

MAY 10 1982

God Matters

Herbert McCabe OP

GEOFFREY CHAPMAN
LONDON

1

Creation

In my view to assert that God exists is to claim the right and need to carry on an activity, to be engaged in research, and I think this throws light on what we are doing if we try to prove the existence of God. To prove the existence of God is to prove that some questions still need asking, that the world poses these questions for us.

To prove the existence of God, then, would be rather like proving the validity of science — I don't mean science as a body of established facts set out in textbooks or journals, but science as an intellectual activity, the activity of research currently going on; and not just routine research which consists in looking for the answers to clearly formulated questions by means of clearly established techniques, but the research which is the growing point of science, the venture into the unknown.

It is perfectly possible to deny the validity of this. It is perfectly possible to say we now *have* science (we didn't have it in the eighth century, let us say, but we have it now). It is just there; from now on it is all really just a matter of tidying up a few details. Now of course all the really great advances in science have come by questioning just that, by questioning, let us say, whether the Newtonian world is really the last word, by digging down and asking questions of what everybody has come to take for granted. But you could imagine quite easily a society which discouraged such radical questioning. In this century we have seen totalitarian societies which have been extremely keen on improving their technology and answering detailed questions within the accepted framework of science, but extremely hostile to the kind of radical thinking I am envisaging; the kind of society where Werner von Braun is honoured and Einstein is exiled. I also think that the same effect can be produced in more subtle ways in societies that don't look totalitarian. And of course it was notoriously produced in the Church confronted by

Galileo. The asking of radical questions is discouraged by any society that believes in itself, believes it has found the answers, believes that only its authorised questions are legitimate.

Faced with such hostility or such incomprehension, you can, of course, say: well, wait and see: you will find that in spite of everything, science will make startling and quite unexpected changes, that our whole world view will shift in ways we cannot now predict or imagine. But that is just to assert your *belief*. And this I think is parallel to asserting your belief in God. I think a belief in God — in the sense of a belief in the validity of the kind of radical question to which God would be the answer — is a part of human flourishing and that one who closes himself off from it is to that extent deficient. For this reason I welcome such belief in God, but what I am asking myself now is not whether I believe, but what grounds I have for such belief. And here again I think the analogy with proving the validity of fundamental thinking in science is helpful. How, after all, do we show that there is still a long and probably unexpected road to travel in science? By pointing to anomalies in the present scientific world picture. If your world picture includes, for example, the idea of ether as the medium in which light waves occur, then there is an anomaly if it turns out to be impossible to determine the velocity of a light source with respect to the ether; and so on. Now in a parallel way, it seems to me, proofs for the existence of God point to anomalies in a world picture which excludes the God question. It is, it seems to me, quite anomalous to hold that while it is legitimate and valid to ask 'How come?' about any particular thing or event in the world, it is illegitimate and invalid to ask it about the whole world. To say that we aren't allowed to ask it merely because we can't answer it seems to me to be begging the question. The question is: is there an unanswered question about the existence of the world? Can we be puzzled by the existence of the world instead of nothing? I can be and am; and this is to be puzzled about God.

The question 'How come?' can have a whole lot of different meanings and be asked at several levels, and the deeper the question you ask about an individual thing the more it is a question about a world to which that thing belongs; there is finally a deepest question about a thing which is also a question about everything. Let me explain that enigmatic remark.

Supposing you ask 'How come Fido?' You may be asking whether his father is Rover or whether it was that promiscuous mongrel down the lane. In such a case the answer is satisfactorily given by naming Fido's parents. At this level no more need be said; the question is fully answered *at this level*. But now suppose you ask: 'But how come Fido's a dog?' The answer could be: 'His parents were dogs, and dogs just are born of other dogs'. Here you have moved to what I call a deeper level of

questioning and begun to talk about what dogs are. You are saying: for Fido to be is for him to be a *dog*, and Fido's parents are the sort of things whose activities result in things being dogs. Now your original question 'How come Fido?' has deepened into a question about the dog species. It remains a question about this individual dog Fido, but it is also a question about dogs — not about dogs in the abstract, but about the actual dog species in the world. Your question 'How come Fido?' at this new level is a question 'How come dogs anyway?'

And of course there is an answer to that too in terms of things like genetics and natural selection and what not. Here we have a new and deeper level of the question 'How come Fido?' — still a question about this particular puppy, but one that is answered in terms of its membership of a still wider community; no longer now simply the community of dogs, but the whole biological community within which dogs come to be and have their place. Then of course we can ask a question about Fido at a deeper level still. When we ask how come the biological community, we no doubt answer in terms of biochemistry. (I am not of course pretending that we actually have the answers to all these questions, as though we fully understood how it came about, and had to come about, that there are now dogs around the place, but we expect eventually to answer these questions.)

And now we can go on from the level of biochemistry to that of physics and all the time we are asking more penetrating questions concerning Fido and each time we go further in our questioning we are seeing Fido in a wider and wider context.

We can put this another way by saying that each time we ask the question we are asking about Fido over against some other possibility. Our first question simply meant: How come Fido is this dog rather than another; he's Rover's son rather than the mongrel's son. At the next level we were asking: How come he's a dog rather than, say, a giraffe. At the next level: How come he's a living being rather than an inanimate, and so on.

Now I want to stress that all the time we are asking about this individual Fido. It is just that we are seeing further problematics within him. Fido's parents brought it about that he is *this* dog not another, but in that act they also brought it about that he is *this* dog (not a giraffe), that he is *this* living dog, that he is this *biochemically complex, living* dog; that he is this *molecularly structured, biochemically complex, living* dog, and so on. We are probing further into what it is for Fido to come to be and always by noting what he is not, but might have been. Every 'How come' question is how come this *instead* of what is not. And every time, of course, we answer by reference to some thing or state of affairs, some existing reality, in virtue of which Fido is this rather than what he is not.

Now our ultimate radical question is not how come Fido exists as this dog instead of that, or how come Fido exists as a dog instead of a giraffe, or exists as living instead of inanimate, but how come Fido exists *instead of nothing*, and just as to ask how come he exists as dog is to put him in the context of dogs, so to ask how come he exists instead of nothing is to put him in the context of *everything*, the universe or world. And this is the question I call the God-question, because whatever the answer is, whatever the thing or state of affairs, whatever the existing reality that answers it we call 'God'.

Now of course it is always possible to stop the questioning at any point; a man may refuse to ask why there are dogs. He may say there just *are* dogs and perhaps it is impious to enquire how come — there were people who actually said that to Darwin. Similarly it is possible to refuse to ask this ultimate question, to say as Russell once did: the universe is just there. This seems to me just as arbitrary as to say: dogs are just there. The difference is that we now know by hindsight that Darwin's critics were irrational because we have familiarised ourselves with an *answer* to the question, how come there are dogs? We have not familiarised ourselves with the answer to the question, how come the world instead of nothing? but that does not make it any less arbitrary to refuse to ask it. To ask it is to enter on an exploration which Russell was simply refusing to do, as it seems to me. It is of course perfectly right to point out the mysteriousness of a question about *everything*, to point to the fact that we have no way of answering it, but that is by no means the same as saying it is an unaskable question. As Wittgenstein said 'Not how the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystery'.

There is indeed a difficulty about having a concept of 'everything', for we ordinarily conceive of something with, so to say, a boundary around it: this is a sheep and not a giraffe. But *everything* is bounded by *nothing*, which is just to say that it is not bounded by anything. To put what is the same point another way: we can have no concept of *nothing*, absolutely speaking. We can use the word relatively; we can say, 'There is nothing in the cupboard' meaning there are no largish objects — we are understood not to be saying there is no dust or no air. 'There is nothing between Kerry and New York' means there is no land. It does not mean there is absolutely nothing, no sea or fishes. The notions of *everything* and of absolutely nothing, are not available to us in the sense that the notions of sheep or scarlet or savagery are available to us. And this means that we are asking our ultimate radical question with tools that will not do the job properly, with words whose meaning has to be stretched beyond what we can comprehend. It would be very strange if it were not so. As Wittgenstein says, what we have here is the mystery. If the question of God were a neat and simple question to be answered in

terms of familiar concepts, then whatever we are talking about, it is not God. A God who is in this sense comprehensible would not be worth worshipping, or even of talking about (except for the purpose of destroying him).

It is clear that we reach out to, but do not reach, an answer to our ultimate question, how come anything instead of nothing? But we are able to exclude some answers. If God is whatever answers our question, how come everything? then evidently he is not to be included amongst everything. God cannot be a thing, an existent among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two. Again, if we are to speak of God as causing the existence of everything, it is clear that we must not mean that he makes the universe out of anything. Whatever creation means it is not a process of making.

Again it is clear that God cannot *interfere* in the universe, not because he has not the power but because, so to speak, he has too much; to interfere you have to be an alternative to, or alongside, what you are interfering with. If God is the cause of everything, there is nothing that he is alongside. Obviously God makes no difference to the universe; I mean by this that we do not appeal specifically to God to explain why the universe is this way rather than that, for this we need only appeal to explanations within the universe. For this reason there can, it seems to me, be no feature of the universe which indicates it is God-made. What God accounts for is that the universe is there instead of nothing. I have said that whatever God is, he is not a member of everything, not an inhabitant of the universe, not a thing or a kind of thing. And I should add, I suppose, that it cannot be possible to ask of him, how come God instead of nothing? It must not be possible for him to be nothing. Not just in the sense that God must be imperishable, but that it must make no sense to consider that God might not be. Of course it is still possible to say, without manifest contradiction, 'God might not be', but that is because when we speak of God by using the word 'God', we do not understand what we mean, we have no concept of God; what governs our use of the word 'God' is not an understanding of what God is but the validity of a question about the world. That is why we are not protected by any *logical* laws from saying 'God might not exist' even though it makes no sense. What goes for our rules for the use of 'God' does not go for the God we try to name with the word. (And a corollary of this, incidentally, is why a famous argument for the existence of God called the ontological argument does not work.)

What I have been saying may seem to make God both remote and irrelevant. He is not part of the universe and he makes no difference to it. It is therefore necessary to stress that God must be in everything that happens and everything that exists in the universe. If Fido's parents

make Fido to exist instead of nothing it is because in their action God is acting, just as if a pen writes it is because in its action a writer is acting. It is because it is God that wields every agent in the universe that agents bring things into existence, make things new. Every action in the world is an action of God; not because it is not an action of a creature but because it is by God's action that the creature is *itself* and has its own activity. But more of that in the next chapter.

For the moment may I just say that it seems to me that what we often call atheism is not a denial of the God of which I speak. Very frequently the man who sees himself as an atheist is not denying the existence of some answer to the mystery of how come there is anything instead of nothing, he is denying what he thinks or has been told is a *religious* answer to this question. He thinks or has been told that religious people, and especially Christians, claim to have discovered what the answer is, that there is some grand architect of the universe who designed it, just like Basil Spence only bigger and less visible, that there is a Top Person in the universe who issues arbitrary decrees for the rest of the persons and enforces them because he is the most powerful being around. Now if denying this claim makes you an atheist, then I and Thomas Aquinas and a whole Christian tradition are atheistic too.

But a genuine atheist is one who simply does not see that there is any problem or mystery here, one who is content to ask questions within the world, but cannot see that the world itself raises a question. This is the man I compare to those who are content to ask questions within the established framework of science, but cannot see that there are genuine though ill-formulated questions on the frontiers. I have made a comparison with scientific research, but just the same parallel could be made with any kind of creative activity. The poet is trying to write a poem but he does not know what he is trying to say until he has said it and recognised it. Until he has done this it is extremely difficult to show that he is writing a poem or that he could write a poem. I can show, by pointing to the existence of bricks and cement and so on and the availability of a work-force, that there could be more *houses* made. I cannot show that there will *ever* be another poem.

I called this paper 'God and Creation' in order to indicate what I and the mainstream Christian tradition understand by creation as a path towards God. We come across God, so to speak, or rather we search and do not come across him, when the universe raises for us a radical question concerning its existence at all. And creation is the name we give to God's answering this question.

I hope it will be evident that creation is here being used in a quite different sense from the way it is used by people who seek to discover the origin of the universe (was it a big bang or a lot of little pops or what-

ever). Whatever processes took place in remote periods of time is of course in itself a fascinating topic but it is irrelevant to the question of creation in the sense that makes us speak of God. When we have concluded that God created the world, there still remains the scientific question to ask about what kind of world it is and was and how, if ever, it began. It is probably unnecessary to say that the proposition that the universe is made by God and that everything that is, is begun and sustained in existence by God, does not entail that the universe has only existed for a finite time. There may be reasons for thinking that the universe is finite in time and space but the fact that its existence depends on God is not one of them.

Coming to know that the universe is dependent on God does not in fact tell us anything about the character of the universe. How could it? Since everything we know about God (that he exists and what he is not) is derived from what we know of the universe, how could we come back from God with some additional information about the world? If we think we can it is only because we have smuggled something extra into our concept of God — for example, when we make God in our own image and ask ourselves quite illegitimate questions like 'What would I have done if I were God?' It should be evident that this is a temptation to be avoided.

There is one last thing I should like to touch on. What are we to make of the notion of a 'personal' God?

I think the idea of a personal God has arisen in two quite different ways. In the first place people have thought of God as a person because they have thought of him as a maker — I mean they have had an image of God as an artist or technician working away at something — and thereby accounting for its existence. In this sense the person (in the sense of human person) is an image of God, a picture which may be useful but could evidently be misleading. In the second place I think people call God personal because it seems absurd to say he is impersonal. However romantic we may get about the great impersonal forces of nature that seem to tower over us, we know perfectly well that they don't. What is impersonal and non-intelligent will, in principle, always obey us if only we know the trick. There are people who speak of God as a great life-force, and that is all right if they merely want to deny that he is some particular concrete individual — evidently he is not, but we have to remember that great forces don't really get anything done unless they are wielded in a context. The wind and the waves don't achieve any aim, there is nothing that counts as success in their thrashing around. It is only by talking about them as *though* they were persons or at least as *alive* that we can speak of them getting anything done, and since whatever else we mean by God we mean what gets something done or

made or existing, it seems that we cannot think of him as merely impersonal.

Once we have denied that God is merely impersonal we are under a strong temptation to imagine him as forming intentions or thinking things out or making up his mind, but none of this is a legitimate deduction. For us the business of being persons is extremely closely tied up with the business of talking, of forming concepts and making judgments but there is no reason at all to transfer all this to God; indeed there are strong reasons for not doing so since this version of personality seems associated with the fact that we are physical beings, parts of a larger material whole.

We can then, I think, say that whatever accounts for the existence of the universe cannot be limited in the way that impersonal unintelligent things and forces are, but this does not justify us in attributing to God our own particular mode of intelligence. If we do speak of God as making up his mind or changing his mind or deciding or cogitating or reasoning, it can only be by metaphor as when we speak of his strong right arm or his all-seeing eye.