Talk about God

FRANK R. HARRISON, III

FROM time to time various philosophical positions claim that we can know nothing about God. During the last forty years a rather different point of view has taken hold. It is now maintained in many quarters that we cannot meaningfully say anything about God. The reason for this is not because of any limitations which we, as finite creatures, have, but because of the nature of meaningful discourse. In the past philosophers would argue about the truth of falsity of such assertions as 'God exists.' Theists would attempt to adduce proofs for this claim or to present some sort of evidence, usually of an empirical sort, as verifying it. Atheists, on the other hand, would purport to show that there is evidence, also usually of an empirical sort, which mitigates against the truth of 'God exists.' But today the question often raised is what is the literal meaning of 'God exists'? Today we are reminded, and rightly so, that we must know what an assertion means before we can debate its truth or falsity.

It is the case that some philosophers, such as A. J. Ayer, have quite frankly said that any assertions about God are cognitively meaningless — non-sensical. This is not to deny that there may be some psychological reaction on the part of a person either hearing or asserting 'God exists,' but this is not to allow any cognitive meaning to the assertion itself.

This has led some, e.g. R. B. Braithwaite and C. B. Martin, to suggest that an individual's (say, Paul's) assertion, 'God exists,' can at best be meaningful insofar as it indicates that Paul has a certain behaviour pattern, a propensity to act in a certain way in certain situations. For example, Paul may go to church on Sundays, light candles on feast days, eat fish on Fridays, wear a dark smudge on his forehead on Ash Wendesday — all depending on many and varied factors of environment and training. And those that hear Paul say, 'God exists,' are in a better position to predict some of his future actions. And, like any other prediction, our's can be checked by waiting and watching Paul. Thus, the assertion 'God exists' turns out to be not about God, but about — if anything — Paul's behavior patterns.

The purpose of this paper is to pinpoint clearly the doctrine which has led to the Contemporary Point of View concerning language about God. When this has been done, I hope that we will be in a better position to see why some contemporary philosophers have allowed themselves to be saddled with a way of doing philosophy of religion which is both inadequate and misleading. It is not my purpose, therefore, to solve problems, but to show their source. In this sense I wish to present a propaedeutic for current discussion in philosophy of religion.

Two of the most important points of commencement of the Contemporary Point of View are the influences of Ludwig Wittgenstein through first his **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** (published 1922) and later his **Philosophical Investigations** (published 1953), and the Vienna Circle which was formed in 1923 and reflected in A. J. Ayer's **Language, Truth and Logic.**

One of the questions raised in the **Tractatus** is the nature of logical and mathematical statements, and the relation of these statements to the world of ships and shoes and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings. The answer given by Wittgenstein may be loosely paraphrased in the following way. State-

FRANK R. HARRISON, III is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion of The University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.

ments of logic and mathematics do not assert anything about particular states-of-affairs in the world. In this sense the statements of logic and mathematics are "contentless." Rather, they show us something about the structure of the world. Thus, a statement of the form 'p or not-p' does not give us any information which is unique about one particular state-of-affairs as opposed to another. Yet it does show us something about the structure of the world. This position was to be modified and then adopted in its modified form by the Vienna Circle. The Circle held that statements of logic and mathematics do not tell us anything about particular states-of-affairs, **and** they merely reflect our arbitrary use of certain marks within a given language. And, indeed, this doctrine was extended to all analytic statements. For example, 'All bachelors are unmarried men' asserts nothing about bachelors and unmarried men. Rather, it says something about the use of 'bachelor' and 'unmarried men' in our language.

The Vienna Circle, under the leadership of Moritz Schlick, attempted to develop a clear and concise criterion whereby it could be judged whether any particular assertion was meaningful or not. Any assertion which did not tally up to this criterion was eliminated as cognitively meaningless. Quite frankly the members of the Circle wanted to guarantee the meaningfulness of statements of the sort found in the natural sciences, logic and mathematics, and to do away with everything else. This was, avowedly, the great move to eliminate metaphysics, and along with metaphysics, religious and ethical discourse. If any assertion was not an analytic statement or did not tally up with the requirements of meaningfulness of non-analytic statements, it was to be discharged as literal nonsense.

In 1936 A. J. Ayer imported—tax exempt—the central doctrines of the Vienna Circle into England, and the English-speaking world. In his small, but potent book, **Language, Truth and Logic,** Ayer claims to raise—and solve—many, if not all, of the traditional problems of philosophy. That necessary criterion, the Verification Principle, had been developed whereby we could forever free ourselves of philosophical and theological nonsense. All that now remained was to apply this criterion to various particular linguistic muddles, to the many logical howlers found in our language. Then our genuine problems would easily be seen to reduce themselves either to the natural sciences or to logic and mathematics. Anything else would be found out for what it is—complete nonsense.

It is made quite clear in **Language, Truth and Logic** that there are only two types of meaningful statements. On the one hand, there are empirical, or observational, statements about actual or possible states-of-affairs in the world of sealing wax, cabbages and kings. But this is not quite adequate. Ayer also wants to allow for statements which belong to the natural sciences, but which themselves are not about any particular **x** as opposed to some **y.** Consider Maxwell's laws concerning electrostatics and electromagnetism. Now these statements are empirical in the sense that it is possible to derive predictions to the effect that under certain specified conditions certain specified observable phenomena will occur. The actual occurrence of these phenomena constitutes verifying evidence, and their non-occurrence falsifying evidence fo the statements in question. From this it follows in particular that an empirical statement is in principle falsifiable. This is simply to say that it is possible to indicate what kind of evidence, if actually found, would prove the statement false.

On the other hand, there are analytic statements. These are also cognitively meaningful. The best examples of these statements come from mathematics and logic. There are, however, examples of them in our ordinary language: for instance, 'It is true that there are not any

round squares,' 'All bachelors are unmarried men,' and so forth. These statements are said to depend for their truth or falsity solely on the conventions of the symbolic system of which they happen to be a member. Thus, it follows that the truth or falsity of these statements is in no way dependent on the empirical world. Such statements say nothing about the world, and consequently the world in no way can be counted as providing a means for verifying or falsifying analytic statements. Because of this, it can be said that they are absolutely certain in that they are either true or false according to the ways in which we define the terms contained in them. While it is absolutely true 'All bachelors are unmaried men,' it is not true because of any factual implications or empirical content. What we are doing is simply showing something about the way we happen to use our language. And it is exactly for this reason that the statement must be validated without any appeal to empirical evidence.

Any assertion which cannot be placed into one of the two above mentioned categories, but not both, is to count as being, literally speaking, nonsensical. For example, it may be suggested that we consider the assertion 'God exists.' Is this a meaningful statement, or a nonsensical utterance? At this point the person uttering the sound 'God exists' may be invited to tell us what he means by it. Is he making some sort of empirical claim? It certainly looks as if this is what he is attempting to do, for, after all, 'God exists' looks very much like 'Paul exists.' But he could not really be making an empirical assertion. For consider what particular state-of-affairs would be allowed to count against the truth of the assertion, and to count against it enough for the religious man to say that 'God exists' is, indeed, a meaningful statement—but, alas, a false one! Admittedly the religious man **may** say that some states-of-affairs **seem** to count against the truth of the assertion 'God exists'; for example, great amounts of seemingly needless pain suffered by seemingly innocent people. But, of course, the religious man would claim that we do not know the entire story. In a word, he will permit nothing ultimately to count against the truth of 'God exists.' And a sentence that denies nothing can in no wise assert something. That is to say 'God exists' cannot be counted as an empirical statement.

But perhaps the assertion 'God exists' may be an analytic statement. If this were so we would not have to bother ourselves with any concern about empirical observations counting against the statement, and, furthermore, we would know that the statement, if true, is necessarily true. The only unfortunate thing about this is if 'God exists' is an analytic statement, there need not be any existing being to which the word 'God' refers. If an analytic statement, there need not be any existing being to which the word 'God' refers. If an analytic statement, and if true, then the statement 'God exists' is true simply in virtue of the ways in which we happen to define the words 'God' and 'exists.' That is to say, the statement 'God exists' only reflects something about our arbitrary rules of language. But surely a religious person wants to say more than this. Yet from the point of view of the Vienna Circle and **Language, Truth and Logic,** if he does attempt to claim more, he is said to be indulging in literal nonsense.

It is not difficult to suggest examples of this point of view in various recent writings dealing with religious language. One has only to turn his attention to the volume entitled **New Essays in Philosophical Theology** edited in 1955 by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre. For example, in J. N. Findlay's article, "Can God's Existence be Disproved," we find the author speaking about those who share 'a contemporary outlook' Such contemporary thinkers

know that the notion of Divine Existence is 'either senseless or impossible.'

> Findlay's position is to show that the Divine Existence can only be conceived in a religiously satisfactory manner, if we also conceive it as something inescapable and necessary, whether for thought or reality. From which it follows that our modern denial of necessary or rational evidence for such an existence amounts to a demonstration that there cannot be a God.[1]

If in principle no evidence whatsoever is possible for **x**, then what sense can we be making when we speak of **x**?

It is next pointed out that a proper object of religious reverance, an object before which we tend to abuse ourselves must not only be thought to exist, but it must be thought of as necessarily existing; such an object must not only be thought of as being good in the highest degree, it must be thought of as being necessarily good in the highest degree, and that source from which everything else that is good derives its goodness; such an object must not only be thought of as being wise in the highest degree, but it must be thought of as being necessarily wise in the highest degree, and that source of wisdom for everything else. There must be no possibility whatsoever of the proper object of religious reverence not existing, of not being supremely good, of not being supremely wise, and so forth.

From the Contemporary Point of View, that is from the basic point of view of **Language, Truth and Logic**, Findlay now presents the 'full-blooded worshipper' with a dilema.

> The religious frame of mind seems, in fact to be in a quandry; it seems invincibly determined both to eat its cake and have it. It desires the Divine Existence both to have that inescapable character which can, on modern views, only be found where truth reflects an arbitrary conviction, and also the character of 'making a real difference' which is only possible where truth doesn't have this merely linguistic basis. We may accordingly deny that modern approaches allow us to remain agnostically poised in regard to God: they force us to come down on the atheistic side. For if God is to satisfy religious claims and needs, he must be a being in every way inescapable, One whose existence and whose possession of certain excellences we cannot possibly conceive away. And modern views make it self-evidently absurd (if they don't make it ungrammatical) to speak of such a Being and attribute existence to him.[2]

In short, we are presented with two alternatives. Either the assertion 'God exists' is self-contradictory or not. Now if it is self-contradictory, then it is necessarily false; that is to say that the existence of God is logically impossible, and thus senseless to assert. But, then, if the utterance 'God exists' is not self-contradictory, it is logically true and does not assert the existence of God, but rather 'reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of our language.'

But the criterion of meaningfulness, the Verification Principle, proposed by the Vienna Circle raised worrisome problems. For example, what was the status of the Principle itself? Consider the assertion, "A sentence is cognitively meaningful if, and only if, it is analytic or in principle verifiable, but not both.' We may ask if this assertion is meaningful or not. If it is, it must be either analytic or in principle verifiable, but not both. If the sentence is analytic, it is simply stipulating an arbitrary definition of 'meaning.' If the sentence in question purports to be an empirical hypothesis, it would itself require verification. But the Verification Principle itself cannot be verified. To attempt to do this would lead to an infinite regress of a disastrous nature. Thus, in accordance with the position of the Positivists, the Verification Principle itself must be

[1] Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1955, p. 48.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

recognized as cognitively meaningless.[3]

Retaining the strict distinction between analytic and non-analytic statements, the Contemporary Point of View was modified. Analytic statements were still held to be arbitrary conventions of our language. The meaning, however, of non-analytic assertions was now coupled with use instead of verifiability. The meaning of a word, an assertion, is its use in a language.

The most single important work developing the Use Principle of meaning is Wittgenstein's **Philosophical Investigations.** While Wittgenstein did not write the **Investigations** to circumvent specific criticisms leveled against the Verification Principle, nevertheless his Use Principle was adopted to augment the Verification Principle.

Concerning philosophy of religion, R. B. Braithwaite in his Eddington Memorial Lectures of 1955, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," employed the Use Principle. First, Braithwaite maintains that religious assertions are not out and out empirical assertions. If they were, it would have to be admitted they are in principle falsifiable. But, as has been pointed out, no evidence is allowed ultimately to mitigate against the truth of, say, 'God exists.' Second, neither does Braithwaite desire to count religious assertions as being analytic, for then they would only assert something about our language, and at least prima facie they appear to do more than that. It cannot be concluded, therefore, that they are meaningless simply because they are neither straight-forward analytic nor empirical statements. After all, religious assertions do have many **uses** in certain linguistic frameworks. Hence, they must have meanings in some sense of 'meaning.'

In order to clarify and support his argument, Braithwaite suggests that moral assertions also do not make factual claims, and neither are they analytic statements. Further, it is the case that we recognize words have various uses, and, therefore, various meanings. Also it is suggested that a religious assertion is used like a moral one, and that the

> . . . primary use of a moral assertion [is] that of expressing the intention of the assertor to act in a particular sort of way specified in the assertion.[4]

Thus, if someone were to say, 'God is love,' what is being asserted is the intention, on the part of the assertor, to follow an agapeistic way of life. The assertion is, consequently, in no wise about God, but about the assertor.

The meaning of the assertion, 'God is love,' is given in terms of its use, and its use is to assert the intention of the assertor to follow a certain course of behaviour. These assertions not only refer to the intentions of the assertor, but also to a body of stories, or myths. By 'story' or 'myth' we are to understand

> . . . a set of propositions which are straightforwardly empirical propositions capable of empirical test (even if they are about mythological beings who never existed but who would have been empirically observable had they existed) and which are thought of by the religious man in connection with his resolution to follow the way of life advocated by his religion.[5]

It is interesting to note that these stories, themselves, need not be believed. Indeed, they need not even be consistent with one another. The requirement is that they have a meaning and be thought about, for the use of these stories, or myths, is to help one pursue a way of life, a fairly specific behaviour pattern. Thus, religious stories, or myths, are not to be viewed as any sort of cognitive support, or evidence, for our religious beliefs. Rather they are to be understood as having a

[3] For a further discussion of the Verification Principle an excellent book is E. L. Mascall's, *Words and Images,* New York: Ronald Press Company, 1957.

[4] R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief." Eddington Memorial Lectures, 1955, p. 12.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 23.

psychological and causal efficacy on our individual actions. These stories are to be looked upon as psychological supports for a fairly particular behaviour pattern that the religious man has asserted he is going to follow. Therefore, Braithwaite can define 'religious assertion' in the following way:

> A religious assertion, for me, is the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain behaviour policy, subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statement, but not the assertion, of certain stories.[6]

While Braithwaite's position might be in harmony with the Contemporary Point of View of philosophy, nevertheless, it is not in accord with traditional Christianity. It is not what a religious man would say his assertions about God mean. What has gone wrong is that Braithwaite, like Ayer and Findlay, has been saddled with a particular view of language. Fundamental to this view are the following points:

(1) All meaningful discourse can clearly be divided into two classes, which completely exclude one another.

(2) One of these classes is analytic statements, which are necessarily true because of arbitrary conventions of the way certain marks are used within a language. Such statements assert nothing.

(3) The other class of meaningful discourse is non-analytic sentences. These sentences derive their meaning from their use in a language. With some of these we assert facts. Such sentences are statements and can be either true or false. They are not necessarily true or necessarily false. At least these three points must be maintained if the Contemporary Point of View of philosophy is to hold. Can this be done? It **seems** that it cannot, although the question is still an open one.

Willard Van Orman Quine brings to task the first point in his article, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." But even if the first point could be maintained, which is extremely doubtful, it does not seem possible to substantiate the second point. One of the several covert doctrines of the second point is that all the laws of logic and mathematics can be formulated without any appeal to the world. This is to say that all such laws are completely syntactical. Rudolf Carnap attempted to demonstrate this in **The Logical Syntax of Language.** It is most important to note that Carnap was forced to abandon this attempt. Until someone vindicates the hopes of Carnap in **The Logical Syntax of Language,** there is no ground for holding to the Contemporary Point of View concerning analytic statements. And finally we must call into question the third point mentioned above. If it is the case that we cannot in all cases clearly distinguish between an analytic and non-analytic statement, and if analytic statements are such that they cannot be shown to be purely syntactical, it then becomes reasonable to ask ourselves whether there may not be some statements which are necessarily true, and which assert something. And, furthermore, may it not be the case that 'God exists' is such a statement?

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 32.