

Eschatological Verification and Parontological Obfuscation

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to comment upon the debate between Nielsen and Mavrodes on Hick's use of the concept of eschatological verification.¹ I have chosen to examine that debate, not because I believe it to be a good one, but because I believe it to be a good example of a bad one. It is a bad one, partly because most of the points made by the contributors are wrong, and partly because the issue which is raised and stated with reasonable clarity by Hick is progressively obfuscated in the course of the discussion. I propose to ignore the minor errors of misunderstanding and misrepresentation which have no crucial bearing upon the central issue under discussion, and to ignore also the snide asides by Nielsen about the distinguished theologians whom he does not profess to understand. I shall be content to take note of his major misunderstandings of the theologian whom he does profess to understand.

The question raised by Hick is whether those religious utterances which have all the appearance of being assertions really are assertions. Part of his purpose is to reject, and give reason for rejecting, the claim of some that they are not.² In particular, his contention is that "God exists," spoken of the Christian God, is an assertion. The assumption underlying his paper is that an utterance is an assertion if it is in principle verifiable, and his concern, therefore, is to show that "God exists," said of the Christian God, is in principle verifiable. Although his underlying assumption is made clear in the course of his paper, it (reasonably) is not there defended; and the same is true of the sense which he gives to the term verification. His claim is that "God exists"³ entails predictions about matters eschatological which are in principle verifiable, albeit only eschatologically. The predictions which he holds to be entailed by "God exists" are stated, and the experiences are described which, if they were to occur, would, in his view, verify them and it.

Being clear about what the issue is, we should also be clear about what it

1. Cf. *CJT*, 9 (1963), 271-81; 10 (1964), 187-91; 11 (1965), 135-41. For Hick's paper see John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 253-74.

2. E.g. R. M. Hare, in his contribution to the discussion of "Theology and Falsification," in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), pp. 99-103; R. B. Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955); reprinted in Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, pp. 229-52).

3. Throughout, it is to be understood that "God exists" is short for "'God exists' said of the Christian God."

is not. The question is not, as Nielsen correctly observes,⁴ whether "God exists" is true; it is whether "God exists" is an assertion. It is not, in other words, about the truth-value of "God exists," but, as Hick puts it in a passage which Nielsen misquotes, about its assertion-status.⁵ More important, at least for the progress of the debate, the question is not, as Nielsen *sometimes* says that it is, whether theistic claims are intelligible or whether religious utterances can be understood. Commands, ejaculations, and all sorts of expressions which are not assertions are certainly intelligible and understood. The question is whether "God exists" is an assertion rather than a command or ejaculation or resolution or anything else, intelligible or unintelligible. I have not said, nor do I wish to suggest, that Nielsen never gets the issue right. Often he does. But sometimes he does not; and, regrettably for the course of the debate, it is the issue as mis-stated by him which is taken up and commented upon by Mavrodes.

It is not difficult to see just how Nielsen gets off the right rails. In the opening paragraph of his paper he affirms that Hick's concern is with the question "whether it is intelligible to claim that divine existence is a fact";⁶ and he emphasizes the word "intelligible" by putting it in italics. His purpose in so doing is, of course, to distinguish the question of the truth of "God exists" from the question of its intelligibility as an assertion. But the introduction of the word "intelligible" operates as a kind of railway switch and we are off on the wrong track in the next paragraph but one when the saving reference to "fact" is dropped off and we are told that Hick's question is whether theistic claims are intelligible.⁷ That is not Hick's question; it is that, however, which Mavrodes, misled by Nielsen, takes to be Hick's question. But more of that later.

Nielsen's central argument against Hick is stated in section II of his paper and culminates in the verdict that "Hick is asking us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps."⁸ The question whether that verdict is a justified one needs to be examined, but a decision on it requires first a reasonably precise formulation of Hick's argument. Central to that argument is the claim that "God exists" entails predictions of an eschatological nature, and part of his paper is concerned with stating what these are. It will not, I think, be a distortion of his thought if we take them to be as follows: first, that some time there will exist that quality of life which the New Testament calls eternal life and which Hick describes, tentatively, as final self-fulfillment and happiness; and, second, that Jesus will reign in this kingdom of final self-fulfillment and happiness.⁹

Implicit in his case is, of course, the claim that both of these predictions are in principle verifiable. Let us call them *a* and *b*. Hick's argument

4. Cf. K. Nielsen, "Eschatological Verification," *CJT*, 9 (1963), 271.

5. Cf. Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, p. 261; *CJT*, 9 (1963), 272.

6. Cf. Nielsen, "Eschatological Verification," 271.

7. Cf. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 276.

9. Cf. Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God*, pp. 269-72.

(severely abbreviated) may then be put as follows. "God exists" is an assertion if "God exists" is a true assertion. "God exists" is a true assertion if *a* and *b* are assertions and true. Therefore, "God exists" is an assertion if *a* and *b* are assertions and true. That argument is, I think, a valid one and, as stated, there is nothing in it which even remotely smacks of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps. But Nielsen's objection is, nevertheless, not an irrelevant one, and may be formulated as an addendum to the argument thus: but *a* and *b* are assertions only if "God exists" is an assertion; the proper conclusion, therefore, is that "God exists" is an assertion if *a* and *b* are assertions, and *a* and *b* are assertions if "God exists" is an assertion. That is what prompts the charge about the improper use of bootstraps.

The important question, therefore, is whether Nielsen is right in his claim that *a* and *b* are assertions only if "God exists" is an assertion. To decide that question, and to see why Nielsen says so, it is necessary to replace the symbols *a* and *b* by formulations of the predictions which are at least closer to those which Hick gives.

Nielsen's complaint, let us say right away, will be entirely justified if the predictions which Hick holds to be entailed by "God exists" and which he holds to be verifiable contain reference, even obliquely, to the term "God." For then the predictions will have the same logical status and the same logical difficulties as expressions about God. If the assertion-status of "God exists" is in doubt, the assertion-status of these other expressions will be equally in doubt; if there is a question whether "God exists" is verifiable, there will equally be a question whether the predictions are verifiable. And in assuming that they are, Hick will be assuming, in effect, that "God exists" is verifiable in order to prove that it is verifiable. The argument will be a *petitio principii*. Now, Nielsen's point is that Hick commits precisely that error, for, in formulating the predictions, Hick talks both of the fulfillment of "the divine purpose for human life" and of "Christ reigning as Lord"¹⁰; and it is certainly true that the terms "divine purpose" and "Christ" are defined in terms of, and thus involve an essential reference to the term "God."

But if Nielsen's complaint against Hick's statement of his case is justified, it is not justified against his case. For it is entirely possible to state the predictions in such a way as to avoid the objection. That it is entirely possible so to state them is made clear by our earlier formulations of them in which no reference is made either to "divine purpose" or to "Christ" or to any other term which involves an essential reference to the term "God." Because this can be done (although Hick does not do it), Hick's case (as distinct from his statement of his case) is not involved in the glaring *petitio* with which Nielsen rightly charges the statement of it. Nielsen's mistake is not in thinking that Hick's presentation is objectionable; it is in not seeing that the case is transparently better than the presentation, in thinking that

10. *Ibid.*

the case falls with Hick's statement of it. Nielsen's confidence in Hick is misplaced, as is his tribute to the "care and skill" with which Hick has presented his argument.¹¹

Nielsen's second major complaint against Hick is stated in section III of his paper and is summed up in his statement that "questions of what is meant by X cannot possibly be settled by faith or trust."¹² Perhaps that is right, but nowhere that I can find does Hick suggest that they can. Certainly he does not say so in the passage to which Nielsen refers. There he is discussing a quite different question, the question whether all or only some will share in the experiences which would constitute a post-mortem verification of the existence of God; and his suggestion is that, perhaps, only those who have faith *ante mortem* will have the relevant experiences *post mortem*. He nowhere claims that faith can be a substitute for these experiences. His suggestion is that possibly it may be a precondition for having them. And that, to use Nielsen's (New England?) expression, is a very different kind of chowder.

Let us turn now to Mavrodes. In the introductory section of his paper Mavrodes summarizes Nielsen's central argument against Hick and concludes his summary with a statement which confirms that he has been misled by Nielsen into misunderstanding Hick's question. "Nielsen," he says, "therefore concludes that Hick's attempt to show the meaningfulness of talk about God has failed."¹³ But Hick, as we have seen, was not attempting to show the meaningfulness of talk about God; he was attempting to show that "God exists" is an assertion. I shall leave until later Nielsen's reply to Mavrodes' summary of his conclusion, and also his reply to Mavrodes' further complaint that "Nielsen gives us no account at all of what he means by verification."¹⁴ I shall leave entirely without comment Mavrodes' account of the history of the verification principle, except to note that he treats the principle, not as a criterion for determining whether an utterance is an assertion (which is what alone is relevant if we are discussing Hick), but as a criterion for "distinguishing the meaningful from the meaningless."¹⁵ I turn, instead, to the central argument of the paper which is given in section II and is summed up in the claim that "the confusion in the response is the mirror image of the confusion in the challenge."¹⁶

Mavrodes' complaint against Nielsen is not that he sees a circle where there is none, but that he sees only one circle where there are two. He agrees with Nielsen that Hick's procedure involves him in a circle; he complains against Nielsen that he does not see that the verificationist challenge, which Hick is attempting to meet, is itself involved in a circle.¹⁷ He is, I think, clearly wrong on both counts. There is no circle in Hick's

11. Nielsen, "Eschatological Verification," 274.

12. *Ibid.*, 281.

13. G. I. Mavrodes, "God and Verification," *CJT*, 10 (1964), 187.

14. *Ibid.*, 188.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 190.

17. Cf. *ibid.*

case; and if that is so, it, of course, cannot be true that the circle in the response is a mirror image of the circle in the challenge. The fact is that there is no circle in the challenge either.

Mavrodes' argument is as follows. The position of the verificationist is that one comes to know the meaning of an utterance (and, therefore, that it has a meaning) by coming to know what will verify it. But one cannot, he objects, know what will verify the utterance unless one already knows the meaning of the utterance (and, therefore, that it has a meaning). Hick, therefore, and others who accept the verificationist challenge, can say what will verify the utterance only by assuming a meaning for it (and, therefore, that it is meaningful), and he is, therefore, involved in a circle; for he is supposed to be showing that it is meaningful by showing that it is verifiable.

If this argument were correct it would mean that, no matter how Hick formulated the predictions which he holds to be entailed by "God exists" and to be in principle verifiable, he would be involved in a circle; for the claim is that he would have to assume a meaning for them in order to say what would verify them. Mavrodes' objection, in other words, does not turn upon the fact that Hick uses terms like "divine purpose," "Christ," "Son of God" and so on in stating the predictions. His implication is that any formulation of them would involve him in a circle; so that the defence of Hick that they can be otherwise stated does not help.

But Mavrodes' argument is quite invalid as a criticism of Hick.¹⁸ For, as has already sufficiently been pointed up, Hick is not using the verification principle as a means of determining whether "God exists" is meaningful; he is using it to determine whether "God exists" is an assertion. His position, in other words, is this. It is agreed that "God exists" is meaningful. The only question is whether it is an assertion or not. To decide that question we apply the verification principle. Either something would verify it or nothing would. If the former is the case, it is an assertion; if the latter, it is not. In that procedure there is nothing circular at all. Mavrodes' belief that there is depends upon his failure to distinguish two things: understanding an utterance and understanding that it is an assertion. And that failure depends upon a failure to distinguish between the use of the verification principle as a criterion of meaningfulness and its use as a criterion of assertion-status.

In his second paper Nielsen makes this (the correct) reply to Mavrodes. "Mavrodes," he says, "misses my intent and misses, I believe, Hick's intent as well";¹⁹ and he proceeds to make the point that neither he nor Hick was using the verification principle as "a general criterion of meaning."²⁰ That is certainly correct so far as it concerns Hick's paper. It is partly correct so far as it concerns his own first one. He is right, therefore, in

18. Despite Alastair McKinnon's endorsement of it; cf. his "Unfalsifiability and Religious Belief," *CJT*, 12 (1966), 118.

19. K. Nielsen, "God and Verification Again," *CJT*, 11 (1965), 137.

20. *Ibid.*

saying that Mavrodes misunderstands Hick's position, but he divests himself too easily of all responsibility for Mavrodes' mistake when he claims that "nothing that I said denies the intelligibility of religious utterances."²¹ By misrepresenting, as he does *sometimes*, Hick's question as the question whether theistic claims are intelligible and Hick's position as the position that they are, he gives every appearance of upholding the conclusion, not, indeed, that they are not, but that Hick has failed to show that they are. Despite his disclaimer, then, that Mavrodes' summary of his case is a mis-statement of it, it can be said that that mis-statement is not wholly without grounds.

Having given the correct reply, Nielsen, however, proceeds thereafter thoroughly to obscure the light which has with such difficulty been shed. Having denied that he was employing the verification principle as a general criterion of meaning, he denies also that he was employing it as a "criterion or condition of cognitive meaningfulness."²² But if he was using it, as he was (and Hick also), as a criterion of assertion-status, or as a criterion of factual intelligibility or of factual significance, then he was employing it as a criterion of cognitive meaningfulness; for all of these are alternative expressions for one and the same thing. It is a complete distortion of the accepted sense of the term to say, as he does, that "How far is the train station?" "Close the window!" "I declare him *persona non grata*" have cognitive meaning.²³ They do not. They are standard ingredients in the lists of expressions which, although intelligible, do not have cognitive meaning. And to say that they do not have cognitive meaning is simply another way of saying that questions, commands, and performatives, although intelligible, are not assertions. If Nielsen wishes to distinguish between cognitive meaning and factual meaning, as the remarks in his footnote would suggest that he does,²⁴ he can, of course, do so by distinguishing between the use of the verification principle as a criterion of assertion-status and its use as a criterion of empiricity or scientific status (much as Popper does),²⁵ and employ it as a criterion by which to distinguish between science and non-science. But if that line is taken, we are no longer dealing with Hick's question, for Hick does not employ the principle for that purpose. If he had done so, the challenge to show that "God exists" is verifiable would have been the challenge to show that it is an empirical or scientific assertion; and that, of course, is not the challenge which Hick is attempting to meet.

I said earlier that I would leave until later Mavrodes' complaint that Nielsen gives us no account at all of what he means by verification, and Nielsen's reply to it; and I take that up now. What bedevils the discussion

21. *Ibid.*, 140.

22. *Ibid.*, 138.

23. Cf. *ibid.*

24. Cf. *ibid.*, n.7.

25. Cf. K. R. Popper, "Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report," in C. A. Mace (ed.), *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), pp. 155-88.

is, of course, not any lack of clarity about the meaning of the term "verification"; it is the lack of clarity, shared by both Mavrodes and Nielsen, about the use to which the verification principle is being put. One must distinguish between its use as a criterion of meaningfulness *tout court*, its use as a criterion of cognitive meaningfulness or assertion-status, and its use as a criterion of empiricity or scientific status. Nielsen's rejoinder, therefore, that he "assumed that we have a reasonably decent understanding of verification"²⁶ is in part right; for it is a refusal to get involved in an issue which is not the central one. But it is in part wrong, or at least inadequate; for it does not make clear what is the central issue and why that is not it. There was also a simpler, more obvious, and more adequate reply, which, however, he does not make: namely, that he was commenting critically on a paper by Hick, and therefore, in order to be relevant, was bound to discuss the issue on the basis of definitions provided by Hick. And whatever may be true of Nielsen's first paper, Hick certainly devotes several pages to an account of what *he* means by verification.

I said in the beginning that my purpose was to examine the debate between Nielsen and Mavrodes. I have said where I think Nielsen is wrong. I have said where I think Mavrodes is wrong. I have said where I think Nielsen is wrong in his response to Mavrodes. I think, incidentally, that Hick is also wrong. But that is another story.

26. Nielsen, "God and Verification Again," 135.