

CHAPTER I

THE UNAVOIDABLE QUESTION

“What’s it worth?” “Is it worth the trouble?” “Is there any point in it?” “What does this mean?” Our daily lives are filled with questions about the value or worth of people and things and about their meaning and point. We would be very surprised indeed if we met somebody who just couldn’t see the purpose or use of such questions. The reason for this is quite simple. Human beings are rational: they naturally seek intelligibility and meaning, they want to know what the point or purpose of something is; they can’t help being interested in what something’s worth, how much value to place on somebody’s word.

Now there is a further question that people cannot help asking: has life itself any meaning or value beyond this world? A philosopher like Bertrand Russell may retort that the question is meaningless, since it makes no sense to talk about meaning or value except in terms of this life and the world we know. But this reaction to a perfectly intelligible question, indeed a question that can be called the question of all questions, which has exercised human minds since the beginning of recorded time, does sound a little too clever by half. Could it be, one can’t help suspecting, just a clever way of simply saying “no” to the question? Maybe, but the interesting thing is that the philosopher to whom I am referring didn’t just do that. It is as if he recognized that people do in fact ask this ultimate question as if it were a sensible question to ask and one that deserved an answer. So, instead of contenting himself with the answer that this life has no meaning or ultimate value, he preferred to argue that the question is meaningless and, therefore, doesn’t deserve a reply because it shouldn’t have been posed in the first place. Well, no doubt that’s

a clever way of pre-empting the question. But clever philosophers aren't necessarily either the most morally serious people or the most sensible of people. For the truth is that people do ask this question as if it were not only perfectly meaningful but also very well worth asking, so much so that it could be said to be the most important of all questions, whether or not an answer can be found to it.

Perhaps the most obvious starting point for most people through the ages is the existence of good and evil. True, clever philosophers have tried hard to explain away good and evil in the sense of explaining them in purely human terms as though they imply or suggest nothing that can't be understood in relation to this life and the world we know. In other words, they don't point to anything or anybody outside this world. However, that is not how it strikes all philosophers. Many philosophers acknowledge that different cultures and societies may vary somewhat in their moral codes, but, in spite of all these variations, there is a universal recognition of the existence of good and evil, of the fact of moral obligation. The mere fact that it is possible for people to criticize the morality in which they were brought up suggests that our sense of good and evil cannot be reduced to the principles and standards of the environment in which we were raised. It makes perfectly good sense to stand back and ask myself if a particular moral belief of mine is right or wrong. And this ability to criticize one's own values adds to the sense that the voice of conscience comes from outside both oneself and society. If so, could it be the echo of the voice of God?

For those who wish to deny that conscience has any such supernatural authority, the real explanation for the authoritative voice of conscience lies not just in the current norms of a particular society but in the universal experience of human beings trying to live together in harmony and peace with one another and in the consequent need to establish moral norms of behavior. Even if this explanation does justice to the sheer force of conscience, it nevertheless still does not account for private personal morality. After all, cruel or malicious thoughts, for example, don't do anyone any harm, unless acted on, and yet we do in fact experience the voice of conscience even in our innermost feelings and thoughts to which no one else has access. Of course, it could be argued that we only have such twinges of conscience because

such evil feelings and thoughts can so easily lead to actions that will harm others. But does this explanation really do justice to our sense of personal imperfection, to our awareness of how far our hearts are from being loving? Would we not suffer guilt and remorse if we were marooned on a desert island with no possibility of rescue, no chance of ever being able to affect others with our uncharity, our selfishness, our bad temper, our pride, our greed, our lust?

If conscience suggests a supernatural source for itself, then it also tells us that God is both personal and moral. But there is the other reason for believing in God that we have mentioned and which similarly gives us information about Him, and that is the universal feeling that this life has a significance and value which protest against mortality and which demand fulfillment in a continuing existence. In fact, it is not just a feeling or hope but a reasonable intuition which postulates a Creator who gives us this significance and value and who therefore must Himself embody them while transcending the goodness of human life. For some, then, it will be this sense of meaning and purpose which runs through life that indicates an afterlife where we shall attain our full potential and find that plenitude of happiness which eludes us in this life.

It is perfectly arguable that religious faith does not require justification; it is self-evidently desirable and meaningful in itself. If it carries its own intrinsic value like art or nature, then it seems otiose to try and find a basis for it, since it will be self-justifying. If religious faith can make people good and happy and fulfilled, is there any need for further argument? After all, if we are to be empirical and go on the evidence, then the results of faith will be very pertinent. Likewise, well-authenticated miracles that purport to be the effect of prayer may be another proof of God's existence.

At this point we must say something about this word "proof" in the religious context. When we speak about proofs here, we are certainly not talking about the kind of proofs that we expect in science and logic. Since, if God is God, He is "outside" the world like an author is "outside" his or her book, His existence cannot be proved scientifically as He is not part of the observable world. It is true that we can find evidence for God's existence in the world just as we infer from a book the existence of an author or perhaps authors. In the

same way that we infer things about an author from his book, we can learn about God from His world. Again, it is a logical truth—true by definition of the words—that if God is good then He cannot be bad; but there is no way we can logically prove the existence of God any more than we can logically prove that a book has one author rather than several. We simply can't put that kind of truth in the form of a syllogism. But then how many of the truths of which we are convinced can be proved logically or scientifically? I have every reason to suppose I will die one day and I would be a fool to deny the fact; but clearly my future death cannot be scientifically verified until I am dead, nor can I construct any kind of logical syllogism by which to arrive at this patent truth. Or a man's most important conviction in life may be the fact that his wife loves him, but this is not something he can prove to a doubting skeptic. There was no way that Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* could prove logically or scientifically that she was a faithful and loving wife to Othello—but she knew that she was, and so should Othello have known.

That word "should" is worth noting. While we blame Othello for not knowing a fact like that, we don't say he was stupid as we would if a logical or scientific truth was put before his eyes. A question of trust enters into a case like this. So many of the most obvious truths in life, as well as some of the most important ones—or rather the most important ones if we think that the truth about our affections is more important than anything else in life—are just not verifiable by either logical or scientific proof. Yet the odd thing is that people commonly make this grounds for not believing in the existence of God or the truth of Christianity, when every day of their lives they hold, and without any hesitation profess, as certain truths about all kinds of things they can't begin to prove logically or scientifically.

We can, then, have excellent, indeed overwhelming, arguments for God's existence, but let us not confuse ourselves by trying to pretend that they must be like the kind of arguments that we use quite properly to prove that I am sitting at a desk or that, if I am sitting down, then I cannot also be standing up. Knowing about God is much more like knowing that somebody loves me. We would be surprised if somebody demanded logical or scientific proofs for something that we know not through our eyes or our brains but in our heart.

In a similar way we can *know* that God exists in our conscience. This kind of reason for believing in a God derives from the nature of human life. It also tells us something about the nature of God. Other arguments may, for some people, be even more compelling, but they are less informative about the nature of God. For instance, the beauty of art and nature may induce a religious outlook. In that case, the idea that a purely chemical or physical explanation for existence will seem fantastic. But beauty doesn't tell us that God is all-good and all-loving. Nor do other arguments drawn from the physical world. The order that exists in the universe, and particularly the human brain, which is the most complex example of design known to us and through which we discern the world's design, indicates that the world has been designed by a designer. This implies a superhuman intelligence, but, again, tells us nothing about a God of love. The same is true of the argument from causality, which in essence is the argument that everything in the world must have an explanation or reason for existing, which in turn implies that the universe as a whole must have a first or uncaused or transcendent cause. Or, to put it more simply, the universe simply doesn't explain itself.

Now what is important to note is that all these different reasons for believing in God, however much or little they tell us about Him, are *personal* ones—that is to say, in each case, only a personal reality as opposed to an impersonal force makes sense of the evidence. Even so, many people prefer to say, when pressed, that they believe in “something” rather than “someone.” One can understand why. Believing in a thing as opposed to a person commits one to less. In particular, believing in “someone out there” would imply that that person might speak to one, make demands on one; whereas “something out there” is less demanding, even less threatening. But by the same token, a person can offer more than a thing. The reality is that in this, as in so many other less important matters in life, people are inconsistent. Their reasons for belief, or at least for hope, in an afterlife and a meaning and purpose to life imply not “something out there” but “Someone out there.”

One obvious reason why a thing rather than a Person is easier to imagine and therefore believe in is that in the developed world, unlike the third world, extraordinary economic and technological

progress has gone hand in hand with a catastrophic decline in the quality of family and community life. For people who may not have experienced a human father who provided stability in childhood, the idea of a Father who is Creator is likely to be correspondingly harder to envisage. Similarly, the wider breakdown of social relationships does not encourage or foster membership in a religious community. The idea of a spiritual society which enhances personal fulfillment and happiness becomes remote from actual experience and, therefore, less credible.

It is easy, though, to understand why so many people prefer to hedge their bets. Not only is the concept of a divine thing potentially less demanding, but it also requires less belief because it involves less and promises less. But, paradoxically, it is only a belief in “Someone out there” that meets most of the reasons for believing in anything at all. The expectations that are natural to human beings are consistent with a personal God, not with an impersonal entity. A super-athlete is not somebody who is not an athlete at all, but an athlete who is endowed with exceptional abilities. Similarly, the supernatural and the superhuman mean not that which is not natural and not human but that which is more than natural, more than human. A transcendent God is not a God who transcends humanity in the sense of leaving the human behind but in the sense of being more than human. A personal God does not transcend personality in the sense of superseding personality but in the sense of adding a higher dimension to personality. The Jewish revelation, which Christianity claims to transcend, not in the sense of rejecting but in the sense of augmenting by fulfilling, holds that human beings are created in the image of God, which means that they resemble their Creator. But if they are like God in the sense of reflecting His nature, and experience their need for God in terms of the human personality, then this God must be a *personal* God in ways that make sense to a human being with a human personality. This God must not be more than the human person in the absurd sense of being *less* than the human person. This God must be all that a human person is but far more, not in an impersonal but in a personal way. A grown-up is not a different kind of being from a child but rather a child who has grown up.

Now if a personal God is the only kind of a God that is worth believing in—in the sense that an impersonal God does not correspond to the reasons why human beings have always felt a need for believing in some kind of a supernatural reality—then this God must be personal in the ways that human beings are persons, but in an infinite and transcendent way. When we think of how human beings differ even from those animals which seem most like human beings in their instincts, feelings, and intelligence, we are confronted by that phenomenon we call self-consciousness and the capacity to reflect on ourselves. Even the most intelligent and sensitive animals lack this capability. For example, an animal can react acutely to pain, but, so far as we can tell, it does not have a consciousness of the experience of pain in the way that human beings not only feel pain but are aware, for example, of the length and the nature of the pain suffered. The difference is between suffering pain and being aware of suffering pain, an extra factor which, of course, increases the suffering. Or again, highly intelligent animals like dogs can be trained not to act in ways that displease their owners, and even to be aware of the displeasure they cause when they break the rules. Or again, the loyalty of a dog to its owner may seem practically human, but it remains an instinctive rather than a conscious loyalty. We simply cannot speak of even the most intelligent animals as possessing the self-awareness with which human beings are endowed.

A personal God, therefore, must have the qualities that characterize human beings, but to an infinite extent and in a transcendent way. I have hinted above that, while we might try and explain human intelligence, love, and even conscience in terms that would differentiate humans from animals in a quantitative rather than qualitative way, it is this capacity for looking at ourselves, for examining critically our thinking processes, our ability to love others, and our moral principles, that puts us in a unique situation in the world of sentient beings. Now, the curious thing is that when we discuss or evaluate or analyze ourselves, it is as though we are talking about another person. The fact that I can talk or think about me, as though “me” were somebody else, is not only a uniquely human capacity but it also provides a key to understanding the Christian idea of God.