

# **New Bases for a Philosophy of God**

*Thomas V. Daly, S.J.*

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*(This is the first part of a paper on AUTHENTIC THEISM to be delivered on 1.4.77 at a JTC<sup>1</sup> Staff Seminar, in which I propose the following theses, without attempting to make too much of a distinction between the second and third:*

- (1) The philosophical insights I have come across in recent years can be very helpful towards an understanding, an affirmation, and an appreciation, of God. Authentic philosophy grows into praise of God.*
- (2) Philosophy as an autonomous subject, practised by authentic thinkers, has nothing to lose in any way by an acceptance of God. Theism is not, as is so widely supposed, a mental suicide but a mental resuscitation. God is not a deus ex machina.*
- (3) The influence of religion, grace, the theological virtues, or theology, is in the direction of supporting a philosophy of God by helping the natural powers of the mind to develop their full potential and adhere to their intrinsic norm, so that even from a human point of view the religious person should normally become far more authentic because of his religion, rather than less so.)*

The first of my theses is expressed in a personal way, partly because it may thus find a resonance here or there among my hearers, and partly because the only human authenticity I can recognize is that which I have so far managed to discover in myself or others.

I put aside then, for a start, all questions of revealed religion and of theology proper, and ask whether any light has been thrown on the notion of God, or support given to the affirmation of God, by recent discoveries (or re-discoveries) in the field of philosophy itself, especially those that have managed, during the last fifteen or twenty years, to penetrate into the mind of the present speaker.

During that period I have gone through a liberating experience in philosophy, not unlike that of scripture scholars, who have seen new horizons opening to them, or liturgists, whose years of patient scholarship have suddenly started to bear fruit.

Not that I was cramped, as some were at other times and places, by my first studies in philosophy. But it is liberating to go beyond what one had thought to be the boundaries of such studies.

I found, when overseas, how fortunate I had been to study the metaphysics of knowledge and the philosophy of God under the guidance of one who had been inspired by Marechal, and who exercised his brilliant and exigent mind as much on the classical writers as on us, his students.

But Geny, too, and our introductory metaphysics opened much up to us, and the struggle, along with Hoenen, to discover the conditions of being an *ens unum per se* showed me how tough a philosophical problem could be and how essential it was to examine it in the light of all we can find out from science.

In ethics, too, there was excitement, stimulated by the students ahead of us more than by Cathrein, with a historical controversy over the morality of taking interest on loans that taught us the importance of context, with Edward Elter's exposition of a theory of obligation that rejected all

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<sup>1</sup> [JTC is Jesuit Theological College where Fr Daly was on the faculty.]

traces of voluntarism, and with the fresh and enthusiastic views coming from American Jesuits in the now-defunct periodical *Social Order*.

Still, even a happy and enriching childhood can be followed by further growth. So I would like to mention some of the discoveries that have come to me since then, to reflect on their influence on my mental attitude to the question of God, and to suggest how a theistic philosophy can be humanly more enlightening, deeper and richer than an agnostic or atheistic one. These discoveries seem to me to build up a philosophy that is more authentic, that is, a view of basic realities that is genuine, mature, healthy, well-developed, and many-sided, as distinct from a world-view that might be under-developed and naive, one-sided, misguided, feigned, wrongly based or confined to appearances.

I found the new moves liberating in that they gave a flexibility and a vitality that had been missing in the philosophy that we had studied. The centre of the stage had been taken up by theses and definitions, not to mention syllogistic proofs, and these had become wooden and limited in scope and application. In their place we were brought to the very source of definitions and a laboratory for constructing theses to cover a much wider range of basic issues.

One way of formulating the break-through would be as an extension of the old distinction of “*exercite*” from “*signate*”, that was being called upon with increasing insistence. Apart from the things I say, or see, or imagine, or want, there is the saying and the seeing and the imagining and the wanting, and indeed there is me saying and seeing and imagining and wanting. This act of saying is there whatever be the signification of the words said — even if what I am saying is “I am not saying anything” or “I do not exist”. Augustine and Descartes, of course, had argued impressively in this way, but there was room for recognizing<sup>2</sup> consciousness as what is given in this way, and for noting that it is prior to any formulations that may be based on it, just as the experience of seeing a rainbow or hearing a possum is prior to any proposition or theory we may form about the rainbow or the possum. Statements based on consciousness become liable to error or exaggeration in much the same way as statements about rainbows or possums, but consciousness is opened up to us as a rich field for investigations that must be carried out just as intelligently, patiently and carefully as the investigations of science, so that one may no longer conjure up “facts of introspection”, just as one may no longer rest ultimately in the “obvious facts” about a table that were demolished by Eddington.

Thus one can gradually become aware of one’s own acts of understanding, and note that they are prior to personal acts of formulation, expression, definition, or theorising, which one experiences as flowing from that understanding and dominated by it. Acts of assent, too can be experienced, and experienced as dependent on personal acts of assessment that are by no means arbitrary, while at the same time being anything but mechanical, stodgily methodical or reducible to standard forms of logic.

Many modern philosophers, theologians and communicators have brought charges of tyranny and corruption against definitions, logic, systems, method, and even science and speech itself, and many of the charges can be sustained. But tyranny is not always cured by tyrannicide. Democracy is a better answer, and this can sometimes emerge from the grass roots of society - an emergence of a large number of bearers of power in the place of the one or two who abused it. Logic has to be renewed by returning to its sources and then entering a vigorous period of growth. Definitions have to be rethought and new insights formulated just as carefully. New theories have to be formulated

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<sup>2</sup> [The original typescript has ‘recongizing’ which is clearly a misprint.]

and tested, and new aspects of the world brought under control by theory, if the old theories and sciences produce fruit that is turning wooden or that provides few of the vitamins currently in need.

When the priority of understanding over concepts and definitions is clearly recognized whole areas in the history of philosophy have to be rewritten, and philosophy is released from its internment in an ivory tower and the inbreeding that was consequent on this.

But understanding itself would not occur without wonder, inquiry, questioning. This is the energy behind all our mental activity, as all of us have experienced and as most of us have shown in one way or another in our writings, although not all of us have mentioned it explicitly, or given it the force that was acknowledged by Aristotle and presented so forcefully by Collingwood. This all-embracing wonder is the key to all genuinely intellectual activity, so that it is truly the acting intellect, the *intellectus agens* that St. Thomas put in the same key role, though his arguments for it were of a more metaphysical nature.

Teaching can no longer be described as the presentation of a truth, or even as the provision of an appropriate set of data. It becomes an attempt to stimulate wonder, a vigorous attempt to grasp intelligently just how much the student already understands, and the selection of a varied range of appropriate elements that might here and now enable him to make the new acts of understanding that are still required.

Common sense is found to be an exercise of intelligence that is far removed from the realm of spontaneous, even if well-trained, sensations to which it is sometimes assigned. It differs from science not by lacking understanding, but by its practical and present intent, its limited range of interest and its healthy lack of respect for the jargon and the precision of expression that do, however, turn out to be necessary when we start exploring areas that are largely unfamiliar.

Strangely enough, the field of consciousness itself turns out to be part of this unfamiliar world. Sensations and emotions are commonly acknowledged to belong to it, so that for many the paradigm example of a conscious experience is the experience of pain. There is a liberation in the realization that consciousness comes to us just as directly in the higher fields of understanding and affirmation and self-commitment.

As regards verification of what we hold or say, the most startling discovery for me was the realization that proofs of themselves never necessitate assent. The half-way house to this is the discovery that you can never force people to an assent in natural theology (or in philosophy, or in religious matters, etc.) by means of a logical proof as you can in mathematics. The second half of the journey has been completed when you have found out that you can never force assent in mathematics either. A few years of teaching mathematics in forms two and three turned out to be a most valuable element in my philosophical formation!

The insufficiency of logical proof was insisted on by Newman in his *Grammar of Assent* where he introduced the term "illative sense" as a name for the power of judgment that enables assents to be given reasonably and responsibly in instances where logic is inappropriate, as it so often is.

In the case of logic, too, and indeed in the parallel cases of methods, systems, reason, rationalism, the proper remedy is not expulsion, but the introduction of peers and companions. Even if proof does not necessitate, proof is often necessary and cannot be dispensed with. But the validity of proof itself, even of the simplest form of syllogism, depends upon the personal grasp, by the investigator concerned, of the sufficiency of the evidence for assent. Until that occurs the syllogism is worth little more than a few sounds in the air or marks on paper.

Another way of discovering this is by searching for first principles — those propositions that can be used as the premises of syllogism, though not themselves requiring syllogistic proof.

Instead of asking which propositions belong to this select list, we can ask what could make them believable. It eventually becomes clear that far more propositions can be so justified than was previously thought possible. “First principles” can be collected freely. They are not a<sup>3</sup> privileged and limited set. The grounds for assent are not still more propositions, but a range of data, with questions and insights that have to be tailored to the existing state of knowledge in the person working towards that assent.

The mention of questions reminds us that in science verification is not a matter of a single look or a single touch or taste, but of multiple and cleverly devised investigations. A similar reliance on a large mass of data is the key to many other types of genuine affirmation.

After verification a reasonable person can give assent, and what he assents to he is confident that he knows. So the word knowledge is often used for a contact with the real facts, a possession of the truth. In this sense it is arrived at through a co-ordinated set of mental activities, which can be very different from one another and yet work together to form an articulated whole.

Unfortunately the approach of many of our text-books has been to concentrate on what is common to these different activities, instead of studying their complementarity and co-ordination. To say that sensation is knowledge and understanding is knowledge and to seek light on knowledge by asking what sensation and understanding have in common, is like seeking to throw light on what a human being is by studying what is common to bones and brain and nerves, without much interest in what is peculiar to each of them and how they manage to work together.

When one has identified in one’s own consciousness the various components in the knowing process, and seen their distinctions and their structure, one is in a position to approach with confidence a great many perennial issues that are otherwise full of confusion: Knowledge is no longer the result of a single activity, like looking, but of an articulated process. The fact that the distinction has often been glossed over may be due to the habit of doing one’s post mortems on items of knowledge that have been stored in our morgue for many years, instead of those whose freshness is still strikingly with us.

In order to arrive at the truth one has to be objective, that is, to avoid subjective distortion of one’s opinions by desires or fears. Objectivity in this sense can be more easily secured and tested when the anatomy of the activities contributing to knowledge is known. Objectivity consists in the proper exercise of each of these mental processes. It should not be thought of as belonging to just one of these activities, or as arising out of some special power distinct from the ordinary processes of knowing. Thus the rules for objectivity are given by Lonergan as “be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible”. Attentiveness is the virtue of sensation, intelligence the virtue of understanding and the formulation of hypotheses, reasonableness the virtue of judgment and assent, and responsibility the virtue of choice or decision. More briefly still the principle is summed up thus: “Objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity”.

We can, of course, be objective (or fail to be objective) about ourselves or things that are in our own minds. Not only external objects are concerned. When we ask whether we can achieve objectivity with regard to external objects the well-known question of the bridge arises: How can I reach out from the knowledge I have in my mind to external objects that are quite independent of my mind? How can a bridge be built from mind to thing?

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<sup>3</sup> [‘a’ added to the original typescript in Daly’s own hand.]

This question is based on the false presupposition that I can have knowledge of myself or of things in my mind before I can know truths external to the mind. But in fact knowledge of truth can be had before we make any distinction between self and object. The distinction between these will be an extra item of knowledge with its own range of relevant evidence, and it will give us a distinct object at the same time, and in the same judgment, as it gives us knowledge that can be said to be restricted to our own mind. If you know A and B jointly and confusedly you can know them separately only by means of the judgment “A is not B”, and in this judgment A is not known as distinct from B before B is known as distinct from A. So the problem of the bridge dissolves, to be replaced by the problem of how to dig a moat. Moats are not terribly easy to dig, but they can be dug in the same way as any other sort of trench or channel.

A rather similar question is how we can know or get in touch with reality. This leads to the question as to just what is meant by reality. There is a temptation to say that the answer is obvious — reality is what we see before us. When mirages and optical illusions are mentioned refuge is sometimes taken in the sense of touch — that, at least, can be trusted. But this too has its weaknesses. Strangely, we find that what people basically mean when they put in a demand for reality is that reality is what can stand up to persistent intelligent questioning. It follows that the criterion, too, of reality is to be found in this same activity of questioning. Thus the centrality of wonder, inquiry, the rigorously questioning attitude, to the very notion of reality is implicit in commonsense demands and in much philosophical activity, while the inadequacy of theories that rely merely on seeing or touching becomes apparent.

I will close my long list of liberating views with a reflection of a more metaphysical nature — the inadequacy of any created cause, not because it needs some special push to act, but because it needs something on which to act, and the provision of any particular object for its activity and appropriate opportunity to act depends upon action by, or lack of hindrance from, many other created agents, with ramifications that could reach through the whole of previous time. So the effect of any agent is not due to that agent alone but to the (providential) cause of the detailed set of circumstances in which it acts. These circumstances do not determine the action of the cause itself, though they do, of course, limit the types of opportunity available for action.

So much for the new conditions of authenticity. What openings do they provide for a fresh approach to our philosophy of God?