

Faith And Experience

VIII Beyond Reason And Language ?

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“We feel that, even if all possible scientific questions have been answered, our existential problems (*Lebensprobleme*) have not been touched at all”¹. I suppose many people would agree that we feel that there must be more to life than just getting sensible answers to sensible questions, there must be more to life than “sweet reasonableness”. “He who does not dance, does not know what is going on”². In a short story by the Russian writer, Olga Larionova, a rebellious young lady who has fallen in love against instructions laughs at the “poverty-stricken wisdom” of her thoroughly rationalist commander from Logitania³. In the words of e. e. cummings:

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom⁴

There have always been those who feel that, in the interests of a greater vitality—for “life is not a paragraph”⁵—they must rebel against the commonsense commonplace certainties which make up their contemporaries’ world of meaning. “They shut me up in Prose,” as Emily Dickinson complains,

As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet—
Because they liked me “still”.⁶

A few years earlier she had written, flippantly, in a letter: “Insanity to the sane seems so unnecessary”⁷, meaning only, on the face of it, that she would like to retain the exuberant “madness” of

spring all the year round. But the image nevertheless has profounder resonances for her;

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –⁸

This is reminiscent of the warning given by St Anthony the Great: "A time is coming when men will be mad: and if they see anyone who is not mad, they will attack him, saying, 'You're mad', because he is not like them"⁹.

In face of the smug "sanity" and "wisdom" of the world, it may be necessary for those who aspire to a fuller, more authentic, humanity to "become fools" (cf 1 Cor 3:18) before they can be truly wise. Refusing the sensible advice of nearly everyone, St Francis insisted on not adopting an established Rule for his Order, with the claim: "The Lord said to me that he wanted me to be a new kind of idiot (*unus novellus pazzus*) in the world; God did not want to lead us by any other way than by this kind of knowledge (*scientia*). But he will confound you by your knowledge and wisdom."¹⁰

In our own time there has obviously been a widespread disillusionment with rationalism and even with rationality; one manifestation of this was the Theatre of the Absurd, which, in a variety of different ways, raised the dreadful possibility that perhaps, after all, "sense" itself does not make sense. Or if it does, it only makes murderous sense. As the nurse comments in Ionesco's *La Lecon*, after the professor has killed his pupil, "I warned you! Arithmetic leads to philology, and philology leads to crime."¹¹

As Martin Esslin explains in his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, it is in the "striving to communicate a basic and as yet undissolved totality of perception, an intuition of being, that we can find a key to the devaluation and disintegration of language in the Theatre of the Absurd. For if it is the translation of the total intuition of being into the logical and temporal sequence of conceptual thought that deprives it of its pristine complexity and poetic truth, it is understandable that the artist should try to find ways to circumvent this influence of discursive speech and logic". Esslin notices that the downgrading of language and logical thought is in accordance with a basic tendency of our time. He quotes

George Steiner as saying: "It is no paradox to assert that much of reality now begins *outside* language. . . . Large areas of meaningful experience now belong to non-verbal languages such as mathematics, formulae and logical symbols. Others belong to 'anti-languages' such as the practice of non-objective art or atonal music. The world of the word has shrunk".¹² Mention could also be made of the considerable shift in understanding of the role of words which, for some people at least, goes with the new interest in man as an animal: language is seen as a biological function, which cannot therefore be used to set rational man over against the rest of nature. As Eugene Linden writes:

The Platonic distrust of nature is being replaced with a distrust of rationality and technology. In the behavioural sciences, Harvey Sarles calls this movement the return to biology. He feels that the return to biology for explanations of man's behaviour reflects a pessimistic age in which man turns to biology for excuses for his failure to fulfil the ideals set by reason. However, while this return to biology reflects an awareness of the failing notions of rational man, I think it is not motivated by a sense of retreat so much as it reflects the first stirrings of a new view of man's place in nature. One cannot condemn as sinful man's failure to live up to the ideals of reason. Over the years reason has constructed a strait-jacket for human behaviour into which only an android could fit comfortably, while the rest of the population is saddled with a sense of failure and forced into various neurotic adaptations. The return to nature is more than an excuse for our failure as rational animals.¹³

As Esslin points out, there is a patent affinity between this kind of rejection, or at least downgrading, of rationality in favour of a more vital, holistic and paradoxical approach to life, and the kind of thing we find in religious and mystical texts from all over the world.¹⁴

Among Christian writers, one of the most famous critics of the pretensions of human reason is Tertullian, whose *certum est, quia impossibile*¹⁵ has been taken to show how remote Tertullian is from the more philosophical theology of the Greek fathers,¹⁶ but which is, in fact, not totally dissimilar to the position adopted by Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁷ They too realize that belief in the Incarnation involves a challenge to the normally accepted rational understanding of what kind of thing can be said about God. Their language is not as startling as that of Tertullian; but in a quiet way they are fighting the same battle that he is fighting. Athanasius, for instance, says: "The more he is mocked by unbelievers, the more evident he makes his Godhead. What men dismiss as impossible, he shows to be possible; what men mock as inap-

propriate (sc. for a divine being), he, by his own goodness, renders thoroughly appropriate; and what men in their sophistication laugh at as human weakness, he shows to be divine in his own power". And Gregory takes it as a sign of intellectual pusillanimity to hang on to an idea of the greatness of God, and refuse to believe in the Incarnation. But it is Tertullian who seems positively to revel in the shock to people's philosophical sensibilities. He is quite happy to talk of faith as involving the *dedecus* of believing that God was crucified. Without this disgrace, the world has no hope. "Whatever is unworthy of God is profitable for me". To safeguard this hope, he will gladly be considered a fool. The death of the Son of God is believable precisely because it is silly (*prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est*).

In his *Testimonium Animae* Tertullian also attacks the pretensions of learning and literature, but this time he appeals, not to soteriology, but to people's instincts. If you poke someone unexpectedly in the stomach, he is likely to cry out "God!" without thinking. That is the real man showing through whatever atheism or polytheism he may think he believes in. And man is man before he is educated man. Culture leads him astray from what he is in himself.¹⁸

In conscious imitation of Tertullian, Sir Thomas Browne in the seventeenth century also delights in the rational difficulties of his religion. "To believe only possibilities is not Faith, but mere Philosophy", he says. He is unenthusiastic about the "metaphysical definitions of Divines", preferring as he does to "understand a mystery without a rigid definition, in an easie and Platonick description". In fact, he complains, "Methinks there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith. . . . I love to lose my self in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an *O altitudo!*"¹⁹

In various nineteenth and twentieth century writers it actually comes to be a defining characteristic of religion, or at least of mysticism, that it involves in some essential way a transcending of human reason. Thus William James gives, as the two most important features of mysticism, ineffability and a noetic quality:

- 1 *Ineffability* – The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced. it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. . . .
- 2 *Noetic quality* – Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations,

revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.²⁰

I have already, in an earlier article, mentioned R. R. Marett's proposal, which Sir Alister Hardy quotes with approval,²¹ that the essence of man's religious sense should be sought "in that steadfast groundwork of specific emotion whereby a man is able to feel the supernatural precisely at the point at which his thought breaks down".

Rudolf Otto considered Marett to be "within a hair's breadth of what I take to be the truth about the matter".²²

Otto himself is probably the most important and influential exponent of the view that some kind of ineffable experience is at the heart of all genuine religion. He is far from being anti-rationalist, and, though he treats the response to the Numinous as being an emotional one, he insists that "the holy" is an *a priori* category, presumably of understanding.²³ However, it is, in his view, the non-rational which is the essential element, the specific distinguishing feature of religion; and he takes it to be immediately recognizable for what it is, once it is encountered, even if the "natural man" has no awareness of it. It is a distinct *experience*.²⁴

This identification of the non-rational as the crucial factor in religion has, predictably, been used for apologetic purposes. Thus people have claimed that Christianity puts forward its doctrines as a kind of poetic statement, which means that it is not really vulnerable to attack from philosophers or scientists. C. S. Lewis' entertaining comments on this suggestion are still well worth reading.²⁵

And Otto was put to work by Thomas McPherson in his delightfully eccentric attempt to hitch the Vienna Circle to a religious chariot; if they declare that religious language is, strictly, nonsensical, though they may think that they are attacking religion, they are in fact making a useful contribution to it. Religious language is "nonsensical", and is bound to be so, and religion should admit this freely, because what it is concerned with is important but unsayable.²⁶

Ineffability has also been adduced as one of the common characteristics of all mystical experience, on the basis of which W. T. Stace reckons he can demonstrate that there is a "common core" underlying all the superficial variety given in descriptions of mystical experience in the world's various religions.²⁷

Finally, ineffability appears several times in the evidence submitted to RERU and in the existing RERU publications. As Edward Robinson says in his introduction to *This Time-Bound Ladder*, "We have words for concrete objects, we have words for abstract ideas and relationships, and for most occasions in life this is equipment enough. But for the experience that seems to reduce

man's individual life to insignificance in relation to a reality that appears to lie wholly beyond it – for this we can only borrow from the language of ordinary life. . . . There seems to be built into this kind of experience an essential element that cannot be described without self-contradiction in any language".²⁸

It would appear, then, that there are both sacred and profane reasons for challenging the sufficiency of reason and rationality. Appeal can be made both to fundamental human instincts and to religion to support the suggestion that we should look for some kind of experience which is more immediate and vivid an awareness of life than that which is yielded by the duller, rather constricting procedures of rational thought. It is from that kind of experience that we shall learn, albeit inarticulately, the deepest significance of our lives, and find the most satisfying fulfilment for ourselves.

The taller priest nodded his bowed head and said: "Ah, yes, these modern infidels appeal to their reason; but who can look at those millions of worlds and not feel that there may well be wonderful universes above us where reason is utterly unreasonable? . . . The mystery of heaven is unfathomable, and I for one can only bow my head".

Alas, the speaker is no priest; it is Flambeau the greatest criminal in Europe. And there is one very straightforward sign that he is false:

"You attacked reason," said Father Brown. "It's bad theology."²⁹

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The attempt to take some ineffable experience as the key to religion or mysticism runs into two serious difficulties right at the outset. The first is indicated by Peter Donovan:

The similar descriptions mystics the world over give of their experiences are often thought to show there is a shared common core. As Stace puts it: "The language of the Hindus on the one hand and the Christians on the other is so astonishingly similar that they give every appearance of describing exactly the same experience'. On their own, however, similarities in language can be very misleading. Whether to regard them as astonishing and striking (as is often done) or as superficial and deceptive, we are in no position to judge, without something further to go on. Even if we could be sure that different mystics were describing experiences with similar features, it does not follow that the features in common are the essential features, so far as the significance of the experience goes."³⁰

The second difficulty is even more serious, and it is pointed out by Katz. It is often claimed, as he remarks, that mystical lang-

uage is defined by its 'ineffability' and 'paradoxicality', and that these elements are the basis, or a basis, for comparing and perhaps identifying different reports of mystical experience. But if the claim to 'ineffability' is taken seriously, no comparison is possible at all. Far from suggesting that two experiences must be similar or identical because they are both ineffable and paradoxical (with or without other similarities), we ought rather to say that if they are both ineffable and paradoxical we have no way of knowing how to compare them, since we are forbidden (by the quality of ineffability and paradoxicality) to take anything that is said about them as being anything more than a very pale and inadequate statement of something that cannot in fact be defined or declared.³¹

This makes it very difficult to suppose that ineffability by itself can provide us with a key to anything. All it can do is warn us not to jump to conclusions in face of apparent similarities or divergences.

But there is an even more radical question which must be faced: does the idea of ineffability really mean anything anyway? In his contribution to *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis on Intuition and the Inexpressible*, Renford Bambrough suggests that the term is misleading and unnecessary.

The main target for his attack is Rudolf Otto. In view of the notorious difficulty in knowing precisely what Otto meant, I shall not try to deal with the question whether or not Bambrough's presentation of him is fair. I think it is probably not, in that it does not take nearly enough notice of Otto's concern to locate rationality with reference to the non-rational. But for our purposes it is sufficient to take Bambrough's Otto as representing a position which is quite recognisable, without being too concerned with Otto-an-Sich.

Bambrough begins with two quotations from *The Four Quarters*, in which Eliot is complaining about the inadequacy of words; he then refers us back to a comment he made a few years ago in an essay on literature and philosophy:

There is the risk here and in other passages of pining for what will have the stillness of the Chinese jar and still have the power of the slipping, sliding perishing words to live and move and have a being that consists in and makes possible their expressing and communicating the shifting surfaces that are the depths and dimensions of the Word. Like Rudolf Otto on the inexpressible, Eliot seems at times to be aspiring after impossible modes of communication that would capture the truth on a blank canvas or a silent gramophone record. Kant once and for all rebuked such aspirations: 'The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space'.

Bambrough offers his new article as a fuller, more argued, statement of his objections to Eliot and Otto. His basic contention is this:

When the poets and the theologians describe what they take to be the limits of thought and the limits of language they are contributing to our understanding of thought and language by indirect means, by means analogous to those through which any persuasive sceptic, when arguing that such and such a kind of knowledge does not deserve the name of knowledge, contributes to the understanding of the knowledge whose credentials he is attempting to impugn. What they succeed in doing is to make clear the differences between the modes of reason or of expression that they are demeaning and some other mode or modes of expression or of reason that they take as paradigmatic, or the requirements of some model or picture or definition of knowledge or communication that does not even fit the paradigms that are offered in its name. Reason and language have many mansions, and we can do justice to the varieties that Otto and Eliot are describing without being driven to represent them as above and beyond thought and language, or below and beneath thought and language.

Bambrough considers that it is just a mystification of something quite straightforward to talk about "limits" of thought or language. It arises because some particular kind of thinking or talking is taken as a totally sufficient paradigm. Bambrough is concerned to make us accept as quite reasonable and unproblematic that there are all kinds of different ways in which we use language; and that, in fact, even our most ordinary uses of language presuppose a whole mass of tacit context which we do not articulate, but which is not therefore "inexpressible" or mysterious. And similarly there are all kinds of different ways in which we understand things, capable of differing degrees of articulation, but not ceasing to be "rational" because at some points there is no obvious way of articulating them.

The point is an important one, in Bambrough's view, because if we fail to take it, we shall end up, not only being disrespectful to the powers of the human mind, but also making unhelpfully crude distinctions between feeling and reason, emotion and understanding. We should do better, he concludes, to refrain from talking about limits of thought and language, and simply say that there are some things we do not, in fact, understand and some things that we cannot, in fact find any way to express. There is no reason to suppose that they are in principle beyond reach of understanding or utterance.

I am sure that Bambrough is making a very useful point in this article. We can be bewitched by idioms, and suppose that just be-

cause we spontaneously talk in a certain kind of way, it is legitimate to make a certain kind of inference. It is not self-evident that we can properly make any deductions at all from the fact that we tend to use apophatic language about experiences that we have found, in some way, impressive. After all, to say "I cannot tell you how beautiful it was" is to tell you how beautiful it was. To say "Words fail me" is to perform a straightforward linguistic operation, not to shift into mysticism. An old lady may say to her companion, "My dear, you are invaluable to me; I cannot begin to repay all your kindness", but she will still be expected to pay her. Similarly "I cannot begin to describe . . ." is quite compatible with in fact giving some kind of description. Before we set up any systematic contrast between what can be said and what cannot be said, whether for philosophical or for religious purposes, we must consider what role is played within language by apparent references to the breakdown of language. And if we were to do this, I suspect we should find, with Bambrough, that Otto's kind of inexpressibility turned out, after all, not to be philosophically or theologically very interesting; nor would it be able to carry anything like the weight that it has been made to carry.

However, I am not convinced that Bambrough has finally proved that there is no serious philosophical use for the concept of inexpressibility. I am sympathetic to his attack on Otto, (or on the view he ascribes to Otto, at any rate); but I think that if we try to tighten it up and make it more rigorous, we shall find that we have disposed only of one particular version of inexpressibility.

There appear to be two distinguishable ingredients in Otto's attempt to commend the non-rational element in religion: the direct encounter with the Numinous can be said to be "inexpressible" both because it is an immediate experience, and because it is an experience of the Wholly Other. These two ingredients need to be tackled separately, because they raise different difficulties.

On the first point, Bambrough comments:

T. E. Hulme said of one of his opponents in controversy, 'Haldane prefers a guide-book to an actual visit'. Otto speaks in a similar tone of the difference between listening to music and hearing tell of a musical performance. We sometimes need these reminders of the order of priority between experience and report, art and criticism, life and literature; but there is a danger of an exaggeration on the other side. The music is more than the description, but the description may help us to understand the music. To say that the guide-books are no substitute for travel need not be to say that guide-books are of no value to the traveller — before, during and after his journey.

It seems to me that we can go much further than this. First of all, we must not be misled by the word "experience". "Experi-

ence” and “report”, for instance, are not appropriately paired off for comparison. Giving or receiving a report is just as much an “experience” as is watching a rocket take off. Thinking about some encounter we have had is just as much an “experience” as the encounter was. The comparison is not between “experience” and something other than experience, it is between different kinds of experience. And I do not see what justification there could be for postulating any over-all priority of one kind of experience over any other kind of experience (even if we could convincingly classify experiences into “kinds”). Reading a guide-book is a different experience from travelling: it is not necessarily inferior. If it is true to say that guide-books are no substitute for travel, it is just as true to say that travel is no substitute for guide-books. Travelling may or may not be more interesting than reading the guide-book.

There is surely something rather sentimental about supposing that “personal encounter” must always outweigh verbalised reports, whether one’s own or other people’s. Many years ago I was once part of a modest crowd watching Krushchev coming down the steps of a Brighton hotel. He may even have spoken to us; I do not now remember. But, so far as I can see, that contributes absolutely nothing to any knowledge or understanding I might have or might wish to have of the late Russian leader. I will concede to anyone who cares that there was something non-rational going on. But it was not mysticism, it was vulgar, irrational curiosity.

To take another example. I suppose most people in the western world are brought up to think of the Niagara Falls as the biggest waterfall there is. Yet many people, when they first see it for themselves, are disappointed at how small it is. What is really impressive is the amount of water that flows over the Horseshoe (Canadian) Falls there; but it does not *look* impressive. It is reading about the figures and comparing them with the figures for other waterfalls that brings it home to one just how exceptional it is. Actually *seeing* Niagara, actually visiting it in the flesh, is more likely to bring home to one other features of the place, such as the beautiful park on the Canadian side, or the tiresomeness of the US customs. The experience of being there oneself and the experience of reading about it complement each other in such a way that it does not seem terribly helpful to give either one any absolute priority.

Or consider the business of looking at ancient manuscripts. Of course there is something quite exciting about handling a very ancient book or papyrus. But if you actually want to read what it says, it is sometimes more convenient to approach it indirectly with the help of special photography, which can increase considerably the clearness and legibility of some not very well preserved manuscripts.

Again, is it really so self-evident that art is always more important than criticism? Surely it makes sense to say that some paintings, for instance, have an immediate visual impact, others only come alive in retrospect, after you have thought about them. Or there may be paintings which do not 'say' anything to you yourself, but which are important to some critic whom you enjoy listening to. There may be plays which do not work as plays, but which nevertheless shed light on the general significance of an author. The criticism, in such a case, might be more valuable than the work of art.

I do not see that we can generalize about "being there yourself" and "seeing for yourself" beyond the rather useless generalization that if you have been there yourself, you have been there yourself, and if you have not, you have not, and that is the difference between them – a conclusion about as helpful as Tweedledee's lesson in logic ("Contrariwise, if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic"). The more interesting question of whether you have gained or lost anything by seeing or not seeing for yourself, and whether what you have gained or lost is important or trivial, must be determined in each case with reference to a thousand and one other factors.

It seems, then, that there is no necessary advantage attached to immediate encounter, over against reflective conceptualization of one's own experience or over against receiving somebody else's verbalized account.

But what of the precise point of "inexpressibility"? Is immediate, preconceptual encounter necessarily beyond reach of thought and language? Bambrough succeeds, I think, in forcing a distinction between the alleged limit of thought and the alleged limit of language. There can be a genuine understanding which is not, in any ordinary sense, non-rational, which is nevertheless not articulable, at least in the sense that the person who has the understanding may not in fact be able to articulate it. Knowing how to follow a logical argument involves more than we should, at any rate normally, try to articulate (we should say all we wanted to say by articulating the argument); but that does not make it non-rational, we do not have to appeal to any mystical faculty of "intuition". And conversely we may be able to make perfectly adequate statements, which we could ourselves come to understand more fully later on, without thereby coming to want to change the original statement. Bambrough uses the example of giving an account of what it is like to have lost a child, when you have observed how other people react to losing a child. When you have lost a child yourself, you might not have any different words to use, but you would "see more meaning in the old words than you had seen before". It seems quite reasonable to say that there is a kind of unin-

telligibility involved here, which is not conjugated with inexpressibility: you “simply cannot understand what it is like to lose a child until you have experienced it for yourself”; nevertheless you may be able to articulate what it is like by empathy and observation.

If this is true, then even if we wish to go against Bambrough and conclude that it is helpful to talk about some element of inexpressibility, we are not necessarily committed to saying that we have gone beyond the bounds of intelligibility. (And if my development of Bambrough, above, is valid, we are not committed to saying that anything very significant is going on, either).

Actually I think there is one, very ordinary, way in which it is quite appropriate to talk in terms of unintelligibility when we are thinking of a situation of direct encounter. If we abstract from all other considerations, nothing is “intelligible” in itself. We understand something only by relating it to other things. In so far as a direct encounter with something is a unique event, it is unintelligible. But I wonder whether human beings ever do actually encounter anything in a state of total abstraction from all possible contexts. And in so far as the new event is immediately related to some kind of context (even if it turns out later that we plumped for the wrong context), we must surely say that some kind of understanding is present, even if inarticulate and only very primitively conceptual.

But what of inexpressibility? Obviously anything which is unique and totally unrelated will be inexpressible, but I doubt if this will get us very far; it is instinctive in us to relate anything new to something already known to us, and then this first kind of inexpressibility will automatically lapse.

But surely Bambrough himself indicates a more interesting kind of inexpressibility, when he draws our attention to the enormous amount of context presupposed in even the most ordinary conversation. Of course it would normally be possible to articulate much that we do not normally in fact articulate. But is it conceivable that we should articulate *all* of it? However much we spell out, there would surely always be more that we had not spelled out. And even if we could, per impossibile, spell out absolutely everything that was in any way pertinent, and even if we could then go on to indicate exactly in what way each item was pertinent to the original topic of conversation, would we not have succeeded only in defeating our own purpose? If we did bring all this material to full articulation, we should have destroyed it precisely as context for our conversation. We should have changed the conversation, in fact.

The point can be made in another way too. The whole point of the tacit context is that we can hold it all together at once. If

we were to try to articulate it, we should have to do so one piece at a time, but then each piece would still presuppose the others as its context, and so would require, if we were going to be thorough, the explicitation of everything else to bring to full articulation its own contribution to the context for the original conversation . . . and so on ad libitum, infinitum and nauseam.

It does seem that we are here dealing not just with a factual difficulty but with a conceptual impossibility.

The same can be said of the particular kind of conversation which is developing a logical argument. Bambrough may well be right in following Wittgenstein and regarding "intuition" as an "unnecessary shuffle". We do not need to postulate any mysterious faculty to validate our being able to see that an argument works or does not work. But we should surely be on even stronger ground in suggesting that, at some stage, an argument is not susceptible of any further proof. It is, quite strictly, impossible to fill in, articulately or by any other kind of linguistic expression, every possible stage in an argument, precisely because it is always conceivable that someone should doubt the very procedure we are using in argument. But that does not mean that our argument is incomplete. There are no more steps that could have gone in. It is just that there are some steps we simply know to be valid. We may support our contention that $2 + 2 = 4$ by showing somebody two oranges and then two more oranges, and getting him to add them all up together. If he then shows signs of taking this as a peculiar quality of these particular oranges, we can repeat the experiment with different oranges, then with bananas, then with pillar boxes and crocodiles. But if he persists in taking all of these as interesting, but disconnected, phenomena, where do we go from there? We can state our conviction that if you add two to two you will *always* get four. But can you state how you know? I quite agree with Bambrough that this does not take us beyond the bounds of reason or thought. But I think it does take us beyond the bounds of linguistic expression. It is possible to formulate a logical law in abstraction from all particular applications of it; but it is not possible to formulate the principle of its validity in abstractions from some use of it, however abstract.

It looks as if we can give some content, then, to the idea of the inexpressible, beyond the mere fact that some things have not as yet been expressed. But so far we do not seem to have found anything which would oblige us to mitigate Bambrough's strictures on Otto.

I think we can; to some extent, vindicate Otto's finding of something inexpressible in any direct encounter. Listening to a piece of music is, as he says, not the same thing as telling someone about listening to a piece of music. Even if you were to give the

most moving, detailed and accurate report of the music, it would not be the same thing as actually taking your friend to the concert. And there is nothing you can do to alter this. No verbal report can actually convey the concert. This is not just an unfortunate practical disability which science, we hope, will shortly overcome. It is strictly inconceivable that words, however graphic, could convey a concert. This does not mean that concert going is a non-rational occupation, or that we have reached the bounds of intelligibility, or anything. It is just that there are some things that words *cannot do*.

But we must not mistake the significance of this. McPherson says, in connexion with Otto's views: "In so far as the numinous experience is an emotion it is no different from other emotions in this. No emotion can be defined in words, or even described -- 'directly' described -- in words".³² This makes it sound as if there were some peculiar link between inexpressibility and emotion. But the difficulty in talking precisely about emotions is only different in degree from the difficulty in talking precisely about sausages. I would agree with Bambrough here that we should not confuse a problem with an impossibility.

It may be harder to talk about feeling slightly, but not totally unpleasantly, sick, than to talk about a banana split. But the radical impossibility is the same in each case: I cannot actually give you my feeling in words any more than I can send you a banana split down the telephone. If anything, it is perhaps slightly less difficult to conceive of my giving you a feeling in words than to conceive of my giving you a banana split in words; but that is only because I can, conceivably, evoke a feeling in you by talking to you, whereas I doubt if I could evoke a banana split. But strictly speaking all I can *give* you by talking to you, apart from things like information and instructions, is an infection; and I could do that better by spitting at you.

What can be said to be inexpressible, then, is the thing-in-itself, whether it be an emotion or a turnip; and it can be said to be inexpressible in the precise sense that however fully and accurately I express it in words (and gesture and paint and all the rest of it), my expression is never identical with the thing in itself. But there is no other way in which the thing in itself can be expressed except by such modes of expression as these. Even if science fiction can imagine the possibility of delivering the groceries down the telephone, it will not alter the philosophical position, that there is a difference between giving you a bunch of coconuts and telling you about a bunch of coconuts.

But once again we must remind ourselves that finding an area of inexpressibility is not the same thing as finding an area of particular human interest and significance. We are not necessarily any

closer to God or even to understanding God just because I cannot give you a banana in words.

To sum up where we have got to so far: we have seen no reason to posit any particular connexion between emotion and inexpressibility; if there is reason to talk about inexpressibility, it is due more to logical considerations than to any particular quality of experience. Thus, so far, we have seen no reason to rescue Otto from Bambrough's attack, though we have seen some reason to rescue inexpressibility, though of a different kind from that favoured by Otto.

But we have not yet touched on the other main ingredient in Otto's version of the non-rational, inexpressible element which he takes to be so crucial in religion. We have, as yet, said nothing of the Wholly Other, who is said to be the object of the all-important encounter.

On the face of it, the Wholly Other looks like an admirable candidate for inexpressibility. If It is really totally unlike any possible object of comparison in every possible way, then there will be no possible way of saying anything intelligible about It at all. We shall indeed be beyond the reach of language and thought.

But there are difficulties. If the Wholly Other is, simply, that, we run at once into Katz's problem: how do we know that we are not dealing with a whole lot of Wholly Others, all wholly other than each other? How do we compare notes, to discover whether our various numinous experiences are or are not experiences of the same object? How do we even ascertain whether our own experiences at different times are or are not experiences of the same object? By what principle could we recognise or identify It?

This seems to me to be a more telling problem than the one raised by Bambrough. He mentions the obvious difficulty about any *via mere negativa*: "If you did succeed in saying only what was negative, you would not escape the fate that Berkeley ascribed to Locke: you would find yourself giving elaborate names to what others are content to call non-entity, to nothing at all. Nothing is conveyed if everything is denied".

I am not sure that it is even true to say that if you simply deny everything, you will convey nothing. But even if it is true that you would convey nothing, denying everything could be a perfectly intelligible procedure. Should you find yourself confronted with something that resists all your attempts at description, you would not be talking about nothing nor would you be talking nonsense if you systematically denied everything as not quite fitting your mysterious *Je ne sais Quoi*.

Nevertheless Bambrough is right to feel uneasy at Otto's use of the *via negativa*, if Otto really intends us to accept awareness of the Wholly Other as a basic and primary datum in the numinous

experience. On this, Bambrough's comment is very much to the point: "There was once a radio play about a recording enthusiast who had an unparalleled collection of silences. It is to be hoped that he also collected the sounds that surrounded the silences, and gave to them their individualities, and such significance as they might achieve. Not even the most solemn intimations could be conveyed by an empty canvas or a silent record, unsupported by such surroundings of tone or colour". You cannot *begin* with meaningful silence; there has to be some kind of context which gives it meaning.

Moreover it is far from clear that one could ever simply *experience* something as Wholly Other. You cannot, as it were, catch sight of something and then, at the first glance, say, "Oh yes, that's Wholly Other". You might say, "That's funny!", but you would have to check carefully before concluding that it was Wholly Other. The only situation in which you could say at a glance, "That's Wholly Other" would be one in which you were using "Wholly Other" as a kind of name, and this would presuppose a certain familiarity with It. But then it is not clear that the non-rational, inexpressible quality would still hold. If something you have never seen before appears on the scene, you are at first likely to be at a loss for words; but if it keeps on coming back, you will find ways of talking about it and making connexions, if only connexions between one visit and the next. In this way it enters into language and thought. And if this is the way of it, then "Oh yes, that's the Wholly Other" is no more non-rational than "Ah, here comes a quark" or even, "That's a surd". If the non-rationality and inexpressibility are to be strictly maintained, then; I suspect, we must insist on the Wholly Other displaying Itself each time in a way which is Wholly Other than any way in which It has ever displayed Itself before. This would certainly stump both mind and language. But it would not be immediately experienceable as such. And it is not clear that it would be a very good basis for religion.

We seem, then, to get into rather a muddle, if we try to take the inexpressible as a primary datum of experience, if by that, at least, we mean that it must be immediately experienced precisely as inexpressible and Wholly Other. There is a sense in which the actual existence, *esse*, being-thereness of things, of anything at all, always transcends utterance. Precisely as a unique, concrete particular, everything, including 'things' that are not strictly things, is inexpressible. That may have religious significance, but even if it does, it will not be because everything is, somehow, in essence non-rational or beyond reach of thought, or even, in any very interesting sense, beyond reach of language. It only means that we can talk about things, we cannot talk things.

This seems to indicate, then, that the attempt to link inexpressibility directly and primarily with “experience” has not succeeded.

In a subsequent article we must attempt to see why religion, including christian theology, keeps on returning to the idea of ineffability; and we must see if the theological use of ineffability sheds any light on the revolt against rationality with which we began this article.

(To be continued).

- 1 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.52.
- 2 Acts of John, 95.
- 3 Translated by Mirra Ginsburg in *The Ultimate Threshold* (Penguin, 1978), p. 115.
- 4 e. e. cummings, *selected poems 1923-1958* (Penguin, 1963), p. 23.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Poem 613.
- 7 Letter 209.
- 8 Poem 435.
- 9 *Aphorismata Patrum*, Anthony 25.
- 10 *Scripta Leonis*, ed. Rosalind B. Brooke (Oxford, 1970), § 114.
- 11 *La Leçon* (Gallimard, 1954), p. 146.
- 12 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Penguin, 1968), pp. 396 f.
- 13 Eugene Linden, *Apes, Men and Language* (Penguin, 1968), pp. 287 f.
- 14 Esslin, pp. 416 ff.
- 15 *De Carne Christi*, 5.
- 16 E.g. Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 1 f.
- 17 See Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 1; Gregory of Nyssa, *Oration Catechetica*, 27.
- 18 *De Testimonio Animae*, 2 & 5.
- 19 *Religio Medici*, I.
- 20 *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Fontana edition), p. 367.
- 21 *The Divine Flame*, p. 71.
- 22 *The Idea of the Holy* (Penguin, 1959), p. 29 n. 1.
- 23 E.g. Otto, pp. 129 ff; 153 ff.
- 24 Otto, p. 18.
- 25 C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape proposes a Toast* (Fontana, 1965), pp. 41 ff.
- 26 Antony Flew & Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (SCM, 1955), pp. 131 ff.
- 27 W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1961), pp. 131 ff. It should be noted that Stace is far more hesitant about ineffability than about other alleged ingredients in the common core.
- 28 *This Time-Bound Ladder*, pp. 6 f.
- 29 G. K. Chesterton, *The Innocence of Father Brown* (Penguin, 1950), pp. 24 ff.
- 30 Peter Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience* (Sheldon, 1979), p. 27.
- 31 Steven Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Sheldon, 1978), pp. 54 f.
- 32 *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 137.