

'God,' 'I' and Ian Ramsey

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As a Christian thinker, Ian Ramsey had a lasting preoccupation with the peculiar logic of the pronoun 'I'. His concern was primarily an apologetic one, directed against the verificationist contention that statements about God are strictly meaningless since they can neither be confirmed or refuted by sense experience nor regarded as true by virtue of the meanings of their terms. Whatever the technical demerits of the Verification Principle as a philosophical argument, it does accurately express a very prevalent metaphysical attitude which makes it difficult for the holder to take traditional Christian talk about God or Jesus Christ seriously. We tend most of us to make a more or less rigid distinction between the objective world of hard facts and cool reason, for which science provides the paradigm of description and explanation, and our various inner worlds of feeling and aspiration, between which there is no rational way of judging and where everyone's view is as right as anyone else's. The Christian wants to say that God's love is a fact. All that he is allowed to say is that he feels as if God loves us and intends to act as if it were so; and this, for most Christians, is not enough.

Ramsey's counter-move was to point out that God-statements are not alone in their logical oddity. The statements in which empirical observations are expressed are also odd, for the 'I' of 'I can see a table over there' is as elusive in terms of empirical description as the 'God' of 'God loves all mankind.' This becomes especially apparent when it is a matter of my reporting my own thinking or actions. The 'I' who is the observing subject is never entirely to be identified with the 'me' who is the object of scrutiny. In observing ourselves we at the same time transcend ourselves.¹ Yet even the most hardened logical positivist has never been deterred on that account from using the first person singular or from thinking that when he did so he was making meaningful statements about matters of fact. If then statements about the observing, thinking self qualify as factual assertions, Ramsey argues, why should statements about God be automatically disqualified for failing to fit a Procrustean bed which equally fails to accommodate other and undeniably respectable modes of speech?²

It is not entirely clear how much Ramsey thought was proved by the parallel between God-talk and first-person language. At the least it shows that one knock-down argument against religious belief fails. It is not impossible for talk about God to be meaningful simply on the ground that God is systematically elusive to empirical reference. Ramsey sometimes wrote as if to have shown that was to have said all that needed to be said. The reason for his doing so was partly, no doubt, that the main threat to religious belief that concerned him was that which stemmed from the logical empiricist school of British philosophy. But there was a further reason. Besides their strictly logical peculiarities, according to Ramsey, God-talk and person-talk have a further feature in common which helps to explain their elusive quality. This something more which sets them apart from ordinary matter-of-fact discourse and which cannot be pinned down satisfactorily in terms of observation reports is the subject of a 'disclosure', an experience akin to seeing the point of a joke, in which what is 'seen' is not a further non-material something but a deeper significance latent in the surface phenomena.

As an account of one aspect of religious experience what Ramsey says is persuasive. He is telling it as it is, or at least as it is experienced by the believer. The trouble is that talk about disclosure tends to bypass what for the unbeliever seems the real problem. 'Disclosure' implies that there is something there beyond the experience itself waiting to be disclosed. What Ramsey often seems not to allow for sufficiently is the possibility that, as with a mirage, the appearance of something real being there may in the end be false. The experience of realising that one has not seen the point after all is not an uncommon one, and its mere possibility is a warning of the danger of building too much on the fact that people have disclosure experiences, however compelling they may be or however necessary to the formation of a belief in God. Psychological and logical necessity are not the same thing. The most that Ramsey has established is that there is a mysterious depth to existence, even on the everyday level of striking up an acquaintance with a stranger, that defies capture in the language of strictly observational reporting. But this falls a good deal short of religious belief, however loosely interpreted. Many a humanist might well agree that there is an ineradicable and valuable element of mystery in human experience but decline to be baptised on the strength of that admission³. One cannot move therefore from the unexceptionable contention that we all have disclosure experiences relating to ourselves and other people and accept that there is something there, a self, to be disclosed, *via* the fact that some people have disclosure experiences which they relate to a cosmic being called 'God', to the conclusion that there must be a God to account for the experience of

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disclosure. It is this weakness in Ramsey's position that makes Ninian Smart accuse him of crypto-atheism⁴.

The reason why empiricists are happy to talk of persons and material objects despite the perplexities that they have felt about defining personal identity or sense-data is that the disclosures that link heard sound to its recognition as meaningful language or seen shapes to the presence of a three-dimensional object are universal and the content that is disclosed is sufficiently consistent both within a single person's experience and between persons to justify the conclusion that there is a real world of people and things waiting to be disclosed. But with religious disclosures the case is rather different. By no means everyone seems to have them, and those who do find it hard to agree on any formulation of what has been disclosed to them.

However, the contrast is easily overstated. Ramsey stresses the common elements contained in all sorts of disclosure situation and the words that we use to deal with them. He often writes as though 'I' always plays the same logical role. But the examples that he gives of non-religious disclosures fall into a number of categories; and this suggests that we may not be dealing here with a single language-game but a number of distinct, if related, ones. The differences may turn out to be as significant as the similarities. Indeed, I would wish to argue, they make possible a view of Christian apologetic which escapes Smart's strictures and is closer to the approach of the Biblical writers than the near-Platonism that suffuses much of Ramsey's work.

When he is writing in a primarily philosophical context, Ramsey's examples tend to be taken from experience of perception, such as knowing that one has a toothache⁵. When the context is theological, however, they come more often than not from the fields of personal relationships or morality. It is more obviously true of these latter that, as Ramsey argues in *Religious Language*, every disclosure involves a commitment on the part of the subject to whom the disclosure is made⁶. To recognise an apparent stranger as one's long-lost wife or even as the Chancellor of the Exchequer is not merely to make a perceptual discovery but also to readjust one's attitudes, dispositions and valuations, so far as that person is concerned. The relevance of this to specifically religious disclosure needs no emphasis. To see the hand of God in events is to change one's stance to those events. But the element of commitment in recognising that one has a toothache is not so obvious — or rather commitment is too strong a word. For undoubtedly to recognise it is to give the sensation attention, to single it out as important and let it stand out from the back-ground of unattended experience. It may also be a preliminary to action, such as making an

appointment with the dentist. But recognition of a toothache is not self-involving, to use Donald Evans' expression, in the same way or to the same degree as recognition of an old friend. I do not commit myself to anyone or anything by saying 'I have a toothache.' It is like saying 'I am in love' as opposed to 'I love you.' The latter might lead to the expectations of wedding bells and justifiable resentment if they did not materialise. The former need be no more than a detached reflection on one's own state of mind.

At this level of personal disclosure, that in it which it is accompanied inextricably by the recognition of a claim upon oneself, whether it be the moral claim to do what one can to rescue a child from drowning or the invitation to relax and let oneself go at a party, it does not seem to be true as a matter of fact that we all have disclosures of a similiar character. Two examples may help here, both somewhat extreme as types of human behaviour, perhaps, but both sufficiently common to suggest that human beings may have very varied capacities for experiencing disclosures at the personal level, just as they seem to be at the cosmic level.

When the stranger on the train introduces himself as Nigel Short, he is exposing himself as a person, making himself vulnerable to the wounds that can only be inflicted by friends, and in doing so he invites a similiar self-exposure in return. But many people, the shy and inhibited, find it hard to do this. They react to such overtures defensively, afraid of being hurt if they relax their guard or allow themselves to become too involved with someone else. They may succeed at one level in getting to know Nigel Short very well – as detached observers and even as scientific predictors of his thoughts and actions. But there is a sense in which they can never get to know him 'as his friends know him', at the level where spontaneous and relaxed self-revelation can take place. That level of disclosure is impossible for them because they cannot manage the degree of self-involvement that is a necessary condition for it to occur.

A rarer phenomenon but a no less real one is the psychopath who has a similiar blindness to disclosures, but this time to those of a moral sort, the man for whom, as for Plato's Thrasymachus, 'justice is the interest of the stronger' and no more, who literally cannot feel the claim to compassion of the drowning child. With him, unlike the rest of us, it is not a matter of making excuses to himself for not taking off his jacket and diving in to rescue him. He just cannot see that there is anything to excuse. Like shyness, this too is a matter of degree. Total blindness to the moral claims of others is mercifully uncommon. Regrettably most of us are partially blind, where other drivers are concerned, or immigrants, or whoever we find a convenient scapegoat for our frustration and guilt.

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Our attitudes to both shyness and psychopathy are distinctly ambivalent. On the one hand we are inclined to excuse their victims by saying 'He cannot help it.' Blindness as such can never be reprehensible. Yet at the same time we feel that they are less than fully human in a way that the physically blind quite definitely are not. They have failed to develop capacities which are necessary if one is to be a fully mature person, and if they have it in their power to develop them, they ought to do so.

One might arrange religious disclosures on a similar scale. At one end are those that are sufficiently widely reported to suggest that all men have them but which carry with them a minimum of self-involving commitment, the sense of human finitude or of being part of a cosmic whole, for example. These have provided the raw material in experience for the traditional 'proofs' of natural theology. But what these purport to prove, 'the God of the philosophers', strikes the religious person as jejune and insubstantial compared with the One whom he has encountered, often in a manner that is grounded inextricably in a particular historical context — 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' — and always profoundly challenging to the whole range of one's attitudes and aspirations.

If we are prepared to admit that not every level of personal disclosure is equally open to everybody, then it may not be so damaging to admit that the same is true of religious disclosure. At the deeper levels in both cases a limiting factor is the degree to which the individual is able to open himself to the personal commitment involved. Being able to 'see' what is to be seen is more like sensitivity to another's feelings than the sensitivity of a cat's eyes in the dark.

This is an area where morality becomes hard to distinguish from epistemology. If we feel justified in thinking that the withdrawn and the psychopathic somehow fall short of full and mature humanity (even if they are not personally blameworthy for it), it is presumably because we define 'humanity' at least in part in terms of the ability to involve oneself in personal commitment; in which case it is fair to claim that the total self-giving that encounter with Christ demands marks the apex of true humanity.

The Christian apologist is therefore not faced with the alternative of offering a proof of his faith that everybody should be able to see or else admitting that faith is wholly subjective. The deeper levels of personal knowledge outside religion require new ways of looking at experience which are not logically compulsory but which do entail an openness to commitment. Granted the Christian concept of God, it should be no surprise if the same holds good within religion;⁷ and granted also the evaluative overtones of 'deeper', the Christian may fairly claim not only that he knows

God but that his claim to knowledge should be treated seriously by those who do not share it.

This argument depends for its effectiveness on acceptance of this valuation of depth and commitment. Historically it is part of our Western culture, including its Marxist and Existentialist strands, which are often overtly anti-Christian. However it is not inescapable. Indeed it is being actively eroded. Evangelism has a vested interest in its defence.

Footnotes

1. I.T. Ramsey, *Christian Empiricism* (1974), pp. 17-31: 'The Systematic Elusiveness of 'I'.'
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-47: 'Biology and Personality'; *Religious Language* (1957), p. 38.
3. See for instance Ronald Hepburn's contribution to H.J. Blackman (ed.), *Objections to Humanism* (1963).
4. Ninian Smart, 'The Intellectual Crisis of British Christianity', in *Christian Empiricism*, pp. 229-236.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-176: 'Facts and Disclosures.'
6. *Religious Language*: pp. 28-37.
7. Cf. John 7:17; Romans 1:18-23; Hebrews 11:1-3.