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PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN

The term 'philosophical theology' may encompass a broader and a somewhat narrower meaning. The term in the broader sense has been used in the history of Western thought when speaking about the cardinal problems of the human situation by way of the conceptual means of abstract reasoning in general.[1] 'Philosophical theology' in the narrower sense – as a term used to refer to a specific kind of apologetical strategy – originated in the middle of the last century, in particular, with the appearance of a research volume under the title "New Essays in Philosophical Theology".[2] Since then it has gained currency as an instrument of Christian apologetics within the context of analytical philosophical cogitation. The conflation of theological reasoning and analytical modes of argumentation has not always been self-evident. This has to do, first and foremost, with the understanding (conceptually and historically) of *analyticity* in general, and with the inherent developments of Christian theological and philosophical thought. It touches also on the development of the intellectual culture of the 20th century in general.

I have discussed these items in a previous article "Philosophical Theology: the Early Years"[3]. I mention in that article that the ideas that came to fruition in the "New Essays…" volume, are to be viewed against a much broader background, and that they reflect the general theoretical dilemma of the post-World War II apologetical situation. Of particular importance was the growing dominancy of the logical positivism and the tentative appearance of new forms of philosophical reflection, which came

to be characterized as the *linguistic analysis*. The present article intends to concentrate on the elements of linguistic approach, circulating within the apologetical argumentation of the fifties and sixties of the 20th century.

Reviewing the period of the last sixty (or so) years of the interaction between philosophy and theology, Nicholas Wolterstorff – himself an active participant of the process – marks that "before roughly 1960 there was very little philosophical theology being done anywhere" and "Something happened to bring about this unexpected flourishing of philosophical theology within the analytical tradition"[4]. Wolterstorff makes a distinction between the approach of the so-called continental and that of the analytical (or, one may say – Anglo-American) tradition, and observes that "Never since the Middle Ages has philosophical theology so flourished as it has during the past thirty years". He notes, that though "there are some who deny any particular significance to the flourishing of philosophical theology within analytic tradition", its flowering "was made possible by the surrender by analytic philosophers of certain assumptions characteristic of philosophy in the modern period, and by emergence of a new understanding of the task of philosophy and its role in culture".[5]

As a specific modification of the analytical tradition facilitating its movement away from the logical positivistic approach Wolterstorff singles out the appearance of meta-epistemological problematics and the demise of classical foundationalism. He also maintains that although within analytic philosophy have been movements that were hostile to ontology (logical positivism and Oxford ordinary language philosophy being prime examples), but overall it has been ontology-friendly, especially early in its carrier, and now again recently".[6]

Being in full agreement with Wolterstorff about the anti-ontological (and by the same token – of anti-metaphysical) character in general of some of the analytic philosophy, especially during the early years of its existence when it was disdainfully challenging the idealistic assumptions (e.g. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic). I would rather accentuate the "friendliness" part of Wolterstorff's theses. And I would particularly stress that lately the evolution of the analytical philosophy has taken significant steps towards

the recognition of the importance of language, including ordinary language. It is due to such developments that the age-long concerns of philosophical reasoning, including those dealing with God-language as a vehicle of religious conviction, have found a niche in the philosophico-theological discourse. The present article is an attempt to show how the so-called linguistic turn of the analytical philosophy fits within the development of the 20th century philosophical discussion and how it facilitated the appearance of a new type of apologetical strategy that goes under the rather vague designation of `philosophical theology`. The article concentrates on the elements of specifically linguistic approach circulating within the apologetical literature of the 50-ies and 60-ies of the 20th century. By and large the apologetical literature of that period consisted of a mixture of the old type of "metaphysical" approach, that very often led into fideistic cul-de-sacks, the modern "scientific" attempts designed to meet the challenges of verificationism, and the accentuation of the role of language for the expression and formulation of Christian religious beliefs.

The designation "linguistic turn", reputedly comming from a collection of essays edited by Richard Rortry, is often used with reference to radical change of course of philosophical reasoning originating with Wittgenstein`s "Tractatus". The term is used in the present article in a somewhat narrower sense; it is used here to describe a specific phase of the development of the analytical thought – the one which is loosly called ordinary language philosophy, and stems from the "Philosophical Investigations" period of Wittgenstein, from common sense philosophy of G. E. Moore, from the author of the so-called "Parable of the Invisible Gardener" John Wisdom, and was developed – in different fashions – by J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, Wilfred Sellars, J. O. Urmson, G. J. Warnock and others.

Conceading that these thinkers were not specifically ontologically-minded, it seems necessary to stress that the general meaning-as-use approach practised by them offered ample opportunities for the analyses of ethical, aesthetical and religious language. It was to become a metaphysics-friendly analytical tool, especially after it was chastened of the verificationistic pretensions of the logical positivism.

The linguistic turn had influenced the argumentation of some of the "New Essays…" authors; it also spilled over the boundaries of this discussion and turned into a diversified apologetical enterprise. One of the theologians (alongside many others) who brought attention to the "new accents" in the theological discourse was Roger Hazelton[7]. His book "New Accents in Contemporary Theology" (1960) drew attention to the fact, that Christian apologetics in an attempt to engage in conversation with the scientific world outlook was confronted with two philosophical choices – either the analytical or the existentialistic-type of argumentation. Hazelton attempted an amalgamation of both, giving slight preference to the analytically linguistic manner. He rightly notes that for many years theology and the logical analysis had had very little, mostly acrimonious contact. To illustrate his theses Hazelton singles out the position of A. Ayer, who had proposed the verification principle as a means for elimination of metaphysics. As against the Ayerian conclusions, Hazelton asserts that "…soon it became clear that instead of applying an all-out standard for distinguishing the meaningful from the meaningless, one could actually be both more analytical and more empirical in recognizing different sorts of meaning in different kinds of statements"[8] (48)

As mentioned above, one of the tasks of the new type of the linguistic-approach theologians was to chasten the discussion from the positivistic, empirical connotations, while preserving the scientific spirit of the linguistic turn (in the Rortrian maning of the term). Hazelton attempts this by way of linguistc analyses of the meaning of `meaning` and asserts that "those philosophers who now adopt this latter approach are no longer positivists". They have replaced the assertion: the meaning of a statement is the method of its investigation by the question: what is the logic of it? This shift noticed by Hazelton, marks a movement towards broader forms of logical analysis which came to be associated with the Oxford language analysis school. P. F. Strawson, for example, holds that "Side by side with the study of formal logic, and overlapping it, we have another study: the study of the logical features of ordinary speech. The second study can illuminate the first and can by it be illuminated or obscured".[9]

Speaking about the "rules of language" and how they bare on our language-use Strawson says: "In the effort to describe our experience we are constantly putting words to new uses, connected with, but not identical with, their familiar uses: applying them to states of affairs which are both like and unlike those to which the words are most familiarly applied. Hence we may give a meaning to sentences which, at first sight, seem self-contradictory".[10]

According to Hazelton, "these analytical philosophers have parted company with the earlier positivists". By way of noting of the significance of this shift for the theological reasoning, he quotes with approval a typical (for the philosophical theology of the fifties and sixties) insight of Basil Mitchell concerning the possible course of events in the new apologetical situation. He reminds, that Basil Mitchell writes, "It would be a very unempirical empiricist, who presumed to pronounce, in advance of careful investigation, that the claims of theology were unfounded, and a very complacent theologian who expected to learn nothing from a philosophical movement which has brought needed clarification into other disciplines[11]Thus Hazelton comes down to language as the centerpiece of philosophical and also of theological investigation of the meaning of any text – both assertive, as well as suggestive or emotionally meaningful. In advance of future developments in the field of linguistic analysis, Hazeltons notes that "…more and more philosophers do not hesitate to discuss such topics as "soul", "the grace of God", "miracles", "death", etc. He says: But our point here simply is that both [philosophers and theologians] are concerned with the matter of language, that is – the question of how and why certain things are said and what is actually meant by them".

According to Hazelton, we may in fact consider the major doctrine of Christian faith in this light as exemplifying a cetain "philosophy of language" "And God said…", "Thus saith the Lord…", "but I say unto you", "In the beginning was Word".

"The 'logic' of such statements would surely seem to be that the relationship[12] between God and man is both a communicating and communicable one" (p. 51).

From which it follows that a wider spectrum of cognitive means – such as myths, analogies, and paradoxes – may legitimately enter into theological argumentation. "A theologian who comes into fruitful contact with linguistic analysis should become more philosophical, not less so"[13] (52) – says Hazelton. At the same time he feels it necessary to concede that: "Theology by its own account is not only faith-talk, but truth-talk".

This is likely to become a vulnerable point in Hazelton's argumentation. As it turned out by subsequent development of the philosophical theology dialogue, the solution (and even then only partial) of this question required more profound discussion of the whole epistemological set-up of the analytical philosophical approach and the claims of theological reasoning. In a word – it required the establishment of a new kind of theological-cum-philosophical discourse which in the fifties and sixties of the last century was still in a nascent stage. R. Hazelton ranks as one of the first protestant theologians, attempting to pave the way for the linguistic turn within the theologico-philosophical dialogue. The main tactics was to justify a language-game attitude towards religious statements. This came upon the difficulties of distinguishing between 'faith-talk' and 'truth-talk', in a word to the truth-value aspects of the theory of meaning of the analytical philosophy, and – in a broader context – the traditional epistemological problematics in general.

The epistemological status of faith in historically extended way was dealt with by John Baillie in his book "The Sense of the Presence of God" (1962)[14] Bailie had attempted a very detailed research into the development of the terms 'knowledge' and 'certitude' and their corollaries starting as from the ancient Greek philosophy. He pays particular attention to the teaching of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, Newman. He follows the story up to the contemporaneous analytical approach and extensively characterizes the options of the 20th century philosophical choices. Baillie pays attention to phenomenalism and empiricism in general, to the anti-metaphysical stance of the logical positivism and the verification principle as the central tenet of modern scientific outlook. Retrospectively evaluating the role of empiricism in the history of thought. Baillie finds

fault with it, because a situation has been created where "the modern empiricist must be and avowedly is a behaviorist in his psychology, a subjectivist in his ethics and aesthetics and an agnostic in his attitude to religion". (27). As to the perspective part of Baillie's programme, this is formulated in the manner, characteristic of the period when the linguistic turn was as yet an up-and-coming trend in the philosophico-theological discussion.

"The thinkers of the Patristic period were able to synthesize the faith of the New Testament with the wisdom of the Greeks; and the so-called Medieval synthesis […] performed a like office for the men of Renaissance. But there has been a long delay in reaching a workable synthesis between what as Christians we believe and the scientific outlook of the modern world, which most of us also share". (157).The main John Baillie's contribution towards that end consists in detailed sketching of the historical background of the faith/knowledge problematics; in detailed criticism of the logical positivism and in significant extension of the applicability of the term 'experience'. "Nearly all contemporary philosophers profess to be empiricists, and to be an empiricist is to believe that all our veridical knowledge derives from our experience and can be checked by reference to it. But the *emperia* or experience many of them have in mind is our experience of the corporal world as revealed to us by our bodily senses, and these assume that this is our only experience[…] My contention will indeed be that we have even what can be called *sense* experience of other things than these…" (52).

In a language-analysis type of argumentation Baillie engages in the classification of the semantic structure of the word *sense*. He reminds that Newman had made use of the 'illative sense' referring to such phrases as 'good sense', 'common sense' and 'sense of beauty'. Baillie enlarges the list and suggests that in order to grasp the meaning of the word 'sense' such phrases as sense of humour, of proportion, of style, of duty, of honour and – above all – 'sense of the presence of God' are to be legitimately considered for the extension of a truly empirical approach.

On account of such an analysis Baillie takes an issue with Alfred Ayer's verificationism. He reminds that, according to Ayer every factual

proposition, as distinguished from merely emotive utterances, must refer to sense experience. "But against this – contends Baillie – I would submit that whereas indeed our ethical, aesthetic and religious knowledge is capable of verification and should constantly be subjected to such, this must be carried out by a return not to our experience of corporal reality but, as the case may be, to our ethical, aesthetical or religious experience itself" (63).

In countering Ayer's verificationism Baillie may be held responsible of a bluntly fideistic stance, for he says concerning emotive assertions (or more precisely: utterances, for Ayer definitely distinguishes between these two kinds of verbalisations) that the principle of verification is equally applicable to all kinds of judgments.

"The ethico-religious judgments are verifieable in their own kind and on their own level. They are verified by an appeal to our ethico-religious experience and to that alone; and certainly not by appeal to our sensible experience of the corporal world. The proper name of religious experience is faith" – concludes Baillie and quotes Heb. ii, 1 "Faith is the evidence of the things unseen", and 2. Cor. 2. 14. 'Spiritual things are spiritually discerned'.

The linguistic-turn elements appear in Baillie's analysis when in Chapter VIII "Meaning and Relevance" of the book he comes to review the theory of meaning advanced by some participants of the "New Essays…" volume (A. Flew, Thomas McPhersson, Jan Cromby as well as J. O. Urmson, R. B. Braithwaite and other scholars), whom he collectively defines as "reductive empiristics".

This change of front – Baillie maintains – appears to have been dictated by the following train of thought: "The logical positivists had held that moral and theological statements were incapable of verification, since the only verification they would acknowledge was to refer to sensory experience… It now came to be felt, however, that in spite of them telling us nothing about reality, moral (and perhaps theological) statements did have their uses, and we were encouraged to investigate their nature by asking ourselves what these uses are. The general answer given was that they conveyed something, whether to ourselves or to others, either about our emotions or about our

intentions, or about both together. But to convey something is to have a meaning; and thus the above-mentioned slogan has come to be understood, not as saying that such statements have no meaning, but rather as saying that we can best understand such meaning as they have, not by seeking it directly, but by approaching it through the examination of the uses we make of them" (150).

This "meaning-as-use" approach finds favour in Baillies eyes and it is in this direction that he proposes to see the further development of the theologico-philosophical discussion.

The difference between the old and the new approach would thus be expressed, not by contrasting meaning and use, but by contrasting the verification principle with the use-principle. "The two things I want to say, then, are that no affirmation has right of place within a system of Christian theology, if it has no such usefulness, and that the meaning of any such affirmation is best understood from an examination of the precise difference it would make to the conduct of Christian life if it were not believed, or at least if it were deliberately denied" (150–151).

Epistemological problematics in a professedly 'linguistic-turn' manner is discussed by Luis Arnoud Reid in his book "Ways of Knowledge and Experience" [15] Chapter VI of the book "The 'Language' of Religion" concentrates attention on the linguistic aspects of religious language and attempts a systematization of a "more flexible" kind, so as to harmonize the meaningfulness of factual, poetic, religious and other types of discourse –"I will only plead here that a more flexible use may make it easier to understand what religious 'languages' are saying" (114).

"There is […] in all knowledge an element of the *given* which impinges upon us, which we receive, and which is not dependent on what we do and how we express it, or the language we use to describe or indicate it […] This is true of religion. In religion as in all knowledge, there is assumed to a *given*, but the content of religion can only become explicit in terms of the languages and expressions we use" (114).

Reid uses the term 'language' in a maximally broad sense – it may be the language of arts, as well as language of ritual, the language of personal

behavior etc. In a systematized manner Reid distinguishes between the 'language' which may be said to 'embody' experiences and the language of concepts and abstract categories. This is the abstract discourse language of science and philosophy and to some extent of ordinary common sense. It is the language of propositions in which truth is affirmed or denied, hypothesis stated, deduction made, inferences examined and tested. (115).

Thus, in effect Reid applies the language-as-use principle to the notion of 'truth' itself, and attempts to tackle the problem that was touched upon by the authors discussed previously. After all, there is one kind of 'truth' that is consistent with the factual type of utterances/statements; and another kind of 'truth' which touches upon the emotional sphere of the human being. There is a common term which is used in two kinds of language-games situations, producing semantic ambiguity. Their meanings are different, but the referential sense remains the same. Exactly like in the well known Fregian maxim about the Morning and the Evening star. In practical textual representation this feature finds expression in the capitalization of letters: if written with a small letter "t" – we have in mind one kind of truth – that of the scientific discourse; if spelled with capital "T" – it is an indication of a religious, or in general an emotional kind of Truth. The language-game approach formulated by Wittgenstein leads on to an amalgamation of different languages as a means of expression of the human condition that is culturally determined. In such a way that the question about the human knowledge acquires a more holistic character – it is knowledge as a cognitive state that helps a person to find the bearings amidst the vicissitudes of ever-changing flux of life. In my opinion such a holistic epistemological approach, which during the subsequent theologico-philosophical discussions became a commonplace, had been proposed by Reid in a tentative and novel manner almost half a century ago.

"I am saying – he concludes – that the judgments arising out of *personal* religious experience in the whole cultural context – including the argumentation (*pro* or *con*) of reason – are, finaly, those by which we have to go on living. It is religious experience, not as an isolated thing, but as personal insight enriched and come to maturity by all the ways of knowing, thinking

and experiencing, which provides such bases as there is for religious living and dying. It has to be tested by experience and insight, and sometimes these tests of religious faith seems, or even are, too great to be born. (191).

The linguistic turn of the philosophico-theological dialogue, originating in the fifties and sixties of the last century within the Protestant (mainly Calvinistic) scholarly circles did not settle the perennial epistemological questions of theology, and much less so – of philosophy. But it provided for a new kind of movement required by the spiritual agenda of the day. It pointed the way towards academic and public discourse which asserted the *intellectual respectability* (W. Hudson)[16] of faith.

Endnotes

[1] As it is done e.g. by John Milbank in his book *The Word Made Strange.* Chapter 4 of this book entitled The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn attempts to provide an answer to the question : Has language been conceived in a particular way by Christian theology? The author discusses the interaction between theology and philosophy of language by way of extensive historical and conceptual analyses. See: Milbank John *The Word Made Strange. Theology, Language, Culture.* Blackwell publishers,1997.

[2] Flew A. and MacIntyre A., eds. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology.* New York, SCM Press, 1955.

[3] *Reliģiski- filozofiski raksti XVI,* Rīga FSI, 2013, pp. 131 – 147.

[4] Wolterstorff N, *How Philosophical Theology Became Possible within the Analytic Tradition, in: Analytic Theology. New Essays in the Philosophical Theology,* ed. by Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 155.

[5] *Ibid.,* p.156.

[6] *Ibid.,* p.166.

[7] Hazelton R. *New Accents in Contemporary Theology.* New York,` Harper and Brothers, 1960.

8 *Ibid.,* p. 52.

[9] Strawson P.F. *Introduction to Logical Theory.* London, Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1960, p. 231.

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 230.

[11]　Mitchel B. *"Faith and Logic"*. London, Allen and Unwin, 1957, pp. 5-6.

[12]　Hazelton R. *New Accents in Contemporary Theology*... p.51.

[13]　*Ibid.,* p. 52.

[14]　John Bailie. *The Sense of the Presence of God.* Oxford University Press, 1962.

[15]　Reid L. A. *Ways of Knowledge and Experience. London.* Allen and Unwin, 1961.

[16]　The term *intellectual respectability of faith* became a central notion in the works of William Donald Hudson, whose Wittgensteinian language-game approach (his works include: Ludwig Wittgenstein: *The Bearing of His Philosophy upon Religious Belief* (1968); *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief* (1975); *A Philosophical Approach to Religion* (1974) provided in the 70ies and eighties of the 20th century a new impetus for the theologico-philosophical dialogue.