Chapter 1

Different Kinds of Question

There are different ways of explaining things.

You are on the bus going in the direction of the city. A friend sees you and shouts, 'Why are you going to town?' To this you reply, 'Because I'm on the bus!' To which you get the answer, 'Don't be funny. Answer my question!' But, in a sense, you did answer the question. You did not give the answer that was expected and that is why the question was thrown back at you. What you did was to state a cause for your going to town. So let's try again. 'Why are you going to town?' 'Because I'm meeting Jim. Because I'm going to the ice show with him.' But if the questioner persists you will have to say, 'I'm going because I want to go. I decided to go. It is my will to go. And that's all there is to say.' Of course there is another answer which most people would never think of, let alone give. But some religious persons would: 'Because it is the will of God.'

Let's take another case.

A child died after contracting an unusual disease. So you ask the parents, 'Why did Jimmy die?' To which they might give one or more of the following answers: 'Because his body did not have the resistance it took to fight the infection.' 'Because we took him on safari with us, instead of leaving him with his granny.' 'Because it was the will of God.' We could understand quite well what the parents meant with either of the first two answers. Those are quite acceptable although they do point to different facts. In the first case to a set of physical ones, in the second to a decision that was taken. There are people who would give the third, but we would probably find this difficult to get hold of, as indeed we did in the first example.

It is late afternoon in the Lake District. Someone is watching the sunset. Suppose you intrude upon him and ask the question, 'What's happening?' You might get a lesson in optics: light of different wavelengths is striking the retina which in turn gives rise to a stimulation of the visual lobes of the brain, so I get a sensation which I register to you as seeing the sunset. The phrase is a sort of shorthand for all this complicated activity. That would be an answer to the question. Appropriate in a physics lesson, but acceptable, and understandable as an explanation. You might get the answer that

recounts his experiencing of beauty. Indeed he might say, 'Hush now. I'll tell you later.' Later he explains that the sight of the sinking sun had stirred feelings within him, and that he was responding to the beauty of the scene. That too is an explanation. This time it is an explanation in terms of aesthetics. But you might get a third answer - the religious answer. 'The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork.' The sun has been an object of worship for ages.

In each of these cases one level does not exclude or make impossible the others. It is incomplete in itself. It does not cover the whole ground. There is more to be said. What we have to do then is to ask what ground it does cover, if any. There will seem to us to be answers which do not say anything. But we must be careful not to dismiss these as simply nonsense. They may in the future come to have some meaning. Nor must we think that one sort of answer will say everything. Take one further example.

Why does the play Hamlet end in tragedy? 'Because Hamlet killed Polonius and this led to a train of events, and so to the tragic end.' 'Because Hamlet was both irresolute and impulsive.' 'Because it was God's will: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will!" ' Now each of these could be argued plausibly - the last less. It is the consequence of a way of seeing rather than a way of arguing. It is an explanation which Hamlet finds plausible.

These several examples make it clear that explanation can be given on different levels. We can give an account of the causes, on the assumption that effects are produced by causes. Since the effects are predictable when the causes are known, to detail the causes is, in a sense, to give an explanation of the effect. But if these are made to cover the whole ground, we are left with the feeling that such an explanation is not really satisfactory. People on buses do end up where buses end up. Children with low resistance do succumb to germs. People watching sunsets do have their optic nerves stimulated. The killing of Polonius did have immediate repercussions. But more will have to be said in each case to satisfy us.

Causes are not reasons. We feel a need to supplement the causal account, however elaborate and accurate it might be, by a further explanation. So the second kind of answer given in our illustrations has to do with the will of the agent, or agents, concerned. The optical explanation of the person watching the sunset would do just as well if he were watching the emptying of dustbins. The physical explanation

would cover the death of a dog as well as the death of Jimmy. And the 'Because I'm on the bus' answer strikes us as amusing because it does not seem to explain anything at all. In each case the result has to do with the person, a living, willing, being. In any adequate account his personality and his will must be taken into account.

Scientific explanation on the causal level is deliberately selective. It does not cover the whole ground. Will as a factor may not be accounted for. But in a comprehensive explanation it must be taken into account. The ballistics expert plays an important part, perhaps sometimes a decisive part, in the criminal investigation. But there's a lot more beside the account of the matter which he's able to explain in his way. You have to ask questions about the person of the criminal.

Now religious people go on to say that the will of God is a factor which should not be forgotten. They have the persistent habit of saying whatever happens or happened is or was the will of God. That seems to be a very strange way of accounting for it, since the statement is made to include everything, and not just the particular matter in question. This does not mean that believers do not distinguish between important and decisive moments in which they see the will of God in a special way from other occasions. They do.

Please notice that the religious explanation is not a substitute for the other kinds of explanation. The scientist does not say, if he happens also to be a believer: 'Since I can't find an adequate cause-effect explanation I'll just have to say that God causes it that way.' In an earlier, less scientific time, this was what might sometimes be said. God became the 'God of the gaps'. When the project ran into difficulties, or when there was an area which had not yet been scientifically explained (in terms of causes and effects) there, it was thought, the God-explanation could be employed. Theologians learned slowly that that kind of God was not worth having. He would become less and less relevant as science closed one gap after another. One can't go on fighting rear-guard actions for ever. Now the scientist says, T do not yet know, but hope with due diligence that we can pass from ignorance to knowledge.'

Our point is that the three levels of explanation need not conflict. Determinism on the causal level, Freedom on the voluntary level, and Will of God are not incompatible. You could 'explain' everything on the level of physical causes and not have touched the problem of freedom. Freedom cannot be analysed in the categories of physics.

There is another sense in which a question can be taken in different ways, and different kinds of answer be given to it. The different sciences have their own ways of answering questions. This is what distinguishes them from each other. The task of learning a science involves the understanding of the language and the methods it uses. Take a question such as 'What is man?' and from different disciplines we shall get different kinds of answer.

The biologist might answer this question by speaking of the size and activity of the brain and explaining its physical functions. The psychologist might answer in terms of man's intelligence and the distinction between that and the intelligence of the higher animals. A philosopher might answer by speaking of his conscience as making him distinctive. The theologian would speak of spirit, of faith, and of man as the creature of God.

Other examples could be given of questions which might be answered on different levels. Think of some.

This brief introduction will be complete if we make three points:

1. Where it is a case of questions which can be answered on different levels it will help if we are aware of the differences between the possible answers so that we do not confuse one kind with another. If we distinguish the levels from one another, we may see that some levels of answer are much more important than others.

2. On each level there are good and bad ways of answering the question. In the above example, concerning man, there are recognized procedures for discussing the question from within the different disciplines. If we are attempting to answer (or to understand) the question from a particular point of view and with a particular method, we must be acquainted with the ways of tackling it which are recognized within the particular discipline.

3. One kind of answer need not exclude another kind of answer. It is a popular, and sometimes welcomed, mistake to think that if some science can answer the question asked, then there is no further word to be spoken about it. This is one of the ways of taking a short cut in discussing the relations between science and religion. If science does not find evidence for the believer's claim that man is the creature of God, the question is not worth pursuing any further. That is how it's seen (sometimes) from one side. If science does not bear out the claims that God is the creator, then so much the worse for science. That's how it's seen (sometimes) from the other side. Both are wrong. It's not a matter of either/or, but rather of both/and.

This makes it much more difficult and taxing. But it also makes it possible to be a cultured believer on the one hand, and an unprejudiced unbeliever on the other. It is not necessary to be a scientist in order to see issues involved in the discussion of relations between science and religion. You have to be intelligent and you have to be serious. The other mistake dies harder. You do not have to be committed to a particular faith in order to understand something about religion. There are ways of talking about religion which are not concerned to 'witness' to you nor to persuade you to be a believer. You can go a long way in understanding what religion is, and what it is not, simply by having a look at what is available generally: in books about religion, in the newspapers, on the radio. You will find that there are people who will be helpful in explaining to you what religion is about, without wanting to persuade you to have faith or to join a religious body. That may or may not come later. What is important for us now is to look reasonably at some of the problems of particular interest to those of us who wish to be well-informed about both science and religion and would welcome the discovery of some kind of working relationship between them.

We now raise a question which will be in the minds of most people when any discussion of religion takes place, the question of God. It is not easy to talk about God. God is the theologian's problem. That is important. It is his problem to make discourse about God intelligible. Is there a level upon which such discourse is meaningful? Apart from oaths and clauses in insurance companies' forms ('act of God') where the function of the words is quite plain we might clear the ground by indicating where such language is not meaningful, that is where it does not clarify or explain anything. This will remove part of the difficulty. It's hard enough to talk about God. We need not make it harder by raising useless problems, or by introducing needless difficulties, one of which is that of oversimplifying the difficulties, either in a negative or a positive direction.

Specifically, shall the theologian talk about God in the language of will as was done briefly in this chapter, that is in the language of human experience? Or shall he refuse to apply to God such analogies drawn from human experience and, so to speak, put a minus sign in front of all such human characteristics when speaking of God?

Indeed, why speak about God at all?

No one knows more about the difficulties of God-language than does the person who seriously tries to use it and to specify the level of

discourse on which it is appropriately used, differentiating that from other levels where other sorts of language are appropriate.

Summary and Conclusion

Questions can be answered on different levels, which levels have rules of right discourse and which need not necessarily conflict with one another. Is there any level of discourse upon which God-language is helpful?

Discussion Questions

Take the following questions and propose different kinds of possible answer. Then ask what kinds of answer you have given.

What is life?

What is death?

What is man?

What happened at Dunkirk?

Why should I refrain from murder? stealing?

Why did Captain Scott and his companions die? Yan Palach?