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CHAPTER I

Philosophical theology

1.1 INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Between theologians and philosophers there has often been a strange love–hate relationship. On the one hand, philosophers have a fundamental interest in those features of human existence on which theologians reflect, while theologians are very much dependent on the methodological tools which philosophers provide. In fact, as we shall argue below, systematic theology can itself be interpreted as largely a philosophical enterprise. On the other hand, however, philosophers have often demanded that religious believers justify their truth claims by standards of rationality which these claims can never meet to the satisfaction of philosophers, and which many theologians consider to be quite inappropriate to the nature of the claims in question. In their view religious belief must be judged on its own terms and does not require any extraneous philosophical foundations or justifications. This opposition is well expressed by Anthony Kenny:

> Some theologians regard religion as a way of life which can only be understood by participation and therefore cannot be justified to an outsider on neutral rational grounds. Such people must consider any attempt at a philosophical proof of God's existence to be wrong-headed... To me it seems that if belief in the existence of God cannot be rationally justified, there can be no good grounds for adopting any of the traditional monotheistic religions.[1]

In the view of many philosophers, then, theology is so obscurantist as to lack all intellectual respectability, whereas

[1] Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways* (London, 1968), 4.

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many theologians have a deep distrust of philosophers whose intolerable demands are aimed at undermining the faith. The result is that the very term 'philosophical theology' seems to many philosophers and theologians to be a contradiction in terms!

This estrangement between philosophy and theology has been aggravated by a prejudice dating from the Enlightenment, that epistemological issues are central to all intellectual inquiry. The basic issue is that of finding an epistemological justification for the claims which are made. The primary question to be faced is: 'How do you know?', and philosophers and theologians seem to differ with respect to the answers they consider appropriate and adequate.[2] Much recent work in philosophical theology breaks this stalemate by following Wittgenstein in 'a refusal to make philosophy the provider of foundations and justifications'.[3] The task of philosophical theology is not to provide proofs of the truth (or falsity) of the Christian faith, or to find neutral rational grounds on which to justify accepting (or rejecting) the Christian, or any other faith. Instead the philosophical theologian asks semantic and hermeneutical questions about the meaning and interpretation of the faith: what are the implications and presuppositions of the fundamental concepts of the faith, and how could the claims of the faith be interpreted in a coherent and relevant way? In this sense philosophical theology has an essential contribution to make in the theological quest of faith seeking understanding.

In this book I will try to explain this view about the task of philosophical theology, and to illustrate it with an inquiry into the implications and presuppositions of one of the central claims

[2] Usually these answers presuppose some version of 'foundationalism'. For criticism of the foundationalist paradigm, see, for example, N. Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1976), 24ff, A. Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', in Plantinga and Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN, 1983), 16–93, D. Z. Phillips, *Faith after Foundationalism* (London, 1988), and from a non-religious point of view, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ, 1979) and Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford, 1983).

[3] D. Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London, 1986), 3. See also Norman Malcolm, 'The groundlessness of belief', in Malcolm, *Thought and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY, 1977), 199–216.

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of the Christian faith, namely that God is a personal being with whom we may live in a personal relation. The first two chapters will deal with the methodological issues regarding the relation between theology and philosophical inquiry, while chapters 3 to 6 will be devoted to an analysis of the concept of a personal God.

In the present chapter I will discuss the nature of philosophical theology and the way it is related to hermeneutics and to confessional theology or dogmatics. Chapter 2 will deal with a basic presupposition of philosophical theology, namely that coherent theo-logy or God-talk is possible. In an important sense this presupposition is sometimes questioned by theologians on the grounds that God is the 'Wholly Other' who transcends the field of application of all our human concepts. All attempts at saying something about God can only be negative or dialectical or paradoxical. The demand of philosophical theology that we should interpret the claims of the faith in a logically coherent way is therefore illegitimate. I will argue that, although this attitude to philosophical theology is both misguided and self-defeating, it does point towards the essentially metaphorical nature of religious thought as something which philosophical theology should take seriously.

The second half of the book will illustrate this view on the nature of philosophical theology by means of an extended analysis of some key aspects of the religious claim that we as human persons can live our lives in a personal relationship with God. This claim presupposes that both we and God are persons in relation to each other. This in turn entails that both God and human persons are free agents in relation to each other. Does this mean that we are free and able to resist the grace of God and that God is free and able to do evil in relation to us? These two questions will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Chapter 5 will deal with the relation between divine and human agency, and especially the so-called doctrine of double agency according to which God can act through the things that human agents do. It is clear that the issues raised in this discussion of divine and human freedom and agency have important implications for the traditional problem of theodicy: how can evil and suffering be reconciled with the love of God? Chapter 6

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discusses the nature of this question and the way in which it has usually been answered in the Christian tradition. Special attention will be paid to the reasons why theodicy arguments often appear morally insensitive to those who suffer and therefore fail to offer them any consolation.

In an epilogue, I will summarize briefly what light our reflections on talk of a personal God throw on the issues raised at the beginning regarding the relationship between theology and philosophical inquiry. I will argue that, although reaching theological conclusions requires more than philosophical reflection, systematic theology is unable to deal with theological issues like those discussed in this book without implicitly or explicitly making use of the tools of the philosopher. In the end, systematic theology remains to a large extent a philosophical enterprise.

1.2 CONCEPTUAL RECOLLECTION

When the first grammar book of the Castilian language was presented to Queen Isabella of Castile, her response was to ask what use it was to fluent speakers of Castilian, since it told them nothing that they did not know already. Although in a sense it was true that they knew the grammar of their language, there was another sense in which they did not know it. Their intuitive ability to construct grammatically correct Castilian sentences showed that they effortlessly observed a system of grammatical rules. But from this it by no means follows that they could effortlessly or with an effort say what these rules were. The ability to do something correctly, in this case speak grammatically, is very different from and does not necessarily involve the ability to say how it should be done. P. F. Strawson uses this example[4] to illustrate how philosophical inquiry is aimed at finding out things which we know all along. Thus people are able to think and to argue logically even when they have never heard of logic. In reply to a remark like that of Queen Isabella, one could point out that this sort of philosophical inquiry has a

[4] P. F. Strawson, 'Different conceptions of analytical philosophy', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 35 (1973), 803.

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twofold use. On the one hand, it has a constructive use in supplying explicit insight into thought forms which we would otherwise only master intuitively. On the other hand, it also has a therapeutic use in helping us to sort out conceptual dilemmas and logical mistakes in our thinking. Let us examine the nature of this kind of philosophical reflection on the forms of thought with which we are in a sense already familiar. After examining the form this reflection takes with such diverse philosophers as Plato, the followers of Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the implications which this has for the way philosophers read texts, we will try in the following sections of this chapter to determine whose thought forms are the object of philosophical reflection, and whether this kind of reflection is innovative or merely descriptive. In conclusion we will see what this implies for the nature of philosophical theology as a reflection on the faith, and how this is related to the kind of reflection characteristic of confessional theology or dogmatics.

It is of course not a new idea that philosophy tries to find out things which we all know all along. Thus Plato let Meno ask of Socrates:

> But in what way, Socrates, will you search for a thing of which you are entirely ignorant? For by what mark which may discover it will you look for it when you know none of the marks that distinguish it? Or, if you should not fail of meeting with it, how will you discern it, when met with, to be the very thing you were in search of, and knew nothing of before?[5]

Plato tried to solve this puzzle by means of his view that philosophy is a kind of recollection (anamnesis): the philosopher tries to recall the vision of the ideas which his soul enjoyed during its pre-existence in the realm of ideas, and which has now been blurred on account of the soul being incarcerated in a body. For our purposes three questions are important with respect to this platonic theory: What is the nature of concepts? How does recollection take place? In what sense does this recollection lead to progress in our thought?

For Plato concepts are memory images of the ideas. In our

[5] Plato, *Meno* 80d.

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bodily state these memories have become so vague that we have to make a special effort to recall them. This kind of *conceptual recollection* is a task for philosophers. How does this take place? Since for Plato the world of sense experience has been fashioned as an imperfect copy of the ideas, it can serve as a mnemonic to remind us of the ideas. For this reason the platonic philosopher is the very opposite of Rodin's *Le Penseur* who sits contemplating with his eyes closed. Platonic recollection is done with your eyes open, looking at the world in order to be reminded of the ideas. It follows that there are two ways of looking at the empirical world. We can look at the world either in order to learn something about *it*, or in order to be reminded of the *ideas*. In the first case we extend our knowledge of the world of experience. In the second case we extend our explicit knowledge of the ideas and in this way become explicitly aware of our concepts as mental representations of the ideas.

Progress in philosophy consists in extending our explicit knowledge of the eternal ideas. The philosopher achieves this to the extent that he manages to form ideal concepts in the sense of perfect mental representations of the ideas. In this way philosophy aims at extending our insight into essentially immutable objects. This has a constructive purpose in extending our insight into the eternal ideas, as well as a therapeutic value in helping us to improve our conceptual forms in the direction of the eternal ideal.

In an interesting essay[6] R. M. Hare also defends the view that philosophy could be described as a kind of recollection. However, in doing so he tries to demythologize the platonic theory along more or less Wittgensteinian lines. Hare explains his view with the help of the following example:

Suppose that we are sitting at dinner and discussing how a certain dance is danced. Let us suppose that the dance in question is one requiring the participation of a number of people – say one of the Scottish reels. And let us suppose that we have a dispute about what happens at a particular point in the dance; and that, in order to settle it, we decide to dance the dance after dinner and find out. We have to

[6] R. M. Hare, 'Philosophical discoveries', in Hare, *Essays on Philosophical Method* (London, 1971), 19ff.

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imagine that there is among us a sufficiency of people who know, or say they know, how to dance the dance – in the sense of 'know' in which one may know how to do something without being able to *say* how it is done.[7]

Interpreting conceptual recollection on the analogy of this example suggests a number of significant differences from Plato's theory.

The first important difference concerns the nature of concepts. Here concepts are no longer seen as mental representations but rather as mental capacities, that is, capacities to perform certain mental activities.[8] Thus the concept of red is not a mental representation of redness, but the ability to distinguish things that are red from things that are not; the concept of 'I' is the ability to distinguish myself from everything else; the concept of identity is the ability to see when one thing is the same as another; and the concept of negation is the ability to see when one thing is not the same as another. Since we usually use language in exercising these capacities, it can also be said that someone has mastered a concept if he is able to use the relevant word or expression or construction correctly. In the words of Peter Geach:

It will be a *sufficient* condition for James's having the concept of *so-and-so* that he should have mastered the intelligent use (including the use in made-up sentences) of a word for *so-and-so* in some language. Thus: if somebody knows how to use the English word 'red', he has a concept of red; if he knows how to use the first-person pronoun, he has a concept of *self*; if he knows how to use the negative construction in some language, he has a concept of negation.[9]

Furthermore, thinking and talking resemble dancing not only in being activities, but also in being rule-guided. Hence conceptual recollection is aimed not merely at recalling how these activities are performed, but also at how they should be performed. In Hare's example the dancers tried to recall the rules which they were able to apply intuitively when dancing. Similarly, in Strawson's example, the Castilian grammarians

[7] Ibid., 22.
[8] For a more detailed comparison between these two views on the nature of concepts, see chapter 3 of my *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry* (London, 1981).
[9] Peter Geach, *Mental Acts* (London, 1957), 12.

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were recalling the grammatical rules which Castilians were able to apply intuitively when talking Castilian, and logicians try to recall the rules which we all apply intuitively when arguing logically. In this sense philosophical reflection is aimed at recalling the rules which constitute the exercise of our conceptual capacities.

A further significant difference between the views of Hare and Plato on the nature of concepts has to do with their origin. While Plato supposed that as philosophers we are trying to remember something we learned in a former life, Hare argues that 'what we are actually remembering is what we learned on our mothers' knees, and cannot remember learning'.[10] Our conceptual forms are not acquired through experience in some pre-existent state, but through the process of socialization by which we inherit all aspects of our culture. This in turn implies that concepts do not represent timeless essential forms, but are in fact aspects of our culture which are in principle subject to historical change and cultural variation.

Like that of Plato, Hare's kind of recollection is performed with open eyes. In this he follows the Wittgensteinian injunction: 'Don't think. Look!' In trying to recall how a certain activity should be performed, we look at the way in which people in fact perform it. Thus we are reminded of the way the dance should be danced by looking at the way it is in fact done, and we are reminded of the way in which our conceptual capacities should be exercised by looking at the way people use words in order to exercise them. Here ordinary language usage functions as mnemonic for philosophical recollection. As with Plato, we can here also distinguish two ways of looking: in order to see what is being done and in order to recollect how it should be done. Hare[11] explains this distinction by comparing the way the dancers in his example look at the performance of the dance in order to be reminded of the rules according to which the dance should be danced, with the way a cultural anthropologist observes a dance in some primitive tribe in order to give an empirical description of how the dance is done. The anthro-

[10] Hare, 'Philosophical discoveries', 37.
[11] Ibid., 25ff.

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pologist describes how a particular dance is in fact being performed by a specific group of dancers on a specific occasion, while the dancers are trying to recollect how it should be danced correctly on all occasions. The dancers' recollection presupposes that they know how to dance the dance and are able to recognize a correct performance when they see it. The anthropologist's description does not necessarily presuppose that he or she has these abilities. Similarly, we could distinguish two ways of looking at ordinary language: in order to give an empirical description of the way people talk in fact, and in order to recollect the way conceptual skills should be exercised correctly. Thus, although philosophers do reflect on empirical data, their reflection is aimed at recollection and not at an empirical description of the data. Hare points out that 'this perhaps explains the odd fact that analytical enquiries seem often to start by collecting empirical data about word-uses, but to end with apparently *a priori* conclusions'.[12]

The difference between Hare and Plato on the nature of concepts entails a difference not only about the nature of philosophical recollection, but also about the nature of progress in philosophy. If our concepts do not represent timeless essential forms, as Plato held, but are aspects of our culture which are in principle subject to historical change and cultural variation, then progress in philosophy is not limited to the extension of our explicit insight into the structure of our thinking. The philosopher can also participate in the cultural process by suggesting possible ways of improving our conceptual forms. Thus Hare points out[13] that his dancers do not merely try to recollect the rules constituting the way the dance has always been performed. They also practise 'innovative dancing' in which suggestions are made for changing the rules. Philosophy does not necessarily leave anything the way it is, but can also generate improvements in our thinking. In section 1.3 below we will have to investigate what is to count as an improvement.

Hans-Georg Gadamer is a very different kind of philosopher from Plato and Hare. Nevertheless, many of the points raised

[12] Ibid., 32.

[13] Ibid., 33.

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above with reference to Plato and Hare are also characteristic of Gadamer's thinking. Without denying the differences, I would like to point out the similarities, since these are instructive for the view of philosophy as conceptual recollection.

In many respects Gadamer's hermeneutical theory[14] can be seen as a reaction to the views of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. According to these two thinkers the aim of textual interpretation is to reproduce as accurately as possible the intention of the author of the text. This is only possible if we interpret what the author says in the light of the historical and cultural situation and the conceptual presuppositions of the author. Hence we can only recover the meaning of the text (i.e. the authorial intention) by means of a disciplined reconstruction of the historical context in which it originated. In order to achieve this, interpreters have to eliminate the conceptual presuppositions and prejudices of their own cultural and historical situation and adopt those of the author whose text they are interpreting. In this way they have to negate the temporal distance between themselves and the author and imaginatively become contemporaneous with the latter. It is clear that for Schleiermacher and Dilthey the interpreter's own historical situation can only have a negative value in the process of interpretation. It is the source of the interpreter's own historical prejudices and distortions, which block a clear understanding of the intentional meaning of the text. For this reason hermeneutics requires that interpreters should systematically neglect their own historicity.

Gadamer directs his criticism against this methodical alienation of interpreters from their own historicity, since for him this not only entails a mistaken view concerning the role of the interpreter and the nature of the interpretative enterprise, but also overlooks the significance of the interpreter's prejudices. The interpreter is reduced to the essentially situationless and non-historical subject of neo-Kantian transcendental philo-

[14] For Gadamer's views, see his *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, 1960), English translation: *Truth and Method* (London, 1975), and Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge (Berkeley, CA, 1977). Linge's introduction to the latter volume provides an excellent summary of Gadamer's theory.

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