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DISCUSSION

MR. RESCHER'S REFORMULATION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL PROOF

By KEITH GUNDERSON AND RICHARD ROUTLEY

In the midst of revived philosophical interest in theological issues, we wish to record our objections to one recent attempt at reformulating the ontological proof for the existence of God.¹ In trying to navigate around what he calls the three "traditional objections" to the proof—viz.: (1) that it "rests upon an explicit definition *per genus et differentiam*" which in turn "depends upon the thesis that *existence* has the status of a predicate", (2) that it invokes "the procedure of defining into existence", and (3) that if the "proof were logically sound, its theological serviceability would be insignificant"—Mr. Rescher, we believe, runs aground on the following criticisms.

1. In pointing out that our understanding of a term need not come about through explicit definition *per genus et differentiam*, but that we may also arrive at it through "experience-presupposing definitions", Rescher confines his treatment of how we come to understand terms to learning definitions of one sort or another. Now he does not rule out other ways, but neither does he discuss or take note of them. And it is important to note that there are other ways, lest it be thought that if we do not come to understand terms through explicit definitions as stated above, we come to understand them through experience-presupposing definitions as described by Rescher. For example, we all seem to come to understand the meanings of various words over a more or less extended period of time, without ever having them defined for us. Later we might come across explicit definitions of the words, though we would not on that account say that we came to understand them through explicit definition. We might instead wish to say that only then would the definition make any sense to us. And we need not say that prior to such a time there was any defining going on at all. Perhaps Rescher would want to say that in all such cases we were only talking about what he calls "experience-presupposing definitions". Then we would simply ask if there was any "coming to understand" which did not count as learning such a definition. But there seems to be little reason why we could not come to understand the meaning of the word

¹ "The Ontological Proof Revisited", this *Journal*, August, 1959.

'God' through the reading of religious literature—perhaps by definitions and accounts other than the so-called "experience-presupposing" kind. These ways should not be neglected—as Rescher neglects them—even if experience-presupposing definitions do provide a way of coming to understand the world. Or, if the reading of religious literature resulted in an understanding of the word 'God', let us say, would it too simply be counted as one form of religious experience in Rescher's terms?

But these comments need a more concrete elaboration.

2. Some important difficulties, which are hinted at by the above, are those which arise in trying to understand Rescher's account of "experience-presupposing definitions". The phrase seems to us to be a hopelessly general catch-all. Included in his category of terms which can *only* be learned in this way, we find "perception words (names of colours, odours, etc.), sensation words (aches, pains, etc.), feeling words (alacrity, lethargy, etc.), emotion words (anger, gaiety, etc.)". Some of these seem most unlike the others in certain important respect, and all of these seem most unlike the word 'God', contrary to the close parallel which he later tries to draw between them, and upon which his main argument rests. (E.g.: it is not clear that words like 'red' are *names* of colours. If they are names at all, they are probably not the same kind of name as 'God'. Many questions would arise about 'God'—whether it is a proper name, the name of a person, of a spirit, etc.—that would not arise about 'red'.)

By saying that the above terms "characterize the modes and character of immediate experience", we interpret Rescher as meaning that a person who is not visually defective comes to understand the word 'red', for example, when he hears or reads that something is red when he is looking at that something, etc. If this is what he means, then it seems clear that even if this were the case for every instance of someone coming to understand the word 'red', not all the types of word listed by him are alike in this respect. For example, would Goliath have to have a hammering pain in his head in order to understand the meaning of 'hammering pain'? Is our range of experience short of hammering pains inadequate for our coming to understand the meaning of 'hammering pain'? Or, rather, would this range of experience be the very sort which Rescher would want to say is presupposed by any understanding of the phrase? If this is so, then everything prior to our understanding a term might count as presupposed experience. But then Rescher is saying no more than that our understanding a term presupposes certain experiences prior to our understanding. And if he thinks that understanding the phrase

'hammering pain' presupposes a hammering pain experience, he is wrong. It is obvious that we do understand a wide variety of perception, sensation, feeling, and emotion words and phrases without ever having had the experiences to which they might be properly used to refer, and that we exhibit this understanding when, having had a new or unusual experience (a feeling, for example), we know how to talk about it, how to report or describe it. We do not say that our understanding of the terms we use in discussing it was simultaneous with the experience discussed, and that only *now* do we understand the words, rather we say that our prior understanding of the meanings of certain terms enables us now to discuss the experience intelligently.

Exceptions to Rescher's account arise in other ways as well, as in the case of colour words and Hume's missing shade of blue. We might think of a term for designating the missing shade of blue—call it 'absentblue'—and then "teach" the meaning of the term by using various colour charts on which the missing shade of blue was missing. All in all, Rescher fails to distinguish between coming to understand a word in a language and having experiences for which such a word is appropriate for referring to or describing.

3. Further difficulties with his use of the phrase "experience-presupposing terms" arise when he says of these terms that "The experiences in question are, to be sure, themselves a wholly subjective matter whose contents cannot be communicated in full". (Though he admits there "are perfectly objective *tests* as to whether or not an experience of the type in question has taken place".) But what can this mean? If he means to say more than that when an experience is my experience it is in one trivial sense only mine, he must show what sort of content others are deprived of, why the experience is "subjective" and not fully communicable. The quotation above seems dangerously close to asserting that we can't know the mind of another. Furthermore, the phrase "cannot be communicated in full" in the above context is unclear in that we are never told what would count for or against such experiences being communicated in full. In other words, we are not able to construct a parallel to "Because of the buzzing interruptions on the line, Jezebel found her message was not communicated in full".

4. We now come to one of the main thrusts in the reformulation. This is the claim that 'Orange is more similar to red than to green' is a synthetic *a priori* truth. (The later contention that the reformulation is invulnerable to the traditional objections is based on the assertion that 'God exists', like the above statement, is synthetic *a priori*.) We shall try to show that even if the

parallel did hold (though it doesn't), nothing would be gained, since 'Orange is more similar to red than green' is itself neither *a priori* nor even true in certain contexts.

Rescher says of the proposition: "It is synthetic in that it presupposes experience, namely that fundamental experience indispensable for having a proper grasp of . . . the key terms involved. Thus, since it is presupposed for the *meaningfulness* of the proposition, experience is, *a fortiori*, involved in its truth. On the other hand, the proposition is *a priori* because its truth 'follows' from its meaning in the sense that once a body of experience adequate as a basis for a grasp of the meaning of the terms is given, this is *ipso facto* adequate as a basis for the truth of the proposition in question. It would be incorrect to construe a dissent from such a proposition as expressive of disagreement on the facts, for it is properly to be taken as *prima facie* evidence that its meaning was not correctly understood, i.e. that there exist gaps or deficiencies in the visual experience of the dissenter that preclude a correct understanding of the statements in question."

But such claims capitalize on treating the proposition apart from any context. If someone were simply to blurt out "Orange is more similar to red than to green" we might not know whether it was true or false or what we should say. Once the expression is given a context it is immediately seen that it is not necessarily true. For one might say that considered in relation to yellow orange is more similar to green than red. And if someone were to ask "Is orange more similar to red than to green?" when, for example, there were a number of coloured cards in front of him, we might look at those cards and then reply "In what respect?" having noticed that some shades were very dull and some very bright. And if the orange cards and the green cards were of very dull shades, whereas the red card was a very bright shade, it would be in order to say "Certainly not in respect to its brightness". So we find that the proposition is neither synthetically nor analytically true in a number of cases. *A fortiori* it is not true synthetically *a priori*.

Moreover it is not at all clear that what Rescher understands to be a synthetic *a priori* truth is a synthetic *a priori* truth, at least in any recognized philosophical sense. Certainly it is not in accord with Kant's usage. For Kant the nature of our experience presupposes certain synthetic *a priori* truths. These are synthetic in that they are said to relate to our experience of the world, but are *a priori* in that they are said not to be "derived" from such experience, but are seen as a necessary condition for the very

possibility of such experience. Rescher works with a topsy-turvy version of the synthetic *a priori*, since for him such truths presuppose having a "body of experience" previous to the grasping of the meanings of the terms involved. Such truths seem directly derived from experience and not *a priori*. It is, of course, apparent that some "body of experience" is necessary for grasping the terms of any proposition. But "body of experience" is such an all-accommodating phrase that, by itself, it can hardly be used as a criterion for marking out synthetic *a priori* propositions from other kinds.

It should also be mentioned that the test of understanding the meaning of a term is not that one has had certain visual experiences. In the above case Rescher slips into treating one's having had certain experiences as a guarantee for one's understanding the meanings of the terms which could properly be used in describing such experiences; i.e., he begins by saying that if we are to know the meaning of a term, we must have certain experiences, but in effect ends up by assuming that if we have the experiences, they will guarantee our understanding of the meanings of the terms in question.

5. His next move is crucial, and, we feel, unwarranted. He says, "I propose to classify the word 'God' within the category of words which cannot be given an explicit definition but whose meaning can only be grasped within experience". (As if when we understood the meaning of a word through explicit definition we should come to understand in a way which was peculiar in that it was somehow not "within experience". What is probably meant is that it is not like coming to understand the meaning of the word 'red' by seeing red. But it is not clear that we ever come to understand solely in this way.) Rescher continues: "On this view a person whose history is devoid of religious experience simply cannot have an adequate grasp of the meaning of the word 'God'. And I submit that a person who *does* have a basis of experience adequate to an understanding of this term, also has, *ipso facto*, the experiential basis of evidence adequate to underwrite rational, warranted assent to the proposition that God exists." Thus it seems that the only adequate test for whether someone understands the word 'God' is whether he gives assent to the proposition 'God exists'. But if this is what Rescher wants to maintain, it is circular. If this is not the case, then there are counter-examples. Rescher would have to deny that a person understood the word 'God' who, let us say, had a conversion experience, became active in the church, prayed daily, read the Bible, etc., but who finally, at some point—perhaps after many years—no longer assented to

the proposition that God exists. Thus when such a person says "I used to believe that God exists, but I don't any longer" Rescher will have to say of him either that he used to understand the word, though he no longer does, or that he never did. If he says the former he must meet the counter-reply of one who says that he does indeed understand the meaning of the word 'God', and that is precisely why he is leaving the church, becoming a militant atheist, etc. He is not doing so because his understanding of the meaning of certain words is slipping. Or if he maintains the latter, how are we to test those who really understand the word 'God', and distinguish them from those who simply assert that God exists on the basis of a misunderstanding?

Experience, in the way Rescher treats it, isn't enough by itself. It cannot guarantee assent. Two people might have similar religious experiences on the basis of which one might say that God exists, and the other not. Furthermore, if Rescher's account were correct, then it might be the case that some day no one will believe that God exists, to which he would have to respond by saying that no one then really understood the word 'God'. How strange it would be to have a word in the language which occurred frequently in book titles, speeches, conversations, commands, curses, etc., which no one really understood! What then would the word 'God' mean? Would it have changed its meaning, or would it then have no meaning at all? And haven't we ways of now telling whether people understand the word 'God', without knowing their future religious affiliations?

And when are we to say that someone has had a religious experience, a vision, let us say, as opposed to a hallucination? How are we to know that it was God who told me that such-and-such would happen? Would we know if we managed to predict correctly the winner of the Irish Sweepstakes? In other words, just how is the so-called religious experience which has been said to be necessary to our understanding of the word 'God' to be marked out from a variety of experiences? Rescher has failed to supply such criteria.

6. He has turned the ontological argument into an argument from religious experience. In the last analysis it is admitted that as reformulated it is no longer a proof. But confession does not always bring absolution. We want to say: "*So that's your reformulation!* We thought there was to be a revisitation of the ontological proof. Now it turns out to be simply an assertion to the effect that anyone who has had a certain sort of religious experience will understand the word 'God' and (may) assent to the proposition 'God exists', and mean no more by this than that

he has had a certain experience." But one does not avoid traditional objections to an argument by producing an entirely different argument any more than one fixes the tear in a friend's tie by giving him an entirely different tie.

7. In all fairness it should be pointed out that the above contention concerning assenting to the proposition glosses over one point. For it is not clear whether Rescher wishes to regard the proposition 'God exists', when uttered by those who understand it, as analytic or as a necessary truth. Moreover, he denies at one point that the reformulated argument is deductive. But he vacillates between two theses: (1) the stronger one; viz., that given a certain body of experience, the person who has assimilated it must, in effect, assent to the proposition that God exists, since it would be self-contradictory for him to deny it; and the weaker one (2) that if a person has suitable experiences then he knows the meaning of 'God exists' and has full reason for asserting that it is true. An example of the latter thesis is provided where he says: "A body of experience adequate as a basis for an understanding of this term must also be adequate as an evidential basis for assent to the proposition that God exists." But he then goes on to say: "Therefore . . . a denial of God's existence is indicative of a failure to grasp the meaning of the word." And when he goes on to say "But the evidential basis for its truth does not call for any experience *over and above* that demanded by its meaning" he has simply restated, not reformulated (nor even replaced) the ontological argument.

8. He in effect replaces 'true' with 'true for x'. For on his account 'It is true that God exists' when said by x would mean simply 'It is true for x on the basis of x's experience'.

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SENSATIONS AND BRAIN PROCESSES: A REJOINDER TO DR. PITCHER AND MR. JOSKE¹

By J. J. C. SMART

Philosophers do commonly regard the thesis that experiences are identical with brain processes as paradoxical. But psychologists and physiologists commonly regard it as a truism. So the thesis is not, as Dr. Pitcher says, *obviously* paradoxical. I favour it for lack of a consistent and scientifically plausible alternative. Pitcher

¹ This *Journal*, August, 1960, pp. 150-160. Pitcher's note is a reply to my "Sensations and Brain Processes", *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 68, 1959, pp. 141-256.