwood had assumed that presuppositions, whether Absolute or relative, were ontological. But some presuppositions do not consist in affirmations concerning "what is," the mark of the ontological. They are affirmations concerning how "what is," may be approached cognitively. I called these presuppositions "epistemological," or "epistemic." Perhaps it would be better to call them "cognitive" presuppositions. The primary cognitive presupposition proposed was that **it is better to think in terms of verified uncertainties than of unverified certainties.** It may be said that this is an ontological presupposition, and affirmation concerning what is. I would agree. At the same time its primary concern is with efficiency and fruitfulness **in thinking** rather than **in living.** One could as-

sume, if he wished, and I am inclined to do so, **that in the long run** efficiency and fruitfulness in thinking will promote human well-being. But this does not deny that the presuposition of Increasing Cognitional Efficiency is primarily epistemic or cognitive.

When one applies Increasing Cognitional Efficiency to ontological presuppositions, some of them can be shown to have detrimental effects upon man's cognitive enterprises. They could, and in specified areas should, be rejected in terms of cognitional efficiency. When we apply this to the problem before us, that of investigating the nature of God, what can we say? Referring again to organic evolution, it is, of course, true that the presupposition of creation by Divine fiat would be rejected because it leaves no unanswered questions. If God created man and woman much as we are now, except for their presumed uncorruptedness, we need search for no "missing links." There are none.

But the question concerning the nature of the agentive function as stated above, does not come under the axe of Increasing Cognitional Efficiency. Research in the field of organic evolution continues with little attention to the problem of agentive function. Herbert Wendt's recently translated **In Search of Adam** (1956) is a descriptive account of the discoveries made which tend to relate present forms of life to earlier forms. No attempt is made to affirm or deny theories concerning the nature of the agentive function.

If we accept the view that the word "God" refers to some unobservable or heteroscopic object, it follows that various conceptions of its "nature" are possible. By "possible" we mean that these conceptions enable us to organize the facts available, provide some intelligible interpretation of them which will serve some forms of religious values. God, as the referent of various divine names, may be personal in nature; or an operative principle functioning within the processes of nature; or some directional dynamism operative at all levels known to us. Granted that there may be differences in their apparent cogency, or compelling force. But these differences may be due to some set of presuppositions we have accepted rather than to the facts themselves. There are some views which appear quite unbelievable today, no matter how relevant they may have appeared in the past. It requires quite an elastic imagination to think of the cosmos as an infinite man, the suggestion made by Tagore. As astronomers now point out, the human appears to be an incidental rather than a pivotal factor in the universe as presently known. Views such as this presuppose reliance upon a rather limited body of data.

The conceptions of God held by process metaphysicians gain their cogency from the acceptance of another presupposition, namely, that the tiniest or most minute bits of stuff are more representative of the whole than the microscopic. Granted that the smallest discoverable units may not move; they are, they disappear and reappear. They change positions but leave no intervening tracks. If this is true at the atomic and sub-atomic levels, must we say this is also true of the macroscopic levels even though telescopic data do not support it? If my information is correct, suns and planets apparently move under telescopic inspection with continuous motion. Here are two bodies of evidence which presumably contradict one another. Shall we deny the evidence from the telescopes because of what we learn from the microscopes? If so, why the preference for the microscopic?

Or, if one derives his categories from an examination of astronomic levels and thinks of the universe in terms of Episodic Durationality, by what right does he give priority to the macroscopic at the expense of the microscopic? Why assume that the evidence from fields such as astronomy is more congruent with "the nature of" the universe than

that from atomic physics? Can we combine them into an inclusive, systematic whole by using Bohr's principle of Complementarity? I tried something like this in a recent paper in **The Iliff Review.** I marshalled information from many fields under the heuristic principle that the metaphysician is a processor rather than a producer of knowledge. Yet I discover when I reread that paper, that I derived my categories primarily from astronomy, sociology and other macroscopic fields. It is true that I tried to include information from atomic and subatomic fields. Yet the outcome differed from what it would have had I begun with the microscopic and included the macroscopic.

What have we before us? We have several possible interpretations concerning "what" reality **is.** If you will permit me to avoid the loaded word "reality," we may say that we have before us several theories concerning the Existential Medium, that in which we live, move and have our being. In a preliminary statement of this problem, I attempted to include the conception of God as Dynamic Directionalism from the criticism just presented. I asked the question: Wherein does this statement differ from admittedly ontological affirmations concerning God? I suggested that the difference, insofar as there is any, lies in the question to which it is an answer. That question is: What can be affirmed on the basis of operational verification about the Existential Medium as a whole or in some significant part which becomes that whereby religious values are realized or are realizable? Please note the words "about" and "that whereby" in the preceding sentence. "About the Existential Medium as a whole or in some significant part" was interpreted to mean "how does the Existential Medium, whatever it may be, enter into our cognitive processes when we reinterpret it for religious purposes." We are not asking "what" it is, but "how" we may relate ourselves to it for religious purposes. The question is functional rather than structural. In other words, I was maintaining that Dynamic Directionalism is a functional answer to a theological question, and that personalistic and process metaphysics were concerned with "is" questions, even though "how" questions were or could be included. What I had in mind was that a metaphysics of Episodic Durationality concerned itself with the question "What God means for" rather than "what God is."

I am not now convinced that this position is tenable. Both personalistic and process theisms are also answers to functional questions. This is indicated by the attention given to practical or technique matters by theologians who belong to both schools of thought. My present position is that the several metaphysical systems listed all attempt to answer "is" questions when used for theological purposes. Insofar as this is the case, whereas each one can be supported by more or less evidence from selected areas of information, it does not appear possible at the moment to falsify any of them. If this is the case, questions concerning the nature of God do not appear answerable at present.

Thus far we have identified two levels of cognitive objects, the perceptual and the heteroscopic. We have reasons to believe that "is" and "has" statements are relevant at the perceptual levels. We may say with some assurance that "this rose is red." We may also say, again with some assurance, that "rose branches have sharp thorns." When we come to the heteroscopic level, the situation changes somewhat. The entities to which we refer, organic evolution, God, etc., are non-observable. They are inferred from what is observed. And it is noted that any inferred reality may be deficient existentially. In other words, it may not exist. The ether, which played such a role in scientific thought of the past, has been replaced by space. There was no way whereby its presence could be verified or falsi-

fied. The history of human thought is filled with the disappearance or replacement of heteroscopic objects. There is no reason to assume that we now have the final word. To state it bluntly, heteroscopic objects, divine and others, which now serve useful purposes intellectually, may not exist as presently defined.

III. What, then, follows for theological education?

The first consequence will be mentioned but not developed here. It is that one must be very careful what names he applies to agentive functions at many levels. Names have many functions. One is that if identifying, namely, making "is" statements concerning what is named. If one uses anthropomorphic or personal names for God, it is difficult to escape identifying God with man or humanity in some definite sense.

The second consequence is that more attention should be given to functional values in our several fields and less to "is" questions. People have found religious values under many different theological banners. They have also had wholesome experiences and satisfactory personal growth under many different psychological banners, and this holds true in other fields. I suggest that questions concerning the nature of man, of God, and of the world have had too much attention in the light of the fact that "nature" as here used refers to heteroscopic cognitive objects. Our conclusions here are very tentative at best. This may account for the partisanship often observable here. Where evidence is lacking, affirmations take over.

Next, in a recent paper, I made the tentative proposal that questions concerning "what God is" should be replaced by "where the divine may be experienced." This is a fruitful area of research and experimentation in which useful conclusions may be reached. The same suggestion may be made concerning theological anthropology. "What man is" does not appear to be as pertinent or as significant as the question: "Under what conditions and in what circumstances does wholesome growth or maturity occur?" Here, again, the prospects for significant conclusions appear to be good.

It may be said that when we speak about religious values and "personal growth and maturity" we are using "is" statements. We may be, but at the level of perceptual cognitive objects. The locus of religiously valuable situations may be determined by investigating the areas where such values are sought, and observing whether or not the predetermined outcomes occur. What about "wholesome growth or maturity?" Do these words refer to heteroscopic cognitive objects? I suggest they are statements concerning personal qualities highly regarded in various cultures. It may be noted that what is highly regarded in one culture, i.e., what has prestige value, is not necessarily so regarded in another. What the "person growing toward maturity" may be is definable in terms of overtly expressed attitudes and not in ontological terms. "Is" statements here refer to the perceptual level, to social approval and prestige.

The fourth consequence has to do with our understanding of the divine. If the attempt to define the nature of God fails because we cannot falsify competing hypotheses, we have several options available as to the use of the divine name. (i) We may discard it altogether. This possibility was considered by John Dewey in **A Common Faith** (1934) and rejected. He believed that the name "God" should be used to designate the "active relation between ideal and actual." What others have called the "perfecting tendency in the nature of things," or the directional momentum operative at many levels, Dewey called "**active** interaction between ideal and actual." I am not sure that Dewey did not move into ontology here. The significance of his statement

is that God appears to be a term necessary in religious thinking. I would agree.

Or, the divine may be used as an heuristic principle in man's quest for religious and perhaps moral value. It would serve the same general purposes in religion that the "Order of nature" serves in scientific investigation. In this case, conceptions of God would change as results in religious living indicated the necessity for such changes. The healing gods of ancient civilizations disappeared when research made them irrelevant. In their heyday, they were subjected to extensive intellectual elaboration and had temples and shrines built in their honor. They disappeared when their heuristic significance was lost, i.e., when the discovery of germs and viruses made them irrelevant. Here again, the "nature" of the healing gods was not important. What was important was the guidance and support such divine beings provided in man's quest for health.

Or, we may appeal to some ultimate mystery with Tillich. God is then the final X required to explain or undergird man's search for ultimate meaning in life. This may be a justifiable method provided it can be shown that such "ultimates" are psychological necessities. Personally, I doubt the significance of such ultimates. Living is done in terms of a succession of "presents," i.e., intervals of varying length within which meanings are found. Values, as I understand them, are not determined too much by time factors.

Finally, the possibility of interacting significantly with the divine does not depend upon understanding what "the divine is as such." One may enjoy music without understanding the several instruments used in its production or the structure of musical compositions. If one is to produce music, then such information is essential. But even at this level, some questions could be raised. I suspect that long before theories concerning the nature of esthetic experiences. Only later did the attempts to understand what was enjoyed become relevant. What does appear essential is that we learn where, that is, in what situations and under what conditions, the divine may become operative in the reorganization of life required by threatening factors or by new insights into possible larger goods.