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Theology, Falsification, and the Concept of Weltanschauung

Professor Flew, in his 'Theology and Falsification' has attacked the claim to cognitivity and factual meaningfulness of religious statements. Employing the falsification principle, according to which one must be able to specify what would count against one's statement for the statement to have factual cognitive meaning, Flew challenges the believer to state what would have to occur for him to admit that his claim that God loved him or that there is a God was false. Flew argues that religious believers do not allow anything to count against these assertions and thus that their claims degenerate into cognitively meaningless and factually nonsensical statements by 'dying the death of a thousand qualifications.' This paper attempts to answer this challenge by developing the concept of Weltanschauung (or conceptual framework) and then first explicating and subsequently arguing for the following three claims:

- 1 a Weltanschauung determines facts and sanctions existence by the inclusion or exclusion of concepts and categories
- 2 a Weltanschauung constitutes 'facts' and 'evidence,' consequently determining the criterion for factual significance and cognitive meaning;
- 3 since what is factually significant and cognitively meaningful is dependent upon facts and evidence, and since facts and evidence are Weltanschauung-determined, it is illegitimate to deny factual significance to religious statements.

All that Professor Flew, and others who employ his challenge, can do is to deny that religious statements are factual in the sense of being like statements about tables and chairs and the like, a denial which in no way undercuts what the religious believer wants to assert. In short, what Flew and those who agree with him are doing is *accepting* and implicitly *recommending* a particular world-view, and nothing more. But world-views cannot be proven or disproven, only accepted or rejected. As the mythological Weltanschauung was replaced by the Aristotelian and subsequently by the Newtonian and later the world-view of quantum mechanics and Einstein, and as the Darwinian biological world-view has replaced the biblical view of special creation, so too Flew can recommend that we do away with a religious Weltanschauung; but it seems to me that he cannot do so by proving that its statements are cognitively meaningless and factually nonsensical. Thus, if what this paper argues is correct, Flew's challenge cannot stand; if incorrect, at least new problems concerning meaning and cognitivity will have been raised and, perhaps, some suggestions for their solutions will have been offered.

I must first explain what is intended by a Weltanschauung, conceptual framework, or 'world-view.' By a Weltanschauung is meant a way of viewing

or seeing the world *as* something; that is, a way of interpreting certain experience. This interpretation or viewing need not be deliberate or conscious, and in fact it is most often unconscious and unwitting. One's conception of life and life's purpose, any teleological or religious view of the world, any cosmological or philosophical outlook – all these are familiar aspects which may comprise or characterize a world-view. Generally, a Weltanschauung constitutes commitment to and preference for a particular viewing of experience, or, what is tantamount, a particular looking at the world: in this sense both science and religion are Weltanschauungen. Anything other than the seeing of physical objects as physical objects constitutes an interpretation which is within one or another conceptual framework. To call lightning the wrath of the gods as primitive man did is to interpret the phenomenon in terms of the mythological world-view or to *see* lightning *as* the wrath of the gods; similarly, to characterize lightning as electricity as the modern scientist does is to *see* it *as* something quite different. Any *seeing as* constitutes an interpretation of experience. 'To view experience in a certain way' means to interpret some feature of the world as something in terms of the concepts, categories, and principles of one's conceptual framework. Therefore, any seeing of the world as a certain reality, any general interpretation of reality as a whole or in part, or a viewing of the world as an integrated whole – this is an over-all Weltanschauung. To put it in another way: a Weltanschauung is an over-all conceptual framework having certain concepts and categories which it imposes on experience. As particle physics has such concepts as electron, force-field, and molecule, and imposes them on experience to interpret and explain it, so theistic religion has its concepts such as God, child of God, love, and salvation, in terms of which it interprets experience. Newtonian and quantum mechanics, psychology, Christianity, or Buddhism are different interpretations of reality in which experience is characterized by imposing different conceptual systems containing differing categories.

What I am stressing is that every way of viewing the world (except perhaps the common-sense view that physical objects exist) is an *interpretation*. There is no seeing that is not *seeing as*; there can be no understanding without imposing concepts upon experience; there can be no knowledge apart from a conceptual framework: there can be no distinction *in experiencing* between what is given and the non-given interpretation. The primitive man *saw* lightning *as* the personified wrath of the gods; the scientist *sees* lightning *as* electricity. The way in which a person characterizes one experience may well influence him in what he sees in a later experience. In science, for example, present experimentation may be sufficient to change and modify past theories and may have a reciprocal effect on any further experimental evidence. An analogous situation would occur in our common-sense system of knowledge, were we to accept, for example, the Rylean concept of mind in place of the traditional Christian-Cartesian concept. No factual statement may be taken from its conceptual framework or Weltanschauung. The language of tables and chairs is as much out of place in science *qua* science as talk of electrons and

force-fields is in normal everyday discourse; similarly, talk of God and spirits and souls is inappropriate in the scientific laboratory just as 'blind mechanical necessity' or 'natural selection' is inappropriate in the language-game of prayer. To put the matter differently: gods were legitimate objects of discourse or the 'forms of life' of the Greek or Roman, but not today; ghosts were the legitimate subject of conversation in Victorian times, though not generally now; electrons and beta-rays have their place in the 'forms of life' of twentieth-century science, though not in pre-contemporary scientific thought or language.

What a word means depends upon the conceptual framework of which it is a part: to remove it from that framework is illegitimate. No cognition can be expressed without an intermediate symbol; this means that no experience can occur without interpretation. To explain why it is illegitimate to remove a concept from its *Weltanschauung*, I shall take as an example the concept of 'man.' In our common-sense view a man is a thing, a physical object; for science man is either a biological organism, a collection of atoms, or a mass of organized chemical processes, etc.; for theistic religion he is a child of God. Obviously world-views are not mutually exclusive, for one may be both a religious believer and a physicist, operating within two different *Weltanschauungen*.

What is meant by claiming that a *Weltanschauung* or conceptual framework sanctions the existence of objects? Viewed in this way, 'existence' is an honorific term by which we allow certain entities to be in our world in a significant way. Existence predicated of anything but physical objects functions in an honorific way which confirms the agreement of someone who adopts a particular conceptual framework to talk about the thing in a significant and real manner: in short, 'existence' is the term applied to that by which a *Weltanschauung* constitutes itself and is applied to those things which are 'permitted' or 'allowed' in that conceptual framework. Obviously, this meaning of 'existence' is not applicable to physical objects. We do not permit or allow things such as tables and chairs to exist – they just do exist. But if the word 'exist' is predicated of tables and chairs, then it cannot be used concerning neutrinos, God, super-egos, or numbers. For, with radically different sorts of 'existing' things, different words logically must be used in predication, lest we commit a category mistake.

Put in another way, to say that what exists (except for physical objects) must be sanctioned by the mind means either that we in our world-view agree to talk significantly about such things as electrons and force-fields and so sanction their existence or that we find in our experience other things than physical objects and, by creating a conceptual framework to include them, sanction their existence. This, then, is what is meant by a *Weltanschauung* determining, sanctioning, or legislating existence. The scientist in his laboratory sanctions the existence of electrons by incorporating them significantly into his systematic framework; the theist sanctions the existence of God by interpreting his experience in a certain way; the Freudian psychologist sanctions the existence of the unconscious by interpreting his findings in a certain

way; the mathematician, by talking about numbers significantly, sanctions their existence. To sanction existence in this sense is to legislate that certain things within different conceptual systems or world-views do exist. One must be careful to note that this does not mean that they exist in a physical way. Within science, entities have 'scientific existence,' within psychology, 'psychological existence,' and within religion, 'religious existence.' As one cannot compare the existence of a chair to a number or to an electron or God or the subconscious, so one cannot further explicate what is meant by 'existence' except as has been done.

Another example may clarify this point. When we read of a primitive man talking about fate or the gods, we understand him as interpreting, albeit unconsciously, his experience in such a way that he can apply the concepts 'fate' and 'gods' to it. Now, it may be argued that it is intelligible to say that 'god' has a significant place in the mythological Weltanschauung but that the gods do not exist. And if by 'existence' he means 'physical-object existence,' then he is right. But, if the primitive did not mean that gods existed as tables and chairs do, then this objection is irrelevant. Similarly it would miss the point to say that 'god' may be significant for the primitive although there is nothing which corresponds to the word, unless one meant something physical. For only then would the objection stand. For the primitive man there were gods and these gods existed for him: this means that he characterized experience in such a way that 'god' was significantly applicable or – to put it in another way – that he held a mythological Weltanschauung. To cite another example: for Aristotle the world was telic and everything was explained in terms of purpose and function. This interpretation is perfectly compatible with all the facts and nothing could falsify it; the same is true of our modern scientific interpretation of mechanical necessity or the conservation of energy. Now just what is there, besides perhaps pragmatic considerations, which would enable us to choose between these two ways of characterizing the world? As nothing counts against them, they may be called 'non-factual.' The fact is that we *choose* one rather than the other, and the entities which comprise the chosen world-view are thus given meaning and existence: their existence is sanctioned and legislated. They may even be called 'real.' Thus to be real or to exist means to be accepted as real or actual and existent in a given Weltanschauung or conceptual framework. In this sense, except for the existence of physical objects, problems concerning what actually exists are pseudo-problems, for it is we who determine what exists by the way in which we choose to characterize our world. Moreover, the way in which we characterize our world is dependent upon what conceptual framework or Weltanschauung we accept and upon the categories of that Weltanschauung, which in turn determine the concepts.

If what has been said is cogent, then it is illegitimate to ask whether God exists. Unless one mistakenly thinks that God's existence is like the existence of tables and chairs, then one must not ask the question. For, within our religious Weltanschauung, God's existence is guaranteed (which is the same

as being 'taken on faith') and outside the world-view God's existence cannot legitimately be questioned. For to do so would be to deny the very world-view in which 'God' functions. Furthermore, to question God's existence is to presuppose another world-view.

Therefore, if someone asks whether God exists or whether his existence is like that of electrons or numbers or whatever, the answer is simply that God's existence is like God's existence, guaranteed within the religious *Weltanschauung* in precisely the way in which electrons and numbers are guaranteed within physics and mathematics. If the paradigm of factual existence is the existence of tables and chairs, then God does not possess factual existence; but then neither do neutrinos or positrons, numbers or mathematical functions.

But the question still remains: Do religious statements make factual and cognitive claims? To answer this question we must understand what constitutes a factual statement. If to be factually meaningful statements are restricted to statements about physical objects, then religious statements would not be factual; but neither would a large class of scientific statements which deal with theoretical entities. But to call science factually meaningless is self-defeating.

But, one might persist, is it a fact that there is a God; that is: does he exist? To answer this question one must understand that the conceptual framework or *Weltanschauung* which one accepts determines *what one will take as a fact*. A fact, by definition, is that which has actual or real existence; but the claim that something actually or really exists – and this is the crucial point – is determined by some *evidence*. If one claims that it is a fact that Mary has on a red dress, certain factual evidence must be brought forward to support or substantiate the claim. If an historian asserts that the Yankees won the Battle of Gettysburg, he must have reference to some evidence in order to claim that the victory is a fact. Now these particular facts are fairly clear and straightforward. But what about scientific 'facts' or psychological 'facts' or religious 'facts'? Chemists assert that a certain atom has such and such a valence, physicists claim that the tides are influenced by the gravitational pull of the moon, psychiatrists tell their patients that they harbored unconscious hatred toward their mother and sexual love for their father deep in their unconscious, and ministers tell their congregations that God loves and cares for them. How is one to construe these statements? Chemists, physicists, psychiatrists, and ministers all want to say that they are making factual statements. Thus what one realizes is that what is *taken as evidence* in one *Weltanschauung* will not necessarily be accepted as evidence in another or that what constitutes evidence in one conceptual framework is not what constitutes it in another. The fundamental point is this: what *is taken as evidence* depends upon what one believes to exist, or what the conceptual framework which one accepts legislates as existing. The claim that there is a God is factually and cognitively significant *if* one accepts the evidence of a theistic religious world-view, just as to claim that there are force-fields, valences, and the unconscious is factually significant given the evidence of physics, chemistry, and a certain psychological theory. The evidence for the existence of force-fields and neutrinos is of a dif-

ferent kind from the evidence of repression in a mentally ill person, and both differ from the evidence which a religious believer would give for the existence of God. To criticize the evidence for religion from the point of view of science, for instance, is illegitimate, just as it would be illegitimate for religion to demand of science the proof on religious grounds for the existence of neutrinos. Evidence, or what is taken *as* evidence, is dependent upon a Weltanschauung; for evidence depends upon what is taken as existing, and existence is the crux of the problem.

On these principles, one can clearly see what those who deny the existence of God are doing. They are actually denying the theistic religious Weltanschauung by refusing to accept it; thus they are refusing to couple the term 'exists' with the term 'God,' thereby determining that they will not allow God to be 'real' and 'existent' for them, given their alternative conceptual framework. In other words, they are expressing their persuasive prejudice or preference. That this is so is indubitably indicated by the fact that for philosophers like Antony Flew, C. B. Martin, and Kai Nielsen, *nothing is allowed to count for the existence of God.*

Let me make clear my fundamental and crucial point again by citing examples. To say that there is a book on the table is to state a fact if there is evidence that the physical object is where it is said to be. But this sort of evidence will not suffice with neutrinos, repression, or God. To support the claim that these things exist and are real, that statements about them are factual assertions, requires evidence of a radically different sort from the evidence of the senses which substantiates physical object existence. When a physicist says that a neutrino exists and has such and such a function, the evidence for this is not 'direct' or from the senses. To say, similarly, that one has repressed emotion associated with a trauma is not to say that one can perceive either the trauma or the associated repressed emotion. But there is 'indirect evidence' for these 'facts,' and this indirect evidence consists in the fact that these concepts fit into a conceptual framework which has been adopted. Therefore, the claim that God loves mankind is a claim for which very special evidence is needed. For the very evidence which one takes or accepts as counting for or against a statement dealing with such phenomena as God's love, repression, or neutrinos is dependent upon a Weltanschauung or conceptual framework. Neutrinos fit into the physical theory of particle physics just as repression and the unconscious fit into the conceptual framework of Freudian psychology. Similarly, God fits into the theistic religious world-view.

If one does not believe in neutrinos, he will not interpret experience in the way in which a modern physicist will; if a psychologist does not believe in repression, he will not interpret experience as did Freud; and finally, if one does not believe in God, he will not see the world as a meaningful creation of a loving, heavenly Father. For all these interpretations of experience, there is *relevant* evidence, but only evidence which is relevant to a *particular* conceptual framework. To repeat the fundamentally crucial point: what one takes as evidence depends upon what the accepted Weltanschauung has sanctioned

as existing. For this reason, proving that something such as God or neutrinos exists is a pseudo-problem. For those within the world-view the existence is already an accepted fact; for those outside, to ask for proof that such and such exists is illegitimate.

If what I have argued in this paper is correct, there is a straightforward reply to Flew's challenge that religious statements are factually nonsensical and cognitively meaningless. The reply is that what is cognitively and factually meaningful is determined by the relevant evidence and facts which are in turn determined by the *Weltanschauung* or conceptual framework which sanctions existence by the use of its categories, first-order principles, and concepts. Thus religious statements may be said to be factually meaningful *in that* they are determined by the facts and evidence relevant in the religious *Weltanschauung*. Professor Flew and other philosophers may reject the religious world-view as they wish, but they should not argue that religious statements lack cognitivity or factual content. For the very criterion for cognitivity and factuality rests *within* the conceptual framework and cannot be applied from outside it. The way to get religious people to stop being religious is not to argue that their language is cognitively meaningless and factually nonsensical, because key propositions are incapable of falsification.¹ Rather one must *persuade* them to give up their entire world-view. Whether this can be done remains to be seen.

1. See my article 'Science and Religion: Their Logical Similarity,' *Religious Studies*, 5 (1969), 49-68.