1

Seeking and Securing Clarity and Unity in Talk and God-Talk[1]

(a) Words and Other Communication

It is clearly possible to represent reconciliation and revelation in pictures (Rembrant's "The Prodigal's Return," Caravaggio's "The Conversion of St. Paul").We may accept this while still allowing that interpreting classical European iconography is an acquired skill, a skill itself extensively formed by verbal communication.[2] Or we could enact silent charades, even a sequence illustrating diverse takes on a theme. Yet we should be aware that gestures are also often culturally specific: a nod of the head may not denote agreement, a shake may not indicate dissent. But to discuss divergent responses at all thoroughly, will most likely require words, asking "What did you mean by that?" or "Could you not have expressed it better another way?" or "Was that last sketch not really the same as the first?"; or, importantly, "Where have we any record of it ever really having happened like that, where have we or may we expect to find any evidence of it actually, here and now, happening the way you suggest it does?" Or one can compose and play music, which may be powerfully expressive, formative, yet it still seems for most of

1. John Tenniel's Humpty Dumpty and Lewis Carroll (Charles L. Dodgson)'s dialogue, opposite, on our un-selfcritical ways of doing things with words, should still prompt reflection.

2. Since drafting this, I've been delighted to read Jane Heath's *Paul's Visual Piety* (2013); it cogently takes issue with scholarship that ignores the importance in the ancient world, and in our own, of seeing (and emphatically not just art works). She includes Caravaggio's "Conversion of St. Paul" as one of her examples. In support of "visuality," cf. Kurek-Chomycz, "The Scent of (Mediated) Revelation."

us to demand verbal interpretation if not accompaniment: it is "so abstract, so semantically fluid."[3]

Striking in relation to this, however, is Kirsten Gerdes on "the materiality of metaphor," along with Claudia Welz on "linguistic synaesthesia," that is, spoken words engaging other senses. These insights have brought me to make clear a basic presupposition of this study, that all our thought, whether articulated or not in speech or writing or in other ways, is material from start to finish, in inception in our brains as well as in expression. There is no "ghost in the machine" stirring the brain cells.[4]

Questions of "what" and "where" meaning and reference arise in words. Does or must "revelation" indicate clarity—and, if so, how much and how extensive? Does or must "atonement" imply "atoning for," and does or must that imply punishment, pain, payment? Might the old sense, "at-one-ment" be better and/or more fruitful for translating Paul's Greek? Does or must the "re-" of "reconciliation" betoken returning to a previous harmony that has been broken? And is just anything said about or ascribed to God (or Christ, or Krishna, or Zeus or Mr. Pickwick) to be taken as referring to one and the same person as named, whether real or imaginary, or possibly to another or others sharing that name? How precise ought our usage be: is there a spectrum beween unusable rigidity and "don't get it right, get it written" (well, it sounds impressive)? All such issues need to be discussed, and the terms of the discussion assessed, even if they are unlikely to be settled. And all that before examining and appraising in more detail recent theological reflections centering on our themes of revelation and reconcilation.[5]

This chapter attempts to pull together, briefly, the present author's aided general and specifically theological reflections on language, reflections accruing over the last half century. These reflections have fairly recently been reorganized with the help of William C. Lycan's *Philosophy of Language*, supplemented by a number of other recent studies.[6] Be it realized that the aim here is not just to list but coordinate work that seems to fit

3. See the essays in Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*; here citing Begbie and Guthrie, "Introduction," 3.

4. Gerdes, "Materiality of Metaphor"; Welz, "Resonating and Reflecting the Divine," 156; Carruthers, *The Architecture of the Mind*.

5. On clarifying usage, avoiding (tendentious) obfuscation, cf. Coakley, "Sacrifice Regained," lecture 2.

6. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 1–71. Lycan notes only minor revisions in the 2nd edition. On what follows see also Downing, "On Doubting Dichotomies." The best recent alternative account of language that I have met is in Rowan Williams *The Edge of Words*. It often overlaps with mine, but diverges in insisting that "meaning" can only properly be verbal. See (l) below; and in being much readier to trust traditional metaphysics see (g) below.

together, which usually appears with little or no reference to other studies touched on in what follows.

(b) Reference and Identification

Lycan begins with Bertrand Russell on reference, trying to sort out such sentences as "The present King of France is bald," with Russell arguing for a complicated analysis of such grammatically well-formed but puzzling sequences. Russell's analysis was later countered by William Strawson, arguing, cogently, that rather than words or sets of words referring, referring is something that speakers or writers do in context. This (so Lycan himself, and others, have since added) limits the range of reference, either in quantity or by quality. "Nobody believes that" is implicitly restricted in description and in range to "no adult passing for sane and of whom I am aware" (though instances of sane adult strangers believing what I don't might shake even my confidence in the critical acumen of my closer acquintances).

I hope the following examples will suffice to show that this sort of discussion is relevant to the themes of this study. In Robert Louis Stephenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the narrator finally discovers that these two very different named characters—visually so distinctive, the gentle physician and the raging killer—occupy the same physical space. In a more recently set version of the story, fingerprint or iris recognition, or, still better, DNA, would be taken to identify them definitively as, in a conventional sense, "the same person." If a police officer in an updated version were to ask who to apprehend, one in the know could say "that man," with ostensive reference to Dr. Jekyll. If brought to court, Dr. Jekyll would probably not be held responsible for "his" actions under the influence of drugs, but remanded to a secure unit for the public's and "his own" safety.

What does it mean to be identified as "the same person"? Ludwig Wittgenstein advised anyone willing to notice to appreciate that "same" (like other words) can be used in varying, context-dependent ways.[7] A relative newcomer to a workplace recognizes a colleague who has taken on a fresh name and appearance as "the same person" whose occasional eccentric behavior cost the first a serious injury. But is the latter still "that same person"—or is she "the same but different," cured?

An acquaintance says, unashamedly, "I'm one person at home with my wife and family, a different person at work, and different again at the golf

7. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 34, 208, 214, 254, 378, and 606. On potential ambiguities in reference, see also Trexler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics*, 241–65.

club." In a chance conversation you might not bother, but take him as you found him currently. Yet if you were thinking of entering into a business partnership, you might want to know just how different, and whether one behavior-set, one character, were dominant. Could you trust him, if you did not really know which "person" you were engaging with? If his club had a reputation for not so subtle racism and sexism, could you trust him to work with a black woman as a senior partner? Would he take her to lunch at his club, or if that seemed unfair to her, relinquish his membership? (Anyway, these multiple roles might end the man with an identity crisis.)

It is no use pretending that there is a clear answer. I guess we are likely to find it easier to trust somene who is consistent, not subject to wild mood-swings. But perhaps we also value a measure of adaptibility: consistency but not rigidity. Thus, in our pluralist western culture, and as suggested at the start of this section, we may have to decide—by all means, with ongoing debate, but decide—whether all, some, or very little other talk of "God" (Dios, *elohim*, Allah) refers to the same being, person, existent (whether the one we trust or the one we refuse to believe in). You perhaps claim that your God, "the one and only God," is the revealed one; then how do you respond if I claim the one and only true God has revealed him/herself to me as clearly very different, with different attitudes to war, women, property, the wider "natural" world? If this comes as revelation to her, why does it not to you? Especially if you both claim to follow the same Scriptures. (But we return, in chapter 6, to attempts to respond to this conundrum.)

So to of Jesus: are some, most, all sketches by historians, novelists, song-writers, or comedians, of a character they name "Jesus (of Nazareth)," to be taken as refering to "our" or "my" Jesus, even if very mistakenly? Or perhaps we prefer to say, no: if they differ at all widely from mine or ours, they refer to one or more quite other, fictional characters, figments of their own creation. Theirs are characters that share only the same name, even if they are also accorded a larger or smaller range of similar settings, opinions, and deeds. The scope and range of reference and identification, and so of Jesus as supposed mediator of revelation, warrant a measure of clarification.

In my Introduction I noted Mike Higton's recent proposal of "self-identication" as a significant gloss for self-revelation.[8] It has seemed to me worth pursuing, though to deploy it rather more critically than Higton himself does. "Self-identification," "identity," "self-definition," and "identifying with or as," as aspects of "reference," are thus relevant to this present study, and will be topics in their respective literary settings in the following chapters. But imagine yourself given a valued membership to an association. You

8. Higton, *Christian Doctrine*, 31–52 and 57.

guess it stems from someone you know well, but a hitherto quite unknown benefactor identifies herself, with convincing detail, as the actual donor. The membership would still be yours for the taking, without the motive, let alone the overall character of the donor being known or explained.

Another example: "Who's there?" you ask, startled, in a cave you thought empty. "Don't worry, it's only I/me." "Sorry, but who? Could you identify yourself, please." "I'm the woman you met in the newsagent's. I told you about this cave." "But why are you here today, now, when you only said you'd known about it but never thought it worth visiting?" It might take a little while and a little more detail for the self-identification to reassure you. Might this not be the woman who's been pestering you on Facebook?

My dictionaries offer "personality" or "character" as a meaning (a possible use) for "identity"; but it is by no means necessary—and likely impossible—to give a full account, a consistent revelation of your character or personality, in order to identify yourself.

Some thirty-five years ago a series of studies was published, titled *Jewish and Christian Self-definition*, with "self-identity" a convenient alternative in the texts.[9] Individuals and social groups define their identities by distinguishing between themselves and others. However, what is distinctive is not necessarily what is in practice most determinant: day-to-day the distinctive may actually be marginal, however emphatically brandished as badge or flag. It may be most important in relations with those actually closest: perhaps those with whom you share the same sacred writings but disagree over their detailed interpretation. "You outsiders may identify us with them—us Christians with those Jews, us true 'Gnostics' with those 'mere Psychics'—but we don't." Making manifest who you agree or refuse, tacitly or explicitly, to identify with, or who identifies or refuses to with you, as kin or friend or ally, may, then, be interpersonally and/or socio-politically very significant. Yet it may leave an outsider quite mystified: the distinctive reveals very little of the real you.[10] Perhaps, even, you two do actually share the same God, but have for now different cerebral articulations to puzzle one another and the observer with—until some effectively definitive self-revelation is granted in some future, which is still in your deity's hands?

9. Sanders et al., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*; cf. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*.

10. On "social identity theory" see e.g., Esler, *Galatians*, 40–57, with reference to H. Taefel.

(c) Meaning or Use?

In this study I have already been following Wittgenstein in preferring to talk of "use" rather than "meaning." This is especially so when "meaning" is treated as a "thing" that a word contains, or at least denotes, points to, a thing that can be denoted by or transferred into another word, in translation, like a beetle taken from one box to another, to a fresh receptacle for meaning as contents. Yet we can never encounter the meaning-beetle or, for that matter, an empty word-receptacle ready for this meaning. If we ask after either, we are given more words, albeit words supplemented by gestures, pictures, objects. Ask what "hammer" means, we could be given a ball-peen hammer, one with a head rounded at one end, flat at the other, and be shown what "hammer" as a verb means. Picking up a claw hammer, we could be told, yes, in our society, that is another kind, and you can use it in some of "the same" ("similar") ways, but also for different purposes. Then, in words, without being shown, we'd probably be told that there are lots of other kinds, with other different uses. We might be shown a tool-maker's catalog, but then told we could use all sort of things to hammer with: we'd still never be shown the naked meaning of "hammer."[11] Words in sentences (one-word or many-word sentences) are meaningful in experienced social use.

No one I have encountered offers to show us what "self-revelation" or "make known" invariably means.

Actually, I have to say, I think Wittgenstein was unfair in picking on Augustine of Hippo as an example of one who thought words named meanings as objects. Rather it was that people in the world of Jesus and Paul (and Augustine) take it that words-as-names are used to "label" and "evoke" ideas, ideas that might be supposed precise or vague, but were in no way contained in or defined by words or sentences, though one could always look for a more effectively evocative word or sequence of words.[12]

I argued a few years ago that this posited, loose fit between word and thoughts-in-the-mind was interestingly akin to the modular model of the mind/brain increasingly deployed if variously elaborated by linguists with an informed awareness of clinical research, practice, and findings.[13] One pleasant surprise in reading a very recent *Introduction to Psycholinguistics* was to find the author quoting the idea of words as "labels" for ideas—a

11. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1–133 (and throughout); Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 73–99.

12. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1; Downing, "Ambiguity"; see also Downing, "Words and Meanings."

13. Cf. Carruthers, *The Architecture of the Mind*, arguing his own case, but in conversation with many others.

usage I thought I had risked coining. Various kinds of brain damage can leave people able to think and understand others' words, spoken or written, able to produce well-formed words in response, but not the ones they want, while readily aware that they are not what they intend. Some part of the thought module has had its link with word production and articulation, the label-finding module disrupted. Or someone can manipulate tools effectively, but not respond to verbal suggestions, requests, orders, written or spoken.[14] The "translation" from within a customary range of sequences of auditory/visual stimulation proceeding into thought and thoughtful action has been disrupted. (We return to words as labels for ideas in a discussion of metaphor, below, but then drawing Paul specifically into the picture.) Looking for what divine self-revelation means for every speaker of some form of English is futile—quite apart from trying to distill it from or impose it on a whole range of theologies and theological systems of ethics.

Language only works by being imprecise, a set of almost endlessly adjustable tools, by being deployed imaginatively: not a ready vehicle for communicating a given and supposedly definitive revelation.

Nonetheless, as noted in the introduction, Timothy Gorringe made the valid observation that the absence of a precise term for divine (self-)revelation in the Jewish canon of Scripture does not entail the absence of any such idea.[15] Something very like it might well be implied, even without any word or phrase demanding that English one in translation. In fact, I have recently argued at some length that ideas of self-control, control of the passions can be found composed in Hebrew in some ancient Jewish texts without any similar vocabulary, and not solely in those Jewish writings in Greek clearly adopting the regular Greek terminology.[16] Without one language's special vocabulary—say, some calcified metaphor such as "reveal" ("unveil")—talk about divine (self-)communication may well be more difficult, but that does not entail impossiblity. So, in chapter 3, I reconsider the evidence, and look wider for what is being said, not just at the choice of key words. Yet, while such absence of a precise terminology ("reveal," "revelation") is not decisive, it may well be held significant. A particular vocabulary can be shown not to be necessary, but it "may make some cognitive tasks easier."[17] Tools clearly apt and available for a particular kind of use left unused suggest there is no such use perceived.

14. Ibid., 18, 63–64, 187–88, 240.
15. Gorringe, *Discerning Spirit*, 8.
16. Downing, "Order Within."
17. Traxler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics*, 23–27.

I must also concede that asking for "the meaning" still remains a useful short hand way of asking for the semantic range, other words with more or less widely overlapping uses: though an example or two of use may be the most helpful response. So, in chapter 2 there are surveys of uses of "reveal," "identify," and "self" from a range of secular and theological authors.

Along with a dismissal of "meanings" as supposedly intangible "things" contained in words, also dismissed are "propositions" and "concepts" as more complex intangible things, contained in or conveyed by sets of words in sentences. Again this may be helpful shorthand, encouraging a speaker/writer/hearer/reader to be aware there may well be other distinct sequences of words that are, for the purpose at hand, nonetheless as or similarly effective. There may well be patterns of thinking with important features in common, deployed sufficiently often to warrant a term like "concept." A test of understanding is often whether you are able to "say it" in other words, in a fresh sequence that may be validated by eliciting an appropriate reponse, even a quite complex practical response, intended or hoped for: near enough "the same" to warrant labeling both sets of words "that author's concept" of reconciliation or self-revelation, or whatever.

The worst danger lies in talk of "*the* biblical concept of *x*," or "*the* Hebrew" as contrasted with "*the* Greek" concept of, say, being human. That would be to imagine that all Hebrew speakers over a millennium thought of, say, fellow humans in a uniform and precise homogenized way; or that ordinary Greek speakers, and philosophers of all schools, and poets, from 500 BCE to 500 CE, conceptualized a uniform and standardized but quite distinctive one. This is not to say that there may not be significant common features, "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein, again), shared variously where *anthrōpos* (possibly *phōs*), or *ish, adam, enōsh* are discursively focal among many Greek or many Hebrew or Judaean Aramaic speakers, respectively. But how variously numerous the resemblances, and how clustered, may well differ not only from community to community and from person to person, but from product to product of "the same" author.

Christian or other faith is quite regularly said to afford believers "the meaning" of life (and everything). Different translations of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures may be accepted as each representing a fair shot at "the sense" of a given passage. But the question must arise, how divergent can an attempt be and still be accepted as conveying anything like "the same sense"? And then, presented, say, with a plurality of divergent Christian interpretations of "the meaning of life," even if many claim to be based on the same Scriptures, how does one decide which if any represents "*the* meaning"? Rather than asking for the elusive meaning, we may do better to use the resources of Christian or other traditions to suggest purposes, aims,

visions to draw us with others, into attempting to realize them together. A conviction of being divinely and costingly loved may lure us on together.

The puzzle of evil challenges any sense of meaningfulness, and the demand for meaning entices us into attempting to make sense of it. Then we can leave it as it is. But our religious traditions do not emerge as philosophical explanations for explanation's sake, but primarily as techniques for attempting to ensure well-being and avert ill, even if that includes at the time accepting some ills as apparently unavoidable. Ill is a practical problem at the heart of each religious practice, not an intrusive surd disrupting a prior coherence. Taking Gen 3:16 (labor pains) as applicable to women for ever, as telling how many things are meant to be, postponed pain relief in childbirth for millions of women in the West and elsewhere. Yet a pragmatic response would have been much more in keeping with the underlying pragmatism of the source culture.[18]

(d) Use

So to "use": Wittgenstein offered a fairly random and not exclusive list of "language games," ways in which words can be used:

> Giving orders and obeying them—
> Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
> Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
> Reporting an event—
> Speculating about an event—
> Forming and testing a hypothesis—
> Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
> Making up a story; and reading it—
> Play-acting—
> Singing catches—
> Guessing riddles—
> Making a joke; telling it—
> Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
> Translating from one language to another—
> Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

18. See Downing, "Problems of Evils"; and cf. Surin, *Theology and the Problem;* Williams, *Dostoevsky,* 232–33.

> It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)[19]

It is not just the final line of the list, but all that precedes it, that can be found in kinds of God-talk (and in books in the religions section of any large library—and even in the present author's small private theological collection). Such flexible use, seeing one thing in terms of another, involves imagination, which is discussed again, below (g).[20]

I prefer to bring in John L. Austin at this point, though Lycan leaves him to a little later in his survey. At much the same time as Wittgenstein in Cambridge, Austin in Oxford was assessing word-use, in speech and in writing, as purposive and (often effective) action. His analysis was published after his death as *How to Do Things with Words*.[21] We do things *in* the act of speaking, writing, signing; we affect things *by* the act of saying, inscribing. Thus when Paul has his amanuensis write, and that person or another in Corinth read (perform) the sequence, *katallagēte tō*$_i$ *theō*$_i$, he is urging his hearers to "be reconciled to God," to become, to become afresh, to become increasingly at one with God. Or is it, to accept, accept afresh, accept increasingly, unity with God? But further, *by* urging this, Paul may in effect persuade. The implication is not that it was God taking unitive action instead of human response, but to engage human response. *In* telling of God uttering a promise (say, to Abraham), God is taken to have made a promise, irrespective of Abraham's interest or even awareness. But here it is only *by* God (through Paul or others) effectively persuading people to accept at-onement that, for them, at-onement happens.

The majority of Austin's "performatives" are not statements, "they do not describe or report . . . they are not true or false," they make no factual claims.[22] Austin's insights have been widely taken up by Christian (and perhaps other) theologians. One of the first was Donald D. Evans, in his *The Logic of Self-Involvement*. When the fourth evangelist has Thomas say to the risen Jesus, "My Lord and my God," it is not on the same level as an

19. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 11–1. The author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was, of course, Wittgensein himself. Well, a differently minded Wittgenstein.

20. Ibid., 197–215 (English); he uses a larger range of German words.

21. Austin, *How to Do Things.*

22. On "neither true nor false," see ibid., 148, on the way that in practice, "truth" and "falsehood" can variously merge. Despite the distinctions he analyses, Austin was averse to dogmatic dichotomies.

actor saying of the drama she is rehearsing, "Jean Smith is my Queen." In saying these words Thomas acknowledges Jesus' status; by saying them he involves himself, commits himself afresh to Jesus. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit," Paul assures us (1 Cor 12:3). Well, in a sense they might. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21). But Paul's "Jesus is Lord," like that of Thomas, is an act of self-involvement.

In *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (hereafter, *Has Christianity?*) it was argued, with the help of many contemporaries, "Christian language about 'God' is intended to express and elicit commitment (and so, but very incidentally), describe ['allude to' would have been better], commitment to him." Sometimes it was further proposed that commitment is the primary function (or force) of the words, and I risked quoting R. B. Braithwaite. Braithwaite had argued, with others, that this was the entire force of God-talk. I insisted that Braithwaite is wrong in taking the commitment to live "agapeistically" as representing the whole force of the words as used by most Christians, and I offer instead: "I intend to live in love, in as complete as I may *humble* love, loving *dependence* on God-who-acted-first-in-love-towards-us-in-Christ."[23] Not all reviewers registered that (repeated) insistence (thirteen pages), which is reaffirmed here.

In his penultimate chapter Austin gets round to allowing that specific "performative" actions, such as "stating" or "affirming" do include a factual element, making them liable to a challenge, along the lines of, "I know you've asserted it, but it's only partially true," or "It's not true at all," in the way that "I promise," "I remit" cannot be untrue (though it my be misleading). On "factuality" I do need to add further reflections, some occurring not long after *Has Christianity?* was published; see the next section, (e).

Whether *by* the New Testament writings, alone or with supplement, God does effectively persuade people to accept these as a definitive revelation of himself must surely affect our decision as to whether that was his intention *in* (one way or another) giving them to us.

(e) "Facts"

God talk is not "factual" in the sense that talk about making computer chips is factual: people from diverse cultures can learn how the latter is done, and do it succesfully. They can do so without worrying about eccentric ultra

23. Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* 179–92; citing here, 179 and 185, original emphases; see also Downing, "Revelation," 229–30.

postmodernists. And they can agree on tests for its working, and can perform them succesfully. "That little piece is a 'diode' and it fits in this way. See, it allows the current to flow only along this route." God talk does not, in practice, work interculturally like that.

Often, of course, "fact" and "factual" are themselves less than clear-cut. In a contested legal case, it is agreed, that there are "facts" at stake, there are "done things" (*facta*, from Latin *facio*, "I do"). Statements about them are "statements of fact." The statements of fact are not themselves the events, the happenings, but assertions about them that implicitly claim to be true. Yet what those events were still remains in question, even if their factuality is agreed upon. Were they "done" in the sense of done deliberately, and, if that, deliberately on the spur of the moment, or with pre-meditated forethought. These are issues that jurors or magistrates or judges have to decide, and reach—if possible—a common mind. Those then become "the agreed facts": that is, what it is agreed, happened. People of differing faiths do not seem enabled to reach such agreements.

Often, and much less formally, "the facts" are what is "in fact" currrently commonly agreed (e.g., "this earth is flat") and that was used as a basis for shared activity, even if later it is "common knowledge" that this planet is "in fact" ("in true statement of fact") roughly spherical.[24] The tally of undisputed facts can change over time. Job's friends insist (in line with Deuteronomy and many psalms, and more) that the facts show that human life is ordered justly by a divine moral agent. Job insists that the facts belie any such conclusion, and, as most of us see human society and the non-human world around us, Job is clearly right.[25] Job in the poems still accepts the reality of a truly amazing creator, though one who leaves us humans to our own devices.

Job is far from denying that God could intervene, and justly, for he wishes he would. But the facts, Job insists, show that God does not. There are, these days, philosophically minded theologians who insist that it is possible to envisage God able to adjust the complex physical system we discern without disturbing its appearance of being rule-bound.[26] There is no

24. Cf. Austin, "Unfair to Facts"; Downing, *Church and Jesus*, 141–47; Downing, "Dissident Jesus," 294.

25. For a recent defense of the distinctive voice of the poetic Job, see Kang-Kul Cho, "The Integrity of Job."

26. Best on my list are Peacocke's *Theology for a Scientific Age*, and especially, *Paths from Science*, 91–115, where God is imagined immanently shaping the direction of the whole system from within it, thus undetectably, with no tests available, and with all the tragedy and injustice allowed for. This is perhaps a good way to imagine God sustaining all there is; but not if so immersed as to preclude our imaginative trust in his empathetic awareness of each of us in our individual relationships.

attempt here to dispute such theories, only to point out that if it happens it does not happen in a way that looks consistently just, let alone loving. (The implications of faith in a God who resolutely refuses to intervene in his/her creation are discussed in more detail is chapters 6, 7, and 8.)

Christian faith invites us, rather, to trust, imaginatively, that in Jesus God identified closely with one entire human life. And such faith may then (also) encourage us to trust that the creator God is lovingly and attentively and sustainingly present in and with all that happens, letting it evolve freely, while sharing its joy and its pain. We may even trust that we are being drawn into sharing in the interpersonal life of the triune God.[27] Living in imaginative faith, we see ourselves as being drawn into an interpersonal life which soon came to be thought of as triune: Creator, Redeemer, Hallower. Such is the argument of this volume and its predecessor. But that is faithful imagining, not a demonstrable fact.

Theologies that deny an interventionist God are regularly dismissed as rationalistic and "deist." What is offered here is very different from classical deism's detached deity (with antecedents in Aristotle or Epicurus or both). The God I am faithfully encouraging us to imagine as real is emotionally involved with us (see chapters 7 and 8), and much more engaged than the very traditional passionless deity taken as metaphysically "proven" by some theologians claiming Thomas Aquinas with roots in Aristotle. Such theologies themselves rely just as much on imagination as anything suggested here, but style it as metaphysics. And they often demand some very difficult imagining, like William Cooper's smiling face behind a frowning providence. (On imagination, see section (g) below ; on Trinity, chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8.)

Theologies that make no shared or at least sharable factual claims are also dismissed with the term "fideist." They are accused of demanding a leap into blind faith. What is presented here invites, rather, an open-eyed appraisal, finding multiple points of contact, varied paths in from where the reader or hearer may stand in her or his current context, not a leap into something wholly other.

Talk about Jesus, as claimed to be a real person in the past, probably aims to be—but cannot yet make good any claim to be—factual even in this common sense. It cannot make good on the claim to be a commonly agreed fact, while committed Christians and other scholars have long offered competing interpretations of the supposed witnesses to the life and character of Jesus. There is no "common mind" on "what actually happened" even though there is widespread agreement that there are facts at stake. (That "Jesus" is a figure entirely invented by the evangelists has itself been proposed

27. For a succinct and lucid exposition, see Tanner, "Is God in Charge?"

as "factual, but is also very hard to substantiate.") And not a few have also asked, and very seriously, whether Paul's Jesus has enough in common with the Jesus of any one or all four of the gospels to warrant asserting that all five "in fact" refer to, identify, "the same person" (see above). Matthew's and/or Mark's and/or Luke's (let alone John's) accounts, represent teaching ascribed to Jesus as central to what he is about, rather than occasional and even then ignorable—as it seems to be in Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 7:10–11; 9:14–15).[28]

For what it is worth, my own answer is, yes, they do all five refer to the same Jesus, but it needs arguing in detail. But the "fact" is, we only have competing reconstructed stories of the early years of the Christian movement, and there is no *proof* that any is more than a story.[29] Quite a number are "complausible." Just so there is no proof that our varying and competing stories of God and Jesus and Holy Spirit are other than stories—perhaps elaborate self-images. Nonetheless, some of us, many of us Christians, take them as stories to affirm and live by, more or less imaginatively (and do so with varying success rates). We trust this God we variously imagine is real in a way responding to but correcting the best we can imagine and attempt to emulate, offering the hope that we may become "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

(f) Fact, Science, and Value

I have preferred to focus on general "factuality" rather than claimed and/or disputed "scientific facts." There is no room here for any thorough discussion of "fact and value," "is and ought," or the possibility of value-free "scientific" facts. I would agree with John L. Austin, "the familiar contrast of 'normative or evaluative' as opposed to the factual is in need, like so many dichotomies, of elimination"; and would point the reader to a recent and very helpful discussion by Sarah Coakley in her 2012 Gifford Lectures.[30]

28. For a very recent discussion of the diverse emphases of the early supposed sources see Tucket, "What is New Testament Study," but also my comment, chapter 7 n. 57. There are other significant common features in the our sources that are retained by the majority of subsequent Christians, despite the genuine discrepancies on the issues Tuckett notes.

29. On this and the preceding paragraph, cf. Downing, *Church and Jesus*, and esp. 171–92.

30. Austin, *How to Do Things*, 148; Coakley, "Sacrifice Regained," lecture 1. On the "is-ought" dichotomy, see Coakley, ibid., lecture 2; and, from long ago, Downing, "Ways of Deriving."

(g) Metaphysics

There is an ancient tradition of inventing "facts" out of the logic of the meanings taken to be contained in words. One's deity "must" be infinite, so "incarnation" seems, in fact, precluded. Or one may ask, what is "being" in itself? And wonder how to answer one's question. Are we limited by what we perceive, so that we discern only what our senses tell us, not what things in fact "really" are in themselves (Immanuel Kant)? Can we ever be sure we know even what we mean, let alone what others mean?

One particular dichotomy that has had a stranglehold on Christian theology is perfect and imperfect. You seem "bound to" to say your God is perfect. But that seems to mean he (she?) cannot change. You cannot become more perfect than perfect, and any other change would be to imperfection. So God is changeless, immoveable, timeless, *apathēs*.[31] It seems to oblige us to try to make sense of an unaffected affection, a passionless compassion, as well as the infinite becoming finite. Ah, well, we have been told these are unavoidable paradoxes. In *Has Christianity?* it still seemed necessary to attempt to make sense of them, rather than abandon them, and Ian Ramsey's device of a "cone of meaning" was deployed. With that we may try, for instance, to shave away various kinds of imperfection that we do not want to ascribe to God, and then stop before we reach vanishing point, hoping we are seeing ways of improving our understanding of divine reality.[32] It now seems to me obviously more helpful to use experientially based metaphors and admit their likely inadequacy, than abstractions with no experiential basis, and claim these are better just because experientially void.

However, in the meantime there has been a considerable willingness to query perfection metaphysics, a much greater willingness to follow an occasional aspect of Martin Luther's theology taken up by a few nineteenth-century German Lutherans, and then by English Anglicans, but also in other ways by North American and other philosophical theologians, and to talk of a God open to suffering, God in process.[33] Do we not now do better simply to use adverbial forms, and think of God as perfectly adaptive, perfectly responsive, infinitely loving, changelessly faithful?

31. I was encouraged to find that discussions of apathy and passionlessness in the early Christian centuries were much more critically sensitive than the version rigified in the west; Downing, "Passions A" and "Passions B."

32. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, 49–89.

33. Sarot, *God, Passibility and Corporeality*; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*; also, Downing, "Passions: A," 83–84; "Passions: B," 103–5.

I see the above discussion as an instance of deploying a useful distinction (yes, another dichotomy) between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" metaphysics.[34] "Perfection" metaphysics prescribes: this is what "perfection" (abstract noun) means, and so, precribes an unavoidable concept. Descriptive metaphysics on the other hand tries to describe the underlying logic of what we actually say, or want to say. So we still have to ask, can we really envisage unwavering integrity in someone endlessly responsive to a very great number of others? Must integrity mean total attention to one thing or person at a time? It would be odd to ascribe that to God. But we might think of a teacher we know, whose integrity impresses us, who heads a school of a thousand, and seems to know each one, not just by name but by character and family. So, what constitutes her integrity? Perhaps it is that she takes the same critical encompassing interest in each, those we'd see as high-flyers and those we'd think of as dullards. Is that what we want to say of God? And how might that fit with other things we also want to affirm? (This is relevant to any talk of being at one with, reconciled to God.) So even descriptive metaphysics may rule some ideas out; but the distinction can be a useful rule of thumb. ("Descriptive metaphysics" in fact covers Kant's "transcendentals" with their prescriptive exclusion of the social pressures on us all, our scientists included, to "see" the observable world in terms of current pardigms.)

Avoiding prescriptive metaphysics at least reduces the number of paradoxes we propose, maybe even obviates them entirely. With these out of the way, perhaps we'll have the courage to not let anyone get away with "hidden revelation." At least we may be emboldened to ask if they can describe what they mean by it.

I suppose one could see past metaphysic as a sort of poetry, a play with words. But it is better done by such "metaphysicals" as Donne and Herbert, who encourage the words to dance to their tune, not remain left standing, frozen.

In this essay the reader is invited to take note of what has been argued metaphysically by past theologians, to assess the worthwhileness of the conclusion, and decide whether it can stand on other grounds, or even in its own right.

34. I take the distinction from Strawson, *Individuals*, 9, though he contrasts "descriptive . . . content to describe the actual structure of our thought" with "revisionary." Historically, "perfection metaphysics" induced Christian thinkers to revise the God-talk they found in their Scriptures. See Downing, previous note; and see further, below, chapter 7. Though I have gained a lot and here cite quite often, from Sarah Coakley, I have to confess, I part company with her on her acceptance of what I can only see as her prescriptive (Thomistic) metaphysics.

(h) Imagination

But must God and Jesus and Holy Spirit then be held, even by believers, as *merely* imaginary? Imagination seems always to be malign in the older English translations of the canonical texts (AV, RV, RSV), not welcome in any way. I cannot find it used at all in more recent versions (REB, NRSV). Yet when Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels tells parables, he is inviting hearers to imagine the rule of God; perhaps first asking them for what they themselves imagine, before suggesting a lead. And what is rcounted then prompts the evangelists, their predecessors, and their successors, to further imagination. Yet that is still to imagine what is clearly taken to refer to what is real, as well as to prompt appropriate practical responses in real life.

The Hebrew prophets and psalmists imaginatively deployed multiple metaphors to indicate the elusive deity they certainly treated as real. Ezekiel actually writes of being challenged on the issue (Ezek 20:40).[35]

"You must consider [*logizesthai*] yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus," insists Paul (Rom 6:11), leaving his hearers to imagine what it might mean to do that, perhaps hoping he's dropped enough hints, with more explanation to follow. But even trying to consider myself dead and newly alive takes a lot of imagining.[36] Yet Paul, too, using his own picture language (much less vivid "parables" than those ascribed to Jesus), does so to evoke enacted real-life responses to imagination of divine reality.[37] Earlier, we have noted, God is taken to have "considered" us (same verb), "imagined" us as set right with himself, and actually treating us in the light of that imagining (Rom 4).

The question of imagining what is taken to be real was raised in the earlier book; here I propose a fresh way to deal with it. In many stories characters in the narrative imagine things—dangerous tigers, a burglar downstairs, an act of unfaithfulness—we know or find out are, in the narrative, purely imaginary. Other things, beings, happenings, places, of which the characters imagine and wonder as to their reality, turn out to be real—real, in the story—and the characters involved may end convinced of this, never disillusioned. Christian believers, I trust, can and may live their versions of the story, imagining the triune God as real, while expecting to be enlightened, finding the truth, the reality, ultimately "revealed" to them. Perhaps they will be disillusioned about themselves and fellow believers, while never

35. Cf. Middlemas, "Divine Presence," and here, 200.

36. Cf. Robert Browning's "An Epistle" imagines Lazarus trying to recount his experience to the skeptical "Karshish the arab physician."

37. See Kalas, *The Parables of Paul*. Other individual studies discuss Paul's various figures in Paul as parables.

expecting ultimate disillusion, only a resolution better than the best imaginable hope, corrected, enlightened, but far from disappointed. That is the gist of my entire argument: believing as real a variant of a shared story, they expect to be validated if also splendidly corrected.

Happily, there is an oncreasing willingness to allow for the place of imagination in many fields, not least, that of scientific hypothesizing. In English language theology it was pioneered by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the early nineteenth century, and then toward the end, carefully weighed and argued by John Henry Newman. To paraphrase, I hope fairly: you have the credal propositions of the church, and you may be convinced intellectually, but they only come alive for "theological assent" with the help of imagination. John Coulson more recently restated Newman's case, in the light of the reflections of Ludwig Feuerbach and T. S. Eliot.[38] Mary Warnock produced a very helpful survey, starting with Coleridge, ignoring Newman, taking in Husserl and phenomenology, but culminating with Ludwig Wittgenstein.[39] David Tracy mentions these predecessors, if at all, only in passing. His "imagination" (unelaborated) seems to focus on a very literary creativity, just amounting to substituting fresh metaphors, despite his emphasis elsewhere on "experience."[40] There is also a helpful survey of yet other proposals, older and more recent (ignoring Coulson, but also Newman), by Garrett Green in his 1989 *Imagining God*, in a discussion vitiated, however, by an uncritical "positivism of revelation" of "*the* Bible" (Protestant canon assumed) as "*the* Word of God."[41] Green, nonetheless, actually comes quite close to my proposal here. When viewed from outside, our Christian imagining may, he allows, seem to be "seeing as if" what we imagine is true, but "we" insiders "see as true" what we faithfully imagine: and he further insists that this "seeing as true" makes full allowance for 1 Cor 13:12 and 1 Jn 3:2.[42] I prefer, however, to retain "imagine" and not paraphrase it with "see," as that seems to risk appearing to betoken a still unwarranted objectivity. Rather do we imagine as real our various imaginings of God, aware that diverse if often overlapping imaginings (not "seeings") are all we have.

38. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*; Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*; cf. Brown, *Tradition and Imagination* and *Discipleship and Imagination,* though he uses "revelation" far too easily; I note also, Micklem, *A Religion for Agnostics*, 56–57.

39. Warnock, *The Analogical Imagination*; here referring to 184–95; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 197–215, again.

40. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*.

41. Green, *Imagining God*. He seeks to escape the charge of "a positivism of revelation" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others against Barth), by allowing for pervasive imagination: but nowhere does he offer warrants for his own Biblicism.

42. Ibid., 134–45.

It is not only that I find predecessors in my reliance on imagination. Many much more traditional believers invite me to share their imaginings: for instance, that a just and compassionate deity, omnipotently in control of everything, secures my present comfortable wellbeing while ignoring the present and pressing misery of millions no more wicked than I, and, maybe, much more generous, selfless, self-giving. I do not suggest that we should feel obliged to imagine just anything.

Some people, in my experience, place great store on "pictures in the mind"; some will pick and choose whether to spin them or allow their arousal; others again prefer abstraction. It is important to discern how important actual seeing is for all of us sighted people, as it was in the culture of the early Christians, with speakers trained in conjuring up visual imagery (*ekphraseis*).[43] However, imagination in our ordinary use is not pinned to "mental imaging," but it is there in all use of language. We rely on our imaginative use of language in situations new to us, in articulating fresh responses to existing relationships. Imaginatively, most of us, and not just the recognized poets among us, explore, propose, and deploy family resemblances, common features of things to be talked about, identified, shared.[44]

Of course, there may be revelatory moments when a poem or an analogy seems to throw a convincing light on some aspect of things. Whether the imaginative construct is valid, whether it really works, fits, is "true," may still have to wait for a possible demonstration. That is as much the case in astrophysics as in theology. (One may note the increased use of "we think" and "imagine" and the offer of alternative theories in Caleb Scharf's recent account of the possible and likely implications of black holes.)[45] Or one can note how much in astrophysics is mathematical imagining, playing with an internal logic, without clear checks on whether objective realities are being enumerated.

On this topic, see further, below, (j), on metaphor.

(i) Implying and Inferring

Austin pointed out, as noted in passing above, that in the vast range of performative utterences much is implicit. The one saying in a Christian

43. Cf., especially, Heath, *Paul's Visual Piety*; Kurek-Chomycz, "The Scent of (Mediated) Revelation?"; Downing, "God with Everything: Dio," 26–27.

44. See also, Williams, *Dostoevsky*, x–xi; and *Faith in the Public Square*, 13–14, on "imaginative construction," trying to see things through others' eyes.

45. Scharf, *Gravity's Engines*, 171 onwards, with alternative theories (hypotheses?): "we think," 172, "we don't know," 173, "imagine," 210, 212.

ceremony "I take you to be my wife/husband," implies, for instance, that he or she is in a single state, is serious, and realizes that this is quite other than a film set. And people present may legitimately infer as much. For "implying" Lycan instances using a demonstrative, "this is a fine red one" where we who only hear or read the utterance have no idea what "this" implies, refers to. Sarcasm is another example: "Oh, well done!" on seeing a pile of plates dropped. Lycan discusses inference (R. V. Sellars) and implication (H. Paul Grice) before his account of Austin; I continue to take it that both, and especially Grice on "implicature," derive from Austin, historically as well as logically.[46] Grice argued that there is an implied contract between speaker/writer and auditor(s)/reader(s), to inform and not mislead, allowing also that silence, what is deliberately left unsaid on matters the hearer might expect to be mentioned, itself may be significant and informative.

With "implicature" we come to what Lycan terms "psychological" theories, where others talk much more widely of "psycholinguistics."[47] As I explained earlier, I prefer to use the term more inclusively still, to include what others separate out as "cognitive science," and have already touched on this.[48] Lycan allows that "most of our intentions in utterance are only tacit" (which seems very close to "implicit"), and then outlines four objections, concluding rather dismissively with: "it is generally agreed that speaker meaning must in *some* way be a matter of speaker's intentions and other mental states."[49] Grice and implicature is taken forward very thoroughly and much more perceptively, I judge, by Robyn Carston, in her *Thoughts and Utterances,* and, much more briefly by Traxler, and in a wider setting by Yan Huang (though with only a passing note on psycholinguistics).[50]

Sometimes we do need to ask, "What are you implying?" Just what inter-subjective objectivity do you claim when you say you have God-given knowledge of God? What depth and extent of "self" have you in mind when you talk of God's self-revelation?

"Discourse analysis" is essayed by quite a few New Testament scholars these days, attempting to discern how sequences fit together and interlink. Thus they will try to imagine what Paul or others imply and seem to be attempting to achieve. Often this will these days be with the obvious help of

46. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words.*

47. E.g., Traxler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics*, ranging much wider than implicature, and subtitled "*Understanding Language Science*," includes a chapter, 8, on Grice etc.; cf. also Crystal, *How Language Works*; Dietrich, *Psycholinguistik*.

48. Traxler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics*, 27–28.

49. Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 102–8, original emphasis.

50. Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances*; Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, 306–10; Huang, *Pragmatics*, 198–201.

the ancient rhetoricians' discussions of *inventio* (what to say) and *dispositio* (arrangement), as well as current rhetorical theory (so long as neither is taken too woodenly).[51] In chapter 4 we have to consider what, if anything, we can discern of Paul's inter-linkages and intentions, especially in 2 Cor 5:17–21, with its repetitions and changes of tense and mood, and the very condensed final phrase.

This unpacking of what our use of terms may imply, and may legitimately be taken to imply, clearly has considerable theological ramifications. I mention one in terms of focal belief. Classical reflections, "pagan," Jewish, and Christian, on the unity of deity clearly took this as not just indicative of a desire for human unity, harmony, concord, but as an urgent inducement to just such "at-one-ment."[52] Another relates to what has long been in practice: the risky but unavoidable procedure of those deploying and expounding authoritative texts. No text attempts to articulate everything its intended readers or those who might hear it read already know or believe or are likely to. Thus even original hearers or readers are likely to have been left wondering, "does he know/suspect that we already do what he condemns, or does he think us likely to, or that we just might be tempted to?" Much elaborate scholarship is devoted to arguing over what we ascertain may have been relevantly taken for granted, implied by an author such as Paul. Allowing that he is presenting his side of the argument, how well-informed of the others does he seem to assume he is; how much allowance is he having to make for his hearers being independently informed on Paul's own views? So also, as a matter of interest, scholars attempt to discern a reader or his/her hearers' likely responses.[53] But, of course, reaching even a fair approximation is much more difficult at this distance in time, and in our other and varying cultures. Paul is often writing for audiences containing people he has met, or has news of, or has a letter from; and there may have been occasions in the past when he has found he misjudged things at least to some extent (see 2 Cor 7:8, 12: "For even if I did . . . it was not"). We lack those interactive advantages.

Varieties of use, and of saying "it" in other words, and of implication and inference, each demands a consideration of metaphor, which now follows, though Lycan leaves it last of all.

51. Cf. Quintilian, *Institutes*, 3.3.1–10; Porter, *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric*; Porter and Carson, *Discourse Analysis*; Porter and Olbricht, *The Rhetorical Analysis*; Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, ch. 5, "Discourse Processing," 187–229.

52. Downing, "Order."

53. Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii*.

(j) Metaphor

Janet M. Soskice has argued, in discussion with many others, and has persuaded many of us, that "metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak of one thing in terms suggestive of another," and, as such it is open and "irreducible."[54] No simple account is satisfactory, least of all the suggestion that metaphor is a time-wasting puzzle. "It is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action."[55] Lively metaphors can stimulate the imagination, even prompt mental imaging.

I found modern discussions especially intriguing in the light of usage in Paul's world. For educated Greeks and Romans, *metaphora* and *translatio* were their respective words for what we call metaphor but also for what we call translation, and meant, not the transfer of "meaning" from one term to another, but the "transfer" (same complex as *translatio*, of course) of name ("label") from one idea to another. This way of seeing it is there in Aristotle, and reappears in Cicero and in the *Ad Herrenium*.[56] Significantly, the rhetorician and grammarian Quintilian could judge that even in the same language, this could be "necessary," because the new label is more significant, or simply better (more effective). Much the same is said by a contemporary, Demetrius, "some things are . . . expressed with greater clarity and precision by means of metaphor."[57]

It is worth showing how Paul displays awareness of the ancient discussions of language that underlie this understanding of metaphor. I was struck some while ago by a passage from Dio of Prusa, where metaphor can be as effective as literal seeing :

> The human race has left unuttered and undesignated no single item that reaches our sense perception, but straightway puts

54. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 15 and 93; cf. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; Kohl, *Metapher*, 119–20; Middlemas, "Divine Presence in Absence," 197–200; Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 207–26; Carruthers, *The Architecture of the Mind*, 324–26; Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, 267–98. Lively, but without explicit interaction with these or their interlocutors, see Brown, *Tradition and Imagination* and *Discipleship and Imagination*. Green, *Imagining God*, 130–33, wants a definition closer to analogy, to curb the freedom for which Soskice argues. On this openness, a remaining unfinished, see also Welz, "Resonating," and Gerdes, "Materiality of Metaphor."

55. Lakoff and Johnson, as cited in Trexler's discussion, *Psycholinguistics*, 285.

56. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 21–22, and *Rhetoric*, 3.2.6–7; Cicero, *Orator*, 24.80–92; anonymous, *Ad Herrenium* 4.34. It is a shame that Gerdes, in her interesting "Materiality of Metaphor," 187–91, perpetuates the thought of transfer of meaning when the ancient authors insist it is a transfer of name, *onoma*, *nomen*, for an idea. It makes a difference.

57. Downing, "Ambiguity"; Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.4–6 ("institutes" meaning principles); Demetrius, *On Style*, 2.82.

> upon it what the mind perceives, the unmistakable seal [my "label"] of a name, and often several utterances [*phōnas*] for one item, so that when anyone gives utterance to any of them, they convey an impression not much less distinct than does the actual matter in question. Very great indeed is the ability and power [*dunamin*] of humans to indicate with words whatever occurs.[58]

This may usefully compare with:

> There happens to be any number of utterance systems [*phōnas*] in our world, and nowhere are such lacking. If I do not perceive the force [*dunamin*] of the utterance I shall be a barbarian babbler to the speaker and the speaker to me. (1 Cor 14:10–11)

I have argued the particular and the overall relevance of these insights at greater length elsewhere. But I repeat (with additions in brackets) here the conclusion drawn:

> What all this does mean is that we can never justifiably assume that an author in this Greek and Roman culture has intended his or her individual words themselves to *contain* a precise "meaning," let alone a clear and readily shareable distinct meaning. "Names" are just not expected to function like that. They *contain* nothing; rather may they summon up, evoke ideas. Ideas of such topics as "faith" or "virtue" or "justice" or "freedom" or "law" [or "at-one-ment" or "revelation"], it is hoped, are coherent and shared or shareable to some worthwhile degree, but can only be named and more or less elaborately evoked, not in any other way conveyed. And then no author can be claimed to have used a disambiguated connotation of a lexeme unless or until she or he has made that disambiguation fully explicit. And such disambiguation seems very unlikely in terms of what the ancients said about words and metaphor and translation. If you could trust that a common idea was already "out there" to be evoked by one among perhaps many common names or sequences of names for it, there was no need to define further the names themselves; indeed, their rich ability in common usage to evoke varied impressions might well be part of, even integral to their power to evoke the particular idea assumed to be on call.
>
> Words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, spoken and heard, written and read worked then (as they work now), but only by being free to flex and adapt, in shared use in life lived together,

58. Dio, *Olympicos, Discourse*, 12.65 (LCL, lightly adapted).

> free to adapt, and not ossified, hardened, made brittle. Sequences of words in our Christian scriptures where we in English (by μεταφορά, *translatio*) use "faith," "believing," "trust" words, as with many other such clusters ("love," "justify," "kingdom," "knowledge" ["at-one-ment," "revelation"], should be allowed much the same free semantic wealth and varying emphasis as their Greek counterparts enjoyed in the passages we study.[59]

This is, again, not to suggest that the ancients' brains worked differently. It is very unlikely that any major genetic change has occurred over just two millennia. The human language function then was surely just as complex as it is today, as complex as is taken for granted in current debates over psycholinguistics.[60] There is no justification for expecting the definitive precision in language that many claimants of revelation (of/by God) presuppose.

(k) Intercultural Comprehension

In just the lifetime of the present author there have been repeated fashions of doubting the ability of people in one culture to understand another, with obvious ramifications for our interpretations of our inherited sacred texts, "the Bible," and, very likely, most or all of our post-biblical heritage.

There has been the powerful influence of Karl Barth, reacting, it would seem, against the ease with which Christian Europe accommodated itself to, even justified, internecine war. Though one gathers Barth softened a little later, for a long while he refused outright any suggestion that there could be a meeting point of any kind between asserted divine revelation and the wider world, secular or religious. Many who read him were persuaded, though many more, of course, were not: among them Catholics with a reliance on traditions of "natural theology," and missionaries from many Western churches working in Africa and Asia. Barth's stance implies that it is possible to use a fairly standard German vocabulary and syntax without its secular or liberal-religious use impinging on his *Church Dogmatics* or its expositors. I have failed to find any attempt to justify such an assumption, not even any awareness of it among devotees. Such a stance lingers on, I think, (in largely Anglo-Saxon) "radical orthodoxy."[61]

59. Downing, "Ambiguity," 167–68.

60. Taken from ibid., 160–61. Kind permission from *NTS* 56.1 (2009) 139–62. In a footnote there: "This is to allow that 'language' includes more than words and sequences of words spoken/heard, written/read."

61. See the careful discussion in Tanner, *Theories of Culture;* and cf. Millbank, *Word*

Contemporary with Barth, and contrasting, was Rudolph Bultmann's insistence that "modern man" who switches on electric light cannot make sense of the mythic world of the Bible, including the New Testament. The only way over this cultural gap is to engender a fresh language, specifically that of existentialism, as expounded by Martin Heidegger, and urged in Britain by, among others, Dennis Nineham. For sure, we could find it very difficult, for instance, to live in a culture whose language had no past tense; but, as Traxler shows, Daniel L. Everett among the South American Pirahã was able to cope, in practice.[62] Cultures are not Nineham's self-contained "totalities," "encapsulated." Others, as well as I, have shown this for our own as for the first-century Mediterranean world. The latter was as mixed, diverse, disparate as our own, with very similar ranges of skepticism and credulity.[63] Nineham was fond of quoting from Leslie P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there," where "the past" in question is in fact within the narrator's lifetime. In practice we can always, with care, feel our way into life as it is or was lived by others, checking on our assumptions, our ideas of consistency and entailment.

Yet another variant was proposed by self-styled Wittgensteinians such as Peter Winch and Dewi Z. Philips, insisting that "language games" are self-contained, only engageable from within. Christianity has its own rules, its own distinct "grammar," untransposable. From such a stance Alasdair MacIntyre wrote in 1963:

> The most perceptive theologians wish to translate what they have said to an atheistic world. But they are doomed to one of two failures. Either they succeed [*sic*] in their translation: in which case what they find themselves saying has been transformed into the atheism of their hearers. Or they fail in their translation: in which case no one hears what they have to say but themselves.[64]

In fact, in later writing MacIntyre has relinquished this dichotomy, and is sure, for instance, that it is possible for us to assimilate the ethos of St. Benedict. But those who claim Wittgenstein for such a take on "language games" ignore the force of what he said about them and about "boundaries" in general: they appear as our creation, not innate in how things are.[65]

Made Strange; Ward, *Christ and Culture*.

62. Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, 1–6.

63. Chester, *Unreached*; Downing, "Access," *Strangely Familiar*, and "Magic."

64. MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," 7.

65. Downing, "Games."

Yet another challenge comes in the form of "postmodernism," with its insistence that there is nothing outside or behind or beneath the text: nothing is accessible but the text itself; or, perhaps, nothing but what you the reader bring to the text from other texts that have been encountered. It means what you make of it.[66] That does not work with a whole range of technical manuals. It might seem plausible with novels, poems, metaphysical treatises. On the surface it may well look very similar to an important ramification of the ancient view of words as transferable name-tags: in classical allegory, a whole sequence of words-in-phrases can represent and be expected to evoke various distinct sets of ideas. There is, however, an important difference even here, in that for the ancients the ideas evokable were expected to be inter-subjective, shared or shareable, not private. Further, this postmodernist program can only be demonstrated if it is only partially, only occasionally the case. Usually diverse, even conflicting readings can be discussed and argued over: you can see why she read "it" her way. If you cannot tell how and why you disagree, you cannot know that you do. Perhaps you actually mean "the same" by readings that only seem very different from one another? A similar argument cuts against William V. O. Quine's conclusion that you could have two systematically and completely different translations of "the same" discursive, non-technical text. You could only tell that they were different translations if you could show how and why they were achieved. (I have not been able to find an actual example, offered by Quine or anyone else.)[67]

Both Quine and then Derrida seem to have been fazed by the imprecision of at least non-technical language. Yet surely its openness, the imaginative adaptability of individual words but also phrases, even whole sentences, to fresh, and marginally, and even very different situations (circumstances exhibiting but a few discernible resemblances), is what allows linguistic communication to work. A nominalist "fresh word for every feeling, hope, judgment, as well as every size of tomato from the same plant," would be useless; a fresh phrase to express every one of, say, a thousand degrees of liking, would clearly be unworkable. What seems to have disturbed Quine and Derrida is what delights the later Wittgenstein (and the present writer).

Yet being persistently made aware of the possibility of carefully argued variant readings, being alerted to what one's own cultural formation leads one to take for granted, is salutary. Not least, it raises questions about the

66. See, e.g., Derrida, *L'écriture* and *Of Grammatology*; and for my argument, Bannet, *Structuralism*, 210–11.

67. Quine, *Logical* and *Word*; cf. Dancy, *Epistemology*, 97–109.

Scriptures as supposedly revelatory texts for most or even for all readers/hearers, but also about being "made one" with God, united in diversity.

(l) But Can't We Just Think?

It seems widely agreed that words, or words-in-sentences, are, at least, a great help. They allow us to communicate with one another, exchange information, plans, desires, problems and problem-solving, and much more (see Wittgenstein's list, above). But do we need them, can we have (and even share) wordless thoughts? Some say yea, some nay. Either way there are issues for God-talk. If words are essential, then we seem at least likely to exclude anyone completely inarticulate, and maybe many merely with limited oracy or literacy. If words are not held necessary for communication with or about God, do we know whether verbal prolixity (even this short work) hinders rather than helps comunication? (St. Francis is often accorded the saying, "Preach the gospel, in season and out of season. If necessary, use words.")

Among the nay-sayers are many recent philosophers. Peter Carruthers instances Wittgenstein, Worf, Davidson, Dennett (I would here add Lycan) who insist there can be no thought without words. Among the yeas insisting we (most adding, along with other animals) can think wordlessly, Carruthers lists Russell, Grice, Fodor, Pinker.[68] Among authors cited here who see themselves primarily as linguists, and who say no, I note Jean Aitchison. Among those who insist yes, there is pre- and non-verbal shared cognition, I place Traxler and Carruthers himself.[69]

Babies show attentive awareness to some spoken sounds, including those to which they have been habituated in the womb, long before they are able to distinguish them, let alone use them as words. Newly born they can protest (at) "something," and protest again if the practical response received fails to deal with whatever "it" was. Even if sometimes it happens that the response given provides some distracting satisfaction, distraction will not always work, and the protest will be repeated, even reinforced. Someone so anesthetized as to be incapable for a period even of "inner speech" can later report his or her thinking engaged during that time; so could someone after an epileptic coma (even acting "thoughtfully" while also totally

68. Carruthers, "Conscious Thinking," 115, and *Architecture of the Mind,* passim, but cf. 372-73; Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 78, citing Joseph Locke, but none of the latters' classical antecedents.

69. Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal*, xix; Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, 326-55; Carruthers, "Conscious Thinking"; Pinker, *The Blank Slate*.

inarticulate). Deaf children in Nicaragua, once brought together, initiated and then elaborated their own sign language without exposure to any adult sign system, producing what we would intepret as common nouns, collectives, verbs, and the ability to communicate reflections on what was being exchanged.[70]

(m) Master or Servant?

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." . . . "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master. That is all."[71]

Perhaps it is agreed, words are there for us to use, we can think without them, but can call on them as and when we want, to serve us. So we are the masters? If we want to communicate, receive and give information, of course we cannot tyrannize, we have to cooperate with other word users. We have grammars and dictionaries to help us conform to common usage, though we may welcome or tolerate or resist neologisms ("googling," "texting"; "mitigate against" for "militate against;" "split infinitives" and loose prepositions to happily seek out).

But there is still a danger that words will themselves master our thinking; especially as they have done in years gone by, dividing and ruling; and by encouraging metaphysical speculations (see [g]). For instance, binary oppositions can afford a convenient short-hand, rule of thumb; but they have in the past taken and still can take control. Hot and cold, black and white, in and out, us and them, up and down, time and eternity, finite and infinite, perfect and imperfect, permanent and evanescent, is and ought, right and wrong, either one or the other, male and female, being and doing: these and many other dichotomies can prompt us to "see" boundaries where there are none, impose boundaries where none is justifiable. A hot tap and a cold tap can be useful, but a mixer tap is often a great improvement. Anyway, how hot is hot, how cold is cold? Most if not all our common dichotomies resolve into a spectrum.

70. Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, 325-60, and 17-19; cf. Carruthers, *The Architecture of the Mind*, 324.

71. Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 269.

(n) Well, What Do You Know?

"I know that my redeemer liveth," proclaims Job (Job 19:25, AV), splendily set to music by Georg Friedrich Händel (though modern translators construe the Hebrew differently). How we use the words "know" and "knowledge," and then how we warrant, justify claims to "know" affects, of course, all talk of our knowledge of God, or of the validity or force of various translations of sacred texts, or of our own or others' general or sometimes distinctive "religious" experience.

I have before me four volumes, dating from mid-1960s to 2011, discussing these sorts of issues interestingly but unsatisfyingly. For instance, only one, Robert Audi, includes religious knowledge.[72] All of them talk of knowledge as justified true belief, and discuss ways of justifying assertions of belief so as to warrant using the terms in a full, intersubjectively shared way. Of course, we can insist we "know" in the sense of strongly believing, having great confidence: "On the basis of the polls we knew we would win, but electoral fraud has robbed us of victory."[73] There was some justification for the belief; but public opinion polls have sufficiently often proved misleading (participants lied, changed their minds, did vote after all, but for somone else . . .), warning against any claim to know in advance the result even of a fair ballot.

Audi, the most recent of the four, is more thorough on the majority of the issues commonly adduced: perception, memory, reason, testimony (including a chapter on "social testimony") as justifying belief as true: but with the one exception of the issue of agreed as opposed to disputed testimony. On the latter only David Hamlyn among these four argues, with Wittgenstein in support, that agreement in judgement is necessary if not sufficient to warrant (not prove) claims to knowledge. Thus there are those who claim to know the laws of economics and those of us who dismiss this as ideology. A few scientists seem to "know" that humans cannot cause climate change, where many more say they are 90 percent sure they have been doing and continue to do so. The majority, it is accepted, may be wrong (as majorities have proved in the past: the "flat-earthers"), but failing agreement, some claimants to knowledge about some topic must be wrong. That is so even if opponents' better substantiated conclusions still lack definitive proof. Where theoretical research is at issue, most will remain tentative. And of course, the claim to a clear knowledge afforded to and openly shared by all

72. Audi, *Epistemology*, 319–28; the others are Dancy, *Epistemology*; Griffiths, *Knowledge and Belief*; and Hamlyn, *The Theory of Knowledge*.

73. Cf. Audi, *Epistemology,* 246.

of a specific group, the more vulnerable is the claim to divergent accounts by members of what their group says and can show it knows.[74]

Audi examines theories of sensory perception in general, then later, in relation to religious knowledge. Neither in general nor in religious contexts does he rule in or out some "mystical" or more ordinary awareness, say, of God speaking, or just being present. All he asks is how one might discriminate between genuine awareness and hallucination. He confesses that discussions in epistemology tend to focus on individual claimants, and, as noted, he has devoted a chapter to social testimony, judging it to be indispensable, and repeats this again in relation to scientific claims and then to claimed experiences of God. Yet that still, and regrettably, fails to discuss the relevance of socially disputed testimony even among scientists, let alone among believers.[75] It is this believers' disagreement among themselves, which remains at the heart of the difficulty argued in the previous book, and again here, of warranting belief in past or current divine (self-) revelation as affording knowledge, propositional or personal, of God.

In line with the confessed individualism shared with fellow epistemologists, Audi's and the others' discussions of "the past" concentrate on a living person's memory, even while Audi allows, it would seem, if only in passing, that testimony to earlier events can count as "knowledge of the past."[76] He is also happy to talk of "introspection," ignoring Gilbert Ryle's argued preference for "retrospection," knowledge of our own past. Retrospection does not claim multiple overlapping layers of conscious attention to mental processes, processes that more recent psycholinguistic research indicates are pre-conscious.[77] Audi argues, cogently, I think, that I have better access to my own thoughts (I would insist, my own past if very recently past thoughts) than anyone else has. But he insists that such privilged access does not itself validate any conclusions I may have reached about events external to me, or even happening to me. I can be right in knowing I believed that I was listening to God, while this does not mean that I was.

Other issues are also discussed by these authors, under these headings of "knowledge" or "epistemology," such as reason, inference, and skepticism: all relevant to God-talk, but not obviously pertinent to the main themes of this present study.

74. Hamlyn, *The Theory of Knowledge*, 177–78; Audi, *Epistemology*, 303–8.

75. Audi, *Epistemology*, 150–72, 305, 323.

76. Ibid., 63.

77. Ibid., 96–101; Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 156–60; cf. Carruthers, "Conscious Thinking."

In our Scriptures there are contradictory stances on the propriety of testing God. A test is sanctioned at Jdg 6:36–40; Ahaz is rebuked for piously refusing to "put the Lord to the test" (Isa 7:10–17); and Paul claims to have displayed the validating "signs of an apostle" (2 Cor 12:12).[78] The Synoptic Gospels, however, have Jesus pick up and emphasize the prohibition in Deut 6:16, and elsewhere sternly rebuke those seeing probabative signs (Matt 4:7; 12:39; 15:4 and parallels); compare Paul at 1 Cor 1:22. In practice, a test for the presence or absence of a God claimed to be omnipresent would seem harder to envisage even than a test for theoretically ubiquitous "dark matter" seems to be. Still more importantly, in personal relationships we unavoidably rely on implicit trust. My trying to prove a friend's good faith would constitute a relationship already broken from my side (an argument elaborated further, in chapter 6).

(o) Sociolinguistics

Most of us are able to communicate well with one another, even if we find on many occasions that someone else misunderstood what we meant (and it may be more our fault than hers). All of us convey a lot by body language—posture, touch, movements of lips, eyes, limbs, head; and intonation and stress in such words as we utter. Even people who are autistic bodily convey their failure to "read" others' facial expressions. Some of us, however, may rely much more on a varied choice of words and phrases to convey, discriminate, nuances of feeling, which others entertain but communicate in different ways. For such, utterances are expected to be clear and precise: statements of fact, of set opinions, of preferences, of command, without lots of ifs and buts and qualifications and anticipations of disagreement or doubt or confusion. Basil Bernstein and associates argued this in the sixties and seventies (and their studies have continued to be reprinted), discerning it as a British "class" issue: the more open and adaptable linguistic code was "middle class," the linguistically restricted code was working class. The adaptability and restriction applied only to the use of language, and did not correlate significantly at all with intelligence or the subtlety of affective social interaction as a whole.[79] As one might expect, Bernstein and associates did not meet with universal acceptance.[80] However, their findings certainly

78. The Fourth Gospel attributes signs to Jesus, but these seem to be symbolic rather than probative.

79. Bernstein, *Class, Codes, and Control.*

80. Rosen, *Language and Class*, 10–12; Hudson, *Sociolinguistics*, 222 (but both are unfair in ignoring the evidence supplied). Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal*, 61-62,

(for what it is worth) tallied with my own experience as an Anglican parish priest in mixed working class (unskilled and skilled) and middle class areas, at a time when "the vicar" was still likely to find friendly entry into a variety of homes. I was able to appreciate the perceptiveness of people who spoke in different styles. These included narrative nuances in some linguistically simple storytelling. But I also discovered people's ability to adjust closer to my linguistic register while still reproducing (quoting verbatim) other conversations that deployed their more usual and quite distinctive registers. And, yes, there were exceptions.

Some major issues of "sociolinguistics" were touched on in previous sections of this chapter: performatives, implicature, the surmountable difficulties of not having a precise word or phase for something you want to say. "Restrictive codes" may hamper; they do not have to imprison. But the fact remains, I suggest, that even people with a normal range of hearing and speaking, and not only those with congenital or later disruptions in or to the brain, may differ considerably in the ways they use and enjoy language, spoken and written. Put at its crudest, are God's supposed self-revelation, or God's supposed at-one-ment with the world, only to be enjoyed with those who have acquired an elaborate ability to accept and use words—if not happy to engage with Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, or even this volume, then at least with C. S. Lewis's Narnia series? Is Christianity, are some forms, pathologically verbose?

And individual words do matter, for all of us, and especially for those of us who expect words to mean (be used for) for what we are accoustomed to them meaning (being used for). I was warned at theological college that "sin," "sex," and "love" were (in late fifties UK) largely co-extensive. I doubt whether "sin" is now (though one intelligent adult confirmation candidate confirmed it for me: "I have no sins to confess. I never made love before marriage, and after that, only with my husband"). With "sin" as extra-marital sex no longer common newspaper parlance, I doubt (unscientifically) whether it is part of common UK parlance at all, except possibly perhaps in matters of diet: the cream cake is a sin, but it's nice.

Using an alien register can be alienating; using strange individual words, or, as bad, familiar ones in strange ways, can be estranging even when inviting reconciliation, obfuscating when offering revelation. In the next chapter the reader is invited to reflect on ways in which "revelation," "self-revelation," "(self-)identification," and "reconciliation" are used in at least some evidenced practice, as well as to imagine other likely instances.

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refers only to one article, failing even then to specify of just which language a working class child may be said to be deprived

In the final chapter of the book, the possibilities of an at-one-ment with God that can be even wordlessly enjoyed will be explored.