

THEOLOGY, VERIFICATION, AND FALSIFICATION

I

I propose in this essay to take a new look at an issue in the philosophy of religion that is now some twenty years old, viz. the so-called “theology and falsification” issue. Religious believers have always assumed that such theological statements as “An omnipotent and loving God exists” were meaningful assertions that describe the world in factual terms. But in 1950¹ Anthony Flew challenged this assumption. In a symposium with R. M. Hare and Basil Mitchell which was widely read when it was reprinted in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955),² Flew argued that typical theological statements are not assertions at all, i.e. are not the kinds of utterances which can describe the world or which can be either true or false. They assert nothing.

II

Let us first be clear on the nature of Flew’s criticism of theological statements.

We must begin with a definition – let us say that a statement is an “assertion” and is “cognitively meaningful” if and only if it makes a genuine factual claim about the state of the world, if it is the kind of utterance that can describe how the world is. Thus the statement, “The item on the table is a piece of chalk” is a genuine assertion, but “Shut the door!” and “Hurray for our team!” are not. These utterances describe nothing in the world – the first gives an order and the second vents an emotion – neither makes a factual claim. They are, then, cognitively meaningless utterances.

¹ The “Theology and Falsification” exchange first appeared in the now defunct journal *University* (1950–1).

² A. Flew and A. MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 96–130.

Now the difficulty is that there are some statements which seem to be assertions but which on investigation turn out not to be assertions. To say that a statement is an assertion only if it makes a factual claim is to say that it is an assertion only if the statement counts for something. And this is a crucial point, for a statement can only count *for* something if it also counts *against* something. That is to say, if an utterance denies nothing, i.e. counts against no possible state of affairs, it also asserts nothing. Thus perhaps the simplest way of finding out whether or not a statement is an assertion is to ask whether or not it could be falsified, whether or not any conceivable set of circumstances could show it to be false. We can easily conceive of circumstances which would falsify "The item on the table is a piece of chalk" – e.g. if we look closer and discover that it is really a cigarette or section of plastic tubing.

This is where we encounter the difficulty with religious faith, or rather with the statements religious people accept "on faith." For it seems that such statements are typically immune to falsification. Take the statement, "An omnipotent and loving God exists." Flew claims that this statement denies nothing and thus asserts nothing because whatever happens, the believer will not give it up. The typical believer will allow no conceivable event or evidence to falsify his belief in a loving, omnipotent God – for every "evil" event which occurs in the world and which is pointed out to him as evidence against his belief he will suggest a reason why God allowed the event to occur. He will allow nothing to "count against" his belief – his mind is closed, nothing could conceivably make him change his mind. Thus Flew asks the pointed question which has come to be called Flew's challenge: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?"³

If Flew's question cannot be answered, or if the answer is that nothing could influence the believer to change his mind, then Flew must be correct. Such theological statements as "An omnipotent and loving God exists," which believers had always considered genuine assertions which describe the world in factual terms, are not assertions at all. They are cognitively meaningless utterances, perhaps on the order of swearing or reciting a poem.

³ *New Essays*, p. 99.

III

This, then, is the falsification challenge. Before launching into the main part of my argument, however, we must note two different claims that are apparently being made here.

The first is that a statement is not an assertion if the person who believes the statement will allow no conceivable contrary evidence to make him reject the statement. Several of Flew's statements read in this way:⁴

. . . what he would regard as counting against . . .

. . . which would induce the speaker to withdraw it or admit that it had been mistaken.

What would have to occur . . . to constitute for you a disproof of . . . ?

What Flew seems to be looking for here might be called a *psychological limit* to belief in a statement. If there is a limit to the contrary evidence which a believer will allow before he modifies his beliefs, the statement he believes is an assertion; if there is no such limit, it is not an assertion. (This has the seemingly odd result that the same statement can be an assertion to one man and a non-assertion to another.)

However, it also appears that Flew is not so much looking for a psychological limit as what might be called an *evidential limit* – a limit of contrary evidence which actually falsifies a statement, a circumstance which, when it obtains, makes it irrational to believe the statement. This notion is not dependent upon the quirks of the individual believer of the statement – when a statement reaches its evidential limit it is presumably falsified for one and all. Thus Flew is saying, on this interpretation of his challenge, that a statement is not an assertion if it has no evidential limit, if no conceivable event or events could disprove it. Assertions, on the other hand, are statements which have evidential limits. Kai Neilsen interprets Flew's challenge in this second way; he says it amounts to the demand for

⁴ *New Essays*, p. 98, 99.

a “conceivable, empirically determinable state of affairs: which, when attained, falsifies the statement in question.”⁵

Flew apparently conflates the two notions of psychological and evidential limit. He asks: “Just what would have to happen not merely (morally and wrongly) to tempt us but also (logically and rightly) to entitle us to say ‘God does not love us’ or even ‘God does not exist’?” The “not merely” clause suggests the notion of a psychological limit while the “but also” clause suggests the notion of an evidential limit. (We will return later to the question of the relationship between the two notions in Flew’s challenge.)

IV

I intend to make three points in this essay: (1) that many (if not all) religious believers have a psychological limit to their faith; (2) that Flew’s challenge is unsound and can itself be challenged on all but one interpretation of its meaning; and (3) that if we interpret Flew’s challenge in this one sound way, the challenge can be answered in terms of a notion of future verification.

In arguing that religious faith can have a psychological limit, we must first ask what it is about religious faith that tempts people like Flew to consider it immune to falsification. I think it is clear that this aspect is the *certainty* with which religious faith is typically held. Religious faith usually takes the form of an almost unshakable conviction; it is held with a degree of certainty which seems far to surpass the degree of certainty which the evidence in its favor strictly allows.

No doubt there are several reasons for the degree of certainty displayed by the believer – one would be the fact that religious faith is typically based upon private but very deeply convincing religious experiences which the believer takes to be encounters with God. No one else has experienced my encounters – so the believer might reason – and so it follows that no one else’s arguments against my faith can carry any weight. Another would be the fact

⁵ Kai Nielsen, “On Fixing the Reference Range of God,” *Religious Studies*, 2 (1967), p. 16. Cf. also Flew’s statement: “If there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not a real assertion.” *New Essays*, p. 98.

⁶ *New Essays*, p. 99.

that the believer in a sense often bases his entire life on his faith; and it would be surprising to find a man basing his life on a proposition about which he is uncertain. (Cf. the conviction of a Marxist that Marxism is the best economic system or the conviction of an Irishman that Ireland is a fine country.)

However, I do not see why religious faith cannot be modifiable by possible future evidence. For I think it is entirely possible for a man to base his life on a statement he may later reject. Indeed, this very thing sometimes happens. After all, there are ex-Christians, ex-Atheists, ex-Communists in the world who for various reasons of evidence have decided to reject the point of view which once informed their entire existence. It is true that religious faith is normally held quite firmly, but I do not see why faith cannot be both strong and modifiable by future evidence.

Of course we may encounter stubborn religious believers, just as we may encounter stubborn atheists or stubborn Communists, whose beliefs will be without psychological limit. But this does not mean that religious faith is always unmodifiable, that *all* believers have completely closed minds. In fact, it has often been argued on religious grounds that faith is healthier and more authentic if it is open-minded. The point has been made by some theologians that the best kind of religious faith is dynamically involved with doubt; faith needs a kind of healthy skepticism to be genuine. An absolutely certain faith is a dead faith, a static faith, unable to move forward or improve itself. For it is by means of doubts and questions, honestly faced, that the believer moves to a more mature, stronger position of faith.⁷

Thus we can look, for example, at the history of Christianity and see many dogmas which were once accepted as articles of faith but which were later rejected because of doubts as to their validity. The medieval doctrine of indulgences was universally accepted in Christendom till Luther raised doubts about it and so triggered the Protestant Reformation. Because of the genealogical calculations of Archbishop Usher, many Christians once believed that the crea-

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 16–22; Rachel Henderlite, *A Call To Faith* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1961), pp. 19–20. Cf. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill (2 vols; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III, II, 4, p. 547: “Unbelief is, in all men, always mixed with faith.” Cf. also pp. 654–655.

tion occurred in 4004 B.C., but modern science has forced Christians to give up this belief. It could be argued that these and many other examples show a healthy open-mindedness on the part of religious believers, a willingness to abandon or modify statements once accepted on faith when conclusive contrary evidence appears.

However, at this point, a critic would surely raise the obvious objection – “It’s all well and good to talk about particular religious beliefs being modified or rejected because of evidence, but what about religious belief itself? This surely is the crucial question – for example, would a religious believer be willing to reject the existence of a good, omnipotent God if contrary evidence became available? Could any conceivable contrary evidence convince the believer to modify or give up this belief?”

I think the answer to this is yes, at least as regards some religious believers. The faith of some believers may be such that no conceivable contrary evidence would convince them to modify their belief (later I shall argue that even this can be questioned), but one can conceive of contrary evidence which would surely convince many religious believers to modify or even reject their belief. For example, it is sometimes said that Christian faith is based upon belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ. We might wonder, then, how it would effect the faith of Christians if one day an archaeologist were to dig up what overwhelming evidence showed was undoubtedly the body of Jesus, thus disproving the doctrine of the bodily resurrection.

I suspect that if the body of Jesus were to be exhumed, (1) the faith of some Christians might remain unaffected (no matter how strong the evidence, they would reject it); (2) some Christians might remain Christians but would retire to an interpretation of Christianity which did not require the doctrine of the bodily resurrection; and (3) some Christians might reject Christianity – and the existence of God – altogether.⁸

In other words, aside from the question whether or not on religious grounds faith ought to have a psychological limit, it seems to me that the faith of at least some believers *does* have a psychological limit. This is not necessarily to say that such believers *will* in the

⁸ I once attended a theological symposium on the doctrine of the Resurrection which was addressed by three theologians of widely different persuasions. In answer to the question from the audience, “How would your faith be affected if the body of Jesus were to be exhumed?” each of the above three positions was defended.

course of their lives change their faith drastically or give it up altogether – for if what they believe is true, i.e. if a good, omnipotent God does exist, no evidence will ever count decisively against it. But what I am saying is that there are religious believers for whom we can specify certain conceivable events which would force them to amend or give up their belief. In the case of a Christian, as we have seen, disproof of the doctrine of the Resurrection might do this. For other religious believers, it might force them to do so if human suffering became unmitigated and universal or if someone invented a valid proof of the non-existence of God based on known premises.

This ought to make us wonder about Flew's phrase, "death by 1000 qualifications."⁹ He argues that the theist qualifies his religious statements to death, i.e. into cognitive meaninglessness, by the fact that he has an answer for any contrary argument the atheist brings up. Thus it soon appears that such religious statements are not genuine assertions, for in his zeal to defend them, the theist will allow no conceivable evidence to falsify them. But I would deny that what the theist does is come up with "1000 qualifications" – so far as I can see he makes only two: (1) he admits that he cannot prove that a good, omnipotent God exists (at least, not to the satisfaction of the atheist), and (2) he admits that he has no answer to the problem of evil (that will satisfy the atheist). So each time the atheist brings up an instance of evil in the world, the believer does not so much add a new qualification as refer back to one he has already made, viz. that for some reason which he admittedly cannot explain God allows evil to exist.

We can see, then, that there are religious believers whose faith is not without psychological limit.

V

Let us now take a closer look at the relationship between the notions of psychological and evidential limit in Flew's challenge. As we have seen, some of Flew's statements seem to indicate he was mainly interested in the first, while others indicate he was interested in the second. Perhaps he had both in mind. However, I think we can now see that whichever he meant, his challenge can itself be challenged. Let us examine the two notions in turn.

⁹ *New Essays*, p. 97, 107.

(1) Flew's challenge might amount to the claim that theological statements are not assertions because the faith with which they are typically held by believers is without psychological limit. If this is so, our answer is that some believers do have a psychological limit to their faith, and therefore the statements they accept on faith are genuine assertions. (Flew surely cannot be claiming that there are no such believers: the fact that there are ex-believers in the world would refute this claim.)

Flew might then retreat to the weaker position that he was only criticizing those believers whose faith is without limit. This criticism would probably be sound, but surely Flew's language in his "Theology and Falsification" contribution does not support this weaker interpretation of the challenge. Flew seems to be doing much more than just criticizing the stubborn *way* certain believers hold to their faith statements – he seems to be criticizing the faith statements themselves, whoever they are held by and however they are held. This is what makes one think he is looking for an evidential rather than a psychological limit.

But there is a point which could be raised even against this weaker position. Earlier we tentatively admitted that there may be believers whose faith is without psychological limit and that Flew's criticisms may have some merit as concerns them. But perhaps not even this admission should be made: perhaps the truth is that *every* believer has a psychological limit to his belief. No matter who the believer, no matter what the belief, perhaps there will always be a point of conceivable contrary evidence at which he will be forced to give up his belief. I am not able to argue this point in detail – it would be difficult to know how to establish it. But I mention it because it is perhaps indicative of a confusion Flew's challenge is based upon. Flew points out, quite rightly, that there are religious believers whose faith has remained steady in the face of all the anti-theistic evidence *that has yet been pointed out to them*. But this does not entail what Flew seems to believe it entails – that the faith of these believers would remain steady in the face of any anti-theistic evidence *that could conceivably be pointed out to them*. Again, I shall not try to argue this point, but simply note that the truth may be that every believer has a psychological limit. It may be just that for the believers Flew had in mind the limit had not been reached.

(2) On the other hand, Flew's challenge might amount to the

claim that theological statements are not assertions because they are without evidential limit, they are such that no amount or quality of contrary evidence could render them false. If this is so, then the question we need to ask of Flew is this: What exactly is an evidential limit? For the notion of evidence disproving or falsifying a given statement is far from clear. It seems to me that there are two possible meanings that might be given to the notion of an evidential limit, but neither will accomplish what Flew intended to accomplish by his challenge.

Perhaps an evidential limit is an amount or quality of contrary evidence so overwhelming in its weight that it would convince anyone beyond a shadow of a doubt that the statement in question is false. In other words, perhaps what Flew is asking for is conceivable evidence against the statement "God exists" that would be clear and distinct and convincing to anybody who noticed it. But of course the problem is that there can be no such evidence for or against any matter of fact. No matter how strong the evidence, the bare possibility of illusion or error can never be ruled out. Furthermore, there are probably going to be people (methodical doubters, perhaps) who will doubt *any* evidence that might come up. So no evidence for or against any matter of fact can be guaranteed to be incorrigible and universally convincing. And if this kind of Cartesian notion was what Flew had in mind, his challenge can surely be dismissed. Religious believers cannot be criticized for failing to specify evidential limits to their faith, for on this definition no statement (outside of logic and mathematics) can have an evidential limit.

But if we reject this definition of an evidential limit, Flew will have to supply us with another, weaker, definition. And it could then be claimed that Flew would be running the risk of collapsing the notion of an evidential limit into that of a psychological limit. Perhaps, after all, an evidential limit is just a psychological limit that has been conventionally accepted as conclusive and final. Perhaps what *proves* (or disproves) a claim about any matter of fact is what *we have simply agreed upon as proving* (or disproving) that matter of fact (where "we" means the community of rational persons). And if this is correct, the obvious difficulty here for Flew is the fact that there are no clear conventions as to what proves or disproves the kinds of theological statements we are considering. In reply,

Flew might ask us to attend to the conventionally accepted criteria of proof and disproof for non-theological statements (which ones?) and apply them to theological statements. For instance, he might argue as follows: "An 'evidential limit' is simply the point that is reached when it can legitimately be said that there is adequate evidence that a given proposition is false. Thus someone says, 'The item on the table is a piece of chalk,' but looking closer, we discover that it is really something else. Here we have reached the proposition's evidential limit, for we would have the full epistemological right to say that the proposition 'The item on the table is a piece of chalk' is false."

It seems to me that if any viable sense can be given to the notion of an evidential limit, it will be some such sense as this. However, on this understanding of the notion, theological statements can and do have evidential limits, as I shall argue.

VI

I wish now to raise the so-called notion of "eschatological verification," a term that has been used by John Hick¹⁰ and others to argue that theological statements are cognitively meaningful. In brief, Hick's argument runs something like this: He admits that the statement "God exists" is unfalsifiable (there is no way it could be conclusively disproved), but denies that this means it is not an assertion. For like other statements which cannot be falsified even if they are false ("There are three successive sevens in the decimal determination of pi"), it is a genuine assertion because it can be verified if it is true. Verification and falsification are therefore not symmetrically related. Thus the statement "God exists" may not be falsifiable, but it is an assertion because it can be verified by means of an eschatological experience. ("Verification" for Hick means not "absolute, indubitable proof" but "removal of rational doubt.")

What kind of an eschatological experience? Hick, a Christian, answers that it would be an after-death experience of the reign of Christ in the Kingdom of God. If a person died and then had conscious experiences which included unclouded communion with

¹⁰ John H. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, First Edition, 1957; Second Edition, 1966); "Theology and Verification," *The Existence of God*, ed. by John H. Hick (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 253-274.

God as he has revealed himself in Christ and the fulfillment of God's purpose for men's lives, this would effectively exclude all rational doubt about the existence of God and the truth of Jesus' teachings, and so would verify the statements "God exists" and "Jesus' teachings are true." So theological statements can in principle be verified. The issue between the theist and the atheist is a real issue, not a mere verbal or emotional difference: and thus such theological statements as "God exists" are genuine assertions.

Hick's position has met with considerable criticism. Some¹¹ have pointed out that he used theological terms to explicate theological terms. That is, in attempting to show the cognitive meaningfulness of such statements as "God exists," Hick had to resort to such terms as "Christ," "God as he has revealed himself in Christ," "Kingdom of God," and "God's purpose for mankind." But these utterances are themselves open to question. It will first have to be shown that statements in which *they* occur are assertions before they can be used to show that "God exists" is an assertion. So it appears that Hick begs the question – he assumes the assertion status of certain of the very kinds of utterances that he is trying to prove are assertions. Others¹² have argued that the after-life experience Hick postulates is essentially a private experience, and that what is really needed to meet Flew's challenge is public verification. That is, it might have to be admitted that the statement "God exists" would be considered verified by anyone who "experienced the reign of Christ in the Kingdom of God"; but such an experience would not verify the statement for those who have not had the experience.

I note these criticisms of Hick not because I intend to argue about them – I do not know whether or not they refute the notion of eschatological verification – but because they show some of the serious logical difficulties Hick's argument raises. I believe that Hick was on the right track in making his proposal, but I also believe that what he was trying to show can be accomplished in a much simpler way, i.e. without appealing to anything so remote as the eschaton.

Hick was right, I believe, that such theological statements as

¹¹ Kai Nielsen, "Eschatological Verification," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (1963), pp. 271–281; D. R. Duff-Forbes, "Theology and Falsification Again," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (1961), pp. 152–154; William Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 114–116.

¹² Paul Schmidt, *Religious Knowledge* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961), pp. 59–60.

“God exists” can conceivably be verified, and that they are therefore cognitively meaningful. This is why he focuses on the notion of verification rather than falsification. And I agree with Hick here; he is surely right that verification and falsification are not symmetrically related and that there are statements which are assertions because they can be verified although they cannot be falsified. What, then, does it mean to claim that a statement “can be verified”? Again, I agree with Hick – it means simply that we can imagine logically possible states of affairs that would render the statement immune to rational doubt. Where I disagree with Hick is that I believe it is unnecessary to appeal to the notion of eschatological verification to show that “God exists” can be verified; I intend accordingly to replace Hick’s notion with what I shall simply call “future verification.” For what is essential to Hick’s argument is surely the claim that theological statements *can be verified* – whether this be in the eschaton or simply in the future does not matter. I now intend to argue, therefore, in two different ways, that the statement “God exists” is in principle verifiable in the future experience of mankind.

VII

My first case involves the following bizarre and highly unlikely but logically possible future event: let us suppose that the words “I EXIST” (written, say, in Hebrew) one day appeared in the sky in letters of fire in a way which scientists were unable to explain. Would this event verify the statement, “God exists”? Well, possibly not – it might still be rationally possible to doubt God’s existence; some skeptics would probably claim this at any rate. But let me point out that since all we need is a logically possible future event – working with the notion of falsification rather than verification, Flew makes it quite clear that the theist can achieve his end by pointing to any *conceivable* event which would falsify his belief¹³ – we can make the evidence as strong as we like. We can conceptually combine the astronomical phenomenon described above with all kinds of other evidence for God’s existence – evidence a thousand times stronger if we like. As God is usually claimed to be incorporeal and infinite, the evidence will have to be indirect evidence, but I

¹³ *New Essays*, p. 98, 106.

do not think it is difficult to imagine indirect but overwhelming evidence in favor of "God exists." I will let the reader use his own imagination here.

Now the question is, would such events as I have suggested and the reader has imagined verify the statement "God exists"? This of course depends on what is meant by "verify." If verify means something like "prove absolutely" or "prove beyond conceivable doubt" the events would not verify our statement. No doubt there would be skeptically-inclined philosophers around who would insist that no matter how strong the evidence, it would fail to amount to verification. For (they might say) the occurrence of the events is logically compatible with God not existing at all. Again, we immediately think of Descartes here – even if we seem at some future time to experience the imagined events, we could still be "dreaming" them, perhaps because of the machinations of some "Evil Genius."

As a strict logical point this is true. Our events would not verify anything if "verify" means "prove absolutely" or "prove beyond conceivable doubt." But of course outside of logic and mathematics "verify" does not mean anything of the sort. As we have noted, no matter of fact can be proved beyond conceivable doubt. The bare logical possibility of error or illusion can never be ruled out. Still, my claim is that the occurrence of the imagined events would constitute such overwhelmingly strong evidence for the truth of "God exists" that it would be irrational any longer to deny the statement. There would no longer be any room for what Hick calls "rational doubt."

This is the only kind of verification that is needed here – and, indeed, the only viable meaning of the word "verify" when we are talking about matters of fact. However, my second case is meant to cover a slightly different and perhaps stronger sense of "verify." Suppose someone invented a logically valid argument for the existence of God based on known premises. Perhaps the argument could be of some form like

1. I think
- .
- .
- .
- n
- n+1 Therefore, God exists

or (cf. the ontological argument)

1. I have an idea of God
- .
- .
- .
- n
- n+1 Therefore, God exists

Would such arguments as these verify the statement “God exists”? It looks as if they obviously would, *ex hypothesi*. And unless there is some reason of logic why such proofs cannot be invented, we must conclude that the inventing of such proofs at some point in the future is a logically possible state of affairs. And if this state of affairs did obtain, it would verify the statement “God exists” in a possibly different and possibly stronger sense of “verify” than we considered above.

Of course if such a proof were invented at some point in the future, we could expect that skeptically-inclined philosophers would have some objections. Since we are postulating a valid argument based on known premises, neither the argument nor the premises could successfully be challenged. In this case, critics might perhaps appeal to a general argument like Hume’s that the existence of no being can be proved: “Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being whose existence is demonstrable.”¹⁴

If all this did happen – i.e. if someone did invent such a theistic proof as we have imagined and if someone else then objected by appealing to Hume’s general argument – it would be difficult to know what to say. One would be tempted to say that if the proof is actually logically unimpeachable the conclusion has to follow and Hume’s general argument must be wrong. And, indeed, there are possible difficulties with Hume’s argument that could be raised. (I will mention one in a moment.) Or if we at least agree with the first two sentences of Hume’s argument, we might want to say that

¹⁴ *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948), p. 58.

since the conclusion of our theistic proof (“God exists”) *has* to follow, God’s non-existence must be inconceivable, in some sense of the word “inconceivable.” (Supporters of the ontological argument have claimed this very thing.) But on the other hand a Humean philosopher might want to argue that since Hume’s general argument is sound, no such theistic proof as we have imagined is possible, and so we can be sure that no one will ever invent such a proof.

Perhaps the minimum moral we can draw from this impasse is that we do not now know whether such a theistic proof as we are considering is possible. Of course, it *is* logically possible that someone invent a theistic proof that *seems* to be sound – say, a proof which no logician can at present refute; but on the possibility that Hume’s general argument is correct, we would have to allow for the possibility that the argument has some unknown flaw. For if Hume is correct the argument cannot prove what it seems to prove. However, it does seem fair at this point to claim that if such a seemingly sound theistic proof were invented, the burden of the proof would be on the Humean to defend Hume’s general argument by showing exactly how the proof is faulty. And if the Humean were unable to do this, then despite his claim that the proof cannot be sound, I think we should have to consider the proof successful. We might accept the conclusion of the proof, i.e. God’s existence, with a certain tentativeness because of the bare possibility that the proof will later be shown to be fallacious; but in the absence of this I think the reasonable conclusion would be to consider that the proposition “God exists” has been verified, i.e. made immune to rational doubt.

I mentioned that there are some possible difficulties with Hume’s general argument. One difficulty concerns his claim that “Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction.” Surely Hume is working here with too narrow a notion of what is “demonstrable.” His claim requires that only logical truths or tautologies can be demonstrable, for these terms are defined as propositions whose denial is self-contradictory. However, the theistic proofs I have imagined seem to “demonstrate” God’s existence in a different and broader sense than this, and surely it is no violation of ordinary usage to claim that if these proofs are logically valid and are based on known premises they do indeed “demonstrate” that God exists. The denial of their conclusion (“God does not exist”) will not imply a contradiction, for both my proofs contain major premises which

are not tautologies but rather are empirical propositions (which are known to be true).¹⁵ And since Hume is right that the truth of any empirical proposition can be denied without contradiction, “God exists” can be denied without contradiction. But despite this, I cannot see how it can be denied that such proofs as I have imagined would, if they existed, “demonstrate” God’s existence.

Furthermore, even if such proofs did exist, it may still be true, in some psychological sense of the word “conceive”, that I could conceive of God as not existing. In this sense, I can conceive of anything I like, even of the existence of a square circle. But in a more strictly logical sense of the word “conceive,” I can conceive of only what is conceivable, and if square circles are inconceivable because the definition of the term “square circle” is self-contradictory, then I cannot conceive of square circles. Admittedly, even if such proofs as I have imagined did exist God’s non-existence might still be conceivable (even in the logical sense), for the (empirically true) premises upon which the proofs are based can, like all empirical propositions, be conceived to be false. But again, I cannot see how this has the effect of showing that “God exists” has not really been demonstrated.

VIII

I think the proper conclusion is that we can conceive of future states of affairs which would verify the statement “God exists.” Thus we can conclude that such theological statements as “God exists” are cognitively meaningful. The statement may not be falsifiable, but this will not turn out to matter. For there are other statements which can be verified if true but which cannot be falsified if false (“There are three successive sevens in the decimal determination of pi”) which I doubt anyone wants to deny are cognitively meaningful.

So theological statements escape from Flew’s challenge on either interpretation of the challenge – first, because some (if not all) religious believers have a psychological limit to their acceptance of

¹⁵ Some would deny, of course, that “I think” is an empirical proposition. I myself do not believe that this statement is true by reasons of logic alone, but even if it is, the other major premise I mentioned, “I have an idea of God,” is surely an empirical proposition and can be taken as the better illustration of my point.

theological statements; and second, because the theological statements that were questioned by Flew can conceivably be verified. The first point rules out criticism of theological statements on the “psychological limit” interpretation of Flew’s challenge, and the second rules out criticism on the “evidential limit” interpretation. As we have seen, on the only viable understanding of the notion of an evidential limit, the statement “God exists” is an assertion because we can conceive of circumstances¹⁶ in which it would have to be considered verified, in which its negation (“God does not exist”) would have to be considered to have reached its evidential limit.

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¹⁶ It is interesting that Hume himself has Cleanthes conceive of circumstances which might be taken as pointing toward God’s existence – circumstances not radically different from my “letters of fire” case. But the use Cleanthes makes of his examples is quite different from the way I have used mine. *Dialogues* p. 26f.