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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

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By

GORDON DABBS

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DESCRIBING GOD

A DISSERTATION

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

Reinaldo Elugardo

Juri Cortes

Kenneth Merrill

Tom W. Boyd

Monte Cook

To Dad and Mom

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Abstract

Describing God

The philosophical difficulty with religious discourse centers around the problem of applying descriptive predicates to a transcendent God. This is contrary to most contemporary accounts of the problem of religious language which claim that the problem is within the peculiar genres of religious language, i.e., analogy, metaphor and narrative.

The first few chapters of this dissertation examine traditional explanations of the problem of religious discourse and finds them to be inadequate for a variety of reasons. The traditional explanations are either founded on a problematic metaphysical system or they are internally inconsistent.

The final two chapters look to metaphor and narrative as answers to the problem of predication. Neither is found to solve the problem and the notion of predicative history is introduced as a way of understanding the application of descriptive predicates to God.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Traditional philosophy of religion has been dominated by the “big questions.” Philosophers have asked questions about the nature of evil, the existence of God and the relationship of theism to philosophical disciplines like epistemology and ethics. While these big questions have not disappeared, the more common questions in contemporary philosophy have to do with linguistic problems in speaking about God. For some, and probably most, theists, speaking about God is generally not difficult; they just do it. Then they wonder why philosophers have such a problem with their utterances. For philosophers such language is fraught with problems. These problems may be summarized by the following question: How can humans speak meaningfully about a transcendent God? As John Grimes notes, “The problem is to explain how ordinary day-to-day language, which exists and lives in and forms the world of individuals and objects, may be used meaningfully to refer to this trans-human reality.”¹ John Hick observed, “It is evident even to the most preliminary reflection that the words traditionally used to describe God, such as “good,” “living,” “just,” wise,” and “powerful,” are not meant in their religious context to bear the sense that they have in their application to human beings.”²

The difficulties that Grimes and Hick describe are different. For Grimes, the problem is one of reference. If one is speaking of a transcendent being, how can we say that our words refer to that being? If reference occurs, it would seem that one must have some access to that being. Yet, if a being is wholly transcendent, can one be said to have any access at all to that being? This is the reference problem. For Hick, the issue is to determine how words like “good” and “just,” which are understood when applied to human beings, apply to God, a being not understood. While the problems that Grimes and Hick are interested in are related, they are not identical. For Grimes the concern is reference; for Hick it is what I will call predication—how do mundane predicates succeed in describing God?

Religious language, for Hick, is about a peculiar business. Religious language attempts to describe a God who is fundamentally different from human beings and the physical world by using terms which are descriptive within that physical world.

“God” and mystery

One of the reasons that speaking about God presents such problems is that the word ‘God’, in some senses, demarcates the edge of

human language. Because 'God' denotes so many absolutes (goodness, power, justice, wisdom, being, etc.) it stands on the frontier of language.

The mistake is to think that the word 'God' either falls well within the edges of language, where religious claims about God would be meaningful but would appear to be false, or else lies outside language altogether. It seems evident to me now that the word never had much life in either of these foreign soils. Planted in its own ground, however, right on, and marking, the boundary of language, the word can be as alive and flourishing today as in the past. If saying "God" is an acknowledgment that one has come to the end of language, if it is a religious way of indicating that one longs to say all that could possibly be said on some matter of great concern, then that is a role which lies just barely but legitimately within our language.³

For the Christian tradition, the complicated notions of trinity, absolute goodness, omnipotence and eternity are packed inside this word. Perhaps it does stretch language, but, more than that, it is a word which demands an epistemic, metaphysical and ethical accounting. Most philosophers and theologians mean more by 'God' than just the very edge of language. It is, for most people, more than just a "boundary-marker"⁴ at the very edge of the frontier of language. Perhaps it stands as a "boundary-marker" because it is not clear whether the term 'God' refers to anything at all. Perhaps it is a "boundary-marker" because it claims to label something that is transcendent. Whatever Van Buren means by "frontier" and "boundary-marker," he is right that it is a word with enormous import and one which carries considerable linguistic difficulties.

Perhaps what Van Buren means by saying that 'God' stands as a boundary-marker at the edge of language is something like saying that it is a title which creates significant meaning problems for those language users who invoke the title. The term 'God' can provoke a stimulating philosophical dialogue, but is not of primary interest in this dissertation. Discussions about the word 'God' center around such questions as: Is 'God' a proper name? Is 'God' an honorific title? What functions does the term 'God' have within our language structure? Is 'God' an abstract singular term like 'wisdom,' 'justice,' or 'goodness'? Each of these questions is worthy of philosophical consideration.

How should a philosophical study of language about 'God' approach these matters? Perhaps the starting point is the recognition that 'God' plays vital, perhaps irreplaceable, roles in language. According to Gordon Kaufman, 'God' is a central word in the English language.

It is a word in ordinary and everyday English, to be found in every dictionary and known and understood by every speaker of the language. It is imprinted on our coins and uttered as part of the pledge of allegiance; it appears in casual oaths as well as desperate cries for help; it carries overtones of value and meaning and significance for ignorant and cultured, secular and believing, alike, whether it is thought to designate that reality most surely to be believed in, or that superstition most certainly to be repudiated. "God" is a word that all Westerners know and understand, one of the most momentous and weighty in our language; it is a word that has helped move men to the vilest of crimes as well as the most inspired acts of devotion and self-giving.⁵

The importance of the term 'God' may be seen, I think rightly, as one for theologians to argue about. For our purposes, it is enough to recognize the centrality of the word in Western culture. A word that is so central to human language and thought merits philosophical analysis.

While this paper recognizes the import of the term 'God' in our vocabulary, it will focus on the linguistic problem of God--not the *term* 'God', but the philosophical problem inherent in predicating attributes of God as a divine being. For purposes of illuminating this problem, we shall not spend energy on an analysis of the term 'God' or on the question of reference, but devote the remainder of this dissertation to the question of predicating attributes of God. It will be assumed that the word 'God' does refer (i.e., there is an existing being to whom the word 'God' refers). How this reference occurs will be left as an open question.

The challenges of meaningfully describing God demand analysis and illumination. The proper role of the philosopher of religion is to balance the theologian's appeal to mystery with proper reasoned investigation. The theologian may assert that a transcendent God is mysterious; the philosopher is not allowed the luxury of such assertions. His fundamental task is to discover the proper role of mystery in the discussion. Can one speak tenably of the mystery, or must one remain silent? How can one

speaking of the mystery that is God? D.Z. Phillips notes that "Our philosophical task is to let the concept of mystery come in at the right place; to show how the concept is mediated in human life."⁶ If theologians invoke mystery as a strategy to avoid charges of meaninglessness in their God-talk, then the concept of mystery only clouds the discussion of discourse about God and serves an anti-philosophical role.

The concept of mystery, however, can be useful if one means to say that God cannot be completely understood and that philosophical analysis has limitations. The characteristics/properties of God which human agents cannot understand is then the mystery. Few theologians or philosophers would argue that God can be completely understood; therefore, mystery refers to the set of questions that lie outside of philosophical or scientific analysis. While mystics may write of the content of the mystery, rational tools of explanation-the tools of philosophers and scientists-are not appropriate. Some intellectual circles exclude the concept of mystery.

The philosophical task of the philosopher of religion is made difficult by the intellectual climate of the day, a climate that is not receptive to religious utterances. Utterances which attempt to approach the mystery are automatically considered meaningless. Phillips continues by noting:

In endeavoring to give perspicuous representations of the grammar of religious belief, the philosopher cannot take his audience for granted. I have already mentioned the anti-religious sense of intellectual superiority

by which he will be confronted. This sense is destroyed at considerable cost to the philosophers concerned. They would have to recognize that they are often in the grip of the very superstitions they condemn in others. It is difficult to clarify the grammar of religious belief in a pervasively secular age.⁷

What Phillips calls the “grammar of religious belief” is not entirely clear. He most likely did not intend to say that religious belief uses a different grammatical structure than other domains of discourse, but that particular issues haunt religious discourse which are not relevant to other modes. The remainder of this dissertation will deal with the peculiar difficulty in speaking about God, primarily the difficulty in predicating attributes of God. Predication is the major, and neglected, issue which resides in the grammar of religious belief.

Is there a problem?

After hinting at the problem of speaking about God, one must ask, however, if such a problem really exists. Perhaps one is chasing a rabbit that need not be caught. If the problem of speaking of God is simply that one doesn't understand him, is this really a problem? Don't people speak meaningfully about ideas and things they don't understand all of the time? Surely they do, but at least with the people and things one speaks about without substantial knowledge, one shares much in common. While one

may not have substantial knowledge about the uniqueness of a person or plant, one can discern a variety of attributes of the physical make-up of either. Also, one knows that a human being has a personality, likes and dislikes, and greater or fewer bad habits. One identifies these because he has these. They are familiar to him. Thus, the ground one shares with the variety of people and things in the physical world allow him to speak unproblematically about them. This is not to mean unproblematic in the sense that one never has mistaken judgments or speaks beyond what his knowledge warrants, just that his statements, whether true or false, wise or foolish, do carry meaning. However, when theists use terms like “transcendent” or “wholly-other” to characterize God, they establish, perhaps without intention, that God is not one about whom we are entitled to speak unproblematically.

In speaking of Carlos, a middle-aged man from Spain whom one has never met, one can say things like: “He is a thin man,” “He is a cat lover,” “He loves chocolate,” or “He is a good man.” Perhaps one is mistaken on each of these judgments. Still she seems to be entitled to say them and she can imagine what it would be like for any of those statements to be true of Carlos. The same statements could even be made of one’s mailbox: “He is a thin man”, or “He is a cat lover.” Of course, these statements are

preposterous when predicated of one's mailbox. Nevertheless, one can make those kinds of predications and know they are preposterous because one has some true ideas about mailboxes, and one knows that these statements do not and cannot meaningfully designate one.

But can one make meaningful statements about a wholly-other God? Perhaps the atheist has no meaning problem when speaking about God, for God is, perhaps, a hallucination of theists, and one can speak about hallucinations. Strangely, the problem of speaking meaningfully about God is principally a difficulty for theists, for believers. For them, the wholly-other is not a hallucination, but a real, divine being. For theists, an account of the meaningfulness, the relationship of the predicate and the God, is imperative.

Meaningfulness in God-talk

In examining the mysteriousness of God-talk, many have argued that religious language is hopelessly meaningless. Those who argued that this position is true because either 1) much of religious discourse is unverifiable or 2) much of religious discourse cannot be falsified, were mistaken. Those positions were not able to stand up to philosophical investigation. Chapters Two and Three will offer an examination of verificationism and the falsifiability positions.

The issue of predication

Chapter Four will mention that the problem of meaning regarding utterances about God is not imagined. The real difficulty lies, as hinted at above, in *predicating* attributes of God. Theists make all sorts of assertions about God, a being who they claim to be transcendent, a word which by itself produces a variety of problems. These assertions/predications about God sometimes involve odd words like “omnipotence,” “omnipresence,” or “omniscience,” but more often involve ordinary words like “father,” “rock,” “shepherd,” and “light.” It is difficult to see how such common words can characterize a transcendent God. Thus, the problem that will be addressed is not one of the following two:

- A) The problem of reference (i.e., Does the word ‘God’ refer to an existing being?), or
- B) The problem of ‘God’ (i.e., unique concerns about the word itself).

Rather, the problem of meaning in describing God is one of predication, one of applying the words one understands to a God whom one does not understand. Can a substantive connection between God and ‘rock’ hold? Can any connection between the two words hold? If theists are to speak meaningfully about God, there must be a connection. In other words, the literal meanings of ‘rock,’ ‘father,’ ‘shepherd,’ etc., are essentially fixed by certain causal, social, and physical features of the world. How,

then, can these words be used unequivocally, with their literal meanings, to predicate anything of God, a being who has transcendent properties? There must be some way in which the predicate is moored to the thing it seeks to characterize. This is the mystery.

Analogical and metaphorical perspectives

Helpful clues to the mystery come from philosophers and theologians who examine language “at full stretch” in analogy and metaphor. Since St. Thomas initiated the analogical perspective, a variety of philosophers have followed the way of analogical language. Most recently, metaphor has come to the forefront of the discussions. Chapter Five will examine the metaphorical perspective. These perspectives will be examined and found to be helpful in many respects, but faulty in others.

Narrative, predicative history and the predication question

Next, we will examine the centrality of narrative to the Western theistic tradition, giving particular attention to the way that narrative approaches the mystery of predication. Narrative fails as an answer to the problem of predication, as it simply pushes the problem away from language and onto the listener.

The answer to the problem of predicating characteristics of God, it will be seen, can be solved by noting that theists and non-theists predicate within predicative histories. Each religious tradition contains a predicative history laid out by the sacred writings, scholars, and prophets of that tradition. These writings constitute the predicative history. The difficulties of predicating attributes of a transcendent God do not impinge upon theists and non-theists who predicate within a predicative history.

Quite simply, this dissertation will argue for two ideas. First, the major danger in speaking of God is the possibility of predicating attributes of him, that is, of linguistically assigning properties or characteristics to him. A consequence of this danger is the need to formulate a view of theistic predication that resolves the difficulty. To resolve the difficulty, we shall see that predicates which describe God, describe God as illuminated by a particular predicative history. As we will see in Chapter Six, the response to the problem of predication briefly sketched above will be sufficient to answer the difficulty of speaking of a transcendent being.

Notes

¹ *Problems and Perspectives in Religious Discourse*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p.7.

² *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p.523.

³ Paul Van Buren, *The Edges of Language*, (New York: MacMillan, 1972), pp.144-5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁵ *God: The Problem*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.258.

⁶ *Faith after Foundationalism: Critiques and Alternatives*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), p.xvii.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2: Verificationism and religious discourse

Theists claim that some transcendent being exists, "God," who deserves our worship and obedience. Most thoughtful theists believe that good reasons compel one to believe in the existence of such a being. Some have developed arguments that purport to prove, or inductively warrant belief in the existence of God. According to the twentieth-century challenge of verificationism, none of this matters. According to the verificationist challenge, one cannot speak meaningfully about God or the attributes of God.¹ Lacking the possibility for empirical verifiability, statements about God are untestable and consequently, according to the verificationist position, meaningless.² Thus, arguments purporting to prove the existence of God are merely engaging in semantic trickery with a concept that is without content. Asking "Does God exist?" makes no sense when the concept of God is meaningless. If the verificationist position is correct, the language of religion is merely a complicated game of hide and seek in which the theist does not really even know what she is looking for.

As the position does not assert the non-existence of God, the verificationist position is not atheistic. However, by suggesting that the term "God" is meaningless, the position is far more threatening to traditional

theism than atheism.³

Framing the contemporary discussion: the criteria reconsidered

The historical import of the verificationist and falsificationist⁴ positions to the issue of religious language is obvious. Each charged that important statements of religionists were meaningless. The former implies that they could not be verified, and the latter because religious utterances could not be falsified. That is, no ground could be provided under which the utterance would be shown to be false. Most every major treatment of the problem of religious language in this century has summarized these positions and sought to offer new insights into their rise and fall. These positions have served and will continue to serve as starting points for adequate treatments of the problem of religious language.⁵ For our purposes, the criteria of verification and falsification will serve as a reference point and beginning explanation of the problem of religious language.⁶ While the both verificationism and the falsification criteria may no longer be philosophically live options, they can serve valuable roles in the thesis of this dissertation.

Their importance is three-fold:

- 1) These positions are generally regarded as the major assault on religious language in this century. They are of historic import for discussions of religious language.
- 2) Whether the positions are correct or mistaken, their fundamental thesis, that religious language is meaningless, is held by many to

be correct.

- 3) A discussion of the positions is useful as a historical landmark, a philosophical reference point, from which new studies of the problem can orient themselves.

This chapter will show that the real problem of religious discourse is not found in a comprehensive inability to verify them empirically. The variety and quality of objections to the verifiability criterion relieve the theist from the duty of responding to its demand for the possibility of empirical testing. This chapter will outline some of these objections and, in so doing, trace the demise of the verificationist position.

The verification criterion defined

The historical roots of the verification criterion lie in the Europe of the 1920's and 1930's among a group of analytic philosophers known as the Vienna Circle, who felt that something was substantially defective with religious utterances. The verification criterion is the major attempt of the "Logical Positivist" tradition to decipher the defect. The positivist tradition sought a criterion of meaning upon which language could be examined and tested. The hope was that the criterion could convict religious language of the crime of semantic gibberish. The position seemed plausible for several reasons. First, there did seem to be something slippery with theistic language

as theists would attempt to define themselves out of problems or use ambiguous terminology which, it seemed, only those within the community of faith could understand. Second, verifiable statements could be examined and understood by both the theist and the non-theist. Third, verifiable statements would be more likely to be clear and unambiguous. The criterion posits that meaningful statements must be either empirically or logically verifiable. Empirically verifiable sentences are statements which can, in principle, be tested as to their veracity by means of observational (scientific) testing. Statements like "It's raining outside," or "My cat has fleas" are statements whose truth or falsity can be examined by looking to observable data. Logically verifiable sentences or sentence sets are true in virtue of the logical relations contained within. Statements like "All kittens are feline. George is a kitten, therefore, George is a feline," or other syllogisms are logically verifiable. Clearly, many important religious statements were neither empirically or logically verifiable. James Ross says, "The peculiarity of the religious situation is that the objects and events referred to in religious beliefs are not directly observable. God, in particular, is said to be wholly unlike or at least to transcend the objects of ordinary experience."⁷

Some theistic replies

The positivists' claim scattered theologians into a number of camps, each trying to provide a new explanation for the meaningfulness of religious language. Often, theologians began retreating prematurely without giving adequate attention to defects in the positivist criterion. Recourses to fideism or assertions that radical ambiguity is appropriate for theistic utterances were unnecessary evacuations of traditional theistic replies to the strangeness of religious discourse.

Theologians were in large numbers frightened by the apparent danger to religion from the positivist's conclusion that metaphysical and religious statements are empirically meaningless because they cannot be empirically verified, and began a large-scale retreat into other accounts of religious meaning (emotive and other noncognitive accounts) before it was widely recognized by philosophers that there is no generally acceptable criterion of empirical meaning, much less of cognitive meaning in its widest sense.⁸

Ross colorfully mocked both sides of the debate by claiming that "positivist attacks overshot the mark and that the theologians' replies are, none of them, systematically convincing. In light of what we know now, the debate was as archaic as a fencing duel during an atomic war."⁹

One response that theologians could have offered would have been to claim that important theistic claims are analytic. A statement is analytic only if the truth or falsity of the statement is fixed solely by the meanings of the words or symbols in the sentence. Mathematical truths and tautologies

commonly fall into this grouping. Statements like "All bachelors are unmarried" or "The cat is a feline" are also analytic. They are made true in virtue of the meanings of the words within the sentence. The statements are true by logical necessity. Such statements do not rely on evidentiary support external to the sentence to establish their veracity. Their truth is a function of the words in the sentence.

Theists can make statements about God that are analytic. A theist may observe that "God exists or does not exist" or that "God is either purple or non-purple" or that "God is a deity." These are analytic statements. Unfortunately for the theist, they have little relevance to the essential claims of theism. They are trivial and unimportant. The statements that do matter to theists do not seem to be analytic. Statements like "God exists," "God loves me," "Christ is the Savior of the world," and "Jesus rose from the dead on the third day" are not analytic. Perhaps the theist could argue that "God exists" is an analytic statement because the ontological argument is valid and sound. That is to say, given that the definition of God contains the necessity of his existence, the statement God exists is analytic. Furthermore, given the perfections that the ontological argument gives to God, the theist may argue that "God exists" necessitates a God like the God of Christianity. Given that few philosophers, and theists for that matter, consider the classic ontological

argument to be valid and sound, this reply is inadequate or at least practically of little value.

The truth or falsity of statements such as "Dan is a bachelor" or "The cat is vicious" does not depend on the meaning of the words, but on whether they do, in fact, correspond with the real world. In order to establish the truth of Dan's marital status, we must ask empirical questions. "Does he have a marriage certificate?" "Is he known to have a wife?" "Does he file a joint return on his taxes?" These kinds of empirical questions will be instrumental in determining the truth about Dan's marital status. The verificationist declares that non-analytic sentences must be, in principle, subject to empirical examination. Those statements which are neither analytic nor empirically testable are not meaningful. Thus, the question of their truth or falsity is irrelevant. The terms "true" or "false" cannot apply to statements without meaning.

The criterion's unveiled purpose

To say that A.J. Ayer viewed his criterion as antagonistic to religious discourse would be a serious understatement for, as Ayer asserts, "The point we wish to establish is that there cannot be any transcendent truths of religion. For the sentences which the theist uses to express such "truths" are

not literally significant."¹⁰ He also explains that "the sentence, 'There exists a transcendent god' has, as we have seen, no literal significance."¹¹ Rowe is correct in affirming that, "As liberal as the idea of empirical verification may seem to be, the logical positivists argued that the statements of theology. . . fail to qualify as empirically verifiable and, therefore, are literally meaningless."¹² An unveiled objective of the Logical Positivist tradition was clearly to demonstrate the meaninglessness of religious discourse. The verification criterion was the main mechanism by which the positivist would make his case.

Revisions of the verification criterion

The criterion underwent a number of modifications as responses to objections raised, but the exclusion of much of religious language remained constant under its various forms. The criterion shall be sketched from its inception to its more complex descendants.

V1: "We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express--that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false."¹³

V2: "...all truly significant assertions must be concerned either with the facts of experience, in the sense in which they are the subject matter of the judgments of common sense and of empirical science, or else with the verbal means used to symbolize such facts."¹⁴

V3: "A sentence has empirical meaning if and only if it is not analytic and

follows logically from some finite and logically consistent class of observation sentence[sic].^{*15}

According to Ayer, two distinctions should be made on V1. A proposition is "strongly verifiable" just in case its truth could be conclusively demonstrated by appeals to experience. By "verifiable in a weak sense," Ayer means to say that it is possible for experience to show the proposition to be probable.¹⁶

The weak version

Weak verifiability is intended to save universal statements from the knife of conclusive verifiability.¹⁷ Statements like "All ravens are black" or "All Brazilians make grammatical mistakes" create problems for strong verification. While one may imagine likely counter-examples to either of these statements, many meaningful statements would be declared meaningless. The statement "No human can fly" would not be meaningful, as its truth could not be conclusively established. One might always find a counter-example (e.g., a living Superman). Without conclusive verification, the strong version of verifiability would judge the statement to be meaningless. In addition to violating the criterion of strong verifiability, it would also fail V1 and V3. V2 is sufficiently vague to allow universal statements; unfortunately, it would seem to allow almost any statement to claim verifiability. The theist may argue that

"God created the world" is clearly concerned with "facts of experience" consistent with "common sense."¹⁸ Clearly, V2 will not do the work of semantic exclusion which the verificationist intends.

Ayer considers two versions of weak verifiability. According to the first, we ask the following question about a proposition: "Would any observations be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood?"¹⁹ If there are relevant observations, then the statement is verifiable in a weak sense. Isaiah Berlin rejects this first version because 'relevance' is an imprecise notion.²⁰ He notes that it is not possible to give a more precise meaning to 'relevance' because "the word is used to convey an essentially vague idea".²¹ For what is "relevant" to one person as an observation may be irrelevant to another. For a devout Jew, "The Lord is my shepherd" is, without question, relevant. She has lived a life of service to the Lord and has, in her opinion, observed his guidance in her life and the lives of her family members. How can one judge her observations to be irrelevant? How can one test her observations about the Lord's guidance in her life? Certainly, her experience is not relevant to a Buddhist living in another part of the world, at least not in any measurable way. Neither is her experience particularly relevant to a tribesman in central Africa. Berlin correctly observes, "As a criterion for distinguishing sense from nonsense, relevance plainly does not work: indeed to accept it is in effect to

abrogate the principle of verification altogether."²² It is the purpose of a criterion of meaningfulness to sort out statements that have meaning and those that do not. A criterion of relevance is sufficiently vague to preclude the verification criterion from performing the function of adjudication on the issue of meaningfulness.

The second version of weak verifiability offered by Ayer is as follows:

To make our position clearer we may formulate it in another way...we may say that it is the mark of a genuine factual proposition...that some experiential propositions can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain other premises without being deducible from those other premises alone. This criterion seems liberal enough.²³

It is unclear whether this is a new version of the criterion, or an attempt to clarify statements derived from other versions. Berlin notes that the above version, if it is a new form of the criterion, is far too weak in that verifiable in this sense implies something like "made probable" or "plausible," both of which are problematically obscure.²⁴ Also, one must ask what is intended by the phrase "mark of a genuine factual proposition." Further, the criterion seems too liberal in that it would allow most any statement to be verifiable. Berlin notes that one can imagine an argument wherein the major premise is verifiable in this sense, yet the syllogism is not a bearer of meaning. He offers the following example:

This logical problem is bright green,
I dislike all shades of green,

Therefore I dislike this problem.²⁵

Perhaps a better example is the following one. Let E be any experiential statement and let R be some religious claim. Then R is a factual empirical claim because it is deducible from $[E \ \& \ (\sim E \vee R)]$ but not from $\sim E \vee R$.

The strong version

The strong version of verificationism failed, as noted earlier, in its attempt to account for universal statements. Statements of the kind 'All A 's are B ' can be problematic for the strong version where A 's fall into an infinite class. Richard Swinburne notes that the strong version is inadequate concerning statements like: 'all ravens are (at all times) black,' or 'all material bodies near the surface of the earth are (at all times) subject to an acceleration towards the earth of c. 32ft/sec.'.²⁶ Carl Hempel discussed this problem, commenting that the "requirement rules out all sentences of universal form and thus all statements purporting to express general laws; for these cannot be conclusively verified by any finite set of observational data."²⁷

The criterion doomed

The failure of strong verificationism forced a reliance on weaker versions that eventually doomed the criterion. In order for verification to survive as a viable criterion of meaning, it had to be broadened, since the stronger versions of the criterion could not allow universal statements. The success of the weak verifiability principle was essential to the success of verificationism in general, given that the strong version could not account for universal statements. The inability of the weak version to exclude many statements that the verificationists thought to be meaningless insured the demise of verifiability as a criterion of meaningfulness.

General objections to verificationism

Three objections which have not yet been considered and apply to the criterion in either its strong or weak versions should be recognized.

The first objection, put forth by Paul Marhenke, claims that the verificationist position is circular in that it assumes that one already knows the meaning of a given sentence. Marhenke offers the following elucidation:

In the proper sense it [a sentence] is said to be verifiable when it is possible to formulate the observation sentences that would verify the sentence if the sentence were true. But the possibility of formulating these observation sentences presupposes that the decision that the sentence is significant has already been made. You cannot devise an observation test until you know the meaning of the sentence you are going to test.²⁸

This objection seems to miss the point of the verificationist position. The assumption of the verificationist is that one will not be able to develop observation tests for a meaningless sentence. One may utter a sentence that seems meaningful to him, yet when asked to give observation sentences which would conclusively verify the position, or make it probable, may find himself unable to provide those sentences. Of course, the fact that one cannot state the relevant observational test sentences for a specific target sentence does not show that the latter lacks empirical content. Another person may utter a sentence that seems meaningful to him, and when asked to provide observation sentences which would verify the position, may find herself able to do just that. Surely both of these people assumed that their sentences were meaningful, yet the first one learned otherwise when attempting to develop observation sentences to verify his sentence. Asking that person to give observation sentences to verify the original sentence does not presuppose that the original sentence is meaningful.

A second objection to the verifiability criterion (strong or weak) is that it fails to give an adequate account of fictional statements. Many fictional statements convey clear meaning, yet are not meaningful according to the criterion. Imagine a statement like "Bilbo Baggins is the Hobbit." Such a statement is not analytic, and it is not possible to empirically test the claim.

No observation sentences could be used for the validation or invalidation of the claim. Is the claim meaningless? Surely not.

The verificationist might reply that either (1) the criterion is not meant to test fictive discourse, or that (2) the claim is literally meaningless and religious language is likewise literally meaningless because it, too, is fictive. The problem with the first response is that it ignores the objection--i.e., that there is meaningful discourse for which the criterion cannot account. The verificationist may claim that this is a question begging response to the criterion. However, the verificationist, it would seem, should provide some good reasons for the exclusion of all fictive discourse. The branding of much of human literature as "meaningless" is a *prima facie* reason to reject the criterion. The second reply is wrong. "Bilbo Baggins is the Hobbit" is literally meaningful. The burden falls on the verificationist to give conclusive reasons that the statement is meaningless--reasons which are independent of the criterion under question. It is not sufficient to simply stipulate that the criterion is an appropriate one.

If fictional discourse is meaningful and is not accounted for according to the criterion, then it is quite possible that other modes of discourse might fall outside of the criterion's scope as well. The criterion is shown to be inadequate if it is found that there exists meaningful discourse outside of its

scope. Fictive discourse is just such an example of meaningful discourse that falls outside of the criterion. As we shall note in Chapter Six, fictive discourse plays a vital role in the traditions of both philosophy and religion.

The third objection to the criterion is perhaps the most interesting of the three. This objection notes that the criterion cannot meet its own test for meaningfulness; thus, the criterion is not an acceptable adjudicator of meaning.

1. A sentence is said to be meaningful just in case it is either analytic or empirically verifiable.
2. "A sentence is said to be meaningful just in case it is either analytic or empirically verifiable." Z is not analytic--i.e., its truth does not follow from the meaning of the words use in making the statement.
3. Z is not empirically verifiable--there exist no observation sentences exist which could test the sentence.
4. Therefore, Z is not a meaningful sentence.
5. Therefore, the verifiability criterion is not meaningful if it is true. This is paradoxical.

The positivists replied that the verifiability criterion of meaning is not a statement, but more like a rule or linguistic proposal.²⁹ Because the criterion is not a statement, it is not meaningless. The criterion, according to this view, is not to be regarded as a statement which may be regarded as true or false, but as a proposal about how meaningfulness can be demonstrated. As Rowe observes, this reply "convinced no one other than those already committed to

the verification principle.³⁰ The criterion seems to be presented by Ayer and others as an informative statement about meaning. If it looks like a statement, smells like a statement and sounds like a statement, then it probably is a statement rather than a prescriptive rule. If it is a non-analytic statement, then it should, according to the verificationist, be empirically verifiable.³¹

Alvin Plantinga argued that the criterion, as interpreted by various verificationists, was either (1) far too restrictive or (2) far too liberal. He argued that "The many attempts to state the verifiability criterion have met a common fate; each has been so restrictive as to exclude statements the verificationists themselves took to be meaningful, or so liberal as to exclude no statements at all."³² Either verification was too restrictive, not just for religious assertions, but for many statements commonly taken to be meaningful, or the definition of verification was so broad as to exclude practically nothing from being meaningful.

Conclusions

When the dust finally settled between verificationism's antagonists and the criterion's various revisions, the main problem was that the criterion fell short of adequately delineating meaningful and meaningless sentences. The strong versions of verificationism were far too limiting. Strong versions which

demanding the possibility of conclusive empirical verification succeeded in eliminating religious utterances, but also in eliminating most of metaphysics³³, epistemology, and theoretical empirical science in the process.³⁴ Furthermore, the strong versions had the unfortunate result of disqualifying universal empirical statements, including many scientific hypotheses.

The weaker versions of the criterion succeeded in excluding almost nothing.³⁵ There are empirical observations relevant to most any statement with the exception of analytic ones. 'Relevance' is far too vague to strain out a significant number of meaningless statements. There are observation sentences relevant to the following statement: "The geometry problem is furry, or my car is not brown." However, it is unlikely that many people would deem that sentence 'meaningful.' One can attach meaningless riders to empirically testable phrases by means of a disjunct, thereby rendering the statement meaningful via the verification criterion. The opponents of the verifiability criterion won the day. Swinburne notes that strong verificationism is "generally agreed to be false."³⁶ According to William Rowe, the verifiability criterion has "not survived as a viable philosophical thesis".³⁷ Alvin Plantinga makes the following sweeping claim: "The fact is that no one has succeeded in stating a version of the verifiability criterion that is even remotely plausible; and by now the project is beginning to look unhopeful."³⁸

The verifiability criterion is not an adequate statement of the problem of religious language. The difficulty must lie elsewhere. However, in spite of the antagonists' victory over the criterion, we shall see that the legacy of Logical Positivism still plays an important role in discussions about religious language. Rowe notes that "There has remained a feeling that the statements of theology and of much of traditional philosophy are somehow suspect, that if they yield no empirical consequences they are not really meaningful at all."³⁹ The role that verificationism still plays is to force theists to examine, as Dan Stiver says, "whether and how religious language makes a difference."⁴⁰

Notes

¹ Among the advocates of verificationism are Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, Kurt Goedel, Friedrich Waismann, A.J. Ayer and Rudolph Carnap.

² In its basic form, the argument of the verificationist is as follows: 1) All non-analytic meaningful statements can be verified empirically. 2) Logical or mathematical statements are meaningful. 3) Many important factual religious statements cannot be verified empirically. 3a) No religious statement is analytic. Therefore, 4) Many important religious utterances are not meaningful.

In its simplest form, the verifiability criterion holds that a "statement is literally meaningful just in case it is either analytic or empirically verifiable." William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), p.92.

³ On a historical aside, later discussion will demonstrate that the threat to theism was not accidental.

⁴ The principle of falsification is that for a sentence to be meaningful, one must be able to produce the grounds under which the sentence would be said to be false. The position will be elucidated in detail in Chapter 3.

⁵ Thomas McPherson noted that the positions help in pinpointing the worry about religious language and can also be instrumental in showing the way out of the problem. "Religion as the Inexpressible," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p.142.

⁶ John Hick noted that the verificationist and falsificationist positions have had a major influence on pushing philosophers of religion toward non-realist accounts of religious language. Hick notes that they pushed theists into arguing that religious language is, in some fundamental way, "unique" and unlike other kinds of utterances. *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, p.525.

⁷ *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), p.154. Certainly verificationists did take certain unobservable objects to be verifiable and statements about those objects to be meaningful. The positivists could accept the statement, "All Euclidean squares are four-sided figures" as meaningful. This would be the case even though "Euclidean square" would be true of ideal, abstract, Platonic entities that are unobservable (if it is true of anything). So, the fact that an object transcends sense experience is not sufficient for claiming that the sentence containing the term is meaningless by the verificationists' position. What the verificationists mean to say is that any statement which contains a "non-observable" object and that is not analytic is meaningless.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.151.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.152.

¹⁰ Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), pp.117-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.119.

¹² Rowe, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.98. Thomas McPherson warns theists not to regard positivism as anti-religious. He claims that "To regard it as anti-religious is wrong. . . The positivistic way is important both because it helps to pinpoint the worry and because it shows a way out of it." *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 142. McPherson may be correct in pointing out that positivism clears up the problem of religious language; however, its anti-metaphysical bent puts it squarely opposite many tenets of theology.

¹³ *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.35. Rowe calls this work "the major manifesto of the movement." *Ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁴ This rendering was offered and dismissed by Isaiah Berlin, *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Vol. 39, 1938-1939, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1939), p.225-26.

¹⁵ Carl Hempel, *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1952), p.45.

¹⁶ *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.37.

¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin notes that the weak sense "was invented to apply to general propositions and to singular-seeming propositions about material objects, in so far as these were thought to entail general propositions about sense data." *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, p.233.

¹⁸ One can imagine a range of semantic difficulties resulting from the phrase "common sense." The phrase is too imprecise and inclusive to do any real work for the verificationist.

¹⁹ *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.26.

²⁰ "Relevance is not a precise logical category, and fantastic metaphysical systems may choose to claim that observation data are 'relevant' to their truth." Berlin, *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, p.233.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.26.

²⁴ *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, p.234.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *The Coherence of Theism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.23.

²⁷ "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning," in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1952), p.168.

²⁸ *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, p.156.

²⁹ "As a consequence, the empiricist criterion of meaning, like the result of

any other explication, represents a linguistic proposal which itself is neither true nor false, but for which adequacy is claimed in the following two respects: First in the sense that the explication provides a reasonably close analysis of the commonly accepted meaning of the explicandum--and this claim implies an empirical assertion; and secondly in the sense that the explication achieves a "rational reconstruction" of the explicandum, i.e., that it provides, together perhaps with other explications, a general conceptual framework which permits a consistent and precise restatement and theoretical systematization of the contexts in which the explicandum is use and this claim implies at least an assertion of a logical character." Hempel, *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, p.61.

³⁰ *Philosophy of Religion*, p.99.

³¹ A.C. Ewing makes the point with clarity in his essay "Meaninglessness," in *Readings in Religious Philosophy*, eds. Geddes MacGregor and J. Wesley Robb, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p.323. Originally published in *Mind*, XLVI (1937), pp.347-364. He concludes, I think correctly, that "the sentence [verifiability criterion] cannot be true, but must be either meaningless or false. According to my view it is the latter (p.323)."

³² *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990, originally published in 1967), p.163.

³³ Copleston observed that the requirement that metaphysical statements be verifiable by empirical observation is to claim that "metaphysics--to be significant--should not be metaphysics." Frederick C. Copleston, "Logical Positivism: Discussion between Professor Ayer and Father Copleston," in *Readings in Religious Philosophy*, eds. Geddes Macgregor and J. Wesley Robb, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p.329.

³⁴ Berlin called this consequence "wholly untenable." *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, p.225. Hempel observed that "many of the formulations of traditional metaphysics and large parts of epistemology" would be considered "devoid of cognitive significance" if the criterion were accepted. *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, p.163.

³⁵ *God and Other Minds*, p.163.

³⁶ *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.23.

³⁷ Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p.92.

³⁸ *God and Other Minds*, p.167.

³⁹ Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p.93-4.

⁴⁰ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.202.

Chapter 3: Falsification and religious discourse

The fact that some important theological statements are not subject to empirical examination does not disqualify them as meaningless. Though the verificationist objection to religious language was problematic, it was an important attempt to pinpoint the nature of the difficulty of religious discourse. The most important descendant of the verificationist position is the falsificationist objection to religious language. Karl Popper, the chief proponent of this view, argued that in order for a statement to be meaningful, one must be able to describe circumstances under which the statement could be said to be false. If it is not logically possible to stipulate conditions under which a statement may be said to be false, then that statement is meaningless.

The principle of falsification

The theist claims that "there is a God." According to Flew, most theists seem unwilling to admit the existence of conditions under which this statement would be false. Atheists make statements like: "Given the amount of evil in the world, a good God cannot exist," and "A benevolent deity would not create a world with the horrendous suffering that exists in this one." The theist seems unwilling to yield his position to any objection that the atheist conceives. The point is not the relative merit of atheistic objections to theism:

it is that the theist seems unwilling to state to the atheist exactly what criterion would establish that a God does not exist. Thus, the atheist is left not knowing what he must prove in order to establish the non-existence of God. The theist seems unwilling to entertain the possibility that God does not exist. The atheist asks, "What must I show you to convince you that there is no God?" The theist answers, "You can give no evidence to convince me of that." The falsificationist position claims that if there are no conditions under which a claim can be falsified, then that claim is meaningless.

The best elucidation of the falsificationist position comes from John Wisdom's essay "Gods."¹ Wisdom asks the reader to imagine that two men are exploring in the jungle. While fighting their way through the jungle underbrush, they come upon a clearing. In the clearing, the explorers find both flowers and weeds. One of the explorers suggests, "There is a gardener who tends this plot." The other explorer, disagreeing with that speculation, claims that "There is no gardener." So, both explorers pitch their tents and begin a round-the-clock surveillance. No gardener is ever observed. Thus, the explorers place a barbed-wire fence around the small clearing. They electrify the fence and use bloodhounds to patrol the area at all times. Surely no gardener can go undetected here. However, no screams of pain are ever heard, and the dogs never bark. No movements in the garden or near the fence ever give notice of an intruder. Even so, this evidence does not convince the Believer. He claims that "A gardener does tend this plot. He is

invisible, non-physical, and never makes a sound or gives any indication of His presence. The gardener comes and secretly tends this plot of land which he dearly loves." The Skeptic finds this conclusion to be unacceptable and irrational. He claims, "What exists of your original position? Just how does an invisible, non-physical, undetectable gardener differ from no gardener at all?"

The point of Wisdom's story is that no empirical evidence exists that is, in principle, capable of defeating the assertion of the believer. No conceivable test, in regards to the garden, which the Skeptic can propose will satisfy the Believer that there is no gardener. Thus, for the Skeptic, the Believer is not being reasonable.

Falsification and statements about God

According to Flew, major theological assertions have the same problem as the one noticed by the Skeptic. A variety of important theological assertions. Assertions like 'God has a plan,' 'God created the world,' and 'God loves us as a father loves his children' are problematic.² Flew asks whether these are true assertions or not; for if they are assertions, then there must be some negation of the assertion.³ In other words, if something is an assertion, then it should be possible to state what the assertion denies, to identify a state of affairs inconsistent with the assertion. Flew claims that "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."⁴ The Believer seems

unwilling to admit any evidence that would count against his claim about the transparent gardener. In regard to Wisdom's parable, Flew notes:

When the Sceptic in the parable asked the Believer, "Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" he was suggesting that the Believer's earlier statement had been so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all.⁵

The meaning issue for Flew is captured in the fact that meaningful assertions posit both (1) some state of affairs and (2) the non-existence of another state of affairs. Thus, to make a statement like "it is raining outside" is to also make a statement against the state of affairs "it is not raining outside" or "it is sunny outside." Meaningful statements make claims about a state of affairs which necessarily rules out other incompatible states. The problem of religious language is, according to Flew, that many religious assertions do not posit the non-existence of any state of affairs. When a theist says "God loves me," he is unwilling to grant that any state of affairs could be incompatible with this statement. Receiving ten million dollars from a winning lottery ticket is evidence that supports the statement that "God loves me," but my child dying of leukemia does not count against the statement that "God loves me." The theist's statement rules out no state of affairs and, according to Flew, is not a meaningful assertion. By being compatible with any conceivable set of circumstances, the statement makes no meaningful claim.

Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for

conceding "There wasn't a God after all" or "God does not really love us then". Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made--God's love is 'not merely human love' or it is 'an inscrutable love', perhaps--and we realize that such sufferings are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that "God loves us as a father (but, of course,...)". We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: "What is this assurance of God's (appropriately qualified) love worth, what is this apparent guarantee really a guarantee against? Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say 'God does not love us' or even 'God does not exist'?"⁶

Thus, the theist who seems to make dramatic cosmological statements is really not making meaningful assertions at all. The inability to provide falsifying conditions for the claims leads one to question whether the claims are meaningful at all. If the theist is really making an assertion, then surely she can provide evidence that would count against the claim, or circumstances which would be incompatible with the truth of the assertion.⁷

In order for a statement to be meaningful or cognitively significant, it must be possible to give evidence one would regard as "counting against" the statement or to elucidate a state of affairs that would be "incompatible" with its truth.⁸ Michael Tooley offers this summary of Flew's falsificationist position:⁹

1. Sophisticated religious believers do not seem to be willing to admit that there are any conceivable experiences or events whose occurrence would result in their abandoning some of their central theological affirmations.
2. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that there are no experiences or events whose occurrence would count against the truth of a typical theological statement.

3. A statement is cognitively significant if and only if there are experiential statements that would decisively count against the truth of that statement.

4. Hence theological statements cannot be cognitively significant.

In order to make a cognitively significant assertion, one must say something about the facts of the world and, consequently, deny something about the facts of the world.

Traditional theistic responses

One response is to argue that the falsificationist position misses an important attitude which differentiates the believer and the observer. Basil Mitchell argues that the believer, as a matter of fact, does not and cannot uncouple himself from his faith in God.¹⁰ It is this inability to detach himself that causes him to interpret the world differently from the observer.

Mitchell counters the parable of the garden with a parable of his own. In an occupied land in a time of war, a member of the resistance meets a mysterious stranger who claims to be a comrade in the resistance movement. They spend the night in conversation, and the Stranger impresses the Partisan with his commitment to the resistance and his love for the cause. In fact, the Stranger tells the Partisan that he is the leader of the resistance. The Partisan finds the Stranger to be believable and puts his trust in him. The Stranger leaves the following morning, and the two never meet again in

privacy. At all future meetings, the Partisan is not free to discuss the resistance or speak intimately with the Stranger.

As time passes, the Partisan observes the Stranger in various circumstances. Often he sees the Stranger helping members of the resistance. Sometimes he asks for the Stranger's help and receives it. At other times, he sees the Stranger turning over partisans to the police. Through all of this, he never doubts the Stranger but has faith in him. His friends murmur against the Stranger, but the Partisan sticks up for him. Each time that his comrades in arms question the Stranger's actions, the Partisan comes to his defense claiming, "The Stranger knows what is best." Sometimes, his exasperated friends ask, "What would the Stranger have to do for you to doubt him--to admit that he is not on our side?" The Partisan never gives an answer to these questions because he refuses to put the Stranger to the test. Sometimes his friends complain, "If this is what the Stranger does for our side, we would be better off with him on the enemy's side."

According to Mitchell, the attitude of the Partisan is parallel to the attitude of the theist. While the theist does concede that certain circumstances count against his belief in the existence of God, he never doubts that a loving God exists. The situations where the Stranger works against the resistance constitute the Partisan's trial of faith. The Partisan can hold that either (a) the stranger is on the enemy's side or (b) he is on the side

of the resistance but that he has reasons for withholding help.¹¹

The Partisan refuses to do (a). The question that Mitchell asks is, "How long can he uphold the second position without its becoming just silly?"¹²

The attitude of the Partisan toward the Stranger flows from his first encounter with the Stranger and the trust that was built during that night. Quite reasonably, the Partisan feels the full force of internal conflict when he sees the Stranger handing over members of the resistance to the police. However, he still holds that the Stranger is on his side.

The Partisan's assertions about the Stranger are meaningful in that (1) he does count some of the Stranger's actions as counting against his allegiance to the resistance and (2) the assertions stem from an explanatory framework developed in the first meeting.¹³ "Does one want to say that the Partisan's belief about the Stranger is, in any sense, an explanation? It seems that one does. It explains and makes sense of the Stranger's behavior: it helps to explain also the resistance movement in the context of which he appears. In each case it differs from the interpretation which the others put upon the same facts."¹⁴ Mitchell believes that the Partisan's beliefs about the Stranger provide a meaningful framework through which the partisan understands the resistance and the actions of the Stranger. Does this mean that the partisan is correct in believing the Stranger is the leader of the resistance? No. But it does mean that the Partisan's assertions about the

Stranger are meaningful.

Flew, rightly it seems, does not find the parable of the Stranger a warrant against the falsification objection. The main problem with the parable is that the theist claims that God is, among other things, omnipotent. Unlike the Stranger, God could, in principle, set right the battle without giving members of the resistance over to the police. Flew argues,

But suppose the Stranger is God. We cannot say that he would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say that he would help if he only knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others. . . I still think that in the end, if relentlessly pursued, he [Mitchell] will have to resort to the avoiding action of qualification. And there lies the danger of that death by a thousand qualifications. . .¹⁵

What may have been a necessary evil for the Stranger, would not be in God's case. Obviously the theist can reply with the full range of responses to the problem of evil—the point, however, is that the parable does not accomplish the goal which Mitchell has for it. Instead of a simple answer to the problem of falsification, the theist must begin a defense of God's action or inaction with regards to the world. It does not seem adequate to appeal to God as the solution when the falsificationist claims that very notion (God) to be meaningless.

Like Mitchell, R.M. Hare offers a story to help answer the falsificationist objection. His parable is a helpful addition to the discussion. Imagine that a certain lunatic is convinced that all Oxford dons wish to murder

him. His friends introduce him to the mildest and gentlest of the dons, but he believes them to be part of the plot. After each of the friendly dons is introduced, his friends tell him, "See, the don doesn't wish to kill you. He's really a nice guy." But the lunatic retorts, "Yes, but he's just covering up the plot. It is a diabolical cunning. He's just trying to get me off-guard." No matter how many kindly dons are brought forward, the lunatic still maintains that every don is out to murder him.

According to Flew's test, the lunatic is not making a real assertion when he claims that all dons want to kill him, for he will not accept any of the evidence presented as counting against his fear of dons. Hare seems to have found an interesting loophole in the falsificationist position, because, while the lunatic's beliefs are not subject to falsification, we are still inclined to say that he has beliefs about dons that are contrary to the norm. If the lunatic is not asserting anything, then we are not able to say that we believe differently from him. Hare notes:

. . .it does not follow that there is no difference between what he thinks about dons and what most of us think about them--otherwise we should not call him a lunatic and ourselves sane, and dons would have no reason to feel uneasy about his presence at Oxford.¹⁶

Hare suggests that we call the difference between us and the lunatic a "blik." The lunatic has a crazy blik and we have a sane one. Hare suggests that we all have bliks and that Flew has shown that a blik does not exist in an assertion or system of assertions.¹⁷

It was Hume who taught us that our whole commerce with the world depends upon our blik about the world; and that differences between bliks about the world cannot be settled by observation of what happens in the world. That was why, having performed the interesting experiment of doubting the ordinary man's blik about the world, and showing that no proof could be given to make us adopt one blik rather than another, he turned to backgammon to take his mind off the problem.¹⁸

A blik, then, is a sort of operating assumption about the world. Everyone has a blik. Hare mentions that he has a blik concerning his automobile. He knows that the steering of the car is accomplished by a number of steel joints and rods. But what will happen if the steel rods break? He asks, "How do I know that this won't happen?"¹⁹ The truth is that he simply accepts it. He has a blik about steel and its properties and, therefore, does not continually doubt the safety of his car's steering system. Certainly his blik about the steering column could change. He may at some point believe the steering column to be unsafe. At that point he says, "I shall never go in a motor-car."²⁰ Clearly, his blik would be different from the normal one.

Would his newly acquired blik about the faultiness of steering columns be falsifiable by testing? He notes that "No amount of safe arrivals or bench-tests will remove my blik and restore the normal one; for my blik is compatible with any finite number of such tests."²¹

The problem with the falsificationist position, according to Hare, is that the position seems to regard religious discourse as some sort of explanation according to a scientific notion of explanation. This is a confusion about the

function that religious utterances serve.

. . . it is nevertheless true to say that, as Hume saw, without a blik there can be no explanation; for it is by our bliks that we decide what is and what is not an explanation. Suppose we believed that everything that happened, happened by pure chance. This would not of course be an assertion; for it is compatible with anything happening or not happening, and so, incidentally, it is contradictory. But if we had this belief, we should not be able to explain or predict or plan anything. Thus, although we should not be asserting anything different from those of a more normal belief, there would be a great difference between us; and this is the sort of difference that there is between those who really believe in God and those who really disbelieve in him.²²

Hare concludes his assault on the falsificationist objection by noting that in the parable of the garden, the two followers have important differences. The difference shows itself in the strength of attachment of the believer to his beliefs. He is not able to achieve the detachment from his beliefs that the falsificationist criterion demands.

The explorers do not mind about their garden; they discuss it with interest, but not with concern. But my lunatic, poor fellow, minds about dons; and I mind about the steering of my car; it often has people in it that I care for. It is because I mind very much about what goes on in the garden in which I find myself, that I am unable to share the explorers' detachment.²³

His point seems to be that it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to detach oneself from one's blik. In this regard, the falsification criterion is unreasonable.

Flew calls Hare's response "fresh and bold"²⁴--then he launches a perceptive attack on the blik response. He notes that most theists do not believe their religious assertions to be about bliks, but positive statements about the cosmos. He claims that "If Hare's religion really is a blik involving

no cosmological assertions about the nature and activities of a supposed personal creator, then surely he is not a Christian at all?"²⁵ Clearly, most theists believe that they are making statements about the universe and not about their biiks. However, this could be said of most anyone with a blik.

The general hypothesis objection

One of the major problems with the falsification criterion is its exclusion of general scientific hypotheses. John Losee notes that "No amount of negative evidence is sufficient to falsify the claim that 'there exist quarks (neutrinos, viruses, capillaries, binary systems of white dwarf stars, etc.)'".²⁶ As a result, "There are good reasons, then, not to accept falsifiability as a criterion of empirical meaningfulness."²⁷ Do scientists conform to a standard of methodological falsificationism? Losee claims that in important instances in the history of science, they have not. He notes,

A hasty survey of episodes from the history of science reveals that scientists as a matter of fact often do not abandon a theory upon its failure to pass a test. The following responses proved fruitful:

- 1) Mendeleef, confronted with evidence that the atomic weight of Tellurium is greater than that of Iodine, nevertheless interchanged the positions of these two elements in order to preserve the regularities demanded by his periodical arrangement.
- 2) Leverrier and Adams, confronted with evidence that the orbit of Uranus does not conform to the requirements of Newtonian Gravitational Theory, posited the existence of a trans-Uranic planet.
- 3) Pauli and Fermi, confronted with evidence that the reaction-products in B-decay possess less energy than the original nucleus, hypothesized that a new particle--the neutrino--carried off just enough energy to insure energy

conservation.²⁸

The point Losee intends to press is that the scientific community does not accept the falsificationist position as categorically binding on its research and that, often, such a criterion would have hindered scientific progress.

Accordingly, the attempts of falsificationists to use the criterion to separate scientific and religious hypotheses have proved ineffective.²⁹ According to Losee, "Theological interpretations cannot be excluded from the range of empirically significant discourse upon appeal to falsifiability."³⁰

Conclusions

The falsificationist criterion has not succeeded in demonstrating the meaninglessness of religious language. The main worry with religious discourse is not that religious claims are not falsifiable--many of them are. If there are religious claims that are not falsifiable, they are no different from a multitude of general scientific hypotheses. While the theistic assumption that a transcendent God exists may be false, the assertion may or may not be meaningless. It is a potentially meaningful blik for encountering the world and it is unreasonable to demand that the theist be able to present circumstances under which her claims would be falsified. The real worry with religious language must lie elsewhere.

Notes

¹ Reprinted in *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. John Hick, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp.334-49.

² Antony Flew, Part A, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p.97.

³ *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.98-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Theological statements and the question of an empiricist criterion of cognitive significance," in *The Logic of God/Theology and Verification*, eds. Malcolm Diamond and Thomas Litzenburg, Jr., (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), p.485.

¹⁰ Part C, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp.103-5.

¹¹ p.104.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ p.105.

¹⁴ Mitchell, *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, p.373.

¹⁵ Flew, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p.107.

¹⁶ Part B, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p.100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.101.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, pp.101-2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.108.

²⁶ *Religious Language and Complementarity*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), p.11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.21.

Chapter 4: The problem of predication

Language is stretched to extraordinary lengths when one seeks to speak about some event or object that is outside the realm of mundane experience. Peter Cole and John Lee claim that this is the chief difficulty faced by religious language. According to Cole and Lee, "The heart of the problem seems to be that religious assertions attempt to refer to things beyond anyone's experience. They describe the 'infinite', the 'mysterious' and other metaphysical ideas that are not dealt with by our everyday language, and it is thus difficult to see whether these religious terms have meaning."¹ They are surely correct insofar as it is difficult to talk about anything that lies outside of human experience. Their summary of the difficulty is inadequate, though, in that it does not recognize the difficulty in applying mundane predicates to this object that lies outside of human experience. This subject-predicate question is one which plays a dominant role in the discussion of speaking about God.²

This chapter will argue that the problem of predication is a central problem for theists in speaking about God. We will first examine the nature of the difficulty in predicating of God, the modes of predicating of God and, the Thomistic attempt to answer the difficulty of predicating of God.

General problems of predication

One may argue that the problems in talking about God are no different from the problems that inhere in any account of meaning derivation. This is to say that predicating attributes of God is difficult because predicating attributes of anything is problematic. That is, any attempt to predicate is problematic. James Ross contended that "The problems of the philosophy of religion are, in general, not problems peculiar to the subject matter of religion. The reason we don't have a satisfactory account of the cognitivity of religious discourse is primarily that we don't have an adequate account of meaning derivation in general".³ Perhaps the derivation of meaning is an area where general work needs to be done; however, many difficulties seem to be unique to language which speaks of God.

While language which predicates of God may not be uniquely challenged by the falsificationist and verificationist objections, it is peculiar language in that the relationship between predicate and subject may be labeled unclear without a philosophical system through which one can understand the relationship. Such a philosophical system seems unnecessary when talking about dogs, trees, or Aunt Wilma's cheesecake. People who speak about such things have an intuitive notion of the subject-predicate relationship, one

that hardly demands a philosophical investigation. The subject-predicate relationship when theists speak about God is, for many, not intuitive. William Rowe notes, "Clearly a major task for theologians and philosophers of religion is to develop a satisfactory theory explaining how predicates taken from the human, finite realm can be meaningfully applied to an infinite, timeless, purely spiritual being."⁴ This is the task which chapter six will clarify.

Predicating of God

To what does this problem of predication amount? Is there a problem in considering God apart from ambiguous predicates like "omnipotence," "omniscience" and the other "omnis". Should theists not be able to approach the divine entity without recourse to such obscure terminology? Many of the predicates used to characterize the qualities of God in a direct sense are noticeably vague. And as D.Z. Phillips notes, oftentimes "We are told to swallow the incomprehensible because so-and-so says it is true. No wonder many balk at giving the language of religion any serious attention."⁵

Predicates like "brown," "tall" or "chalky" unproblematically describe things like dogs, trees and Aunt Wilma's cheesecake. However, the predicates that are not vague, but in normal usage quite clear, present even more problems when talking about God. How is it that predicates like "father," "light," or

"rock" describe God? As if it were not enough that intractable words like "transcendent" are applied to God, the application of mundane human predicates to God demands an answer to the question of just how those words apply to God. There are several ways that they can be said to predicate characteristics of God: (1) they may univocally predicate attributes of God; (2) they may equivocally predicate of God; or (3) they may in some sense analogically predicate attributes of God.

Univocal, Equivocal and Analogical modes of discourse

Univocality. Univocal description means that the predicate characterizes the subject in a direct one-to-one way. Historically many philosophers and theologians have defended the position that some religious predicates describe God univocally. John Duns Scotus, evangelical theologian Carl Henry, liberal theologian Schubert Ogden, and analytic philosopher William Alston have all defended this view.⁶ In this view, the predicate describes the subject without qualification. To say that "Wilbur is the father of Suzanne" is to make the claim that the predicate, "father," directly describes the relationship of Wilbur to Suzanne. No difficult nuances influence the application of "father" to Wilbur; no special use of the word "father" controls its application to Wilbur; only a blunt and straightforward statement affirms that

Wilbur is the father of Gordon. "Wilbur" and "father of Gordon" designate the same thing.

To hold that the human predicates which describe God describe in this one-to-one sense would be naive. If the word "rock" bears a one-to-one relation to God, then the theist is in deep trouble. Clearly, God is not a rock in a univocal sense. It would seem that the only predicates which may apply to God in a univocal way are ones which have no limiting function. At least, no limiting function other than the fact that they speak of one or several attributes of God and not all of them at the same time. One may predicate terms like "transcendence," "limitless power," "eternal existence," or "infinite goodness" in a univocal sense. Generally, these univocal predicates carry problems of their own. It could be argued that "transcendence" expresses an unintelligible concept or that "infinite goodness" is a meaningless term. At this point, it is not necessary to consider the merit of these objections. It is enough to note that if any predicates can be made to apply to God in a univocal way, these--for better or worse--are the likely candidates. William Alston pointed out that "The impossibility of literal talk about God has become almost an article of faith for theology in this century."⁷ Alston himself does not hold this view.

It is both interesting and useful to note that 'literal' statements about God, or anything for that matter, need not necessarily be unambiguous. Literal statements can suffer from problems of vagueness just as non-literal statements can. Alston notes that "Meanings that words have in a language can be more or less vague, open-textured, unspecific, and indeterminate in a variety of ways. Hence I can be using words literally and still be speaking vaguely, ambiguously, or unspecifically."⁸ I might say to you "Smith is big." This is a literal, straightforward statement about Smith. Yet, if standing in a full room of Smiths, it may be unclear which Smith I am intending to describe. Further, it may be unclear what I mean by the word "big." Is Smith overweight? Is Smith tall? Does Smith have an overbearing personality? Thus, to speak literally of God or anything is not necessarily to speak unproblematically.

Equivocation. The second alternative is that of equivocation. According to Dan Stiver,

The assertion that all religious language is equivocal, and must be negated, may strike us as being skeptical and belonging rather to unbelief than to belief. What is perhaps surprising at first glance is that this view is often held by those who are most emphatic about the reality and vividness of an experience of God. This is a characteristic view of the mystical tradition that, according to some, cuts across different world religions.⁹

Without question, predicates can describe their subject in a completely equivocal way. This is to say that the relationship of predicate and subject is

completely without connection or without observable connection to each other. An example of equivocation might be the difference between the claims that (A) "my left shoe is the President of Botswana" and (B) "my left shoe is God." It is not the empirical falseness of either claim that is of interest for our discussion, but the fact that the predicate and the subject seem, in (B) to bear either (1) no relation or (2) a completely unobservable relation. In (A), it is simply false that my shoe is the President of Botswana. But if one were to genuinely assert (B), falsity is not the issue. Meaninglessness arises as the issue. If either (1) or (2) is the case, then the statement seems to be meaningless. It would appear that (1) is the case.

The position that predicates describing God are purely equivocal would be one that many non-theists would hold as most tenable. For one who believes that there is no referent to the word "God," properties applied to "God" will be pure equivocation. Theists may use terms like "strong" or "loving" to apply to "God," but what the theist perceives as God is, perhaps, some set of psychological experiences or some phenomena unrelated to an actual omnipotent being. It is possible to view the predicates as purely equivocal, but that they describe something like, a) a figment of the theist's imagination, b) a fictive being or c) some set of phenomena which the theist interprets as God and therefore applies predicates to this collection of experiences. In

these cases, while belief in God might be a false belief, one may still predicate of God. This might be the case with the statement about my left shoe—that it is a hallucination.

To many modern theists this position may seem absurd and wholly unacceptable; however, it is a position that has influenced and will continue to influence discussions of religious discourse.

This approach is a reminder, especially to the univocal way, that language is notoriously unstable when applied to God. We are stretching it to its breaking point—and perhaps beyond. It is a warning against the idolatry of language. Even religions centered on writing and speaking can see how language functions to protect the transcendence of God. An obvious example in the Jewish tradition was the earlier refusal to speak or write the name of God, with the result that today we still are not sure of what that name was.¹⁰

Stiver produces a balanced critique of the equivocal and univocal ways of predicating and finds both to be objectionable.

It is apparent that the univocal way is still alive and well, but that it has its endemic problems. It may be that if the only choice is between equivocal or univocal language, many may choose the latter; but the cost is high. It is difficult to see how we can move from literal language, with its context in everyday life, to the transcendence of God without sacrificing something precious to common religious sensibilities.¹¹

Pure equivocation and pure univocity seem to be polar opposites. Neither of them seems a meaningful mode through which predication of God is possible. The search will now turn to middle-ground, the way of analogy.

Analogy. The need for a third approach to predication led St. Thomas Aquinas to analogy. By defending analogy as a tenable way to describe God,

he began what has remained the most significant approach to the application of predicates to God. Janet Soskice claims that his approach was intended as “a middle way between terms used in only one straightforward sense, univocally, and terms used in more than one sense which bear no relation to one another, equivocally.”¹² Stiver notes that “his appeal to analogy became the standard model for understanding religious language”¹³. His approach has been a nursemaid to a number of approaches, its most significant offspring being metaphorical approaches to problems in religious discourse. Versions of the analogical position will occupy the remainder of this monograph, with particular emphasis given to a narrative way of understanding analogy.

Proponents of the analogical position do not, for the most part, say that all predicates characterizing God are analogical, but that certain problematic predicates serve as analogues to the divine. The statement, “God is a rock” is clearly not one that can be sensibly taken as a univocal statement about God. God is not, strictly speaking, a rock. He does not possess the range of attributes necessary to fit into the category of rocks. He is (1) not a mineral and (2) presumably does not possess the property of solidity. Argument is really not needed here and the obvious is being belabored. “Rock” does not univocally describe God. Does it then describe God in a purely equivocal

sense? The common theistic reply is to say “no” and to claim that “rock” characterizes God in an analogical way. While God does not literally possess the property of solidity, many claim that he does possess the quality in an analogical way, i.e., he is like a rock in that his character does not change. He is like a rock in that he is one who can be depended on. While he does not instantiate every property of rockhood, though he does share in some of them. Just as one might say of a person that she is like a rock, one might use the word “rock” to describe God.

Thomas began with the assumption that every term used to describe God must, in an important sense, not be true of him. For we are more sure of what God is not than of what he is. Thomas does not, however, stop here. For, as Stiver notes, “He shares the later Scotist conviction that we do have cognitive revelation, that is, we know something of God and can express this knowledge in language.”¹⁴ The proper position is lodged between the extremes of univocity and equivocation and is the middle-ground of analogy. Thomas’ theory of analogy has been interpreted in two major ways, attribution and proportionality.

Analogy of attribution

Analogy of attribution can be understood in Thomas's example of the use of the word "health." We often speak of people as being healthy. To say this is to say quite literally that they possess the property of health. However, we also can speak of medicine as being healthy. Obviously, medicine does not possess health in the same way that people possess it. What other way is there? Medicine is healthy in that it causes people to be healthy; thus, it is healthy in a secondary sense. Thus, while God may not possess "love" or "justice" in the normal human understanding of the two terms, clearly these attributes may be predicated of him because he is the cause of those characteristics in human beings.

One may object that analogy of attribution allows everything to be attributed to God without qualification. Since there is a great amount of evil in the world, why not attribute that to God as well? To this Stiver notes that Thomas may respond in two ways. First, he can appeal to his understanding of evil as the absence of being. To attribute evil to God is to literally attribute nothing to God since evil is not a thing. Secondly, Thomas can respond that since God is infinite, predicates that are without limit would best describe him. "Thus, "good" is more appropriately applied to God than is "lion."¹⁵ Within this

metaphysical system his replies are adequate. As we shall find, there are serious reasons to question his system.

The problem of Thomistic attribution revolves around the role he gives to causation.¹⁶ According to Thomas, we have goodness, wisdom, love, etc., because it is caused by a God who possesses these qualities in infinitude. The proper question to ask is in what sense does he use "causality." It would seem that if we predicate causality of God in a straightforward univocal sense then his theory of analogy is based on the one univocal assumption that God *is* cause.¹⁷ Would not the straightforward predication of causality to God bring the whole family of univocal problems discussed earlier to bear on his analogical position? A univocal application of causality to God in order to explain the use of analogy is not satisfactory given his own rejection of univocal application of predicates to God.

However, if "causality" is predicated as an attribute of God analogically, then Thomas is caught in circular reasoning. If the application of analogical predicates to God makes sense given that God is the cause of those same properties we see in the world, and "causation" is predicated of God analogically, then the explanation of analogical predication given by Thomas is unsatisfactory. Richard Swinburne holds that the Thomistic explanation of analogy is, because of this, contradictory.¹⁸ Perhaps the position is not

inconsistent with itself, but circular. It is not clear which would be the worse defect. Either way, the attribution version of applying predicates analogically is internally doomed.

A final objection to the attribution version of Thomistic analogy theory is, as hinted at earlier, that it rests on highly questionable metaphysical ground. He assumes that God stands atop a causal chain leading down to the world and that, because of this causal relationship, we can predicate analogically up the chain. This assumption seems less than obvious given the development of metaphysics in the last few hundred years and the contemporary rejection of the cosmological proofs for the existence of God.¹⁹

Analogy of proportionality

The second approach to analogical predication is termed proportionality. To say, for example, that a human being is free, and a falcon is free, is merely to say that each has freedom in a mode appropriate to it. A human being has freedom in the way appropriate to human beings, the falcon in a way appropriate to falcons. The term “freedom” functions in very different ways when referring to men and falcons, yet these functions are similar in some respects. A proportional connection exists between the freedom of men and falcons. When describing God, the proportionality is simply extended. It

could be properly said then that freedom is to a falcon as freedom is to God. Unfortunately, the proportional use of analogy has, as did attribution, certain difficulties.

Normally, at least two of the three terms in the analogical relation will be known. We have an idea of what the properties of men and falcons are and can rationally or at least meaningfully predicate freedom of both. In the case of God, however, we are left with two unclear parts of the analogical triad. In the example that freedom is to God as freedom is to man we come in (1) not having a way to know who God is and (2) therefore not knowing what the term "freedom" means in reference to God. Only "freedom" predicated of man is meaningful. Neither the term "God" nor the term "freedom" carries any distinct meaning going into the comparison between freedom in men and freedom relating to God.²⁰ "God" is not distinct, or the analogy would not be necessary in the first place. "Freedom" is a word which carries distinct meaning only when operationally defined by the subject matter. A man is free in a way quite distinct than that in which a falcon is free. It is not a simple matter of quantity or proportion. The man is not more free and the falcon less free. The difference is in the quality or mode of freedom. While Wilbur, my father, and I may have freedom in the same mode, can it be rationally said that God and I have freedom in the same mode? Perhaps, but this position

would require a strong argument and perhaps, most problematically, an understanding of what it is like to be God. Humans, presumably, know what it is like to be free as a human but cannot rationally pretend to know what it is like to be free as a bird. As a human being it is not likely that one will ever know what it is like to be a falcon, much less, what it is like to be God.

Both analogy of attribution and of proportionality are grounded on dubious metaphysical soil.²¹ Thus, neither mode of predicating properties of God is adequate. As James Ross notes, "The theory of analogy (which is the classical answer of the Aristotelian and medieval philosophers to this general problem) was never fully worked out."²² While medieval expositions of analogy may be unsatisfactory in our age, they do provide a helpful starting point for modern philosophical investigations of religious language. Modern solutions to the problem of predication most always take a turn toward analogical language at some point.

Conclusions

The insights of Thomas provided direction for the discussion of predicating characteristics of God, but were unsatisfactory as explanations of the analogical nature of much religious discourse. His insights do, however, further illustrate the notion that the problem of predication lies at the heart of

many difficulties in discovering meaning in religious discourse. Rational agents find a great number of predicates to be meaningful, yet they have great difficulty imagining what it would mean for some of these predicates to be applied to other creatures. It may be known what it would be like for both a human and a tree to be large or to predicate "blue" to both a human's and a bird's eyes. Many would find it meaningful to predicate "friendly" to a dog's behavior as well as a girl's behavior. However, while we may know what it is for a man to be "just," "good," or "truthful," can we know what it is for a dog to have these qualities predicated to him? The answer would seem to be "no." Likewise, the problem of predication is that it seems we cannot know what it means for God to have these either.

Notes

¹ *Religious Language*, (Marlbrook, England: Abacus Educational Services, 1994), p.5.

² D.Z. Phillips makes this point in *Faith After Foundationalism*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p.141.

³ *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.173.

⁴ *Philosophy of Religion*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), p.101.

⁵ *Faith After Foundationalism*, p.275.

⁶ Dan Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp.20-2. Alston makes the argument in "Functionalism and Theological Language," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 22(1985), pp.221-30.

⁷ *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁹ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.23.

¹² *Metaphor and Religious Language*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1985), p.65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.23. Janet Soskice noted that "Since the writing of the *Summa Theologica*, analogy has, however, been much discussed by theologians with regard to religious language." p.65.

¹⁴ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, pp.23-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹⁶ This discussion occurs in Chapter 32 of St. Thomas' *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)*.

¹⁷ Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.26.

¹⁸ *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, p.42.

¹⁹ Dan Stiver notes that "These assumptions, as well as the background assumption of the cosmological argument, are not nearly so self-evident after the criticisms of David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century, as we can see by examining virtually any modern discussion of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. If we question these foundations, though, the whole apparatus begins to totter." *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.27.

²⁰ Stiver argued that, "In Aquinas's case, however, the two sides of the comparison are not only materially different, they occur in ontologically different realms of reality. So we should dismiss from the outset the exactitude that comes from the misleading appearance of being a mathematical proportion. In addition, even a mathematical proportion must have three known terms in order to find the fourth. If we know that 2 is to 4 as some x is to 16, we can easily deduce the x as 8. Aquinas's model trades on this fact. His idea is that we can give sense to a

predication such as "good" by placing it in equation with three other known terms. For example, good (x) is to God as good is to persons. The problem is that we do not have a way of knowing who God is either. Actually, we have two unknown terms, which means that the proportionality is useless." *Ibid.*, p.27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.28.

²² *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.156.

Chapter 5: Metaphor and the problem of predication

One of the popular ways to address questions of meaningfulness in religious language has been to develop a metaphorical approach to understanding difficult religious expressions or, in more general terms, to develop a holistically metaphorical approach to theology. Gordon Kaufman notes that "God is ultimately profound mystery and utterly escapes our every effort to grasp or comprehend him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable."¹ As Stiver observed "Since the 1960s, metaphor has leapt from its relegation to the sidelines of discussion about cognitive language to the forefront."² He continued by noting that "a sea-change has occurred with regard to the understanding of metaphor, making it philosophically significant and having repercussions in many areas. Some of the most important effects have been in religion".³

The positivist tradition minimized metaphor because of its inherently ambiguous nature. However, the passing of positivism made possible the rebirth of metaphor in philosophical circles.

A major handicap historically to perceiving the significance of metaphor for philosophy and religion was the increasing marginalization of metaphor to the position of a figure of speech or ornament to language, important to rhetoric and poetics but not for philosophy. It is this situation that has radically and quickly changed, altering the philosophical landscape in the last half of the twentieth century.⁴

Stiver is correct. While philosophy of religion has become increasingly

concerned with questions of religious language, these questions have most commonly looked to metaphor for answers. Proponents of metaphorical approaches to religious language no longer stand at the periphery of philosophical discussions, only to have their positions labeled “quasi-philosophy,” but they now find themselves at the center of a raging debate about whether religious discourse makes sense, or whether it even *can* make sense. The positivists have lost their position at center stage, only to be replaced in the spotlight by their rivals the metaphorists. Demands for precision in religious discourse have not been dropped but have become less prominent, and metaphorical views of religious language have gained prominence and, in many circles, acceptance.

This chapter examines the metaphorical response to the problem of speaking about God, principally the position of popular metaphorist Sallie McFague. As it is important to get an understanding of what a metaphorical perspective on religious language entails, and her position is a major representative of the metaphorical perspective, it is necessary to do quite a bit of expository work on her position. By clarifying McFague’s work, we will better understand the rationale of the metaphorical approach to religious language. Finally, it is argued that while the metaphorical perspective is a promising direction for the answer, McFague’s view is not adequate.

A metaphorical perspective

By speaking metaphorically about God, metaphorists mean that God is referred to by comparison. The metaphor (e.g., "rock," "fortress," "shepherd") is used as a sort of model for God. William Alston says,

what the metaphorical statement most basically "says" is that the exemplar can usefully be taken as a "model" of the subject. The hearer is invited to consider the exemplar as a model of the subject, as a way of discovering, highlighting, or rendering salient, various features of the subject.⁵

Through the use of a linguistic model (metaphor) the hearer is able to understand, at least in part, something about a transcendent God in terms of something which is available and known.

In some respects the metaphorical approach is a response to the positions outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. Perhaps it is not simply the case that the verificationist and falsificationist positions are internally problematic, but perhaps they are limited in that they can only account for "straightforward" propositional language. If religious language is, at a fundamental level, ambiguous, then perhaps it falls outside the scope of either verificationism or falsificationism. The sterile language of the positivist has been replaced with the rich language of the metaphorist. The merit of this change is subject to debate, but for our purposes it is enough to give a head nod to the change and begin evaluating this new perspective—the metaphorical perspective. Even traditionally non-linguistic concerns for philosophers of religion are

being drawn into language issues. If the problem of evil is to be answered, philosophers and theists must wrestle with the meaning problematic terms like "omnipotence" and "omniscience" and metaphors like "Father" and "Shepherd." Would a "Father" or a "Shepherd" allow his children or flock to face the amount and variety of evil that humankind faces every day? Linguistic considerations, especially metaphor, are increasingly coming to the forefront of such discussions.

McFague's metaphorical view

One of the major proponents for a metaphorical approach to religious language is Sallie McFague.⁶ Instead of focusing on the issue of predication, which as it has been argued is the leading problem with such language, McFague holds that the main difficulties with religious discourse "from both the worship and the interpretive contexts of religious language, are idolatry and irrelevance."⁷ An idolatrous view of religious language takes language about God to be rigid, inflexible and dogmatic. In such a view, the language itself becomes the main object of attention, not the supposed divine being beyond the language. The irrelevance extreme is the view that the language of religion is wholly non-applicable to modern life. Religious language is pushed to the periphery of life and regarded as pure sentimentality or gibberish.

To those who claim that religious language is simply straightforward, that it speaks in clear and univocal ways about God, she argues that they have idolized the language. This is to say that they have spoken too literally about the transcendent being. This view, she argues, pours concrete on language, which should remain liquid and living--flexible. It interprets highly symbolic language in one-dimensional literalistic ways.

To appropriate the metaphor of a Zen sutra, 'poetry is like a finger pointing to the moon.' It is a way to see the light that shines in darkness, a way to participate in transcendent truth and to embrace reality. To equate the finger with the moon or to acknowledge the finger and not perceive the moon is to miss the point.⁸

Similarly, "We are never able to point to this or that object or quality of experience and say, 'That is what the name "God" denotes.' Any such direct identification of God with a particular in the world would be idolatrous."⁹

Arguably, much of traditional theism is guilty of just this. Metaphors which come to be regarded as literal are, according to McFague, dead metaphors.¹⁰

McFague's objection to literalistic interpretations of religious statements does not reduce to the Thomistic objection to univocality.

McFague's motivation

McFague's objection is as much a denunciation of the theology behind modern literalism as it is of the inadequacy of the interpretation of religious language literally. Thus, the objection is as much theological/moral as it is philosophical. For, according to McFague, the theology of literalism is

mischievous in that, among other things, it has stifled the advancement of women.¹¹ The idolater of religious language effectively blocks helpful change by locking in a stifling vocabulary of religion. A new vocabulary, according to the idolater, is unacceptable. Most importantly, new understandings are banned as heretical. McFague opposes this position vigorously. The veracity and merit of her sentiment will be addressed only to the extent that her position bears upon the issue of meaningfulness.

Religious language is plagued with the problem of irrelevance when it becomes purely sentimental. It is irrelevant when it does not attempt to truly speak about the world in any meaningful way but is reduced to empty creedal statements or ritualistic utterances. "For many people, religious language, biblical language, has become, like a creed repeated too many times, boring and repetitious. We are essentially indifferent to it."¹² Few would disagree with this point. Theists worry that few people take seriously the things that are said about God; this is precisely because many people do not see the traditional statements of Christianity as having any bearing on their lives. We live in an age, it would seem, when irrelevance is among the greatest of sins.

According to Gilbert Fell,

The old categories of oppositional thinking make religion increasingly remote and irrelevant or, worse still, perpetuate the old worlds of elect and damned with all their attendant horrors and fail to do justice to the intricacies and complexities of genuine theological understanding.¹³

Religious discourse, according to Fell and McFague, has become an

outdated and inflexible mode of encountering the world. The philosophical problem is that religious language is often irrelevant because of its tendency toward equivocity. The inability of theists to speak clearly of God to a secular audience pushes them to the periphery of an intellectual world that respects clarity and relevance.

A pluralistic perspective

One of the perceived needs for the metaphorical perspective is, according to McFague, a contemporary pluralism.¹⁴ She argues that, quite recently, we have become aware of the variety of perspectives available for interpretation. She claims, with some merit no doubt, that one's perspective is not always freely chosen but may be the result of a variety of temporal and cultural influences. "It is not only our time and place in history that influences our religious language, but also our class, race, and sex; our nationality, education, and family background; our interests, prejudices and concerns."¹⁵ McFague sees a metaphorical approach, one which embraces a variety of perspectives, as a better approach to religious language. Though McFague believes many traditional views are misguided, she calls for an inclusive perspective which allows traditional understandings and embraces non-traditional interpretations, especially feminist ones. The metaphorical perspective, one which embraces multiple metaphors and models and encourages a continual flow of new comparisons, is best equipped to express

"the richness and variety of the divine-human relationship."¹⁶ This perspective permits enormous linguistic freedom by encouraging the development of novel metaphors. Metaphor allows enormous freedom because of its inherent impropriety. "A metaphor is a word or phrase used inappropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another: the arm of the chair, war as a chess game, God the father."¹⁷ In respect to McFague's insistence that a metaphorical theology is better equipped for pluralism, some might object that pluralism is not desirable in religious language as it may cloud distinctions that have been carefully drawn; some Christian thinkers may even call it an invitation to heresy. Whatever the merits of linguistic pluralism in addressing God, McFague's broad concern with social issues is an obvious catalyst in her argument for a metaphorical perspective. This is not a dismissal of the pluralism which she recognizes and advocates, but it is a realization that her perspective is driven as much by cultural issues as philosophical/linguistic ones.

McFague believes the major contemporary problem of religious language to be that such language has traditionally excluded feminine characteristics of God and has provided fuel to societal gender inequities. The hardened masculine metaphors for God (e.g. "Father," "Son") need not be replaced, but need to augment a variety of other metaphors that seek to describe God. Such issues are fascinating, but not pertinent to the meaning issue. McFague's metaphorical theology does not posit that traditional

metaphors are meaningless, but that they have hardened with the subsequent result that they are oppressive. Thus, for many proponents of metaphorical theology, the issue of religious language is as much one of ethics as one of meaning.

Metaphor and noetic structures

One of the arguments given by advocates of a metaphorical answer to the major questions of religious language is that metaphor has epistemic primacy in the discussion. For, as they argue, metaphor lies at the base of the human noetic structure. McFague made the following brash claim consistent with this idea:

Less obvious, but of paramount importance, is the fact that metaphorical thinking constitutes the basis of human thought and language. From the time we are infants we construct our world through metaphor; that is, just as young children learn the meaning of the color red by finding the thread of similarity through many dissimilar objects (red ball, red apple, red cheeks), so we constantly ask when we do not know how to think about something.¹⁸

Along these lines, proponents of metaphor are quick to recognize the importance of metaphors/models to scientific inquiry. They note that scientific language is “shot through with metaphor” and that

Metaphor is not an optional addition to univocal language. Nor is it the key to creative advance that is then gradually replaced by univocal language. Rather, the two intertwine at every level of science. Metaphor is often used in models, that is “extended metaphors” that structure scientific understanding, testing and prediction.¹⁹

We are, according to many advocates of metaphor, metaphorical creatures.

Stiver notes:

Metaphor sometimes says what has not been said before and cannot be said in any other way. In other words, metaphor is often irreducible to literal language. Indeed, in a brash suggestion, [Max] Black claimed that metaphor does not just help to discern reality, it creates reality.²⁰

Some suggest that all language is the result of metaphor.²¹ Even the most basic words and phrases that we use are the product of hundreds and thousands of years of metaphor. Human language is a collection of layers of fossilized strata. Layers of words replaced by more layers. The process has produced the languages used today and continues to alter and change language. The “leg” of a table or the “arm” of a chair are not generally regarded as metaphorical, yet at some point were live metaphors descriptive of the objects they represent. “Falling in love” is a straightforward expression and few notice that one does not literally “fall” in love, but that it is a hardened metaphor.

Centrality of metaphor in religious tradition

One of the values of a metaphorical perspective on problems of religious language is that it is consistent with both Western and Eastern religious traditions which rely heavily on metaphor in their sacred texts. When attempting to speak of the divine, many religious traditions generate metaphorical language. The Bible is the Western example of the dominance

of metaphorical language. With incredible flexibility, the Bible can use a metaphor to speak of God and his relationship to his people. The marriage metaphor is used in both the Old and New Testaments with enormous variety. The minor prophets describe Israel's idolatrous experiments with other ancient religions as "adultery." God is described as a jealous husband longing for the affections of his unfaithful wife. With its emphasis on intimacy and faithfulness, the sexual component of the metaphor is central to the metaphor that ancient Hebrews used. Thus, an idolatrous Israel is called a "harlot" and a "prostitute," neglecting the exclusive claim of her husband upon her affections.

The authors of the New Testament canon take up this metaphor and use it to elucidate the relationship of Christ with the church. He is a husband and his church is his bride.

Without question, the Bible is a book rich in metaphor, and it is a strength of the metaphorical perspective that it is a perspective consistent with language of the world's important religious texts. Philosophers and theists need not discount traditional sacred texts when considering religious language as metaphor.

A metaphorical theology is not primarily concerned with questions of meaningful predication in religious discourse but primarily with an understanding of how ancient religious texts have taken shape in modern theological discussions. For McFague,

The distinctive goal of a metaphorical theology is to assess the ways in which the foundational language of parables and Jesus as parable—with their characteristics of openness, tension, relativity, indirection, and transformation—have been retained in the course of the various translation languages comprising theology.²²

The theology of metaphor is more concerned with developing new ways of speaking about God than assessing historical utterances of religionists. In this respect, it tends to be highly imaginative and flexible. New metaphors are continually under development, and old ones are buried under a heap of new metaphors.²³ The metaphorical enterprise, then, is more one of theology than philosophy. It takes a greater interest in expressing truths²⁴ about God through metaphor, than discerning questions of meaningfulness about God-talk. The problem of predicating attributes of God is not one of great concern to McFague or to other metaphorists. They are more concerned with the practice of theological reflection than with fundamental questions of the meaningfulness of religious utterances and the central problem of predication. This is not a comment with regard to the relative merit of a metaphorical perspective, just a recognition that such a perspective is not primarily concerned with predication. It may be possible to give perspectives on predication through a metaphorical approach, but McFague's approach does not adequately ground such a search. Her approach treats metaphors like flexible scientific models which attempt to order theology rather than promote new discoveries.²⁵

Metaphor and analogy

McFague claims that metaphorical theology is essentially different from the analogical perspective as advocated by Thomas. The metaphorical one avoids the “symbolical” nature of the analogical perspective. While the analogical perspective may say that “Father” is symbolic of God, the metaphorical perspective boldly says that “God *is* Father.” This is not to claim a univocal relationship between metaphor and God, but to claim that there is a sense in which God both “is” and “is not” the metaphor. Thus, God *is* and *is not* “Father.” It is in this dual tension that the metaphor finds power.

There is, however, a deeper level to the semantics of metaphor: it is not just that a judgment is being made that one subject is both like and unlike another, but the tension of duality in such a judgment is, as Ricoeur insists, between a literal or conventional interpretation which self-destructs and an extended, new interpretation which is recognized as plausible or possible.²⁶

It is the insistence that “two active thoughts which remain in permanent tension or interaction with each other”²⁷ which is essential to metaphor and to distinguishing it from Thomistic analogy. While the analogy “God is like a shepherd” posits that God shares certain similarities with a shepherd but really is not a shepherd, the metaphor “God is a shepherd” boldly claims that God both is, and is not, a shepherd.²⁸ The analogy compares characteristics; the metaphor claims an identity. The point of the metaphorist is that God is not merely *like* a shepherd but that he *is* a shepherd. Perhaps, however, the position of the metaphorist is not as distinct from that of analogy as McFague

would hope.

Similarities with the Thomistic tradition

While McFague sees the metaphorical perspective as a break with Thomistic/Catholic tradition, at least three important similarities connect them. One important commonality is that both Thomas and McFague believe that the mind understands the world through metaphor. Metaphor is considered a mode of understanding by both McFague and Thomas. Therefore, according to St. Thomas,

When any name expresses such perfections along with a mode that is proper to a creature, it can be said of God only according to likeness and metaphor. According to metaphor, what belongs to one thing is transferred to another, as when we say that a man is a stone because of the hardness of his intellect.²⁹

In naming the properties of God, Thomas indicates that metaphor/analogy is the exclusive vehicle. McFague's attempt to distance herself from Thomas tends to muddy the linguistic waters. Stiver made the following observations about the attempted distancing of the metaphorical perspective from the Thomistic view:

What muddies the picture is that those like Sallie McFague or Janet Soskice in the metaphorical tradition, largely rooted in literary tradition, can in direct opposition to the Thomistic tradition disparage analogy in relation to metaphor. For these writers, analogy remains closer to literal language; it is basically a noncreative extension of meaning, as opposed to the genuine innovation of metaphor. Since those in one tradition often speak critically of the terminology of another tradition, it is no surprise that confusion often reigns.³⁰

Additionally, McFague's recognition of the need for many metaphors is

consistent with the view advocated by Thomas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. According to Thomas, since we are unable to know God in a direct way, we are forced to consider the consequences of his actions. We know him from observing the effects of his actions upon the world. Because we see a great variety of effects which he has upon the world, we must give him a variety of names. We must approach him with a plurality of names or metaphors which reflects the diverse effects of his actions, which we observe in the world.³¹

Perhaps the most significant similarity between McFague's metaphorical theology and the Thomistic view of religious language is their common recognition that the problematic poles of religious language are, to use McFague's terminology, idolatry and irrelevance. For Thomas, this is the problem of univocity and equivocity. The first claims a misguided intimacy with the divine, knowledge of his properties and language that speaks of God in a one-to-one descriptive way. Equivocity is language that really says nothing. It speaks of God in a nebulous linguistic cloud that prohibits one from approaching any understanding of the divine.

The notable difference between McFague and Thomas on the question of speaking about God is that the latter does seem to recognize that the fundamental problem of religious language is the problem of predicating characteristics of God, a problem which Thomas believes can be solved only by appealing to analogy—of which metaphor is a type. The problem that St.

Thomas sees in regard to speaking of God is one of meaningfulness of discourse, not of finding more modern ways to speak of God. In this respect, Thomas is closer to the philosophical problem than is McFague.

Inadequacies in McFague's position

A critical analysis of McFague's position reveals at least three important problems. They are certainly not all fatal, but all merit recognition and discussion.

Religious tradition. In McFague's search for new and varied models through which to speak of God, she neglects the unique position of the Bible for Western religious culture. While she does call the Bible "the classic"³² upon which other models must test themselves, she does not seem to appreciate the import of the exclusive centrality of the Bible in Western religious discourse. McFague sees the Bible as a classic document of Christianity by McFague, but not as an the authority in religious discourse. In fact, the Bible, in some respects, perpetuates problems of rigidity in speaking of God. Perhaps, as she suggests, "One profound limitation of the Bible as classic text is that it suggests conservatism and the power of tradition."³³

One of the metaphors which McFague believes would be best disagreed is that of servant. Such a metaphor is inappropriate to our time and culture.

At this point, however, metaphorical theology should step in. That is to say, although the inclusive way of the cross and the triumphalist way of

resurrection were in Jesus' time powerfully and appropriately contrasted by the metaphors of servant and king, they can be no longer. The language of servitude is no longer current, acceptable, or significant for expressing the distinctive and unconventional kind of love epitomized in the cross. There are, I believe, other metaphors, such as those of mother, lover, and friend, that express dimensions of that love more fully and appropriately for our time.³⁴

One must wonder what McFague means when she says that the model of servitude is not "acceptable." In what sense is it unacceptable to say that Christ was a servant? Who makes such decisions about which metaphors are acceptable and which are unacceptable given this metaphorical theology? Perhaps contemporary culture needs the model of Jesus as servant particularly because the culture does not understand the centrality in the Gospel of serving other people. Such questions seem theological in nature, but have import for a philosophical examination of McFague's theory. A theory which seeks to answer questions of the meaningfulness of religious language must be sensitive to historical examples of religious language, particularly those found in scripture. This is not to say that the language of servitude is right or wrong, but to say that a departure from such language is a departure from the very tradition one wishes to vindicate and advocate.

According to McFague, a significant departure from traditional metaphors is needed.³⁵

The New Testament writings are foundational; they are classics; they are a beginning. But if we take seriously the parables of Jesus and Jesus as parable of God as our starting point and model, then we cannot say that the Bible is absolute or authoritative in any sense except the way that a "classic" text is authoritative: it continues to speak to us.³⁶

However, to root out Biblical metaphors and then to replace them with new ones seems an approach which most theists would resist. For theists to replace Biblical metaphors with new “acceptable” ones is rather like asking an elderly lady to trade in her wedding ring for a more beautiful new one. She is unlikely to make such a trade. Obviously this is not a fatal flaw in her approach, nor is it necessarily a flaw at all. It is a recognition that her approach may not be broadly acceptable. For non-theists the metaphorical perspective will not render religious language meaningful, especially since it disregards the problem of predicating about God. For the majority of Christian theists, it is an unacceptable move from the central text. Roland Frye notes:

In Christianity, scriptural authority is recognized as basic to the teaching and practice of the whole church. As a twentieth century heir of the Reformed tradition, I do not always construe this authority in the same way as may a Roman Catholic theologian, or as did the great Reformers, but it operates for all of us.³⁷

Richard Swinburne made a similar observation about the primacy of the Bible to the Christian tradition when he stated, “The Church which declared that creeds expressed the essence of revelation also declared at least from the second century onwards that Holy Scripture was the paramount vehicle of revelation.”³⁸ Paul Minear objects most strongly to the idea of replacing Bible metaphors as he argued that “When we change what the Bible does say to what we think it should say, it becomes a dummy for our own thought—and no dummy exercises authority over the ventriloquist.”³⁹

Alston agrees that such an open-ended perspective which applauds linguistic creativity is problematic for theists since, "with sufficient ingenuity, virtually any metaphorical predicate can be elaborated in a theologically plausible way."⁴⁰ Holding that old models need to be reconsidered, even replaced, and that creative new models are needed opens McFague's position to the charge of theistic ventriloquism. Alston objects further that

What I take to be unacceptable theologically is not that God can metaphorically be said to be a spider or an apple, but that these statements are on a par with statements like "God created the heavens and the earth" and "God commanded us to love one another."⁴¹

While novel similes might not be so objectionable to theists (e.g., God is *like* a spider, or God is *like* a big sister), direct identification of creative new metaphors might be unacceptable (e.g. God is a spider, God is a big sister). The simile merely stipulates that God shares some things with the spider, not that God is a spider.⁴²

A metaphorical perspective which stresses the invention of new metaphors to solve old philosophical problems runs the risk of stripping an entire tradition of its relevance. Alston did not take on McFague directly, but his observation relates to the risk involved with boldly applying new metaphors to God. Alston says,

I take it that these consequences are radically unacceptable to the "religious attitude" or, to speak less pretentiously, to the bulk of those in the mainstream of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A theology the propositions of which are logically compatible with anything else sayable of God, which can be true only in the same way virtually anything one might say of God is true, which have no determinate consequences either for theory or for practice, so eviscerated a theology is stripped of virtually all its impact for human life.⁴³

While not all metaphorists need be committed to each of Alston's premises, his objection rings true with any metaphorist who fails to specify criteria for meaningful and meaningless metaphors.

As previously noted, traditional religious texts are filled with metaphor, and, consequently, a metaphorical perspective need not discount these texts and certainly need not be offensive to traditional theists. While McFague may challenge specific metaphors in the Bible, she is right in considering metaphor as a primary mode of God-talk. Philosophically, metaphor seems an appropriate vehicle through which the problems of univocity and equivocation can be avoided; theologically, McFague's version of a metaphorical theology may not be acceptable to the mainstream Judeo-Christian tradition. Perhaps, for McFague, this is a strength of her position, not a weakness.

Predication concerns. A major philosophical gap in McFague's metaphorical theology is that it neglects the problem of predication, focusing instead on the opaque concept of "relevance." The focus of her metaphorical view is the workability of particular metaphors without directly considering the issue of meaningfulness common to any predicate characterizing God. The problem is critical because, whether a particular metaphor appears relevant to a particular theist, is of little consequence if one cannot predicate any term or phrase, metaphorical or non-metaphorical, of God. In other words, making

the statement “God is a fortress” is of no value if there is no account given for how the metaphor “fortress” describes God. Since it clearly does not describe God in a literal one-to-one way, how then does it predicate? it may seem a helpful model for a theist who is seeking to understand God, yet be indefensible philosophically if there is no tenable account given of how the term describes. To stipulate that “it works” gives no answer to the question of linguistic meaningfulness. The non-theist may grant that the term is relevant to a particular theist, but deny its meaningfulness. Many theists may not be concerned with the linguistic ambiguities in calling God a fortress; perhaps it works within a certain religious community or context. However, philosophical concerns about the meaningfulness of predicating attributes of God are important if the theist intends to carry the ambiguity outside of her particular religious community. And, as history shows, the theist often is concerned with doing just that. If this is true, then both theist and philosopher must once again concern themselves with the question of how predicates describe God. Perhaps an account of metaphor can be given that gives an adequate explanation. Shortly this text will argue that just such an account can be given. One answer that will be shown lies in the inherent narrative quality of theistic metaphors and language about God.

A concluding thought on narrative. A third difficulty with McFague’s exposition of a metaphorical theology is that it does not give adequate consideration to the language of parable and narrative. in her attempt to

make all of religious language metaphorical, she mistakenly identifies

parable/narrative as simply "extended metaphor." For example,

The parables, brief stories told in the secular language of Jesus' time, are extended metaphors that say something about the unfamiliar, the "kingdom of God," in terms of the familiar, a narrative or ordinary people doing ordinary things.⁴⁴

There is truth in this statement in that parables are metaphorical in nature;

that is, they do not speak of God literally but indirectly through a story.

However, it does not seem appropriate to label parables as simply big

metaphors or collections of simpler metaphors. Rather, they are stories,

perhaps even true ones, that ask the hearer to make the leap from the story

to what the story suggests about the sacred. Very rarely does the story make

direct statements about God; more often they contain no mention of God.

The hearer is forced to make the story into a metaphor by thinking that it in

some way relates to God.

We have seen that metaphor, while helpful, does not offer a genuine solution to the problem of predicating attributes of God. Following this conclusion, we will examine narrative language as an answer to the problem of predication.

Notes

- ¹ *God: The Problem*, p.95.
- ² *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.112.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p.127.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.112.
- ⁵ *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p.22.
- ⁶ Stiver noted that "more than any other theologian," McFague "has emphasized not only Religious language but theology itself as metaphorical." *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.132.
- ⁷ *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).
- ⁸ Phyllis Trible *God and the rhetoric of sexuality, overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p.16.
- ⁹ Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem*, p.82.
- ¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of dead metaphors when he wrote, "What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymics, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which become poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage, seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses, coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal. "On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense"(1873), in *Works II*, p.180.
- ¹¹ *Metaphorical Theology*, pp.8-10.
- ¹² Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, pp.7-8. Interestingly, Richard Swinburne noted that even creedal statements abound with metaphor. "Metaphor flourishes even in creeds, and although some new uses of words in creeds tend to utilize a recently established sense or to create a new sense with which the words are then used in other sentences, this does not always happen." *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1992), p.157.
- ¹³ "Explorations into linguistic practice as a source of religious polarities, or the inevitability of ineffability," *Language in Religion*, eds. Humphrey Tonkin and Allison Keef, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), p.14.
- ¹⁴ *Models of God*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp.38-40.
- ¹⁵ *Metaphorical Theology*, p.3.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20.
- ¹⁷ *Models of God*, p.33.
- ¹⁸ *Metaphorical Theology*, p.15.
- ¹⁹ Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.119.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.115.
- ²¹ *Metaphorical Theology*, p.16.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p.103.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.106, 20.
- ²⁴ D.Z. Phillips notes that metaphorical approaches to religious language are attempts to express "a truth." *Faith After Foundationalism*, p.323. Certainly this is a valid theological enterprise, but perhaps that one must tackle the philosophical problem of

meaningfulness I addition to considering the problems of conveying truths about God through human language.

²⁵ *Metaphorical Theology*, p.107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.37.

²⁸ Gabriele Vahanian notes the reliance of analogy upon sacredness by appealing to Lacan. Vahanian said, "But I shall simply appropriate for myself a remark of Lacan's when he says that analogy is no metaphor, and adds: analogy rests on Being, on the sacred (or vice-versa), whereas metaphor is geared to the primacy of the word. Analogy turns language into a tool, at best into some annex of the human if not into an instrument of annexation. By contrast, metaphor fails if it does not underscore, indeed score, the verbal condition of reality, whether human or divine," in *God in Language*, eds. Robert Scharlemann and Gilbert Ogutu, (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), p.200.

²⁹ *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I: God*, tr. Anton C. Pegis, (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), p.140.

³⁰ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.125.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

³² *Metaphorical Theology*, p.62.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Models of God*, p.56. McFague also claims that the metaphor "lord" is no longer an "appropriate" one. *Models of God*, p.61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.29.

³⁶ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p.19.

³⁷ Roland M. Frye, "Language for God and feminist language: Problems and principles," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41, 4 (1988), p.456.

Frye also notes that "Where fundamentalists may insist upon a rigid literalism, their counterparts on the other extreme may assume that if a biblical expression does not literally and univocally represent the data to which it refers, then one figurative expression may work as well as another. These two approaches are mirror images of each other, or put differently are two sides of the same coin, as I have argued elsewhere. Examples of feminist language for God fall into the second of these two errors." *Ibid.*, pp.459-60.

³⁸ *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, p.163.

³⁹ Paul S. Minear, "Changes in metaphor produce changes in thought," *Presbyterian Outlook*, December 19-26 (1983), p.458.

⁴⁰ *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p.32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁴² Frye notes that while simile suggests a resemblance between two things, metaphor boldly states that one thing is another. This is not to suggest a literal identity. "Language for God and Feminist Language," p.463.

⁴³ *Divine Nature and Human Language*, p.35.

⁴⁴ McFague, *Models of God*, p.50.

Chapter 6: Narrative and predicative history

While McFague might be mistaken on several points, she is right to look to metaphorical language as the vehicle which offers the best hope for language about God. If the extremes of univocality and equivocality are to be avoided, the middle ground is metaphorical discourse. Metaphorical language, broadly construed, covers everything from analogy, to ornamental metaphors (metaphors as poetic decoration), to simile, to narrative. While religionists, philosophers and scripture speak of God in many ways, the one that dominates is story/narrative. While “story” and “narrative” may be used interchangeably, staying with the rubric given this type of language in our contemporary setting--“narrative”-- would be better.¹

If the solution to the problem of predication lies in a particular genre of language (e.g., metaphor, analogy), then narrative is the best candidate. This chapter will outline a narrative response to the problem of predication. Then it will more generally discuss a narrative approach to religious discourse, concluding, however, that narrative is not a solution to the problem of predication. Narrative will be described as only moving the problem away from language and onto the hearer or reader. Thus, it substitutes a new problem for the old. Also, while narrative language has great communicative

power in religious contexts, it provides no answer to the question of how predicates describe a transcendent God. This chapter will offer a detailed outline of a narrative view of religious discourse and, in particular, the response of a narrative view to the problem of predication. After finding this response to be inadequate, we shall examine a novel view which answers the problem. This view will recognize the important role of predicative history--the predicates common to a particular religious tradition--in speaking of God and will argue that within a particular predicative history, one can predicate attributes of God in a meaningful way. Thus, the problem of predication will be answered. Because of the centrality of narrative to the predicative history of Western Christianity, narrative will have an important place in future philosophical and theological discussions of God.

Defining narrative

Narratives are stories which may be either fictional or non-fictional. A narrative perspective observes that human dialogue has an essential "story-like" nature. It presupposes that people are *homo-narrans*² or story-telling creatures and that their discourse should be evaluated accordingly--as story. The definition of a narrative is quite simply a story. A narrative is a combination of statements formed together in a logical sequence to provide

the hearer with a 'word-picture.' When a mother tells a bed-time story to her infant, she is most likely using a fictive narrative. When a man recounts stories from his youth, he is using actual (true) narratives. A narrative may be either true, false, or a little of both. A narrative perspective becomes a valuable way of looking at human discourse because human discourse has essential narrative elements. Thus, a fruitful linguistic model for religion can be developed.³

Narrative and metaphor

While narratives can be, and often are, a type of metaphorical language, they need not be. As previously noted, a narrative can be "true" in a straightforward sense as a report of an actual event. A metaphor is never true in this sense. One may properly presume Katherine Hepburn's autobiography (*Me*) to be true. It is true in that it recounts actual events that occurred from her childhood to adulthood. It contains bits of data which may be researched and proven to be accurate or inaccurate. At the same time, her autobiography is a narrative, it is a story of her life. It is not simply a collection of bits of data. It is a full-blown life story. While her autobiography contains metaphors, it is not strongly metaphorical. Her autobiography, *Me*, is quite straightforward and true in a generally univocal sense.

Narrative excesses

Sociologists and theologians who argue for a narrative perspective are often prone to make sweeping generalizations about narrative. As some proponents of a metaphorical approach claim that all human thought is metaphorical, some proponents of narrative make the same grandiose claims.⁴ To what extent their claims are valid is not relevant to our search for an answer to the problem of predication.

Pluralism and narrative

The pluralism that McFague argues as a hallmark of the metaphorical perspective is, according to narrativists, also a strength of a narrative approach, not only to language, but to reason as well. They argue that one of the real values of such a perspective is that it allows common people to reason together without being "unreasonable." The intricacies of formal logic and scientific reasoning are not present, but the arguments may nonetheless be valid and provide good reasons for the audience. If humans are narrative creatures, then people have the capacity to reason in terms of narrative. One does not need to be an "expert" to provide good reasons through narrative, one only needs to be human. The narrative perspective provides a

democratic common ground where common people and experts come together to discuss theological issues. The elitism of modern scientific approaches is replaced by a more common-sense approach. The thought is that "all persons have the capacity to be rational in the narrative paradigm".⁵ Wesley Kort argued that this is the "commodious quality of narrative, the capacity, that is, of a narrative to contain differing voices and discourses without needing to have one dominate the others."⁶ This sentiment is one which, as we saw in the previous chapter, McFague holds to be an important reason to adopt a metaphorical perspective.

Narrative and reason

Are not narratives, at least those that make or imply objective truth claims, held to a standard of reasonability? If they are, then the narrative seems to be adjudicated by something outside of itself, by its reasonableness. While the narrativists may be correct that humans often think and remember in terms of narrative, it does not seem to be the case that they always think in these terms. Straightforward propositional logic does not involve narrative. Thus, the sweeping claim that all human reason is narrative seems an exaggeration, if not straightforwardly mistaken.

Narrative in the philosophical tradition

For the philosophical community, narrative has proven to be one of the most resilient modes of philosophical discourse. In answering Socrates' question about the nature of virtue, Protagoras wonders about the mode through which he should argue his position.

Now shall I, as an old man speaking to his juniors, put my explanation in the form of a story, or give it as a reasoned argument?

Many of the audience answered that he should relate it in whichever form he pleased.

Then I think, he said, it will be pleasanter to tell you a story.⁷

Plato, Aristotle, Berkeley,⁸ Hume,⁹ Antony Flew,¹⁰ John Hick,¹¹

Jonathan Bennett, and many others have chosen narrative as a mode of philosophical discourse. While many eminent philosophers have chosen to use narrative, there seems to be a twentieth-century bias against the use of fiction in philosophical argument. Susan Anderson makes the following point:

There is a feeling, I think, among the majority of philosophers, that philosophy is one thing and fiction something else. If Sartre hadn't, in at least one work, written in an accepted philosophical style, I doubt that he would be considered a philosopher. (Camus generally isn't, I believe, for this reason.) This bias against combining philosophy and fiction comes from the analytic movement which has dominated twentieth century Anglo-American philosophical thought. According to the analytic method, one must express one's views as clearly as possible, in an unemotional fashion, defending them with arguments, defining crucial terms, and considering all possible objections to one's views. A work of fiction doesn't seem to be the ideal medium through which to accomplish this.¹²

In spite of this, many analytic philosophers of the twentieth century have used narrative in their philosophical writings.¹³ There are, according to Anderson, several reasons that philosophers have chosen to use narrative through which to argue their positions.

First narrative shows the relevance of philosophy to life. For example, an ethicist may show the relevance of utilitarianism and, at the same time, define utilitarianism by telling a story about the making of utility judgments in everyday life.

Second, communicating a philosophical idea through narrative means that the “reader must actively participate in the reasoning process.”¹⁴ To read a work of fiction, at least a good work of fiction, is to get involved in the story. One begins to identify with the character and the situation in which the character finds himself. The reader begins to reason philosophically without realizing it. In the end, it is possible that the conclusion the writer wishes to promote has been drawn by the reader without any “straightforward” argument. Jonathan Bennett refers to Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* to make a point about the human conscience and to show that “when someone believes himself to be in a moral temptation situation, it is possible for us to wish that he would do what he is inclined to do rather than what he feels he should do.”¹⁵ Huck wants to help his slave friend Jim escape but feels that

this is wrong. He tries to suppress his desire to help Jim escape, but gives in to the temptation of aiding his escape from slavery.

One needs to have a certain amount of distance from the agent to see that it is possible and a certain amount of sympathy for him to understand how he might not know that there is something wrong with the moral code he has accepted. A skillful writer of fiction can allow us to have access to a mind like Huck Finn's and see that his situation is indeed a possible one. And then a reflective person, reading this story, might even ask: Is it possible that some of my moral beliefs might be wrong, particularly those that repeatedly conflict with my sympathies?¹⁶

Finally, "the emotional impact of a good work of fiction is likely to be greater than that of a conventional philosophical work; so, although both may raise an important question, the work of fiction is more likely to make us care about answering it."¹⁷ One particular example of this is the problem of evil presented as an argument against theism. While the argument may be outlined as a syllogism, the impact of it is seen most clearly in specific cases—in stories. Rarely does one read a philosophical account of the problem of evil without that account providing a narrative about a specific event (e.g., earthquake, tornado, war), or a disease (e.g., leukemia, cancer) or some other story which seems contrary to the nature of a loving, omnipotent God who is working in the world.

The question at hand is whether or not narrative can help answer the problem of predicating attributes of God. While it may not seem relevant to this question that philosophers use narrative, it has at least secondary

importance. First, because the tradition of philosophy and the classic works of this discipline are laden with narrative, it would be inappropriate for a philosopher to charge that narrative language is "irrational" or "inappropriate" for scholarly dialogue. Narrative is clearly an appropriate vehicle for philosophical argumentation. This does not, however, give warrant to theologians who use narrative God-talk. The peculiar problem of predicating attributes of a transcendent being still presents itself uniquely to theologians, and not necessarily to philosophical discussions of a general nature.

Narrative and religious tradition

One of the objections against McFague's view was that her reply might be seen as a threat, rather than a help, to the theistic community. This is not an objection to a narrative perspective. Many of the important documents of Judeo-Christian history are uniquely recorded as narrative. For Christians, Jesus' use of parables and common stories shows the importance of narrative to scripture.¹⁸ At one point, the Gospel of Mark notes that "He did not speak to them without a parable" (Mark 4:33). In fact, in the brief three-year ministry of Jesus, forty different parables are recorded. Clearly, narrative was the primary mode of teaching about God and predicating characteristics of God.

Narrative/Parable in the Teaching of Jesus

Lamp under a bowl (Matt. 5:14-15; Mark 4:21-22; Luke 8:16, 11:33)
Wise and foolish builders (Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49)
New cloth on an old coat (Matt. 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36)
New wine in old wineskins (Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38)
Sower and the soils (Matt. 13:3-8, 18-33; Mark 4:3-8, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15)
Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43)
Mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19)
Yeast (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20-21)
Hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44)
Valuable pearl (Matt. 13:45-46)
Net (Matt. 13:47-50)
Owner of a house (Matt. 13:52)
Lost sheep (Matt. 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7)
Unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:23-34)
Workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16)
Two sons (Matt. 21:28-32)
Tenants (Matt. 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-11; Luke 20:9-18)
Wedding banquet (Matt. 22:2-14)
Fig tree (Matt. 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-29; Luke 21:29-31)
Faithful and wise servant (Matt. 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-48)
Ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13)
Talents (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27)
Sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46)
Growing seed (Mark 4:26-29)
Watchful servants (Mark 13:35-37; Luke 12:35-40)
Money lender (Luke 7:41-43)
Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37)
Friend in need (Luke 11:5-8)
Rich fool (Luke 12:16-21)
Unfruitful fig tree (Luke 13:6-9)
Lowest seat at the feast (Luke 14:7-14)
Great banquet (Luke 14:16-24)
Cost of discipleship (Luke 14:28-33)
Lost coin (Luke 15:8-10)
Lost son (Luke 15:11-32)
Shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-8)
Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
Master and his servant (Luke 17:7-10)
Persistent widow (Luke 18:2-8)

Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:10-14)

Aside from the importance of narrative in Scripture that can be clearly shown in fictive stories like the parables of Jesus or the Old Testament book *Song of Solomon*, other arguments can be advanced to the effect that much of religious language is essentially narrative. The Bible in many respects is a collection of narratives about a certain group of people. From the narrative life-stories of Moses, David, Joshua, Esther and Daniel in the Old Testament to the narratives of the life of Jesus (in the Gospels) and his followers (in the book of Acts), the Bible is permeated with narratives, both fictional and non-fictional. Narrative is dominant in Western religious traditions.

Dan Stiver writes that narrative is indispensable to Christian theology. "The identity of Jesus Christ and through him, of God, is given to us in an irreducible way in the Bible. . . We cannot divorce interest or faith from understanding the story in this case. Thus, theology is rooted in narratives in an indispensable way."¹⁹.

The narrative perspective is useful for theists because it enables people to reasonably choose between competing accounts of experience. The Christian perspective holds that it is acceptable and necessary to justify our values in experience.²⁰ People are able to judge according to the narratives of others and then according to their own experience which makes

religious claims more relevant and compelling to the individual. Stories, unlike straightforward statements, do not simply provide raw data to the hearer, but they provide experience based data which can be accepted or rejected based on the hearer's experience: they provide models for interpreting experience. James Ross states that the idea that the experiential nature of narrative predicates is integral to religious discourse.

The unbound description of the human condition in experience-predicates. . . is correlated with a religious story, with story-predicates: creation, fall, exile, sin sickness, promise, covenant, violation, recovenant, incarnation, death, resurrection, redemption, salvation, repentance, metanoia, life, light, fulfillment and glory. The basic meaning patterns of the story-predicates are established by the way they are used to explain and resolve the human condition through the telling of the religious story.²¹

The experiential data come pre-packaged from the writer's experience and is translated into the life of the reader. Religious writings, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, are comprehensively narrative in nature, and a perspective on religious language which accepts this will prove beneficial. Coste Didier argues for the importance of the narrative perspective.

Narratology is not only one of the best ways of understanding the individual perception of mortality and its consequences. It is also an approach to the anthropological dimension of societies, institutions, religions, rites.²²

Kierkegaard is one of the great masters of the narrative form of religious argument. His writings are full of beautiful fictional stories/parables and metaphors, and his recognition as a great writer is due in large part to his

mastery of narrative. As Thomas Oden notes, "Kierkegaard had a metaphoric mind. He communicated, and apparently thought, in dramaturgic images. One has the impression that it would have been impossible for him to communicate meaningfully in any other way".²³ It is improbable that Kierkegaard could have accomplished such an impact on the religious thinking of his day without the use of narrative. One reason for their importance to his success is that they demand the reader or hearer to participate. One of Kierkegaard's parables that is a good example of narrative in the Western Christian tradition is "The Rigorous Coachman."

Once upon a time there was a rich man who ordered from abroad at a high price a pair of entirely faultless and high-bred horses which he desired to have for his own pleasure and for the pleasure of driving them himself. Then about a year or two elapsed. Anyone who previously had known these horses would not have been able to recognize them again. Their eyes had become dull and drowsy, their gait lacked style and decision, they couldn't endure anything, they couldn't hold out, they hardly could be driven four miles without having to stop on the way, sometimes they came to a standstill as he sat for all he was worth attempting to drive them, besides they had acquired all sorts of vices and bad habits, and in spite of the fact that they of course got fodder in overabundance, they were falling off in flesh day by day. Then he had the King's coachman called. He drove them for a month--in the whole region there was not a pair of horses that held their heads so proudly, whose glance was so fiery, whose gait was so handsome, no other pair of horses that could hold out so long, though it were to trot for more than a score of miles at a stretch without stopping. How came this about? It is easy to see. The owner, who without being a coachman pretended to be such, drove them in accordance with the horses' understanding of what it is to drive; the royal coachman drove them in accordance with the coachman's understanding of what it is to drive.

So it is with us men...I have often said to myself despondently, "Here are talents and powers and capacities enough--but the coachman is lacking." Through a long period of time, we

men, from generation to generation, have been, if I may so say, driven (to stick to the figure) in accordance with the horses' understanding of what it is to drive, we are directed, brought up, educated in accordance with man's conception of what it is to be a man...

Once it was different. Once there was a time when it pleased the Deity (if I may venture to say so) to be Himself the coachman; and He drove the horses in accordance with the coachman's understanding of what it is to drive. Oh, what was a man not capable of at that time! ²⁴

Kierkegaard is a brilliant narrator. With great acumen he combines his craft of philosophy/theology with his skill as a fiction writer. The result of the enterprise is a meaningful exhortation to a lackluster Christian community to be driven, once again, by the Master Coachman. The call is to relinquish the reins, the individual control of one's life, and to put it in God's hands. Further, a variety of other interpretations may be equally valid. The narrative applies equally well to the Church as a whole and to those who are not part of the circle of faith. All are called to achieve greatness by returning control to God. Note that even his summary paragraph at the end does not entirely spell out the narrative of the coachman. In fact, his summary is a continuation of the narrative language of the previous story. It leaves much to the individual reader. Yes, he straightforwardly identifies God as the coachman, but he chooses not to bring out specific application, leaving this to the reader. Thus, the reader must participate in the

narrative in order to find its meaning. Janet Burroway responds that since the author "let[s] us use our senses and do our own generalizing and interpreting, we will be involved as participants in a real way."²⁵ The reader is called to predicate attributes of God and, thus, becomes a participant in the process of predication.

Religion makes demands on the lives of those who are inside a community of faith. Narratives are a primary way that these demands are communicated to the constituent members of that community. Carl Vaught argues, "Story-telling often points to the discord of the human soul and to the development that leads beyond it. It also suggests that wholeness sometimes comes, not as the result of human achievement, but simply as a gift." He continues by noting, "The stories of our collective consciousness are richly human and contain expressive uses of language. . . Both faith and philosophy should reflect the richness of experience to which stories can give us access."²⁶

Narrative and the problem of predication

Questions as to the truth or falsity of religious utterances are interesting and can and should be the subject of debate among theologians. They are not, however, the primary questions with which philosophers wrestle. The problem of predication, developed in chapter four, is the primary question for philosophers of religion who are concerned with the issue of speaking about God. The concern is one of meaningfulness. Can one make meaningful statements about a being one claims to be transcendent and radically different from anything the human creature can understand? What is interesting is that the theist and the non-theist make essentially the same claim, that God is not comprehensible. While the non-theist, therefore, declines to speak, the theist speaks anyway. Can the theist speak meaningfully in the face of the incomprehensibility of God? Can the theist predicate attributes of God?

One possible answer to these questions lies in narrative. Stiver claims that "narrative is extremely helpful in understanding meaning."²⁷ For Stiver, the question is not one of meaning, it is one of truth. How

do narratives convey truth about God?²⁸ For Stiver, genuine questions about the meaningfulness of narrative do not exist. Instead he questions the capacity of narrative to carry truth. It is enough to affirm that "religious language is communicable and understandable. Even if religious language possesses more indeterminate and figurative language, it is not so unlike other language, even scientific language."²⁹

Stiver is not trying to give a comprehensive account of narrative, or a philosophical analysis of narrative. He is providing a summary of various narrativists, and he does an adequate job on this score. The philosophically interesting question remains: How do narratives predicate? Two plausible responses might answer this question. One is that narratives do not directly predicate characteristics of God; they require participatory predication on the part of a hearer. The other answer, with the help of Max Black's analysis of metaphor, lies in the complexity of meaning relationships suggested in narrative. As we shall see, neither of these answers is adequate. The first reply only trades a linguistic problem for an epistemic one. The second does not adequately answer our concern about the issue of predicating attributes of God.

Narratives and predication

The first answer to the problem of predication is easy enough to arrive at. A consideration of religious narratives will clearly yield the answer. Do the narratives which seek to describe God predicate of him? No doubt some narratives will appear to predicate qualities of God. Perhaps they do, but most often the narrative must be separated from commentary provided by the speaker. For example, Aesop's fables often end with a 'moral' of the story. The moral of the story is not to be confused with the narrative itself. The moral of the story is a method of bringing out the intended lesson in a clear and straightforward way; the moral is not to be confused with the fable itself. As with any metaphorical expression, both good and bad examples or adequate and inadequate examples may be found. The most recognized cases of narrative in Western religious discourse are the parables of Jesus.³⁰ Do his narratives predicate attributes of God?

Three parables which speak to the nature of God are located in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. In verses 4-6, Jesus tells a story about a man who loses a lamb. The rancher promptly leaves

ninety-nine of them in an open pasture and vigilantly pursues the lost lamb. When he finds the animal, he brings it home, calls to friends and neighbors, and hosts a celebration.

In the second narrative (verses 8-9), Jesus talks about a woman who loses one of her ten silver coins. In order to recover the valuable coin, she quietly sweeps her floor while leaving the lamp unlit, hoping that she will hear the coin when the broom moves it across the hard floor. When she finds it, Jesus says, she will call her friends and neighbors together to celebrate.

In the third (verses 11-32), and more famous, parable, Jesus tells the story of a son who demands his inheritance from his still living father. His father gives him his inheritance and the young son embarks on a careless spending spree. With a famine coming on the land, he takes a job feeding pigs. Ending up penniless and starving, he longs just be able to eat some of the food that he gives to the pigs. After remembering the love and security that he once had in his father's house, he devises and memorizes an apology to give to his dad. Then he travels home. While the youth is still some distance from his home, his father runs out to him, hugs him, places expensive clothes on him, puts a ring on his finger, and orders his servants to prepare a great

feast for his son who “was dead and is alive again” and “was lost and is found.”

The three parables follow the statement at the beginning of chapter fifteen, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘this man welcomes sinners and eats with them (verses 1-2).’” Immediately, Jesus tells the three stories. Those who read the stories understand that Jesus is answering the religious scholars by proclaiming that God deeply loves those who are lost. He demonstrates this by seeking after them and rejoicing when they turn to him. The only mentioning of the religious scholars is in the final story. In the story, as the young prodigal returns home and the father prepares the feast, the older brother refuses to attend. He is angry that the wasteful younger brother is receiving such a party. Here the religious scholars find themselves, as represented by the older brother, resenting the acceptance extended by God to those who are “sinful.” These three parables seem to predicate a variety of attributes to God. He is loving, seeking, hopeful and ready to celebrate. However, the interpretation and predication is mine. The stories themselves not only do not predicate particular characteristics of God,

they do not even mention God. The first one predicates attributes of a shepherd, the second of a woman and the third of a despondent father. The hearer is the one who predicates characteristics of God, otherwise the stories ascribe no explicit meaning to the nature of God.

A metaphor, while not univocal, does make a direct predication of the subject. God *is* "light" or a "shepherd" or a "rock." Narrative is peculiar in that it does not directly predicate attributes of God, but demands the hearer to make the application/predication. Predication occurs, but not in the direct way of a univocal statement or of a metaphor.

The language of narrative does not, by itself, carry the problem of predication. Because of this, the narrative can avoid the pitfalls of idolatry and irrelevance that, for theologians, pose a significant problem for religious utterances. As to the concern over predicating properties of God, narrative language does seem to dodge much of the problem by never directly predicating but leaving that task to the reader.

To offer only this response to the problem of predication would be insufficient. For while the narrative may not directly predicate

characteristics of God, clearly the narrative is intended to make some positive statement about the nature of God by way of the story. The hearer-reader is supposed to make some positive conclusions about the nature of God in light of the narrative, even though the narrative may not clearly define each conclusion to be drawn. Also, it seems clear that the hearer-reader is not free to draw just any conclusion, or to make just any predication of God, after listening to the story. Apparently, the hearer will make appropriate and inappropriate predications of God in response to the story. For example, in the stories of Luke chapter 15, the narratives may not directly predicate, but they still *involve* predication or at least call for it.

The main deficiency in this reply is that it does not solve the problem of predication but pushes it back to a different level. Instead of dealing with the problem of predication as a linguistic issue, the hearer is left with the problem of predication. Epistemically, how does the hearer apply human terms ("father," "shepherd") to a transcendent God? This is no less difficult than the linguistic problem. Thus, while the problem may no longer be a language problem, one problem is replaced with another and the problem of predication goes unanswered.

Participatory predication. The particular way the narrative involves predication is a strength for both philosophers and theists. The story involves predication by enlisting the participation of the hearer/reader. In a good work of fiction, the reader is drawn into the story. The reader begins to pull for the protagonist and identify with the situation that the hero faces. The reader imagines what it would be like if she were in similar circumstances and feels an emotional attachment to the ebb and flow of the story. The author of a good piece of fiction need never say things like: "John is the protagonist," "He an honest man," "He has a slight drinking problem," "He cares about his wife and children." Such clear and straightforward statements would not help the author convey her story but would interrupt the story and make the reader into less of a participant. When the reader gets into the story, the reader unknowingly predicates characteristics of John and reaches an understanding of him.

The religious narrative hopes to draw the hearer into drawing her own conclusions. A good narrative does not go about the business of offering clear answers to theological questions; it most often raises those questions and thus confronts and challenges the hearer-reader. It does not create coherence as much as it destabilizes

the world-view of the hearer. The narratives, as used in the New Testament, are confrontational, revolutionary and discomforting.

A narrative theology, rather than enlist in a campaign to protect theological interests, to ensure Christian coherence, or to produce certainty, will serve instead to challenge and subvert Christian certainty, coherence, and identity. A narrative theology will take narrative discourses as liminal places where, like Jacob with the night visitor at the Jabbok brook, one wrestles in order to obtain not only a name (an identity, coherence, or a theology) but also, if not more so, an injured hip, a chronic instability.³¹

The Parables of Jesus by Joachim Jeremias is a lucid examination of the narratives of the New Testament. He argues that the parables of the New Testament are intended to shock the hearer.³² They are also intended to bring judgment on the hearer.³³

For theologians and philosophers, narrative is valuable in that it draws the hearer/reader into the argument. Unable to stand by and cast argumentative stones at the thesis of the author, the narrative forces the hearer into the arena. A good narrative brings a new understanding and, often, a participation in the thesis of the author or speaker. It is doubtful that Jesus chose stories as a way to avoid the sticky problem of predication: it is more likely that he chose them because they compelled the hearer to participate in them, and to confront and challenge the hearer. Straightforward propositional

language would, quite probably, not have accomplished these objectives.

Thus, the first response to the problem of predication is genuine. Narratives do not, in fact, predicate attributes of God. Instead, they involve predication by compelling the hearer to predicate attributes of God. The problem is shifted to the hearer. This shift is intentional on the part of the narrator. "Is God really like the father in the story?" "In what ways is God not like the father?" "In what ways does God search for and pursue people?" "What would it mean for God to celebrate when someone repents?" These questions, each of which involve predicating attributes of God, are ones which the hearer must answer. Thus, as noted previously, the problem has not been solved.

Narrative and complexity of meaning relationships

The second way that narratives might be said to deal with the problem of predication is that they allow enormously complex meaning relationships. This is to say that, because narratives typically involve more complexity than a single metaphor, and often contain multiple

metaphors within the story, they allow a fuller broader interaction between language and subject.

Max Black argued in *Metaphor*,³⁴ and most recently in *More about Metaphor*,³⁵ that an interaction view of metaphor solves certain problems. For narrative language, an interaction view enables a better understanding of how narratives convey meaning, and consequently, how a narrative undertakes to enable a hearer to predicate.

Black summarized his view of metaphorical language in the following lengthy account:³⁶

1. A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects, to be identified as the "primary" subject and the "secondary one."

In *Metaphor*, I spoke instead of the "principal" and the "subsidiary" subjects. The duality of reference is marked by the contrast between the metaphorical statement's focus (the word or words used nonliterally) and the surrounding literal frame.)

2. The secondary subject is to be regarded as a system rather than an individual thing.

Thus, I think of Wallace Stevens's remark "Society as a sea" as being not so much about the sea (considered as a thing) as about a system of relationships (the "implicative complex" discussed below) signaled by the presence of the word "sea" in the sentence in question. (In *Metaphor*, I proposed that the primary subject, also, be taken as a system. But it seems in retrospect needlessly paradoxical, though not plainly mistaken, to say that Stevens was viewing society, too, as a system of social relationships.) In retrospect, the intended emphasis upon "systems," rather than upon "things" or "ideas" (as in Richards), looks like one of the chief novelties in the earlier study.

3. The metaphorical utterance works by "projecting upon" the primary subject a set of "associated implications," comprised in the implicative complex, that are predictable of the secondary subject.

The label "implicative complex" is new. "Projection" is, of course, a metaphor that will need further discussion. In the earlier study, I spoke of a "system of associated commonplaces" (which later provoked some pointed criticisms by Paul Ricoeur). My notion was that the secondary subject, in a way partly depending upon the context of a metaphorical use, determines a set of what Aristotle called *endoxa*, current opinions shared by members of a certain speech community. But I also emphasized, as I should certainly wish to do now, that a metaphor producer may introduce a novel and nonplatitudinous "implication-complex."

4. The maker of a metaphorical statement selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the members of the secondary subject's implicative complex.

5. In the context of a particular metaphorical statement, the two subjects "interact" in the following ways: (a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject's properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the secondary subject.

This may be considered a crux for the interaction view. . . . Although I speak figuratively here of subjects interacting, such an outcome is of course produced in the minds of the speaker and hearer: It is they who are led to engage in selecting, organizing, and projecting. I think of a metaphorical statement (even a weak one) as a verbal action essentially demanding uptake, a creative response from a competent reader. In *Metaphor*, I said—scandalizing some of my subsequent critics—that the imputed interaction involves "shifts in meaning of words belonging to the same family or system as the metaphorical expression". I meant, of course, a shift in the speaker's meaning—and the corresponding hearer's meaning—what both of them understand by words, as used on the particular occasion.

Irreducibility of narratives. In explaining what metaphors do,

Black holds that a metaphor is not just an ornament of language. The

metaphor does more than serve merely as a decorative substitute for some set of literal statements (the “substitution view”).³⁷ Neither is the metaphor merely a reducible analogy, comparisons between two objects which can be stated in literal language (the “comparison view”).³⁸ For Black, a metaphor creates an “implicative complex” at which the hearer arrives. The secondary subject (the metaphor) provides a system through which one perceives the primary subject. Thus, if one says, “Tom is a storm,” he is not making a statement that can be reduced to a series of literal statements; he is advancing a system of relationships that are prompted by “storm” and through which one understands Tom. As Black notes, the metaphor, even a poor one, demands a “creative response from a competent reader.”³⁹ The reader selects some properties of the secondary subject and projects them onto the primary subject. As with narrative, the hearer is a participant. While the speaker predicates the secondary subject onto the primary subject, the hearer is the one who selects which properties of the secondary subject to project and organizes her thinking about primary subject in terms of the secondary.

Wesley Kort notes a variety of reasons for the massive implicative complex spawned by narrative language. “1) the place,

environment, and conditions of the narrative world (atmosphere), 2) people as individuals and in relationships (character), 3) actions and events in themselves and in their relations to one another (plot), and 4) the teller in the tale (tone).ⁿ⁴⁰

Narratives do allow a greater implicative complex. The hearer becomes involved in selecting from a multitude of properties those which he will predicate as attributes of God. While this may deepen the theological insight of religious discourse, involve the participant, and illuminate a difficult theological notion, it does not solve the problem of predication. In fact, the problem is made greater. As narrative multiplies the number of possible predicates which may be used to describe God, the problem of how a descriptive predicate actually works to characterize a transcendent God becomes more severe. Neither the involvement of the participant through narrative discourse nor the greater implicative complex serve to answer the problem.

There are other difficulties with narrative discourse as well. Regarding the meaning issue in general, it is difficult to pin down specific meanings for many narratives. How far do the implicative complexes go? Are just any implicative complexes appropriate which

may be drawn by a hearer? As Stiver notes, "Narratives. . . are not easy to pin down precisely or to evaluate exactly."⁴¹ He also notes that "The specter of relativism and fideism that hovers over many of these approaches is not easily exorcised".⁴² Narrative, as with other forms of metaphorical language, can open the door to seemingly limitless interpretations and differing understandings.

Narrative is not a failure as a mode of religious discourse. As we have seen, it is an important mode of speaking about God and an immensely powerful mode for theists to employ. Yet, it does not answer the question of how predicates describe God.

The problem of predication solved

The great difficulty for theists and non-theists who wish to speak about God is, as illuminated in chapter four, the problem of predicating attributes of God in a meaningful way. The problem of meaning is one of understanding just how these predicates can have a descriptive role concerning a God who transcends the world. While not recognizing this problem, theists and others have noticed that religious discourse is uniquely problematic. The verificationists, falsificationists, Thomists and

modern metaphorists have argued that a variety of problems confront the language of religion. They may disagree as to the exact nature of the problem, but they have agreed that one exists.

The predication problem as defined earlier is not solved by analogy, metaphor, narrative, or an appeal to some other genre of discourse, but by recognizing that predicates which describe God occur within a predicative history. This is to say that one does not predicate independently of a religious tradition. However, statements about God occur within a long predicative history, and one can meaningfully predicate qualities of the God who is illuminated in that history. For the theist, the predicative history describes an existing divine being who possesses the variety of properties validated by that history. For the non-theist, the predicates meaningfully describe the God within a particular predicative history, but this God does not exist. The transcendent God is made linguistically accessible through particular religious traditions.

Consider the following:

S1. Predicates which are said to describe God occur in the context of a particular religious tradition (various Judeo-Christian traditions, Islam, etc.).

When one predicates, he predicates attributes of the God revealed in a particular religious tradition. For her, this being does, or does not, exist.

S2. Her predicates either correspond, or do not correspond, to the God revealed within that particular religious tradition. One need only examine the particular tradition to determine which is the case. While it remains an open question as to whether they describe a real God ($G\uparrow$) they do predicate attributes of God as described in the particular tradition ($G\uparrow$).

S3. Therefore, predicates can meaningfully describe God ($G\uparrow$).

But are the above moves legitimate? It would seem that S1 can be taken without argument. One would be hard pressed to find an example of a contemporary religious text that occurs outside a particular predicative history which is encapsulated in a religious tradition.⁴³ One would likewise have difficulty finding a theist who predicates attributes of God but does not predicate from a particular religious tradition, i.e. one who claims to stand outside of any religious tradition and speak of God. No doubt some attempt to do just that, to speak about God without any mooring to a predicative history. Assuming that one is able to speak of God without doing so from a predicative history, one would again be confronted by the predication problem described earlier. Such a person would not have access to the view outlined above. So, S1 seems, with few exceptions, to be correct.

The latter part of S1 is simply a recognition that because an agent predicates within a given predicative history, the predicates she uses describe the God who is characterized in that history. Predicates like “Father,” “Son,” “Rock,” etc., come directly out of the Western Christian predicative history and are, therefore, quite common. To the extent that one’s predicates are identified with descriptions common to a particular tradition, they have meaning. They describe *Gt*. Within a particular predicative history, *Gt* serves as a reference point for those seeking to describe *Gr*. This is not to say that one can only repeat those predicates already mentioned within a tradition, but to say that the meaningfulness of predicates arises from their connection to that tradition. In the western Christian tradition, one may say “God is loving.” One might also say “God is not loving.” Both of these sentences are meaningful because they predicate descriptively of the God revealed in the tradition. The sentences are meaningful given the history of Christian predication concerning God. The predicates take on a meaning within that predicative history.

Consider this sentence: “X was a noble and just king.” Depending on what one inserts as X, the sentence may or may not be meaningful. If one asserts “Arthur was a noble and just king,” it is a perfectly meaningful sentence. If one asserts “Druvex was a noble and just king,” meaningfulness

is an open question. One doesn't know if Druvex is a human, an object, a metaphysical property, a grammatical rule of the Chinese language, or nothing at all. In the case of Druvex, it is not reasonable to label it as a meaningful sentence, at least not without more information. In the case of King Arthur, one is given a predicative history through the legend of King Arthur through which to understand Arthur and speak descriptively of him. Given the novels written about King Arthur, the movies produced, etc., one may meaningfully predicate attributes of him.

Whether or not God is an existing being, one may predicate characteristics of God through the matrix of a predicative history. In the Christian tradition, a predicative history is given through the Bible as well as other literature. One may predicate attributes of *Gr* meaningfully through this tradition. It makes sense to describe God as "father" because that predicate is yielded through the predicative history of Christianity. One may likewise meaningfully describe God as "mother" or "spider" through the predicative history of Christianity. Perhaps these predicates are not true of *Gt*, but even so, they make sense through that history.

It is important to distinguish questions of meaningfulness and questions of truth. To say that within the Christian predicative history one may meaningfully assert either that "God is loving" or "God is not loving" is to

make a claim about meaning. It is not the case that both of these assertions are true of *Gt*. One may meaningfully predicate of the nation of Brazil both "largeness" and "smallness." They are both meaningful, but the latter is false.

One might object that this is not the way theists normally think of their predicates. Usually, when a theist utters a statement like "God is loving," he believes that he is speaking of *Gr*, not of *Gt*. Whether or not a theist recognizes that his predicates correspond to the God revealed in his predicative history is not relevant. What is relevant is that they (the descriptive predicates) *are* part of a predicative history and that their meaningfulness arises in that those predicates describe *Gt*. If *S1* is true, then whether or not the theist recognizes its veracity does not concern us. That their statements have meaning within the particular tradition is enough. They are predicating attributes of *Gr*, for they believe that their tradition is valid. They hold that the *Gr* and *Gt* are identical. They may or may not be right. Whether *Gr* and *Gt* are identical, or whether there is a *Gr*, may well be the great mystery which philosophers of religion face. This mystery is not of concern here.

The non-theist may meaningfully discuss the predicates as well, the difference being that, for the non-theist, the being is not-existent. For the non-theist, *Gr* and *Gt* are not identical, for no *Gr* exists. Just as two people may

discuss the political career of King Arthur and disagree as to whether or not he actually lived, a theist and non-theist can meaningfully discuss God as revealed by a particular predicative history. If Arthur did not exist, then he had and has no observable qualities. Even so, predicates may describe him because of the literary history surrounding the legend of King Arthur. He is revealed in this history. In the case of King Arthur and the case of God, one can predicate meaningfully precisely because there exists a predicative history exists wherein the predication occurs.

S2 concerns theologians and expositors of particular religious traditions. These are people who are not so much concerned with whether or not meaningful predication is possible (they assume that it is), but with the propriety or impropriety of specific predicates describing God given their religious tradition. A theist who believes that *Gr* and *Gt* are identical will be concerned with adjudicating as to whether predicates are consistent with religious tradition and scripture, illuminate properties of God, or oppose the conception of God within that tradition.

Because *Gt* is accessible, it is possible to meaningfully attach predicates to *Gt*. Thus, it is reasonable to believe S3. One might go even farther and suggest that given S1 and S2, it would be unreasonable to deny S3. However, it would still be possible to claim that S3 would not be true

concerning *Gr*. In this case, one may still engage in predicating attributes of *Gt*, but deny that *Gr* exists.

Conclusions

The logical positivists who argued for the verification criterion and later the falsification criterion incorrectly identified the problem of religious discourse, but were correct in sensing that there is something peculiar about such discourse. Concerning discourse about God, there is a problem. The central difficulty with discourse about God is, as we have seen, the question of how predicates common to language can be used to describe God. How can these predicates describe a being who is said to be wholly transcendent?

Thomas's analogical position and the metaphorical position fail for a variety of reasons noted in chapters four and five. Both of these solutions sought an answer in looking to a particular genre of language. Finally, we saw a good candidate in narrative language. Such language allows more complex interaction between the predicate and object. Also, such language is unique to Western religious traditions. However, it was seen that the narrative view also failed. None of these positions (analogy, metaphor or narrative) adequately addressed the problem of predication. The most hopeful one, narrative, only pushed the problem onto the listener.

The problem of predication was not, however, without a solution. In the Christian tradition, the predicates which theists and non-theists use to describe God are descriptions that correspond to an entity spelled out by a long and detailed history. Theists do not, in fact, predicate descriptions of God independently of a religious tradition. They do predicate characteristics of the God they know through a particular predicative history. While *Gr* may be unknown because of his transcendence, *Gt* is not unknown. Predicates describe this being in that they are validated or invalidated by that predicative history. If one can predicate meaningfully of Hamlet, Bilbo Baggins or King Arthur in this view, one can likewise predicate descriptions of *Gt*.

There remain difficulties in speaking about God. Sometimes, language about God is hopelessly vague. At other points, such language may be, as McFague put it, "idolatrous" or "irrelevant." However, we saw that the main problem is that of predicating attributes of a transcendent God. This dissertation has responded to that problem. To the extent that the problem of predication is the central problem regarding talk about God, this dissertation has demonstrated the possibility of speaking meaningfully about the divine.

Notes

¹ "Story", seems to carry the connotation of being fictional. Additionally, we often use "story" or "storyteller" to describe an account or individual we find to be untrustworthy. These seem to be good reasons to stick with the perhaps more bulky term "narrative."

² Walter Fisher offers the illustration as humans as *homo-narrans*. "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," *Communication Monographs*, 51 (1984), p.6. He draws heavily upon Burke's definition of man as the "symbol-using animal." Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man" in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on life, literature, and Method*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp.3-24.

³ Models are useful because they "give us something to think about when we do not know what to think." McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p.24. In this sense, they serve a useful heuristic function. She continues by arguing that "What we do not know, we must stimulate through models of what we do know." *Ibid.*, p.25.

One cannot approach religious discourse with a mind unclouded by tradition and history. Models are part of our thinking whether we like it or not, or whether we choose one or not. It is a dangerous thing to believe that one can read scripture or examine religious truth-claims without a model or a religious tradition. In speaking about my own religious tradition, the Church of Christ, Allen notes that "if we naively assume that we are fresh and pure, that we stand above worldly compromise and spiritual failure, that we espouse only the Truth and nothing but the Truth, then we lose the capacity for self-criticism, for repentance, and thus for spiritual growth" (Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1990, p.12).

⁴ For example, Roland Barthes claims that sentences are miniature narratives. In sentences, the nouns and verbs perform the same functions as characters and actions. This seems to go too far. To claim that sentences are narratives is to over-broaden the narrative perspective and reduce its effectiveness in approaching genuine narratives. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Literature," trans. Lionel Duisit, in *New Literary History* 6, 2 (Winter 1975), p.241.

⁵ Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," p.10.

⁶ *Bound to Differ*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p.129.

⁷ *Protagoras*, 320c, translated by W.K.C. Guthrie.

⁸ *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, first published in 1713.

⁹ *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, first published in 1779.

¹⁰ Flew, Antony, Hare, R.M., and Mitchell, Basil, "Theology and Falsification," *University*, 1950-51.

¹¹ "Theology and Verification," *Theology Today*, XVII,1, 1960.

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 - ¹² "Philosophy and Fiction," *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 23, No.3, July 1992, p.203-
 - ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.204.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.209.
 - ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.
 - ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.209.
 - ¹⁸ Modern theologians clearly recognize the importance of narrative to the teachings of Jesus. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p.17.
 - ¹⁹ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.141.
 - ²⁰ Jeff Hobbs, "The Narrative Paradigm and the Rational Justification of Values: Religious Argument in the Christian Tradition," in *Spheres of Argument* ed. Bruce Gronbeck, (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1989), p.255.
 - Peter Lamarque argues that by telling and hearing stories, we are able to make sense of the world. The epistemological importance of this is that we "have no access to the world beyond the stories that we tell." *Narrative in Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.151. He may be overstating the claim a bit, but the point is that narratives enable humans to organize their beliefs and experiences and thus, interpret their environment.
 - Experience should be viewed as a medium and never the norm of truth (borrowing from Tillich). Otherwise, we might all go off into our own solipsistic worlds with stories galore. Experience instructs belief--it does not create truth.
 - ²¹ *Portraying Analogy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.169.
 - ²² Didier Coste, *Narrative as Communication*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p.11.
 - ²³ Thomas Oden, *Parables of Kierkegaard*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.ix.
 - ²⁴ This story appears in Kierkegaard's work *For Self Examination* and the version that is quoted is from *Parables of Kierkegaard*, pp.59-60.
 - I have at some places taken the liberty to omit material from the parables which is unnecessary for this study.
 - ²⁵ *Writing Fiction*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), p.80.
 - ²⁶ "Faith and Philosophy," *The Monist*, 75, 3, (1992), p.335.
 - ²⁷ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.155.
 - ²⁸ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.196.
 - ³⁰ This shall be taken as an uncontroversial observation on my part.
 - ³¹ *Bound to Differ*, P.134.
 - ³² Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p.30.
 - ³³ *Ibid.*, p.29.

³⁴ "Metaphor," in *Models and Metaphors*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp.25-47.

³⁵ "More about Metaphor," in *Perplexities*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.47-76.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.59-60.

³⁷ *More about Metaphor*, p.58.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.58-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁴⁰ *Bound to Differ*, p.130.

⁴¹ *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, p.199.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.162.

⁴³By "predicative history," I mean that extensive bundle of predicates that are used to describe God within a particular religious tradition. In the Christian tradition, predicates like "father," "shepherd," and "fortress" (and many others) are commonly taken as descriptive of God. The borders of the set of predicates which compose the predicative history are not always, or perhaps ever, clear. There will be differences in the sets used by different Christian churches and between groups within those churches. Some predicates, like those listed above, will fall in the middle of the tradition, others (e.g. "mother") will not be so clearly a part of a certain predicative history.

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