

THE PUZZLE OF  
GOD



Peter Vardy

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PETER VARDY

# *The Puzzle of God*

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To my wife, Anne  
– again

With thanks for enduring patience, tolerance, support, love –  
and five children!

*Amor vincit omnia*

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## *LETTER TO THE READER*

Dear Reader

Poets, musicians, philosophers and saints have, throughout the centuries, sought to communicate the reality of God to the world. Today we live in a rational age and their voices are muted. Still the eternal questions remain to challenge us and to mock the shortness of our brief lives.

In this book I have tried to present, clearly and simply, the main features of many of the central debates concerning God's reality and how God is to be understood. No answers are given – rather the aim is to help you, the reader, to think through the problems for yourself. Wherever specialised terms are used, they are defined so that no previous knowledge or reading is required.

The search for truth is never a comfortable one. It is always easier and more secure not to think and to remain content with our own certainties. Yet, whether we are believers or non-believers, doubts and problems about our own positions creep into our minds, however much we may try to avoid thinking about them. If there is a creator God, surely He has created our minds, and so the search for truth should not lead us away from Him. If there is no creator God, we have only ourselves on whom to depend. The search for truth and meaning is one of the few things that endure in a transitory world. As the book of Proverbs says when talking about wisdom:

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*Receive my instruction and not silver;  
and knowledge rather than choice gold.  
For wisdom is better than rubies;  
and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared  
to it.*

(Proverbs 8:10-11)

This book is a small attempt to help in the search for understanding. It is a search that will never be completely achieved, but this does not mean that the attempt must not be made. I hope you find the quest as exciting and worthwhile as I do.

My thanks are due to my wife Anne for her great patience in commenting on the draft manuscript and for her help in proof-reading. I am also grateful to Philip Gudgeon SJ, Sarah Allen and Gwyneth Little for their comments. Also I owe a real debt to the undergraduate and postgraduate students at Heythrop College, the smallest College of London University, where I lecture. I am also indebted to those studying for the Masters degree in the philosophy of religion at the Institute of Education, London. Their open-minded search for truth as well as their friendship have meant and still mean a great deal to me.

Peter Vardy  
St. Clair  
Devon.

Heythrop College  
University of London  
Advent 1989 to Epiphany 1990

## ONE

### *Unicorns, Numbers and God*

1. (a) I believe in God.  
(b) I do not believe in God.
2. (a) I believe in unicorns.  
(b) I do not believe in unicorns.

We all know what a unicorn is. If we met one walking down our local High Street we would recognise it. We might, of course, have some doubts as to whether it was a real unicorn. We might well suspect that it was a trick of some sort, and might imagine that what we saw was a horse which had had a spiral horn somehow grafted onto its forehead. However, there would be tests that we could apply, and these might well include finding out where the animal came from. It may well be that we think that meeting a unicorn is so unlikely that no tests would satisfy us – in this case we would be sceptical about the possibility of unicorns. We would agree about what a unicorn would be like – but we would simply deny that there were such animals!

Imagine that you have a friend who is useless at mathematics. As soon as he sees a mathematical symbol, his mind goes blank. He has no notion of the basic elements of mathematics, although he is otherwise intelligent. Imagine that you try to explain to him what a prime number is. You might say: "A prime number is any whole number that is divisible by itself and one and by no other number." You might go on to give

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examples and to tell him that the numbers 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19 and so on are prime numbers and that there are an infinite number of prime numbers. The person to whom you are explaining might, however, not be able to make anything of all this talk – to him, prime numbers are simply not real. They are a curious idea used by mathematicians, but they are simply irrelevant and make no sense to him. Finally he might say to you: “You say prime numbers are real and that they exist. All right – show me one.” You will probably be puzzled by this – you can’t put him in a car and drive him to see the prime number 17. Prime numbers certainly exist, but you cannot go to visit them. The prime number 17, or any other prime number, is not sitting in a particular place. The very fact that he asks you to show him a prime number means that he has not understood what a prime number is.

We understand what unicorns are and most of us accept that they do not exist. We understand what prime numbers are and most of us accept that prime numbers exist – albeit in a different way to unicorns. We understand that trees, love, atoms and evil exist – but in different ways. What, however, does it mean to talk of God existing?

The word God has been the most fought-over and debated word in the history of ideas. For centuries it dominated the thought of the most intelligent people on this planet. Even today, talk about God is guaranteed to raise the passions. Religion is an emotive subject, and around the world families and communities are divided from each other because of different religious beliefs. All too often these beliefs are passionately held, yet all too rarely do those holding the beliefs stop to think about what it is that they believe.

Even within a particular community people will differ about what the word God means. Many people have a somewhat childish idea of God, seeing Him as an old man with a white beard sitting somewhere above the clouds. If we

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talk to someone else about God, we will normally find considerable differences between the two of us, and examining these differences with an open mind can help each of us to be clear about what we do and do not believe.

Philosophy is partly concerned with a search for truth and understanding. In this book we will be taking this search seriously. There is no hidden agenda, no attempt to provide you with the "right" answer. Rather, the aim is to help you, the reader, to think through what God means and then to go on to explore the consequences of holding this view. Whatever view you hold is going to be fraught with difficulties and complications. Some people are nervous of philosophy because they do not think it is right to think about or to examine their faith. However, most religions make a claim to truth, and so this claim should be taken seriously. Any religion that seeks truth should not be frightened of the search for greater understanding. Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it this way:

He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity and end by loving himself better than all.

If we refuse to seek the truth, if we retreat behind our own certainties because we are frightened that they cannot bear examination, then we are likely to become increasingly intolerant of others. In a world where there are many different religious systems, the search for truth and understanding must be a worthy one. In previous centuries, religious wars were used by one religious grouping to impose their beliefs on others. We should have moved beyond that stage now (although events such as the condemnation to death of the author Salman Rushdie make us ask whether we have), and we should be able to sit down with friends who have different

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religious beliefs and reason our way towards greater mutual understanding.

In the pages that follow we shall look at four different ideas of what it means to talk about God. All these ideas are persuasive, all are influential. Some have an ancient history, others have their roots in the past but have been more recently brought up to date. All are credible, all suffer from disadvantages. In exploring these different ideas of God we will be exploring the very heart of religion and, by so doing, we may be able to come closer to the goal of our own search for ultimate truth.

## TWO

### *What is Truth?*

One way of learning to swim is to be thrown into the deep end! We are going straight into a discussion which is probably going to be at the heart of philosophy and theology in the next century, yet few people are aware of the issues. It really revolves around the question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus – “What is truth?” This is tremendously important – particularly when we start to consider what it means to say that a religious or a moral claim is true.

To understand the issues, we are going to have to think about how language is used. We learn language at our parents’ knees. Very young children have an innate ability to master language. This mastery is one of the key elements in human development. Early man developed an ability to wield tools, but as the first inarticulate grunts developed into a means of communication, so it became possible for individuals to co-operate towards some common end. Language is a public affair. It is the way in which we communicate ideas, aspirations, truths, objectives and insights. We use language to tell others of our needs, feelings and intentions.

Language is not static – it is developing all the time. New words are introduced and the meanings of old words change. The meaning of the term, a “gay young man” a hundred years ago was entirely different to what it is today. Even thirty years ago, a billion in Britain meant a million million. Today Britain has adopted the United States convention and a billion means a thousand million – a substantial difference. Terms



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like nuclear disarmament, embryo research, charged particles, acid rain or video recorder simply did not exist until recently, as the ideas they represented were not there to be expressed.

Language is rich and it is dynamic. It expresses truth – and, of course, it can also express falsity. However, what does it mean for language to express truth? Take a simple statement like: “Murder is wrong.” What does it mean to say that this statement is true? Most people would probably agree with this view, but that does not mean that we understand what would be necessary to make the statement true.

There are two basic theories of truth, or ways of understanding truth:

### **The correspondence theory of truth**

The correspondence theory of truth maintains that a statement is true if it corresponds to a state of affairs which is independent of language and of the society in which we live. Someone who holds to a correspondence theory of truth is today called a *realist*.

Realists maintain that reality is separate from our language and that our language stretches out to a reality that is external to us and tries to express it accurately. Sometimes we make errors – for instance, people once believed that the world was flat. This view was mistaken, those who hold to the correspondence theory will maintain, because the world is *not* flat. The error lay in people thinking that the claim to flatness correctly represented the world, when it did not.

The realist will maintain that a statement is *either* true *or* false. This is to affirm *bivalence*. Bivalence means that a statement is either true or it is false – whether or not we have evidence of this truth or falsity. A statement is true if it successfully corresponds to some reality. Language seeks to

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express this reality and sometimes, as in the case of talk of the world being flat, it does so falsely. To talk of truth is to talk of success or of an achievement – it is to claim that language correctly corresponds to the reality that lies beyond it.

On this basis, the statement, “I am sitting on a chair” is true if and only if what I am sitting on is a chair. This seems obvious, but it need not be. In some societies, they may have no idea of chairs – they may never sit down. We could easily imagine a society in which everyone lay down to have meals and the alternatives were between standing and lying down. If someone from such a society were shown a chair she would not know what it was, and might instead regard it as a thing which one stands on in order to make oneself higher – in other words, a form of pedestal. Truth, it might be claimed, is expressed in language and language is used in different ways in different societies. It is this claim that leads onto the alternative conception of truth.

### **The coherence theory of truth**

The coherence theory of truth maintains that a statement is true if it coheres with other true statements. Someone who holds a coherence theory of truth is today called an *anti-realist*.

Imagine a jigsaw. One piece of a jigsaw belongs or is correct only if it fits in with other pieces. Jigsaw pieces are not isolated, they are part of a dynamic whole. All the definitions in a dictionary are in fact circular, since they are all expressed in words, and each of those words is defined by other words. There is no word that cannot be defined using other words.

The coherence theory of truth says that the same sort of principle applies to language. Language is the jigsaw into which words and expressions have to fit. A word that does not fit in does not make any sense. The statement about the world being flat, the anti-realist claims, would once have been

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true because it formed an integral part of the way in which the world was then seen. It was once true, but is so no longer.

According to this theory, as I have said before, a statement is true if it coheres or fits in with other true statements. Take the case of morality. If you are a Roman Catholic, then the statement, "artificial Birth Control is wrong" will be true for you. (You may not, of course, choose to obey this moral rule, but it is nevertheless a rule which forms part of the Catholic way of life.) Similarly, it is true that you have a duty to go to Mass on Sunday and on Holy Days of obligation. If you are a Hindu, it is true that you must respect cows. If you are a Muslim, then it is true that you have an obligation to pray facing towards Mecca and, so far as this is possible, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during your lifetime.

What makes these statements true is that they are part of or fit in with a particular form of life. Within the Catholic, Hindu or Islamic worlds, within their different forms of life, these statements are true. On this basis, there can be different truths in different communities. Truth is not absolute, it is relative. Truth in one culture may be different from truth in another. We can see this very clearly in the case of morality, where different societies have different moral rules and all equally claim that these rules are true. The realist will claim that there is one, absolute morality and that morality within different societies is right or wrong to the extent that it corresponds to this ultimate. The anti-realist claims that there is no absolute morality – moral demands which may be correct in one society are incorrect in another.

Two posts with another post joining them across the top is only a goal post to a society where there is a knowledge of football. What makes this arrangement a goal post is how the society uses the term, and the use it has for the idea of goal posts. In a society which does not play football, the same

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arrangement might be correctly termed “washing line”. In another society it might be called “execution place” – because it is the place from which people are hung by ropes suspended from the cross bar.

The anti-realists hold that truth is relative to the form of life or the community in which it is claimed or expressed. Within a particular form of life, within a particular society, something may be true which is not true elsewhere. Anti-realists deny bivalence (we defined this at the beginning of this chapter), since they claim that some statements are neither true nor false – they just have no content. It is neither true nor false to a tribe of Amazonian Indians who have never seen an outsider before that the three poles form a goal post. The idea of goal posts has simply no meaning for them, and the question of truth or falsity does not, therefore, arise.

\* \* \*

If we consider the moral arena, the issue may be clearer. Take the following statements:

1. Sex before marriage is wrong.
2. Homosexuality is wrong.
3. Killing your parents is wrong.

The realist will maintain that these statements are either true or false and that their truth or falsity does not depend on the society in which they are expressed. Beyond any of our earthly societies, they might perhaps claim, there is a transcendental realm of value which makes moral statements either true or false. If our moral statements correctly correspond to this transcendent morality, then they are true. If they do not correspond, they are false.

The anti-realist will reply, “Oh no, this is not the case at all. Within some societies sex before marriage, homosexuality

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and killing your parents is wrong, but in other societies these may be right. There are no absolutes. There is no independent standard or vantage point from which or by which we can judge moral norms. Morality evolves to meet the needs of society and in different societies there may be different moralities. A hundred years ago sex before marriage was wrong. Today, in the Western world, it is morally acceptable between two people who love each other and who are in a long-term relationship. In some African societies, sex before marriage is the accepted norm."

If there are disagreements about morality between different societies, the realist will claim that one society is right and the others are wrong, as there can be only one truth. The anti-realist will say that there is no single truth – within each society there are true and valid moral positions, and you cannot judge the morality of one society by the ideas of another.

Someone can be a realist about some things and an anti-realist about others. For instance, someone can be a realist about morality but an anti-realist about the future. Take the statement, "Elizabeth will have sixteen children" made about a girl who is presently aged nineteen and who is biologically capable of having children if the circumstances are right:

1. The realist about the future will maintain that it is either true or false *now* that Elizabeth will have sixteen children, even if we do not know which is the case. Somehow, the realist will maintain, there exists a fact "out there" to which the statement "Elizabeth will have sixteen children" either corresponds or does not correspond. We may not have the evidence to tell whether or not this statement is true, but lack of evidence does not prevent the realist saying that the statement is either true or false.
2. The anti-realist will simply deny that there is any truth to

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be known, since there is no fact "out there" and there is no evidence that could count for or against the statement about the number of children that Elizabeth will eventually have.

The issue of how the realist and the anti-realist make sense of mistakes is important. Both realist and anti-realist recognise that mistakes can be made, but their understanding is different:

1. The realist will seek to justify the truth of a statement by establishing its correspondence with the independent reality to which it is held to relate. A statement will be false if it fails to correspond to the reality that lies beyond language.

Even when the realist has exhausted *all* the available verification conditions, she will still say, "But I could still be wrong." Truth, for the realist, transcends (or goes beyond) the verification conditions that are or could be available and a *global mistake* is always possible. (A global mistake is a total mistake, a mistake made even after every available or possible checking procedure has been correctly carried out.)

2. The anti-realist will seek to establish the truth of a statement by determining whether it coheres or fits in with other true statements – whether, in other words, it fits in with the jigsaw which is the form of life of the particular society.

For the anti-realist, a statement is false if it fails to cohere with other true statements within a particular society. The anti-realist checks whether the statement does correctly cohere by applying verification procedures to test the statement against other statements accepted as true within the society concerned.

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Once the anti-realist has exhausted all the possible or available checks (the conditions or tests that would verify whether the statement fits into the jigsaw), then the statement is simply held to be true. To continue to say, "Well, we have exhausted the checks – we have used every means to ensure that the statement does cohere with other true statements – but are we *sure* it is true?" simply does not make sense, since truth *is* coherence with other true statements in a particular society or form of life.

A global mistake is, for the anti-realist, impossible. Once we are certain – by applying all the available or possible checking procedures (there is a difference between these two categories which we do not have space to explore here) – that the statement does cohere with other true statements, then the statement in question is simply true.

The difference between realist and anti-realist can be illustrated by the belief in a flat earth which we have used as an example. If we had lived a thousand years ago, all the tests that would have been available would have served to demonstrate that the world was flat. Everyone would have agreed about this, all the best text books would have confirmed it and the evidence would have been overwhelming. The anti-realist would have maintained that in the society in which people were then living it was true to say that the world was flat. The realist, whilst accepting that all the available evidence pointed in this direction, would still have said, "But I could still be wrong." The eventual discovery that the earth was in fact round would, for the realist, have shown that the original claim that the earth was flat was an error, a mistake. It was not correct because the statement did not correspond to the state of the world.

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### **Summary**

There are two different ways of looking at what it means to say that a statement is true:

1. The realist claims that a statement is true because it corresponds to a state of affairs that is independent of language and of the society in which we live. To say that a statement is true is to claim that it correctly refers beyond itself.
2. The anti-realist claims that a statement is true because it coheres with other true statements within a particular society or form of life. To say that a statement is true is to claim that it fits in or coheres with other true statements.

When we come to apply this to God, we shall see that the realist maintains that the statement, "God exists" is true because it corresponds or refers to the God who created and sustains the universe. The anti-realist, on the other hand, will claim that "God exists" is true because the statement coheres or fits in with other statements made by religious believers. As we shall see, the two positions are very different!



### THREE

## *The Background to the Debate about God*

If you ask someone who speaks Chinese to write down the Chinese symbol for God, he or she may well say, "Which one? The Catholic or the Protestant God?" The Chinese language has a character for each of the two different Gods. Many Christians, of course, would say that this is a mistake and that both Protestants and Catholics worship the same God. This, however, is over-simplistic. There is an enormous difference between the God of traditional Catholic theology and the God with which many Protestants identify – although many Catholics worship the Protestant idea of God and many Protestants think in terms of the Catholic view. In the next four chapters we shall be examining four different conceptions of what it means to talk of God, but before doing this we need to lay some historical foundations.

It has been said by the British philosopher Whitehead that all western philosophy is really a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle. We need to start by looking at their two different positions.

### **Plato**

Plato was born in 427 BC and died in 347. He was a native of Athens and came from a noble family. He became a pupil of Socrates. After Socrates was condemned to death for, among other things, "corrupting the young" – by getting them to think for themselves and to challenge the views of their