ORDINARY LANGUAGE ANALYSIS
AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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The philosophical *bete noir* of the 1930's and 1940's is dead. Such at least is the case with that classical form of logical positivism which reduced all cognition to science and forced all science into a descriptivist and operational mold. Its principle tool, the verifiability theory of meaning, has been weakened beyond effectiveness, metaphysics—once eliminated from meaningful discourse—has been reintroduced into respectable philosophic society in a chastened but profitable form, and as a result theology has been given another chance to show what it is really talking about. From today's perspective we might even regard logical positivism as an unpleasant but instructive interlude in the history of traditional philosophic inquiry. It was unpleasant because of its radical reductionism, but it was instructive because of the attention it forced to questions of philosophic methodology and because of the repudiation it has won of eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalisms.[1].

If theology is to take advantage of this new chance to explain itself, it must learn from the positivist interlude to avoid pouring theology into either a rationalistic or a scientistic mold; for, let us face it, theology has at times mistreated Biblical religion, whether by tying its meaning and truth to scientific-type verification or by uncritically adopting the rationalism of Thomas Aquinas or Thomas Reid or John Locke or even Hegel. Theology is undoubtedly a "rational inquiry" into redemptive history and revealed truth, but the thing we must watch is our definition of "rational" and the consequent method of "inquiry."

In British philosophy the *bete noir* has been succeeded by what is usually called "ordinary language analysis," a movement which had its roots in the Cambridge philosophers G. E. Moore, John Wisdom, and the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and which was further developed by such Oxford philosophers as Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, P. F. Strawson, etc.[2] Rather than imposing uniform standards of meaning and truth on

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1. On logical positivism and its demise, see J. O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis* (Clarendon Press, 1956); G. J. Warnock, *English Philosophy Since 1900* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1958); A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (Free Press, 1959), and *The Revolution in Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1956). Also Alvin Plantings, "Analytic Philosophy and Christianity," *Christianity Today*, VIII (1963). 78.
2. See, for instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Macmillan, 1964), and *The Blue and Brown Books* (Harper Torchbooks, 1958); Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954); J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1962) and *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon Press, 1961); V. C. Chappell (ed.), *Ordinary Language* (Prentice-Hall, 1964).

all supposedly cognitive discourse, these analysts prefer to describe how language is actually used. They recognize a large variety of what Wittgenstein called "language games," in which the same players (words) may operate according to very different rules. Not all words name empirical objects, and not all language is descriptive. Rather than either formalizing arguments into deductive systems or insisting on empirical verification, the analyst engages in "logical mapwork," an attempt to map out the peculiar logic (or logos-structure, intelligible order) of moral language, or the language of freedom and responsibility, or the language of sense perception, or religious language. Each must be examined on its own terms; each has its own "informal logic." The task of philosophy is not to prescribe what is or is not logically legitimate, not to reduce one king of language or logic to another—this sort of thing only creates needless puzzles and confusion. The task is not to *revise* but to *describe* the ways in which language works, and so to make explicit and clear the accumulated insight stored in linguistic use. While such mapwork begins at the local level and often appears trivial or fragmented, larger relational questions arise—what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblances" between language games—and these in turn lead to an analysis of the language, say, of behavioristic determinism in relation to that of individual freedom and responsibility, or of science in relation to religion. This illuminates traditional philosophic questions. It leads to more complete and integrated "logical maps" that tie things together by using philosophic categories, or models and constructs, or "integrator words" like "God." Systematic metaphysics is thus reborn.[3]

The "informalizing" of logic and methodology has reopened questions the positivists discarded as meaningless about the logic of religion and theology. Some analysts still ask what kind of experience religious discourse is about, and what kinds of experience consequently bear on its verification or falsification. The various answers proposed reflect corresponding views of the nature of religious knowledge and experience, so that Schleiermacher reappears and Ritschl and Joseph Butler and Thomas Aquinas and Rudolph Otto and Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, in new forms and combinations.[4] Some of the better attempts to handle religious language preserve both its historical references and its cognitive content and its personal or existential character. Generally speaking, however, in less than orthodox hands, the stress is on religious experience

3. D. F. Pears (ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics* (Macmillan, 1957); Ian Ramsey (ed.), *Prospect for Metaphysics* (Allen and Unwin, 1961); Everett Hall, *Philosophical Systems* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960); Frank Dilley, *Metaphysics and Religious Language* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1964); P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (Anchor Books, 1963); F. Zabeeh, "Oxford and Metaphysics: A New Page in Contemporary Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, III (1963). 307.

4. For instance, Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (SCM Press, 1955); Basil Mitchell (ed.), *Faith and Logic* (Allen and Unwin, 1957); Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language* (SCM Press, 1957); Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (Harper, 1961); William Hordern, *Speaking of God* (Macmillan, 1964).

rather than historical revelatory situations and on existential rather than interpretive or metaphysical functions of language. This is however a matter of emphasis rather than exclusion, and is more due to the absence of evangelicals from this phase of philosophical theology than to anything intrinsic to the analytic method.

In what follows let me make it clear that my concern is not with exegetical method, nor primarily with apologetics, but with systematic theology. It is sometimes customary to regard induction and deduction as the only two methods available for either concept-formation or system-building. If we take the analysts seriously, this is not necessarily so. Theology, like other "language games," must be handled on its own terms, not with the logics of other disciplines. Deduction is the logic of mathematics, native to that area, but it is of limited usefulness elsewhere. It is a logic of universals, of class concepts and universally distributed middle terms, and as such it cannot take every logical step we might need. It cannot draw inferences from logically particular statements nor derive concepts from unique events, nor can its logical necessities be applied to contingent truths. It may sometimes be useful, even necessary, but it is not sufficient.

If deduction were the logic of theology, (1) we would have to formalize in deductive fashion every movement of theological thought, (2) we would have to ignore the historical narrative except for illustrative purposes and work only with logically universal propositions, (3) we would have to reduce all Biblical analogy and metaphor and symbol and poetry and connotation to logically univocal as well as universal form, (4) we would have to regard all events in redemptive history and the consequent application of grace as *logically necessary* rather than contingent on the will of God. This I cannot do. (1) Deduction is, I want to point out later, not descriptive of all theological concept-formation and system-building. (2) Biblical history is important in theological concept-formation; it has its own revelational value, be it declarative, paradigmatic, symbolic or whatever. (3) Biblical language is too rich. Its literary diversity is more than a historic accident or a decorative device; it is a vehicle for imaginative thought and creative expression about things difficult to grasp. Analogy, metaphor, symbol, poetry—these and other forms cannot be translated without risking cognitive loss into univocal and pseudo-scientific form; each must be examined on its own terms. (4) I do not subscribe to the view that God's sovereign acts in creation or history or grace occur out of logical necessity. I am not prepared to grant the rationalistic conception of God. For these reasons, then, deduction appears less than sufficient as the logic of theology.

It may be objected that theology nonetheless systematizes deductively, drawing logical implications from Biblical propositions and developing them into a formal system. I am not sure this is the *whole* story, that *all* doctrines are deduced and then interrelated in this specific way.

Systematics begins with exegesis; the question is, how does systematization proceed from an exegetical beginning? What gives deductive order any edge on other kinds of system? How, for instance, does the Incarnation of God in Christ give the unity it does to systematic theology? Is it that everything else in theology is deduced from statements about the Incarnation, or is it that everything else serves to extend and detail the meaning of this central event so that it becomes the recurring theme of a theological symphony? The doctrines of God, of creation, of revelation, of man, of redemption, of the church, of history—all these areas of thought develop and detail, in their own Biblical and conceptual materials and to their own advantage, the fuller meaning of the central theme that God is in Christ.

In these terms, the analyst will have serious doubts about conforming the logic of theology entirely to deduction. Induction, moreover, is the logic of early empirical science (not of modern science, it should be noted). In what sense could theology be inductive? Is it (1) Aristotelian induction? For Aristotle, induction was the intuitive abstraction of universal principles from familiar classified data, and as such it presupposes the Aristotelian view of man and nature: potential and active intellect, hylomorphism, etc. To use Aristotelian induction intact would tie theology to Aristotle, and this I am not prepared to do. Is theological induction, then, (2) the very different method of Francis Bacon? You recall that he discarded the Greek view of man as contemplative intellect, seeking instead to know the laws of nature for pragmatic reasons, manipulating the variables to ensure that causes are correctly assigned to effects. This kind of induction—as also Mill's logic—is concerned with the experimental identification of causes, and this is obviously not what theology is doing. Induction of this sort is not the logic of theology. What then is induction in theology? I suggest that it is (3) a loose approximation to Aristotle's quest for generalized concepts based on an inspection of empirical data, in this case the Biblical data. But here two problems arise. (a) Is a complete induction ever possible? This was Hume's problem in another context, but it is equally applicable to any theologian present who is less than omniscient about Scripture and its historical context and languages, applicable also at any stage when the church only knows in part or sees through a glass darkly. And if complete induction is impossible our theological concepts lack logical finality. (b) Is inductive generalization actually the way we construct our theological concepts? Is theological method just a repetitious collection and collation of proof texts that unambiguously dictate both their individual and their collective meaning? Or does it involve more than this, more complex procedures, postulates regarding language and logic, regarding the literature we call Scripture and so regarding life? Theology seems to me to involve hermeneutical assumptions and pre-understandings, the selection of materials, the choice of some preferred materials in interpreting others, the adoption of guiding hypotheses, the use of models, the gradual hesitating construction of conceptual maps.

This is neither deduction or induction. The logic of theological language is different from that of mathematics or early modern science. We are helped somewhat by the realization that modern science is not really inductive either—nor is it some easy combination of induction and deduction. Recent philosophy of science is increasingly explicit that concept-formation means adducing models and developing constructs, and some analysts have accordingly compared the logic of models and constructs in science and theology,[5] for these are different "language games."

For the sake of alliteration, let us call this third kind of logic "adduction." The questions for theological method become: (a) How are models adduced and conceptual or logical maps constructed? (b) How is their truth-value ascertained? To the first question, (a) the evangelical replies that they are adduced from Scripture. But this is deceptively simple. Scripture uses a multiplicity of models in different contexts: for instance, God is Father and King and Fortress and Lover and Creator and Judge and Covenant-maker, all wrapped into one. He redeems from bondage, reconciles the alienated, forgives the offender, covers sin, regenerates the dead-in-sin—all of this wrapped in one. These are models. Theology analyzes their meaning without falsely literalizing them. Some creative and constructive mapwork is needed, to explore family resemblances between Father-language and Lover-language and King-language, and between bondage-language and alienation-language and dead-in-sin-language. The result is a doctrine of God, and a doctrine of sin and redemption. Then larger family resemblances are explored, perhaps using the Covenant model as the integrating device, and the relation between God and sin and redemption appears. The statements of Scripture are frequently in model-contexts. The theologizing of the apostle Paul often uses models. The task of the theologian is not to dispense with them, not to reduce them to univocal or "literal" language, but to explore and develop them. It is very obscure what "literal" means in theology, if it is meant to exclude models and metaphors and symbols, those pregnant cognitive devices that make a literature intellectually alive, able to generate insight and understanding, able to reveal truth. The medievals were not altogether wrong when they developed a logic of analogy.

If theology is mapwork that explores the logical layout of the models adduced from Scripture, care should be taken to explore them in the total context of Scripture, its didactic as well as its historical and

5. Mary Hesse, Models and Analogies in Science (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1961); Stephen Toulmin, Foresight and Understanding (Hutchinson Univ. Library, 1961); Norwood Hanson, Patterns of Discovery (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958); Ian Ramsey, Models and Mystery (Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), and Religion and Science (SPCK, 1964); Frederick Ferre, "Mapping the Logic of Models in Science and Theology," The Christian Scholar, XLVI (1963). 9, and "The Cognitive Possibilities of Theistic Language," ch. XIII in Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion (Scribners, 1967).

other materials. Particular caution is needed if the theologian uses non-Biblical models, whether those of Greek thought like "ens realissimum" or "Prime Mover" or "hypostasis," or those of Heideggerian ontology like "Ground of Being." These are rightly criticized if they force us to play a Greek or Heideggerian language game rather than that of Christian theology, that is to say—in more traditional terms—if they limit our conceptualization to the God of the philosophers rather than extending it to the God of Abraham and Isaac, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The poverty of natural theology is as real today as in the past.

This logic of "adduction," models, and constructive mapwork seems then, to fit the needs of evangelical theology. It also accounts for theological diversity. If theology is neither rigorously deductive nor the result of a complete and pure induction, but is sometimes conducted by less formal and conclusive means, then its systematic structure and to a certain extent its concept-formation will vary with the selection and creative interrelation of models. After all, Protestant theology is an open-ended and somewhat pluralistic venture. We do not usually claim to have one final theology to end all other and all future theologies. This, however, introduces our second question about adduction, (b) the ascertaining of truth.

If the method were purely inductive, then some sort of Biblical correspondence or direct empirical verification would be sufficient. But not so, if induction is not the only method, if there is not always a 1:1 correlation between theological construct and the heterogeneous Biblical models and statements it is intended to embrace. If the method were purely deductive, then some sort of formal self-consistency of the system would be the criterion—granted of course the truth of the Biblical premises—and we could establish one system to the exclusion of all others. But if deduction is not a sufficient logic for theology, then formal consistency is not an adequate criterion. This need not surprise us. In the history of philosophy a truth criterion has always been a function of a larger methodology for knowing. In recent philosophy it is recognized that different truth criteria may be appropriate to different kinds of knowing—to different language games. It has even been suggested that truth judgments may sometimes be "performative" rather than indicative. "It is true that ..." may add no more to a proposition than a "Hear ye!" or an exclamation mark. In other words, the old schema on the problem of truth (correspondence, coherence, etc.) is breaking down with the breakdown of reductionist epistemologies.[6]

What sort of truth criteria, then, are appropriate in theological discourse? In evaluating conceptual schemes, interpretations, constructs and models, analytic philosophers tend to retain both an empirical and a

6. See Everett Hall, *op. cit.*, ch. V and VI; George Pitcher (ed.), *Truth* (Prentice-Hall, 1964); F. Ferre and Kent Bendall, *Exploring the Logic of Faith* (Association Press, 1962).

rational criterion—though not the traditional ones. If a construct attempts to interpret a range of data, it must possess "empirical adequacy." That is, it must embrace the entire scope of relevant data, not ignoring some, not distorting others, but doing justice to all relevant factual considerations. If a model is intended to make certain facts more intelligible, then it should fit those facts properly. It must "fit" closely enough to avoid being the sort of generality that fits any conceivable facts at all. In these terms, Tillich's conception of God as Ground of Being, whether or not "adequate" to cover the relevant Biblical data, is so imprecise, it "fits" so loosely, that it could as well interpret naturalistic humanism as Biblical theism. This, I suspect, is the way some post-Tillichians have taken the notion.

But empirical adequacy and fit are not the only criteria. If a model or construct is an attempt to unify what is given, and if larger logical maps attempt to interrelate and unify the whole, then we need some sort of coherence criterion, some index to logical unity and order. In fact, a theological construct may be adduced in a particular form precisely for this reason: it is the preferred way to round out a coherent conceptual scheme.

I suspect, by way of example, that such is the case with the conception of Biblical inerrancy. I am not convinced that, in its usual extension to all historical details, scientific allusions and literary references inerrancy is either explicitly taught in Scripture or is *deduced* therefrom without a fallacy of equivocation. Nor do I see it as the result of *inductive* study of the phenomena—the induction is too incomplete. In other words, I think *both* sides in the evangelical intra-mural debate on the subject are methodologically mistaken. Rather I see inerrancy as a second-order theological construct that is *adduced* for systematic reasons. The first-order Scriptural doctrine of revelation includes the affirmation that the Biblical literature was given by Divine inspiration and constitutes our only final and sufficient rule of faith and practice. But inerrancy as we usually construct the concept, is something further, something which I do not find logically entailed in the statement "Scripture speaks the truth," at least not in a form sufficiently precise to "fit" all the facts. Rather ,inerrancy is adduced because of the high level of expectation (kind of truth demand) created by the Biblical doctrine, and the attractiveness of rounding out the doctrine with this further extrapolation. It is constructed and qualified so as to "fit" the actual phenomena and to "cohere" within the overall doctrine of Scripture. If the construct is modeled on twentieth century standards of scientific accuracy or precision in documentation, it just does not "fit." I suspect therefore that some people's objection to "inerrancy" may be an objection to a term that evokes a malfitting model, rather than to the conceptual construct careful theologians try to delineate by a thousand qualifications. In that case the intramural debate is methodological and semantical rather than

about substantive issues. Careful analysis might go a long way towards clearing it up.

There is however another ingredient in our theological truth-judgments that is more convictional and personal than it is systematic or empirical. Post-positivist analysis faces this squarely and explores the logic of conviction and personal involvement.[7] This means probing the relation of personal conviction to concept-formation, to system-building, and to truth-judgments, and takes into account the I-Thou dimension of revelation, the witness of the Spirit, and kindred elements. But it is less a question for theological method than for apologetics and the philosophy of religion. It belongs to another occasion.

7. See for instance D. D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (Ryerson Press, 1964); A. F. Holmes, "Philosophy and Religious Belief," *Pacific Philosophy Forum*, V (May, 1967). 4.3.