Is Religious Education possible?
An examination of the logical possibility of teaching for religious understanding without religious belief

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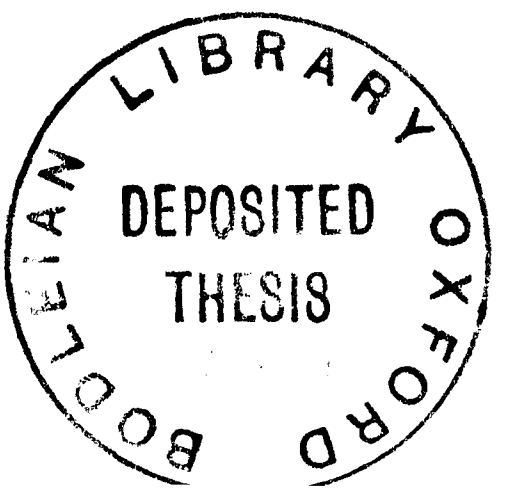
Thesis submitted to the University of Oxford for the degree of D.Phil.



Christ Church

Trinity Term 2001

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College: Christ Church *Date:* Trinity Term 2001

Abstract

The present thesis is a contribution to an unresolved debate in philosophy of education about the logical coherence of a particular account of Religious Education.

The account of Religious Education at issue, which I call the liberal account, prescribes the teaching of religious understanding without religious belief. It stipulates that the aim of Religious Education is to teach pupils the *meaning* of religious propositions while leaving open the question of their *truth*. Underpinning the account are the assumptions that (i) no religious proposition is known to be either true or false and (ii) it is morally objectionable to teach questionable propositions as if they were known to be true.

Opponents of the liberal account argue that it is logically incoherent. Their argument rests on two premises: (i) that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class or 'form of knowledge', and (ii) that understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. If both premises are sound, it follows that religious understanding necessarily involves religious belief.

The aim of the present thesis is to show that this challenge to the logical coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education is unsuccessful. I argue that the second premise is sound but the first is not.

The second premise, that understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false, is an extension of an argument about language in general made by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein claims that 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 242). That is to say, language-users must reach agreement not only on how words are connected to each other (agreement in definitions) but also on how words are connected to experiences (agreement in judgments). The process of fixing experiential criteria necessarily involves accepting the truth of certain contingent propositions. I contend that Wittgenstein's argument can properly be extended to individual epistemological classes, with the exception of the class of necessary propositions.

The validity of the first premise, that there is a religious form of knowledge, turns on the method of verification of religious propositions. I argue that religious propositions are propositions about divine persons and, as such, are verified in exactly the same way as propositions about human persons. Gods, like other persons, comprise minds and bodies (or minds and a relation to the material world analogous to 'having a body'), so religious propositions can be distributed without remainder over the familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions. Pupils can be taught what religious propositions mean with reference to other propositions of the same epistemological kinds and without reference to distinctively religious experiences. It follows that the aim of teaching for religious understanding without religious belief is logically coherent.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my interviewees and their teachers for their time and cooperation; and to the Economic and Social Research Council for funding my research.

Thanks to my supervisor, Richard Pring, for his encouragement, guidance and criticism; and to John Wilson for showing me the way in philosophy.

Thanks to Richard Davies, my sparring partner, for never letting common sense stand in the way of a good argument.

Thanks to Clare Buntic, my confessor and counsellor, for her loyalty and friendship through good times and bad; and to Kreso, Katie and my best friend Luka for making me feel like part of the family.

Thanks to David and Linda Winkley for putting ideas into my head and a roof over it.

Thanks to Mum and Dad for all their love and support, and for making home a safe place to hide.

Thanks, finally, to Charlie, my flame-haired muse, for finding something attractive in an impecunious, workshy student. I promise to get a job now.

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Chapter One

The philosophical debate

1.1.0 Introduction

The present thesis is a contribution to an unresolved debate in philosophy of education. The debate is concerned with the logical possibility of Religious Education; or, to be more precise, with the logical coherence of a particular account of Religious Education. It was initiated by Paul Hirst in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and taken up by contributors to the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* in subsequent years. The questions raised appear to have been abandoned rather than answered at the beginning of the 1980s.

The account of Religious Education at issue, which I shall call the liberal account, has informed educational practice in the UK for some thirty years. If it is incoherent in the way suggested by its detractors, the aims of Religious Education are unrealisable and the efforts of practitioners doomed to failure. The debate therefore has radical implications for educational policy and practice.

My aims in this chapter are twofold: (i) to set out the liberal account of Religious Education; and (ii) to summarise the arguments of the key contributors to the debate. I turn now to the first of these tasks.

1.2.0 The liberal account of Religious Education

The statutory entitlement of pupils in British state schools to Religious Education (or, before the 1988 Education Reform Act, Religious Instruction) has long presented a problem to educators. The problem is this. The central aim of liberal education is the transmission of knowledge, but in the sphere of religion there is no knowledge to transmit. That is to say, there is no religious proposition which we know to be either true or false. Even the most basic religious questions are subjects of legitimate disagreement among reasonable people.

One solution to this problem is to take some body of religious beliefs and teach it *as if* it

were a body of knowledge. This solution is rejected by the liberal educator on the grounds that transmitting religious beliefs as if they were known to be true is either indoctrinatory or deceptive, and therefore morally wrong. Whether or not liberal anxieties about indoctrination and deception are justified is a question I shall take up in Chapter Four. For the time being, let us accept that this solution is unacceptable to the liberal educator.

The liberal account of Religious Education is an alternative solution to the problem. It runs as follows. Although we cannot teach religious truths, we can teach the meaning of religious truth claims. We can explain to pupils what religious propositions mean without trying to persuade them of their truth or falsity. The knowledge transmitted will not be *religious* knowledge, but *linguistic* knowledge of religious meaning. The liberal Religious Educator teaches for religious understanding without religious belief.

Here, then, is the liberal account of Religious Education. It has, I think, a *prima facie* logical coherence. Whether or not that appearance is deceptive is the subject of the present thesis.

Before turning to the debate about the logical coherence of the liberal account, I want briefly to consider another type of philosophical challenge to which it may be susceptible. Implicit in a number of philosophical writings on the subject is a rejection of the liberal account on the grounds that the educational programme it prescribes is not appropriately described as religious. That is to say, the account transgresses the conceptual boundaries laid down by the conjunction of the terms 'religious' and 'education'.

One such challenge is developed by W.D. Hudson in his paper 'Is religious education possible?' (1973). Hudson is concerned here with the logical possibility of religious education, with whether or not 'the concept of religious education [is] an intelligible one' (p.168). He recognises that there is 'something - perhaps many things - *called* religious education', but sets out 'to appraise the extent to which the expression 'religious education' is, in practice, misused' (p.168). His conclusion is that there *is* an enterprise correctly described as religious education, but that teaching people *about* religious beliefs does not qualify.

Education, according to Hudson, is a process of initiation into a range of practical and theoretical pursuits. To give a person a religious education is, therefore, to initiate her into religious pursuits. But religious pursuits are necessarily premised on religious belief. A pursuit is correctly described as religious when it involves either 'conceiving of god and putting oneself in the way of the explanations and experiences which this concept constitutes', or 'engaging in those ways of committing oneself in trust and obedience to god which are characteristic of the expression of religious belief' (pp.177-8). It follows that merely teaching people *about* religious beliefs, including teaching them what religious propositions mean, will not count as giving them a religious education.

There are a number of defences one can pursue in the face of such challenges to the liberal account of Religious Education. One strategy is to meet the challengers on their own terms by quarrelling with their conceptual analyses. John Wilson, for example, offers a rather different analysis of the phrase 'religious education' (Wilson, 1971). He argues that education is a matter of helping people to become more reasonable, and religious education a matter of 'helping them to become more reasonable in the sphere of religion' (p.1). A religiously educated person is not one who has been initiated into religious pursuits, but one who has been taught to approach religious questions rationally. On this analysis, the liberal programme of teaching the meaning of religious truth claims without trying to persuade pupils of their truth or falsity is well described as religious education.

Another strategy is simply to concede the phrase 'Religious Education' to those who would construe it in such a way as to exclude the liberal account. So long as the educational programme prescribed by the liberal account is held to be worthwhile, it does not much matter what we call it. If there are those who wish to reserve the phrase 'Religious Education' for some other educational programme, the easiest thing may be to let them have it. This is the strategy suggested by Peter Gardner, a defender of the liberal account, in response to Hudson's analysis:

> W.D. Hudson, for example, would say that secularism is not concerned with religious education, since such a title should be preserved for education in religious belief, rather than about such beliefs, and that the process deserving this title

> should include initiation into religious devotion and worship. Obviously the secularist is not going to advocate initiation into activities which presuppose the truth of claims about which there is such disagreement. Still, if the cost of taking this stance is the loss of a title, that will be no great price to pay. (Gardner, 1980, p.164)

A third strategy, and I think the most persuasive one, is to argue that curriculum subject headings function more like names or labels than precise descriptions of content. What goes on in schools under the headings of English and Mathematics, for example, is not restricted to the initiation of pupils into the English language and the discipline of mathematics. The National Curriculum Programmes of Study for English require that pupils be initiated into a range of literary, dramatic and argumentative practices; those for Mathematics require that pupils be taught to operate calculators and computers. A comprehensive educational programme incorporates many and varied learning objectives; curriculum subject headings are merely labels for the loose categories over which those objectives are distributed.

If this is true of subject headings like English and Mathematics, it is even more true of 'artificial' subject headings like Physical Education, Sex Education and Religious Education. What goes on in schools under the heading of Religious Education is certainly not restricted to the initiation of pupils into the discipline of religious education, for there is no such discipline. Religious Education is a label for the curriculum category into which learning objectives connected with religion are placed. While there may be good reasons for objecting to the learning objectives currently placed in this category, the fact (if it is a fact) that the category label does not exactly or exhaustively describe its contents does not constitute such a reason.

So much, then, for this line of criticism of the liberal account of Religious Education. I turn now to the altogether more serious charge that the account is logically incoherent.

1.3.0 The philosophical debate

Those who find the liberal account of Religious Education logically incoherent argue that

the proposed separation of religious understanding from religious belief is not possible. That is to say, one cannot come to understand religious propositions without also coming to believe that certain religious propositions are true or false. This is not a psychological claim about the cognitive capacities of human beings, but a logical claim about what is necessarily involved in understanding religious propositions. The precise grounds for this logical claim are, as we shall see, a matter of some dispute.

There is, of course, one kind of religious understanding which is only accessible to those who hold, or have held, religious beliefs: namely, the kind of understanding which comes from personal experience. Only a person of faith, a person who has experienced religion first-hand, can be said to understand religion in this sense. But it is not this kind of religious understanding with which we are concerned. We are concerned with religious understanding in the sense of knowing what religious propositions mean, and it is not at all obvious that this kind of understanding is unavailable to the non-believer.

I shall examine the contributions to this debate of four philosophers: Paul Hirst, Roger Marples, David Attfield and Peter Gardner.

1.3.1 Paul Hirst

Two papers by Paul Hirst set the agenda for the debate. In the first, 'Morals, religion and the maintained school' (1965b), Hirst presents a powerful defence of the liberal account of Religious Education. In the latter, 'The forms of knowledge revisited' (1973b), he rejects the account on the grounds of logical incoherence. The two papers are confusingly reprinted in reverse chronological order in his 1974 collection of papers *Knowledge and the Curriculum*.

In 'Morals, religion and the maintained school', Hirst gives a clear exposition of the liberal account of Religious Education. He argues that as educators we are concerned with the transmission of knowledge, that religions involve 'claims to truth and knowledge', and that if these claims can be substantiated religious knowledge ought to be transmitted in schools. As a matter of fact, however, religious truth claims cannot be substantiated. Therefore 'we can only speak of a domain of religious beliefs and not of a

domain of publicly justifiable religious knowledge' (Hirst, 1965b, p.184).

Hirst goes on to argue that state maintained schools have no business transmitting religious beliefs. His argument is not that *no-one* has the right to transmit religious beliefs, or 'to educate children as Christians', but that the state has no mandate for such an undertaking. Given that nothing is known in the sphere of religion, the state is obliged 'to refrain most carefully from joining any particular religious cause and rather do all in its power to maintain the fullest freedom for religious education' (p.181). Decisions as to which religious beliefs (if any) children are to be taught fall outside the 'legitimate province' of public bodies.

It follows that the only proper function of Religious Education in state maintained schools is 'factual instruction about the beliefs that have played and do play so large a part in our history, literature and way of life' (p.182). In an additional note appended to the original paper for its reprint in *Knowledge and the Curriculum*, Hirst expands on what he takes to be involved in 'factual instruction':

> To speak of teaching 'about' religion is open to many different interpretations. In one sense that phrase expresses very well what one wants, for it manifestly excludes all teaching aimed at pupils' coming to hold any particular religious beliefs. Understanding not belief is what is sought. But 'teaching about religion' is taken by some to mean a study of religion that is always one remove from actually getting to grips with the truth claims religions make. To them it is a matter of studying the psychology, the sociology or history of religion. Whilst there is much that can be said for such studies, and elements of these will no doubt figure in any satisfactory school syllabus, pupils can only understand any religious position if they begin to grasp its concepts and therefore its truth criteria. (*ibid.*, p.187)

Factual instruction in religious beliefs, then, is concerned with the transmission of religious concepts and truth criteria, with religious understanding as opposed to religious belief. Pupils must enter 'as fully as possible into an understanding of what [religions] claim to be true' (p.187).

Hirst's endorsement of the liberal account of Religious Education in 'Morals, religion and

the maintained school' is unambiguous and persuasive. Yet it is an endorsement which he withdraws in 'The forms of knowledge revisited', where the liberal account is rejected as incoherent. The argument he develops in the latter paper has two premises: (i) that religion is 'a logically unique form of knowledge' and (ii) that understanding a logically unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. If both premises are accepted, it follows that religious understanding necessarily involves religious belief.

Hirst presents his first premise without much confidence. To say that religion is a logically unique form of knowledge is to say that religious propositions form an epistemologically autonomous class, that they are irreducible to propositions of other epistemological types. On the question of the irreducibility of religious propositions, Hirst suggests, 'few would dare to pronounce categorically'. He continues:

> Certainly, some have sought to give an account of religious meaning which has seen its cognitive core to be totally reducible to knowledge belonging to other forms (usually moral, historical, or aesthetic) and the rest to be emotive in character. If such a reduction can be legitimately carried through, then there can here be no distinct form of religious knowledge. But can it? That I doubt. (Hirst, 1973b, p.88)

But Hirst does not here (or anywhere else as far as I am aware) offer an argument in support of his doubt. The claim that religion is a logically unique form of knowledge is one which he thinks we ought to take seriously, but for which he is unable or unwilling to make a case. This is all the more surprising given that the relevance of his second premise is contingent on the validity of his first.

Hirst states his second premise as follows:

> If these propositions belong to a logically unique form, then their truth criteria must be unique. Religious propositions are then only intelligible to those who know these unique truth criteria. But can such unique truth conditions be known without our actually being able to judge any propositions of this kind true or false? Can there be unique truth criteria that are never satisfied? If meaning is tied to knowing a unique set of truth criteria, is not meaning tied to our actually satisfying these in judging some propositions true or false?...

> The claim to an irreducible, unique form of propositional meaning, thus seems to necessitate that at least some proposition of this kind be known to be true. If so, there can only be a unique form of meaning if there is a unique form of knowledge, and the claim that religion involves a unique form of belief only, is incoherent. (*ibid.*, pp.88-9)

This passage seems to me to be ambiguous. Hirst's second premise, that 'knowing a unique set of truth criteria' involves 'actually satisfying these in judging some propositions true or false', can be interpreted in two ways. It might mean (i) that understanding propositions of a particular logical type involves *establishing* that certain propositions of that type are true or false, or (ii) that understanding propositions of a particular logical type involves *agreeing* or *accepting* that certain propositions of that type are true or false. I shall say a little about the difference between these interpretations.

On the first interpretation, which is perhaps the most natural reading of the passage above, it is a condition of understanding a unique set of truth criteria that one has used those criteria to *establish* the truth or falsity of certain propositions. This claim seems to me to be necessarily false. One plainly cannot use a set of truth criteria to establish the truth or falsity of a proposition unless one already knows what those criteria are. The former cannot possibly be a condition of the latter. It might, I suppose, be argued that until one has used a set of truth criteria to establish the truth or falsity of propositions, one's understanding of those criteria is purely theoretical, and hence that it is a condition of *practical* understanding of truth criteria that one has used them in this way. But if this is the argument Hirst is making, the defender of the liberal account of Religious Education has an easy retort: it may be true that we cannot transmit *practical* understanding of religious truth criteria without also transmitting religious beliefs, but we can and should transmit *theoretical* understanding.

On the second interpretation, it is a condition of understanding propositions of a particular logical type that one first *agrees* or *accepts* that certain propositions of that type are true or false. It is not that one must have used truth criteria to establish the truth or falsity of certain propositions, but that one must have accepted the truth or falsity of certain propositions in order to grasp their truth criteria. This claim is very much more plausible, for reasons brought out by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical*

Investigations (1953):

> If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. - It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call 'measuring' is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement. (Section 242)

Language comprises words and rules for the use of those words. Some rules, which I shall call logical criteria, connect words to other words; other rules, which I shall call experiential criteria, connect words to experiences. Becoming proficient in the use of language involves learning both logical and experiential criteria. But whereas one can learn logical criteria without being committed to the truth or falsity of any contingent propositions, one cannot learn experiential criteria without being so committed. Learning the experiential criteria for such terms as 'hot', 'red' and 'pain' necessarily involves accepting the truth of certain contingent propositions of the form 'This is hot', 'That is red' and 'I am in pain'. Unless I accept that something is hot, and thus learn which experience the word 'hot' is associated with, I shall remain unable to establish the truth or falsity of any proposition which ascribes the property of heat.

Wittgenstein illustrates his argument with reference to the practice of measuring. All propositions which state the results of measurement are contingent; but agreement on the truth of some such propositions is necessary to fix units of measurement. There must be agreement on some measurements if the practice of measuring is to get off the ground. Earlier in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein remarks on the curious status in language of the standard metre in Paris. It is clearly a contingent proposition that the standard metre in Paris is one metre long. It is a physical object and as such may be compressed, filed down or otherwise interfered with in such a way as to render the proposition that it is one metre long false. On the other hand, to deny that the standard metre in Paris is one metre long seems to put the whole business of measuring things in metres in jeopardy:

> There is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the

> standard metre in Paris. - But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule... What looks as if it *had* to exist, is part of the language. It is a paradigm in our language-game; something with which comparison is made. (*ibid.*, Section 50)

Before we can *establish* that *anything* is one metre long, we must first *agree* that *something* is. Agreement on the truth of at least one proposition of the form 'X is one metre long' is a necessary condition of the ability to test the truth of other propositions of the same form.

Thus Wittgenstein shows that there must be agreement in judgments as well as agreement in definitions if propositions are to be informative, if there are to be publicly recognised procedures for distinguishing true propositions from false ones. Hirst, if our second interpretation of his second premise is correct, is proposing an extension of Wittgenstein's argument about propositions in general to an argument about epistemologically autonomous classes of propositions. Wittgenstein shows that understanding propositions presupposes agreement that certain propositions are true or false; Hirst adds that understanding propositions *of a given epistemological type* presupposes agreement that certain propositions *of that type* are true or false. If a form of knowledge is distinguished by a unique set of truth criteria, and agreement in judgments is required to fix truth criteria, it follows that agreement in judgments is a necessary condition of understanding a form of knowledge.

Assuming the validity of his first premise, this second interpretation of Hirst's second premise constitutes a formidable objection to the liberal account of Religious Education. If religion is a logically unique form of knowledge, and understanding a logically unique form of knowledge involves accepting that certain propositions of that form are true or false, it is clear that religious understanding necessarily involves religious belief.

1.3.2 Roger Marples

A similar argument for the incoherence of the liberal account of Religious Education is presented by Roger Marples in his paper 'Is Religious Education Possible?' (1978).

Marples sets out to show that 'religious understanding presupposes religious belief' and hence that 'those of us who admit to no religious beliefs cannot be said to possess such understanding' (p.82). His argument rests on the same two premises as Hirst's argument in 'The forms of knowledge revisited'.

Hirst's first premise, that religion is 'a logically unique form of knowledge', is endorsed by Marples in the following passage:

> My concern is with people who do not share a religious form of life. They have not been initiated into its language and associated conception of reality... They confess to not knowing what is being said when they hear statements such as 'God is omnipotent', 'When we die we shall go to heaven'. In addition to everyday language it appears that there are subsections of society speaking a 'language' of their own. Try as they may to understand they remain simply baffled. (Marples, 1978, p.85)

Religion, according to Marples, is a 'form of life' with its own 'language and associated conception of reality'. Religious propositions are formulated not in the 'language of everyday' (p.85) but in a distinctive religious language, a language which the uninitiated simply do not understand. Whether or not Marples would want to use the phrase 'form of knowledge' to describe religion, he would certainly agree that religious propositions have 'unique truth criteria' and are not reducible to propositions of other logical types.

As with Hirst's presentation of this premise, it might be thought that Marples' argument is less than persuasive here. Is it true that non-believers are 'baffled' by religious language? Do they in fact profess not to understand what is meant by such propositions as 'God is omnipotent' and 'When we die we shall go to heaven'? If we were to conduct a survey, is it not more likely that we should find non-believers professing to understand but disagree with religious truth claims? The non-believer's claim is not that she is unable to understand the proposition 'God exists' but that she considers the evidence for it to be inadequate. Of course, from the fact that many non-believers *think* they understand religious propositions it does not follow that they *do*, but Marples' description of 'those who do not share a religious form of life' rings a little hollow.

Hirst's second premise, that understanding a logically unique form of knowledge involves

holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false, is presented by Marples as follows:

> The fact that we do share forms of life with a particular conceptual structure - that is, there is intersubjective agreement as to the truth conditions for the application of concepts - together with the fact that we normally agree on what is to count as fact and fiction, makes possible human communication about the world. So it is that Hamlyn says: 'That there must be facts... that make certain statements true is a precondition of any view about the world. What these facts are is something that we can raise questions about only from a point of view within what is agreed, and which provides the framework for intelligible discussions about what is fact and what is not'. (*ibid.*, pp.84-85)

This is the second, Wittgensteinian interpretation of Hirst's second premise, according to which understanding propositions of a particular logical type involves *agreeing* or *accepting* that certain propositions of that type are true or false. The reason for this is that words are connected not only to each other (logical criteria) but also to experiences (experiential criteria), and establishing connections of the latter kind involves accepting the truth of certain contingent propositions. The distinction between logical and experiential criteria finds expression in Marples' paper as a distinction between *exercising* and *applying* concepts:

> Let us imagine a child who has no religious concepts in his vocabulary. Now it is quite easy to imagine someone teaching him the language game of religion, enabling him to become quite competent in speaking the language in accordance with its grammar such that to all intents and purposes he would appear to understand. But why should we assume that he understands simply because he can speak the language? There is more to understanding than verbal skill. There has to be a minimal grasp of the relevant concepts; and there is more to this than simply being able to exercise the concept. Unless one can apply the concept to particular cases one's so called understanding is little more than an ability to parrot. (*ibid.*, p.83)

To understand the 'language game of religion' it is not enough to be able to *exercise* religious concepts, to have the 'verbal skill' which consists in knowing the logical connections between religious words; one must also be able to *apply* religious concepts,

which is to say that one must know the connections between religious words and experiences. Since learning to apply religious concepts requires agreement 'on what is to count as fact and fiction', one cannot come to understand religion without adopting some religious beliefs.

Marples' argument, then, though cast in a different idiom, is substantially the same as Hirst's. If religion is a form of life with its own conceptual scheme, and understanding a conceptual scheme involves the ability to apply concepts as well as the ability to exercise them, it follows that religious understanding necessarily involves religious belief.

There is, however, an oddity in Marples' argument. As an example of a proposition acceptance of which enables one to apply as well as exercise religious concepts, he cites the proposition 'God is omnipotent'. But he also asserts that 'God is omnipotent' is a *grammatical* claim, a claim the truth of which 'is governed entirely by the concepts used to make it' (p.85). There is plainly a contradiction here. If 'God is omnipotent' is a conceptual or analytic claim, then accepting that it is true merely equips one with knowledge of a logical connection between words, and hence the ability to *exercise* a concept. Insofar as the claim is used to fix an experiential criterion, enabling those who accept it to *apply* a concept, it must be factual rather than conceptual. Given Marples' earlier insistence that, on its own, knowledge of conceptual truths is mere 'verbal skill' and 'little more than an ability to parrot', it is surprising that he should here blur the distinction between conceptual truths and contingent propositions used to fix experiential criteria.

1.3.3 David Attfield

In his reply to Marples, David Attfield (1978) tries to defend the liberal account of Religious Education against what he calls 'the general form of the neo-Wittgensteinian argument'. As we have seen, it is the extension of Wittgenstein's argument about language in general to individual forms of knowledge or conceptual schemes which poses the real threat to the coherence of the liberal account. Attfield states the neo-Wittgensteinian argument as follows:

> Not only, that is, must language users know the meanings and implications of terms but they must also know *how* they apply, what are the criteria for their employment, what points of contact they have with experience. Indeed, among the majority of those who embrace a conceptual scheme there must be, for most of the time, actual agreement on the factual judgments made in the light of its categories. Otherwise there will be a deep failure in understanding. (*ibid.*, p.94)

Attfield attempts to show that this argument is fallacious, that it is possible to understand the terms of a given conceptual scheme without knowing 'what points of contact they have with experience'. Taking as a test case 'the conceptual scheme we use for colour-perception', he argues that one can understand this conceptual scheme without accepting any contingent propositions about the colours of objects.

The colour conceptual scheme comprises 'a colour vocabulary with definitions relating each colour expression to others' and 'the necessary grammatical proposition that something is red if and only if it is seen as red under normal conditions'. Ordinarily, when we learn to use this conceptual scheme, instances of colour concepts are pointed out to us. In this way we learn the experiential criteria of colour words and come to hold beliefs about the colours of objects. But Attfield asks us to imagine 'a personal rational creature - spaceman or angel according to taste - who lacks our form of sensibility, who does not possess our sensory apparatus' (pp.94-95). Such an angel, he maintains, could come to understand the colour conceptual scheme whilst being quite unable to apply the concepts within it, and therefore without holding beliefs about the colours of objects. 'So our spirit understands without being committed to the existence of red objects' (p.95).

But does our spirit understand? Insofar as the colour conceptual scheme is utterly divorced from his experience, in what sense can he be said to understand it? Has he not merely acquired what Marples calls a 'verbal skill' or 'an ability to parrot'? Not, says Attfield, if we speculate that 'though a spiritual being lacks our form of sensibility, he has one of his own, which includes some kind of intuition analogous to sense perception whereby he is able to detect material objects and make sense of the appearance/reality contrast' (p.95). Such a spirit could understand the colour conceptual scheme *by analogy*, by 'working outwards from the conceptual scheme of his own intuition'.

Colour-blind people illustrate Attfield's point rather more simply. Colour-blind people are generally familiar with, and are ordinarily said to understand, the colour conceptual scheme, even though they cannot apply colour words. The reason they are said to understand is because there are other properties of material objects which they *can* detect, and from which they can extrapolate to grasp colour concepts. In this way the colour conceptual scheme can be understood without knowledge of the experiential criteria of colour words.

It is worth noting that the same argument can be applied to Wittgenstein's example of metric measurement. Wittgenstein rightly notes that we cannot settle factual questions about the length of objects in metres unless there is something whose length in metres we agree on, 'something with which comparison is made'. But no such agreement is required to *understand* the conceptual scheme of metric measurement. So long as we have the concepts of material object, length and measurement, we can understand what is meant by propositions stating results of metric measurement by analogy with other kinds of measurement. We need not know how long a metre is or come to any agreement on the accuracy of metric measuring devices.

Is Attfield's argument valid? The first point to make is that the understanding in question is certainly an attenuated kind of understanding. To understand what colours are by analogy with, for example, smells and textures, is to understand less perfectly or less clearly than the person who can pick out colours. Nevertheless, Attfield is surely right that the colour-blind person has *some* kind of understanding of the colour conceptual scheme. If religion is a parallel case, the aim of transmitting religious understanding without religious belief may yet be realisable.

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There is, however, a second and more serious difficulty with Attfield's argument. The angel can understand the colour conceptual scheme without being able to apply colour words only if 'he is able to detect material objects and make sense of the appearance/reality contrast'. A person can understand metric measurement without having encountered metric units only if she has the concepts of material object, length and measurement. The conceptual schemes of colour and metric measurement are not *epistemologically autonomous* conceptual schemes; they are subsections of what might be called the material conceptual scheme, the conceptual scheme we use to refer to and

describe material objects and events. Because we know the experiential criteria of basic terms within the material conceptual scheme, we are able to understand other terms within the same scheme by analogy. Attfield shows that we can understand a cluster of connected concepts without being committed to the truth or falsity of any proposition in which those concepts are exercised; he does not show that we can understand an epistemologically autonomous conceptual scheme without being so committed.

If we imagine 'a personal rational creature' with *no* form of sensibility, a creature who cannot detect material objects at all, it is difficult to see how it could ever come to understand the material conceptual scheme. Here there is no basis for understanding by analogy or extrapolation. The ability to apply some material object terms, and hence agreement on the truth or falsity of some propositions about material objects, is a necessary condition of any kind of understanding of the conceptual scheme.

Therefore Attfield's attempt to refute the neo-Wittgensteinian argument is unsuccessful. Clusters of concepts can be understood without agreement in judgments; autonomous conceptual schemes cannot. If it is maintained that religion is a logically unique form of knowledge, or a form of life with its own conceptual scheme, the challenge to the liberal account of Religious Education remains unanswered.

1.3.4 Peter Gardner

The last contribution to the debate I want to consider is Peter Gardner's paper 'Religious Education: in defence of non-commitment' (1980), in which he defends the liberal account of Religious Education against its philosophical detractors. He begins by setting out what he calls the 'secularist attitude' to Religious Education:

> Religions involve unique ways of looking at the world, and unique claims, claims, that is, that are irreducible to those that are non-religious, such as those of ethics or sociology. However, as genuine doubts exist and can reasonably exist about the epistemic status of such claims, then if the teaching of religion is to be part of the educational process, these claims should not be taught as true, as statements to be believed; rather if religion is to be taught, a distinction must

> be drawn between elucidation and advocacy, and the former should be the appropriate method of teaching. (*ibid.*, p.158)

It is interesting to note that, in presenting his version of the liberal account of Religious Education, Gardner immediately concedes one of the key premises of the arguments of his opponents; namely, that religions involve 'unique claims... that are irreducible to those that are non-religious'. This is a premise which Hirst himself admits to be contentious and for which he is unable or unwilling to make a case. That Gardner should accept it so readily is therefore somewhat surprising.

Gardner proceeds to address the arguments of Hirst and Marples in turn. He attributes to Hirst the claim that 'understanding religious propositions requires knowledge of their truth criteria, which entails knowledge of some of the propositions in question' (p.159). He then rejects this claim on the grounds that 'it overlooks the distinction between the possession of an ability and its employment' (p.160). He writes:

> Looked at from this position we can observe that to know the truth criteria for a set of propositions is to have certain abilities, but this in no way entails that one has actually employed those abilities under the appropriate circumstances and so come to know. (*ibid.*, p.160)

It is clear that Gardner is here addressing what I referred to above as the first interpretation of Hirst's second premise. Insofar as it is Hirst's contention that understanding propositions of a particular logical type involves *establishing* that certain propositions of that type are true or false, Gardner's criticisms find their mark. Indeed, he somewhat understates his case. Not only *can* one have an understanding of truth criteria before one uses them to test propositions, but one necessarily *must* have. Knowing the truth criteria for a set of propositions is a necessary condition of establishing that propositions within that set are true or false.

However, the second, Wittgensteinian interpretation of Hirst's second premise is untouched by Gardner's criticisms. Here the claim is that understanding truth criteria involves *accepting* or *agreeing on* the truth or falsity of certain propositions governed by those criteria. The propositions in question are not *known* to be true or false, for one has not yet acquired the ability to establish their truth or falsity; rather they are *agreed*

to be true or false in order to fix truth criteria for propositions of that type. On this interpretation, Gardner's remarks about 'the distinction between the possession of an ability and its employment' are entirely beside the point.

Gardner turns next to consider Marples' contribution to the debate. Prompted, perhaps, by the oddity in Marples' argument noted above, Gardner ascribes to him the view that some contingent propositions used to fix experiential criteria in religious discourse are conceptual truths. If this were so, he argues, the rejection of such contingent propositions would entail the rejection of certain logical connections between religious words. Religious language comes to mean something different to the atheist from what it means to the theist. It is therefore quite possible that 'there is no disagreement between the atheist and the theist', and communication between the two on the subject of religion 'becomes one of the wonders of the world' (p.162).

It is indeed an implausible consequence of the view Gardner ascribes to Marples that atheists and theists are rendered unable to communicate with each other, but this is scarcely the most serious objection to it. The most serious objection is that the view is flatly self-contradictory. To describe a proposition as contingent is precisely to say that it is *not* a conceptual truth. The suggestion that there might be contingent, criterion-fixing propositions which are analytically true is a logical nonsense.

Once again, Gardner neglects to address the Wittgensteinian argument which lies at the core of Marples' paper. That he fails to appreciate the force of this argument is revealed in his account of the sense in which religious understanding is available to the non-believer:

> Usually a person is said to have grasped a concept if he can identify things to which the concept applies, which is often taken as indicating concrete understanding, or if he can give us an account of the things to which the concept applies, and this is often taken as indicating formal understanding. Clearly tests for concrete understanding are difficult when we are dealing with religious concepts, although we can and do test for formal understanding, and such tests can be passed by both believers and non-believers. Thus, an atheist can give an account of what it would be for something properly to be called a sin, or a miracle, or a divine command, etc. This, I am aware, may not be a very exciting

> approach to understanding, but it does have the benefits of being in accord with normal usage, of allowing for disagreement and of not making a mystery out of communication. (*ibid.*, p.162)

Regardless of whether or not one considers Gardner's approach to understanding to be 'exciting', it simply ignores the Wittgensteinian demand for agreement in judgments. What Gardner calls 'formal understanding' is what Wittgenstein calls 'agreement in definitions' and Marples calls 'verbal skill'. If, as Gardner himself claims, religious propositions are 'irreducible to those that are non-religious', agreement in definitions is not enough for understanding. The autonomous conceptual scheme of religion must be anchored in experience if it is to be intelligible. This is the most serious challenge to the liberal account of Religious Education and Gardner singularly fails to rebut it.

This completes my summary of the philosophical debate. It will be clear that it has not been satisfactorily resolved. Neither of the key premises of Hirst's argument in 'The forms of knowledge revisited' has been either proved or disproved. The claim that religion is a logically unique form of knowledge, about which Hirst himself seems disconcertingly uncertain, has been assumed rather than argued for by subsequent contributors to the debate. The claim that understanding a logically unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false is supported by a powerful Wittgensteinian argument which has so far resisted attempts to refute it.

1.4.0 A related debate

In more recent years a related debate about the teaching of religion has arisen in philosophy of education. Because this later debate bears more than a passing resemblance to the earlier one, it is important to distinguish clearly between them.

The later debate is premised on a spurious conclusion drawn from the Wittgensteinian argument that agreement in judgments is needed to fix truth criteria. The conclusion drawn is that there is a special class of empirical propositions which, because they are

used to fix truth criteria, cannot themselves be tested. Such 'river-bed' or 'foundational' propositions are the presuppositions of argument and evidence-giving, so cannot themselves be argued for or supported by evidence. They must be taken on faith by anyone who wishes to participate in the argumentative and evidence-giving practices which they make possible.

If there are such river-bed propositions, it is argued, they must be exempted from the normal objections to the transmission of not-known-to-be-true beliefs to children. Indeed, because they have the special function of facilitating the pursuit of knowledge, it is highly desirable that we transmit them. By refusing to do so, we debar children from engaging in the theoretical pursuits at whose foundation they lie.

The existence of river-bed propositions is assumed by both sides of the later debate. What is at issue is whether or not the class of river-bed propositions includes any religious propositions. That is to say, is it plausible to characterise religion (or theology) as a theoretical pursuit with its own set of truth criteria, and therefore its own set of foundational beliefs? If so, there seems to be a strong case for transmitting foundational religious beliefs to children.

Tasos Kazepides (1987) argues that the class of river-bed propositions does *not* include any religious propositions or doctrines. He identifies four characteristic features of river-bed propositions which, he maintains, religious doctrines do not share:

> First, belief or disbelief in doctrines is not a criterion of rationality, whereas the questioning of river-bed propositions is a sign of organic mental disturbance.
> Second, there are *alternatives* to particular doctrines but not to river-bed certainties. One can doubt, question, accept, modify or abandon doctrinal beliefs but not river-bed propositions.
> Third, river-bed propositions are *acquired* or inherited without any thinking, investigation or justification... Doctrines, on the other hand, are *learned*...
> Fourth, whereas all explanations and justifications come to an end, that end is not doctrines that can be doubted but the river-bed propositions which cannot. (*ibid.*, pp.405-6)

Michael Leahy and Ronald Laura (1997) argue that the features of river-bed

propositions to which Kazepides draws attention are not necessary features. What is crucial about river-bed propositions, or 'epistemic primitives', is that they have 'a presuppositional or foundational function' and are therefore 'exempted from the doubt that ought to apply to them as factual claims' (p.333). River-bed propositions are necessarily immune to doubt and questioning *within the theoretical pursuit whose truth criteria they fix*; it does not follow from this that they are immune to doubt and questioning within other theoretical pursuits. Therefore the fact that the questioning of religious doctrines is not normally construed as 'a sign of organic mental disturbance' does not disqualify them from membership of the class of river-bed propositions.

Against Kazepides, then, Leahy and Laura maintain that certain religious propositions *do* have a presuppositional and foundational function in religious discourse, and that for this reason it is rational to accept them as true:

> Their rationality consists in the foundational role they play for the articulation of other rational claims and thus they are no less rational than the analogous foundational beliefs of science, or indeed of any other coherent system of beliefs. Since resistance to falsification is a necessary characteristic of the epistemic primitives of all belief systems, such resistance does not undermine the rationality or capability of factual reference of the primitives of any system. And if their unfalsifiability does not render them incapable of factual reference and thus 'non-rational', the teaching of religious beliefs as true cannot be dismissed as indoctrinatory on Kazepides' definition of that term. (*ibid.*, pp.333-4)

It is my contention that this debate is vitiated by the implausibility of its premise: namely, that there is a class of river-bed propositions to which certain religious propositions may or may not belong. The existence of river-bed propositions is certainly *not* entailed by the Wittgensteinian argument that agreement in judgments is needed to fix truth criteria. It is true that each of us must take some contingent propositions on faith if we are to become competent language-users; but this is not the same as saying that there is a special class of contingent propositions which *everyone* must take on faith. Suppose that John learns the experiential criterion for the term 'white' by accepting the truth of the proposition 'Snow is white'. Snow now becomes a paradigm for John, a 'something with which comparison is made' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 50). Because 'Snow is white' fixes the truth criterion for propositions of the form

'X is white', it is, perhaps, the one proposition of that form which John cannot verify. But just because *John* cannot verify it, it does not follow that no-one can. Other people learn the experiential criterion for the term 'white' in relation to other white substances, and for them there is no difficulty at all about verifying that snow is white. Because different people learn the experiential criteria of words in relation to different instances, there are no individual propositions which fix truth criteria for everyone. The same truth criterion can be fixed by many different propositions. (Moreover, it may not even be true that John cannot verify the proposition 'Snow is white'. Once he has used his initial paradigm to identify a range of white substances, he has multiple paradigms of whiteness available to him. At this point it seems quite possible for him to use one of his later paradigms to go back and check that snow is white.)

The examples of river-bed propositions cited by Kazepides are 'I have two hands', 'I am a human being' and 'Automobiles do not grow on trees'. Such propositions, he says, 'constitute criteria of rationality about which one cannot be mistaken' (*op. cit.*, p.405). But it seems quite clear that one *can* be mistaken about them, that these propositions are not at all immune to doubt or verification. The soldier wounded in battle who wakes to find that he has lost his eyesight and all sensation in his limbs may very well doubt that he has two hands. If by 'human being' Kazepides means 'conscious subject', then perhaps, for reasons pointed out by Descartes, I cannot doubt that I am a human being; but there is nothing to prevent *others* from doubting it. It is not hard to conceive of circumstances under which someone else might mistake me for an automaton or a waxwork model. And the child who has not yet learned that automobiles do not grow on trees may be ignorant of a fairly basic fact about the world, but she is not missing a criterion of rationality. None of the propositions cited by Kazepides must be taken on faith by everyone as a condition of competent language-use. The case for the existence of river-bed propositions is therefore far from being made out.

At any rate, it will be clear that the later debate differs from the earlier one in its dependence on this premise. The claim that there are some contingent propositions which must be taken on faith by everyone does not enter into the arguments of the contributors to the earlier debate. From the insistence that we all need paradigms against which to assess to the truth or falsity of contingent propositions, it does not follow that we all need *the same* paradigms.

1.5.0 Conclusion

My principal aims in this chapter have been to set out the liberal account of Religious Education and to summarise the arguments of the contributors to the debate about its logical coherence.

According to the liberal account, the aim of Religious Education is the transmission of religious understanding without religious belief. That is to say, teachers ought to explain to pupils what religious propositions mean without trying to persuade them of their truth or falsity. The reason for this is that no religious proposition is known to be true or false, and the transmission of not-known-to-be-true beliefs is morally objectionable.

The logical coherence of the liberal account was first thrown into question by Hirst in his paper 'The forms of knowledge revisited' (1973). Hirst deduces that it is impossible to transmit religious understanding without religious belief from the premises (i) that religion is a logically unique form of knowledge and (ii) that understanding a logically unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. The ensuing philosophical debate has turned on the validity of these two premises. Both are endorsed by Marples, who shares the view that 'religious understanding presupposes religious belief'. Attempts to defend the liberal account have been made by Attfield and Gardner, both of whom concentrate on disproving the second premise. However, Attfield's attempt to defeat the neo-Wittgensteinian argument is unsuccessful and Gardner fails to address it altogether. I concluded that neither of Hirst's premises has been either proved or disproved.

I also discussed a related debate in philosophy of education about whether or not the class of river-bed propositions includes any religious propositions. If so, such propositions should perhaps be exempted from the prohibition on transmitting religious beliefs. However, there seems to be no good reason for positing the existence of river-bed propositions in the first place.

The central aim of the present thesis is to resolve the debate about the logical coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education. It will be argued that Hirst's second

premise is sound but his first is not. Once the claim that religion is a unique form of knowledge is rejected, the case against the liberal account of Religious Education collapses.

1.5.1 Overview of thesis

I conclude with a brief overview of the thesis.

In Chapter Two I set the philosophical debate in practical context. I show, with reference to current Agreed Syllabuses, that the transmission of religious understanding without religious belief is an explicit aim of Religious Education in British state schools. I then discuss the research evidence on students' interpretations of religious propositions, and report on a small empirical investigation into what students understand by the proposition 'God exists'.

In Chapter Three I set out what I take to be the nature of philosophical inquiry. I examine the type of truths with which philosophy is concerned and the method by which such truths are uncovered. I go on to identify three types of philosophy, based on the different aims with which philosophical inquiries are conducted. I conclude with some remarks about the subdiscipline of philosophy of education.

The *raison d'etre* of the liberal account of Religious Education is the conviction that the transmission of religious beliefs is morally wrong. My aim in Chapter Four is to defend that conviction. In the first part of the chapter I examine and clarify the concept of indoctrination; in the second I argue that the transmission of religious beliefs is either indoctrinatory or deceptive and therefore morally wrong.

The central argument of the thesis is developed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. The challenge to the liberal account of Religious Education rests on the premises (i) that religion is a unique form of knowledge and (ii) that understanding a unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. I argue in Chapter Five that the second of these premises is sound. In Chapter Six I examine and reject various attempts to defend the first premise, and in Chapter Seven I set out a

positive account of the meaning of religious propositions which involves no claim to epistemological autonomy. Briefly, I argue that religious propositions are propositions about the existence, nature and actions of divine persons and, as such, do not differ in epistemological type from ordinary propositions about the existence, nature and actions of human persons.

Because they are propositions about persons, religious propositions can be distributed without remainder over the epistemological classes of mental and material propositions. In Chapter Eight I expand on and clarify the distinction between mental and material propositions.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I summarise the argument of the thesis and relate it back to the features of the practical context identified in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

The practical context

2.1.0 Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to set the philosophical debate described in the previous chapter in practical context. In the first part of the chapter I show, with reference to current Agreed Syllabuses, that the transmission of religious understanding without religious belief is an explicit aim of Religious Education in British state schools. In the second part I discuss the research evidence on students' interpretations of religious propositions and report on a small empirical investigation into what students understand by the proposition 'God exists'.

2.2.0 The aims of Religious Education

Under the 1988 Education Reform Act, Religious Education is part of the Basic Curriculum but not of the National Curriculum. That is to say, Religious Education is required by law and has the same status as the subjects of the National Curriculum, but it is not subject to a nationally prescribed syllabus:

> The special status of religious education as a part of the basic but not the National Curriculum is important. It ensures that religious education has equal status in relation to the core and other foundation subjects within a school's curriculum, but it is not subject to *nationally prescribed* attainment targets, programmes of study and assessment arrangements. (Circular 3/89, DES)

The 1988 Act requires that syllabuses for Religious Education be drawn up at the local level by Agreed Syllabus Conferences and their implementation monitored by Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs). Agreed Syllabus Conferences are encouraged but not required to adopt the National Curriculum subject model of Attainment Targets and Programmes of Study. Most have done so, though a few have offered token resistance. Attainment Targets have been rejected by some Conferences in favour of Aspects (Warwickshire Agreed Syllabus, 1996), General Objectives (Suffolk Agreed Syllabus, 1995) or Principles (Wigan Agreed Syllabus, 1993), but these differences in vocabulary are largely cosmetic.

The reasons for the exclusion of Religious Education from the National Curriculum are not at all clear. Edwin Cox speculates as follows:

> Why is religious education alone left to local control? The assumption behind this provision would seem to be that the teaching about religion has to be dealt with differently in different localities and that a common national syllabus would not meet pupils' needs. If this is the case it throws an interesting light on what Parliament thinks religious education is designed to accomplish. It is to teach mainly about the religion and the religious concerns of the neighbourhood, and be fashioned and monitored, to some extent, by local religious interests. Behind it is the hope that religious education will incline pupils to accept the dominant faith of the locality and so be welded into the local community. (Cox & Cairns, 1989, p.25)

Whether or not the hope that syllabuses informed by 'the religious concerns of the neighbourhood' would 'incline pupils to accept the dominant faith of the locality' was entertained by Parliament in 1988 is an interesting question. But whatever it may have hoped for, by assigning the task of syllabus construction to locally constituted Agreed Syllabus Conferences, Parliament forfeited its say in what 'religious education is designed to accomplish'.

What, then, are the aims of Religious Education as laid down in the Agreed Syllabuses? I examined fifteen Agreed Syllabuses[1] and found them to be unanimous in their endorsement of the liberal account of Religious Education. That is to say, they all give implicit or explicit support to the propositions (i) that Religious Education is not concerned with the transmission of religious belief and (ii) that it is concerned with the transmission of religious understanding.

Many Agreed Syllabuses are at pains to point out that the teacher of Religious Education has no business either promoting or undermining religious belief. For example:

> ... an Agreed Syllabus must not be designed to convert

[1] The syllabuses examined were those for the counties of Dorset, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Suffolk, Warwickshire and Wiltshire; the cities of Birmingham and Coventry; the London Boroughs of Havering and Redbridge; and the Metropolitan Boroughs of South Tyneside and Wigan.

students or to urge a particular religion or religious belief on students.
(*Reaction, Reflection, Response: The Dorset Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, p.1)

The intention is not to get pupils to believe that a particular religion is true or false, nor to encourage them to adopt a particular faith. Religious education is neither indoctrination nor a missionary enterprise.
(*Religious Education and Collective Worship: The Havering Agreed Syllabus and Handbook*, 1992, p.4)

The role of the school is not to encourage or support any one religious faith. Religious Education in our schools makes no judgments between different faiths.
(*Religious Education in Coventry: Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, 1991, p.8)

It is no part of the responsibility of the school either to promote or to undermine any particular religious stance.
(*Shropshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, 1991, p.4)

There is a clear distinction between the role of faith communities in nurturing pupils in a religion and the role of the school in teaching pupils to reflect on religion in its many forms in the world.
(*Religious Education in Oxfordshire: The Agreed Syllabus*, p.1)

Those syllabuses which do not explicitly reject the aim of transmitting religious belief or nurturing faith do so implicitly by failing to list it among the aims of the subject.

Several Agreed Syllabuses include a general statement of the aims of Religious Education. The development of religious understanding features prominently in such statements. For example:

> The central aims of Religious Education are to enable pupils to acquire and develop *appreciation and understanding of religious belief*, and to consider some of the fundamental questions of human existence which religions address in different ways.
> (*Religious Education in Coventry: Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, 1991, p.8, my italics)

> The principal aim of Religious Education is to help young people to achieve *a knowledge and understanding of religious*

experiences, insights, beliefs and practices. This will enable them to deepen or realise their own beliefs, and respect the freedom of other people to hold beliefs different from their own.
(*Shropshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, 1991, p.5, my italics)

[The aim of Religious Education is] to enable pupils to gain *a knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs, practices, experiences and insights* and appreciate the importance and influence of these in the life of believers, in order that they may develop their own beliefs, ideas and attitudes while respecting the right of other people to hold beliefs different from their own.
(*Religious Education and Collective Worship: The Havering Agreed Syllabus and Handbook*, 1992, p.4, my italics)

Religious Education encourages a reflective approach to living, *a knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and practices*, and a development of personal skills in forming reasoned opinions based on evidence and argument.
(*Religious Education in Oxfordshire: The Agreed Syllabus*, 1992, p.1, my italics)

Finally, those Agreed Syllabuses which conform to the National Curriculum subject model all include an Attainment Target (AT) or Profile Component (PC) concerned with understanding religious belief. (Profile Components are superordinate categories for the classification of Attainment Targets. They were a feature of early versions of the National Curriculum, but were dropped from later versions when the number of Attainment Targets in each subject was reduced.) For example:

AT1: Knowledge, Understanding of religious belief and practice.
(*Religious Education in Oxfordshire: The Agreed Syllabus*, 1992)

AT2: Knowledge, understanding and evaluation of religious belief, practice and expression.
(*Reaction, Reflection, Response: The Dorset Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, 1992)

PC1: To develop knowledge, understanding and appreciation of religious belief and practice.
(*Shropshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, 1991)

PC3: Knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and

practices.
(*Religious Education and Collective Worship: The Havering Agreed Syllabus and Handbook,* 1992)

PC1: Knowledge, experience and understanding of religious beliefs and practices.
(*Religious Education in Coventry: Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education,* 1991)

PC1: Understanding the nature, meaning and importance of religion.
(*Religious Education in the Basic Curriculum: Wiltshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education,* 1992)

To say that Agreed Syllabuses are unanimous in their endorsement of the liberal account of Religious Education is not to say that they speak with one voice. There are, for example, notable disagreements between syllabuses over the extent to which, and the means by which, Religious Education should contribute to pupils' spiritual and moral development. The disagreements here reflect a wider lack of consensus in the educational community about (i) what exactly moral and spiritual development are and (ii) the curriculum subject headings under which they ought to be pursued. However, differences in the emphasis placed on the promotion of pupils' spiritual and moral development do not affect the basic agreement between syllabuses on the aim of transmitting religious understanding without religious belief.

Against this it might be argued that those Agreed Syllabuses which adopt the aim of promoting spiritual development while renouncing the aim of transmitting religious belief are guilty of self-contradiction. Such an argument might derive support from OFSTED's assertion that spiritual development is 'characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life, and intimations of an enduring reality' (OFSTED, 1994a). The phrases 'valuing a non-material dimension to life' and 'intimations of an enduring reality' are frustratingly vague, but might well be thought to imply the possession of certain religious beliefs. It remains an open question whether or not it is logically possible to promote spiritual development while remaining neutral on matters of religious belief, but it is clear that this is at least the intention of the Agreed Syllabuses in question. They may be guilty of philosophical confusion, but their commitment to the principle of religious neutrality is not in doubt.

I conclude, then, that the transmission of religious understanding without religious belief is a central and explicit aim of Religious Education in British state schools.

2.3.0 Students' interpretations of religious propositions

How, as a matter of fact, do students interpret religious propositions? What do they take propositions such as 'God exists', 'Jesus is the Son of God' and 'Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu' to mean? At this stage I do not wish to ask *whether they understand* religious propositions, for this would preempt the argument of the present thesis; my concern here is simply with *what they understand by* religious propositions. I shall return to the question of whether their interpretations are correct in the Conclusion to the thesis.

The research evidence on students' interpretations of religious propositions is surprisingly limited. The overwhelming majority of empirical studies have focused on students' religious beliefs, on whether students accept or reject particular religious propositions rather than what they understand by them. Although there are many studies which profess to be concerned with 'children's religious concepts', these turn out to be studies of the beliefs children hold about God, prayer, heaven, etc., not studies of what the terms 'God', 'prayer', 'heaven', etc. are taken to mean (e.g. Deconchy, 1964, 1967; Gorsuch, 1967, 1968; Ludwig *et al.*, 1974; Heller, 1986; Tamminen *et al.*, 1988; Rosenberg, 1989; Frangoulis *et al.*, 1996).

Some attention to young people's interpretations of religious propositions was paid by Harold Loukes and Ronald Goldman in their influential studies of young people's 'religious thinking' in the 1960s. In *Teenage Religion* (1961), Loukes tried 'to discover what the pupil received from religious instruction, and what went on in his mind' (p.9) by asking some 500 secondary school pupils to comment on a series of religious statements generated in classroom discussion. His research participants seem to have been most interested in expressing their agreement or disagreement with the statements, but some of their comments shed light on what they took the statements to mean.

One of the religious statements upon which students were asked to comment was: *Well it could be true that God made the world, Miss, but it's not proved, is it? Nobody stood there and watched him, so we don't know if he did it or not.* Most students took this as an invitation to deliver their own verdicts on the truth or falsity of the proposition 'God made the world'. In some cases they supported their verdicts with reasons, thereby giving some indication of what they understood by the proposition in question. In all such cases, students clearly interpreted the proposition 'God made the world' as a historical claim about an action performed by a personal being at the dawn of time. This interpretation contrasts sharply with that of Loukes himself, who maintains that, contrary to appearances, 'God made the world' is a proposition in the present tense: 'To say 'God made the world' is really to say, 'The world is made, *intended*': and to affirm or to deny it is to make a statement about the meaning or meaninglessness of human life' (p.39).

Another statement presented to the students was: *I've always imagined God as an old man with long hair and a beard, wearing white robes, with a nice calm face and that.* Once again, some of the students' responses reveal what they understood by the proposition 'God is an old man with long hair and a beard'. Some took it to be a literal description, predicating physical features of an individual called God; others took it to be a metaphorical description, predicating of God the character attributes associated with elderly bearded men (wisdom, serenity, etc.). In both cases God was taken to be the sort of personal being to whom either physical features or character attributes can be intelligibly ascribed.

A few students took the term 'God' to refer not to an independent personal being but to some part or aspect of human persons. One student remarked 'I think that God is the soul of every person, because that is pure and when we die the soul leaves us'; another wrote 'I believe that God is not a physical thing, but other men's thoughts (their good thoughts) their bad ones being the devil' (p.47). These students rejected the ascription of either physical features or character attributes to God on the grounds that God does not exist independently of human beings. As Loukes remarks, however, it is 'the rarity of this view [that] makes it worthy of note' (p.47).

Goldman's *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (1964) reports an investigation into the religious thinking of 200 pupils from 6 to 17 years of age. Using the clinical interview method developed by Piaget, Goldman questioned his research participants on their responses to a series of religious pictures and Bible stories. The Bible stories he used were the stories of the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, and the temptations of Christ in the wilderness. Most of the questions Goldman asked about the stories required interviewees to speculate about the causes of, or reasons for, the narrated events; a few questions required them to explain what exactly they took those events to be.

For example, Goldman tried to elicit students' interpretations of the proposition 'God called out from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"' by asking them 'If Moses had been deaf, do you think he would have heard God calling him?' (p.93). In the answers he received he detected an age-related progression from the view that Moses' deafness would prevent him from hearing God, through the view that God would temporarily cure or overcome Moses' deafness, to the view that Moses' deafness would present no obstacle because God communicates telepathically. Goldman considered this progression to support his general thesis that religious thinking develops along Piagetian lines. What is perhaps more noteworthy, however, is the agreement between students of all ages that the proposition reports an act of communication from one person to another. Participants disagreed about whether the communicative act was publicly audible or telepathic, but not about the general nature of the event being reported.

In the same story God says to Moses, 'You are standing on holy ground'. Goldman went on to investigate what students understood by the assertion that Moses was standing on holy ground. Here it is evident that some young children took the word 'holy' to mean simply 'full of holes'. One said, 'If he has his shoes on, the ground might fall down. There's a lot of holes in it, you see, and it wasn't safe' (p.122). Others thought 'holy' described the texture or substance of the ground: 'It's soft ground... God's only in special places where they are soft. *Is this ground holy?* No, it's made of wood' (p.122). Most participants, however, took holy ground to be ground in some way associated with the presence of God. One child remarked, 'God was there and performed a deed there by making the bush burn' (p.123); another said, 'It's like when there's a king stands on a carpet, it's special. Well, God stood on that ground' (p.124). Confronted with the

objection that God is everywhere, some participants denied it, others reasoned that everywhere must be holy, and still others suggested that God might be more *more* present in some places than others. An older student suggested that God's presence is 'like a magnet. The magnetic field is everywhere, but the pole is in one spot' (p.125). Once again, it seems clear that those students who took 'holy' to mean 'associated with the presence of God' took 'God' to refer to an independent personal being.

Since the work of Loukes and Goldman, there have been only a handful of investigations into students' interpretations of religious propositions. The most interesting of these are two studies by Helmut Reich. In the first of these (Reich, 1989), he explored the difficulty young people have in reconciling the religious view that God created the world with the scientific view that the world was formed by cosmological and evolutionary processes. Operating on the assumption that these views are in fact complementary rather than contradictory, Reich sought to assess the levels of 'complementarity reasoning' which his participants exhibited. Those able to reconcile the views were said to be exhibiting higher levels of complementarity reasoning than those unable to do so. Reich explains the idea of complementarity reasoning as follows:

> When we speak of complementarity in thinking, we are referring to the way in which two or more descriptions or explanations of the same reference-object are coordinated. For example, the appearance of a human skill may be understood in terms of nature or nurture. Such descriptions or explanations pertain to different categories, are not independent of each other, but neither is there a causal relationship between them. They cannot be reduced to nor derived from each other. (*ibid.*, p.63)

That is to say, a full and adequate explanation of human skill will need to make reference to both nature and nurture, to both genetic dispositions and personal biographies. What appear at first sight to be rival explanations for something may turn out to be explanations of different kinds, and therefore complementary rather than contradictory. Reich assumes rather than argues for the view that, as explanations of the world, the doctrine of creation and the theories of the 'big bang' and evolution are complementary in just this way.

Reich interviewed 24 young people aged 6-25. He presented his interviewees with religious and scientific explanations of the world and asked them which explanation they considered to be correct. He found that the youngest children, aged 6-11, chose the religious explanation over the scientific one. A mid-range group, aged 11-14, asserted that both explanations were correct but were unable to explain how they could be reconciled. The older participants affirmed both explanations and attempted to integrate them with varying degrees of success.

The attempts made by these older participants to reconcile the doctrine of creation with the theories of the big bang and evolution give some indication of how they interpreted the former. Most argued that the religious account stands to the scientific account as explanations in terms of personal agency stand to explanations in terms of material causes. Just as mass-produced goods are made in one sense by human beings and in another sense by machines in factories, so the world was made in one sense by God and in another sense by cosmological and evolutionary processes. One participant says, 'the big bang is alright, but insufficient as an explanation. That takes something more, like a higher spirit who originated the big bang'; another remarks, 'the scientists are also right, but they cannot say why the world exists... God wanted it to exist' (p.65). Once again, then, we find young people interpreting the proposition 'God made the world' as a proposition ascribing an action to a personal being, here distinguished from propositions describing causal relations between material events.

In the second study (Reich, 1994), Reich questioned 30 adults and young people about their interpretations of two central Christian doctrines: the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus Christ. Both doctrines contain apparent self-contradictions. The doctrine of the Trinity appears to assert that God is both one person and three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit); the Christological doctrine appears to assert that Jesus Christ is both one person and two persons (God and man). As in the earlier study, Reich used the responses he elicited to place his participants on a scale of complementarity reasoning, awarding the highest scores to those who argued that the apparently contradictory elements of each doctrine are in fact complementary.

Reich found that his participants divided fairly evenly into three groups: those who found the doctrines irredeemably self-contradictory, those who felt they made partial

sense, and those who found them fully coherent. In itself, this finding tells us little about what participants understood by the doctrines. More illuminating are the interview excerpts Reich uses to illustrate his conclusions. One participant, commenting on the doctrine of the Trinity, said:

> Well, that is another problem you can't really grasp nor picture. But it shows our relationships: God the Father, the creator - you imagine what you feel for your own father but projected onto God. Then the Son, he is the mediator, he is much closer. He has reconciled us with the Father. And the Holy Spirit, the wisdom, the love, [is] really humanity's ideal. It is almost as if God has personally cut this up for us... Depending on the problem, we address ourselves each time to another 'person' in quotes. That simply is a help for us. (*ibid.*, p.122)

According to this participant, God is one person but not three persons. God is a personal being with whom human beings can enter into relationships. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not personal beings but forms or aspects of God. When the term 'person' is predicated of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, it is being used figuratively or 'in quotes'. God reveals himself in three aspects 'simply [as] a help for us'.

Another participant, discussing the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, argued:

> You can't judge this by the usual rationality nor by arguing from personal experience. Jesus has to be human, otherwise he could not suffer [and wouldn't be close to us]. And he has got to be God, otherwise atonement wouldn't work. And because both [natures] have to come together in a single person, you get this helplessness with the usual notions. (*ibid.*, p.122)

This participant finds a contradiction in the doctrine of the two natures of Christ which she is unable to resolve 'by the usual rationality'. The attempt to identify Christ as a human being on the one hand and as God on the other produces a 'helplessness with the usual notions'. She does not explain why this is so, but it is reasonable to infer that she holds the human and the divine to be mutually exclusive categories of person. Within the limits of human reason, Christ cannot be 'truly God and truly man' because he cannot be both a divine person and a human person.

Again we find propositions about God being interpreted as propositions about a personal being. The difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the two natures of Christ arise insofar as we expect talk about God to conform to the logic of talk about persons. The fact that most of Reich's participants felt the force of these difficulties, even if they thought they could solve them, suggests that they shared this expectation.

As part of his survey of Religious Education in over 500 schools, Colin Alves (1968) investigated students' interpretations of quotations from the Gospels. Unfortunately he used a multiple choice test which gave students a choice of four possible interpretations of each quotation, thus imposing rigid limits on their responses. In each case all the interpretations which make mention of God clearly present him as an independent personal being.

Finally, E.B. Turner (1978) interviewed 192 secondary school students about their interpretations of 130 religious words, selected on the basis of their inclusion in two well-respected biblical dictionaries. Students' interpretations of each word were scored dichotomously (i.e. marked simply right or wrong) against the definitions given in the dictionaries. The results were used to construct a standardised Religious Language Comprehension Test. The 12-year-olds in Turner's sample scored an average of 35 out of 130, while the 16-year-olds scored an average of 65. Unfortunately, Turner does not report any of his participants' actual responses, or give any indication of the range or variety of their interpretations.

The existing research, then, is somewhat limited. What evidence there is clearly indicates that students tend to interpret propositions about God as propositions about an independent personal being. There are exceptions, such as the participants in Loukes' study who thought that God could be equated with the human soul or with 'good thoughts'; but they are rare. For the majority of students, to say that God made the world is to make a historical claim about an action performed by a personal being at the dawn of time; to say that God is an old man with long hair and a beard is to ascribe either physical features or character attributes to a personal being; and to say that God called to Moses from the middle of a bush is to report an act of communication from one person to another.

2.3.1 An empirical investigation

To supplement the existing research I conducted a small empirical investigation into students' interpretations of the proposition 'God exists'. There follows a brief report of my research.

Research aim

The aim of the research was to find out what students nearing the end of their compulsory education understand by the proposition 'God exists'.

Research method

To know the meaning of a proposition is to know its *truth conditions* or its *method of verification*. (One can, of course, know the method of verification of a proposition without being in a position to verify it. At the time of writing *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), A.J. Ayer was unable in practice to verify the proposition that there are mountains on the far side of the moon; but he knew quite well how it could, in principle, be verified.) It follows that, to find out what a person takes a proposition to mean, one must find out what she takes its truth conditions to be, what she would count as decisive evidence for its truth or falsity.

To find out what students understand by the proposition 'God exists', I put the following standard question to my research participants:

> Some people believe in God and some people don't. What do you think would be decisive evidence for the existence of God? What would prove that God exists?

A question can be put to participants either orally (by interview) or on paper (by questionnaire). The advantages and disadvantages of each are well-rehearsed in the literature on research methods. The most decisive consideration here was the scope offered by interviews for asking follow-up questions adapted to participants' initial

responses. Initial responses to complex, open-ended questions are rarely clear and comprehensive; follow-up questions allow the researcher to seek clarification and elaboration. Follow-up questions also afford opportunities to correct misunderstandings of the original question and to give encouragement and reassurance to participants who lack confidence and might otherwise decline to answer. Another notable advantage of the face-to-face interview over the written questionnaire is that it increases the emotional investment of participants and hence the likelihood of their giving serious and considered responses.

The interview method of asking participants an initial predetermined question and a series of follow-up questions adapted to their responses is sometimes referred to as the *clinical method.* It was used extensively by Piaget (e.g. 1929, 1930), who claimed to have borrowed it from 'the method of clinical examination used by psychiatrists' (Piaget, 1929, p.9). Hugh Coolican describes the clinical method as 'a semi-structured interview method', the characteristic feature of which is that 'each person questioned will be asked the same questions, but further questions are tailored to the nature of initial replies' (Coolican, 1994, p.122). Janet Powney and Mike Watts concur that 'the precise nature of such interviews is determined by the child, since the child's answers determine the next experimenter/interviewer's question' (Powney & Watts, 1987, p.20). Ronald Goldman explains the advantages of the clinical method as follows:

> ... in the interview situation it is possible to follow up question after question to a considerable depth. A simple: 'How do you mean?' or: 'What makes you think so?' may elicit many types of response... This makes for wider differentiation of response, reveals obscurities, explores them, and gives a more accurate picture in depth of a child's concept. (Goldman, 1964, p.35)

In the light of these considerations, I put the standard question to participants in the context of informal interviews and followed it up with questions tailored to their responses. Participants were also asked some simple preliminary questions designed to ease them into the interview situation and build their confidence.

Sample

A sample of 40 students was drawn from four state schools in Oxfordshire. The sampling procedure was opportunistic, though efforts were made to ensure that the sample included roughly equal numbers of male and female students and that a range of ability levels were represented. The students were aged between 15 and 17 and had therefore completed at least ten years of compulsory Religious Education. They had also demonstrated an interest in studying religion by choosing Religious Studies as a GCSE subject or a General Studies option.

Research findings

In presenting my research findings I shall begin by giving an overview of the data, then examine some individual interviews in detail.

Of the 40 participants, 32 considered God to be an independent personal being whose existence could, in principle, be decisively verified. A further seven participants held God to be an independent personal being whose existence could *not* be decisively verified. The remaining participant offered a voluntarist account of religious belief, whereby the question of the existence of God somehow turns on whether or not one *wants* him to exist.

The 32 participants who argued that the existence of God could be decisively verified cited three principal types of evidence: (i) seeing God, (ii) communicating with God, and (iii) witnessing miracles. Two participants were sufficiently confident in their ability to recognise God on sight to assert that seeing God would be enough to settle the matter. 17 thought the existence of God would be proved by the occurrence of a *bona fide* miracle. The remaining 13 argued that some combination of seeing God, communicating with him and witnessing the performance of miracles would be necessary.

The seven participants who denied that the existence of God could be decisively verified did so on the grounds we have no reliable means of distinguishing God from other superhuman persons. Even if one were to encounter a personal being who claimed to be

God and performed miracles on demand, it would always be theoretically possible that what one had encountered was in fact the Devil in disguise. The possibility of a superhuman impostor, capable of emulating God in all observable respects, means that we have no way of establishing with certainty that God exists.

I turn now to examine some of the interviews in detail. (In the following interview transcripts, 'I' stands for interviewer and 'P' for participant.)

Interview 1 - Stuart

I: Some people believe in God and some people don't. What do you think would be decisive evidence for the existence of God? What would prove that God exists?

P: Ah, right. If he was able to stop things in the world, say, he wasn't very happy with what was going on down here and he just sorted everything out, all conflicts. And just showed himself to us, as such. Let us see him, instead of him just seeing us.

I: And how would we recognise him? How would we know it was him?

P: I don't know. I don't think he'd be able to do it as a human life-form, because he wouldn't be able to pull it off, really. You'd just say 'That's a nutter running about', wouldn't you? So, I don't know, he'd have to appear from the skies really, wouldn't he? For anyone to really believe in it.

I: And even then, how would you know it wasn't some alien being pretending to be God? What could be done so there would be no question at all in anyone's mind that this must be God?

P: I don't know. He'd have to do something to really convince them. He'd have to show that he has got the powers of God. And no one but him is able to do it, not even aliens.

I: And what would those powers be? What is it that only God could do?

P: I don't know. Tricky questions! Until you actually see, you wouldn't know what he is capable of doing. You'd have to see him do it.

I: Right. What would convince you?

P: I don't know. He'd have to be pretty convincing, actually. Being able to sort out some sort of place, say, like all volcanoes, just sorted them out. If he could stop natural disasters. Natural disasters is the main thing he'd be able to stop. That would pretty much convince me.

Stuart is a typical example of the 32 participants who considered God to be a personal being whose existence could, in principle, be established. He argues that a being who 'appeared from the skies' and performed some mighty deed, such as stopping natural disasters, would have done enough to prove that he was God. It would not be enough for God to appear in human form and introduce himself as God: he would simply be dismissed as 'a nutter'. Whatever physical form he took, 'he'd have to show that he has got the powers of God'. Stuart points out that we do not know the extent of God's powers, or 'what he is capable of doing', but argues that the power to 'sort out' volcanoes and other natural disasters would be convincing evidence of his identity.

Interview 2 - Andrew

I: OK, now some people believe in God and some people don't. What do you think would be decisive evidence for the existence of God? What would prove that God exists?

P: Um, well it would prove it if he did speak to everyone at the same time with the same message. So people speak to each other and God has spoken to them, telling them the same thing, which could be something like 'I exist'. Or using a form of media such as television to somehow make an appearance. But it can almost be proved through faith healing, which can be recorded on video. And that is quite certain proof of another force being used which isn't human, which for me is God. But the existence of God is hard to prove because he's not visible, and humans need to see to believe.

I: So, to go back to the first thing you said, which was if he communicated with everybody at the same time in a way they could understand, how could we be sure that it was God who was communicating with us? What would make us know that that was God? And not, say, some alien being, or...

P: I think if God was to speak to you then somehow you'd have the knowledge it was God because it would be with sincerity, but also it would be calming. It would make everyone calm and take away anxieties and things. Whereas if an alien force was to, then I'm sure that it would cause panic. But God is something that does provide peace. And things like that.

I: So that would be the main way in which we could identify that it was God speaking to us, because it gave us a feeling of peace?

P: Yeah. And you'd just have the knowledge that it would

be God because your reaction to it wouldn't be the reaction to thinking something yourself and debating it; it would be undebatable, I think.

I: Do you think it may be the case that some people do have hallucinations in which they think God spoke to them, but they're wrong? And how would we know that that wasn't what was happening to us?

P: I don't think that you could prove a hallucination of God wrong because it's something that's happened to them. Anything that's happened inside someone else's head you can't necessarily prove to be wrong.

I: Mm. Right. So it would have to happen to all people. Because it would be quite hard to convince someone else just on the basis of what had happened in your head, I suppose.

P: Yeah. If it was to happen to everyone, then... A lot of people do speak to God and God gives them messages of what to do. And it hasn't happened to me so I can't say, but other people say it's happened to them. So if it was to happen to everyone, then it would be discussed openly and everyone, I think, would have a belief in God. Which isn't the case at the moment.

I: OK. And going on to faith healings, which is an interesting case. There are a lot of people who can perform tricks of all kinds, magic tricks, and there are various kinds of medicine and alternative medicine. How would one know that it was God that had done this particular healing, and wasn't some sort of clever...

P: Well, we watched a video actually in RE about faith healings, which featured a woman who was completely crippled and couldn't move and was in constant pain. And then they used a German man who was a Christian, who said he wouldn't do anything, and it was all from God, and God could send him the power to heal, which showed that God existed and God had the power to take care of someone. The woman was describing the pain she was in before and was thinking of killing herself, though she wasn't strong enough to do that. Then we had coverage of how she came in ill and the man just put his hands above her, and then she became better and ran around celebrating. And they all praised God because it had happened because of God. And she said she felt something inside her, she could feel herself become better, because she had a hundred percent belief that God would heal her.

I: Do you think her believing that God was going to heal her was connected with the fact that he did?

P: Yeah. I think she really did have a belief that she would be healed. I also think that the healer himself had a complete, undoubted belief in God, to be able to take power through God and use it to heal someone else.

Andrew considers that the existence of God is difficult to prove because 'he's not visible, and humans need to see to believe', but suggests two kinds of evidence which might be sufficient. They are (i) communication with God (which Andrew represents as private and telepathic), and (ii) the occurrence of faith healings.

With regard to the claim that God could demonstrate his existence by means of telepathic communication, Andrew offers ingenious solutions to a number of difficulties. First, to overcome the problem of privacy, Andrew stipulates that God would have to 'speak to everyone at the same time with same message', so that people could compare experiences and reach public agreement about the message and its source. Second, in response to the objection that the telepathic speaker might be 'some alien being' and not God, Andrew argues that the communication would instil a sense of peace in the hearer, would 'make everyone calm and take away anxieties and things', and that this would mark it out as a communication from God. Third, the complex question of how telepathic communications could be distinguished from one's own thoughts, addressed by Andrew without prompting from the interviewer, is answered as follows: 'you'd just have the knowledge that it would be God because your reaction to it wouldn't be the reaction to thinking something yourself and debating it; it would be undebatable, I think'.

The least coherent aspect of Andrew's argument is his response to the interviewer's suggestion that some people who claim to have received communications from God might be hallucinating. He says: 'I don't think that you could prove a hallucination of God wrong because it's something that's happened to them. Anything that's happened inside someone else's head you can't necessarily prove to be wrong'. Andrew seems to be alluding here to the fact that one person can never know for certain what another person has privately experienced. This is quite true, but has no bearing on the question of whether or not a particular private experience is an hallucination.

Andrew goes on to argue that the existence of God is proved by the fact that people who have 'complete, undoubted belief in God', and who ask God for the power to heal, are sometimes given that power. Such evidence, he says, can be 'recorded on video', and is 'quite certain proof of another force being used which isn't human, which for me is God'.

I: Some people believe in God and some people don't. What do you think would be decisive evidence for the existence of God? What would prove that God exists?

P: This is on my revision sheet! Isn't it to do with the way the world is really orderly? And Christians believe that God created the earth, and seeing it as orderly would rule out the possibility that it was done by accident.

I: Do you think that's decisive evidence? Certainly that's one of the arguments that people put forward, but do you think it makes it indisputable?

P: No. I mean the number of Christian believers should have some say. Not everyone's going to be... If they've all got strong beliefs then there's obviously something behind it. Also you have experiences when you're dying, and people see the light at the end of the tunnel. You speak to people who say, when their heart stopped, they were in between God, with his hand out, and life. And they saw him and stuff.

I: Things like that tend to convince the person who it's happened to, don't they, but do they really convince anyone else?

P: No.

I: So is there anything you can think of that God might do, or that we might do, to finally decide the question once and for all?

P: Well the Christians say that he's going to come back and he's going to judge the living and the dead. So to be certain, then he could come back and review the world, you know, say what was wrong with it.

I: Right, and how would we be sure - if some superbeing turned up and said 'I'm going to judge you all' - how would we be sure that it was God?

P: I guess you could never be sure because there are going to be hoaxes around, so I'm not sure.

I: But someone who turned up and did that would be a pretty likely candidate?

P: No he wouldn't, but... I'm not sure.

I: What would absolutely convince you?

P: I guess it wouldn't be a mass movement. Whole countries aren't persuaded overnight. It's more like individual people. And when bad things happen to people, like disasters, and they tend to look for a reason why, that's when people start to turn to religious belief. I guess the way it would convince more people would be if something like global warming started to have more of an effect, and then people would start to think 'Why is this happening?', and that would turn people.

I: Would that be a good reason for starting to believe in God? Because you were scared for the future of the world?
P: It might help you answer questions about why it was happening.
I: Right. Would it make it any more likely that it was true, though, that there was a God?
P: Not really, no.
I: OK, so what about you? What would make you certain?
P: What, that there was a God?
I: Yes.
P: I guess if either I did have an out-of-body experience, or if something happened to me that was really tragic, then I guess I would value life more. And then I'd think, well, why is there life. If I started asking questions, then that's when I think religion can help you. It still wouldn't convince me though. I guess an out-of-body experience would.

Barry offers four distinct forms of evidence for the existence of God. They are (i) 'the way the world is really orderly', (ii) 'the number of Christian believers', (iii) near-death or out-of-body experiences in which God is encountered, and (iv) the coming of God 'to judge the living and the dead'. However, he quickly withdraws any claim to the sufficiency of each form of evidence when it is challenged by the interviewer (with the exception of (ii), which the interviewer does not pursue). The design argument, which Barry has remembered from his revision sheet, is abandoned when it is put to him that the orderliness of the world may be suggestive of the existence of God but does not seem to be decisive. The appeal to near-death experiences is given up in the face of the objection that such experiences tend to convince only those who have had them. And the eschatological verification argument is dropped when the interviewer asks how we could be sure that a being who came to judge the living and the dead was in fact God. In the end, Barry returns to out-of-body experiences as the only decisive evidence for the existence of God. A personal encounter with God, in the twilight space 'between God, with his hand out, and life', would, for Barry, settle the question of his existence.

In this interview, as in several others, the questions 'What would absolutely convince you?' and 'What would make you certain?' are used by the interviewer as approximate equivalents of the initial question about what would constitute decisive evidence. Barry, however, picks up on the fact that being convinced or certain of something is not the

same as knowing or having verified it. Presenting people with decisive evidence for a proposition is only one way of making them accept it. Thus, in response to the question 'What would absolutely convince you?', Barry argues that the prospect of a global disaster might make people turn to religious belief: 'I guess the way it would convince more people would be if something like global warming started to have more of an effect, and then people would start to think 'Why is this happening?', and that would turn people'. Barry agrees that an acceleration in global warming would not 'make it any more likely that there was a God'; his point is that it would prompt people to ask the sort of existential questions to which religion offers answers. 'Bad things' and 'disasters' do not constitute *evidence* for the proposition 'God exists', but they do furnish people with *motives* for accepting it.

Interview 4 - Rebecca

I: Some people believe in God and some people don't. What do you think would be decisive evidence for the existence of God? What would prove that God exists?

P: It's not meant to be proved. Um. Why do you have to show that he exists? Practically, if you think about it, he doesn't really exist.

I: OK. But just hypothetically suppose he did, suppose the people who believe in God are right, and God decided he was fed up with people not believing in him and he wanted to convince everybody that he really existed.

P: Well you can't prove that he exists, can you?

I: Why?

P: Because you don't know what he looks like, or what sort of form he comes in. I mean God could just be the air. He could be that table.

I: So there's nothing he could do?

P: I mean, some people think that miracles show that he's around, and some people say that they've seen him, and that sort of thing. But...

I: Why don't they work? Why don't they count as proof? Miracles and visions and things?

P: Because they're just the actions of him, in a way.

I: Right. But I suppose, if they're his actions, he must exist to perform the actions.

P: Yeah but how do you know it's God? It could be the Devil doing it.

I: OK. So is there anything God could do such that it would have to be God? So we'd have to say 'Oh, this can't be the Devil, the only person who could do this is God'?

P: No, I don't think so.

Rebecca is one of the seven participants who considered God to be a personal being whose existence could not be decisively established. She recognises that miracles and religious visions are often cited as evidence for the existence of God, but denies that they are sufficient on the grounds that we cannot be sure that God is responsible for such phenomena. 'It could be the Devil doing it', she argues. We might be able to establish the existence of personal beings with superhuman powers, but we could not reliably distinguish one such being from another.

Prior to developing this powerful objection to the possibility of verifying the existence of God, Rebecca tries two other objections. First, she objects that the existence of God is 'not meant to be proved'. It is not clear whether she means that God wants people to believe in him in the absence of proof, or that the proposition 'God exists' cannot be proved because it is not true. In either case it remains perfectly intelligible to ask what *would* count as decisive evidence *if* God existed and wished to make his existence known. Rebecca seems to accept this point when it is put to her by the interviewer.

The other objection Rebecca raises is that 'you don't know what he looks like, or what sort of form he comes in. I mean God could just be the air. He could be that table'. This is a valid objection to the view that one could establish the existence of God simply by seeing him. Since we do not know what God looks like, we can hardly be expected to recognise him on sight. The objection has little force, however, against approaches to establishing the existence of God which are not dependent on visual recognition.

Interview 5 - Maria

I: Some people believe in God and some people don't. What do you think would be decisive evidence for the existence of God? What would prove that God exists?
P: I think you can't prove that God exists because it's not like something like chemistry or biology. He was always there and will be ever there.
I: OK, but if God decided that he wanted to convince everybody, to prove to everybody... because there are a lot of people who don't believe in him at the moment. What could God do to persuade everyone?
P: No, I don't think that God wants to persuade

somebody to believe in him, because I think it's just if you want to believe in him you can, but you don't have to. I mean the people who don't believe in God don't have a bad life.

I: But presumably if God wanted to he could make people believe in him, couldn't he? If he decided that he did want that?

P: I don't think he could. Because I think nobody could influence me to believe in God if I didn't want to believe in God.

I: Even God himself?

P: I mean if you don't believe in God he can't influence you because you don't think he's there, and you can't be influenced by something that's not there.

Maria is the participant I described earlier as having defended a voluntarist account of religious belief. She argues that the question of the existence of God is not a scientific question, not 'something like chemistry or biology', and not a question that is susceptible of proof. As it happens, God does not want to prove his existence to people; but even if he wanted to, he would be unable to do so. The truth or falsity of the proposition 'God exists' is determined for each of us not by a method of verification, by the discovery and examination of relevant evidence, but by an act of will. 'Nobody could influence me to believe in God', she says, 'if I didn't want to believe in God'. Least of all could she be influenced by God himself, because, for those who don't believe in him, he is simply 'not there'.

The voluntarist idea that the existence of God depends on whether or not one wants him to exist is an extremely obscure one. At any rate Maria does not seem to share the view of the other 39 participants that the term 'God' refers to an independent personal being. Such a being plainly *could* exercise influence over those who did not want to believe in him, and would remain in existence regardless of whether or not his existence was recognised. Quite what, if anything, the term 'God' *does* refer to for Maria remains unclear.

Discussion

The most significant research finding was that an overwhelming majority of participants

(39 out of 40) considered 'God exists' to be a proposition asserting the existence of an independent personal being. Most of these thought that the proposition could, in principle, be decisively verified; a few thought that it could not. According to the former group, one would establish the existence of God in exactly the same way as one would establish the existence of any other person: by meeting him, communicating with him, and observing his actions. According to the latter group, the problem of identifying God is exactly the same as the problem of identifying any other person: there is always a theoretical possibility of impersonation or pretence.

It would be unwise to draw any strong conclusions from this finding. The sample was small and opportunistic, so generalisation to the wider population of students nearing the end of their compulsory education is statistically unwarranted. Only one religious proposition was tested, and no steps were taken to establish that participants' interpretations of 'God exists' were typical of their interpretations of religious propositions in general. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that the research participants were unrepresentative of their peer group, or that they placed 'God exists' in a different epistemological category from other religious propositions.

The important point to note is that the finding supports the existing research evidence discussed earlier. Most students, it seems, take the term 'God' to refer to an independent personal being, and consequently expect propositions about God to conform to the logic of propositions about persons. Whether or not they are correct in this interpretation is a question to which I shall return at the end of the present thesis.

2.4.0 Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to set the philosophical debate described in Chapter One in practical context.

In the first part of the chapter I argued that the transmission of religious understanding without religious belief is currently an explicit aim of Religious Education in British state

schools. I examined fifteen Agreed Syllabuses and found them to be unanimous in their endorsement of the liberal account of Religious Education.

In the second part of the chapter I examined the research evidence on students' interpretations of religious propositions and reported on a small empirical investigation into what students understand by the proposition 'God exists'. The most striking fact to emerge from the research literature, and the key finding of my empirical study, was that most students interpret propositions about God as propositions about an independent personal being.

It will be clear that the features of the practical context identified in this chapter do not carry much weight in the philosophical debate about the coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education. From the fact that the liberal account is unanimously endorsed by Agreed Syllabuses, it does not follow that it is coherent; and from the fact that most students appear to interpret religious propositions in the same way, it does not follow that they interpret them correctly. What the identified features of the practical context show is (i) that the philosophical debate is highly relevant to current educational practice, and (ii) that there is an intelligible interpretation of religious propositions which involves no claim to epistemological autonomy and which is widely accepted by students.

Chapter Three

Philosophy and method

3.1.0 Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to set out what I take to be the nature of philosophical inquiry, and thus to lay bare the methodological assumptions of the present thesis. I begin by examining the type of truths with which philosophy is concerned and the method by which such truths are uncovered. I go on to identify three types of philosophy, based on the different aims with which philosophical inquiries are conducted. I conclude with some remarks about the subdiscipline of philosophy of education.

I should emphasise at the outset that the type of inquiry I describe is not the only type of inquiry which goes on under the heading of philosophy. Plainly the term 'philosophy' is not tightly defined and it is fair to say that, historically, philosophers have not felt unduly constrained by disciplinary boundaries. Nevertheless, it is a type of inquiry which is, I think, peculiarly philosophical and which can reasonably be said to lie at the heart of all serious contributions to the discipline.

3.2.0 Necessary truths

Philosophy, like mathematics, is concerned with necessary truths. A proposition is said to be necessarily true when its truth is not contingent on any state of affairs, when there are no conceivable circumstances under which it would not be true. The philosopher and the mathematician are excused from making observations or collecting data because empirical facts are irrelevant to the type of truths in which they are interested.

To say that a proposition is necessarily true is to say that it is *analytically* true, or true *a priori*. The terms 'necessary', 'analytic' and '*a priori*', when used in conjunction with the terms 'truth' or 'proposition', are synonymous. Their synonymy is clearly demonstrated by Anthony Quinton (1963), whose arguments are worth rehearsing here.

Quinton begins by observing that the distinction between necessary and contingent

truths constitutes 'an exclusive and exhaustive division of the realm of truths' (p.109). A necessary truth is one that is 'true in itself'; a contingent truth is one that is 'true dependently on or because of something else'. There are no other ways in which a proposition may be true.

He goes on to argue that the idea of the analytic is 'a development or elucidation of the idea of the necessary' (p.109). An analytic truth is defined as a proposition which is true in virtue of its meaning. If a proposition is true in itself, it must be true in virtue of its meaning:

> If a truth is necessary it is true in itself and independently of everything outside it. The statement itself consists of a form of words with a meaning attached. But it is not the form of words that determines the truth of the statement... Since there is nothing more to the statement than the words it is composed of and the meaning they are given and since the words do not determine its truth, if it is true in itself it must be true in virtue of its meaning. (*ibid.*, pp.109-10)

An *a priori* truth is negatively defined as a truth which is not empirical, and the idea of the empirical is 'a development or elucidation of the the idea of the contingent' (p.110). The something else on which contingent truths are dependent must be experience, because a proposition whose truth depended on something outside itself and outside human experience would be unintelligible to us, and therefore not a proposition at all:

> [The idea of the empirical] aims to explain how a statement can owe its truth to something else, what conditions the something else must satisfy if it is to confer truth on a statement. To require it to be experience is to say that unless it is something of whose existence we can in principle become aware then the form of words involved has not made out its claim to be a statement. No limit is set here to the possible forms of experience or awareness, in particular no equation of experience and sense-experience is implied. For a form of words to be understood as a statement we must know what its truth-conditions are and to know this is to be able to recognise them when they occur, to know what it would be like to experience them. (*ibid.*, p.110)

Quinton concludes that the distinctions between necessary and contingent, analytic and synthetic, and *a priori* and empirical, are logically equivalent. The temptation some

philosophers have felt to postulate the existence of 'synthetic *a priori* truths' is attributable to the fact that the terms 'synthetic' and '*a priori*' are both negatively defined. A synthetic truth is one which is not analytic and therefore not true in virtue of its meaning; an *a priori* truth is one which is not empirical and therefore not true in virtue of experience. This seems to leave open the possibility of propositions which are true in virtue of 'some third consideration', and which are therefore both synthetic and *a priori*. But in fact there is no such possibility because the analytic and the empirical are elucidations of the necessary and the contingent, which make an exhaustive division of the realm of truths. A synthetic *a priori* truth is simply a contradiction in terms.

A necessary truth, then, is true in itself, which is to say that it is true in virtue of its meaning. But what exactly does this mean? How is it possible for a proposition to be true in virtue of its meaning? The answer is that an analytic truth *asserts* no more than it *assumes*. A proposition comprises a subject-expression (the assumption) and a predicate-expression (the assertion). Where the meaning of the subject-expression includes, or is identical with, the meaning of the predicate-expression, the assertion does not exceed the assumption and the proposition is 'true in itself'. 'In an analytical judgment,' writes Kant, 'I predicate of the concept only that which was already thought in it' (Kant, 1781, p.151). Quinton puts it as follows:

> The question was: how can the meaning of a statement be such as to rule out the possibility of its falsehood and thus make it necessarily true? The reply is that if a statement makes some assumption, categorical or hypothetical, as to how things are and then does no more than assert all or part of what has been thus assumed it runs no risk of falsification. The only way to guarantee that what a statement asserts is correct is to assume that it is. Unless the occurrence of something incompatible with what is asserted is ruled out by the assumption of the statement the assertion may turn out to be false. Necessary truth, then, depends on repetition. (*op. cit.*, pp.113-4)

The proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried men' is analytically true because the meaning of the term 'bachelor' is identical with the meaning of the phrase 'unmarried man', so what is asserted is identical with what has been assumed. Or again, the proposition 'All squares are rectangles' is analytically true because the meaning of the term 'square' includes the meaning of the term 'rectangle', so what is asserted is included

in what has been assumed.

The fact that analytic truths depend on repetition gives rise to the suspicion that they are mere trivialities, a suspicion which tends to be reinforced by the use of such examples as 'All bachelors are unmarried men' and 'All squares are rectangles'. But it is an unwarranted suspicion. These examples are chosen not for their philosophical profundity but for their simplicity and indubitability. When we are dealing with epistemological questions, remarks Renford Bambrough, 'we stick to "two and two make four" for the sound reason that it is difficult enough to explain *how* we know a mathematical proposition to be true, without having to wonder at the same time *whether* we know it to be true' (Bambrough, 1969, p.25). To illustrate the nature of analytic truths it is easiest to use trivial examples; it does not follow that all analytic truths are trivial. If the argument set out above is correct, the proposition 'All *a priori* truths are analytic' is analytically true, but one feels little temptation to describe it as trivially true.

3.2.1 The meaning of an expression

I have argued that a proposition is necessarily or analytically true when the meaning of the subject-expression includes or is identical with the meaning of the predicate-expression. As yet, I have said nothing about what I take 'the meaning of an expression' to be. It is a phrase to which J.L. Austin thinks no coherent meaning can be assigned: 'the phrase "the meaning of a word" is, in general, if not always, a dangerous nonsense-phrase' (Austin, 1961, p.56). This is an excessively sceptical view of the matter, but it is certainly a phrase which stands in need of careful scrutiny.

As a first shot, we may follow Wittgenstein in observing that the meaning of an expression is the set of rules governing its use:

> For a *large* class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 43)

The meaning of an expression is not the object to which it refers, but the rules by which

it is used. The relationship between an expression and its meaning is not that of 'money, and the cow that you can buy with it', but that of 'money, and its use' (*ibid.*, Section 120). Paul Hirst expands on the analogy:

> Words, phrases and even sentences are, to some extent, like coins and their meanings are like the values of coins. With the coins one can buy a multitude of different things, get the laundry done, see a film and so on. But the value is none of these particular things, nor what is represented say in gold. It is only through its part in the monetary system as a whole, and what that entails, that we can know what its value is. So with the meaning of a word. It is what you can do with it that is the key to its meaning. (Hirst, 1974, p.75)

Wittgenstein also likens words to chess-pieces. 'Bachelor' is a word which can always and only be applied to unmarried men; a bishop is a chess-piece which can always and only be moved diagonally across the board. Learning the rules of language is no different in principle from learning the rules of chess. Both are 'normative practices', in which 'rule-governed techniques are learnt by engaging in the practice, subject to correction, guided by example and explanation' (Hacker, 1996, p.211). Words, like chess-pieces, are empirical phenomena which can be seen, described, measured and counted; but to understand them is to know what can be done with them, to know the rules by which they are used:

> We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. But we talk about it as we do the pieces in chess when we are stating the rules of the game, not describing their physical properties. The question 'What is a word really?' is analogous to 'What is a piece in chess?' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 108)

The meaning of an expression, then, is the set of rules governing its use. What the analogies with coins and chess-pieces do not bring to light is the fact that there are two distinct types of rule or criterion which can govern the use of an expression. I shall call these *logical criteria* and *experiential criteria*. Put simply, logical criteria connect expressions to other expressions and experiential criteria connect expressions to experiences. It will be recalled that the distinction between logical and experiential criteria was drawn in Chapter One to explain the argument that understanding

propositions of a particular logical type involves holding certain propositions of that type to be true or false. I want here to elaborate on the distinction.

The distinction can be illustrated by means of a standard example. To know the meaning of the word 'red' is to know (i) the rules connecting it to other words and (ii) the rule connecting it to a particular experience. To know the former is to be able to define the word 'red', to construct propositions with it, to say what is entailed and what is not entailed by propositions in which it appears. To know the latter is to know which experience is the experience of seeing the colour red, to know what the colour red looks like. A person who knows both the logical criteria and the experiential criterion governing the use of the word 'red' is said to know its meaning.

I want to make two key points about this relatively straightforward distinction. First, while all expressions are governed by logical criteria, only some are governed by experiential criteria. Second, while the logical criteria for the use of an expression can be learned independently of its experiential criteria, the reverse is not true. I shall argue each of these points in turn.

It is clear that all expressions are governed by logical criteria. A word with no logical connection to other words would not be part of a language, and therefore would not be a word at all. But it is not clear, and is not in fact the case, that all expressions are governed by experiential criteria. Some words (e.g. 'red', 'round', 'sticky', 'pain', 'anger') are connected to particular experiences which operate as criteria for their application; other words (e.g. 'thief', 'alkali', 'discovery', 'ingenious', 'storage') are not so connected. There are, of course, sequences of observations one can undertake to establish that something is a thief or an alkali, but there are no particular experiences uniquely associated with thieves and alkalis. These are words which lack experiential criteria.

There is nothing mysterious about how expressions which lack experiential criteria can be applied to the world. They are connected to experience *indirectly* though their logical connections to expressions which have experiential criteria. It is necessary, if language is to be a form of communication, for *some* words to be directly connected to particular experiences, but not for *all* words to be so connected. A conceptual scheme must be anchored in experience at some points, but it need not be anchored at every point.

Now to my second point. It is plainly possible to learn the logical criteria governing the use of expressions without learning their experiential criteria. To keep to our example, a colour-blind person who is fluent in the English language may be said to have learned the logical criteria but not the experiential criteria for the use of the word 'red'. She is prohibited from learning its experiential criteria by a physical incapacity. One can equally well imagine, though one is less likely to encounter, a colour-sighted person fluent in the English language who has simply never been taught which colours are which. Such a person can see colours perfectly well, and she understands the logical relations between colour words, but she has not learned the experiential criteria which would enable her to pick out red objects.

Logical criteria, then, can be learned quite independently of experiential criteria. The reverse, however, is not true. A person cannot learn the experiential criteria for the use of an expression without also learning (or already knowing) its logical criteria. The reason for this is that experiential criteria can only be taught by *pointing*, by what Wittgenstein calls 'ostensive definition'; but pointing is never sufficient to identify the object, property or event one has in mind. To teach experiential criteria by pointing, one must say what one is pointing at, but to say what one is pointing at is to teach (or presuppose knowledge of) the logical criteria of the expression in question. Wittgenstein writes:

> So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use - the meaning - of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition "That is called 'sepia'" will help me to understand the word. (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 30)

He continues:

> Suppose, however, someone were to object: "It is not true that you must already be master of a language in order to understand an ostensive definition: all you need - of course! - is to know or guess what the person giving the explanation is pointing to. That is, whether for example to the shape of the object, or to its colour, or to its number, and so on." - And what does 'pointing to the shape', 'pointing to the

> colour' consist in? Point to a piece of paper. - And now point to its shape - now to its colour - now to its number (that sounds queer). - How did you do it? (*ibid.*, Section 33)

One cannot simply point at the colour red. When one points at a red object and utters the word 'red', the hearer has no way of knowing which of the various properties of the object is being described, or even that the term 'red' is descriptive. It could be the *name* of the object. ('The person one gives the definition to doesn't know what one wants to call "two"; he will suppose that "two" is the name given to *this* group of nuts!' (*ibid.*, Section 28).) The hearer's attention must be explicitly directed towards the colour of the object, but to direct her attention in this way is to teach or presuppose knowledge of the logical connection between the terms 'red' and 'colour'.

To sum up: the meaning of an expression is the set of rules governing its use; such rules can be of two types, logical and experiential, which connect an expression to other expressions and to a particular experience respectively. In the light of these conclusions, let us return to the question of necessary truth and see what light has been shed on it.

It was argued above that a proposition is necessarily or analytically true when the meaning of the subject-expression includes or is identical with the meaning of the predicate-expression. We can now restate this as follows: a proposition is necessarily or analytically true when the rules governing the use of the subject-expression include or are identical with the rules governing the use of the predicate-expression. What remains to be clarified is whether the relation of inclusion or identity obtains between the *logical* or the *experiential* criteria for the use of the expressions in question.

My contention is that analytic propositions are true in virtue of the *logical* criteria governing the use of their constituent expressions. The proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried men' is analytically true because the expressions 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' are governed by the same logical rules, stand in the same logical relation to other expressions in the English language. These are good examples of expressions which do not have experiential criteria, expressions the meanings of which can be taught entirely without ostension. If the constituent expressions of an analytic proposition are not governed by experiential criteria, the proposition plainly cannot be true in virtue of such criteria.

In the case of propositions the constituent expressions of which *are* governed by experiential criteria, it seems that analytic truth can be established without knowledge of those criteria. A colour-blind person would have no difficulty in recognising the analytic truth of the proposition 'Nothing is both red and green all over'. Things are prohibited from being both red and green all over by the logic of colour words; one does not need to know what the colours red and green look like to see this.

Nevertheless, philosophers sometimes argue that it is experiential criteria, not logical criteria, in virtue of which analytic propositions are true. One such argument is developed by C.I. Lewis in *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946). Lewis uses the terms 'linguistic meaning' and 'sense meaning' to mark the distinction between logical and experiential criteria:

> It is in fact possible to think of intension in either of two ways. First, it may be taken as constituted by the pattern of definitive and analytic relationships of the word or expression in question to other words and other expressions. And second, it may be taken as the criterion in terms of sense by which the application of expressions is determined. The first of these we shall call linguistic meaning; the second, sense meaning. (*ibid.*, p.131)

'Sense meaning' is, I think, an unfortunate term because it implies that the only type of experiential criterion an expression can have is a sense criterion, which is certainly not the case. But this terminological quibble need not concern us here. It is clear that the distinction Lewis is drawing is precisely the distinction we have been discussing. He goes on to argue that it is sense meaning rather than linguistic meaning in virtue of which analytic propositions are true. The test of analytic truth is an 'experiment in imagination' in which two sense meanings are compared:

> We know that 'All squares are rectangle' [sic] because in envisaging the test which a thing must satisfy if 'square' is to apply to it, we observe that the test it must satisfy if 'rectangle' is to apply is already included. This experiment in imagination - which we must be able to make if we know what we mean and can recognise squares and rectangles when we find them - is sufficient to assure that the intensional meaning of 'square' has to that of 'rectangle' the

> relation prescribed by 'all-are'. (*ibid.*, p.152)

The problems here are manifold. First, it is doubtful that the terms 'square' and 'rectangle' have experiential criteria at all. There are no particular experiences uniquely associated with squares and rectangles; I can learn the meanings of these terms without ever having had squares or rectangles pointed out to me. Second, even if we allow that the terms 'square' and 'rectangle' are governed by ostensively taught criteria which connect them to the experiences of 'seeing a square' and 'seeing a rectangle', it is difficult to imagine what a relation of inclusion between such criteria could consist in. In what sense could the experience of seeing a square, as a pure sensory experience, *include* the experience of seeing a rectangle? One might, I suppose, notice certain similarities between the two experiences, but such similarities would hardly warrant the conclusion that all squares are rectangles. And third, even if both the preceding problems were overcome, it would still be the case that the analytic truth of the proposition 'All squares are rectangles' could be ascertained on the basis of logical considerations alone. The definition of the term 'rectangle' (a parallelogram all of whose angles are right angles) is included in the definition of the term 'square' (a parallelogram all of whose angles are right angles and all of whose sides are equal). Even if there were an 'experiment in imagination' which tended to confirm this relation of inclusion, it would be superfluous to the determination of analytic truth.

The reason Lewis gives for trying to build analytic truth on the foundation of sense meaning is that linguistic meaning will not bear its weight. Linguistic meanings are mere conventions, rules for the use of words devised by human beings, and a proposition which owes its truth to linguistic conventions cannot be said to be *necessarily* true. If analytic truth is to have the character of necessity, meaning must be made of sterner stuff than linguistic convention. Sense meanings, claims Lewis, are antecedent to and independent of language and therefore have a facticity which linguistic meanings lack:

> Taking these sense meanings apart from any question of their verbal expression, a relation of them is as much a brute fact, unalterable to our wish and will and obdurate to any decision or convention of ours, as is the fact that trees have leaves and rocks are hard. (*ibid.*, p.152)

But in fact sense meanings are no less conventional than linguistic meanings. Criteria for

the use of expressions, whether experiential or logical, are linguistic conventions, established by us and alterable 'to our wish and will'. On Lewis' own definition, a sense meaning is 'the criterion in terms of sense by which the application of expressions is determined' (p.131). The experience of seeing the colour red is what it is regardless of language; but to make that experience *a criterion for the application of a term* is to institute a linguistic convention. The experience might have been made a criterion for the application of some other term, or it might not have been made a linguistic criterion at all. The connection between the word 'red' and the experience of seeing the colour red is as much a matter of convention as the connection between the word 'red' and the word 'colour'.

The idea that the meanings of words could be somehow independent of language is barely intelligible. Meanings, writes Lewis, 'are not the creatures of language but are antecedent'; they would exist 'even if there were no linguistic expression of them' (p.131). But meanings are precisely and necessarily 'creatures of language'; if there were no words there would be no meanings of words. Meanings depend for their existence on the expressions or symbols whose meanings they are. Meanings, Lewis continues, are 'something which even a creature without the language-habit would have to entertain in order to use his intelligence for the successful conduct of life' (p.139). But however non-language-using creatures conduct their business, it is plainly not by entertaining meanings. The concepts of language and meaning begin to unravel at the seams if one tries to unpick the logical connections between them.

In any case, Lewis' anxiety that linguistic conventions cannot confer necessity on analytic propositions rests on a misunderstanding. He wrongly supposes that a proposition which is true in virtue of linguistic rules can itself be no more than a statement of a linguistic rule. And it is certainly true that a linguistic rule cannot be a necessary truth; it cannot be any kind of truth, for it does not assert anything. But analytic propositions are not statements of linguistic rules. 'All bachelors are unmarried men' is an assertion about bachelors in exactly the same way as 'All bachelors are unattractive' is. It differs from the latter proposition in that what it asserts about bachelors is already included in the meaning of the word 'bachelor'. Whereas the latter proposition could be falsified by the discovery of an attractive bachelor, nothing could count as evidence against the former proposition. 'All bachelors are unmarried men' is

true *in virtue* of linguistic rules without itself *being* a linguistic rule.

Lewis' attempt to make experiential criteria the basis of analytic truth is therefore neither successful nor justified. Analytic propositions are true in virtue of the logical criteria governing the use of their constituent expressions.

3.2.2 Quine's challenge

I want to conclude this section by examining an influential challenge to the very notion of analytic truth. In his essay *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1953), W.V. Quine rejects the 'fundamental cleavage between truths which are *analytic*, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are *synthetic*, or grounded in fact' (p.20). He mounts his attack on two fronts. In the first part of the paper, he argues that the concept of analyticity is unclear, that all attempts to explain or elucidate the concept have been unsuccessful. In the second part, he sets out a theory of truth which he considers to be incompatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction.

Quine's first argument, then, is that the concept of analyticity has nowhere been satisfactorily explained. As H.P. Grice and P.F. Strawson (1956) point out, even if this argument were successful, it would not do the work required of it. If, as seems to be the case, there is a perfectly workable distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions in ordinary philosophical usage, the failure of philosophers to give a satisfactory explanation of that distinction hardly constitutes a reason for rejecting it. The distinction is there, whether we can explain it or not:

> In short, 'analytic' and 'synthetic' have a more or less established philosophical *use*; and this seems to suggest that it is absurd, even senseless, to say that there is no such distinction. (Grice & Strawson, 1956, p.143)

Furthermore, by his own admission Quine's objections apply to only one type of analytic truth; namely, the type which rests on synonymy. He distinguishes between analytic truths of the form 'No unmarried man is married', which he describes as *logically* true, and analytic truths of the form 'No bachelor is married', which can be made into

logical truths 'by putting synonyms for synonyms' (*op. cit.*, pp.22-23). It is this procedure of putting synonyms for synonyms which he finds problematic. But if the first type of analytic truth can be explained to Quine's satisfaction, the problem clearly does not lie with the concept of analyticity. As Quinton remarks:

> Even if his objections to synonymy were well-founded his argument would not show that there are no analytic statements. It would show, rather, that explicit truths of logic were the only unequivocally analytic statements. (Quinton, 1963, p.126)

With these important qualifications in mind, let us turn to the substance of Quine's argument. The analytic proposition 'No bachelor is married' depends for its truth on a relation of synonymy between the terms 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man'. Synonymy, however, is an obscure notion. The only explanation we can give of it is one which presupposes the concept of analyticity:

> Turning the tables and assuming analyticity, indeed, we could explain cognitive synonymy of terms as follows (keeping to the familiar example): to say that 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' are cognitively synonymous is to say no more nor less than that the statement:
>
> All and only bachelors are unmarried men
>
> is analytic. (*op. cit.*, pp.28-9)

We are caught here in a vicious circle of technical philosophical terms. Synonymy and analyticity can be defined in terms of each other, but not in terms which give us any clue to their meaning.

In their response to Quine's paper, Grice and Strawson rightly insist that synonymy is not at all the obscure notion Quine makes it out to be. 'Synonymous' means the same as 'means the same as'. The distinction between 'means the same as' and 'does not mean the same as' is a perfectly ordinary, everyday distinction. The term 'bachelor' means the same as the phrase 'unmarried man' and does not mean the same as the term 'spinster'. If Quine continues to deny that he understands the distinction being drawn, it is difficult to know how to react to him. What he needs is not philosophical argument but English

lessons.

Let us turn, then, to the second part of Quine's paper. Here he espouses a pragmatic theory of truth which he holds to be incompatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction. All 'so-called knowledge', he argues, is provisional and subject to revision. The body of human beliefs is a vast 'man-made fabric' which we adjust when it comes into conflict with experience. Our criteria for making these adjustments are pragmatic. Although there is 'much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience', we tend to make adjustments which 'disturb the total system as little as possible':

> Each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic. (*ibid.*, p.46)

There are some beliefs which we are less inclined to revise than others, but there are no beliefs which are immune to revision, which are true 'come what may'. What we mistake for necessary truths are merely beliefs which are 'relatively centrally located within the total network', beliefs which we prefer not to change in the interests of maintaining the stability of the system. There is no difference in kind between centrally located propositions and propositions near the 'experiential periphery':

> ... it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system... Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. (*ibid.*, p.43)

Quine considers that his theory of truth is incompatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction because it excludes the possibility of beliefs which are immune to revision. The difficulty here is that the phrase 'immune to revision' obscures a crucial distinction. There is indeed a sense in which no belief is immune to revision. Any true proposition can be rendered false if we are prepared to change the meanings of its constituent expressions. If we change the meaning of the word 'bachelor' to what is currently meant

by the word 'spinster', the proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried men' ceases to be true. It is certainly and obviously the case that no true proposition can remain true under any reinterpretation of its terms. In this sense we can concede to Quine that no belief is immune to revision (though one might question whether it is correct to speak here of a change of *belief*).

But there is another sense in which it is false to say that no belief is immune to revision. We ordinarily describe a belief as provisional or subject to revision if we can conceive of some experience or experiment which would falsify it or count as evidence against it. Thus a person might believe that there are no black swans, but would be obliged to revise her belief if and when she came across one. Quine's talk of 'recalcitrant experiences' and 'sensory promptings' is strongly suggestive of revisions prompted by empirical falsification or conflict. But there are clearly some beliefs which are immune to this type of revision. There is no experience which could conceivably count against or conflict with the proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried men' or the proposition 'All squares are rectangles'. Some propositions are subject to revision in the light of experience and some are not.

Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, then, is rendered plausible only by the concealment of another distinction, that between empirical falsification and falsification by change of meaning. While all propositions are subject to the latter type of falsification, only synthetic propositions are subject to the former. The argument is concisely made by Grice and Strawson:

> Now for the doctrine that there is no statement which is in principle immune from revision, no statement which might not be given up in the face of experience. Acceptance of this doctrine is quite consistent with adherence to the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Only, the adherent of this distinction must also insist on another; on the distinction between that kind of giving up which consists in merely admitting falsity, and that kind of giving up which involves changing or dropping a concept or set of concepts. (*op. cit.*, pp.156-7)

Quine fails to show that the 'fundamental cleavage' between analytic and synthetic propositions is an unfounded 'dogma of empiricism'. It is, on the contrary, an

indispensable and well-understood distinction between two types of truth, and the basis of the distinction between science and philosophy.

3.3.0 Philosophical method

How, then, does one go about investigating whether or not a proposition is necessarily true? The question seems to present us with a paradox. If I know what a proposition means, it would seem that I should also know whether or not it is necessarily true, since necessary truths are true in virtue of their meaning; if I do not know what it means, I am not in a position to investigate its truth or falsity at all. One cannot know the meaning of the proposition 'All bachelors are unmarried men' and still be in doubt about its truth. Its truth could be doubted only by someone ignorant of the meanings of its constituent expressions, and such a person would require not a philosophical method but a dictionary. There does not seem to be any scope for a philosophical method.

This apparent paradox rests on the unfounded suspicion that all necessary truths are trivial. It is certainly the case that some necessary truths are such that to understand them is to see their truth. Because the word 'bachelor' is ordinarily *defined* as 'unmarried man', it is obviously and trivially true that all bachelors are unmarried men. The gap between understanding this proposition and judging it to be true is too narrow to require a methodological bridge. But many necessary truths are not trivial. It is quite possible to know the meaning of a non-trivial necessary proposition without noticing that it is necessarily true. Where the subject-expression of a necessary proposition is not ordinarily defined in terms of the predicate-expression, it is easy to miss the relation of inclusion or identity which holds between the meanings of those expressions. In such cases there is scope for inquiry, and thus for a method of inquiry.

To illustrate philosophical method, philosophers have traditionally turned to the class of necessary truths we usually classify as mathematical. Mathematical truths are paradigm cases of propositions which are logically true without being trivially or obviously true. In *The Meno*, Socrates demonstrates philosophical method to Meno by guiding a slave-

boy to knowledge of the necessary truth that the square on the diagonal of an original square has twice its area. The slave-boy does not initially know this to be true, even though he knows the meanings of the terms 'square', 'side', 'area', etc.; indeed, at the beginning of his conversation with Socrates, he holds the necessarily false belief that a square has twice the area of another square when its sides are twice as long.

Socrates begins by proving to the boy that his existing opinion is mistaken. Doubling the length of the sides of a square doubles its length *and* breadth, so the new square has four times the area of the original. He then asks the boy again how long the sides of a square must be if it is to have twice the area of an original square. Now the boy is flummoxed and unable to give Socrates an answer. Socrates asks Meno to watch how he leads the boy to the answer without supplying him with any new information:

> Now notice what, starting from this state of perplexity, he will discover by seeking the truth in company with me, though I simply ask him questions without teaching him. Be ready to catch me if I give him any instruction or explanation instead of simply interrogating him on his own opinions. (Plato, *The Meno*, pp.135-6)

Socrates proceeds to show the boy, through a series of leading questions, that the square on the diagonal of an original square has twice its area. The diagonal of a square bisects it, forming two equivalent right-angle triangles. If four such right-angle triangles are arranged in a square, with the hypotenuse of each triangle forming one side of the square, the new square has twice the area of the original square. This conclusion, which the slave-boy readily accepts, is a genuine discovery for him. Although he knew the meanings of the relevant expressions, he had not previously traced the logical connections in virtue of which Socrates' geometric proposition is true.

Socrates' illustration shows how a person can be ignorant of the necessary truth or falsity of a proposition while knowing perfectly well what it means, and indicates the kind of inquiry that is required to dispel such ignorance. It is a crucial feature of such inquiry that it does not involve the acquisition of new information. It does not involve making observations or collecting data; nor does it involve learning new words or concepts. What it does involve is disciplined scrutiny of the meanings of words, of the ways in which words are logically connected. It involves noticing features of the logical

structure of language which one has not previously noticed, but which are entailed by the ordinary definitions of words.

In an effort to explain how we can come by new knowledge without acquiring new information, Socrates (as presented by Plato) speaks of the immortal soul *recollecting* what it knew in previous incarnations:

> Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the next world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which, as we see, it once possessed. (*ibid.*, pp.129-30)

The doctrine of recollection is a useful metaphor. It is not wholly misleading to say that we already know the answers to philosophical questions, or at least that the answers to philosophical questions are embedded in what we already know. Thinking is all that is required to reveal them. Like memories, necessary truths lie dormant in the soul until they are disturbed by thought. 'If then there are going to exist in him, both while he is and while he is not a man, true opinions which can be aroused by questioning and turned into knowledge, may we say that his soul has been for ever in a state of knowledge?' (*ibid.*, p.139).

As a literal explanation of how it is that necessary truths can be brought to light merely by thinking, however, Socrates' doctrine of recollection is both inadequate and superfluous. It is inadequate because it merely defers the problem. If my discovery of necessary truths in this life is a remembering, there must have been an initial discovery in a previous life which was not a remembering, and this initial discovery stands in need of explanation. It is superfluous because there is a straightforward explanation for the presence of necessary truths in the soul which makes no reference to previous lives or prenatal recollections. Necessary truths are embedded in the structure of the language we learn as children. We learn them implicitly when we learn language and we make them explicit through philosophical inquiry.

In philosophy, then, we make discoveries by scrutinising or analysing the logical entailments of words. We remind ourselves what can and cannot be done with them, and

try to make explicit those logical connections which are not given in ordinary definitions. And the only resource we require for this enterprise is competence in the use of language.

3.4.0 Three types of philosophy

I have identified the type of truths with which philosophy is concerned and the method by which such truths are uncovered. In this section I want to sketch a loose typology of philosophical inquiries, based on the different aims with which such inquiries are conducted. I shall identify three types of philosophy: *logical geography*, *logical criticism of language* and *logical criticism of accounts and arguments*.

3.4.1 Logical geography

Logical geography is a metaphor coined by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (1949). He notes that ordinary language-users 'can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them' (p.9). They are perfectly capable of using and applying the terms in a language, but are largely ignorant of the network of logical connections and criteria which makes intelligent language-use possible:

> They are like people who know their way about their own parish, but cannot construct or read a map of it, much less a map of the region or continent in which their parish lies. (*ibid.*, pp.9-10)

The aim of the philosopher *qua* logical geographer is to construct such maps. Her task is to explore and chart logical territory, to stake out the terrain of meaning. She seeks 'to determine the logical cross-bearings of the concepts we know quite well how to apply' (p.10). Logical geography is philosophy for its own sake; it aims at the discovery of necessary truths simply because they are there to discover.

Ryle's own cartographic undertaking was to map the logical connections between 'the

concepts of the powers, operations and states of minds' (p.10). He wanted to mark the positions in logical space of such concepts as knowledge, intelligence, understanding, volition, feeling, sensation and imagination. I shall have something to say about Ryle's analysis of these concepts in Chapter Eight.

Other philosophers have examined other clusters of concepts. Ontologists have scrutinised the concepts of essence, existence, appearance and reality; epistemologists the concepts of knowledge, belief, truth and meaning. Philosophers naturally tend to be most interested in those concepts which seem to be the cornerstones of intelligibility, the most general elements in our conceptual schemes. The attempt to map these general or categorial concepts is sometimes dignified with the title 'metaphysics' and distinguished from the more precise and localised work of 'conceptual analysis' (e.g. Strawson, 1959, pp.9-10); but the difference here is one of degree, not of kind.

3.4.2 Logical criticism of language

The second type of philosophy I want to consider is premised on the idea that many of our ordinary forms of expression are systematically misleading. They are misleading because their grammatical form is at odds with their logical form; that is to say, they appear to mean something quite different from what they actually mean. The aim of philosophy *qua* logical criticism of language is to rewrite such expressions so that their grammatical form is congruent with their logical form.

Expressions with misleading grammatical forms do not necessarily mislead; we ordinarily use and understand such expressions without difficulty. But they do sometimes mislead, and the misunderstandings to which they give rise are curiously intractable. The logical critic of language tries to remove such misunderstandings by rewriting misleading expressions in a form which reflects their logic. As Wittgenstein has it:

> Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different

> regions of language. - Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an 'analysis' of our forms of expression, for the process is something like one of taking a thing apart. (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 90)

Philosophy, Wittgenstein continues, 'is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (Section 109). The problem lies not in incompetent language use, but in the grammatical forms of language itself. Grammatical similarities between logically different types of expression can mislead us about the meanings of those expressions. The problem is solved 'by looking into the workings of our language, and in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them' (Section 109).

Perhaps the clearest account of this type of philosophy is Gilbert Ryle's 'Systematically Misleading Expressions' (1931), which constitutes a 'powerful plain manifesto' for logical criticism of language (Flew, 1951, p.10). Ryle argues, with a hint of disappointment, that at least one of the tasks of philosophy is 'the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories' (p.40). The business of philosophy is the 'transmutation of syntax' (p.39):

> There are many expressions which occur in non-philosophical discourse which, though perfectly clearly understood by those who use them and those who hear or read them, are nevertheless couched in grammatical or syntactical forms which are in a demonstrable way *improper* to the states of affairs which they record (or the alleged states of affairs which they profess to record). Such expressions can be reformulated and for philosophy but *not* for non-philosophical discourse must be reformulated into expressions of which the syntactical form is proper to the facts recorded (or the alleged facts alleged to be recorded). (Ryle, 1931, pp.15-16)

Ryle goes on to give some examples of systematically misleading expressions. He begins with what he calls 'quasi-ontological statements', statements which assert that such-and-such exists. In the proposition '*x* exists', the grammatical subject is '*x*' and the grammatical predicate 'exists'. But these are not the *logical* subject and predicate. The proposition is not about *x*, nor does it ascribe the quality of existence. The logical subject of a proposition identifies the thing the proposition is about, and it is necessarily

true of an identified thing that it exists. If *x* were the logical subject of the proposition '*x* exists', it would state a necessary truth. But it is clear that when we use this form of expression we do not mean to state a necessary truth but a fact which might have been otherwise. If I assert that unicorns exist, my claim is contingent and contentious, not necessarily true.

The logical subject of the proposition '*x* exists' is not *x* but an unspecified something; and the property ascribed to this something is not existence, but the property of being an *x*. The proposition '*x* exists' can be rewritten, without change of meaning, as 'something is an *x*'. This form of expression has the advantage of being congruent with the fact it reports:

> To put it roughly, '*x* exists' and '*x* does not exist' do not assert or deny that a given subject of attributes *x* has the attribute of existing, but assert or deny the attribute of being *x*-ish or being an *x* of something not named in the statement. (*ibid.*, p.19)

Another example of systematically misleading expressions is what Ryle calls 'quasi-Platonic statements'. A quasi-Platonic statement is one whose grammatical subject is a universal, such as 'unpunctuality is reprehensible' or 'virtue is its own reward'. Again, unpunctuality and virtue are not the logical subjects of these propositions. It is not unpunctuality which is reprehensible, but unpunctual people; 'it is unpunctual men and not unpunctuality who can and should be blamed, since they are, what it is not, moral agents' (p.23). Similarly, it is not virtue but virtuous people who are rewarded. By rewriting these propositions as 'whoever is unpunctual merits reproof' and 'whoever is virtuous is benefited thereby' the misfit between grammatical and logical form can be removed.

Quasi-ontological and quasi-Platonic statement do not ordinarily mislead people. They are perfectly good English and we usually understand exactly what is meant by them. But they do present a metaphysical temptation to the unwary; namely, the temptation to multiply entities. If a proposition is to be meaningful, its logical subject must be an identifiable thing. The temptation is to mistake the grammatical subjects of quasi-ontological and quasi-Platonic statements for logical subjects and conclude that the world

is filled with things that don't exist as well as things that do, and with universals as well as particulars.

It is sometimes suggested, with some justification, that logical criticism of language is an act of philosophical penance, of atonement for the sins of the philosophical fathers. It is, after all, philosophers who have been most badly led astray by the metaphysical temptations presented by grammatically misleading expressions. The task of rewriting such expressions is an attempt by philosophers to put their own house in order, to undo the mistakes of the past. It is perhaps for this reason that Ryle does 'not very much relish' the conclusions to which his arguments point. Glenn Langford writes:

> The philosopher, therefore, may find employment in dealing with those problems traditionally regarded as philosophic by showing that we have been mistaken in regarding them as problems. Philosophy would continue to exist, but only by devouring its capital of past error; it has nothing positive to contribute. (Langford, 1968, p.25)

If this is intended as a criticism of logical criticism of language, it is only partially fair. The fact that it is philosophers who have been most badly led astray by systematically misleading expressions simply reflects the fact that it is philosophers who have taken the keenest interest in the workings of language. Systematically misleading expressions continue to pose a threat to understanding, to tempt the unwary into metaphysical error, so the task of detecting 'the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories' remains an important one.

3.4.3 Logical criticism of accounts and arguments

The third type of philosophy I want to identify is logical criticism of accounts and arguments. Whereas the logical critic of language is concerned with correct but misleading forms of expression, the logical critic of accounts and arguments is concerned with incorrect language-use, with incoherent accounts and fallacious arguments. Accounts are incoherent and arguments fallacious when words are misused or entailments overlooked, when statements contradict each other or conclusions do not follow from premises. Logical criticism of accounts and arguments is the attempt to remove misunderstandings

which arise from the incautious use of language.

The philosopher *qua* logical critic of accounts and arguments is the enforcer of logical laws and the detector of logical crimes. She scrutinises accounts and arguments for contradictions and inconsistencies, tautologies and ambiguities, solecisms and lacunas. She upholds the authority of language by showing how breaches of linguistic rules result in breakdowns of intelligibility.

There is no kind of account or argument which is immune from logical error. The philosopher monitors the pronouncements of physicists, psychologists and theologians, of politicians, teachers and lawyers, as well as those of other philosophers. She examines accounts of justice and arguments for the existence of God, theories of learning and justifications for military action, descriptions of quantum phenomena and explanations of mental illness. All of the many and varied edifices people construct with language are subject to spot-checks by the logic inspector.

This completes my typology of philosophical inquiries. The three types of philosophy I have identified are alike concerned with necessary as opposed to contingent truths, with logical connections and criteria as opposed to empirical facts and phenomena. They differ in their reasons for trying to articulate such truths: the logical geographer articulates necessary truths simply to increase the sum of human knowledge; the logical critic of language to remove misunderstandings arising from systematically misleading expressions; and the logical critic of accounts and arguments to remove misunderstandings arising from incautious language-use.

3.5.0 Philosophy of education

Let us turn, finally, to the subdiscipline of philosophy of education. Philosophy of education is philosophy which is relevant to the practice of education. A philosophical inquiry is said to be relevant to the practice of education when it contributes, directly or indirectly, to the improvement of educational practice or the solution of educational

problems. Philosophy of education, writes Langford, 'just is philosophy, but with an eye to the practices and problems of those engaged in or concerned with education' (Langford, 1968, p.14).

Importantly, the criterion of relevance to the practice of education does not restrict the philosopher of education to the analysis of educational concepts. The practice of education raises questions about what can be known as well as what can be taught, about what constitutes a good person as well as what constitutes an educated one. The philosopher of education will address many of the central questions of philosophy, but she will address them because and insofar as they are raised by the practice of education. As R.S. Peters has it:

> The philosophy of education is a family of philosophical inquiries linked together both by their philosophical character and by their relevance to educational issues. This relevance to education provides the point of entry which determines their selection from the general corpus of philosophical inquiry. The inquirer may be led, of course, by the logic of his probing into the most general problems of metaphysics and logic. But if he is, his route will be marked by a thread leading back to the centre. (Peters, 1966b, p.68)

The philosopher of education may conduct any of the types of philosophical inquiry identified in the previous section. In practice, most philosophy of education has been of the first and third types. Its twin concerns have been (i) to map the logical geography of educational concepts and (ii) to examine the coherence and validity of educational accounts and arguments.

In the 1960s and 70s there was a strong emphasis on the first of these concerns. Logical geographical work focused on such concepts as education (e.g. Peters, 1966a, 1967, 1970; Langford, 1973a), teaching (e.g. Scheffler, 1960; Hirst, 1971), learning (e.g. Hamlyn, 1967, 1973; Wilson, 1979) and indoctrination (e.g. Snook, 1970, 1972; White, 1967, 1970). By 1980, writes Paul Hirst, 'the very nature of education had been analytically mapped out and examined as never before... Many of the central concepts and beliefs in terms of which we determine and structure the content and practices of education had been analysed and critically examined' (Hirst, 1998, p.15). Logical geographical work of this type contributes to the improvement of educational practice

and the solution of educational problems by sharpening our understanding of what education is. Langford writes:

> But requests for clarification of the aims of education are perennial, and I want to consider, in general terms, what might be involved in such a request. Such requests spring from the feeling, which I share, that discussion of particular educational problems will be more profitably undertaken in the context of an understanding of education as a whole. What is really required is an understanding of the concept of education, and of the related concepts which occur in educational discussion ('teaching', 'learning', 'knowledge', 'punishment', etc.), and the provision of such understanding is a proper philosophical concern. (Langford, 1968, p.46-7)

In more recent years there has been greater emphasis on the second concern, the examination of educational accounts and arguments. Philosophers of education have been less interested in the geography of educational concepts than in the coherence of educational proposals and the justifiability of educational policies. An early example is Richard Pring's work on the arguments for curriculum integration (Pring, 1971, 1974). One of the arguments Pring examines is that the curriculum ought to be integrated because knowledge itself is integrated; that is to say, there is a unity in knowledge which is concealed by fragmented, subject-based curricula and can only be adequately conveyed by an integrated curriculum. He notes that the unity of knowledge thesis has a distinguished philosophical pedigree, but asks what exactly it would mean to speak of knowledge being integrated or unified. Integration is 'a unity of parts in which the parts are in some way transformed' (Pring, 1971, p.127); to integrate distinct bodies of knowledge is not merely to group or gather them, but to connect them in such a way as to transform them. 'There would have to be some formal characteristic of the whole from which the parts gained some new identity, this characteristic belonging only to the whole' (*ibid.*, p.127). It would follow, if knowledge were integrated, that a change in one area of knowledge would effect changes in all other areas:

> Thus one would, if one is to make the extreme claim about the ultimate unity of all knowledge, have to show that growth of meaning in any area of knowledge (for example in the sciences) would, even if in only a minute degree, necessarily affect the meaning that had been developed in any other area (for example, in one's conception of oneself and thus in moral knowledge and so on). (*ibid.*, p.128)

Since it does not appear to be the case that developments in one discipline entail developments in all other disciplines, and no good philosophical argument to the contrary has been forthcoming, the argument for curriculum integration from the unity of knowledge must be rejected.

These, then, are the two central concerns of philosophy of education. They are usefully summarised by T.W. Moore:

> This body of educational discourse is subject matter for the philosopher of education. His concern with it will be twofold. He will be interested in the conceptual apparatus employed. He will want to examine the major concepts used by practising teachers and theorists to see what exactly is being said by this kind of language... This activity of analysis is important perhaps in its own right, but certainly so as a preliminary to the second of the philosopher's interests, the examination of educational theory. For educational discourse is to a large extent a matter of educational theory and theories need to be scrutinised to see whether they are well founded or not. (Moore, 1982, p.14)

It is sometimes claimed that the criterion of relevance to educational practice requires philosophers of education to be 'close to the ground', close to the world of practitioners and policy-makers. This claim is certainly not logically true. Proximity to practice is not a necessary condition of relevance to practice. It is quite possible, in principle, for a philosopher to examine the geography of educational concepts, the coherence of educational accounts and the validity of educational arguments without ever having been, or been acquainted with, an educational practitioner or policy-maker. But although the claim is not logically true, it is, I think, generally true. The reason for this is that many of the accounts and arguments used by practitioners and policy-makers, which it is the philosopher's job to subject to logical criticism, are not articulated with conceptual precision. Educational discourse is riddled with metaphors and slogans, with ambiguous and rhetorical language. Before the philosopher of education can examine educational accounts and arguments she must work out what those accounts and arguments actually are. She must look beyond what is *said* to what is *meant*, and to do this she must be familiar with the ways in which talk is connected with action in the world of educational practice. When what people say is unclear, one can find out what they mean by seeing

what they do. Richard Pring writes:

> Moreover, any description of what is being done might *on the surface* contain all sorts of contradictions or looseness of expression that would make it compatible with a wide range of theoretical positions. It is rarely of help to take what is said literally and subject *this* to philosophical analysis. The meaning therefore of what is said can only be fully understood in terms of what is done in practice, what is not done, and what is deliberately excluded. (Pring, 1974, pp.33-34)

He continues:

> Far from there being any technical vocabulary, or explicit philosophical positions which one can immediately subject to philosophical examination or criticism, there frequently appears (especially in curriculum theory) to be little else than a medley of slogans, descriptions of practice of an obvious and disconnected kind, persuasive and emotive talk, and particular methodological recommendations. To make consistent sense of this requires careful reconstruction of what is said. (*ibid.*, p.37)

Philosophers of education must be close to the world of practice if they are to undertake this preliminary task of reconstruction, of interpreting or translating the forms of words used by practitioners and policy-makers. To neglect this task is to run the risk of analysing arguments which no-one is making. Pring suggests that his critique of the argument for curriculum integration from the unity of knowledge may not in fact be decisive, or even to the point, as it is unlikely that the phrase 'unity of knowledge' is being used literally. Advocates of curriculum integration probably have in mind a weaker thesis about knowledge, perhaps a thesis about the interrelationship between disciplines. Even as staunch a defender of the logical autonomy of different forms of knowledge as Paul Hirst speaks of 'the complex connections between the different domains'. It may be that what is concealed by subject-based curricula is the interrelationship between disciplines, and hence that the argument for curriculum integration from the 'unity of knowledge' has some force. It is, argues Pring, on the examination of the connections between disciplines, and not on the refutation of the unity of knowledge thesis, that the logical critic of this argument ought to focus her attention.

This concludes what I want to say about the subdiscipline of philosophy of education. It will be clear that the present thesis is an exercise in what I have called logical criticism of accounts and arguments, and that the educational account under examination is the liberal account of Religious Education. Though it is certainly the case that practitioners and policy-makers who advocate the liberal account of Religious Education do not always articulate it with conceptual precision, I take it that the preliminary task of reconstructing the account has been satisfactorily completed by previous contributors to the philosophical debate outlined in Chapter One.

3.6.0 Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to describe the nature of philosophical inquiry and thus to indicate the methodological assumptions of the present thesis. There follows a brief summary of my key points.

Philosophy is concerned with uncovering necessary or analytic truths as distinct from contingent or empirical ones. A truth is necessary when it is true in virtue of its meaning; more specifically, when the meaning of the subject-expression includes or is identical with the meaning of the predicate-expression. Some necessary propositions are obviously or trivially true; others are found to be true by means of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical inquiry proceeds, on the model of mathematical inquiry, by tracing logical connections and entailments.

Philosophical inquiries can be classified by their aims. Logical geography is philosophy for its own sake, philosophy which aims to uncover necessary truths simply to increase the sum of human knowledge. Logical criticism of language is philosophy which aims to remove misunderstandings arising from systematically misleading expressions, expressions whose grammatical and logical forms are incongruent. Logical criticism of accounts and arguments is philosophy which aims to remove misunderstandings arising from incautious language-use, to detect and expose incoherent accounts and fallacious arguments.

Philosophy of education is philosophy which is relevant to the practice of education. Most philosophy of education is concerned with the mapping of educational concepts or the examination of educational accounts and arguments. As a prelude to their philosophical inquiries, it is often necessary for philosophers of education to reconstruct the accounts and arguments they wish to examine, for which they require a familiarity with the world of educational practice.

Chapter Four

The objection to transmitting religious beliefs

4.1.0 Introduction

It was suggested in Chapter One (Section 1.2.0) that the transmission of religious beliefs is either indoctrinatory or deceptive, and therefore morally wrong. My aim in this chapter is to substantiate that claim.

The *raison d'etre* of the liberal account of Religious Education is the conviction that the transmission of religious beliefs is morally wrong. Because teaching for religious belief is objectionable, teachers of Religious Education must limit themselves to teaching for religious understanding. By the same token, the anxiety of those who reject the liberal account of Religious Education as logically incoherent is that, insofar as teachers are successful in transmitting religious understanding, they must also be guilty of transmitting religious beliefs. The fact, if it is a fact, that religious understanding necessarily involves religious belief is only educationally important if there is a moral objection to the transmission of religious beliefs.

This chapter has two main sections. In the first I examine and clarify the concept of indoctrination. In the second I substantiate the claim that the transmission of religious beliefs is either indoctrinatory or deceptive, and therefore morally wrong.

4.2.0 The concept of indoctrination

It is widely agreed that at least some ways of transmitting religious beliefs are indoctrinatory. There is rather less agreement on exactly which ways. Philosophical analysis of the concept of indoctrination has conspicuously failed to locate its logical boundaries. As Tasos Kazepides observes:

> Although few educational concepts have been subjected to such an extended systematic philosophical scrutiny as has indoctrination, there are still serious disagreements with regard to its exact nature. (Kazepides, 1987, p.397)

It is my contention that the concept of indoctrination is resistant to clarification because

it is what Wittgenstein calls an *inexact* concept. In ordinary usage, the term 'indoctrination' does not have clear logical boundaries; anyone wishing to use it with precision must *fix* logical boundaries by *stipulating* a definition. In what follows I shall (i) explain what I mean by an inexact concept; (ii) examine the range of criteria governing ordinary usage of the term 'indoctrination'; and (iii) stipulate the definition of 'indoctrination' I propose to use in the present thesis.

4.2.1 Inexact concepts

One of the difficulties in philosophy is what J.L. Austin calls 'the snag of Loose Usage' (Austin, 1961, p.183). The meaning of a word is its use in the language, so if a word is used loosely, or divergently, or inconsistently, it is naturally difficult to say what it means. There are various reasons for loose usage, some of which are more troublesome to the philosopher than others. Sometimes people simply choose their words carelessly. In ordinary conversation we do not always take the time to find just the right words; we make do with words which are approximately right, which give the gist of what we want to say, without worrying too much if we slightly abuse their logic. These minor infractions of linguistic rules are just that, infractions, and do not call the rules themselves into question. More awkward is when competent language-users genuinely disagree about the meanings of words. The same word is used in different, albeit similar, ways by different people, each under the impression that she is using it correctly. Here the philosopher has no choice but to recognise the existence of two or more concepts marked by the same term, and to specify which concept she is going to use.

But the most troublesome reason for loose usage, and the one we are concerned with here, is that there are some words we find ourselves unable or unwilling to define. It is not that these words are defined differently by different people, but that we get by without defining them at all. We agree on certain standard applications, but outside the standard cases usage is divergent because there are no firm rules to follow. Such words may be said to mark inexact concepts.

An exact concept comprises a set of necessary and sufficient criteria for the use of a term. An inexact concept typically comprises some necessary but insufficient criteria

and a range of additional criteria which function as loose guidelines rather than firm rules. Something is an instance of an inexact concept if it satisfies the necessary criteria and *some unspecified combination of* the additional criteria. The additional criteria are not individually necessary, but it is necessary that at least some of them are satisfied.

Let us consider Wittgenstein's famous example of an inexact concept, the concept of game:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? - Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" - but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. - For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 66)

It is an exaggeration to say that there is *nothing* which all games have in common. There are certainly *some* necessary features of games. All games, for example, are activities, which is to say that they necessarily involve sequences of actions intentionally performed by persons. Games cannot be played by inanimate objects or animals, nor can they be played inadvertently or accidentally. But to say that all games are activities is not to say very much. It is certainly not to supply a sufficient condition, for not all activities are games. To give anything like a sufficient account of games, one must point to a range of additional criteria, none of which, as Wittgenstein rightly observes, are common to all:

> Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here there is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! (*ibid.*, Section 66)

Games *tend to* involve amusement, winning and losing, competition between players,

skill and luck. None of these features is necessary, but nor are they merely contingent. They are implicated in what we ordinarily mean by the word 'game'; we only count something as a game if it possesses some combination of these features. Wittgenstein compares the non-necessary criteria of inexact concepts to fibres in a thread: 'the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres' (Section 67).

Inexact concepts, then, are concepts 'with blurred edges'; they are like 'indistinct photographs' or 'areas with vague boundaries' (Section 71). Words which mark inexact concepts are not particularly difficult to use, any more than it is difficult to know what to do when someone says 'Stand roughly there'. They are, however, used divergently, because it is nowhere specified which combinations of non-necessary criteria are sufficient for their application. Inexact concepts are resistant to clarification because they do not comprise a set of necessary and sufficient criteria for the use of a term. The philosopher finds herself unable to locate their logical boundaries for the simple reason that 'none has so far been drawn' (Section 68).

The failure of philosophers to reach agreement on the exact nature of the concept of indoctrination is, I suggest, attributable to the inexactitude of the concept. I turn now to the task of examining that concept.

4.2.2 Some criteria of indoctrination

Inexact concepts, I have argued, typically include *some* necessary criteria, and this is certainly true of the concept of indoctrination. I want to begin by drawing attention to two criteria of the concept of indoctrination which are widely accepted as necessary by those who have subjected the concept to philosophical scrutiny. First, indoctrination is a kind of teaching. A person cannot be indoctrinating unless she is teaching, and a person cannot be indoctrinated with a belief unless she has been taught to hold it. As I.A. Snook remarks, 'All cases of indoctrination are cases of teaching. To say that someone is indoctrinating is not to deny that he is teaching; it is to presuppose that he is' (Snook, 1972, p.102). Second, only beliefs can be indoctrinated. Skills, habits, dispositions and attitudes can be taught but they cannot be indoctrinated. An indoctrinated person has

necessarily acquired certain beliefs. Snook continues: 'Some sorts of teaching cannot be cases of indoctrination: only where beliefs are being imparted is 'indoctrination' appropriate' (*ibid.*, p.102). Indoctrination, then, necessarily involves the teaching of beliefs, but not all teaching of beliefs is indoctrinatory. Further criteria must be satisfied before we are prepared to talk of indoctrination, and it is these further criteria which confer inexactitude on the concept.

Snook identifies four contentious criteria of indoctrination, which he labels the *content* criterion, the *method* criterion, the *intention* criterion and the *consequence* criterion. The teaching of beliefs is unambiguously and paradigmatically indoctrinatory when all four criteria are satisfied; that is to say, when the beliefs taught are doctrines (content criterion), when the teaching methods used are authoritarian (method criterion), when the teacher intends the beliefs to be held non-rationally (intention criterion), and when the beliefs are in fact held non-rationally (consequence criterion). What is in dispute is which of these criteria, if any, is necessary. I shall argue that all four criteria are implicated in the concept of indoctrination but that none of them is necessary.

Let us begin by considering the consequence criterion. The teaching of beliefs is indoctrinatory, it is suggested, when pupils come to hold those beliefs non-rationally or non-evidentially. A non-rationally-held belief is:

> a belief which is causally motivated (by a desire to obey authority for instance) rather than rationally motivated. Any such belief will necessarily be (so to speak) dogmatic: that is, either the believer will not be able to give relevant reasons for it at all, or else the reasons he gives will not in fact be the true motivators of his belief - they will be rationalisations. This might apply, for instance, to a person who had been taught by a very sophisticated indoctrinator to parrot what were in fact good reasons for a belief, but who, nevertheless, did not really *found* his belief on those reasons. (Wilson *et al.*, 1967, p.171)

To hold a belief non-rationally is to hold it for the wrong reasons, to hold it because one has formed a psychological attachment to it and not because one has judged the evidence to be adequate. As a result, beliefs held non-rationally tend to be immune to the introduction of counter-evidence. T.F. Green writes:

> When beliefs are held without regard to evidence or contrary to evidence, or apart from good reasons or the canons for testing reasons and evidence, then we may say that they are held non-evidentially. It follows that beliefs held non-evidentially cannot be modified by introducing evidence or reasons or by rational criticism. When beliefs, however, are held 'on the basis of' evidence or reasons, can be rationally criticised, and therefore can be modified in the light of further evidence or better reasons, then we shall say they are held evidentially. (Green, 1964, p.33)

It is, of course, a necessary condition of believing something that one knows what sort of evidence would count for or against it. One cannot believe a proposition to be true if one does not understand it. But knowing what sort of evidence is relevant to one's beliefs is not the same as holding those beliefs evidentially. To hold a belief evidentially I must not only know what sort of evidence is relevant to my belief, but also hold my belief *on the basis of* that evidence.

Suppose, to borrow an example from John White, a child is indoctrinated with the belief that she is of low intelligence (White, 1967, p.123). She must at least know what would constitute low intelligence (inability to apply knowledge, solve problems, think abstractly, etc.), or she could not be said to hold the belief at all. She may even be able to cite the relevant inabilities as reasons for her belief. But they would not be the real reasons. If it were pointed out to her that she was, in fact, highly capable of applying her knowledge, solving problems and thinking abstractly, it would have little or no effect on her belief. She holds her belief not on the basis of the evidence but because she is psychologically attached to it, an attachment formed, perhaps, by the repeated reinforcement of her belief by someone she fears. She holds her belief non-rationally or non-evidentially.

That pupils have come to hold beliefs non-rationally is certainly a criterion of indoctrination. It is one of the things we would check if we were trying to settle a dispute about whether or not a teacher was guilty of indoctrination. But I do not think it is a necessary criterion. There are cases of indoctrination where it is not satisfied. Consider, for example, a teacher who intends the beliefs she imparts to be held non-rationally, and who employs authoritarian teaching methods in an effort to ensure that

they are so held. Perhaps she wishes to instil 'blind' religious faith and goes about it by forcing her pupils to recite creeds and sing hymns, suppressing their questions and punishing expressions of doubt. We would, I think, be tempted to say that she was indoctrinating her pupils *even if she were unsuccessful*. The fact that her pupils were tough-minded enough to resist the imposition of religious beliefs would not save her from the charge of indoctrination. To indoctrinate is not necessarily to succeed in bringing it about that beliefs are held non-rationally.

This brings us to the intention criterion of indoctrination. If it is not necessary that pupils come to hold their beliefs non-rationally, perhaps it is necessary that their teacher intends that they should. The intention criterion has certainly been a popular candidate for a necessary criterion of indoctrination among philosophers. According to I.A. Snook, 'A person indoctrinates P (a proposition or set of propositions) if he teaches *with the intention* that the pupil or pupils believe P regardless of the evidence' (Snook, 1970, p.154, my italics). John White concurs that 'Indoctrinating someone is *trying* to get him to believe that a proposition 'p' is true, in such a way that nothing will shake that belief' (White, 1967, p.120, my italics).

The intention criterion does catch some cases of indoctrination which the consequence criterion misses. Our teacher trying unsuccessfully to instil blind faith in her pupils is now convicted. But it also misses some cases which the consequence criterion catches. It misses cases of *unintentional* indoctrination. As John Wilson points out:

> ... we should call some of the things that Roman Catholics or Communists (justly or unjustly) are supposed to do 'indoctrination', whatever description they gave, however sincerely, of their *aims*. They might say, and believe, that they were helping people to form their own beliefs rationally and freely; but this might not be what they were in fact doing. (Wilson *et al.*, 1967, p.170)

An indoctrinator must certainly be engaged in the teaching of beliefs, 'but he need not specifically intend that the pupil should always maintain the belief in the face of reason' (*ibid.*, p.170). A teacher may indoctrinate her pupils by poor choice of teaching methods or by sheer force of personality *despite* her efforts to supply good reasons for the beliefs she imparts.

To ask whether 'indoctrination' is governed by the intention criterion or the consequence criterion is to ask whether it is a 'task word' or an 'achievement word' (Ryle, 1949). Task words, like 'looking', 'listening' and 'searching', imply trying without necessarily succeeding; achievement words, like 'seeing', 'hearing' and 'finding', imply succeeding without necessarily trying. I can search for something without finding it and find something without searching for it. If the intention criterion is necessary and the consequence criterion is not, indoctrination is a task word; if the consequence criterion is necessary and the intention criterion is not, it is an achievement word.

There is a parallel debate in philosophy of education about whether 'education' is a task word or an achievement word. In his paper 'Values in education', Glenn Langford (1973b) argues that education is the name of an activity and therefore logically involves 'the agency of a person who has some conception of the situation in which and on which he is acting; and who acts in order to bring about changes which he wishes, or wants, to bring about' (p.117). Educating, like looking, listening and searching, is something people deliberately do in an effort to achieve something. Whether or not they are successful is conceptually irrelevant. In his response to Langford's paper, R.S. Peters (1973a) denies that education is the name of an activity, arguing instead that it lays down criteria to which activities may or may not conform. An activity is educative if it contributes to 'the state of mind of an educated person', and 'people who contribute to this end may or may not have it in view' (p.137). Educating, like seeing, hearing and finding, implies an achievement which may or may not have been preceded by efforts directed towards it. One can educate someone 'without having the remotest intention of so doing' (p.136). (Interestingly, Peters is not entirely consistent on this point. He elsewhere argues that 'education' suggests 'the *intentional* bringing about of a desirable state of mind in a morally unobjectionable manner' (Peters, 1966a, p.27). But the inconsistency need not concern us here.)

My suggestion is that both 'indoctrination' and 'education' mark inexact concepts and combine the features of task words and achievement words. Sometimes we describe people as educating or indoctrinating on the basis of their intentions, regardless of the consequences of their actions; sometimes we describe people as educating or indoctrinating on the basis of the consequences of their actions, regardless of their

intentions. 'Indoctrination' may be used as the name of an activity, but it may also be used as a criterion to which the activity of teaching may or may not conform. That a teacher intends her pupils to hold beliefs non-rationally is, therefore, a criterion of indoctrination, but not a necessary criterion.

Another contentious criterion of indoctrination is the use of authoritarian teaching methods. Snook characterises authoritarian teaching methods as follows:

> (i) the teacher is authoritarian, allowing little discussion or questioning; (ii) the content is drilled or 'drummed in' in some way; (iii) there are threats of some sort which are held over the children; (iv) free discussion is not allowed. (Snook, 1972, p.22)

Snook goes on to argue that there are difficulties about the application of this criterion, since teaching is a complex and multi-faceted activity which typically involves some open discussion and some imposition of authority, some learning by discovery and some learning by drill, some internal pleasures and some external rewards and punishments. Teachers employ a range of methods and techniques in the course of their work, many of which are not readily classifiable as 'authoritarian' or 'democratic'. Notwithstanding these anxieties, it seems clear that we can speak meaningfully of more or less authoritarian teaching, of teachers who tend to favour and teachers who try to avoid authoritarian teaching methods.

Extensive use of authoritarian teaching methods would, I think, ordinarily be counted as evidence of indoctrination. Teachers who rely heavily on such methods seem to be running the risk that the beliefs they impart will be held non-rationally, even if that is not their intention, and are therefore vulnerable to the charge of indoctrination. But again, the method criterion is not necessary to the concept. The sophisticated indoctrinator does not need to use authoritarian teaching methods to bypass her pupils' rationality. There are much more subtle ways of instilling non-rationally-held beliefs than by drumming them in. John White gives the following example:

> A skilful religious indoctrinator may get his class intelligently to discuss the validity of some religious argument. But the subject chosen may be such (e.g. Is God one person or

> three?) that merely to have agreed to enter into the discussion commits one to a belief in God, a belief which is reinforced by taking part in the discussion itself... The indoctrinator may encourage people, therefore, to air their views in such a discussion, because this commits them to accepting another (presupposed) belief. (White, 1967, pp.125-6)

A case for the necessity of some form of the method criterion is made by John Wilson. Wilson argues that it is a necessary criterion of indoctrination that pupils come to hold beliefs non-rationally, and that coming to hold beliefs non-rationally is logically connected to the methods by which those beliefs are taught. I have already given reasons for doubting the necessity of the consequence criterion; here I want to question the alleged logical connection between the consequence criterion and the method criterion. Wilson states his case as follows:

> ... it is also logically necessary to the concept of indoctrination that the indoctrinated person arrives at the belief by non-rational methods. The indoctrinator must (consciously or unconsciously) be using such a method, thereby implanting a belief which is causally motivated (by a desire to obey authority for instance) rather than rationally motivated. (Wilson *et al.*, 1967, pp.170-1)

Wilson's error is to conflate methods of learning with methods of teaching. There is certainly a logical connection between how one holds a belief and how one learned or acquired it. But the connection between how one holds a belief and how that belief was taught is a contingent one. From the fact that a pupil comes to hold beliefs non-rationally it does not follow that those beliefs were taught by authoritarian or non-rational teaching methods. A child overwhelmed by a teacher's charisma may accept whatever she says quite uncritically and without regard for the reasons and evidence offered. Teaching methods, sadly, are not logically tied to learning outcomes; education, writes R.S. Peters, is 'a chancy business', because success 'necessarily depends on people other than the educator' (Peters, 1973, pp.137-8). The method criterion, then, is neither necessary to the concept of indoctrination nor logically entailed by the consequence criterion.

Let us turn, finally, to the content criterion. A number of philosophers have taken it to

be necessarily true, even self-evidently true, that indoctrination involves the transmission of doctrines. 'No doctrines; no indoctrination!' declares Antony Flew (Flew, 1967, p.114); 'whatever else 'indoctrination' may mean it obviously has something to do with doctrines,' concurs R.S. Peters (Peters, 1966, p.41).

There is, however, some dispute about what exactly doctrines are. Snook argues against the content criterion on the grounds of 'the extreme vagueness of the concept of doctrines' (Snook, 1972, p.32):

> If the claim 'indoctrination is connected with doctrines' is to be taken seriously we need to know what is connoted by the term 'doctrines'. Otherwise we have not been told anything. Strangely, most of those who have argued for doctrines as the criterion have not attempted any analysis of the term 'doctrine' which remains as vague as the 'indoctrination' it was meant to illuminate. (*ibid.*, p.32)

Tasos Kazepides points out that, even if it is true that the concept of doctrine is vague, it does not constitute an argument against the content criterion. 'If the word doctrine is vague then that makes 'indoctrination' a vague concept. It does not constitute a good reason for abandoning the criterion' (Kazepides, 1987, p.401). Nevertheless, we are clearly not in a position to determine whether or not the transmission of doctrines is a criterion of indoctrination unless we can say what doctrines are. There is an onus on advocates of the content criterion to clarify the concept of doctrine. Yet, as Snook rightly complains, such clarification has not been forthcoming. Moreover, the suggestions that have been made seem to me to be mostly incorrect.

Antony Flew (1966b) admits that he has 'not been able to offer any satisfactory specification of the sort of belief which has to be involved' in indoctrination (p.85). He toys with the idea that doctrines must be either false or not known to be true, but goes on to suggest that there is no particular difficulty about the notion of there being 'a right doctrine' (p.82), and eventually settles on the view that being either false or not known to be true is a requirement which indoctrinated beliefs must satisfy *in addition* to the requirement that they be doctrines (p.85). The only criteria of doctrines he mentions are (i) that they are ideological and (ii) that they carry normative implications, neither of which is satisfactory. If an ideology is *any* system of ideas or beliefs, it is too broad to

shed much light on the concept of doctrine; if it is a theory distorted by the interests of a social group, there is no reason to think that doctrines must be ideological. Flew insists that the teaching of religion is 'a strong frontrunner' for the most common form of indoctrination in Britain today, but only a committed Marxist would characterise all religious doctrines as ideological in the latter sense. As to the claim that all doctrines carry normative implications, while it may be plausible with respect to the doctrine of papal infallibility, it is hardly defensible with respect to the doctrine that the Son is of one being with the Father, or the doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

I.M.M. Gregory and R.G. Woods boldly state that 'The salient characteristic of doctrines is the fact that they are not known to be true or false' (Gregory & Woods, 1970, p.171). But it is simply not the case that all doctrines satisfy this criterion. It is a doctrine of Christianity that Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried. It is also an undisputed historical fact. It is *usually* the case that doctrines are not known to be true or false, for reasons I shall explain shortly, but it is not a necessary criterion. In an effort to make the criterion not only necessary but sufficient, Gregory and Woods add the rider that doctrines 'are not arrived at by the use of scientific method' (*ibid.*, p.173), thus excluding scientific theories and hypotheses from the class of doctrines. But the exemption of unproven scientific propositions is arbitrary, for there are a great many unproven propositions which are neither scientific nor doctrinal. 'Nobody knows', writes John White, 'whether or not it is true that Mr Gladstone sneezed ten times on 10th August 1886; but it is hard to see what is especially doctrinal, on any account, about this proposition' (White, 1970 p.193).

Tasos Kazepides (1987) suggests five criteria of doctrines: (i) doctrines are 'in principle unfalsifiable beliefs about the existence of beings, states of affairs or relationships'; (ii) they are 'outside the rational tradition'; (iii) they are 'not isolated beliefs but form a system of interrelated beliefs that constitutes the foundation of a particular world view, defines human nature, and determines humanity's 'proper' place in the world'; (iv) they have 'an overriding prescriptive function'; and (v) they 'presuppose the existence of *authorities* and *institutions* which have the power to uphold them when they are challenged by critics' (p.402). Bizarrely, as an illustration of his first criterion, Kazepides cites 'the belief in the infallibility of the Pope'. In fact this is a good example

of a doctrine which is straightforwardly falsifiable; all that is required to falsify it is an erroneous papal utterance. Kazepides' second criterion, that doctrines are 'outside the rational tradition', is unclear. He presumably means that they are not subject to rational evaluation, that there are no reasons for preferring one doctrine to another, in which case one wonders what he supposes Christian theologians and philosophers of religion to have been up to for the last two thousand years. The claim that doctrines 'form a system of interrelated beliefs that constitutes the foundation of a particular world view' is still more unclear: it is difficult to conceive of any belief which is not interrelated with others in *some* way, and 'world view' is an intolerably vague metaphorical construction. The 'prescriptive function' criterion is a version of Flew's 'normative implications' criterion which we have already had reason to reject. It is, I think, only with his fifth and final criterion, that doctrines 'presuppose the existence of authorities and institutions which have the power to uphold them', that Kazepides comes close to the mark.

I want to suggest that doctrines can be defined as *criteria of orthodoxy*. Just as we test propositions against truth criteria to determine whether they are true or false, we sometimes test them against criteria of orthodoxy to determine whether they are orthodox or heretical. To say that a proposition is true is to say that it corresponds with the facts; to say that it is orthodox is to say that it is consistent with a body of doctrine. A proposition acquires the status of a doctrine when it is adopted by a community or institution as a condition of membership and a criterion of orthodoxy.

Whether a doctrine is true or false, and whether or not it is known to be true or false, is conceptually irrelevant. In practice, it will tend to be the case that doctrines are not known to be true or false. Propositions known to be true do not usually require institutional backing, and institutions which back propositions known to be false are likely to have difficulty attracting members. But this is a contingent feature of doctrines. It is sometimes the case, as with the doctrine that Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried, that propositions known to be true are so integral to an identity-sustaining narrative that they are adopted as doctrines.

If this account of the concept of doctrine is correct, it is clear that many religious beliefs are not doctrines. If I believe that I have been filled with the Holy Spirit, or that God wants me to give up my job and become a missionary, my belief is religious but not

doctrinal. It is subject to assessment as orthodox or heretical, but it is not a criterion of orthodoxy. Doctrinal religious beliefs are the religious beliefs one must hold, and with which one's other religious beliefs must be consistent, if one is to be a member of a particular religious community or institution.

What, then, of the content criterion of indoctrination? Once again, I think it is fair to say that doctrinal content is a criterion of indoctrination but not a necessary criterion. We are more inclined to speak of indoctrination when doctrines are being transmitted, but we are prepared to speak of indoctrination when they are not. John White asks us to consider the following case:

> A teacher may want to get a child to believe that Melbourne is the capital of Australia. He may try to fix this belief unshakably by associating it with his charismatic influence on the boy: for the boy, whatever the teacher says *must* be right... If a teacher did this, would it not be indoctrination? The fact that we *generally use* the word 'indoctrination' only in connexion with the teaching of ideological beliefs cannot be used to prove that the *concept* of indoctrination covers only such cases. (White, 1967, p.123)

This would, I think, ordinarily be counted as a case of indoctrination, even in the absence of doctrinal content. The obvious etymological connection between the words 'indoctrination' and 'doctrine' should not blind us to the fact that not all teaching of doctrines is indoctrinatory and not all indoctrination involves the teaching of doctrines.

In conclusion, then, the consequence, intention, method and content criteria are non-necessary criteria of indoctrination. They are all conceptually relevant but none of them is conceptually decisive. They are the fibres of an inexact concept, 'and the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 67).

4.2.3 A stipulative definition

The inexactitude of the concept of indoctrination does not render the term difficult to use or understand in ordinary conversation. Although we lack necessary and sufficient

criteria for the use of the term, we know *roughly* what it means and when to apply it. It is a blunt instrument, but sharp enough for the purposes of the educational layman. Professional educators and educationalists, on the other hand, have need of sharper conceptual tools. If we are to counsel trainee teachers against indoctrinating their pupils, it is important to specify just what we are counselling against; if the transmission of religious beliefs is to be condemned as indoctrinatory, we need to be able to explain why. The term 'indoctrination' will be of little use to educational practitioners and theorists unless we know *exactly* what it means and when to apply it.

Exactitude can be conferred on inexact concepts by means of stipulative definition. The expedient of stipulative definition is defended by a number of the contributors to the debate on the concept of indoctrination. Willis Moore, for example, argues that American educationalists were prompted to define 'indoctrination' in terms of method alone by a proper concern for 'the character of the referent situation':

> Where the proponents of language analysis are inclined to limit their efforts to the description of the logical geography of a word, treating their findings as revelatory and authoritative in philosophic debate, the associates and followers of Dewey are so concerned with the character of the referent situation that they tend to treat language as an adjustable tool properly subject to whatever re-fashioning might render it a better instrument for dealing with problems in a situation only more or less adequately reflected in language. (Moore, 1966, pp.94-5)

Antony Flew objects that Moore does 'the proponents of language analysis' an injustice here, and that their interest in describing 'existing language conventions' certainly does not commit them to 'holding that there is no room for considered changes for the better' (Flew, 1967, p.106). He cites as evidence J.L. Austin's remark that 'essential though it is as a preliminary to track down the detail of our ordinary uses of words, it seems that we shall in the end always be compelled to straighten them out to some extent' (Austin, 1961, p.134). Indeed, in his own analysis of the concept of indoctrination, to which Moore was responding, Flew openly admits that he may have crossed the 'elusive line between description and prescription':

> ... it may well be that in developing our own preliminary

> sketch of an account of what we have called the primary concept we have in fact already crossed unwittingly the here very elusive line between description and prescription. We may thereby have provided a notion rather more precise than that determined by present standards of of correct usage for the term *indoctrination*. (Flew, 1966b, p.87)

In a similar vein, John White suggests that where competent linguistic analysts disagree over the meaning of a word, 'one should take the claims not merely as analyses, but also partly as *recommendations* that the word be used in such-and-such a way' (White, 1970, p.195).

The practice of stipulating definitions is not, therefore, philosophically unrespectable. It is, however, fraught with danger. There is a strong temptation to stipulate definitions which support the argument one is making and reduce the arguments of one's opponents to logical contradictions, whilst bearing little relation to ordinary usage. D.J. O'Connor's well-known discussion of educational theory is cautionary. O'Connor begins by noting the inexactitude of the concept of theory and arguing, much as I have done, that 'when we are trying to explicate a concept in the interests of clear thinking we often have to supplement such descriptions of common usage by *recommendations*, definitions of a stipulative or persuasive kind' (O'Connor, 1973, p.50). He goes on to stipulate that 'a theory is a logically interconnected set of hypotheses confirmed by observation and which has the further property of being both refutable and explanatory' (p.50). Armed with this definition, O'Connor rejects as logically incoherent Paul Hirst's claim that educational theory is both descriptive and prescriptive, both explanatory and action-guiding. Theories cannot be prescriptive because prescriptions are not 'hypotheses confirmed by observation' and cannot be 'logically interconnected' with such hypotheses. A theory is not 'an intellectual salad' but 'a set of propositions made into a unity by logical relations between the members'; and as yet no-one has succeeded in showing 'that there can be logical relations between statements of fact and statements of value' (p.56). It follows that an action-guiding theory is simply a contradiction in terms.

O'Connor thus secures his victory by definitional fiat. If we were to agree to his definition of 'theory', we would no doubt be obliged to reject the possibility of action-guiding theories; but why should we accept a definition which excludes so many ordinary cases? Moral theories, political theories, legal theories and educational theories

are all typically action-guiding; it is commonplace to speak of putting theories into practice, or of knowing the theory without having mastered the practice. There is a perfectly ordinary sense of 'theory' whereby 'it is not a patterning of understanding that is of first importance but the determination of what ought to be done in some range of practical activities' (Hirst, 1966b, p.48). It might be argued that the term 'theory' is used analogically or even equivocally in the phrases 'action-guiding theory' and 'scientific theory'; but to define action-guiding theories out of existence is hardly to contribute to our understanding of them.

Such are the dangers of stipulative definition. But the fact that the practice can be abused is not a reason for giving it up. It is a reason for paying careful attention to ordinary usage and trying to ensure that the denotation of a term as stipulatively defined is maximally coextensive with its denotation in ordinary usage.

I propose to define 'indoctrination' as *the teaching of beliefs with the consequence that those beliefs are held non-rationally*. That is to say, the consequence criterion will be regarded as a necessary and sufficient criterion of the concept of indoctrination. I contend that indoctrination so defined includes as many as possible, and excludes as few as possible, of the cases included by ordinary usage.

In the vast majority of cases where teaching has the consequence that pupils come to hold beliefs non-rationally, we are ordinarily inclined to speak of indoctrination. We will usually continue to speak of indoctrination even if we find out that the teacher did not intend this outcome, or that she did not use authoritarian teaching methods, or that the beliefs taught do not qualify as doctrines. A teacher whose psychological hold over her pupils undermines their rationality, despite her good intentions and her adoption of democratic teaching methods, is still in an important sense responsible for the outcomes of her teaching and therefore guilty of indoctrination.

Conversely, there are relatively few cases where we are ordinarily inclined to speak of indoctrination in the absence of this consequence. A teacher who intends that her pupils come to hold their beliefs non-rationally but fails to realise her intention is most naturally described as a *would-be* indoctrinator. Similarly, a teacher who uses authoritarian teaching methods to transmit rationally-held-beliefs is more likely to be

praised for her judicious and effective use of such methods than accused of indoctrinating her pupils. And we are not much tempted to describe as indoctrination the teaching of doctrines with the consequence that they are held evidentially, even where pupils have been deceived about the adequacy of the evidence. There are no doubt *some* cases excluded by our stipulative definition which would ordinarily be called cases of indoctrination, but not enough to render the definition unduly narrow.

Having thus fixed the logical boundaries of the concept of indoctrination, let us turn to consider the moral objection to the transmission of religious beliefs.

4.3.0 The objection to transmitting religious beliefs

The moral objection to the transmission of religious beliefs rests on two premises: (i) that the transmission of religious beliefs is necessarily either indoctrinatory or deceptive; and (ii) that indoctrination and deception are morally wrong. In this section I shall examine each of these premises and argue that they are sound. I shall conclude by considering the possibility that, although indoctrination and deception are *generally* wrong, the transmission of religious beliefs to children is an exceptional case.

4.3.1 Indoctrination and deception

Our first premise, then, is that transmitting religious beliefs is necessarily either indoctrinatory or deceptive. We must immediately add the rider: *given that no religious proposition is known to be true or false*. It is a contingent fact that nothing is known in the sphere of religion. If, at some point in the future, we succeed in establishing bodies of religious knowledge, we shall be entirely justified in transmitting those bodies of knowledge to children as part of their education. Our discussion here proceeds on the assumption that, at present, religious beliefs are held in the absence of decisive evidence for their truth or falsity.

I should also emphasise that by 'transmitting religious beliefs' I mean teaching with the direct consequence that pupils come to hold religious beliefs. Teaching which has this as an *indirect* consequence, in the sense that pupils may choose, on the basis of their own assessments of the evidence, to adopt religious beliefs about which they have learned in school, will not count as transmitting religious beliefs.

My contention is that there are only two ways of transmitting religious beliefs, two ways of ensuring that pupils come to hold religious beliefs even though the evidence for them is inconclusive. The first is to bypass the rationality of pupils so that they come to hold religious beliefs without regard for the evidence. This is indoctrination. The second is to represent inconclusive evidence as conclusive, so that pupils find themselves rationally obliged to adopt religious beliefs. This is deception. These are the only two ways of ensuring that pupils come to hold beliefs for which the evidence is inconclusive.

The concept of deception is a straightforward one. To deceive someone is to bring it about that she believes what is not the case. A teacher who tells her pupils that there is decisive evidence for the truth of a religious proposition brings it about that they believe what is not the case and therefore deceives them. Moreover, she deceives them even if she sincerely believes what she is telling them; deception does not require intention on the part of the deceiver.

Therefore, since not-known-to-be-true beliefs can only be transmitted by bypassing the rationality of pupils or misrepresenting the evidence, the transmission of religious beliefs is necessarily either indoctrinatory or deceptive.

4.3.2 The moral argument

Our second premise is that indoctrination and deception are morally wrong. This is a value-judgment rather than a descriptive proposition. I shall begin by saying a few words about the justification of value-judgments.

The function of value-judgments is not to describe objects or convey information, but to

prescribe actions or guide choices (Hare, 1952). Value-judgments stand in a closer relation to commands and instructions than to descriptive propositions, notwithstanding the fact that they often resemble the latter in grammatical form. They are 'systematically misleading expressions', not in the sense that they are 'couched in grammatical or syntactical forms which are in a demonstrable way improper to the states of affairs which they record' (Ryle, 1931, pp.15-16), but in the sense that they appear to record states of affairs when in fact they do nothing of the sort. To say that indoctrination is wrong is not to ascribe a property (wrongness) to an object (indoctrination), but to issue a prescription condemning acts of indoctrination.

Because value-judgments have a different function from descriptive propositions, evaluative conclusions cannot be derived from descriptive premises. My beliefs about the world place me under no logical obligation to abide by any action-guiding principle. It follows that arguments with evaluative conclusions must include at least one evaluative premise. The purpose of moral argument is to demonstrate that disputed value-judgments are entailed, not by certain facts, but by undisputed or less disputed value-judgments. A value-judgment is said to be justified when it has been shown to follow from a more general or widely accepted one.

I propose to argue that the value-judgment 'Indoctrination and deception are morally wrong' can be derived from the more general and widely accepted value-judgment 'One ought to act in such a way as to promote human happiness'. Before making this argument, however, I want to consider a possible short cut. It might be thought that the need for moral argument can be circumvented by making indoctrination and deception wrong *by definition*. That is to say, it might be possible to build prescriptive force into the concepts of indoctrination and deception.

Plainly there are some concepts which include both descriptive criteria and prescriptive force. A murder is a wrongful killing; a reform is a change for the better. There is no need to construct moral arguments to show that murder is bad and reform is good because these propositions are necessarily true. Could we not, then, add prescriptive force to our descriptive criteria for indoctrination and deception, so that indoctrination becomes the *wrongful* teaching of beliefs with the consequence that those beliefs are held non-rationally, and deception becomes *wrongfully* bringing it about that a person believes

what is not the case?

Certainly we *could* stipulate these definitions, and there is a certain amount of support for the stipulations in ordinary usage, at least in the case of indoctrination. Flew comments that 'Wilson and Hare both take it that disapproval is built-in, that indoctrination must, as such, be a bad thing. I am inclined to think that this is now the dominant use' (Flew, 1966b, p.78). But building prescriptive force into the concepts of indoctrination and deception does not circumvent the need for moral argument. For although it is now necessarily true that indoctrination and deception are wrong, the introduction of prescriptive force has the effect of rendering the descriptive criteria insufficient. We must now say that the teaching of beliefs with the consequence that those beliefs are held non-rationally *may or may not* be indoctrinatory, depending on whether or not one is prepared to condemn it. And the question of whether or not such teaching should be condemned remains unanswered.

Introducing value-words into moral questions does not answer those questions but changes their form. The moral question about murder is not 'Is murder wrong?' but 'Which killings are murders?'. We all agree that murder is wrong, but we disagree about which killings should be counted as murders. Moral questions involving value-words typically take the form of questions about the denotation of those words:

> ... in so far as indoctrination is to be taken as essentially bad, normative disagreements involving this notion are likely to appear as disagreements about the instances to which it is properly applied. People will agree about the connotation but dispute over the denotation. (Flew, 1966b, p.78)

It does not very much matter whether we agree that indoctrination and deception are wrong and argue about their range of application, or agree on their range of application and argue about whether or not they are wrong. I take the latter course because I do not think that ordinary usage of the terms 'indoctrination' and 'deception' warrants the stipulation of necessary prescriptive force. It does not run counter to ordinary usage to consider the possibility of justifiable indoctrination or justifiable deception, whereas it is logical nonsense to consider the possibility of justifiable murder. The conclusion that indoctrination and deception are wrong must be reached by moral argument rather than

logical deduction.

The moral argument I wish to make, then, is that the obligation to refrain from indoctrination and deception follows from the obligation to act in such a way as to promote human happiness. To make this case I shall try to show (i) that there is a connection between promoting happiness and promoting rationality and knowledge, and (ii) that indoctrination and deception undermine rationality and knowledge.

Demonstrating the connection between happiness on the one hand and rationality and knowledge on the other is a task with which philosophers of education have long been concerned. The central aim of liberal education is the transmission of rationality and knowledge to children and young people. Philosophers concerned with the justification of liberal education must therefore show that there is a connection between promoting rationality and knowledge and promoting human happiness. Unless it is generally true that rational and knowledgeable people are happier than irrational and ignorant people, or that rational and knowledgeable people contribute more to the happiness of others than irrational and ignorant people, it is difficult to see how the enterprise of liberal education can be justified.

It is clear enough that, if there is a connection between rationality and knowledge on the one hand and happiness on the other, it is not a straightforward causal connection. Rationality and knowledge do not stand to happiness as manipulations of levers stand to movements of railway signals. A good education is no guarantee of a happy life. But the absence of a straightforward causal connection does not warrant the conclusion that there is no connection at all. In fact, I suggest, at least two kinds of connection can be identified.

First, there is an instrumental connection. Happiness consists, in part, in the satisfaction of desires, and educated people are better equipped to satisfy their desires. The more I know about the world and the people I share it with, and the more rational I am in applying my knowledge, the better I am able to obtain the things I want and bring about the states of affairs I desire. Glenn Langford justifies the transmission of rationality and knowledge on these sorts of grounds (Langford, 1973a). He begins by asserting that 'to become educated is to learn to be a person' (p.3) and goes on to describe persons as

follows:

> Persons... have some conception of the world in which and on which they act; they are able to anticipate the changes which their actions will bring about and act with the intention, which may be consciously formulated, of doing so. They are therefore able to bring about changes relevant to their wants, needs and interests. (*ibid.*, p.11)

The mark of a person is the ability 'to bring about changes relevant to their wants, needs and interests', and the aim of education is to equip young human beings with the rationality and knowledge they need to become persons. Education does not make people happy, but it furnishes them with the tools to pursue happiness for themselves.

The second kind of connection is rather more subtle and difficult to articulate. In his *Preface to the Philosophy of Education* (1979), John Wilson argues that rationality and knowledge increase people's *capacity* for happiness as well as their ability to pursue it. A person who is rational and knowledgeable is capable of *more* happiness, of a richer kind of happiness, than a person who is not. The reason for this is that educating a person enlarges her consciousness, so that there is, so to speak, more of her to be happy:

> We ascribe predicates like 'contented', 'satisfied', 'happily married', etc., to what look like the same subjects - 'he', 'she', 'they', 'human beings'. We acknowledge a point at which these predicates are inapplicable because there is no longer a person in the required sense... But we also have the feeling that, as we move along the scale from persons to pigs, or philosophers to Polynesians, the subjects of these predicates get *thinner*. It is not so much that they exist in full up to a certain point, and then vanish (when the subject loses consciousness, goes very mad, or dies); it is rather that (we feel tempted to say) there is less and less of a person, a progressively narrower consciousness. (*ibid.*, p.156)

Notwithstanding anxieties about the relative positions on this scale Wilson assigns to philosophers and Polynesians, one can hardly deny the phenomenon to which he adverts. The consciousness of the new-born baby is plainly in some sense narrower or 'thinner' than that of the educated adult. Rationality and knowledge broaden or 'thicken' consciousness, and hence increase people's capacity for happiness. Wilson continues:

> ... the unique way in which, *as educators*, we contribute to happiness should be governed by the unique way in which the particular goods of learning contribute: that is, by providing enjoyable objects of attention which (we hope) will permanently enlarge and and enrich our pupils' consciousness. (*ibid.*, pp.161-2)

It is, then, reasonable to hold that there is a connection between promoting happiness and promoting rationality and knowledge. Education contributes to happiness both instrumentally, by better enabling people to satisfy their desires, and constitutively, by enlarging people's consciousness and hence their capacity for happiness.

The second step of my argument, that indoctrination and deception undermine rationality and knowledge, requires little elaboration. To indoctrinate someone is to bring it about that she holds beliefs non-rationally; to deceive someone is to bring it about that she believes what is not the case. Indoctrination is the enemy of reason, deception the enemy of truth. Of these twin impediments to the goods of learning, it is indoctrination which does the more lasting damage. The deceived person is hampered by misinformation but retains the ability to revise her false beliefs in the light of further evidence. The indoctrinated person, on the other hand, is deprived of the power to form and revise judgments on the basis of relevant evidence in some area of her life:

> For here we have taken over, or put to sleep, a central part of the child's personality - his ability to think rationally in a certain area. To put it dramatically: there is always hope so long as the mind remains free, however much our behaviour may be forced or our feelings conditioned. But if we occupy the inner citadel of thought and language, then it is difficult to see how a person can develop or regain rationality except by a very lengthy and arduous course of treatment. To indoctrinate is to take over his personality in a much more radical way than anything we do by way of force or conditioning: it is, in effect, to take over his consciousness. (Wilson *et al.*, 1967, pp.174-5)

I conclude, then, that indoctrination and deception are morally wrong. Given the facts (i) that there is a connection between promoting happiness and promoting rationality and knowledge and (ii) that indoctrination and deception undermine rationality and knowledge, the general moral principle that one ought to act in such a way as to promote

human happiness entails the principle that one ought not to indoctrinate or deceive.

4.3.3 An exceptional case?

My defence of the value-judgment that indoctrination and deception are wrong does not exclude the possibility that there are exceptional cases. Although the principle that one ought not to indoctrinate or deceive is generally sound, there may well be circumstances under which indoctrinating or deceiving a person is the lesser of two evils. Rationality and knowledge are by no means the only factors contributing to human happiness, and indoctrination and deception are not the only threats to it. Confronted with a choice between deceiving a person and telling her a truth which will cause her suffering, it may be morally preferable to take the former course. The expression 'white lie' was coined for just such occasions. It is harder to think of cases of justifiable indoctrination, but there is no reason to rule out the possibility of such cases.

Might it be argued, then, that the transmission of religious beliefs to children is an exception to the rule that indoctrination and deception are wrong? That is to say, might confessional religious education be one of the special cases in which indoctrination or deception is less detrimental to human happiness than the alternatives? To make this argument, it would be necessary to show that the consequences of failing to transmit religious beliefs to children are more damaging than the consequences of transmitting them.

One possible strategy here would be to claim that religious beliefs confer certain emotional or psychological benefits on children. If these benefits are significant enough, the emotional cost of failing to transmit religious beliefs to children might outweigh the cognitive cost of transmitting them. That there are *some* not-known-to-be-true beliefs we transmit to children on these sorts of grounds can hardly be doubted:

> Suppose, however, that it is sometimes right to make children believe certain myths in order to give them more security - even, perhaps, to fulfil the ultimate objective of bringing them up to be free and independent adults. Thus we might persuade a child to believe that 'Daddy will stop

> anything nasty happening to you', 'Mummy will always be there', or 'Jesus will protect you': and suppose that we do not give the child any real evidence for these beliefs, but just encourage his wishful thinking. This process is illegitimate, *not in the sense that it is a morally wrong thing to do*, but rather in the sense that the methods used in relation to these beliefs are non-rational, or logically inappropriate. (Wilson *et al.*, 1967, p.172, my italics)

Sometimes we indoctrinate children, or deceive them about the evidence for certain beliefs, to protect them from uncertainties which might be emotionally damaging to them. As mature, well-adjusted adults, we can cope with doubts and anxieties which might be crippling for children. It is plainly not true that fathers can always stop nasty things happening to their children, or that mothers are always there, but we instil these beliefs because we judge security to be more important than rationality in the early stages of development. The question is whether or not the transmission of *religious* beliefs can be justified along these lines.

An argument to this effect is developed by T.H. McLaughlin in his paper *Parental Rights and the Religious Upbringing of Children* (1984). McLaughlin argues that it is a 'precondition of the child's subsequent development into an autonomous liberal citizen' that she is first inducted into 'a stable and coherent primary culture' (p.78). A primary culture is 'a substantive set of practices, beliefs and values' which gives the child an initial orientation to the world she inhabits. Since there are many primary cultures more or less equally suited to this purpose, parents have the right to induct their children into the primary culture of their choice. Some primary cultures comprise the practices, beliefs and values associated with particular religions.

McLaughlin is specifically concerned with the right of parents to give their children a religious upbringing, but it is clear that his argument could be expanded into a justification of confessional religious education in schools. If the transmission of religious beliefs to children is morally justifiable, it is merely a logistical matter whether the task is undertaken by parents themselves or by teachers acting *in loco parentis*.

However, I do not think McLaughlin's justification of religious upbringing is successful. Even if we were to accept that (i) children require a primary culture and (ii) transmitting

a primary culture necessarily involves transmitting some not-known-to-be-true beliefs, we should still have good reason to prefer the primary culture with the fewest not-known-to-be-true beliefs. The fact, if it is a fact, that transmitting dubious beliefs to children is a necessary evil does not release us from the obligation to minimise that evil. And it is clearly the case that religious primary cultures include many more dubious beliefs than at least some non-religious ones. McLaughlin summarises this criticism of his argument as follows:

> The attack might be developed in the following way: the criterion of an acceptable primary culture is that it should be 'the least restrictive environment consistent with [the child's] dialogic and behavioural development'. But the provision of a religious element goes beyond this necessary minimum. The child unquestionably needs in a very fundamental sense at this stage such things as language, consistency and coherence of parental behaviour and expectations, love, moral training and so on. But is religion *necessary* or *fundamental* in quite the same way? (*ibid.*, p.81)

Interestingly, in responding to this criticism, McLaughlin does not dispute the key point that religious primary cultures include many more dubious beliefs than at least some non-religious ones. He rather tries to evade the issue by introducing a new line of argument to the effect that the right to transmit religious beliefs to one's children is a necessary corollary of the right to practise religion at all. 'In many cases,' he writes, 'to ask a family to excise the religious elements from its culture for the purpose of child upbringing is in effect to ask it to change its culture completely' (p.81). And again, 'It is impossible for a parent who practises a religious faith to insulate his children from that faith' (p.82). But refraining from transmitting religious beliefs to one's children requires neither the excision of religious elements from family culture nor the insulation of children from faith. Plainly there is an important distinction to be drawn between exposure to expressions of religious faith and the inculcation of religious beliefs. Moreover, if it did turn out be the case that the right to transmit religious beliefs to one's children is entailed by the right to practise religion, it would constitute a stronger reason for rejecting the latter than for granting the former.

McLaughlin, then, offers no answer to the objection that, if children must be inducted into a primary culture, we have good reason to prefer the primary culture with the

fewest not-known-to-be-true beliefs. If we can safeguard 'the child's subsequent development into an autonomous liberal citizen' without inculcating her with religious beliefs, then it is morally desirable that we should do so. Unless it can be shown that religious beliefs have a unique contribution to make to a child's emotional well-being, or that non-religious primary cultures include equal numbers of dubious beliefs, the transmission of religious beliefs to children cannot be seen as an exception to the principle that indoctrination and deception are wrong.

4.4.0 Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to substantiate that claim that the transmission of religious beliefs is either indoctrinatory or deceptive, and therefore morally wrong. The validity of this claim is presupposed by both advocates and opponents of the liberal account of Religious Education. Advocates of the liberal account argue that, because transmitting religious beliefs is objectionable, teachers must limit themselves to transmitting religious understanding; opponents of the liberal account argue that transmitting religious understanding is objectionable because it necessarily involves transmitting religious beliefs.

In the first section of the chapter, I examined and clarified the concept of indoctrination. I argued that indoctrination is an inexact concept, a concept comprising some necessary but insufficient criteria and a range of additional criteria which function as guidelines rather than rules. Following Snook, I identified four non-necessary criteria of indoctrination: the consequence criterion, the intention criterion, the method criterion and the content criterion. To confer exactitude on the concept of indoctrination for the purposes of philosophical discussion, I stipulatively defined 'indoctrination' as *the teaching of beliefs with the consequence that those beliefs are held non-rationally.*

In the second section of the chapter, I set out the moral objection to transmitting religious beliefs. I argued (i) that the transmission of religious beliefs is necessarily either indoctrinatory or deceptive (given that no religious proposition is known to be true or

false); and (ii) that indoctrination and deception are morally wrong. Finally, I considered the possibility that the transmission of religious beliefs to children might be an exception to the general prohibition on indoctrination and deception, but concluded that there is no good reason for holding this to be so.

Having defended the claim that the transmission of religious beliefs is morally wrong, I turn now to the central question of the present thesis: is it logically possible to transmit religious understanding without religious beliefs?

Chapter Five

Understanding a form of knowledge

5.1.0 Introduction

The present thesis is concerned with the logical coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education. According to that account, the aim of Religious Education is the transmission of religious understanding without religious belief. The argument of those who oppose the liberal account is that it is logically impossible for a person to understand religious propositions without holding some religious propositions to be true or false. As formulated by Paul Hirst (1973b), this argument rests on two key premises: (i) that religion is a unique form of knowledge, and (ii) that understanding a unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false.

I shall examine the first of these premises in Chapters Six and Seven. My concern in this chapter is with the second premise. My aim is to determine whether or not it is true that understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false.

5.2.0 The forms of knowledge thesis

The principal difficulty about answering this question is that it is not at all clear what a form of knowledge *is*. I shall therefore begin by examining in some detail Hirst's presentation of the forms of knowledge thesis and some of the criticisms it has attracted. I shall then offer a restatement of the thesis which, I hope, avoids some of the confusions and ambiguities in Hirst's presentation.

5.2.1 Hirst's presentation of the thesis

Hirst originally presented his thesis in 'Liberal education and the nature of knowledge' (1965a), in the context of a defence of liberal education. Defining liberal education as 'education based fairly and squarely on the nature of knowledge itself' (p.30), he attempts to resurrect, in modified form, the Greek argument for the central role of

knowledge in the development of the mind. In its original form, the argument was straightforwardly teleological: 'it is the peculiar and distinctive activity of the mind, because of its very nature, to pursue knowledge' (p.30). In its modified form, the argument is rather that to have knowledge, to have one's experience structured and made intelligible, just *is* to have a mind:

> To acquire knowledge is to learn to see, to experience the world in a way otherwise unknown, and thereby to come to have a mind in a fuller sense. It is not that the mind is some kind of organ or muscle with its own inbuilt forms of operation, which if somehow developed, naturally lead to different kinds of knowledge... It is rather that to have a mind basically involves coming to have experience articulated by various conceptual schemata. It is only because man has over millennia objectified and progressively developed these that he has achieved the forms of human knowledge, and the possibility of the development of mind as we know it is open to us today. (*ibid.*, pp.40-1)

Developing minds, then, is a matter of teaching the forms of knowledge, the various 'complex ways of understanding experience which man has achieved' (p.38). A crucial task for the philosopher of education is the identification of these forms of knowledge. This is 'a strictly philosophical task' (p.43) because forms of knowledge are differentiated by their 'conceptual, logical and methodological features' (p.41). Hirst proceeds to set out four 'distinguishing features' of forms of knowledge:

> (1) They each involve certain central concepts that are peculiar in character to the form...
> (2) In a given form of knowledge these and other concepts that denote, if perhaps in a very complex way, certain aspects of experience, form a network of possible relationships in which experience can be understood. As a result the form has a distinctive logical structure...
> (3) The form, by virtue of its particular terms and logic, has expressions or statements (possibly answering a distinctive type of question) that in some way or other, however indirect it may be, are testable against experience...
> (4) The forms have developed particular techniques and skills for exploring experience and testing their distinctive expressions... (*ibid.*, p.44)

Curiously, Hirst immediately denies that his 'suggested distinguishing marks' are adequate to the task in hand. They are, he says, 'neither clear enough nor sufficient for

demarcating the whole world of modern knowledge as we know it' (p.45). Furthermore, he seems to suggest that it is enough for a class of propositions to satisfy any one of his four criteria to be counted as a form of knowledge. So, while the sciences differ from mathematics in respect of 'some particular kind of test against experience' (and here we might well ask whether it is correct to say that mathematical propositions are tested against experience at all), historical knowledge differs from religious knowledge in respect of its 'logical features' and the human sciences from the physical sciences in respect of their 'central concepts'.

The difficulties here are obvious. If the distinctions between science and mathematics, history and religion, the human sciences and the physical sciences, are distinctions of different kinds, then there is no reason to believe, and good reason to doubt, that the categories to which they collectively give rise will be mutually exclusive. The minimum requirements of a logical taxonomy of knowledge are that the categories it comprises are (i) exhaustive and (ii) exclusive, and these requirements are unlikely to be met by categories yielded by multiple differentiating criteria.

Hirst goes on to list eight 'distinct disciplines or forms of knowledge': mathematics, physical sciences, human sciences, history, religion, literature and the fine arts, philosophy and morality. His use of the term 'discipline' as a synonym for 'form of knowledge', coupled with the remarkable similarity of his list of forms to the traditional subject headings of school and university curricula, gives rise to the suspicion that his categorisation of knowledge is as much influenced by sociological considerations as by logical ones. The inadequacy of his four distinguishing criteria tends to reinforce the impression that Hirst is rationalising rather than justifying the organisation of knowledge traditionally favoured by educational institutions.

In 'Language and thought' (1966a), Hirst relates his notion of a form of knowledge to the Wittgensteinian notion of a language-game. The term 'language-game', he suggests, is used in two distinct ways. First, it is used to distinguish between the different things people do with words, things such as making assertions, asking questions and giving commands. Second, it is used to distinguish between the different domains of discourse within which assertions are made, questions asked and commands given:

> In this second sense the distinct languages employ unique concepts according to unique rules that are related to distinctive claims for truth or validity. If one is concerned with different areas of understanding as making different claims to knowledge, then it is with language-games in this second sense that one is concerned. From this point of view, it seems to me that man has achieved some seven or eight distinct forms of discourse that are connected with notions of truth or validity and that each of these language-games has distinctive logical features (*ibid.*, p.82)

Forms of knowledge, then, are equivalent to language-games in this second sense, and they are distinguished by their 'unique concepts', their 'distinctive logical features' and their 'distinctive claims for truth or validity'.

By the time of the publication of *The Logic of Education* in 1970, the shape of Hirst's list of forms of knowledge had changed somewhat. It now comprises the following: formal logic and mathematics, the physical sciences, inter-personal knowledge, morality, aesthetics, religion and philosophy. The crucial changes here are the removal of history and the human sciences and the addition of inter-personal knowledge. I think these changes represent an important move away from traditional subject headings and a sharpening up of the notion of a form of knowledge. Where we previously had a distinction between the human sciences and the physical sciences based on 'the nature of their central concepts', we now have a distinction between inter-personal knowledge and the physical sciences based on 'the grounds of our objective judgments':

> To be clearly distinguished from knowledge and experience of the physical world is our awareness and understanding of our own and other people's minds. Concepts like those of 'believing', 'deciding', 'intending', 'wanting', 'acting', 'hoping' and 'enjoying', which are essential to inter-personal experience and knowledge, do not pick out, in any straightforward way, what is observable by the senses. Indeed the phrase 'knowledge without observation' has been coined to make this point. The precise nature of the grounds of our objective judgments in this area is not yet adequately understood, though their irreducibility to other types of test can perhaps be most readily seen in judgments of our own states of mind. (*ibid.*, p.63)

The difference between claims about the physical world and claims about minds is not merely a difference of vocabulary or 'central concepts'; it is a difference of

epistemological footing. Physical objects are 'observable by the senses'; mental states are not. At least in the case of propositions about our own mental states, it seems clear that observation plays no part in our establishing their truth or falsity. Although Hirst thinks that 'the precise nature of the grounds of our objective judgments in this area is not yet adequately understood', he understands it well enough to see that it differs in kind from the nature of the grounds of our objective judgments about the physical world.

Indeed, Hirst now adverts to distinct kinds of objective test in relation to each of the seven forms of knowledge on his revised list. He is frustratingly vague about what he supposes the tests to be in the moral, aesthetic, religious and philosophical forms, but he now seems committed to the idea that a form of knowledge is primarily defined by the kind of *truth tests* or *methods of verification* by which knowledge is acquired.

At this point, Hirst makes a remark of which it is difficult to make sense and which has been a notable cause of consternation to his critics. He writes:

> The division of modes of experience and knowledge suggested here is thus a fundamental categoreal division, based on the range of such irreducible categories which we at present seem to have. That other domains might, in due course, come to be distinguished, is in no sense being prejudged; for the history of human consciousness would seem to be one of progressive differentiation. (*ibid.*, pp.64-5)

There is a tension here between Hirst's assertion that his taxonomy of knowledge is a 'fundamental categoreal division' and his suggestion that 'the history of human consciousness' might bring new forms of knowledge to light. Insofar as the forms of knowledge are *logical* forms, and the distinctions between them *necessary* distinctions, they are not susceptible to change or development. Logical truths are not contingent on experience or history. It may be that the current generation of philosophers is not up to the task of identifying all the forms of knowledge made possible by our conceptual scheme, but if so the problem lies with the current generation of philosophers, not with our having tackled the task too early in the history of human consciousness. Distinctions which are not necessary now will not become necessary in the future.

Hirst's remark fuels the suspicion that his categorisation of knowledge is as much

influenced by sociological considerations as by logical ones. Although history cannot produce new logical categories of knowledge, it can certainly produce new sociological categories. The proliferation of curriculum subject headings in schools and universities in recent years is a clear example of the historical emergence of new ways of classifying knowledge. If Hirst's thesis is in fact a sociological one, we need not quarrel with the suggestion that the ever-expanding body of human knowledge will continue to be divided and subdivided in hitherto unthought of ways. But Hirst emphasises often enough that the distinctions he is drawing are supposed to be logical distinctions to make us wary of treating his thesis as sociological.

The most charitable interpretation of Hirst's remark, and the one which is most consistent with his presentation of the forms of knowledge thesis, is that he is allowing for the possibility that future evolutionary developments may lead to a radical expansion of our existing conceptual scheme. It is perfectly intelligible, if not particularly plausible, to suppose that, at some point in our evolutionary future, we will develop faculties for the apprehension of objects and events which we are presently unable to detect. If this were to happen, it is likely that we would extend our conceptual scheme to include ways of referring to and describing such objects and events, and of checking the correctness of our references and the accuracy of our descriptions. In this way it is possible to see how evolutionary developments could, in principle, give rise to new forms of knowledge. It is not that we might find ourselves in a position to make new logical distinctions within our existing conceptual scheme, but that the expansion of our conceptual scheme might bring new logical distinctions with it. Whether or not this is what Hirst is trying to say, it is, I think, the only coherent sense one can give to his suggestion that 'the history of human consciousness' might bring new forms of knowledge to light.

In 'Literature and the fine arts as a unique form of knowledge' (1973a), Hirst attempts to defend the inclusion of aesthetics in his logical taxonomy of knowledge. Aesthetic propositions are not, as one might expect, propositions which bring natural or manufactured objects under such descriptions as 'is beautiful', 'is subtle', 'is cliched', etc., but rather works of art themselves. 'This is to take 'Guernica', *Middlemarch*, 'Fidelio' or a Haydn symphony, as a statement expressing a truth we can properly be said to know' (p.152). Works of art themselves are propositions which can be true or false, verified or

falsified, believed or disbelieved. 'The thesis I am interested in says that works of art are indeed artistic statements, stating truths that cannot be communicated in any other way' (p.153).

To make out the case for regarding works of art as propositions or statements, it would have to be shown that they refer to and describe objects or events independent of themselves. But Hirst declines to take up this challenge, on the grounds that 'it is not at all clear that works of art are in this way about something that exists beyond themselves, and immense difficulties have come from trying to identify these existents' (p.155). Instead he adopts the unpromising strategy of denying the logical connections between stating, referring and describing.

He begins by arguing that art is a 'language-game', in the first of the two senses of 'language-game' he identifies in 'Language and thought'. Works of art can be regarded as a kind of speech-act, alongside other kinds of speech-act such as 'commanding, praying, making statements, singing catches, asking questions' (p.157). Different kinds of speech-act, with their attendant logical rules and criteria of success, constitute different language-games:

> We are able to engage in 'language games', whereby meaning is a matter of a distinctive function that noises and marks can carry out in a given physical and social context. Only under particular conditions can there be noises that command or make statements. If this is so, then works of art can, I suggest, be thought of as constituting a language game or several language games. (*ibid.*, p.157)

Unfortunately, making good the claim that art is a language-game in *this* sense, far from supporting the case that art is a form of knowledge, positively undermines it. For if works of art are a distinctive kind of speech-act, on a par with statements, commands and questions, they cannot also be a species of statement. Art cannot be a language-game in Hirst's first sense *and* in his second.

Hirst then proceeds to the crux of his argument, which is to detach the terms 'statement' and 'true' from the language-game of referring and describing and give them a more general application. Statements, he argues, are not logically tied to reference and description, but

only to truth and falsity; and truth is 'a fundamental notion' which 'cannot be analysed into other notions'. It is this curious and unwarranted mystification of the concept of truth which enables him to admit works of art to the ranks of statements.

At times he seems to suggest that *any* speech-act judged to be successful against publicly agreed criteria counts as a true statement. The only criterion of truth he is prepared to admit is that 'there must be beyond the noises and marks, a relation to the context in which the correct application of the concepts is objectively determined' (p.160). Certainly we *could* treat 'statement' as a synonym of 'speech-act' and 'true' as a synonym of 'successful', but to do so would hardly be in line with ordinary usage. So widened, the class of true statements includes not only good works of art but also well-formed commands and questions. The onus is on Hirst to explain why referential-cum-descriptive and artistic speech-acts should be regarded as candidates for truth or falsity, but imperative and interrogative speech-acts should not. And this he singularly fails to do.

In fact, as I shall argue later, the terms 'statement' and 'true' cannot be detached from the language-game of referring and describing. A statement is an attempt to refer to and describe something; it is true when the reference is correct and the description accurate. Works of art are not statements and cannot be assessed as true or false. Certainly there are publicly agreed standards against which we assess works of art as good or bad, original or derivative, profound or banal; but to describe these standards as truth criteria, and the works of art as statements, is to stretch the use of these terms to the point of unintelligibility.

In 'The forms of knowledge revisited' (1973b), Hirst sets about clarifying some of the more obscure and disputed aspects of his original presentation of the forms of knowledge thesis in 'Liberal education and the nature of knowledge'. He reasserts three of the original four distinguishing features (the fourth is abandoned on the grounds that it adds nothing to 'the strictly logical distinctions which mark out possible forms of knowledge' (p.86)), but again leaves it unclear whether these features are to be regarded as individually or collectively sufficient criteria of a form of knowledge:

> We shall get at the logically fundamental characteristics of

> true propositions only by looking at those features which are necessary to all such propositions and the question is whether or not within them there exist mutually irreducible categories. On these grounds, the three elements in which the differences are to be found are the concepts and the logical structure propositions employ, and the criteria for truth in terms of which they are assessed. (*ibid.*, p.85)

He goes on to justify the crucial changes to the list of forms of knowledge in *The Logic of Education*; namely, the removal of history and the human sciences and the addition of inter-personal knowledge. History and the human sciences, he argues, are composite or 'logically complex' disciplines, comprising, on the one hand, 'truths that are matters of empirical observation and experiment' and, on the other, 'explanations of human behaviour in terms of intentions, will, hopes, beliefs, etc.' (p.86). It is this distinction between material propositions and mental propositions, and not the curricular distinctions between the natural sciences, the human sciences and history, which is epistemologically important.

Hirst then comments briefly on what he takes to be the most contentious of his forms of knowledge, aesthetics and religion. It is here, in the context of defending the claim that there is a religious form of knowledge, that Hirst notes the necessary connection between understanding a form of knowledge and holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. We shall return to this point in due course.

The idea of a form of knowledge is once more related to the idea of a logical category. The distinctions between the forms, writes Hirst, 'are what I understand by categorial distinctions, being matters of the types of concepts, logical structures and truth criteria which are irreducible to each other' (p.91). Unfortunately, the idea of a logical category is itself too obscure for this remark to cast much light on what a form of knowledge is supposed to be.[1]

Hirst next reiterates and elaborates on the perplexing claim made in *The Logic of Education* that the distinctions between the forms of knowledge, though they are logical or conceptual distinctions, may not be fixed or unchanging. He writes:

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[1] For a useful discussion of the idea of a logical category, as found in the writings of Aristotle and Kant, see Gilbert Ryle's paper 'Categories' (1938).

> The conceptual and logical analysis which indicates the divisions I have stressed is a matter of the logical relations and truth criteria to be found at present in our conceptual schemes. Notions of what is and is not intelligible are employed, but these are questions of coherent thought and communication in public discourse. As distinct from a Kantian approach, it is not my view that in elucidating the fundamental categories of our understanding we reach an unchanging structure that is implicit, indeed *a priori*, in all rational thought in all times and places. That there exist any elements in thought that can be known to be immune to change, making transcendental demands on us, I do not accept. (*ibid.*, p.92)

Hirst's assertion that his divisions are conceptual or logical but not *a priori* is flatly self-contradictory. As we saw in Chapter Three, to say that a proposition is necessarily or conceptually true is to say that its truth can be established by deduction and without reference to experience, which is just what '*a priori*' means. Logical distinctions, as opposed to sociological ones, are precisely distinctions which hold in all times and places.

Again, the only coherent interpretation of Hirst's comments here is that he is trying to allow for the possibility of radical evolutionary developments and consequent extensions of our conceptual scheme. If, in the future, we were to develop faculties for the apprehension of new kinds of object and event, it is likely that we would also develop new modes of reference and description. In this sense, our logical taxonomy of forms of knowledge might be said to be subject to change. To repeat the point made earlier, it is not that we might find ourselves in a position to make new logical distinctions within our existing conceptual scheme, but that the expansion of our conceptual scheme might bring new logical distinctions with it. The following passage from 'The forms of knowledge revisited' lends some support this interpretation:

> The capacity of man for linguistic development, like his sensory apparatus, is an evolutionary product. The environment in which he lives, physical as well as social, is similarly the outcome of change. All of this continues in flux, though the time scale of change for different elements varies hugely. Even the notions of reason, intelligibility and objectivity are within this situation. Nothing can any more be supposed fixed eternally. Yet none of this means that we cannot discern certain necessary features of intelligibility and

> reason as we have them. Although the nature of man may be changing and we are within a great context of total change, nevertheless we can pick out those concepts and principles which are necessary and fundamental to anything we could at present call understanding, as well as to the understanding we actually have. The ultimacy of these elements is there and they mark out the limits of anything we can intelligibly conceive. (*ibid.*, p.93)

Finally, Hirst considers the propriety of using the term 'discipline' as a synonym for 'form of knowledge'. 'Discipline', he concedes, is an ambiguous term which can be used to mean (i) a form of knowledge, (ii) a form of knowledge along with 'the skills and methods, attitudes and values, that go with an understanding and concern for this area of knowledge' (p.97), (iii) a curriculum unit or 'subject', or (iv) a research unit. It is therefore a term which should be used with caution when formulating educational objectives and planning curricula. In fact, it seems to me doubtful that the term 'discipline' is *ever* used as a synonym for 'form of knowledge' in ordinary English. Hirst obscures rather than clarifies his position by using it as such.

This completes my examination of Hirst's presentation of the forms of knowledge thesis. I turn now to consider some of the criticisms the thesis has attracted.

5.2.2 Criticisms of Hirst

In his *Knowledge and Schooling* (1976), Richard Pring asks what exactly a form of knowledge is supposed to be. He tries to take seriously Hirst's suggestion that forms of knowledge can be distinguished by their 'central' or 'categoreal' concepts, but finds that the criterion is too loosely formulated to be of much use. It is not clear how we are to distinguish central concepts from peripheral ones, or categoreal concepts from non-categoreal ones. Pring identifies three distinct senses of the term 'category':

> Firstly there is a notion of category as a necessary condition, not of a particular form of thought, but of any thought whatsoever... Secondly there is a notion of category as fundamental to a way of thinking (it picks out a central area of interest) where however that way of thinking is not indispensable... Thirdly, Hirst includes amongst his

> categoreal concepts those that play an important, structuring part in a mode of thinking but which are dispensable even to that mode of thinking. (*ibid.*, p.41)

The examples of categoreal concepts Hirst provides give no clear indication of which of these senses he has in mind. On the contrary, they suggest that he is drawing on all three senses as and when it suits him. The difficulty, writes Pring, is that 'Forms of knowledge are not, qua forms, defined in the same logical manner - or (put more crudely) Hirst pitches his 'central concepts' at too many different levels' (p.41).

This is, I think, an entirely justified complaint. Hirst does seem to move freely between the three notions of category identified by Pring. Moreover, insofar as he draws on Pring's second and third notions, it is clear that the identification of categoreal concepts is dependent on the prior identification of forms of knowledge. If a categoreal concept is one that is either indispensable or structurally important to a form of knowledge, then the notion of a category is logically dependent on the notion of a form of knowledge. It follows that any attempt to define forms of knowledge in terms of categoreal concepts is circular.

Pring goes on to make a specific attack on Hirst's implausible account of the aesthetic form of knowledge. His objection is the one outlined above: the term 'statement' cannot be detached from the language-game of referring and describing without loss of intelligibility. As Pring has it:

> ... as *statements* works of art must be saying something about a reality that exists independently of the statements themselves... But it is not at all clear from Hirst's argument what this independent element is with which I can 'compare' or test out the artistic statements. And unless such an independent element can be given, then it is not clear to me how works of art can continue to be classed as statements or art itself as a unique form of knowledge. (*ibid.*, p.44)

Like Pring, John Wilson (1979) is concerned with 'the general question of what a 'form of thought', as Hirst conceives it, is supposed to *be*' (p.112). In particular he wants to know whether the forms of knowledge thesis is to be regarded as logical or sociological. While much of what Hirst says suggests that he is tackling the properly philosophical

task of classifying propositions by their method of verification, his insistence that his distinctions are based on the historically specific range of categories 'which we at present seem to have' seems to contradict this impression. Either Hirst is interested in 'real (i.e. logically sound or necessary) distinctions' or he is not; and if he is not, what we are dealing with is 'just a rather sophisticated sociological thesis' (p.114).

I have already commented on this ambiguity in Hirst's presentation of his thesis, and indicated what I take to be the most plausible and defensible interpretation of his remarks about the possibility of identifying new forms of knowledge in the future. Necessary truths are true in virtue of the logical connections between terms in our conceptual scheme; if we are prepared to allow for the possibility of radical extensions of our conceptual scheme to accommodate new kinds of object and event, we must also allow for the possibility of the emergence of new epistemological distinctions.

If this interpretation is correct, it ought to allay Wilson's doubts about the logical character of Hirst's thesis. However, there is some evidence that Wilson demands rather more from a forms of knowledge thesis than that the distinctions between forms are logically sound. He apparently requires that the distinctions should be deducible from the concept of a rational creature:

> ... we have to show, by conceptual rather than empirical argument, that certain basic types of experience giving rise to certain structures of thought and language are inevitable for any rational creatures living in a space-time continuum. (*ibid.*, p.118)

This seems to me to be asking too much. It is quite possible for the distinctions between forms of knowledge to be 'real (i.e. logically sound or necessary) distinctions' without also being deducible from the concept of a rational creature. It may be true that some 'basic types of experience' are 'inevitable for any rational creatures living in a space-time continuum', but this hardly rules out the possibility of there being other 'basic types of experience' which are not inevitable.

Allen Brent (1978) is generally sympathetic to Hirst and endorses all seven forms of knowledge on his list. He nevertheless shares Wilson's suspicion that the forms of

knowledge thesis as presented by Hirst is ultimately a sociological one. He argues that Hirst has been influenced by what he calls 'the relativistic interpretation of Wittgenstein's theory of objectivity' (p.150), according to which criteria of truth and objectivity are agreed, more or less arbitrarily, by particular language-communities in particular times and places. They vary between communities and are subject to change within communities. A proposition which is true when assessed against the truth criteria of one community may be false when assessed against the truth criteria of another. And if different language-communities adopt different criteria of truth and objectivity, they will naturally draw different epistemological distinctions.

Brent argues, rightly, that this account fails to recognise the logic of the terms 'truth' and 'objectivity'. To say that a proposition is true is to say that it is true for all people in all times and places. It is an offence against logic to assert that a proposition is known to be true by one person and known to be false by another:

> The logic of any human truth claim therefore implies that, when I call something knowledge and truth instead of 'knowledge' and 'truth' (the equivalent of something like 'legitimation' or 'nihilation'), what is known and what is truth cannot be said to be knowledge and truth for my group alone but necessarily must mean knowledge and truth that I claim to be binding on all men. (*ibid.*, p.189)

It is of course possible for people to believe that false propositions are true, or to mistake arbitrarily agreed criteria for the assessment of speech-acts for truth criteria, but the philosopher has no business colluding in these mistakes. Just as the moral philosopher must not mistake what some people call just for what is just, so the epistemologist must not mistake what some people call true for what is true:

> If Hirst is simply describing the standards of 'objectivity' that we have today, and which can be different, all that he is engaged in is descriptive anthropology and not epistemology, just as an anthropologist describing society's mores is not engaging in ethics. (*ibid.*, pp.160-1)

If Hirst has indeed been influenced by 'the relativistic interpretation of Wittgenstein's theory of objectivity', and some of his remarks certainly suggest this, then Brent's criticisms are pertinent and sound. It seems to me likely, however, that Hirst is well

aware of the logical features of the terms 'truth' and 'objectivity' to which Brent draws attention, and that my own more charitable interpretation of the apparently sociological aspects of his thesis is closer to the mark.

Interestingly, Brent, like Wilson, demands more from a forms of knowledge thesis than that the distinctions between forms are logically sound; namely, that they should be deducible from the notion of a 'truth-asserting, objectivity-claiming language' (p.168). The forms of knowledge, he thinks, must be shown to be 'presupposed as the framework of judgment in any language', such that 'it is logically impossible to construct reality in terms of only one of them or to dispense with any one of them and still leave the rest of the framework able to function' (p.206). But, again, it is not clear why we should accept this stricture. It may be the case that some forms of knowledge are logically required by any truth-asserting, objectivity-claiming language, but I see no reason to suppose that all are.

5.2.3 Knowledge, propositions and truth

I shall shortly offer a restatement of the forms of knowledge thesis which, I hope, avoids some of the confusions and ambiguities in Hirst's presentation. Before doing so, I want to make a few remarks about the nature of knowledge, propositions and truth.

Knowledge may be dealt with briefly. A person is said to know that *p* when (i) she believes *p* to be true, (ii) she has adequate evidence for believing *p* to be true, and (iii) *p* is true. Believing that *p* is a necessary condition of knowing that *p*, but not all cases of believing are cases of knowing. A person may falsely believe that *p*, or may truly believe that *p* without adequate evidence, and in neither case does she know that *p*. Only when a person truly believes that *p* on the basis of adequate evidence do we say that she knows that *p*.

Propositions and truth are more troublesome. What is a proposition, and under what circumstances do we say that a proposition is true? There is a temptation here to construe '*p* is true' along the same lines as 'pillar boxes are red', to think of propositions as objects and truth as a property which those objects may or may not possess. But this

is to make what Ryle calls a 'category-mistake' (Ryle, 1949, p.17), to misallocate propositions to the category of objects and truth to the category of properties. In fact, propositions are not objects but actions, and truth is not a property but an achievement.

Propositions (statements, assertions) are a kind of speech-act, one of the things people do with words. They are, moreover, actions with a purpose, actions of which it is always appropriate to ask whether or not they were successful. To say of a proposition that it is true is simply to say that it achieved its purpose, that it was successful. 'Proposition' stands to 'true proposition' as 'shot' stands to 'goal' or 'treatment' stands to 'cure'.

What, then, is the purpose of propositions, the achievement of which makes them true? It is to refer to something correctly and describe it accurately. A proposition comprises a subject-expression and a predicate-expression, a referring part and a describing part. When the referring part refers correctly and the describing part describes accurately, the proposition is successful and therefore true.

This account of the nature of propositions and truth is roughly the same as the account given by J.L. Austin in 'Truth' (1950). Austin begins by asserting that the proper subjects of the predicate 'is true' are statements, and that statements are historic events:

> A statement is made and its making is a historic event, the utterance by a certain speaker or writer of certain words (a sentence) to an audience with reference to a historic situation, event or what not. (*ibid.*, p.151)

He goes on to ask when we say of a statement that it is true, and supplies the answer 'When it corresponds to the facts' (p.152). Recognising that this truism is liable to mislead, he elaborates as follows:

> If there is to be communication of the sort we achieve by language at all, there must be a stock of symbols of some kind which a communicator ('the speaker') can produce 'at will' and which a communicatee ('the audience') can observe: these may be called the 'words'... There must also be something other than the words, which the words are used to communicate about: this may be called the 'world'... And finally (for present purposes - of course there are other

> conditions to be satisfied too) there must be two sets of conventions:
>
> *Descriptive* conventions correlating the words (= sentences) with the *types* of situation, thing, event, etc., to be found in the world.
>
> *Demonstrative* conventions correlating the words (= statements) with the *historic* situations, etc., to be found in the world.
>
> A statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions (the one to which it 'refers') is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions. (*ibid.*, pp.152-3)

P.F. Strawson (1950) endorses (with minor reservations) Austin's account of the criteria by which statements are to be judged successful or unsuccessful, and of the conventional relations between words and the world which make reference and description possible:

> A *reference* can be correct or incorrect. A *description* can fit, or fail to fit, the thing or person to which it is applied. When we refer correctly, there certainly is a conventionally established relation between the words, so used, and the thing to which we refer. When we describe correctly, there certainly is a conventionally established relation between the words we use in describing and the type of thing or person we describe. These relations, as Mr Austin emphasises, are different... And *stating* is different from referring, and different from describing; for it is (in such cases) both these at once. Statement (*some* statement) is reference-cum-description. (*ibid.*, pp.165-6)

Where Strawson famously disagrees with Austin is in his denial that 'is true' predicates success of a propositional speech-act. Austin's error, argues Strawson, is to conflate the question of the success-conditions of propositional speech-acts with the question of truth. 'What supremely confuses the issue is the failure to distinguish between the task of elucidating the nature of a certain type of communication (the empirically informative) and the problem of the actual functioning of the word 'true' within the framework of that type of communication' (p.182).

The proposition '*p* is true', on Strawson's account, qualifies as a systematically

misleading expression. The grammatical subject and predicate of the proposition '*p* is true' are not its logical subject and predicate; the proposition is not about *p*, nor does it characterise anything as true. The logical subject and predicate of the proposition '*p* is true' are in fact the same as the logical subject and predicate of the proposition *p*. When I assert that *p* is true, I am not making an assertion about *p*, but asserting *p* in a particular way. Strawson gives the following example:

> For instance, in discussing the merits of the Welfare State, I might say: 'It is true that the general health of the community has improved (that *p*), but this is due only to the advance in medical science.' It is not necessary that anyone should have said that *p*, in order for this to be a perfectly proper observation. In making it, I am not talking *about* an actual or possible speech-episode. I am myself asserting that *p*, in a certain way, with a certain purpose. I am anticipatorily conceding, in order to neutralise, a possible objection. I forestall someone's making the statement that *p* by making it myself, with additions. (*ibid.*, p.163)

To borrow Austin's terminology, the function of the phrases 'is true' and 'it is true that' is *illocutionary* rather than *locutionary*. They do not add to the propositional content of a speech-act, but indicate that the speaker is making a concession or giving an endorsement. A person who concedes or endorses *p* by means of the prefix 'it is true that' naturally holds *p* to be a successful propositional speech-act; but she is not thereby *asserting* that it is a successful propositional speech-act. 'Certainly, we use the word 'true' when the semantic conditions described by Austin are fulfilled; but we do not, in using the word, *state* that they are fulfilled' (p.173).

Although the phrases 'is true' and 'it is true that' add nothing to the propositional content of a speech-act, they do imply certain things about its *setting*. For example, it only makes sense to say 'It is true that *p*' if someone has already asserted that *p* or might reasonably be expected to assert it. The act of conceding or endorsing a proposition presupposes that the proposition in question is already 'on the table':

> The man who looks and sees that the statement that there is a cat on the mat is true, sees no more and no less than the man who looks and sees that there is a cat on the mat, or the man who looks and sees that there is *indeed* a cat on the mat. But the *settings* of the first and third cases may be different

> from that of the second. (*ibid.*, p.177)

What are we to make of Strawson's account of the use of the word 'true'? It is certainly the case that the phrase 'it is true that' typically carries the illocutionary force Strawson ascribes to it, but, as Austin points out, this is not inconsistent with the claim that it also carries locutionary meaning:

> I agree that to say that it is true that the cat is on the mat *is* very often, and according to the all-important linguistic occasion, to confirm the statement that the cat is on the mat or to grant it or what not; but this cannot show that to say that it is true that the cat is on the mat is not also and at the same time to make an assertion about the statement that the cat is on the mat. (*op. cit.*, p.161)

While Strawson makes some interesting and valid points about the illocutionary force of speech-acts in which the word 'true' is used, he fails to show that '*p* is true' is not exactly what it appears to be; namely, a proposition about *p*. Whatever else a person is doing when she asserts that *p* is true, she is surely making an assertion about *p*; and what she is asserting is that *p* correctly refers to and accurately describes something in the world.

5.2.4 A restatement of the thesis

In the light of these general remarks about knowledge, propositions and truth, I turn to my restatement of the forms of knowledge thesis. My restatement is, I think, true to the spirit of Hirst's thesis and retains its central features. As we shall see, however, the sharper formulation of what constitutes a form of knowledge casts doubt on several of Hirst's seven forms.

The thesis is this. The forms of knowledge are the categories of a logical taxonomy of propositions, which categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Propositions are categorised by the kind of *truth test* or *method of verification* by which their truth or falsity is determined. All propositions can be so categorised because all propositions are either true or false and can, in principle if not in practice, be verified or falsified.

In developing our logical taxonomy, the first distinction to be drawn is the distinction between necessary and contingent propositions. Since I have examined this distinction in some detail in Chapter Three (Sections 3.2.0, 3.2.1, 3.2.2), we may be brief here. A necessary or analytic proposition is one which is true in virtue of its meaning and is therefore verified by analysing the meanings of its constituent expressions. A contingent or synthetic proposition is one which is true or false in virtue of experience and is therefore verified or falsified by being checked against the facts. Because all propositions must be true or false either in themselves or dependently on experience, the distinction between necessary and contingent propositions is exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

It should be noted here that necessary propositions are exempt from one of the general truth conditions of propositions identified in the previous section. A proposition, we said, comprises a referring part and a describing part, and is true when the referring part refers correctly and the describing part describes accurately. In the case of necessary propositions, the condition of correct reference is dropped. A person can make a true statement without succeeding in making reference if (and only if) the statement does not need to be checked against the facts. If the meaning of the predicate-expression is identical with or included in the meaning of the subject-expression, it does not matter whether or not the subject-expression refers. Where the accuracy of the describing part of a proposition is guaranteed by the meaning of the referring part, there is no need to identify and examine the referent.

For example, while most propositions about unicorns are false because they fail to refer, necessary propositions about unicorns (e.g. 'All unicorns have a single horn') are true even though they fail to refer because their truth is not dependent on the facts. There is no need to identify actual unicorns to find out whether or not they all have a single horn.

The next step in developing our taxonomy is to subdivide the class of contingent propositions. Contingent propositions are those which are verified by identifying and examining a referent (or referents). Differentiating between contingent propositions by their method of verification will therefore be a matter of differentiating between referents by their method of identification. We may begin, then, by drawing a distinction between *public referents*, which exist independently of individual minds and are identified by observation (or an analogue of observation), and *private referents*, which are states of

individual minds and are identified without observation.

Public referents are things like clouds and rain-storms, cars and collisions, human bodies and patterns of behaviour. They exist or occur in public space, which is to say that they can be observed by a community of conscious subjects with similar observational faculties. Because observing is subject to error, individuals can be mistaken about the existence and nature of public referents and are subject to correction by the community of observers.

Private referents are minds and their states, including such things as thoughts and intentions, sensations and feelings, hopes and memories. Mental states can be decisively identified only by the conscious subject to whom they belong, and they are identified without observation. Nor can a conscious subject be mistaken about her mental states. A person knows whether or not she is in pain, or thinking about her mother, without observation or introspection and without possibility of error.

Corresponding to the distinction between public and private referents, then, is a distinction between propositions about public referents and propositions about private referents. Propositions of the former kind are verifiable by a community of conscious subjects by means of observation; propositions of the latter kind are verifiable by only one conscious subject and without recourse to observation.

Against this distinction it might be objected that some referents are neither simply public nor simply private, but comprise a public and a private component. Most notable among these are persons and actions. A person comprises a mind and a body; an action (in general though not always) comprises an intention and a material event. Propositions about persons and actions therefore seem to defy classification as either propositions about public referents or propositions about private referents.

The answer to this objection is that many propositions about persons and actions are double-barrelled propositions requiring two kinds of truth test. For example, to verify the proposition 'John kicked the ball', we need to establish something about John's mind (that he intended to strike the ball with his foot) and something about John's body (that his foot struck the ball). The component of the proposition that is about John's mind

can be decisively verified by John alone, and John cannot be mistaken about it. The component of the proposition that is about John's body can be verified by any observer, though all observers, including John, can be mistaken and are subject to correction by the community of observers.

Not all propositions about persons and actions are double-barrelled in this way. To verify that John is in the living room, I need only establish something about the position of John's body; to verify that he is in pain, I need only establish something about the state of his mind. Because John comprises a mind and a body, propositions about John may be simple propositions about his mind or his body or compound propositions about his mind and his body.

More radically, it might be objected that there are no such things as private referents, on the grounds that private phenomena could not be made objects of reference in a public language. On this view, propositions about minds and mental states are ultimately reducible to propositions about bodies and behaviours. I think the behaviourist objection can be defeated, but, to avoid a lengthy digression, I shall postpone my discussion of it to Chapter Eight.

So far, then, our logical taxonomy comprises three categories: necessary propositions; contingent propositions about private referents (let us call these mental propositions); and contingent propositions about public referents. We must now ask whether it is possible to further subdivide this last category, whether there is more than one epistemological type of public referent.

Certainly the most important class of public referents is the class of material objects and events, the class of referents which we observe by means of the senses. Whatever else it may contain, public space contains things and happenings which we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Let us call propositions about public referents of this kind material propositions.

There is no logical reason why there should not be other kinds of public referent, observable by other kinds of faculty. Indeed, the history of philosophy is littered with attempts to suggest that there are. Plato, for example, argued that, in addition to the

'visible order' of objects apprehended by the senses, there is an 'intelligible order' of objects apprehended by the faculty of reason:

> Let me remind you of the distinction we drew earlier and have often drawn on other occasions, between the multiplicity of things that we call good or beautiful or whatever it may be and, on the other hand, Goodness itself or Beauty itself and so on. Corresponding to each of these sets of many things, we postulate a single Form or real essence, as we call it.
>
> Yes, that is so.
>
> Further, the many things, we say, can be seen, but are not objects of rational thought; whereas the Forms are objects of thought, but invisible. (Plato, *The Republic*, p.213)

Plato regarded 'Forms' or 'real essences' as public referents analogous to material objects, and reason as a faculty for the apprehension of public referents analogous to the senses. In support of his view, it is certainly the case that goodness and beauty can be the grammatical subjects of propositions (e.g. 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'), and such things plainly do not belong to the class of material objects. But we are not obliged to conclude, with Plato, that they must therefore belong to a second class of objects, inaccessible to the senses but discoverable by rational thought. We may rather contend that abstract nouns do not refer at all, that though goodness and beauty can be grammatical subjects, they cannot be logical subjects. Propositions such as 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder' are systematically misleading expressions whose grammatical forms are 'in a demonstrable way *improper* to the states of affairs which they record' (Ryle, 1931, p.16).[2]

But to reject Plato's argument on these grounds is by no means to deny the logical possibility that there are non-material public referents. Other candidates for this position are 'values' or 'moral absolutes', apprehended by the conscience or by practical reason, and religious or spiritual objects, apprehended by a spiritual sense or 'the eye of faith'. To determine whether or not there are moral or religious public referents one must examine the logic of moral and religious discourse; there is no general argument to show that there must or cannot be. It is for this reason that Wilson and Brent are wrong to demand that the forms of knowledge be deduced from the notion of a rational creature or

[2] For a discussion of systematically misleading expressions, see Chapter Three, Section 3.4.2.

a truth-asserting, objectivity-claiming language. Neither notion settles the question of whether human beings are able to identify non-material public referents by non-sensory means.

To sum up: our taxonomy comprises three categories of proposition (necessary propositions, mental propositions and material propositions) and a logical space into which further categories might be introduced (contingent propositions about non-material public referents). The categories (together with the logical space) are exhaustive and mutually exclusive, and represent the different kinds of truth tests or methods of verification by which the truth or falsity of propositions is determined.

Our revised list of forms is shorter than but not dissimilar to Hirst's. The categories of material propositions and mental propositions are equivalent to Hirst's physical sciences and inter-personal knowledge; the category of necessary propositions includes, and collapses the distinction between, formal logic and mathematics and philosophy; and the (possibly empty) category of contingent propositions about non-material public referents allows for the possibility of there being moral and religious forms of knowledge. Whether or not religious propositions are in fact governed by a distinct kind of truth test will be the topic of the next two chapters.

5.3.0 Understanding a form of knowledge

Having purged the forms of knowledge thesis of its most glaring ambiguities, let us return to the question with which we began: is it true that understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false? We might start by reminding ourselves of Hirst's statement of the case:

> But can such unique truth conditions be known without our actually being able to judge any propositions of this kind true or false? Can there be unique truth criteria that are never satisfied? If meaning is tied to knowing a unique set of truth criteria, is not meaning tied to our actually satisfying these in judging some propositions true or false?... The claim to an irreducible, unique form of propositional meaning,

> thus seems to necessitate that at least some proposition of this kind be known to be true. (Hirst, 1973b, pp.88-9)

It was argued in Chapter One that this passage is ambiguous. Hirst might mean either that understanding a form of knowledge involves *establishing* that certain propositions of that form are true or false, or that understanding a form of knowledge involves *agreeing* or *accepting* that certain propositions of that form are true or false. If he means the former, his argument must be rejected on the grounds that 'it overlooks the distinction between the possession of an ability and its employment' (Gardner, 1980, p.160). Knowing 'a unique set of truth criteria' not only *can* precede the use of those criteria to establish the truth or falsity of propositions, but logically *must* precede it. If he means the latter, his argument is more plausible and derives *prima facie* support from the Wittgensteinian argument that understanding language involves 'agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 242).

The Wittgensteinian argument is that acquiring language involves learning not only the logical criteria which connect words to each other (agreement in definitions) but also the experiential criteria which connect words to experiences (agreement in judgments). A person learns the experiential criteria for words like 'red', 'dry' and 'hot' by having red things, dry things and hot things pointed out to her, thereby coming to accept that certain propositions in which the terms 'red', 'dry' and 'hot' are applied are true. One cannot establish that anything is red unless one has accepted that something is, just as one cannot measure the length of anything unless one has accepted the accuracy of at least one measuring device. To be in a position to check a proposition against experience, one must have what Wittgenstein calls 'a paradigm', 'something with which comparison is made' (*ibid.*, Section 50).

Hirst's contention (on the latter interpretation of the passage above) is that the Wittgensteinian argument about language in general holds good at the level of individual forms of knowledge. Agreement in definitions and in judgments is a condition of understanding not only propositions in general, but each epistemological type of proposition. If the Wittgensteinian argument can be extended in this way, it follows that understanding a form of knowledge does involve holding certain propositions of that

form to be true or false.

David Attfield, it will be recalled, tries to resist this extension of the Wittgensteinian argument by showing that an angel who 'lacks colour vision and the other senses' could come to understand colour judgments (albeit in an attenuated way) without accepting the truth or falsity of any such judgment. His objection fails because colour judgments do not constitute an autonomous epistemological class, but rather a subset of the class of material propositions. Attfield concedes that our angel understands colour judgments only by analogy with other judgments about material objects which he *is* in a position to verify or falsify. He must have 'some kind of intuition analogous to sense perception whereby he is able to detect material objects' as the basis of his imaginative grasp of colour judgments (Attfield, 1978, p.95). A full understanding of some material propositions is a necessary condition of an analogical understanding of others.

There is, however, at least one epistemological class of propositions to which the Wittgensteinian argument does not apply; namely, the class of necessary propositions. A necessary proposition is one that is true in virtue of its meaning and not in virtue of experience. One verifies it by analysing the meanings of its constituent expressions, not by checking it against the facts. It follows that there is no need to learn the experiential criteria of terms which appear in necessary propositions, no need to reach agreement in judgments. In order to verify that all pillar boxes are red, I must have been taught to pick out red things; in order to verify that all red pillar boxes are red, I need have received no such teaching. Knowledge of the logical connections between words, or agreement in definitions, is sufficient for the verification of necessary propositions.

It might be argued that, in the case of necessary propositions, agreement in definitions *is* agreement in judgments, so there is still a sense in which understanding necessary propositions involves agreement in both definitions and judgments. But now the point of Wittgenstein's distinction is lost. We shall do better, I think, to admit that his argument cannot easily be applied to the class of necessary propositions and concentrate on its application to contingent propositions.

Let us, then, modify our question as follows: is it true that understanding a form of *contingent* knowledge necessarily involves holding certain propositions of that form to

be true or false? Here, I think, we must admit that it is. Verifying contingent propositions involves identifying and examining the referents of those propositions, which in turn involves having learned the experiential criteria which make the identification of referents possible. Even if we accept that a person who has not learned the experiential criteria of colour words can understand colour judgments by way of analogy with judgments of, say, taste, temperature or texture, she must still have learned the experiential criteria of taste, temperature or texture words, and thus have accepted the truth or falsity of judgments of the same epistemological type as colour judgments. One must be able to identify at least some material objects and properties if one is to understand references to material objects and properties in general. In the same way, one must be able to identify at least some mental states, or at least some non-material public referents, if one is to understand references to mental states, or to non-material public referents, in general.

In conclusion, then, with the exception of the class of necessary propositions, it is true that understanding an epistemological class of propositions involves agreement in definitions and in judgments, and therefore involves holding certain propositions within that class to be true or false.

5.4.0 Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the second of the two key premises of Hirst's argument against the liberal account of Religious Education is, with a minor qualification, sound. That is to say, in the case of all forms of knowledge but one, understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. If Hirst's first premise, that religion is a form of knowledge, is also sound, his argument against the liberal account of Religious Education is decisive.

I have also indicated what form religious propositions would have to take if they were to constitute an autonomous epistemological class. They would have to refer to and describe non-material public referents, observed or apprehended by non-sensory means.

Whether or not religious propositions take this form, and, if not, what form they do take, will be the topic of the next two chapters.

Chapter Six

Is there a religious form of knowledge?

6.1.0 Introduction

The claim that there is a religious form of knowledge, that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class, is the linchpin of the argument against the liberal account of Religious Education. If it is true, the aim of transmitting religious understanding without religious belief is unrealisable. In this chapter and the next I try to show that it is not true.

I begin, in this chapter, by examining a number of attempts by philosophers to show that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class. I conclude that each of these attempts is unsuccessful. In the next chapter I shall argue that religious propositions can be distributed without remainder over the familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions.

6.2.0 Six accounts of religious belief

As we noted in Chapter One, Hirst himself seems unwilling or unable to defend his claim that there is a religious form of knowledge. In 'The forms of knowledge revisited' he expresses but makes no attempt to justify his doubt that religious propositions are 'reducible to' propositions of other kinds:

> Certainly, some have sought to give an account of religious meaning which has seen its cognitive core to be totally reducible to knowledge belonging to other forms (usually moral, historical or aesthetic) and the rest to be emotive in character. If such a reduction can be legitimately carried through, then there can here be no distinct form of religious knowledge. But can it? That I doubt. (Hirst, 1973b, p.88)

We must therefore turn to other philosophers to find arguments in support of Hirst's doubt. I propose to examine six philosophical accounts of religious belief, each of which can be seen as a defence of the view that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class. Because Wittgenstein is frequently identified as the originator of this view, the first three accounts I shall consider are those of Wittgenstein

himself and two of his followers, D.Z. Phillips and W.D. Hudson. The fourth account is the influential theory of religious meaning advanced by John Wisdom. The fifth is Allen Brent's attempt to justify the inclusion of religion as a distinct category in Hirst's sevenfold taxonomy of knowledge; and the sixth is a recent argument by Michael Leahy and Ronald Laura to the effect that religious propositions refer to entities visible only to those with 'the eye of faith'.

6.2.1 Wittgenstein

In his 'Lectures on religious belief' (c.1938), which we have from the extant notes of his students, Wittgenstein insists that he is himself unsure of the meaning of religious beliefs. Considering the case of two people who disagree about whether or not there will be a Judgment Day, he says: 'My normal technique of language leaves me. I don't know whether to say they understand one another or not' (p.55). Later he adds: 'If Mr. Lewy is religious and says he believes in a Judgment Day, I don't even know whether to say I understand him or not' (p.58). He professes to find the idea of life after death similarly perplexing:

> Suppose someone said: "What do you believe, Wittgenstein? Are you a sceptic? Do you know whether you will survive death?" I would really, this is a fact, say "I can't say. I don't know", because I haven't any clear idea what I'm saying when I'm saying "I don't cease to exist," etc. (*ibid.*, p.70)

Wittgenstein's protestations of ignorance are not to be dismissed lightly and warn us against attributing to him too clear a view of the nature of religious beliefs. Nevertheless, he holds strong views about some of the ways in which religious beliefs should *not* be interpreted, and at least hints at some ways in which they should be.

Wittgenstein is certain that religious beliefs differ in kind from ordinary factual beliefs. He ridicules one Father O'Hara for trying to make religion 'a question of science', a question of contingent propositions supported by empirical evidence. 'In a religious discourse we use such expressions as: "I believe that so and so will happen," and use them differently to the way in which we use them in science' (p.57). If one person

believes there is a German aeroplane overhead and another is not so sure, the two people are 'fairly near'; if one person believes in a Last Judgment and another is not so sure, there is 'an enormous gulf' between them (p.53). Arguments and disagreements in religion have a different logical character from arguments and disagreements in science: 'These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons' (p.56).

When it comes to saying exactly *how* religious beliefs differ from scientific beliefs, Wittgenstein is more cryptic. One possible interpretation of his scattered and unsystematic remarks in the 'Lectures on religious belief' is that a religious belief is one which is held *unshakeably* or *regardless of the evidence*. A person who believes in the Last Judgment, he writes, has 'what you might call an unshakeable belief' (p.54). My beliefs are religious when 'Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me' (p.56). Of people who hold religious beliefs one could say that 'they are not reasonable - meaning they don't use *reason* here' (p.59).

On this interpretation, to say that a belief is religious is not to say something about its content, but to say something about the way in which it is held. Any belief can be held religiously because any belief can be held non-rationally or non-evidentially. It is because of the non-rational character of religious beliefs that we tend to speak of 'dogmas' rather than 'opinions' or 'hypotheses':

> This is partly why one would be reluctant to say: 'These people rigorously hold the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgment'. 'Opinion' sounds queer.
> It is for this reason that different words are used: 'dogma', 'faith'.
> We don't talk about hypothesis, or about high probability. Nor about knowing. (*ibid.*, p.57)

A second possible interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks is that a religious belief is not actually a *belief* at all. In ordinary English, to hold a belief is to hold a proposition to be true, to hold that a referential-cum-descriptive speech-act is successful. But Wittgenstein suggests that the word 'belief' is not used in its ordinary sense in the phrase 'religious belief', that holding a religious belief is not a matter of holding a proposition to be true. In the context of religion, 'there is this extraordinary use of the word 'believe'. One talks

of believing and at the same time one doesn't use 'believe' as one does ordinarily' (p.59).

But if a religious belief is not a proposition held to be true, what is it? The clearest suggestion Wittgenstein makes is that it is a *prescription* held to be *binding*:

> Here believing obviously plays much more this role: suppose we said that a certain picture might play the role of constantly admonishing me, or I always think of it. Here, an enormous difference would be between those for whom the picture is constantly in the foreground, and the others who just didn't use it at all. (*ibid.*, p.56)

What is 'believed' is not a proposition but a prescription, and 'believing' consists in holding that prescription to be binding, in keeping it 'in the foreground'. The prescriptions one holds to be binding are the principles which govern one's actions. A person's religious beliefs show, says Wittgenstein, 'by regulating for all in his life' (p.54).

For example, the religious belief that there will be a Last Judgment amounts to a commitment to live by certain principles. As such, it is logically independent of factual beliefs about events in the distant future:

> Suppose somebody made this guidance for this life: believing in the Last Judgment. Whenever he does anything, this is before his mind. In a way, how are we to know whether to say he believes this will happen or not? (*ibid.*, p.53)

> Suppose, for instance, we knew people who foresaw the future; make forecasts for years and years ahead; and they described some sort of a Judgment Day. Queerly enough, even if there were such a thing, and even if it were more convincing than I have described, belief in this happening wouldn't be at all a religious belief. (*ibid.*, p.56)

Religious belief in the Last Judgment neither entails nor is entailed by the factual belief that there will be an event called the Last Judgment at some point in the future, for the simple reason that an 'ought' can neither entail nor be entailed by an 'is'.

There is textual support for each of these possible interpretations of Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief. My concern here is not with whether one interpretation is

closer to Wittgenstein's intention than the other, but with whether either interpretation yields an account of religious beliefs such that they could be said to constitute an autonomous epistemological class. It will, I think, be clear that neither interpretation yields such an account. If religious beliefs are beliefs held non-rationally, then propositions of any epistemological kind can be adopted as religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are distinguished not by a method of verification but by a refusal to face the question of verification. If, on the other hand, religious beliefs are prescriptions held to be binding, they are not beliefs at all and therefore not beliefs of a particular epistemological type. (We might prefer to say that there are two senses of the term 'belief', but then it is no more helpful to say that religious beliefs and scientific beliefs are two kinds of belief than to say that investment banks and river banks are two kinds of bank.)

Moreover, neither interpretation yields an account of religious belief that is plausible. It is no doubt true that many people hold their religious beliefs non-rationally, but it does not follow that beliefs are religious *in virtue of* being non-rationally held. There are many beliefs held non-rationally which we are not remotely tempted to describe as religious, and many religious beliefs held on the basis of what is judged to be good evidence. Again, it is true that religious people typically hold certain prescriptions to be binding, but it does not follow that such prescriptions *are* their religious beliefs. On the contrary, we are inclined to say that they hold certain prescriptions to be binding *because of* their religious beliefs, because they believe in a god whom they consider to be a legitimate moral authority.

The principal reason for Wittgenstein's denial that religious beliefs are propositions held to be true on the basis of evidence is that he judges the propositions one might be tempted to call religious to be obviously false. Religious people cannot be doing what they appear to be doing when they state their religious beliefs because the blunder they would be making is too big:

> If you compare it with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can't credit that anyone could soberly argue: "Well, I had this dream... therefore... Last Judgment." You might say: "For a blunder, that's too big." If you suddenly wrote down numbers on the blackboard, and then said:

> "Now, I'm going to add," and then said: "2 and 21 is 13," etc.
> I'd say: "This is no blunder."
> There are cases where I'd say he's mad, or he's making fun.
> Then there might be cases where I look for an entirely different interpretation altogether. (*ibid.*, pp.61-2)

Because he judges religious beliefs to be as preposterous as the proposition '2 and 21 is 13', Wittgenstein casts about for 'an entirely different interpretation altogether'. But here he surely exaggerates the implausibility of supposing that people might hold religious propositions to be true on the basis of what they judge to be good evidence. It may in fact be the case that there are no gods, and therefore that no religious propositions are true, but it is not *obviously* the case, and certainly not so obvious as to warrant the suspicion that religious beliefs are other than they seem.

Another reason Wittgenstein gives for questioning the ordinary factual character of religious beliefs is that doubting the existence of a god sometimes incurs disapproval:

> If the question arises as to the existence of a god or God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of. One said, had to say, that one *believed* in the existence, and if one did not believe, this was regarded as something bad. Normally if I did not believe in the existence of something no one would think there was anything wrong in this. (*ibid.*, p.59)

But this phenomenon is not difficult to explain without giving up the idea that religious beliefs are factual. If one believes that there is a god who is a legitimate moral authority, and who sets exacting moral standards for human beings, one might reasonably suspect that those who deny the existence of that god are motivated less by a concern for the truth than by a weakness of moral will. Atheism may be a conclusion based on a rational assessment of the evidence, or it may be an attempt to avoid one's moral obligations. Insofar as it is the latter, it is, in Wittgenstein's words, 'something bad'.

In conclusion, then, Wittgenstein's reasons for denying the ordinary factual character of religious beliefs are unpersuasive and the alternatives he offers implausible. But even if he is right that religious beliefs are either beliefs held non-rationally or prescriptions held to be binding, they clearly do not constitute an autonomous epistemological class.

6.2.2 D.Z. Phillips

D.Z. Phillips' account of religious belief in *Religion Without Explanation* (1976) is heavily influenced by Wittgenstein's 'Lectures on religious belief', and is apparently premised on the same conviction that, interpreted as ordinary factual propositions, religious beliefs are obviously false. Discussing John Wisdom's example of a child who believes his dead father is watching him from heaven, Phillips remarks: 'The child holds a belief which is patently false: he believes his dead father is still alive'. Like Wittgenstein, Phillips seeks 'an entirely different interpretation altogether' to explain the believer's adherence to what appear to be false propositions. But his account of religious belief, which is admittedly obscure in places, is not quite the same as Wittgenstein's account, on either interpretation of the latter. A religious belief, for Phillips, is neither a proposition held to be true regardless of the evidence nor a prescription held to be binding.

Phillips states clearly and repeatedly that religious beliefs are not propositional, not referential-cum-descriptive, in character. Religious beliefs, he writes, 'are certainly not hypotheses. It is even misleading to call them propositions' (p.144). The 'notion of reference' is 'quite alien to them' (p.148). Rush Rhees is quoted with approval:

> 'God exists' is not a statement of fact. You might also say that it is not in the indicative mood. It is a confession - or expression - of faith. This is recognised in some way when people say that God's existence is 'necessary existence', as opposed to the 'contingency' of what exists as a matter of fact; and when they say that to doubt God's existence is a sin, as opposed to a mistake about the facts. (*ibid.*, p.174; from Rhees, 1969)

Philosophers of religion, both sympathetic and unsympathetic, tend to 'share the same confused assumptions that 'There is a God' is a statement in the indicative mood, and that 'God will judge us all' is a prediction of a future matter of fact' (p.190). They then proceed to argue about whether or not the statement is true or the prediction correct. But in such arguments both sides are 'equally confused', for the doors to theoretical theism and theoretical atheism 'lead nowhere' (p.190).

At one point, Phillips argues that religious beliefs have much in common with what he calls 'basic propositions'. Basic propositions are empirical propositions that are certainly or obviously true, propositions for which it is impossible to adduce evidence because any evidence adduced would be less certain than the propositions themselves. Attention was drawn to propositions of this kind by G.E. Moore in a paper entitled 'A Defence of Common Sense' (1925). Among the examples Moore gives are: 'There exists a living human body which is my body', 'Other human beings exist', 'The earth has existed for many years', and 'The mantelpiece is nearer to me than the bookcase'. Confronted with someone who doubted the truth of a basic proposition, says Phillips, we should be at a loss to know how to help her. What such a person needs is 'not correction, but training' (p.160).

According to Phillips, religious beliefs resemble basic propositions in being certainly or obviously true. There is sense in which religious beliefs 'cannot be questioned' (p.163); there is 'nothing tentative or hypothetical' about them (p.167). Within the language-game of religion it is not possible to doubt the truth of religious beliefs, and people who try to do so are in need of training rather than correction.

There are, I think, grave difficulties with Phillips' account of basic propositions, but these need not concern us here. For what is very much more striking than the alleged similarities between basic propositions and religious beliefs is one fundamental difference between them; namely, that religious beliefs are not propositional. Phillips writes:

> Yet, once we have noticed this similarity between propositions which play a fundamental role in our talk of physical objects and in people's belief in God, we have to recognise that there are also deep going differences... Talk of God's existence or reality cannot be considered as talk about the existence of an object. Neither can questions about whether we mean the same by 'God' be construed as whether we are referring to the same object. (*ibid.*, pp.172-4)

This 'deep going difference' eclipses any apparent similarities between basic propositions and religious beliefs. If religious beliefs lack propositional content, then whatever kind of certainty or indubitability attaches to them is of an entirely different

order from the kind of certainty that attaches to Moore's basic propositions.

Unfortunately, like Wittgenstein, Phillips is a good deal clearer about what he thinks religious beliefs are not than about what he thinks they are. He seems to endorse Wittgenstein's suggestion that religious beliefs are like pictures that 'play the role of constantly admonishing me', but there is little indication that he regards them as essentially prescriptive in character. For Phillips, I think, a religious belief is *a form of words which expresses a religious feeling*, where religious feelings are such things as awe, reverence, humility and gratitude. Holding a religious belief is a matter of routinely using a particular form of words to express a particular feeling, in the same way as some people routinely use the word 'ouch' to express pain, or a favourite expletive to express anger or frustration. Phillips gives the following example:

> For the Christian, the necessity and unavoidability of death show the essential contingency of all things, his own creaturehood, that all things are a gift, that nothing is his by right. His response to this is one of humility and gratitude... In face of what is given, the believer kneels. Talk of 'God' has its sense in this reaction. It is not the name of an individual; it does not refer to anything. No individual could give a day to men, since the sense in which a day can be said to be given depends on the absence of any such giving. (*ibid.*, pp.147-8)

To 'believe' that each new day is a gift from God is to use talk of 'God' and 'giving' to express the feelings of humility and gratitude one experiences when confonted with the finality of death. It is not to believe that new days are actually gifts, or that they are given by an individual called 'God'. To interpret religious utterances as propositions about an individual called 'God' is to misunderstand them, to mistake expressive speech-acts for referential-cum-descriptive ones.

To ask for a justification of religious beliefs is, on Phillips' account, tantamount to asking for a justification of religious feelings. In one sense such a request is quite unreasonable. If I feel gratitude for each new day, or reverence for the dead, then that is just the way I feel. It is fact about my nature and does not stand in need of justification. 'If one asks why people should believe in the reality of the dead, why the dead should be held in awe, reverence or dread, one can only reply that people *do* react to the dead in this way, that is all' (pp.134-5). It is in this sense that religious beliefs might be said to be 'certain'

or 'immune from doubt'. I can no more doubt my feelings of awe and reverence than I can doubt my aches and pains.

On the other hand, feelings do not lie entirely beyond rational control. Although we are to some extent at their mercy, we can choose to either indulge or suppress them, explore or ignore them. We can train ourselves to react or refrain from reacting in particular ways. There is therefore a sense in which it *is* reasonable to ask for a justification of religious beliefs. If I express my feeling of reverence for the dead by talking of the reality of the dead, I thereby *endorse* or *indulge* that feeling, and my endorsement or indulgence stands in need of justification. The disagreement between the believer and the non-believer is a disagreement about whether religious feelings ought to be indulged or suppressed. The non-believer refuses to express feelings of reverence for the dead because she disapproves of such feelings and wishes to distance herself from them. Phillips speculates about the reasons a non-believer might have for disapproving of reverence for the dead:

> The protestors may feel that though the memories of the dead should be cherished, it would be foolish to allow such memories to intrude upon the decisions with which people are faced now in the course of their lives. Or perhaps the protestors feel that one should not tie oneself to the memories of the dead, however much they were loved when they were alive. The only realistic thing to do is to look for new relationships to replace those that death has destroyed. Such attitudes may stem from a general view that life is for the living, that those who are dead have had their chance and that what is important rests with the present. (*ibid.*, p.136)

Religious beliefs, then, are expressions of religious feeling. Insofar as religious feelings are brute facts of human nature, religious beliefs are 'certain' and require no justification. Insofar as human beings can exercise rational control over their feelings, whether or not one ought to indulge religious feelings by giving expression to them is a proper subject of rational inquiry and debate.

Our question is whether or not religious beliefs on Phillips' account constitute an autonomous epistemological class. Again it should be clear that they do not, on the grounds that expressions of religious feeling do not qualify as beliefs. Phillips explicitly

denies that religious beliefs are propositional in character and readily concedes that the terms 'belief' and 'truth' have a different meaning in the language-game of religion. Discussing the work of R.B. Braithwaite, he remarks: 'Braithwaite does not realise that in these religious beliefs, the grammar of 'belief' and 'truth' is not the same as in the case of empirical propositions' (p.143). Here one is tempted to agree with J.L. Mackie that Phillips is too ready to see new meanings in old words:

> But now the firm ground beneath our feet has disappeared, and we are struggling helplessly in a bog. Of course Braithwaite was right to work with the simple, common, conception of truth and falsity. To speak of a different grammar of 'truth' is to demand a licence for evasion and double-talk. (Mackie, 1982, pp.224-5)

It is, of course, possible that there are people in the world who use the term 'belief' to refer to expressions of feeling and the terms 'true' and 'false' to indicate whether or not such expressions satisfy some criterion of success. We need not insist on the univocality of these terms. What we must insist on is that their alternative uses are not confused or conflated with their conventional uses. Whether we call them beliefs or not, expressions of feeling are not propositions and have no place in a logical taxonomy of propositions.

6.2.3 W.D. Hudson

W.D. Hudson is another philosopher of religion heavily influenced by Wittgenstein's 'Lectures on religious belief'. He too maintains that religious beliefs differ in crucial respects from beliefs of other kinds. In *A Philosophical Approach to Religion* (1974), he tries to show that religious discourse constitutes 'a logically distinct language-game' (p.22), and that it is an intellectually respectable game to play.

Unlike Phillips, however, Hudson does not doubt that religious beliefs are propositional in character. To hold religious beliefs is to hold certain propositions to be true, which propositions refer to and describe objects or events. In contrast to Phillips' insistence that 'talk of God's existence or reality cannot be considered as talk about the existence of an object', Hudson maintains that 'the word 'god' stands for someone or something which men encounter in their experience of life or the world about them' (p.23).

It will be recalled that one possible interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks in his 'Lectures on religious belief' is that religious beliefs are propositions held to be true *regardless of the evidence*. There is some evidence that Hudson is sympathetic to this view. In the following passage he notes that religious beliefs are resistant to revision in the light of conflicting evidence:

> Take, as a simple example of religious belief, the claim that God always cares for us when we are in need. Compare this with the belief, say, that the social services of this country always care for us when we are in - at any rate certain sorts of - need. If we look at the way in which these respective beliefs function - if, to recall Wittgenstein's remark, we see their sense as their employment - then differences begin to appear. The claim about the social services functions normally as a belief which is falsifiable by empirical evidence. If, for example, we discovered by taking random samples that half the unemployed do not in fact receive unemployment benefits, then *ceteris paribus* we should abandon the claim that the social services always care for us when we are in need. But it is not normal for a religious believer, when confronted by, say, the fact that half the population of the world is underfed, to disclaim his belief that God always cares for us when we are in need. (*ibid.*, p.9)

The religious believer holds on to her beliefs even when her experience seems to contradict them. A religious belief, says Hudson, 'functions as a kind of end-point to inquiry'; the believer keeps looking for evidence of the goodness of God 'however hard it may be to find' (p.10). 'Notice that it is part of the point of my belief that I should go on holding it even when evidence appears to falsify it' (p.10). These remarks are at least suggestive of the view that religious beliefs are beliefs held non-rationally, or regardless of the evidence.

In fact, I do not think Hudson takes this view. The person who believes that God always cares for us when we are in need holds on to her belief in the face of global poverty and malnutrition not because her belief is non-rational, but because it rests on other grounds. The grounds for her belief are that God has promised to care for those in need and always keeps his promises. Her belief is based on her assessment of the character of God, not on her assessment of the extent to which those in need appear to

be cared for. Just as it is sometimes reasonable to judge a defendant innocent on the basis of her good character, even when the evidence is stacked against her, so it may be reasonable to believe that God cares for those in need even when the evidence seems to point in another direction.

For Hudson, religious beliefs are distinguished not by their non-rational character but by their connection with the concept of god. As he puts it, 'the concept of god is the constitutive concept of religious belief' (p.16). Religious beliefs appear to be connected with the concept of god in one of two ways. A religious belief is either (i) a belief about a god or (ii) a belief *based on* beliefs about a god. A belief is said to be based on beliefs about a god when a person's reasons for holding it involve reference to a god. So, for example, if I believe that the world will end on such-and-such a date on the grounds that a god has promised it, my belief is religious. If I hold the same belief on the grounds that cosmologists have predicted it, it is not.

A god, according to Hudson, is a transcendent conscious agent:

> ... whatever is god is, I think, conceived to be *conscious*, in the sense that god participates with understanding in the communication which invariably goes on between god and men; and god is conceived also to be *active*, in the sense that god wills certain ends and can at least under certain circumstances carry them into effect. By saying that divine consciousness and agency are *transcendent*, I mean, to put it in a nutshell, that there is always more to god's consciousness or activity than to man's. God's understanding is more acute than man's or, at least, more guileful; god's activity is more powerful, or at least more effective. (*ibid.*, pp.14-15)

A god, then, is a transcendent conscious agent who exercises influence over events. A person who believes in a god will invoke divine agency to explain certain events in the past and predict certain events in the future. This, suggests Hudson, is what Wittgenstein means when he says that believers and non-believers have 'different pictures':

> Confronted by illness, Wittgenstein's believer asks a radically different question about it from his unbeliever and so gets a different explanation. He sets the illness, so to say, within the

> picture of divine judgment and it is explained for him when he recognises it as a punishment. The picture he uses determines what constitutes for him an explanation of the illness. (*ibid.*, p.19)

The believer uses a picture of the world in which a god is active; the non-believer uses a picture of the world in which gods do not feature. The believer considers explanations which invoke the agency of a god, and is therefore willing to see illnesses as punishments or recoveries from illness as healings; the non-believer declines to consider such explanations.

Hudson argues that, because the believer and the non-believer use different pictures, disagreements between them 'cannot be resolved in any ordinary way'. This is true in the sense that gathering more evidence about a person's illness will not help to resolve a dispute about whether or not it is a divine punishment. The disagreement runs much deeper than an ordinary dispute about, say, whether an illness is a cold or a flu. The disputants cannot hope to settle the question of whether or not a particular illness is a divine punishment until they have settled the more basic question of the existence of a god. But this is not to say that disagreements between believers and non-believers are unresolvable or immune to rational debate. It is simply to say that they rest on a deeper disagreement about the existence of a god.

Hudson states at the outset that the intellectual respectability of religious belief turns on the question: 'does religion make sense in that it is *about something which really or objectively exists*? When one talks about God is one talking about anything which exists outside one's imagination?' (p.xii). Unless there really is a god, it is obviously absurd to explain things in terms of divine agency or make predictions on the basis of divine promises. Imaginary or fictional gods cannot exercise influence over events. If religious belief is to be rationally defensible, a case must be made for the existence of a god.

Unfortunately, Hudson does not think that either logical or empirical arguments for the existence of a god are successful. The proposition 'A god exists' is neither necessarily true nor supported by the empirical evidence. But rather than conclude from this that religious belief fails the test of intellectual respectability, Hudson resorts to a curious obfuscation of the meanings of the words 'existence' and 'reality':

> My own way of dealing with the question 'Is it the case that God really exists?' is to point out that the expression 'really exists' is systematically elusive to final definition... the logic of the word 'real' and its cognates is such that it does not make sense for anyone to claim that he has discovered what in a final or absolute sense really does exist. (*ibid.*, p.97)

The concept of reality, he argues, has an *openness* about it; the word 'real' is indefinable in the same sort of way as G.E. Moore thought the word 'good' was indefinable. Moore argued that no proposition of the form 'X is good' is necessarily true, and hence that there are no necessary criteria for the application of the term 'good'. Later moral philosophers concluded from this that 'a speaker can choose his own criteria of goodness' (p.103). Hudson's contention is that the word 'real' has the same logical features:

> Anyone who says that something is real can legitimately be called upon to say what he takes the criteria for the use of 'real' and its cognates to be. But when he has given them, the question can (logically) always be asked, 'Is what is in accordance with these criteria real?' No such question is manifestly self-answering according to the ordinary use of the word 'real'. It follows, I would claim, that anyone who uses the word 'real' can (logically) decide in accordance with what criteria he is using it. He is not tied down to one set of defining characteristics, in accordance with which he must describe anything as real. (*ibid.*, pp.103-4)

We are each required to make our own 'ultimate ontological decision' about what to count as real and what unreal (p.104). It is, says Hudson, no less rational to ascribe reality to a god than to ascribe reality to material objects.

Implicit in Hudson's discussion is the idea that reality or existence is a quality we ascribe to some things and not others, the difficulty being that different people ascribe it to different things. This seems to me to be confused. All things are real and all things exist, for unreal or non-existent things are not things at all. Two people cannot meaningfully disagree about the existence of an identified object because an object which did not exist could not have been identified in the first place. It is true that 'is real' and 'exists' are grammatical predicates and therefore *appear* to bring an identified object under a

particular description, but the appearance is deceptive. As we noted in Chapter Three (Section 3.4.2), the grammatical form of a proposition is sometimes at odds with its logical form. Propositions of the form 'X exists' are systematically misleading expressions; they are not about X and they do not ascribe the quality of existence. As Ryle explains:

> To put it roughly, '*x* exists' and '*x* does not exist' do not assert or deny that a given subject of attributes *x* has the attribute of existing, but assert or deny the attribute of being *x*-ish or being an *x* of something not named in the statement. (Ryle, 1931, p.19)

The words 'existence' and 'reality' certainly exhibit logical peculiarities, but not the peculiarities Hudson ascribes to them. People are not required to make their own 'ultimate ontological decisions' about which things to count as real. In particular, they are not required to make a decision about whether or not to count a god as real. If there is a god at all, it is a real, existent god; if there is not, we cannot conjure one into existence by making ontological decisions. And the question of whether or not there is a god can only be answered by examining the empirical evidence. As Hudson himself remarks, 'the word 'god' stands for someone or something which men encounter in their experience of life or the world about them' (p.23). If, as Hudson thinks, all empirical arguments for the existence of a god are unsuccessful, he is obliged to conclude that there are no gods and therefore that religious belief is rationally indefensible. He cannot avoid this conclusion by obfuscating the meanings of the words 'existence' and 'reality'.

Finally, then, do religious beliefs, on Hudson's account, constitute an autonomous epistemological class? I think it is clear that religious beliefs of the second kind, beliefs *based on* beliefs about a god, do not. The proposition that the world will end on such-and-such a date is a straightforward material proposition, regardless of the reasons one might have for holding it to be true. Religious beliefs of the first kind, beliefs about a god, are more plausible candidates for epistemological autonomy. The question here is what kind of things gods are. If they are minds, bodies, or compounds of minds and bodies (i.e. persons), then propositions about gods are mental propositions, material propositions, or combinations of the two. If, on the other hand, gods are neither minds nor bodies but non-material public referents, then propositions about gods belong to an

epistemological class of their own.

However, Hudson's definition of a god as a transcendent conscious agent strongly suggests that gods are either persons or disembodied minds. (For Hudson, whether or not gods have bodies is a contingent matter, not a logical one.) Gods are conscious subjects with thoughts, feelings and intentions. Their transcendence consists only in the fact that their understanding is more acute and their actions more powerful than human understanding and actions, and perhaps the fact that they do not 'need a body in order to be active in the world' (p.15). Divine minds and human minds share the same logical features, so propositions about divine minds are of the same epistemological type as propositions about human minds.

Whether or not we should accept the claim that religious discourse, as described by Hudson, constitutes 'a logically distinct language-game' depends on what we take the ill-defined term 'language-game' to mean. But insofar as we take it to be a synonym for 'form of knowledge', the claim must be rejected.

6.2.4 John Wisdom

In his celebrated paper 'Gods' (1944), John Wisdom presents two distinct accounts of religious belief. He contends that religious propositions have undergone a change of meaning in modern times, and therefore that one must distinguish between the 'old' meaning and the 'new' meaning. I shall consider each of his accounts in turn.

On the old meaning, religious propositions are propositions about divine minds. The method of verification for propositions about divine minds is the same as the method of verification for propositions about human minds other than our own. Just as we identify other human minds by making inferences from patterns in the behaviour of bodies similar to our own, so we identify divine minds by making inferences from patterns in the world as a whole. Wisdom explains:

> The hypothesis of mind, of other human minds and of animal minds, is reasonable because it explains for each of us

> why certain things behave so cunningly all by themselves unlike even the most ingenious machines. Is the hypothesis of minds in flowers and trees reasonable for like reasons? Is the hypothesis of a world mind reasonable for like reasons - someone who adjusts the blossom to the bees, someone whose presence may at times be felt - in a garden in high summer, in the hills when the clouds are gathering, but not, perhaps, in a cholera epidemic?... It is clear now that in order to grasp fully the logic of belief in divine minds we need to examine the logic of belief in animal and human minds. (Wisdom, 1957, p.151)

Propositions about divine minds, then, are not epistemologically distinct from propositions about animal and human minds. Throughout most of its history, religion has been concerned with propositions of this kind.

However, with the advance of modern science and 'our better knowledge of why things happen as they do' (p.149), it has become increasingly apparent that all propositions about divine minds are false, that 'the hypothesis of a world mind' is redundant. Gods, declares Wisdom, have been exposed as 'the persistent projections of infantile phantasies' (p.166). In the light of these developments, religious people have been faced with the choice of abandoning religious language altogether or giving religious words new meanings. According to Wisdom, they have taken the latter option.

On the new meaning, religious propositions are propositions about *patterns in human reactions*. What they now refer to are not the 'superhuman, sub-human, elusive beings' of ancient mythologies, but rather those 'patterns in human reactions which are well described by saying that we are as if there were hidden within us powers, persons, not ourselves and stronger than ourselves' (p.166). That is to say, the very patterns in nature which were once the *evidence for* religious propositions are now the *subjects of* religious propositions. To assert that 'in each of us a devil sleeps' (p.166) is not now to assert that there are malign agents other than ourselves influencing our thoughts and actions, but to make the altogether more plausible assertion that human beings are sometimes cruel and destructive against their own better judgment. Wisdom writes:

> New knowledge made it necessary either to give up saying 'The sun is sinking' or to give the words a new meaning. In many contexts we preferred to stick to the old words and give them a new meaning which was not entirely new but,

> on the contrary, *practically* the same as the old. The Greeks did not speak of the dangers of repressing instincts but they did speak of the dangers of thwarting Dionysus, of neglecting Cypris for Diana, of forgetting Poseidon for Athena. We have eaten of the fruit of a garden we can't forget though we were never there, a garden we still look for though we can never find it. Maybe we look for too simple a likeness to what we dreamed. (*ibid.*, p.167)

Wisdom's suggestion that the new meaning of religious propositions is 'practically the same as the old' is extraordinary. He wishes to make the point that the patterns to which religious propositions now refer are the same patterns previous generations used as the bases of their inferences to divine minds. But this hardly constitutes an equivalence of meaning. There is clearly an enormous difference between propositions about patterns in human reactions and propositions about divine minds.

The claim that religious beliefs have undergone the change of meaning Wisdom describes is, I think, highly implausible. Despite 'our better knowledge of why things happen as they do', it remains the case that those who accept or reject religious truth claims take themselves to be accepting or rejecting claims about a god, about a divine person or mind, not claims about patterns in human reactions. Renford Bambrough remarks:

> While Wisdom gives us an interpretation of the sentence 'God exists' according to which it makes an assertion that is either true or false, it seems to me doubtful whether his interpretation preserves the assertion as the *kind* of assertion that it is - namely, an assertion of the *existence* of a *substance*, and, what is more, of a *personal* substance. He shows that the words have an intelligible use in which they do not express the conclusion either of a purely *a priori* or of an inductive investigation, but it seems to me that he does not and could not show that that intelligible use is the use to which that form of words has traditionally been put and is still put by orthodox Christian believers. (Bambrough, 1969, p.66)

Moreover, it is not at all clear that propositions about divine minds have been falsified or even rendered improbable by the advance of modern science. It remains an open question whether or not 'the hypothesis of a world mind' is supported by human experience, whether or not the world proclaims a creator as a watch proclaims a watch-maker. The claim that there is 'someone who adjusts the blossom to the bees, someone whose presence may at times be felt - in a garden in high summer, in the hills when the

clouds are gathering' (p.151) is a claim about which reasonable people continue to disagree.

Wisdom's 'new meaning' is, of course, familiar to us as a *metaphorical* use of religious language. We certainly speak of thwarting Dionysus when we mean repressing instincts, or of the devil within us when we mean our own malevolent impulses. But the metaphorical use of religious language in the hands of the poet is not to be confused with its literal use in the hands of the believer.

However, let us set aside these misgivings about the plausibility of Wisdom's account and consider the epistemological status of claims about patterns. A pattern is a property exhibited by a set of objects or a sequence of events. The epistemological class to which propositions about patterns belong depends on the nature of the objects which exhibit the pattern. Propositions about patterns in material objects are material propositions; propositions about patterns in mental states are mental propositions. Nor is there any mystery about how one establishes that a set of objects exhibits a particular pattern. One establishes that a set of dominoes is arranged in a zigzag pattern in exactly the same way as one establishes that the dominoes are black or the set comprises 28 pieces: by observing or examining the dominoes.

It is true that some patterns are easily missed and are only discovered after close scrutiny of the objects or events in question. A person may stare at brush strokes on a canvas for several minutes without noticing the pattern they form. It is for this reason that we sometimes speak of 'discerning', 'distinguishing' or 'recognising' patterns. Observing patterns often requires a level of care and attention which is not usually necessary for, say, observing colours. But the fact that some patterns are difficult to see has no bearing on the epistemological status of propositions about them.

Wisdom, however, makes the odd claim that there are at least some propositions about patterns which, though contingent, are not empirically verifiable. They are certainly not *necessary* propositions, and empirical evidence is certainly *relevant* to their verification, but after all the relevant empirical evidence has been collected, there is still room for disagreement about their truth or falsity. So two people who have made every conceivable observation of a set of objects and agree on all the empirical facts, may yet

disagree about whether or not the objects exhibit a particular pattern.

Now it is true that people sometimes disagree about the truth or falsity of contingent propositions even after all the evidence has been collected. Two people may disagree about whether or not the average height of a group of trees is twelve metres, even after measuring every tree in the group, because one of them has made a mistake in calculating the average. But we should not hesitate to describe propositions of this kind as empirically verifiable, for their truth or falsity is *logically entailed* by the evidence. Wisdom explicitly denies that the truth or falsity of propositions about patterns is entailed by, or can be deduced from, any amount of empirical evidence. He writes: 'it won't do to describe the theistic issue as one settleable by such calculation, or as one about what can be deduced in vertical fashion from the facts we know' (p.156).

Wisdom's suggestion is that there are two phases in the verification of propositions about patterns. The first phase is the collection of relevant empirical evidence, which is necessary but not sufficient for the determination of truth or falsity. The second phase is a special form of reasoning which moves from the evidence collected to the truth or falsity of the proposition in question. This form of reasoning is not deductive, since, *ex hypothesi*, the empirical evidence is not logically sufficient. But nor is it inductive, since inductive reasoning moves from known facts to unknown facts and, in this case, also *ex hypothesi*, all the relevant facts are known. The possibility of there being propositions with the method of verification Wisdom describes therefore turns on his being able to identify a valid mode of inference which is neither deductive nor inductive. He attempts to do this in the following passage:

> In such cases we notice that the process of argument is not a chain of demonstrative reasoning. It is a presenting and re-presenting of those features of the case which severally co-operate in favour of the conclusion... The reasons are like the legs of a chair, not the links of a chain. Consequently although the discussion is *a priori* and the steps are not a matter of experience, the procedure resembles scientific argument in that the reasoning is not *vertically* extensive but *horizontally* extensive - it is a matter of the cumulative effect of several independent premises, not of the repeated transformation of one or two... This encourages the feeling that the issue is one of fact - that it is a matter of guessing from the premises at a further fact, at what is to come. But

> this is a muddle. *The dispute does not cease to be* a priori *because it is a matter of the cumulative effect of severally inconclusive premises*. The logic of the dispute is not that of a chain of deductive reasoning as in a mathematic calculation. But nor is it a matter of collecting from several inconclusive items of information an expectation as to something further, as when a doctor from a patient's symptoms guesses at what is wrong, or a detective from many clues guesses the criminal. It has its own sort of logic and its own sort of end. (*ibid.*, pp.157-8)

This description of 'horizontally extensive' *a priori* reasoning is extremely obscure. It is not at all clear how Wisdom's 'severally inconclusive premises' are supposed to have their 'cumulative effect'. Premises either entail conclusions or merely suggest them. A conclusion entailed by its premises is reached by deductive inference; a conclusion suggested by its premises is reached by inductive inference. There seems to be no room for a third form of inference with 'its own sort of logic'. And in the absence of a coherent account of non-deductive, non-inductive reasoning, the claim that propositions about patterns are contingent but not empirically verifiable is barely intelligible.

Wisdom is simply wrong that two people can make every conceivable observation of a set of objects and agree on all the empirical facts, yet still disagree about whether or not the objects exhibit a particular pattern. Such a disagreement *is* a disagreement about the empirical facts. And if the objects really do exhibit the pattern in question, then one party to the dispute has made an observation which the other has failed to make. It is true that a person who has missed a pattern can be helped to see it by someone who has noticed it; but she is not helped by any kind of *argument* or process of *reasoning*. She is helped rather by *pointing*, by having her attention directed towards features of the set of objects which show up the pattern. Coming to see patterns is not a matter of deriving conclusions from premises; it is simply a matter of noticing what one has previously failed to notice.

Wisdom gives a number of examples of what he takes to be disagreements about patterns which cannot be settled by observation. One example is a legal dispute about whether or not Mr. A, who has handed his long-trusted clerk signed blank cheques, is guilty of failing to exercise reasonable care. Here, says Wisdom, 'opposing counsel are agreed as to the facts and are not trying to settle a question of further fact' (p.157). Given that there

is complete agreement on all the relevant facts, the question of Mr. A's guilt does not seem to be empirically settleable. Another example is a disagreement between two observers about whether or not a painting, which both have examined in detail, is excellent.

These examples can be dealt with in either of two ways. The first is to accept Wisdom's claim that they are disagreements about patterns but deny that they cannot be settled by observation. *If* the decision about whether or not Mr. A exercised reasonable care turns on the question of whether or not his conduct exhibited a particular pattern, then the matter *is* settleable by making further observations, by reexamining the evidence before the court; for either the prosecution has missed the pattern or the defence has imagined it. Again, *if* the question of the painting's excellence turns on the presence or absence of a particular pattern in the marks on the canvas, then further and closer observations of the painting *are* the only way to answer it.

The second way of dealing with these examples is to reject the claim that they are disagreements about patterns. The most obvious explanation for both disagreements is *not* that in each case there is a pattern which one party to the dispute has missed, but that in each case the disputants are trying to assess something without an agreed set of assessment criteria. To assert that Mr. A exercised reasonable care or that the painting is excellent is to assess Mr. A or the painting against certain criteria; but these criteria are not given in the meanings of the expressions 'reasonable care' and 'excellent'. The reason for this is that 'reasonable care' and 'excellent' are, at least in part, *evaluative* expressions. As we noted in Chapter Four (Section 4.3.1), evaluative expressions are such that, although there may be *necessary* descriptive criteria for their application, there are not *sufficient* descriptive criteria, with the result that 'People will agree about the connotation but dispute over the denotation' (Flew, 1966, p.78). Therefore, from the fact that Wisdom's disputants agree on the meanings of the expressions 'reasonable care' and 'excellent', it does not follow that they agree on the criteria of reasonable care in Mr. A's profession or the criteria of excellence in art. And insofar as their disagreements can be attributed to the use of different assessment criteria, the disputants may not disagree about the facts at all.

Neither Wisdom's account of non-deductive, non-inductive reasoning nor his examples of

empirically unsettleable disagreements support his contention that propositions about patterns have the distinctive epistemological property of being contingent but not empirically verifiable. Even if one were to accept his argument that religious propositions have acquired a new meaning in modern times, and are now about patterns in human reactions, it would not follow that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class.

6.2.5 Allen Brent

In his *Philosophical Foundations of the Curriculum* (1978), Allen Brent offers a detailed exposition of Hirst's forms of knowledge thesis, in the course of which he makes a number of attempts to justify the claim that there is a religious form of knowledge. I shall argue that his various attempts are neither consistent nor persuasive.

On his first attempt, Brent adopts the negative strategy of saying what religious propositions are not. He presents a pseudo-religious account of the origins of the universe with which genuinely religious accounts are to be contrasted. According to the pseudo-religious account, the universe was created by a black cloud with both material and mental properties. The black cloud has a material body which 'consists of billions of highly complex electronic circuits' and which will, at some point in the future, contract 'from its present all-pervasive extension throughout the whole universe to occupy an area at its centre of a few cubic miles' (p.105). It also has the ability 'to think, analyse, decide, command, store unforgettable memories, etc.' and 'to determine that it is never discovered' (p.105). As the possessor of a body and a mind, the black cloud is presumably a kind of *person*, though plainly not a human person.

Brent's contention that this account of the origins of the universe is *not* a religious account is justified as follows:

> Why, then, is not such an account a religious account? The reason is that the black cloud, for all its eternity and involvement in human destiny, is not describable by means of the concept of God, because it is not transcendent - it is not 'wholly other' than ourselves. As such, reverence, awe and

> worship could never be properly given to it. We may be pleased that the black cloud exists, and happy that we shall live again in the form of electronic analogues of ourselves (if indeed it is possible for us to do so), but we cannot be grateful to it, and we cannot give to it our thanks and praise. (Brent, 1978, p.106)

But these assertions beg the question. Why is the black cloud not a god? Why is it not transcendent? Why can it not be a proper object of reverence, awe and worship? The onus is on Brent to explain what he means by the terms 'god' and 'transcendent' and why they do not apply to the black cloud. If, for example, we were to use the definitions of these terms furnished by Hudson (see above, Section 6.2.3), the black cloud would readily meet their criteria of application. A god, says Hudson, is a transcendent conscious agent, and a conscious agent is transcendent when its consciousness is more acute than human consciousness and its agency more powerful. On the face of it, the black cloud is a prime example of a god or a transcendent being, and an appropriate object of reverence, awe and worship.

There is some evidence that, despite ascribing to the black cloud the ability to think, analyse, decide and command, Brent means for us to think of it as a material object only, rather than a person with a body and a mind:

> A ritual that sacramentally invoked the greater presence of the black cloud in our lives would be invalid, since its relationship to human life is causal whereas that of God is personal. Sacrifice would be non-applicable because the pervasion and contraction of the black cloud is determined by causal laws whereas sacrifice involves the entreaty of an autonomous being. (Brent, 1978, p.106)

Certainly, if the black cloud is merely a material object causally connected with other material objects, and not a personal being, we feel little temptation to describe it as a god. But if this is what Brent is saying, he has shown only that propositions about gods differ from or go beyond material propositions in exactly the same way as propositions about human persons differ from or go beyond material propositions. He has supplied no reason for supposing that religious propositions are epistemologically distinctive.

Brent's second attempt to justify the claim that there is a religious form of knowledge

bears no relation to his first and comprises an endorsement of Wisdom's suggestion that religious propositions are contingent but not empirically verifiable. The disagreement between the theist and the atheist, he concurs, is a factual disagreement which cannot in principle be settled by experience or observation. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Wisdom fails to provide a coherent account of the non-deductive, non-inductive reasoning by which such disagreements are supposed to be settled, and thus fails make the notion of contingent but empirically unverifiable propositions intelligible. Brent does nothing to make up the shortfall in Wisdom's argument.

Brent's third attempt represents another change of tack. He now contends that religious questions are questions of the form 'What kind of person ought I to *be*, *x* or *y*?', to be contrasted with moral questions which have the form 'What ought I to *do*, *x* or *y*?' (p.206). While morality is concerned with our duties to others, and therefore with our conduct or actions, religion is concerned with our duties to ourselves, and therefore with our character or dispositions. The objection to being a 'perfect hypocrite', a hypocrite whose hypocrisy is never discovered, is not moral but religious.

There are a number of complaints one can make here. First, this is unrecognisable as an account of what makes a question *religious*. If it were correct, the atheist who asks whether or not she ought to be courageous would be asking a religious question, while the theist who asks whether God is three persons or one would not. It is quite contrary to ordinary usage of the term 'religious' to equate religious questions with questions about character.

Second, the assignment of questions about character to the domain of religion leaves Brent with a curiously truncated view of morality. Questions about character, about the kind of person one ought to be, have traditionally been as central to moral discourse as questions about conduct, about the things one ought to do. Moreover, the distinction between character and conduct cannot be drawn too sharply. It is certainly the case that people *sometimes* act out of character, but the idea of a person who *always* or even *usually* acts out of character is unintelligible. The concept of character is logically connected with the concept of conduct, so that questions about the kind of person one ought to be cannot be divorced from questions about the things one ought to do.

Third, and most important, questions of the form 'What kind of person ought I to be?' are not questions of fact. When I say to myself 'I ought to acquire disposition *x*', I am not bringing myself under a description which may or may not be accurate, but issuing myself a prescription. And when two people disagree about the kind of people they ought to be, they are not disagreeing about the truth or falsity of a proposition, but about which of several policies to pursue. Their disagreement is settled not by a verification but by a decision. Brent gives us a criterion for distinguishing religious prescriptions and policies, but tells us nothing about what, if anything, is to count as a religious proposition.

I conclude, then, that none of Brent's various attempts to justify the claim that there is a religious form of knowledge is successful.

6.2.6 Michael Leahy and Ronald Laura

It was argued in the previous chapter (Section 5.2.4) that the question of whether or not there is a religious form of knowledge turns on the question of whether or not religious propositions refer to and describe non-material public referents. If they do, their method of verification must differ from the methods by which we verify mental and material propositions, and they must therefore constitute an autonomous epistemological class. In their paper 'Religious 'Doctrines' and the Closure of Minds' (1997), Michael Leahy and Ronald Laura argue that religious propositions refer to just such non-material public referents, to objects and events which exist and occur in 'a transempirical dimension of reality' (p.337).

In the first part of their paper, Leahy and Laura argue that religious discourse resembles other forms of discourse in its dependence on what they call 'epistemic primitives', factual propositions which are untestable or unfalsifiable. This argument was criticised in Chapter One (Section 1.4.0) and I shall not repeat my criticisms here. Leahy and Laura go on, in the second part of their paper, to give an account of the logic of religious discourse, and it is with the coherence and plausibility of that account that we are presently concerned.

The difference between the believer and the non-believer, according to Leahy and Laura, is not that they make different inferences from the same set of facts, but that the believer is privy to facts of which the non-believer is ignorant. Whereas the non-believer is only able to observe objects and events in the material world, the believer is able to observe, in addition, objects and events in the spiritual world. She has a perceptual ability which the non-believer does not have, an ability Leahy and Laura call 'the eye of faith'. Those blessed with 'enlightenment concerning the referents of religious claims' are 'those endowed with the eye of faith' (p.329).

The suggestion that believers have perceptual abilities which enable them to perceive spiritual objects and events invisible to non-believers is, I think, perfectly intelligible. The idea of non-material public referents presents no great conceptual difficulties. This is not to say, of course, that the suggestion is plausible. The intractability of the disagreement between believers and non-believers certainly stands in need of explanation, but the attribution of additional perceptual abilities to believers is a rather desperate expedient. For one thing, it implies too deep a gulf between believers and non-believers. It fails to account for those on the periphery of religious belief, those who waver between belief and non-belief, those who come to faith in later life and those who abandon it. It suggests too much certainty on the part of the believer and too much incomprehension on the part of the non-believer.

Nevertheless, the implausibility of Leahy and Laura's account does not detract from its coherence. What does detract from its coherence is their attempt to explain why it is that some people have the eye of faith and others do not. The explanation is not, as one might think, that believers and non-believers are physiologically different, in that the former possess sense organs which the latter lack. It is rather that, although all people are physiologically equipped to perceive objects and events in the spiritual realm, some are prevented from doing so by what Leahy and Laura call 'the empiricist world-view':

> The empiricist world-view sees the realm of what exists as exhausted by the domain of sensible objects bounded by a contiguity of three spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension. Given the parameters of this demarcation of the space-time manifold, the senses of past and future rely upon the concept of the 'present' to define the domain of ontic propriety, the realm, that is, of actual events and existent

> objects. These ontological limits of the world in turn mark the boundaries of the 'knowable', of that of which we can be rationally conscious. Thus, the epistemic primitives of empiricist epistemology lay down that the only existence claims which shall admit of the assignment of truth-value will be those referring to sensible objects alleged to exist within this spatio-temporal continuum delimited by three spatial dimensions and one temporal one. (*ibid.*, pp.337-8)

No doubt there are people who are prepared to recognise as 'actual events and existent objects' only *material* events and objects. Let us call such people 'materialists'. And no doubt materialists are wrong to impose this curious restriction on their use of the words 'actual' and 'existent'. The world includes a great many actual events and existent objects (e.g. feelings, memories, ideas, intentions) which are neither sensible nor spatially located. But Leahy and Laura's bizarre contention is that people who refuse to apply the terms 'actual' and 'existent' to certain things are thereby rendered unable to perceive or apprehend those things. The non-believer is unable to perceive spiritual objects simply because she has decided that 'the only existence claims which shall admit of the assignment of truth-value will be those referring to sensible objects'.

It follows that non-believers can acquire the eye of faith by giving up 'the empiricist world-view' and extending the range of application of the terms 'actual' and 'existent'. Once people admit the possibility that there might be non-material things in the world, they miraculously find themselves able to perceive such things. The key to acquiring the ability to perceive spiritual objects and events, according to Leahy and Laura, is to admit the possibility of there being dimensions other than those of space and time:

> As self-reflective creatures we humans are capable of transcending the limits of our perceptual apparatus to the extent of 'correcting' the dimensionality we bring to bear on reality... On this view 'religious consciousness' is defined by the capacity for enhanced or corrected dimensionality which enables believers to perceive a further - transcendent - dimension to the world bound by the spatio-temporal manifold. (*ibid.*, p.340)

This explanation of why it is that some people have the eye of faith and others do not seems to me to be logically muddled. Leahy and Laura confuse *the willingness to describe an object as 'existent'* with *the ability to perceive that object*. While it is certainly

within the power of human beings to change the meanings of words, and thus to extend the range of application of the terms 'actual' and 'existent', it is not within their power, at least not by dint of an epistemological decision, to change their perceptual abilities. From the fact that I am prepared to recognise the possible existence of objects of a certain kind, it does not follow either that such objects exist or that I am able to perceive them; nor does my refusal to describe certain objects as 'existent' render me incapable of perceiving them. Materialists who deny the 'existence' of mental states do not thereby cease to feel their pains or experience their emotions.

The implausibility of Leahy and Laura's claim that believers differ from non-believers in their ability to perceive objects and events in a spiritual realm is, then, compounded by the logical confusion inherent in the idea that one can acquire new perceptual abilities merely by changing the meanings of words. Although, if their account were correct, religious propositions would constitute an autonomous epistemological class, they fail to make it either plausible or fully coherent.

6.3.0 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined six attempts by philosophers to show that there is a religious form of knowledge and argued that none of them is successful.

If religious beliefs are prescriptions held to be binding (Wittgenstein) or routine expressions of feeling (Phillips), they are not really beliefs at all and therefore not beliefs of a distinct epistemological kind. If religious beliefs refer to transcendent conscious agents (Hudson), patterns in human reactions (Wisdom) or autonomous personal beings (Brent), they belong to epistemological categories already familiar to us. Only on Leahy and Laura's account, where religious beliefs refer to non-material public referents apprehended by 'the eye of faith', do they possess epistemological features which distinguish them from beliefs of other kinds; but this account is neither plausible nor fully coherent.

I turn now to the task of setting out a positive account of the meaning of religious propositions and identifying the epistemological class or classes to which they do in fact belong.

Chapter Seven

The meaning of religious propositions

7.1.0 Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to set out a positive account of the meaning of religious propositions. I try to show that, far from constituting an autonomous epistemological class, religious propositions can be distributed without remainder over the familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions.

If I am successful in this, I shall have vindicated the liberal account of Religious Education. The challenge to the coherence of that account, it will be recalled, rests on the twin premises that (i) religion is a unique form of knowledge and (ii) understanding a unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. The second premise, it was argued in Chapter Five, is true. But if religious propositions can be distributed without remainder over the epistemological classes of mental and material propositions, the first premise is false and the case against the liberal account of Religious Education collapses.

7.2.0 The concept of religion

What is it that distinguishes religious propositions from non-religious ones? Indeed, does it make sense to talk of 'religious propositions' at all? Or does the expression involve a 'category-mistake' (Ryle, 1949, p.17), an attempt to bring objects of one type under a description appropriate to objects of another type? To answer these questions it is necessary to undertake an analysis of the concept of religion.

Recent discussions of the concept of religion emphasise the wide range of application of the term and the difficulty of formulating a precise definition. It is frequently argued that there is no single feature shared by all instances of the concept. 'There is', writes Alister McGrath, 'a growing consensus that it is seriously misleading to regard the various religious traditions of the world as variations on a single theme' (McGrath, 1994, p.458). John B. Cobb asserts that analysis of the concept of religion is 'pointless':

> Arguments about what religion truly is are pointless. There is no such things as religion. There are only traditions, movements, communities, peoples, beliefs and practices that have features that are associated by many people with what they mean by religion. (Cobb, 1990, p.83)

Now it is certainly the case that applications of the term 'religion' in ordinary discourse are many and varied. But the conceptual analyst need not be daunted by this fact. She has at her disposal at least two strategies for accommodating such diversity. First, she may draw a distinction between *literal* and *metaphorical* applications of the term, between what is actually a religion and what merely resembles one. Second, she may admit the possibility that the concept of religion is *inexact*, that its criteria function as loose guidelines rather than firm rules.

7.2.1 Metaphorical applications of the term 'religion'

It is, I think, clear that many ordinary applications of the term 'religion' are metaphorical applications. That is to say, we often apply the term 'religion' to things which are not actually religions but which resemble religions in certain striking ways.

For example, we say of a person who is very committed to football that football is her religion. Here we are drawing attention to the resemblance between the commitment of the football fanatic and the commitment of the religious believer. Zeal and fervour are characteristic features of religions, so we use the term 'religion' to describe whatever is pursued zealously or fervently. But there is no suggestion that being very committed to something is a sufficient criterion of having a religion.

Again, we sometimes apply the term 'religion' to political or intellectual movements which require people to hold beliefs on the basis of textual or institutional authority, rather than on the basis of evidence and reasons. We describe Marxism as a religion insofar as we suspect Marxists of basing their economic claims not on the empirical evidence but on the authority of Marx. Here again we are speaking metaphorically. Submission to authority is a characteristic feature but not a sufficient criterion of religion. It is true that religious people often subordinate rational inquiry to textual or

institutional authority, but this is not what their religion consists in.

We may, then, reduce the diversity of the range of application of the term 'religion' by discounting metaphorical applications. Interests which are zealously pursued and movements which require submission to authority are perhaps *ordinarily* but are certainly not *literally* described as religions. We are concerned here only with literal uses of the term.

7.2.2 Four criteria of religion

Even after we have eliminated metaphorical applications of the term 'religion' from consideration, we may find that there is no single feature which all religions have in common, or that whatever features they do have in common are also found in things we should not wish to call religions. In this case we shall begin to suspect that the concept is inexact. As I argued in Chapter Four (Section 4.2.1), an inexact concept comprises (i) some necessary but insufficient criteria and (ii) some additional criteria of which an unspecified combination must be satisfied.

I propose to identify four criteria of the concept of religion. The first criterion is necessary but not sufficient; the other three criteria are such that, though they are not individually necessary, at least one of them must be satisfied.

First, it is a necessary criterion of having a religion that one holds *beliefs about a god or gods*. The sphere of religion is the sphere of (what is taken to be) human commerce with the divine. And it is a necessary condition of engaging in (or supposing oneself to be engaged in) commerce with the divine that one holds beliefs about the existence, nature and actions of gods. Whatever else it may involve, having a religion at least involves holding beliefs about gods.

The necessity of this criterion is occasionally disputed on the grounds that (i) Buddhism is a religion and (ii) Buddhists do not believe in gods. However, both premises of this objection are open to question. On one hand, it is not at all unusual to hear people deny that Buddhism is a religion and speak instead of 'the Buddhist philosophy' or 'the

Buddhist way of life', precisely because they take the crucial element of human commerce with the divine to be missing. On the other, it is not in fact the case that Buddhists do not believe in gods. For many schools of Buddhism (collectively referred to as Mahayana Buddhism), the heavens are richly populated with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, ready to help human beings along the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. It is true that this pantheon is not recognised by Buddhists of the older, Theravada school; but, as Christmas Humphreys argues, it was only with the emergence of the Mahayana schools that Buddhism became a religion:

> Certainly within a hundred years of the death of Asoka the change was profound and all but complete. From a human being the Buddha had become a super-human Being, and his spiritual Essence had entered a pantheon nearly as large as that of the Hinduism from which it largely derived. The Arhat ideal, that of the human being who, by strenuous effort, acquires Enlightenment, gave way to that of the Bodhisattva, the Saviour of Mankind, and compassion replaced Wisdom as receiving the greater emphasis. A moral philosophy for the few became a religion for all, and salvation by faith, the transference of 'merit' to the benefit of others, the practice of Bhakti Yoga, or devotion to a personified ideal, these and the other habitual accompaniments of religion filled the lives of men who claimed to be followers of one who would, it seems, have none of them. (Humphreys, 1951, p.48-9)

Holding beliefs about gods, then, is a necessary criterion of religion. It is not, however, a sufficient criterion. A person may hold beliefs about gods and yet be utterly indifferent to them. She may regard the existence of gods as one more fact about the world which has no relevance to her life. To hold beliefs about gods is not necessarily to take an interest in them. But a person who was indifferent to the gods she believed in could not, I think, be said to have a religion. The insufficiency of the belief criterion of religion is pointed out by John Wilson:

> [The belief criterion] is not sufficient, since as we have seen it is satisfied by the Epicurean beliefs, which are not religious. They are not religious because Epicurus' gods are no more than a sort of scientific hypothesis: there may be gods, he thinks, just as there may be men on Mars, but they have nothing to do with us. What is lacking is belief in gods who are somehow relevant to human life. (Wilson, 1961, p.14)

It is not enough, then, merely to hold beliefs about gods. Something more is needed. But what exactly? Wilson suggests that, in addition to holding beliefs about gods, the religious person must *adopt a moral code for reasons connected with her beliefs about gods*. These two criteria, he argues, are the necessary and sufficient conditions of having a religion:

> ... we may say, therefore, that if a man commits himself to beliefs and assertions about God or the supernatural, and also to a morality, a way of life or a set of principles which is somehow connected with these beliefs and assertions, then he has a religion. (*ibid.*, p.16)

Wilson's contention that his second criterion is necessary seems to me to be wrong. It is not difficult to imagine cases of religion where this criterion is not satisfied. People who worship and revere the gods they believe in, or who supplicate their gods for assistance in times of need, certainly have a religion, even if their religious beliefs have no influence on their moral principles and judgments. While it is true that a person does not have a religion if her beliefs about gods are irrelevant to her life, they may be relevant in other ways than determining her choice of moral code.

The claim that these two criteria are together sufficient is much more plausible. In general, a person who holds beliefs about gods and adopts a moral code for reasons connected with those beliefs will be said to have a religion. Even here, though, Wilson's formulation will not quite do. The difficulty lies in his failure to specify the nature of the connection between the beliefs about gods and the reasons for adopting the moral code. There are, I think, at least some kinds of connection which would discourage us from using the term 'religion'.

Consider the case of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Ivan lives his life in a state of rebellion against a god whom he finds repulsive. He believes in a god who created the world with foreknowledge of the suffering human beings would undergo, suffering for which a future harmony is supposed to compensate. His moral perspective is predicated on his rejection of a divine scheme in which the suffering of innocents is an acceptable means to the end of universal harmony. It is therefore true to say that Ivan adopts his moral code for reasons connected with his

beliefs about a god, but it is doubtful that he could be described as a religious man.

What is needed to make Wilson's criteria of religion sufficient is a tighter specification of the required connection between the beliefs about gods and the reasons for adopting the moral code. Roughly, the moral code must be adopted *as an act of obedience to a god.* The adoption of a moral code is pertinent to the determination of whether or not a person has a religion only if she has adopted the code in an effort to conform herself to the will of a god. Any other reason, even if it is in some way connected with beliefs about gods, is irrelevant.

So far, then, we have identified only one necessary criterion of religion: that the religious person holds beliefs about gods. We have noted that this criterion is not sufficient because the religious person must also be in some way interested in or involved with the gods she believes in. The difficulty is that not just *any* kind of interest or involvement will do, but nor is it possible to identify *one* kind of interest or involvement which is logically necessary. My suggestion is that there are three general kinds of interest in or involvement with the gods which are conceptually relevant to having a religion. That is to say, in addition to the necessary criterion already identified, there are three non-necessary criteria of religion, at least one of which must be satisfied.

First, a person has a religion if she *worships* (what she takes to be) a god or gods. When the gods she believes in inspire awe and reverence in her heart, prompting her to acts of devotion and praise, we have no hesitation in describing her as religious.

Second, a person has a religion if she *supplicates* (what she takes to be) a god or gods. Quite independently of whether or not her gods inspire awe in her, she may believe them to be (i) willing and able to intervene in human affairs and (ii) receptive to requests for assistance. Insofar as she acts on these beliefs and petitions her gods through private or public prayer, she is certainly said to have a religion.

Third, a person has a religion if she *obeys* (what she takes to be) a god or gods. Again, obedience is a different kind of involvement with gods from either worship or supplication. A person may find herself unable to worship her gods and consider it presumptuous to supplicate them, yet still endeavour to abide by their commandments

and conform herself to their will. She may be motivated here either by the belief that her gods are legitimate authorities or by the belief that it is in her interests to earn their favour and avoid their wrath. In either case her efforts mark her out as a religious person.

Typically, of course, the religious person is interested in or involved with her gods in all of these ways. Moreover, she will see them as connected. But the connections between them are not necessary connections and each kind of involvement is perfectly intelligible in the absence of the other two. My contention is that any one of them is sufficient. Religion is an inexact concept designed to embrace several ways of being involved with gods, several forms of human commerce with the divine.

These, then, are the four criteria of the concept of religion. To have a religion is necessarily to hold beliefs about gods and, in addition, to worship or supplicate or obey those gods.

7.2.3 Two anxieties about the concept of religion

I commented earlier on the anxiety about the concept of religion induced by the wide range of application of the term. I have argued that this anxiety is unfounded and can be dispelled by (i) distinguishing between literal and metaphorical applications and (ii) recognising that the concept is inexact. This is not, however, the only anxiety about the concept of religion to have emerged in recent years. I turn now to consider two others.

First, some writers have expressed an anxiety that the concept of religion is somehow *inadequate* to its instances. Although the religions of the world satisfy the criteria of religion, to call them religions is somehow to do them an injustice, to classify them by their least interesting features. Religions certainly have in common those features in virtue of which they are religions, but they also have in common other, more important features. By describing them as religions, it is argued, we mask what is interesting or important about them, and to that extent misrepresent them.

This objection is raised by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his influential book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962). Cantwell Smith traces the history of the word 'religion' and

argues that it acquired its current meaning in the seventeenth century. Prior to this time the word was only used in the singular and meant, roughly, what we now mean by 'religiousness' or 'piety'. It was pressed into new service by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, who turned it into a count noun and used it to refer to sets of beliefs about gods and associated practices. This, Cantwell Smith recognises, is the concept of religion we have today. It is, however, a concept which is 'inherently and necessarily inadequate for interpreting man's religious life' (p.134).

The main reason for the inadequacy of the concept of religion, in Cantwell Smith's view, is that it hides the most important feature of its instances. The important thing about religions is not that they incorporate beliefs about gods and associated practices, but that they succeed in putting human beings in touch with the divine. That is to say, the sphere of religion is the sphere of *actual* and not merely *supposed* commerce between human beings and gods. The concept of religion misrepresents the experience of having a religion 'by omitting not only the vitality but the most significant of all factors in that vitality, namely its relation with transcendence' (p.136).

Cantwell Smith's contention, then, is that all religions succeed in establishing contact between human beings and gods, and that this is what is important about them. He objects to the concept of religion because it identifies religions only by what religious people believe to be the case and suppose themselves to be doing, leaving open the possibility that they are mistaken. He speculates that this impoverished concept of religion was developed by Christians to enable them to recognise the existence of other religions while denying their truth and their power to save:

> The concept 'a religion', and the conceptualising of named religions, omit, we have argued, the transcendent dimension from what they seek to represent. This has to do with the fact that Christians have regularly failed or refused to recognise that the faith of non-Christians has that transcendence; that God does in fact encounter men in Buddhist, Muslim and Hottentot forms, as he does in the Christian. (*ibid.*, p.139)

Cantwell Smith's suggestion is that we abandon the concept of religion altogether and find new ways of referring to religions which do justice to their transcendent dimension.

This objection to the concept of religion is wholly misconceived. Setting aside Cantwell Smith's extraordinary confidence that all religions succeed in putting human beings in touch with the divine, what is at fault here is his understanding of the function of concepts. It is no argument at all against the adequacy or usefulness of a concept to observe that its instances share distinctive common features beyond those required by the concept. It is no part of the function of a concept to identify *all* the common features of its instances. On the contrary, one of the key functions of concepts is to enable us to identify a class of objects and investigate what they have in common *besides* their membership of the identified class.

Suppose for a moment that Cantwell Smith is right and the class of religions is in fact co-extensive with the class of true religions, or the class of religions which succeed in establishing contact between human beings and gods. It is still possible to *imagine* a false religion, still possible that a false religion will be discovered at some point in the future. Furthermore, since it is plainly the case that many people are not aware of the fact that all religions are true, it will be extremely useful in making them aware of it to have at our disposal a concept which enables us to refer to religions without prejudicing the question of their truth or falsity. The fact that the concept of religion allows for a possibility which is not realised (that is, the possibility of a false religion) does not diminish its usefulness or adequacy.

In fact, of course, it is far from clear that Cantwell Smith is right. There is a reasonable doubt that *any* religion, let alone all of them, succeeds in establishing contact between human beings and gods. And while such doubt remains, there is certainly a need for the concept of religion, for a means of referring to those sets of beliefs and associated practices which are the *supposed* sites of human commerce with the divine.

Let us turn to the second anxiety about the concept of religion. Some writers have contended that none of the things we ordinarily call religions are in fact religions. That is to say, there is a radical disjunction between the connotation and the denotation of the term 'religion'. What we say when we are asked to explain the meaning of the term is quite at odds with the things we point to when we are asked to identify instances.

This is the objection raised by Nicholas Lash in his collection of essays *The Beginning*

and the End of 'Religion' (1996). Lash agrees with Cantwell Smith that the concept of religion was invented in the seventeenth century and argues that it has been systematically misapplied from the outset. The things we ordinarily call religions do not and have never satisfied the criteria of religion:

> It is now generally agreed the 'the religions of the East' were invented by the European imagination in the early nineteenth century, and that the conceptual framework used for this invention was most ill-suited to its contents. That framework was, as we have seen, fashioned in the seventeenth century. In our own day, as we emerge from the culture of modernity, it becomes easier to see that this modern framework of 'religion' distorts the so-called 'religions of the West' - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - no less disastrously than it does the traditions of prayer and practice, thought and discipline and devotion, now known as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. (*ibid.*, p.15)

Unfortunately, Lash does not make clear what exactly he takes the term 'religion' to mean, or how exactly the things we ordinarily call religions fail to satisfy its criteria of application. He describes the misfit between the concept and its supposed instances as follows:

> Within this scheme of things, the relation of human beings to the Holy One, once understood as creaturely dependence relearned as friendship, is now reduced to knowledge of an object known as 'God'. All objects of enquiry are shaped by the methods used for their investigation. The invention of 'religion' carried with it the reduction of faith's attentive wonder to the entertaining of particular beliefs. (*ibid.*, p.13)

If Lash is saying that the concept of religion somehow excludes the possibility of friendship with 'the Holy One' or an attitude of attentive wonder, we must quarrel with his analysis of the concept. It seems quite clear that the concept of religion does not rule out, but is rather suggestive of, the pursuit of friendship with gods and an attitude of attentive wonder. If, on the other hand, he is saying that the concept of religion necessarily involves entertaining beliefs about a god or gods, we may agree with his definition but quarrel with his claim that it excludes the things we ordinarily call religions. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists *do* hold beliefs about gods. In either case, Lash has not demonstrated the alleged disjunction between the

connotation and the denotation of the term 'religion'.

Cantwell Smith also raises an objection to the concept of religion along these lines, as a supplement to his principal objection examined above. He argues that the concept of religion is systematically misapplied on the grounds that it entails a stability or unchangeability which its supposed instances do not exhibit:

> Neither the believer nor the observer can hold that there is anything on earth that can legitimately be called 'Christianity' or 'Shintoism' or 'religion' without recognising that if such a thing existed yesterday, it existed in a somewhat different form the day before. If it exists in one country (or village), it exists in somewhat different form in the next. The concepts were formed before the ruthlessness of historical change was recognised, in all its disintegrating sweep. They have in practice been being abandoned as awareness has since grown. It is time now definitely to reject them theoretically, as inherently inept. (p.142)

But it is not clear why Cantwell Smith thinks that the concept of religion entails stability or unchangeability. There is nothing in his own account of the concept which suggests that religions are immune from change. It is obviously the case that religions develop and evolve over time, and there is certainly no logical contradiction in admitting as much. Naturally there are some features which religions must retain if they are to remain religions; namely, those features in virtue of which the term 'religion' is applied to them. But just what religious people believe about their gods, and the forms their worship, supplication and obedience take, may vary indefinitely. Nor does the concept of religion imply that what is a religion now has always been or will always be a religion. There is no difficulty about the idea of a set of beliefs and associated practices becoming or ceasing to be a religion. We have already noted the point in the history of Buddhism at which Buddhist beliefs and practices evolved from 'a moral philosophy for the few' into 'a religion for all' (Humphreys, 1951, p.49).

Neither Lash nor Cantwell Smith, then, make good the claim that the things we ordinarily call religions are not in fact religions. Moreover, there is some doubt about the intelligibility of the idea that there could be a radical disjunction between the connotation and the denotation of a word. One of the principal sources of evidence we have for

determining the meaning of a word is its range of application. When we are searching for the necessary criteria of a concept, we test suggested criteria against the range of instances of that concept. If we find instances which do not satisfy a suggested criterion, we reject the criterion and resume the search. We do not conclude that the term in question is systematically misapplied. It is true that the range of application of a word is not the *only* evidence we have to go on when trying to determine its meaning (we also examine what is entailed and what is not entailed by propositions in which the word is used), but if we were to find a radical disjunction between the range of application of a word and its logical entailments in certain forms of discourse, we should conclude that there were two concepts marked by the same word, not that the word was systematically misapplied. It is not clear what kind of evidence could warrant the conclusion that all the ordinary applications of a word were misapplications.

I conclude, then, that neither of these anxieties about the concept of religion is justified. The concept is neither inadequate to its instances nor incorrectly applied to them.

7.3.0 The meaning of religious propositions

We undertook the foregoing analysis of the concept of religion, it will be recalled, in order to determine (i) whether or not it makes sense to speak of 'religious propositions' at all, and if so, (ii) what it is that distinguishes religious propositions from non-religious ones. We are now in a position to answer these questions. First, there is a distinctive kind of belief, and therefore a distinctive kind of proposition, logically connected with religion. Propositions of this kind are reasonably described as religious propositions. Second, what is distinctive about the beliefs logically connected with religion is their concern with a god or gods. Religious propositions, then, are propositions about the existence, nature or actions of gods.

I take the following to be paradigmatic instances of religious propositions:

> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
> (Genesis 1:1)

> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)
>
> There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things both visible and invisible. (The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, Article I)
>
> He is Allah, besides whom there is no other god: He is the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One, the Giver of Peace, the Keeper of Faith; the Guardian, the Mighty One, the All-powerful, the Most High! (*The Qur'an, Sura* 59: 23)
>
> Allah is Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. (Muslim *shahadah*)
>
> There exists but one God, who is called the True, the Creator, free from fear and hate, immortal, not begotten, self-existent, great and compassionate. (The *Adi Granth*, Guru Nanak's hymn)

The question of the epistemological character of religious propositions therefore turns on the question of the nature of gods. Here there are two possibilities. Either gods are minds, bodies or compounds of minds and bodies, in which case propositions about gods are mental propositions, material propositions or combinations of the two; or they are non-mental, non-material referents, in which case propositions about gods have a unique method of verification and therefore constitute an autonomous epistemological class. To determine whether gods are referents of the former or the latter kind, we shall need to examine the concept of god.

7.3.1 The concept of god

I do not think there is anything very obscure or complex about the concept of god. A god is *a transcendent or superhuman person*, a person who transcends or exceeds the ordinary limits of human personhood. Gods possess the same powers and capacities as human beings, but to a greater degree. They tackle the same kinds of tasks, but on a grander scale and with greater success. Their actions are unhampered by the ordinary

constraints on human action; their thoughts unrestricted by the limitations of the human mind.

This account of the concept of god is substantially the same as the account given by W.D. Hudson in his *A Philosophical Approach to Religion* (1974):

> ... whatever is god is, I think, conceived to be *conscious*, in the sense that god participates with understanding in the communication which invariably goes on between god and men; and god is conceived also to be *active*, in the sense that god wills certain ends and can at least under certain circumstances carry them into effect. By saying that divine consciousness and agency are *transcendent*, I mean, to put it in a nutshell, that there is always more to god's consciousness or activity than to man's. God's understanding is more acute than man's or, at least, more guileful; god's activity is more powerful, or at least more effective. (*ibid.*, pp.14-15)

It might be objected to this account that not all gods are persons. (It is interesting that Hudson avoids the term 'person' and speaks instead of 'consciousness and agency'.) A person is ordinarily held to be a compound of a mind and a body, but many religious believers explicitly deny that the god they worship has a body. The god worshipped by Christians, for example, is typically believed to be 'without body, parts, or passions'. A being with a mind but no body appears to fall outside the range of application of the term 'person'.

Let us concede immediately that a pure mind, a mind wholly detached from the material world, would not count as a person. But nor, I think, would it count as a god. The unfortunate condition of the pure mind is well described by P.F. Strawson: 'the strictly disembodied individual is strictly solitary, and it must remain for him indeed an utterly empty, though not a meaningless, speculation, as to whether there are any other members of his class' (Strawson, 1959, pp.115-6). The pure mind is necessarily solitary because he has no means of making himself known to others; there is no observable behaviour from which his existence may be inferred. He is radically impotent, 'having no power of initiating changes in the physical condition of the world, such as one at present does with one's hands, shoulders, feet and vocal chords' (p.115). He may be capable of performing private mental acts, but he is wholly incapable of performing public acts or

communicating with others. While it is true that some religious believers deny that their god has a body, I think it is clear that, in doing so, they do not mean to ascribe to him the condition of the disembodied mind.

What, then, do believers mean by the claim that their god has no body? At least part of what they mean is that he cannot be located in physical space. One cannot point to him, or identify him with one body as distinct from others. Moreover, neither his range of perception nor his power to move are confined to a particular body. All events are within the range of his seeing and hearing, no matter where in the universe they occur. And he is able to move all material objects at will. He controls the material world not indirectly, as human beings control their environment, but directly, as human beings control their bodies.

If this were all believers meant by the claim that their god has no body, their point would be better expressed by saying that the entire material world is his body. He cannot be located in physical space because he occupies the whole of physical space; all objects are under his control because all objects are parts of his body. But this is not quite all they mean. They also mean that their god is not *dependent* on the material world in the way that human beings are. Whereas human beings depend for their well-being on the health and safety of their bodies, his well-being is not dependent on the state of any material object. There is no body the destruction of which would kill him, or injury to which would cause him pain. He is attached to the material world in the sense that it is under his control, but not in the sense that he is at its mercy.

What believers mean, then, by the claim that their god has no body, is not that he is *wholly* detached from the material world in the manner of Strawson's disembodied minds, but that he is *more* detached from the material world than human beings are. He satisfies some but not all of the ordinary conditions of 'having a body'. We are dealing here with a special case, a case for which the concepts of personhood and embodiment are not quite adequate. My proposal, which I think is in line with ordinary religious usage, is to loosen the concept of person a little to include not only individuals with minds and bodies but also individuals with minds and *some relation to the material world analogous to 'having a body'*. If the concept of person is loosened in this way, our definition of a god as a transcendent or superhuman person is able to accommodate gods

who do not have bodies.

7.3.2 A note on the term 'God'

We are discussing the concept marked by the term 'god'. I want to pause briefly to ask whether or not there is another concept marked by the term 'God' (with an upper-case 'G') and, if so, how it is related to the concept under discussion.

In his paper 'About 'God'' (1961), Paul Ziff examines the use of the term 'God' in the utterance 'God exists'. In the context of this utterance, he observes, 'God' is clearly a noun. It is not a count noun because it does not require an article. Nor is it a mass noun because one cannot say 'How much God exists?' or 'A quantity of God exists'. Nor is it a pronoun because it does not refer to a previously identified person or object. Thus, he concludes, 'it is reasonably clear that 'God' in 'God exists' is a proper noun, i.e. a proper name, or for short, a name' (p.201).

I think the use of the term 'God' in the utterance 'God exists' is the ordinary use: 'God', in most contexts, is a proper name. There are some exceptions. When Yahweh speaks to Moses from the burning bush, he says 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6). Here 'God' is being used as a descriptive term with exactly the same sense as 'god', the capitalisation being a sign of respect. Usually, however, 'God' does not take an article and is used as a proper name.

Insofar as 'God' is a proper name, it does not mark any concept because names do not have meanings. The point of names is that they enable us to identify individuals without specifying our criteria of identification. Quite how it is possible for proper names to have reference without sense is a longstanding philosophical problem which cannot be explored here. The solution provided by John Searle seems to me to be more or less satisfactory:

> If the criteria for proper names were in all cases quite rigid and specific then a proper name would be nothing more

> than a shorthand for these criteria, a proper name would function exactly like an elaborate definite description. But the uniqueness and immense pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lies precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to agreement on what descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object. They function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions. Thus the looseness of the criteria for proper names is a necessary condition for isolating the referring function from the describing function of language. (Searle, 1958, p.95)

We use the term 'God', then, to identify an individual of whom we have a range of descriptions, without specifying which of those descriptions are necessary criteria of identification. By using 'God' referringly, I commit myself to the truth of an unspecified set of claims about God, but not to the truth of any one claim. 'God' is not a description but a peg on which to hang descriptions. There is, therefore, no such thing as the concept of God.

7.3.3 The logic of disputes about gods

Let us return, then, to the concept of god. A god, I have suggested, is a particular kind of person. If this is correct, disputes about gods can be expected to conform to the logic of disputes about persons. I propose to show that this is in fact the case by examining some examples of religious disputes.

My first example is the dispute about the existence of a god between Cleanthes and Philo in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

> *Cleanthes* Look around the world: Contemplate the whole and every part of it. You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions, to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy, which ravishes into admiration all men, who have ever

> contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work, which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori*, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a deity and his similarity to human mind and intelligence...
>
> *Philo* If we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder, because this is precisely that species of effect, which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause. But surely you will not affirm, that the universe bears such a resemblance to a house, that we can with the same certainty infer a similar cause, or that the analogy is here entire and perfect. The dissimilitude is so striking, that the utmost you can here pretend to is a guess, a conjecture, a presumption concerning a similar cause; and how that pretension will be received in the world, I leave you to consider. (Hume, 1779, pp.53-55)

Cleanthes and Philo are here arguing about the validity of the design argument for the existence of a god. They differ about whether or not, and to what extent, the natural world resembles 'the productions of human contrivance'. What is important from our point of view is the assumption they share: that if the natural world *does* closely resemble the productions of human contrivance, it constitutes powerful evidence for the existence of a god. A god is a person similar to human persons but wiser and more powerful; so an argument showing that 'the author of nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man; though possessed of much larger faculties' is an argument for the existence of a god.

One can imagine a precisely parallel dispute about the existence of a human being. Suppose two people find an unfamiliar object on the ground. One thinks she detects

signs of design and infers that the object was produced by someone; the other detects no such signs and rejects the inference to a producer. In an effort to settle their disagreement they examine the object more closely. The first person draws attention to what she takes to be signs of design; the second to the fact that the object is quite unlike any human product they have previously encountered. The logic of their argument is identical to the logic of the argument between Cleanthes and Philo. In both cases what is at stake is the validity of an inference to the existence of a person.

My second example is taken from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). In an earlier chapter, Ivan Karamazov has declared himself to be an atheist. Now he explains to his brother Alyosha, a religious novice, that what he doubts is not so much the *existence* as the *goodness* of a creator-god. 'It is not God that I do not accept', he insists, 'but the world he has created' (p.275). For Ivan, the world is ultimately tragic and the god responsible for it morally repugnant:

> 'Listen: if all have to suffer so as to buy eternal harmony by their suffering, what have the children to do with it - tell me, please? It is entirely incomprehensible why they, too, should have to suffer and why they should have to buy harmony with their sufferings... too high a price has been placed on harmony. We cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket of admission. And indeed, if I am an honest man, I am bound to hand it back as soon as possible. This I am doing. It is not God that I do not accept, Alyosha. I merely most respectfully return him the ticket.'
>
> 'This is rebellion,' Alyosha said softly, dropping his eyes.
>
> 'Rebellion? I'm sorry to hear you say that,' Ivan said with feeling. 'One can't go on living in a state of rebellion, and I want to live. Tell me frankly, I appeal to you - answer me: imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but that to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture to death only one tiny creature, the little girl who beat her breast with her little fist, and to found the edifice on her unavenged tears - would you consent to be the architect on these conditions? Tell me and do not lie!'
>
> 'No, I wouldn't,' Alyosha said softly. (*ibid.*, pp.286-288)

What I want to draw attention to here is the logic of Ivan's demonstration of the moral depravity of God. He asks Alyosha to imagine that it is he who is 'erecting the edifice of human destiny' and to consider whether he would consent if he knew that it would be necessary 'to torture to death only one tiny creature'. Ivan's point is that any good person would refuse to consent under these conditions, and therefore that God, who created the world with foreknowledge of the suffering of innocents, cannot be good.

The moral principle at issue, that the end of eternal harmony does not justify the means of innocent suffering, may or may not be sound. What is important for our purposes is that, as a person, God is subject to the same moral standards as other persons. To determine whether or not God is good we must assess his actions against the very criteria we use to determine the goodness of human beings. *If* it would have been morally unjustifiable for a human being to create the world, *then* it was morally unjustifiable for God too.

My third and final example is taken from the transcripts of the trial of Joan of Arc. Following a spectacularly successful military campaign against the English, Joan was captured and tried before an ecclesiastical court at Rouen in 1431. She was found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake. In the following extract she is interrogated by the court about her encounters with Saint Michael the Archangel:

Joan When Saint Michael came to me, he said to me: 'Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret will come to thee; follow their counsel; they have been chosen to guide thee and counsel thee in all that you have to do: believe what they shall tell thee, it is the order of Our Lord.'

Examiners If the devil were to put himself in the form or likeness of an angel, how would you know if it were a good or an evil angel?

Joan I should know quite well if it were Saint Michael or a counterfeit. The first time I was in great doubt if it were Saint Michael; and I was much afraid. I had seen him many times before I knew it was Saint Michael.

Examiners Why did you recognise him sooner at that time, when you say you believed it was he, than when

he first appeared to you?

Joan The first time I was a young child, and I was much afraid; afterwards, he had taught me so well, and it was so clear to me, that I believed assuredly it was he.

Examiners What doctrine did he teach you?

Joan Above all things he told me to be a good child, and that God would aid me to come to the help of the King of France, among other things...

Examiners In what form, kind, size, and dress did Saint Michael come to you?

Joan In the form of a true honest man; of his dress and the rest I will say nothing more... I believe the deeds and words of Saint Michael, who appeared to me, as firmly as I believe that Our Saviour Jesus Christ suffered Death and Passion for us. And that which makes me believe it, is the good counsel, comfort, and good doctrine which he has given me.

(The Trial of Joan of Arc, Seventh and Eighth Private Examinations, 1431)

Neither Joan nor her examiners doubt that the heavens are populated with divine beings. The difficulty lies in telling them apart, in differentiating the angels from the demons. Joan believes that she has encountered Saint Michael; her examiners insinuate that she has encountered the devil 'in the form or likeness of an angel'. That the divine being in question identified himself as Saint Michael is not enough, since the devil in disguise is certainly capable of lying.

The considerations Joan brings to bear in support of her contention that she has encountered the real Saint Michael are (i) that she has met him on many occasions and (ii) that he has given her 'good counsel, comfort and good doctrine'. The first time she met him, she says, she was 'in great doubt if it were Saint Michael'; as yet she had no reason to trust him or believe what he said. Over the course of many meetings, however, he earned her trust. He taught her well, comforted her and gave her good advice. She accepted his claim to be Saint Michael on the basis of her acquaintance with him and her knowledge of his character.

Once again, I suggest, these are exactly the sorts of considerations we should bring to bear if the identity claim of a human being were in doubt. In the absence of external corroborating evidence, we should investigate the character of the individual in question and ask whether she was the sort of person who might lie about her identity. Insofar as we found her to be truthful and trustworthy, we should have good reason to believe what she said. The form of Joan's argument for accepting the claims of the divine being she encountered is familiar to us as a valid form of argument for accepting the claims of another person.

Disputes about gods, then, conform exactly to the logic of disputes about persons. Gods are persons, albeit, in some cases, persons with a relation to the material world which is only analogous to 'having a body'. It follows that propositions about gods can be distributed without remainder over the epistemological classes of mental and material propositions and, therefore, that religion does not constitute a unique form of knowledge.

7.4.0 Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show that religious propositions do not constitute an autonomous epistemological class. I began by asking whether or not there are such things as religious propositions and, if so, what distinguishes them from non-religious ones. I argued that a person is said to have a religion when she (i) holds beliefs about gods and (ii) worships, supplicates or obeys those gods. There is, therefore, a distinct class of propositions logically connected with the concept of religion; namely, propositions about gods. I went on to argue that gods are transcendent or superhuman persons, and that persons comprise minds and bodies (or minds and a relation to the material world analogous to 'having a body'). It follows that propositions about gods do not constitute an autonomous epistemological class but can be distributed without remainder over the familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions.

If this account of religious propositions is correct, the liberal account of Religious Education is vindicated from the charge of incoherence. If religion does not constitute a unique form of knowledge, but only involves truth claims of familiar epistemological kinds, there is no difficulty about transmitting religious understanding without religious belief. Pupils can be taught exactly what religious propositions mean with reference to other propositions of the same epistemological kinds and without reference to distinctively religious experiences. The aim of teaching for religious understanding without religious belief is therefore perfectly coherent.

Chapter Eight

Mental and material propositions

8.1.0 Introduction

My central argument is now complete. I have argued that the challenge to the liberal account of Religious Education is unsuccessful because one of its key premises, that religion is a unique form of knowledge, is false. Religious propositions do not constitute an autonomous epistemological class, but can be distributed without remainder over the epistemological classes of mental and material propositions.

The basis of religious understanding, then, is understanding of the mental and material forms of knowledge. In this final chapter I propose to expand on the brief description of these two forms of knowledge given in Chapter Five. In particular, I wish to clarify the distinction between them and counter the behaviourist contention that mental propositions are reducible to material ones.

8.2.0 Mental and material propositions

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the account of mental and material propositions given in Chapter Five. The key points were set out in the following passage:

> The next step in developing our taxonomy is to subdivide the class of contingent propositions. Contingent propositions are those which are verified by identifying and examining a referent (or referents). Differentiating between contingent propositions by their method of verification will therefore be a matter of differentiating between referents by their method of identification. We may begin, then, by drawing a distinction between *public referents*, which exist independently of individual minds and are identified by observation (or an analogue of observation), and *private referents*, which are states of individual minds and are identified without observation.
>
> Public referents are things like clouds and rain-storms, cars and collisions, human bodies and patterns of behaviour. They exist or occur in public space, which is to say that they can be observed by a community of conscious subjects with similar observational faculties. Because observing is subject to error, individuals can be mistaken about the existence and

> nature of public referents and are subject to correction by the community of observers.
>
> Private referents are minds and their states, including such things as thoughts and intentions, sensations and feelings, hopes and memories. Mental states can be decisively identified only by the conscious subject to whom they belong, and they are identified without observation. Nor can a conscious subject be mistaken about her mental states. A person knows whether or not she is in pain, or thinking about her mother, without observation or introspection and without possibility of error.
>
> Corresponding to the distinction between public and private referents, then, is a distinction between propositions about public referents and propositions about private referents. Propositions of the former kind are verifiable by a community of conscious subjects by means of observation; propositions of the latter kind are verifiable by only one conscious subject and without recourse to observation. (Chapter Five, Section 5.2.4)

I went on to argue that, since private referents are defined as minds or states of minds, all propositions about private referents are mental propositions. And while it is not necessarily the case that all public referents are material objects or events, since it is possible to imagine non-material public referents detectable by faculties other than the five senses, it is clear that material propositions form a large and important class of propositions about public referents.

I take this account of material propositions to be relatively uncontentious. It is difficult to argue with the claim that there is a class of propositions which are verified by sensory observation, or the claim that, because observation is subject to error, individuals are subject to correction by the community of observers. It is true that philosophers sometimes draw a distinction between 'the-world-as-it-appears-to-human-beings' and 'the-world-as-it-is-in-itself' and suggest that the senses may be an unreliable guide to the latter; but insofar as we are concerned with the task of investigating and describing the phenomenal world, the accuracy of our descriptions is plainly determined by means of sensory observation.

The account of mental propositions, on the other hand, is rather more controversial. The idea that there are propositions which can be verified by one person alone, without

recourse to observation and without possibility of error, has seemed objectionable to many philosophers. Rather than admit that mental propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class, they have sought to show that mental propositions are in fact a subset of material propositions, that all claims about minds and mental states are ultimately reducible to claims about bodies and behaviours.

It is crucial for an adequate understanding of the language we use to describe persons, and therefore of the language we use to describe gods, that the basic epistemological distinction between mental and material propositions is recognised. In what follows I shall try to show that mental propositions cannot be reduced to material ones without loss of meaning, and that the principal objections to the autonomy of mental propositions can be satisfactorily met.

8.3.0 The autonomy of mental propositions

That mental propositions are irreducible to material ones can be demonstrated simply. Consider the proposition 'Mary is in pain'. The truth or falsity of this proposition can be determined by Mary and Mary alone. Others may *reasonably infer* that Mary is in pain from what she says or how she looks, but they cannot *decisively verify* that she is pain because they cannot feel what she feels. Mary's pains are exclusive to Mary. A pain is a private referent, the existence of which can be established with certainty by one person only.

Opponents of the view that mental propositions are irreducible argue that 'Mary is in pain' is roughly equivalent in meaning to 'Mary is exhibiting the symptoms of pain'. But this is plainly not the case. It is quite possible for Mary to be in pain without exhibiting pain symptoms (she may be a stoic), or for her to exhibit pain symptoms without being in pain (she may be an actress). There is a crucial and inescapable distinction between Mary's pain, which is private and unobservable, and Mary's pain symptoms, which are public and observable.

The appeal of the suggestion that 'Mary is in pain' is equivalent in meaning to 'Mary is exhibiting the symptoms of pain' lies in the fact that both propositions give rise to the same expectations in the observer. As observers of Mary, what we should expect to see and hear on learning that she is in pain does not differ from what we should expect to see and hear on learning that she is exhibiting the symptoms of pain. In both cases we should expect to find her wincing, clutching part of her body, saying 'ouch', etc. If Mary is left out of the picture, the behaviourist account has some plausibility. But by what right do we leave Mary out of the picture? For Mary, the expectations to which the two propositions give rise are quite different.

This point is brought out clearly by John Wisdom in *Other Minds* (1952). Wisdom begins by noting that some pairs of propositions differ 'in the pictures with which they are worked' but not 'in expectation value' (p.13). For example, 'The sun is rising' suggests a different picture from 'This part of the earth is coming into the sun again', but the two propositions give rise to the same expectations and can therefore be said to have the same meaning. He goes on to ask whether the difference between mental and material propositions is a difference of this kind, a difference in picture but not in expectation value.

The pair of propositions Wisdom takes as his example is 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow' and 'Tomorrow Smith will give all signs of being colour-blind'. These propositions, he admits, give rise to the same expectations in observers of Smith. But they do not give rise to the same expectations in Smith. 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow', he points out, 'certainly means more to Smith than any story, however complete, about his confusing flags, crashing trains, etc.' (p.48). And if it means more to Smith, it *must* mean more to observers of Smith, 'unless it is claimed that though Smith speaks English, 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow' has for him a different meaning from what it has for us' (p.48). The fact that the two propositions differ in expectation value for Smith is enough to secure a difference in meaning for all of us:

> Now, what we have just recalled is, (1) that 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow' means more to Smith than 'Tomorrow Smith will give all signs of being colour-blind', and that this difference in meaning is a difference in the expectations the two sentences lead to; (2) that 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow' doesn't mean something different to

> us from what it means to Smith. It follows that 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow' means more to us than 'Tomorrow Smith will give all signs of being colour-blind'. And that this difference in meaning is a difference in expectation. (*ibid.*, p.54)

If it is asked how observers of Smith can decisively verify the proposition 'Smith will be colour-blind tomorrow' when *for them* it does not differ in expectation value from 'Tomorrow Smith will give all signs of being colour-blind', the answer is that they cannot. The salient logical feature of mental propositions is precisely that they can be decisively verified by one person only. Smith and Smith alone will be able to say for certain whether or not he is colour-blind tomorrow. As Wisdom has it: 'the peculiarity of the soul is not that it is visible to none but that it is visible only to one' (p.226).

Here, then, is the case for the epistemological autonomy of mental propositions. Propositions about mental states differ in expectation value, and therefore in meaning, from propositions about the behaviour associated with those states. In a moment I shall examine the behaviourist case in more detail. First I want to comment briefly on the argument of the most famous, and infamous, champion of the irreducibility of mental propositions: Rene Descartes.

8.3.1 Descartes' argument

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1642), Descartes sets out to rebuild the edifice of human knowledge on secure foundations, to determine what can be known with certainty and might therefore serve as the basis for all other knowledge. His method is to 'withhold assent no less carefully from what is not plainly certain and indubitable than from what is obviously false; so the discovery of some reason for doubt as regards each opinion will justify the rejection of all' (p.61). Employing this method of radical doubt, he argues that all knowledge about the material world must be rejected as uncertain, on the grounds that the material world might be an illusion, created by our minds in the manner of a dream or placed before our minds by an evil spirit. We cannot establish with certainty the existence of any of the objects of our experience. What we *can* establish with certainty, however, is the existence of ourselves:

> I suppose, therefore, that whatever things I see are illusions; I believe that none of the things my lying memory represents to have happened really did so; I have no senses; body, shape, extension, motion, place are chimeras. What then is true? Perhaps only this one thing, that nothing is certain.
>
> How do I know, however, that there is not something different from all the things I have mentioned, as to which there cannot be the least occasion of doubt? - Is there a God (or whatever I call him) who gives me these very thoughts? But why, on the other hand, should I think so? Perhaps I myself may be the author of them. - Well, am I, at any rate, something? - 'But I have already said I have no senses and no body-' At this point I stick; what follows from this? Am I so bound to a body and its senses that without them I cannot exist? - But I have convinced myself that nothing in the world exists - no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies; so am I not likewise non-existent?' But if I did convince myself of anything, I must have existed. 'But there is some deceiver, supremely powerful, supremely intelligent, who purposely always deceives me.' If he deceives me, then again I undoubtedly exist; let him deceive me as much as he may, he will never bring it about that, at the time of thinking that I am something, I am in fact nothing. Thus I have now weighed all considerations enough and more than enough; and must at length conclude that this proposition 'I am', 'I exist', whenever I utter it or conceive it in my mind, is necessarily true. (*ibid.*, pp.66-7)

According to Descartes, I can doubt the existence of my body, of the external world, of all the objects of my experience, but I cannot doubt the existence of my mind and my current mental states. I can suspect that the image before my mind does not correspond with any state of affairs in the external world, but I cannot doubt that I have an image before my mind. No matter what tricks a supremely powerful deceiver plays on me, 'he will never bring it about that, at the time of thinking that I am something, I am in fact nothing'.

What are we to make of Descartes' argument? Let us begin by admitting that he is mistaken on one important point. For reasons already well-rehearsed in the present thesis, it is not possible for me to doubt simultaneously *all* my beliefs about the material world. In order to doubt a proposition I must at least understand it, and it is a necessary condition of my understanding propositions about the material world that I hold some such propositions to be true. As soon as I begin to doubt that *anything* is red or solid or

wet, I lose my grip on what redness and solidity and wetness *are*. From the fact that *some* of my observations may be unreliable because I am dreaming or hallucinating, it does not follow that *all* my observations may be unreliable.

We can, however, accommodate this mistake by slightly modifying the argument. Although it is not true that I can doubt all material facts at once, it *is* true that any material fact can be doubted. I can hypothesise that any one of my material beliefs is false, no matter how basic or commonsensical. It is highly unlikely that I am mistaken in the belief that I have two hands, but the supposition is perfectly intelligible and it is not hard to devise scenarios in which such a mistake could plausibly be made. By contrast, I am wholly unable to doubt that I exist, or that I am currently thinking about what can and cannot be doubted. Assertions of my own existence and correct descriptions of my current mental states are, for me, utterly indubitable. In this respect they differ fundamentally from propositions about the material world, and it is this fundamental difference that Descartes draws to our attention. We identify material objects and events by observation and are therefore subject to error; we identify our own minds and mental states without observation and without possibility of error.

It is, of course, highly significant that Descartes' starting point in the quest for certain knowledge is the individual conscious subject. Had he started with the *community* of conscious subjects, and sought propositions about which there could be *public* certainty, he would have reached very different conclusions. From a communal point of view, mental propositions are an unpromising foundation for the edifice of human knowledge because they can be decisively verified by one person only. The existence of Descartes' mind may be more certain *for Descartes* than the existence of any material object, but it is somewhat less certain for the rest of us.

Nevertheless, within the terms of his inquiry, Descartes' argument is sound. The individual conscious subject, reviewing her beliefs in isolation, is obliged to recognise that the only beliefs about which she can be certain are beliefs about her own mind and current mental states. It is for his clear identification of this distinguishing epistemological feature of mental propositions that Descartes is justly remembered.

8.3.2 The behaviourist case

Let us now consider the behaviourist case in more detail. That case is nowhere made more rigorously and persuasively than in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

Ryle's aim in *The Concept of Mind* is to debunk 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine', the view that a person comprises a body which can be observed by others and a mind which cannot. He represents that view as follows:

> The official doctrine, which hails chiefly from Descartes, is something like this. With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind... Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers... But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private. Only I can take direct cognisance of the states and processes of my own mind. (*ibid.*, p.13)

Ryle marshals an impressive array of negative arguments designed to show that 'the official doctrine' is incoherent, and develops a positive, behaviourist account of the logic of mental propositions. I shall argue, first, that Ryle's most persuasive negative argument, though sound, does not in fact undermine the epistemological distinction between mental and material propositions; and, second, that his positive account of the logic of mental propositions is quite unsatisfactory.

The most persuasive of Ryle's negative arguments is his critique of the myth of introspection. According to this myth, a person acquires knowledge of her own mental states by a kind of inward-facing observation called introspection: 'much as a person may at a particular moment be listening to a flute, savouring wine, or regarding a waterfall, so he may be 'regarding', in a non-optical sense, some current mental state or process of his own' (p.157). Just as we verify propositions about the material world by sensory observation, so we verify propositions about our own minds by introspection.

Ryle examines the myth of introspection in relation to those states of mind we call

sensations. He begins by noting that we do not have a 'neat' sensation vocabulary, but rather 'describe particular sensations by referring to how common objects regularly look, sound and feel to any normal person' (p.194). To identify particular sensations we must use descriptions like 'the visual sensation normally produced by the colour red' or 'the auditory sensation normally produced by the sound of the violin'. There are very few 'neat' sensation words in the English language, and for this reason there is 'a linguistic difficulty in discussing the logic of the concepts of sensation' (p.194). With some reservations, Ryle uses such words as 'glimpse', 'whiff', 'itch' and 'tweak' to refer to different types of sensation.

He goes on to consider the plausibility of the suggestion that a person learns of her own sensations by means of introspective observation. Does a person discover the tweaks produced by an ill-fitting shoe by peering within herself? Plainly not, says Ryle:

> It is true that the cobbler cannot witness the tweaks that I feel when the shoe pinches. But it is false that I witness them. The reason why my tweaks cannot be witnessed by him is not that some Iron Curtain prevents them from being witnessed by anyone save myself, but that they are not the sort of things of which it makes sense to say that they are witnessed or unwitnessed at all, even by me. I feel or have the tweaks, but I do not discover or peer at them; they are not things that I find out about by watching them, listening to them, or savouring them. (*ibid.*, p.196)

Ryle's objection is that sensations are not the sort of things one can bring under observation. The difficulty is not merely that, as a matter of contingent fact, human beings lack the observational apparatus with which to conduct introspective observations, though this is clearly true; it is that sensations are logically improper objects of observation. Sensations cannot be objects of observation because they are the means by which observations are made:

> An object of observation, like a robin, or a cheese, must therefore be the sort of thing of which it is possible to catch glimpses, or to get whiffs. But many theorists ask us to look away from such common objects as robins and cheeses towards such things as glimpses and whiffs, and we are asked to declare that I, though nobody else, can observe the glimpses and whiffs that I get, and observe them in the same sense of 'observe' as that in which anyone can observe the

> robin or the cheese. But to grant this would be to grant that if, when I catch a glimpse of a robin, I can observe that glimpse, then, in so doing, I must get something like a glimpse or a whiff of that glimpse of a robin. If sensations are proper objects of observation, then observing them must carry with it the having of sensations of those sensations analogous to the glimpses of the robin without which I could not be watching the robin. And this is clearly absurd. (*ibid.*, p.197)

The absurdity may be stated as follows: if conducting observations necessarily involves having sensations, but I can only learn of my sensations by observing them, it follows that I can never complete an observation. Suppose that I am trying to observe a football match. I begin by observing the match itself, which involves having visual sensations of the pitch and the players. Next I must observe my visual sensations of the pitch and the players, which involves having sensations of my sensations. Then I must observe my sensations of my sensations, which involves having sensations of my sensations of my sensations; and so on *ad infinitum*. Every observation I make immediately generates the need for another.

To put the problem another way, what is the situation of the person who has glimpsed a robin but failed to glimpse her glimpse? Has she seen the robin or not? Shall we say that she has seen it without knowing that she has seen it, as a person might step on a spider without realising that she has done so? But it is clear that seeing robins is quite unlike stepping on spiders, precisely in the sense that one can be oblivious to the latter in a way that one cannot be oblivious to the former.

Thus Ryle succeeds in showing that the myth of introspection, the view that mental states are discovered by introspective observation, is logically incoherent. He concludes from this that the epistemological distinction between mental and material propositions must be rejected *in toto*:

> It follows from this that it was wrong from the start to contrast the common objects of anyone's observation, like robins and cheeses, with the supposed peculiar objects of my privileged observation, namely my sensations, since sensations are not objects of observation at all. We do not, consequently, have to rig up one theatre, called 'the outside world', to house the common objects of anyone's

> observation, and another, called 'the mind', to house the objects of some monopoly observations. The antithesis between 'public' and 'private' was in part a misconception of the antithesis between objects which can be looked at, handled and tasted, on the one hand, and sensations which are had but not looked at, handled or tasted, on the other. (*ibid.*, p.198)

However, one who rejects the myth of introspection is not thereby obliged to reject 'the antithesis between public and private'. We may agree with Ryle that propositions about mental states are not verified by introspection without accepting his conclusion that they are verified in the same way as material propositions. What is required, if the epistemological distinction is to be maintained, is an account of the method of verification of mental propositions which does not fall prey to Ryle's critique of introspection. I shall offer such an account shortly. For the time being, it is sufficient to note that our inability to make observations of private referents does not require us to deny their existence.

Let us turn now to consider Ryle's positive account of the logic of mental propositions. His contention is that all the evidence pertinent to the truth or falsity of mental propositions is publicly available. The subject of a mental state is in exactly the same position as everyone else with regard to the verification of propositions about that state. What mental propositions refer to and describe are not private referents 'visible only to one', but public referents available to all.

Most mental propositions, according to Ryle, ascribe to individuals *dispositions to behave in certain ways*. Judgments about such dispositions are based entirely on observations of behaviour. If people tend to be the best judges of their own character, it is only because they tend to make the closest observations of their own behaviour. In fact, of course, as Ryle is quick to point out, it is often the case that people are *not* the best judges of their own character. Sometimes others observe our behaviour more carefully and impartially than we do ourselves.

A typical mental attribute, for Ryle, is understanding of an argument. A person is said to understand an argument when she has a disposition to give a particular range of performances under certain conditions. She will be disposed, in the appropriate

circumstances, to paraphrase the argument, to give concrete illustrations of its abstract points, to draw valid conclusions from it, etc. In advance of her giving these performances, she does not know any better than we do whether or not she understands the argument. Indeed, she may suppose herself to understand it and be quite mistaken. The claim that she understands is verified by checking her observable performances against public criteria of correctness, not by examining the contents of some private mental realm:

> In short, it is part of the meaning of 'you understood it' that you could have done so and so and would have done it, if such and such, and the test of whether you understood it is a range of performances satisfying the apodoses of these general hypothetical statements... Even if you claimed that you had experienced a flash or click of comprehension and had actually done so, you would still withdraw your other claim to have understood the argument, if you found that you could not paraphrase it, illustrate, expand or recast it; and you would allow someone else to have understood it who could meet all examination-questions about it, but reported no click of comprehension. (*ibid.*, p.163)

Understanding of an argument, like the majority of mental attributes, is a dispositional property ascribed on the basis of observed behaviour. When we say that a person understands an argument we are making the same kind of assertion as we make when we say that sugar is soluble or glass is brittle. We are making a prediction about what is likely to happen under certain circumstances. Sugar will dissolve if submerged in water; glass will break if struck by a stone; a person who understands an argument will give correct answers if questioned about it. We are also offering a certain kind of explanation for the predicted events; namely, the kind of explanation whereby events are identified as particular instances of general tendencies. As Ryle has it: 'The ascertainment of a person's mental capacities and propensities is an inductive process, an induction to law-like propositions from observed actions and reactions. Having ascertained these long-term qualities, we explain a particular action or reaction by applying the result of such an induction to the new specimen' (p.164).

What are we to make of Ryle's account of mental propositions? Perhaps the first thing to say is that he does not interpret *all* the mental attributes he considers as dispositions to behave in certain ways. Sensations, for example, are not so interpreted. 'It is true and

important,' he writes, 'that I am the only person who can give a first-hand account of the tweaks given me by an ill-fitting shoe, and an oculist who cannot speak my language is without his best source of information about my visual sensations' (p.199). A tweak, by Ryle's own admission, is not identical with a disposition to exhibit tweak symptoms. But unless Ryle can successfully reduce *all* mental propositions to propositions about behaviour, he has failed to show that 'the official doctrine' can be dispensed with. This is a criticism of Ryle made by Peter Geach:

> [Ryle] leaves some reports of mental acts standing, without offering any analysis of them into hypothetical or semi-hypothetical statements about behaviour. The mental acts in question are indeed referred to throughout in a highly depreciatory style, as 'itches', 'tingles', 'tweaks', 'agitations', etc.; but this rhetorical trick proves nothing. If reports of these mental acts cannot be reduced to hypothetical or semi-hypothetical statements about overt behaviour, then the view that the distinction between categoricals and hypotheticals is the logical distinction between physical and psychological statements must be completely wrong.' (Geach, 1957, p.5)

Not only does Ryle fail to offer reductive accounts of some important kinds of mental proposition, but the reductive accounts he does offer are quite unsatisfactory. Let us consider once more his interpretation of what it is to understand an argument. According to Ryle, a person who understands an argument has a disposition to give certain observable performances, which performances must satisfy public criteria of correctness. What is objectionable here is not the claim that understanding an argument involves public criteria of correctness, nor the claim that understanding is a dispositional attribute. It is the claim that the occurrences in which the disposition is displayed are observable performances.

That understanding an argument involves public criteria of correctness can hardly be disputed. Understanding, like knowledge, has truth conditions as well as belief conditions. Beliefs about the import of an argument are only said to constitute understanding of that argument if they are true. A proposition ascribing understanding to a person is a compound proposition comprising an ascription of beliefs to a person and an ascription of truth to those beliefs. It is classified as a mental proposition in virtue of the former ascription rather than the latter.

That understanding is a dispositional attribute is similarly uncontentious. If a person understands an argument at all, she understands it continuously, regardless of whether or not she happens to be thinking about it, articulating it or acting upon it. She does not cease to understand it when she falls asleep, or gets drunk, or turns her attention to something else. This, as Ryle remarks, is 'hardly more than a dull fact of ordinary grammar' (*op. cit.*, p.112).

The crux of the matter is the nature of the occurrences in which the disposition we call understanding of an argument is displayed. According to Ryle, the occurrences in question are observable performances. A person's understanding of an argument consists in her periodically paraphrasing it, illustrating its abstract points, drawing valid conclusions from it, etc. That she sometimes gives such performances is just what we mean by the claim that she understands the argument. The difficulty here is that people regularly understand arguments without ever giving such performances. The research student conducting a literature review, for example, will read and understand hundreds of arguments, most of which she will never paraphrase, illustrate or develop in public. Moreover, it is quite possible to conceive of a person who, though she perfectly well understands a particular argument, chooses for her own reasons to act as if she does not understand it, to misstate it and draw invalid conclusions from it. There is, in short, a logical gap between understanding an argument and giving those performances from which understanding might be inferred by others.

The attempt to equate understanding with the giving of correct performances also denies us the possibility of making causal connections between the two. Ordinarily we should want to say that understanding is one of several possible explanations for a correct performance. When a less than conscientious pupil submits an accurate exposition of a complex argument as a piece of homework, a number of explanations suggest themselves. One is that the pupil understands the argument in question. Another is that the exposition has been copied verbatim from a textbook, or dictated to the pupil by an enthusiastic parent. A correct performance may or may not have understanding as its explanation. And the kind of explanation in question is not the kind which identifies an event as a particular instance of a general tendency, but the kind which relates an event to an antecedent cause. Understanding can only stand in a causal relation to correct

performances if it consists in occurrences which are distinct from those performances.

This point is made by Glenn Langford in his discussion of the concept of belief. Holding a belief, he argues, cannot *both* consist in a particular set of behaviours *and* function as a causal explanation for those behaviours. On Ryle's account, my belief that there are cookies in the cupboard is simply a behavioural disposition to do such things as go to the cupboard when I am hungry. But then it makes no sense for me to cite my belief as my *reason* for going to the cupboard when I am hungry:

> What is being offered is an account of belief that something is the case, e.g. that there are cookies in the cupboard; but the proposition whereby the belief in question is described is given a purely epistemological status. It is something that can be true or false, but not something that has any relation to the person holding the belief. If I believe that there are cookies in the cupboard I am disposed to act as if the proposition 'There are cookies in the cupboard' were true. The disposition will display itself when I am hungry and when I am in the vicinity of the cupboard; in these circumstances I will go to the cupboard and, if there are any cookies there, eat them. But on a purely dispositional account of belief there is, and can be, no cause or reason for my going to the cupboard. There is no way in which the internal causes - in this case my hunger - can achieve external direction or orientation. (Langford, 1971, p.89)

It will not do, then, to describe such mental attributes as understanding and believing as dispositions to behave in certain ways. The occurrences in which mental dispositions are displayed are not public performances but private mental acts or states. The disposition we call holding a belief is displayed in private acts of entertaining and assenting to a proposition; the disposition we call understanding an argument is displayed in private acts of entertaining and assenting to a set of true propositions about the import of that argument. Because these occurrences are private, it is quite possible for a person to hold beliefs and understand arguments without ever publicly articulating or acting upon them. It is also perfectly intelligible to ask questions about the causal connections between a person's public behaviours and performances on the one hand and her beliefs and understandings on the other.

Ryle's positive account of the logic of mental propositions must therefore be rejected.

Although it is true than many mental attributes are dispositional, the occurrences in which those dispositions are displayed are mental rather that behavioural. And there is no escaping the fact that the subject of a mental occurrence stands in an epistemologically unique position with regard to propositions about that occurrence.

8.3.3 Knowledge without observation

Accepting, then, that mental propositions have a distinct method of verification, let us return to the question of what that method of verification might be. Ryle's critique of the myth of introspection, I have argued, is sound. It is plainly incorrect to say that a person acquires knowledge of her mental states by means of introspective observation. But if she does not discover her sensations, thoughts and feelings by peering within herself, how does she discover them? How exactly does a person know whether or not she is in pain, or thinking about her mother, or feeling depressed?

The solution to this problem is, I think, deceptively simple. It is part of what we mean by a mental state that the person who has it knows that she has it. To be in pain is, by definition, to know that one is in pain; to have an intention is, by definition, to know that one has it. It belongs to the logic of mental states that the one who has them knows about them; a mental state one did not know about would not be a mental state at all. It makes no sense to ask how I come to know of my pains because my pains do not exist independently of my knowing about them. They would not be pains at all if I were not aware of them.

That is why it is correct to speak of knowing that one is in pain, but incorrect to speak of doubting it, failing to notice it or making a mistake about it. Doubt is possible only where what is known can be separated from the knowledge of it. In the case of mental states no such separation is possible. The claim that I am in pain ceases to be intelligible if it is doubted that I know I am in pain. I alone know for certain whether or not I have a particular mental state, but I cannot be in doubt about it, or check it, or make a mistake about it. The only kinds of mistake I can make here are mistakes about the meanings of words. As Wittgenstein remarks, 'if anyone said "I do not know if what I have got is a pain or something else", we should think something like, he does not know what the

English word 'pain' means; and we should explain it to him' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 288).

The inseparability of mental states from the knowledge of them is brought out clearly by John Searle:

> Well, what about my own inner goings-on? Can I observe those? The very fact of subjectivity, which we are trying to observe, makes such an observation impossible. Why? Because where conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed, between the perception and the object perceived. The model of vision works on the presupposition that there is a distinction between the thing seen and the seeing of it. But for 'introspection' there is simply no way to make this separation. Any introspection I have of my conscious state is itself that conscious state. (Searle, 1992, p.97)

Propositions ascribing mental states to oneself are true or false, and are known to be true or false. One verifies that one has a mental state simply by having it; the experience *is* the method of verification. The route by which one comes to know of one's mental states is the very route by which one comes to have them. There is no need for me to make introspective observations to find out what I am thinking; if I didn't already know what I was thinking, I wouldn't be thinking it. Mental states are self-verifying; knowledge of them is logically built in.

What about propositions ascribing mental dispositions rather than mental occurrences? Is knowledge built into mental capacities and tendencies in the same way as it is built into mental acts and states? And if so, how is one to account for the familiar fact that people are not always the best judges of their own character? How is it that a person's ambitiousness, say, is sometimes more visible to others than it is to herself?

It is certainly the case that a person has an advantage over her observers in identifying her own mental dispositions; namely, the advantage of experiencing the mental occurrences in which those dispositions are displayed. An ambitious person is one who is prone to strong feelings of desire for status, wealth or power; and, whenever she is in the grip of such a feeling, her knowledge of it is significantly more secure than the

inferences of those observing her behaviour. But although she has this notable advantage, her judgments about her mental dispositions may yet be less reliable than those of her observers. The reason for this is that she may pay little or no attention to certain feelings, particularly feelings of which she is ashamed, when making assessments of her own character. Although she can hardly be in doubt about her feelings of desire for status, wealth or power while she is experiencing them, she may judge these feelings to be atypical or unrepresentative of her character; and in this judgment she may be quite mistaken. Meanwhile those keeping her under close observation might correctly infer from the frequency with which she exhibits ambition symptoms that she is, in fact, an ambitious person.

In this sense, then, it is possible for a person to be mistaken or in doubt about her mental dispositions, though not about the mental states in which those dispositions are displayed. Just as there may be real disagreement between meteorologists about whether or not a particular storm is representative of a meteorological trend, so there may be real disagreement between a person and her observers about whether or not a particular mental state is representative of her character. Ascriptions of mental dispositions are generalisations and, as such, are susceptible to the usual difficulties and disagreements about the validity of generalisations.

In conclusion, and with this qualification about ascriptions of mental dispositions, the distinctive epistemological feature of mental propositions is that they are decisively verifiable by only one conscious subject and without recourse to observation. And the reason observation is not required is that having knowledge of one's mental states is part and parcel of what it means to have mental states at all.

8.4.0 The problem of other minds

The view that I have been arguing for, that ascriptions of mental states can be decisively verified only by the subjects of those ascriptions, gives rise to what is sometimes referred to as the problem of other minds. If the only mind I can identify with certainty

is my own, what is the basis of my conviction that I am not alone in the world? How can I be sure that what appear to be other people are in fact other people and not mere material objects?

Scepticism about other minds is a more interesting philosophical problem than, say, scepticism about material objects. Once all the usual tests and checks have been carried out, a person who persists in asking 'But is there *really* a table in front of me?' is asking a question we can conceive no way of settling. And if we can conceive no way of settling a question, we can reasonably doubt that it is meaningful. But a person who has carried out all the usual tests and checks to establish that her father is in pain, yet persists in asking 'But is he *really* in pain?', is asking a question which is clearly still meaningful. It is meaningful because her father alone knows for certain whether or not he is in pain. Although we can conceive no way for her to settle the question, we know that *he* can settle it, and hence that it is a meaningful question to ask.

The standard solution to the problem of other minds is this: though it is true that we cannot establish the existence of other minds with certainty, we can and do reasonably infer their existence from the behaviour of other bodies. Because I have experienced correlations between patterns of behaviour and mental states in my own case, I can reasonably infer the existence of other minds from the existence of other bodies which exhibit those patterns of behaviour. I know for certain that the pain symptoms exhibited by my body are correlated with pains, so it is a plausible hypothesis that the pain symptoms exhibited by other bodies are also correlated with pains. This account of the rational basis of our knowledge of other minds is called the argument from analogy.

I contend that the argument from analogy is a satisfactory solution to the problem of other minds. It has, however, seemed objectionable to some philosophers. In the remainder of this section I propose to examine four objections to the argument and show that none of them stands up to scrutiny. The objections are as follows:

(i) *It is irresponsible to generalise from a single case.*
(ii) *The existence of logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others is a necessary condition of such ascriptions being meaningful.*
(iii) *The existence of logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to*

others is a necessary condition of teaching the meanings of mental predicates.

(iv) *The existence of logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others is a necessary condition of ascribing mental states to anything at all.*

The first objection, then, is that experienced correlations between patterns of behaviour and mental states in one's own case are too weak a basis for inferences from similar patterns of behaviour in other bodies to similar mental states. As Wittgenstein has it:

> If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word 'pain' means - must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalise the one case so irresponsibly? (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 293)

The same point is made by Ryle:

> If someone has inspected a number of railway-signals and signal-boxes, he can then in a new case make a good probable inference from observed signal-movements to unobserved lever-movements. But if he had examined only one signal-box, and knew nothing about the standardisation methods of large corporations, his inference would be pitiably weak, for it would be a wide generalisation based on a single instance. Further, one signal-arm is closely similar to another in appearance and movements, so the inference to a correspondingly close similarity between the mechanisms housed in different signal boxes has some strength. But the observed appearances and actions of people differ very markedly, so the imputation to them of inner processes closely matching one another would be actually contrary to the evidence. (Ryle, 1949, pp.52-3)

So how irresponsible is the generalisation? Not, I suggest, as irresponsible as Wittgenstein and Ryle make out. Contrary to what Ryle says, the similarity in the appearance and behaviour of human bodies is quite striking, and certainly sufficient to suggest the hypothesis that bodies which look and behave like mine might also house minds like mine. And once the hypothesis has been advanced, and predictions made in accordance with it, the evidence supporting the hypothesis rapidly becomes overwhelming. I can hardly fail to be impressed by the fact that other human bodies behave, with remarkable consistency, in just the way I would expect them to behave if they housed minds like mine. So the claim that my own case is too weak a basis for the

hypothesis of other minds seems to me to be unpersuasive.

The second objection, that the existence of logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others is a necessary condition of such ascriptions being meaningful, is premised on a strong interpretation of the verification principle. According to the verification principle, understanding a proposition consists in, or at least involves, knowing its method of verification. The question is whether or not 'knowing the method of verification' of a proposition requires that one could, in principle, get into a position to verify it. If so, the claim that one can never get into a position to verify decisively ascriptions of mental states to others must be false, because it renders such ascriptions meaningless. Therefore, it is argued, there must be logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others.

But the fact that a strong interpretation of the verification principle is incompatible with the logic of mental propositions is a stronger argument against the former than the latter. It is the strong interpretation of the verification principle that ought to be rejected here. As A.J. Ayer writes:

> [The failure of the argument from analogy] will follow from the ruling that I cannot attach sense to any statement which I could never be in a position to verify directly. But this in itself appears to me now to be an objection against maintaining the verification principle in such a stringent form. (Ayer, 1963, p.110)

On a weak interpretation of the verification principle, 'knowing the method of verification' of a proposition requires only that one knows how it could be verified, not that one could get into a position to verify it oneself. To understand the proposition 'Mary is thinking about her mother' it is enough for me to know how it could be verified by Mary. It is true that I can only learn this by verifying some mental propositions for myself; but that there are *some* mental propositions I can verify is not in question. By verifying mental propositions about myself I learn the method of verification, and hence the meaning, of mental propositions in general.

The third objection I want to address is the claim that the existence of logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others is a necessary condition of teaching

the meanings of mental predicates. If pain symptoms are not logically adequate criteria for the application of the term 'pain', how can the meaning of the term 'pain' be taught? How is it to be explained to someone what does and what does not count as a pain? In the absence of public criteria by which pains can be decisively identified, it is argued, the term 'pain' cannot be introduced into the language.

In fact, however, the difficulties here are not severe. The correlation between pain and pain symptoms is sufficiently reliable that, initially, the two can be conflated for teaching purposes. A child is taught the word 'pain' by having pain symptoms pointed out to her. Later, as her view of the world becomes more sophisticated and she starts to distinguish real pains from faked pains, she will have need of the distinction between pain and the behaviour associated with pain. By this time she will have experienced and feigned enough pains of her own for the distinction to be perfectly intelligible. Although we initially learn the meanings of mental predicates through their association with certain forms of behaviour, the forms of behaviour are subsequently expelled from the meanings of the predicates. As Ayer remarks:

> ... even if one grants the premise that we should not in practice be able to acquire an understanding of words which refer to inner states or processes, unless those inner states were outwardly detectable, it does not seem to follow that once our understanding of these words has been acquired, we cannot divorce them from their original associations. (*ibid.*, p.101)

It is the contingent correlation of mental states with certain forms of behaviour, not some logical connection between the two, which allows us to use forms of behaviour to teach the words for mental states. It might have been the case that mental states were not correlated with forms of behaviour, in which case mental states would still exist but we should be unable to develop a public language by which to identify them. As it is, behavioural criteria are practically adequate for teaching the meanings of mental predicates without being logically adequate for the ascription of mental states.

The fourth and final objection, that the existence of logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others is a necessary condition of ascribing mental states to anything at all, is forwarded by Strawson in *Individuals* (1959). He writes:

> What I have said is that one ascribes P-predicates to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour; and that the behaviour-criteria one goes on are not just signs of the presence of what is meant by the P-predicate, but are criteria of a logically adequate kind for the ascription of the P-predicate. On behalf of this conclusion, however, I am claiming that it follows from a consideration of the conditions necessary for any ascription of states of consciousness to anything. The point is not that we must accept this conclusion in order to avoid scepticism, but that we must accept it in order to explain the existence of the conceptual scheme in terms of which the sceptical problem is stated. (*ibid.*, p.106)[1]

Why does Strawson consider this to be the case? He begins by arguing that one could not think of oneself as a subject of experience in isolation from the idea of other subjects of experience. If I do not have the idea of other subjects of experience, I must suppose that all experiences are mine; but if all experiences are mine, I might just as well say that they are no-one's. It makes no sense to ascribe experiences to myself if I am unable to ascribe them to others. In a solipsistic world, experiences are just experiences; the whole business of ascribing them to subjects cannot get off the ground.

It is, then, a necessary condition of ascribing experiences to myself that I recognise the possibility of there being subjects of experience other than myself. I can only classify experiences as mine if I am prepared to admit that there may be experiences which are not mine. As Strawson has it:

> ... it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness, experiences, to oneself, in the way one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself. (*ibid.*, p.99)

Thus far Strawson's argument is correct. One cannot ascribe experiences to oneself unless one is prepared, in principle, to ascribe them to others. But from this fact Strawson tries to deduce the conclusion that one cannot ascribe experiences to oneself unless one has logically adequate criteria for ascribing them to others. That is to say, not

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[1] P-predicates, in Strawson's terminology, are all the predicates we apply to persons other than those which can also be applied to mere material objects. The class of P-predicates includes 'is smiling', 'is going for a walk', 'is in pain', 'believes in God'; it does not include 'weighs 10 stone', 'is in the drawing-room'. See Strawson, 1959, p.104.

only must one be prepared to ascribe experiences to others, but one must be able to do so with logical certainty. And this conclusion does not follow from the premise. Ayer remarks:

> It is true that I could not think of myself as satisfying the conditions of being a person unless I admitted the possibility that others satisfied them too. But all that this excludes is the view, which has indeed been held by some philosophers, that it is meaningless to ascribe states of consciousness to anything but oneself; it is perfectly compatible with the view that one does not know, or even with the view that one cannot know, that such an ascription is ever in fact true. (*op. cit.*, p.105)

Ayer is surely right here. There is a significant difference between admitting the possibility that other persons exist and being able to verify decisively that they exist. The latter requires that we have logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others; the former does not. But it is only the former which is a necessary condition of ascribing mental states to oneself.

Strawson offers the following explicit rejection of the argument from analogy:

> For suppose in no case did these ways of telling constitute logically adequate kinds of criteria. Then we should have to think of the relation between the ways of telling and what the P-predicate ascribes, or a part of what it ascribes, always in the following way: we should have to think of the ways of telling as signs of the presence, in the individual concerned, of this different thing, viz. the state of consciousness. But then we could only know that the way of telling was a sign of the presence of the different thing ascribed by the P-predicate, by the observation of correlations between the two. But this observation we could each make only in one case, viz. our own. And now we are back in the position of the defender of Cartesianism, who thought our way with it was too short. For what, now, does 'our own case' mean? There is no sense in the idea of ascribing states of consciousness to oneself, or at all, unless the ascriber already knows how to ascribe at least some states of consciousness to others. So he cannot argue in general 'from his own case' to conclusions about how to do this; for unless he already knows how to do this, he has no conception of his own case, or any case, i.e. subject of experiences. (*op. cit.*, p.105-6)

Strawson implies that there is a vicious circularity in the argument from analogy. The basis for the ascription of mental states to others is the experienced correlations between patterns of behaviour and mental states in my own case; but I cannot even make sense of 'my own case' unless I already have logically adequate criteria for the ascription of mental states to others. In fact, all I require to make sense of 'my own case' is a *willingness* to ascribe mental states to others. I need never have made such an ascription, nor do I need logically adequate criteria for doing so. And there is no circularity in the rather obvious proposition that it is a necessary condition of my ascribing mental states to others on the basis of experienced correlations between patterns of behaviour and mental states in my own case that I am willing to ascribe mental states to others.

I conclude, then, that each of the four objections to the argument from analogy we have considered can be satisfactorily met. The argument from analogy is a correct account of the rational basis of our knowledge of other minds. Our belief that what appear to be other people are in fact other people, though it is a belief we can never decisively verify, is rational and well-founded because of the striking resemblance in appearance and behaviour between others and ourselves.

8.5.0 Conclusion

My aims in this chapter have been to clarify and expand on the distinction between mental and material propositions set out in Chapter Five, and to counter the behaviourist contention that mental propositions are reducible to material ones. I conclude with a brief summary of my key points.

The first important difference between mental and material propositions is that the former can be verified by one person only. While the material proposition 'Mary is exhibiting the symptoms of pain' can be verified by anyone observing Mary, the mental proposition 'Mary is in pain' can be decisively verified by Mary alone. These two propositions may have the same expectation value for observers of Mary, but they have radically different expectation values for Mary herself. And because they differ in

expectation value for Mary, they differ in meaning for all of us. To recall Wisdom's words: 'the peculiarity of the soul is not that it is visible to none but that it is visible only to one' (Wisdom, 1952, p.226).

The second important difference between mental and material propositions is that the former are verified without observation. A person does not need to observe her own behaviour to find out what she is thinking or feeling; nor does she need to make introspective observations of her mental states. Ryle's critique of the myth of introspection is sound. A person knows what she is thinking or feeling merely by virtue of the fact that she is thinking or feeling it. Knowing about one's mental states is part of what it means to have them.

The fact that each of us can only decisively verify mental propositions about ourselves opens the door to scepticism about the existence of other minds. But while it is quite true that we cannot establish the existence of minds other than our own with logical certainty, we can and do make reasonable inferences to other minds from the appearance and behaviour of other bodies. The argument from analogy, which asserts that experienced correlations between patterns of behaviour and mental states in our own case are the rational basis of our inferences to other minds, can be satisfactorily defended against the objections of its detractors.

Conclusion

My aim in this thesis has been to settle the unresolved debate in philosophy of education about the logical coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education. Here I shall briefly summarise the terms of the debate and the solution I have proposed, then relate my argument back to the features of the practical context identified in Chapter Two.

The liberal account of Religious Education prescribes the teaching of religious understanding without religious belief. It stipulates that the aim of Religious Education is to teach pupils the *meaning* of religious propositions while leaving open the question of their *truth*. Underpinning the account are the assumptions that (i) no religious proposition is known to be either true or false and (ii) it is morally objectionable to teach questionable propositions as if they were known to be true.

Opponents of the liberal account argue that it is logically incoherent. Their argument rests on two premises: (i) that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class or 'form of knowledge', and (ii) that understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false. If both premises are sound, it follows that religious understanding necessarily involves religious belief.

I have argued that this challenge to the logical coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education is unsuccessful. The second premise is sound but the first is not.

The second premise, that understanding a form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false, is an extension of an argument about language in general made by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein claims that 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments' (Wittgenstein, 1953, Section 242). That is to say, language-users must reach agreement not only on how words are connected to each other (agreement in definitions) but also on how words are connected to experiences (agreement in judgments). The process of fixing experiential criteria necessarily involves accepting the truth of certain contingent propositions. I have suggested that Wittgenstein's argument can properly be extended to individual epistemological classes, with the exception of the class of necessary propositions.

The validity of the first premise, that there is a religious form of knowledge, turns on the method of verification of religious propositions. I have argued that religious propositions are propositions about divine persons and, as such, are verified in exactly the same way as propositions about human persons. Gods, like other persons, comprise minds and bodies (or minds and a relation to the material world analogous to 'having a body'), so religious propositions can be distributed without remainder over the familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions. Pupils can be taught what religious propositions mean with reference to other propositions of the same epistemological kinds and without reference to distinctively religious experiences. It follows that the aim of teaching for religious understanding without religious belief is logically coherent.

If my argument is correct, the defect in the contributions to the debate discussed in Chapter One is clear. All four contributors focus their attention on the second premise of the case against the liberal account and leave the first largely unexamined. Hirst acknowledges that 'some have sought to give an account of religious meaning which has seen its cognitive core to be totally reducible to knowledge belonging to other forms', but makes no attempt justify his doubt that 'such a reduction can be legitimately carried through' (Hirst, 1973b, p.88). Marples contents himself with the bold and implausible assertion that 'people who do not share a religious form of life' are 'simply baffled' by religious language (Marples, 1978, p.85). Attfield predicates his defence of the liberal account on a rejection of 'the neo-Wittgensteinian argument' that understanding a conceptual scheme involves 'actual agreement on the factual judgments made in the light of its categories', without questioning the assumption that there is a distinctively religious conceptual scheme (Attfield, 1978, p.94). And Gardner declares without argument his allegiance to the view that 'Religions involve unique ways of looking at the world, and unique claims, claims, that is, that are irreducible to those that are non-religious' (Gardner, 1980, p.158). It is because of this failure to give serious attention to the claim that there is a religious form of knowledge that the debate about the logical coherence of the liberal account of Religious Education has remained unresolved for so long.

How, finally, does my argument bear on the features of the practical context identified in

Chapter Two? First, it shows that the unanimous endorsement of the liberal account by Agreed Syllabuses does not commit teachers of Religious Education to logically unrealisable aims. This is not to deny that there may be other objections to the aim of transmitting religious understanding without religious belief, or that there may be practical obstacles to the realisation of this aim. But it is to deny that the aim must be rejected on the grounds of logical incoherence. The requirement currently placed on teachers of Religious Education to teach pupils the meaning of religious propositions while leaving open the question of their truth is one which can, in principle, be met.

Second, my argument suggests that the interpretation of religious propositions favoured by most students, as revealed by the research literature and by my own empirical study, is the correct interpretation. According to the majority of students, the term 'God' refers to an independent personal being and propositions about God conform to the logic of ordinary propositions about persons. It will be clear that this interpretation is exactly in line with the account of the meaning of religious propositions I have advanced.

In my own survey of 40 students nearing the end of their compulsory education, 39 considered 'God exists' to be a proposition asserting the existence of an independent personal being. Of these, 32 thought that the proposition could, in principle, be verified and argued that one would establish the existence of God in the same way as one would establish the existence of any other person: by meeting him, communicating with him, and observing his actions. The remaining seven participants denied that the proposition could be verified on the grounds that attempts to identify God run up against the same difficulty as attempts to identify any other person: there is always a theoretical possibility of impersonation or pretence.

Thus, if the admittedly limited empirical evidence on students' interpretations of religious propositions is reliable, there is reason to believe not only that the aim prescribed by the liberal account of Religious Education is in principle realisable, but that it is, in fact, being realised.

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