



Mr. Hare on Theology and Falsification

H. J. N. Horsburgh

The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 6, No. 24 (Jul., 1956), 256-259.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8094%28195607%296%3A24%3C256%3AMHOTAF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

The Philosophical Quarterly is currently published by The Philosophical Quarterly.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/philquar.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

MR. HARE ON THEOLOGY AND FALSIFICATION

I wish to make some brief comments on Mr. Richard Hare's contribution to the now celebrated discussion on 'Theology and Falsification', which first appeared in 'University' (Winter 1950).¹ Mr. Hare's paper was a general defence of religion written in reply to the papers of his fellow symposiasts, Professor Anthony Flew and Mr. P. Nowell-Smith, who both maintained that theological utterances cannot be assertions because they are not falsifiable. Mr. Hare concedes that they are not assertions and it is this concession on the part of an avowed theist which has provoked the following comments. They contain no suggestion as to how the theist is to escape such a concession; what they attempt to show is that in Mr. Hare's case the concession has been made in vain since his general defence of religion cannot withstand criticism. I suspect that all defences of religion involving this concession are similarly doomed and that theists must face the fact that they make assertions and thereafter concentrate their intellectual resources on the task of showing how their statements are to be understood.

Hare introduces his theory by means of a parable. 'A certain lunatic', he says, 'is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons . . . and after each of them has retired, they say, "You see, he does not really want to murder you. . . ."'. But the lunatic replies, "Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time. . . ."'. However many kindly dons are produced the reaction is still the same. Now we say that such a person is deluded. But what is he deluded about? . . . Let us apply Flew's test to him. There is no behaviour of dons that can be enacted that he will accept as counting against his theory; and therefore his theory, on this test, asserts nothing. But it does not follow that there is no difference between what he thinks about dons and what most of us think about them. . . .'. At this point Hare suggests the word 'blik' for that in which the sane man differs from the lunatic. 'Flew has shown that a blik does not consist in an assertion or in a system of them; but nevertheless it is very important to have the right blik'. Bliks do not explain, Hare says; 'but it is nevertheless true to say that, as Hume saw, without a blik there can be no explanation; for it is by our bliks that we decide what is and what is not an explanation. Suppose we believed that everything that happened happened by pure chance. This would not, of course, be an assertion; for it is compatible with everything happening or not happening, and so, inci-

¹The most valuable parts of it have now been republished in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Mr. Hare's contribution is to be found on pp. 99-103 of that volume.

dentally, is its contradictory. But if we had this belief, we should not be able to explain or predict or plan anything. Thus, although we should not be asserting anything different from those of a more normal belief, there would be a great difference between us ; and this is the sort of difference that there is between those who really believe in God and those who really disbelieve in Him '.

I wish to make four comments on Hare's theory. In the first place, the notion of a blik is an unsatisfactory one, for, if we base the conception on Hare's examples rather than upon the letter of his definition, there are important logical differences between some bliks and others. Thus, ' Everything happens by chance ' and the madman's belief about dons, both of which are said to be bliks, differ with respect to falsifiability. ' Everything happens by chance ' has no tendency to collide with any matter of fact. The madman's blik is quite different. True, it can escape falsification ; but this is only because the madman is obsessively intent on rescuing it, framing blik-saving hypotheses whenever it seems to be in danger. Thus, when the dons are nice to him he is aware that this tells against his blik ; he therefore ascribes their kindness to diabolical cunning instead of accepting it at its face value. His procedure is similar to that of a scientist who shores up a favourite hypothesis with auxiliary hypotheses when the facts appear to be undermining it. Bliks are therefore divisible into absolutely unfalsifiable or pure bliks and artificially unfalsifiable or impure bliks. Pure bliks can function only as bliks. But impure bliks can function either as bliks or as assertions. This follows from what has just been said with regard to unfalsifiability. Thus, ' Everything has a cause ' cannot function as an assertion. On the other hand, it is easy to produce sentences that sometimes function as bliks and sometimes as assertions. Thus, if someone goes mad and is heard to declare, ' I am Socrates ', to the rest of us this will simply be untrue ; but to the lunatic himself it will be the blik of a lifetime, something he will defend with all the power of his pent-up intellectual engines, launching whole salvos of hypotheses sooner than make his surrender to common sense. Another logical difference between pure and impure bliks is that whereas the pure blik strictly fulfils the requirements of blikness as laid down by Hare, the impure blik fails to fulfil them. Consider the blik ' Everything has a cause '. This statement explains nothing but it does provide us with a pattern of explanation. Now consider the madman's blik, ' The dons want to murder me '. Surely this blik itself explains as well as enabling the madman to choose between possible explanations ? If the dons are rough and menacing owing to a surfeit of the lunatic's company their wish to murder him is adduced as an explanation ; but if they are friendly their wish to murder him is used to choose between possible explanations, that one being chosen which is most easily reconciled with the blik. Notice, too, that I said of the madman's blik that it enabled him to choose between possible explanations and not that it enabled him to decide what is and what is not an explanation. In this, too, it is unlike the pure

blik 'Everything has a cause', for that blik does not simply offer us a rule of preference; it provides us with a means of deciding whether a statement is or is not an explanation. These differences are so important that even in rough weather Mr. Hare should have known better than to bring them all together under the umbrella of a single term.

Secondly, it is clear from what I have already said that the notion of an impure blik is inadmissible; for its toleration would force us to say that an explanation can be unfalsifiable. Thus, the madman's blik is used as an unfalsifiable explanation when the dons show hostility. Purity must therefore be enjoined on bliks—unless we are prepared to say that explanations can be unfalsifiable.

In the third place, it seems clear that theological utterances such as 'God exists' or 'God loves us' are not pure bliks. Consider the sentence 'God exists', which, for the moment, I assume to be a blik. At first glance it is difficult to say whether 'God exists' enables us to choose between possible explanations. But it seems immediately obvious that it does not enable us to decide what is and what is not an explanation. As far as I can see it can only affect our explanations by being consistent with some of them and not with others; and it can only do this if it is an impure blik, i.e., one which is only artificially unfalsifiable. (Mr. Basil Mitchell is surely correct when he says 'the theologian . . . would not deny that the fact of pain counts against the assertion that God loves men. This very incompatibility generates the most intractable of theological problems—the problem of evil'.² Nothing could be more obvious than that if 'God loves us' is unfalsifiable, it is artificially unfalsifiable). Therefore, unless we are prepared to allow impurity in bliks, this forces us to say that it cannot be a blik at all.

Finally, if we overrule the apparently insuperable objection to impure bliks and say that theological utterances such as 'God loves us' are bliks of this kind, we create very serious difficulties for any religion such as Christianity, which calls on us to make a number of historical assertions, any of which may be falsified. The problem is how to effect a logical patchwork—or how to arrange a harmonious marriage between the unfalsifiable and that which must be declared an honest woman. And one can never make it easy to live with the unfalsifiable. Furthermore, impure bliks are dangerous, showing a strong tendency to pass on the contagion of blikness to hypotheses which have too much to do with them. This can be illustrated in connexion with the madman's blik. We say to him, 'A is a don and he was friendly to you'. 'Not at all', says the lunatic, 'he's brimming with diabolical cunning'. We hasten to deny this, producing abundant evidence of the kindness of A's nature. At this point the hypothesis that A is diabolically cunning succumbs to blikness and there is the usual gush of saving hypotheses. But if we fasten on these they too become infected until eventually everything falsifiable in the madman's world has perished in a plague of galloping

²*New Essays on Philosophical Theology*, p. 103.

blikness. It is only too likely, therefore, that when the attempt is made to link our religious blikns to allegedly historical occurrences—as Christianity would oblige us to do—the historical assertions will degenerate into blikns. And this, of course, cannot fail to give rise to further problems, e.g., that of providing reasons for holding that such and such events, or alleged events, are really blikns and not the straightforward historical occurrences they always seemed to be.

I conclude, therefore, that if the religious man must retreat under pressure from such critics as Flew and Nowell-Smith, the defence lines proposed by Hare offer him no security.

H. J. N. HORSBURGH

Australian National University.