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William P. Alston

Speaking Literally of God

William P. Alston (1921–2009) brings his widely recognized expertise in the philosophy of language to bear upon issues related to religious language. In the following essay, he explores the question of whether we can speak literally of God. Recognizing the popular professional opinion that our talk of God must be somehow nonliteral (e.g., symbolic, metaphorical, figurative), he develops an argument for how religious language can be used literally. Alston carefully frames the question as follows: can we form subject-predicate sentences that can possibly be asserted truly of God conceived as an incorporeal being? In pursuing this question, he restricts his study to *personalistic predicates*—what he calls "P-predicates"—that distinctively apply to personal agents. The range of personalistic predicates, of course, includes *mental predicates* (pertaining to cognitions, feelings, and other psychological states) and *action predicates* (pertaining to what an agent does). Alston looks at the concept of God's incorporeality to see whether it provides a sovereign objection to applying personalistic predicates to God and concludes that it does not. There simply is nothing inherent in the concept of God's incorporeality to prevent such predicates from applying to God. Alston appreciates the fact that much more work remains to be done to build a comprehensive argument that we can speak literally of God—work that would include an analysis of timelessness, immutability, and other classical divine attributes to see if they might constitute a bar to speaking literally of God. Nonetheless, Alston believes that his present argument shows that in principle we can indeed speak literally of God.

Literal Predication and Theology

In this essay we shall be concerned with only one stretch of talk about God, but a particularly central stretch—subject-predicate statements in which the subject term is used to refer to God. I mean this to be limited to *statements* in a strict sense, utterances that are put forward with a "truth claim." This is a crucial stretch of the territory, because any other talk that involves reference to God presupposes the truth of one or more statements about God. For example,

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if I ask God to give me courage, I am presupposing that God is the sort of being to whom requests can be sensibly addressed. Thus our more specific topic concerns whether terms can be literally predicated of God.

According to contemporary Protestant theologians of a liberal cast, it is almost an article of faith that this is impossible. Let us be somewhat more explicit than people like that generally are, as to just what is being denied. When someone says that we cannot speak literally of God, that person does not mean to deny us the capacity to form a subject-predicate sentence that contains a subject term used to refer to God, making a literal use of the predicate term and uttering the sentence with the claim that the predicate is true of the subject. I could easily refute that denial here and now—"God has commanded us to love one another." I have just done it. But presumably it is not that sort of ability that is in question. It is rather a question as to whether any such truth claim can succeed. What is being denied is that any predicate term, used literally, can be *truly applied* to God, or as we might say, that any predicate is *literally true* of God.

But even this is stronger than a charitable interpretation would require. Presumably, no one who thinks it possible to refer to God would deny that some negative predicates are literally true of God—for instance, incorporeal, immutable, or not-identical-with-Richard-Nixon. Nor would all extrinsic predicates be ruled out; it would be difficult to deny that "thought of now by me" could be literally true of God. Now it is notoriously difficult to draw an exact line between positive and negative predicates; and the class of predicates I am calling "extrinsic" is hardly easier to demarcate. It is either very difficult or impossible to give a precise characterization of the class of predicates to which the deniers of literal talk should be addressing themselves. Here I shall confine myself to the following brief statement. The reason various predicates are obvious examples of "negative" or "extrinsic" predicates is that they do not "tell us anything" about the subject—about the nature or operations of the subject. Let us call predicates that do "tell us something" about such matters "intrinsic" predicates. We may then take it that an opponent of literal theological talk is denying that any *intrinsic* predicate can be literally true of God. It will be noted that "intrinsic" predicates include various *relational* predicates, such as "made the heavens and the earth" and "spoke to Moses."

Various reasons have been given for the impossibility of literal predication in theology. Among the most prominent have been the following.

1. Since God is an absolutely undifferentiated unity, and since all positive predications impute complexity to their subject, no such predications can be true of God. This line of thought is most characteristic of the mystical tradition, but something like it can be found in other theologies as well.
2. God is so "transcendent," so "wholly other," that no concepts we can form would apply to him.
3. The attempt to apply predicates literally to God inevitably leads to paradoxes.

It is the second reason that bulks largest in twentieth-century Protestant theology. It has taken several forms, one of the more fashionable being the position of Paul Tillich that (a) God is not *a* being but Being-Itself, since anything that is *a* being would not be an appropriate object of "ultimate concern"; and (b) only what is *a* being can be literally characterized.

In my opinion, all these arguments are radically insufficient to support the sweeping denial that *any* intrinsic predicate can be literally true of God. But this is not the place to go into that. Nor will I take up the cudgel for the other side on this issue and argue that it must be possible for *some* intrinsic predicates or other to be literally true of God. Instead I will focus on a particularly important class of predicates—those I shall call "personalistic" (or, following Strawson, "P-predicates")—and consider the more specific question, whether any P-predicates can be literally true of God. Or rather, as I shall make explicit shortly, I will consider one small part of this very large question. By "personalistic" predicates, I mean those that, as a group, apply to a being only if that being is a "personal agent"—an agent that carries out intentions, plans, or purposes in its actions, that acts in the light of knowledge or belief; a being whose actions express attitudes and are guided by standards and principles; a being capable of communicating with

other such agents and entering into other forms of personal relations with them. The conception of God as a personal agent is deeply embedded in Christianity and in other theistic religions. Communication between God and man, verbal and otherwise, is at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Equally fundamental is the thought of God as a being who lays down commands, injunctions, rules, and regulations, and who monitors compliance or noncompliance; who created the world and directs it to the attainment of certain ends; who enters into covenants; who rewards and punishes; who loves and forgives; who acts in history and in the lives of men to carry out His purposes. The last few sentences indicate some of the kinds of P-predicates that have traditionally been applied to God.

What Does It Mean to Speak Literally?

Before coming to grips with this problem, we must provide some clarification of the central term "literal." To begin on a negative note, despite the frequent occurrence of phrases such as "literal *meaning*" and "literal *sense*," I believe that such phrases constitute a confused or at least a loose way of thinking about the subject. To get straight about the matter, we need to keep a firm hold on the distinction between *language* and *speech*. A (natural) language is an abstract system, a system of sound types or, in principle, types of other sorts of perceptible items. The systematicity involved is both "internal" and "external." The phonology, morphology, and syntax of a language reveal its internal system—the ways its elements can be combined to form larger units. The external system is revealed by the semantics of the language—the way units of language have the function of "representing" things in the world and features of the world.[1] A language serves as a means of communication; in fact, it is plausible to look on the entire complex structure as "being there" in order to make a language an effective device for communication. Speech, on the other hand, is the *use* of language in communication (using "speech" in an extended sense, to cover written as well as oral communication). It is what we *do* in the course of exploiting a linguistic system for purposes of communication.

Now the fact that a given word or phrase has the meaning(s) or sense(s) that it has is a fact about the language; it is part of the semantic constitution of the language.[2] Thus it is a semantic fact about English that "player" has among its meanings:

1. an idler;
2. one who plays some (specified) game;
3. a gambler;
4. an actor.[3]

It is partly the fact that a word *has* a certain meaning in a language that gives the word its usability for communication; this fact constitutes one of the linguistic resources we draw upon in saying what we have to say.

The term "literal," on the other hand, stands for a certain way of *using* words, phrases, and so on; it stands for a mode of *speech* rather than for a type of meaning or any other feature of *language*. As such, it stands in contrast with a family of *figurative* uses of terms—"figures of speech," as they are appropriately termed in the tradition—the most familiar of which is metaphor. Let us make explicit the difference between literal and metaphorical uses, restricting ourselves to uses of predicates in subject-predicate statements.

We may think of each meaning of a predicate term as "correlating" the term with some, possibly very complex, property.[4] Different theories of meaning provide differing accounts of the nature of this correlation. Thus the "ideational" theory of meaning, found for example in Locke's *Essay*, holds that a meaning of a predicate term correlates it with a certain property—P—*iff* the term functions as a sign of the *idea* of P in communication. Other theories provide other accounts. It will be convenient to speak of the predicate term as "signifying" or "standing for" the correlated property.

Now when I make a *literal* use of a predicate term (in one of its meanings) in a subject-predicate statement, I utter the sentence with the claim that the property signified by the predicate term is possessed by the subject (i.e., the referent of the subject term), or holds between the subject, if the predicate is a relational one. Thus, if I make a literal use of "player" in

saying "He's one of the players," I am claiming, let us say, that the person referred to has the property specified in the fourth definition listed above. And if my statement is true, if the person referred to really does have that property, we may say that "player" is *literally true* of him in that sense—does *literally apply* to him in that sense.

But suppose I say, as Shakespeare has Macbeth say, "Life's ... a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more." It is clear that life is not really an actor; nor, if we surveyed the other established meanings of "player," would we find any properties signified that are exemplified by life. Hence in uttering Macbeth's sentence, I will, if I am sensible, be using the term "player" metaphorically rather than literally. Since figurative uses appear in this paper only as a foil for literal uses, I will not be able to embark on the complex task of characterizing the figures of speech. Suffice it to say that when I use a term metaphorically, I exploit some meaning the term has in the language, but not in the straightforward way that is involved in literal usage. Rather than claiming that the property signified by the predicate does apply to the subject(s), I do something more complex, more indirect. I first, so to speak, "present" the hearer with the sort of thing to which the term literally applies (call it an exemplar) and then suggest that the exemplar can be taken as a "model" of the subject(s); I suggest that by considering the exemplar, one will thereby be put in mind of certain features of the subject(s). In the example just given, the exemplar is an (insignificant) actor who plays his part in a stage production and then disappears from the view of the audience; the suggestion is that a human life is like that in some significant respect(s).[5]

The term "literal" has picked up a number of adventitious associations in recent times. I think particularly of "precise," "univocal," "specific," "empirical," and "ordinary." However common the conflation, it is simply a confusion to suppose that "literal," in the historically distinctive sense just set out, implies any of the features just mentioned. Meanings that words have in a language can be more or less vague, open-textured, unspecific, and otherwise indeterminate. Hence I can be using words literally and still be speaking vaguely, ambiguously, or unspecifically. Again, I can be using my words just as literally when asking questions, cursing fate, or expressing rage, as when I am soberly asserting that the cat is on the mat. The conflation of "literal" with "empirical," however, is more than a vulgar error; it reflects a conviction as to the conditions under which a word can acquire a meaning in the language. If this requires contact with "experience" in one or another of the ways spelled out in empiricist theories of meaning, then only terms with empirical meanings can be used literally, for only such terms *have* established senses. But that does not follow merely from the meaning of "literal"; it also requires an empiricist theory of meaning, and it is by no means clear that any such theory is acceptable.

It might be thought that after the term "literal" has been stripped of all these interesting connotations, the question as to whether we can speak literally of God has lost its importance. Not so. To demonstrate its importance, we merely need appeal to some highly plausible principles which connect meanings and concepts. It seems clear that I can attach a certain meaning to a predicate term only if I have a concept of the property signified by the term when used with that meaning; otherwise, how can I "get at" the property so as to signify it by that term? And on the other hand, if I do have a concept of that property, it could not be impossible for me to use a term to signify that property. And if a sufficient number of members of my linguistic community share that concept, it could not be, in principle, impossible for a term to signify that property in the language. Thus it is possible for a term in a certain language to signify a certain property *iff* speakers of that language have or can have a concept of that property. Hence our language can contain terms that stand for intrinsic properties of God *iff* we can form concepts of intrinsic properties of God. And since we can make true literal predications of God *iff* our language contains terms that stand for properties exemplified by God, we may say, finally, that we can speak literally of God (in the relevant sense of true literal predication) *iff* we can form concepts of intrinsic divine properties.[6] And whether this last is true is *obviously* an important issue—one that has been at the very center of metatheology from the beginning.

The question whether certain terms can be literally applied to God is often identified with the question whether those terms are literally true of God in senses they bear outside theology. Thus with respect to P-predicates, it is often supposed that God can be spoken of as literally having knowledge and intentions, as creating, commanding, and forgiving, only if those terms are literally true of God in the same senses as those in which they are literally true of human beings. The reason usually given for this supposition is that we first come to attach meaning to these terms by learning what it is for human beings to command, forgive, and so on, and that there is no other way we can proceed. We cannot begin by learning what it is for God to know, command, or forgive. I do not want to contest this claim about the necessary order of language learning, though there is much to be said on both sides. I will confine myself to pointing out that even if this claim is granted, it does not follow that terms can be literally applied to God only in senses in which they also are true of human beings and other creatures. For the fact that we must begin with creatures is quite compatible with the supposition that at some later stage terms take on special technical senses in theology. After all, that is what happens in science. There, too, it can be plausibly argued that we can learn theoretical terms in science only if we have already learned commonsense meanings of these and other terms—senses in which the terms are true of ordinary middle-sized objects. But even if that is true, it does not prevent such terms as "force" and "energy" from taking on new technical senses in the development of sophisticated theories. Why should not the same be true of theology?

Many will claim that the same cannot be true of theology, because the conditions that permit technical senses to emerge in science do not obtain in theology. For example, it may be claimed that theological systems do not have the kind of explanatory efficacy possessed by scientific theories. These are important questions, but I can sidestep them for now, because I will restrict myself here to whether (some) P-predicates can be true of God in (some of) the senses in which they are true of human beings. The only qualification I make on that is that I shall consider a simple transformation of certain human action predicates—"simple," in that the change does not involve any radical conceptual innovation. The revised action predicates are fundamentally of the same sort as human action predicates, though different in some details.

Whether certain predicates are literally true of God depends on both parties to the transaction; it depends both on what God is like and on the content of the predicates. To carry out a proper discussion of the present issue, I would need to (a) present and defend an account of the nature of God, and (b) present and defend an analysis of such P-predicates as will be considered. That would put us in a position to make some well-grounded judgments as to whether such predicates could be literally true of God. Needless to say, I will not have time for all that; I would not have had time, even if I had cut the preliminary cackle and buckled down to the job straight away. Hence I must scale down my aspirations. Instead of trying to "tell it like it is" with God, I shall simply pick one commonly recognized attribute of God—incorporeality—which has been widely thought to rule out personal agency, and I shall consider whether it does so. My main reasons for focusing on incorporeality, rather than on simplicity, infinity, timelessness, or immutability, are that it, much more than the others, is widely accepted today as a divine attribute and that it has bulked large in some recent arguments against the literal applicability of P-predicates. On the side of the predicates, I shall consider those types of analyses that are, in my judgment, the strongest contenders and ask what each of them implies as to literal applicability to an incorporeal being.[7]

This investigation is only a fragment of the total job. It is radically incomplete from both sides, and especially from the side of the divine nature. Even if we satisfy ourselves that personalistic terms can be literally true of an incorporeal being, that will by no means suffice to show that they are literally true of God. God is not just any old incorporeal being. There may well be other divine attributes that inhibit us from thinking literally of God as a personal agent—simplicity, infinity, immutability, and timelessness. But sufficient unto the day is the problem thereof.

Mental Predicates and God

P-predicates may be conveniently divided into mental or psychological predicates (M-predicates) and action predicates (A-predicates). M-predicates have to do with cognitions, feelings, emotions, attitudes, wants, thoughts, fantasies, and other internal psychological states, events, and processes. A-predicates have to do with what, in a broad sense, an agent *does*. For reasons that will emerge in the course of the discussion, it will be best to begin with theories of M-predicates. I shall oscillate freely between speaking of the *meanings* of predicates and the *concepts* those predicates express by virtue of having those meanings.

The main divide in theories of M-predicates concerns whether they are properly defined in terms of their behavioral manifestations.[8] On the negative side of that issue is the view that was dominant from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century—what we may call the Private Paradigm (PP) view. According to this position, the meaning of an M-predicate—for example, "feels depressed"—is given, for each person, by certain paradigms of feelings of depression within his own experience. By "feels depressed" I mean a state such as X, Y, Z, . . . , where these are clear cases of feeling depressed that I can remember having experienced. We might say that on this model an M-predicate acquires meaning through "inner ostension"; I attach meaning to the term by "associating" it with samples of the state it signifies. On the PP view, an M-predicate is not properly defined in terms of its invariable, normal, or typical behavioral manifestations. Even if feelings of depression are typically manifested by droopy appearance, slowness of response, and lack of vigor, it is no part of the *meaning* of the term that these are the typical manifestations. Our *concept* of feeling depressed is such that it makes sense to think of a world in which feelings of depression typically manifest themselves in alert posture and vigorous reactions. Since the term simply designates certain feeling qualities, it is just a matter of fact that feelings of depression manifest themselves in the way they do.[9]

There are solid reasons for the PP view, especially for feeling and sensation terms. (1) If I have never felt depressed, then in an important sense, I do not understand the term, for I do not know *what it is like* to feel depressed; I simply do not have the concept of that sort of feeling. (2) My knowledge of my own feelings is quite independent of my knowledge of my behavior or demeanor; I do not have to watch myself in a mirror to know how I feel. Hence it seems that what I know when I know how I feel cannot consist in any behavioral manifestations or tendencies thereto. (3) It does seem an *intelligible* supposition that the kind of feeling we call a feeling of depression should be manifested in ways that are radically different from those that do in fact obtain. And the PP account allows for this.

However, the PP account has been under attack throughout this century. There are four main motives for dissatisfaction. (1) If feeling depressed is not, by definition, typically manifested in certain ways, then how can I tell what other people are feeling, on the basis of their behavior and demeanor? For I can discover a correlation between a certain kind of feeling and certain kinds of behavior only in my own case; and how can I generalize from one case? Thus the PP view has been felt to rule out knowledge of the mental states of others. (2) How can you and I have any reason to suppose that we attach the same meaning to any M-predicate, if each of us learns the meaning from nonshareable paradigms? How can I tell whether my paradigms of feeling depressed are like your paradigms? Thus the PP view has been thought to sap our conviction that we share a public language for talking about the mind. (3) On the widely influential Verifiability Theory of Meaning, the meaning of a term is given by specifying the ways in which we can tell that it applies. Since we can tell whether M-predicates apply to others by observing their demeanor and behavior, the latter must enter into the meaning of the term. (4) Wittgenstein mounted a very influential attack on the possibility of attaching meaning to terms by private ostension.[10]

These arguments against PP support the idea that mental states are identified in terms of their typical manifestations in overt behavior and demeanor. We may use the term Logical Connectionism (LC) as a general term for views of this sort, on the ground that these views hold that there is a logical

(conceptual) connection between a mental state and its manifestations.

The general concept of LC allows plenty of room for variation. The simplest form that is not wildly implausible is Logical Behaviorism (LB). LB may be formulated as the view that an M-predicate signifies a set of behavioral dispositions—dispositions to behave a certain way, given certain conditions.[11] Thus a logical behaviorist would explain "S feels depressed" in some such way as this: If someone makes a suggestion to S, S will respond slowly and without enthusiasm; if S is presented with something S usually likes, S will not smile as S normally does in such situations, and so on.[12] LB is not nearly as prominent now as a decade or so ago, and in my opinion, there are excellent reasons for this decline. The fatal difficulty is this. The response tendencies associated with a particular case of a mental state will depend upon the total psychological field of the moment—that is, the other mental states present at the time. For example, whether a person who feels depressed will react in a characteristically depressed way depends upon whether he is sufficiently motivated to conceal his condition. If he is, the typical manifestation may well not be forthcoming. Thus any particular behavioral reaction emerges from the total contemporary psychological field and is not wholly determined by any one component thereof. This consideration should inhibit us from attempting to identify any particular M-concept with the concept of any particular set of behavioral dispositions.

Under the impact of these considerations, more subtle forms of LC have developed, for which we may use the generic term, "Functionalism." The general idea of Functionalism is that each M-concept is a concept of a certain functional role in the operation of the psyche. A major emphasis in this position has been the functional character of M-concepts. In attributing a certain belief, attitude, or feeling to S, we are committing ourselves to the position that a certain function is being carried out in S's psyche, or at least that S is prepared to carry it out if the need arises. We are not committing ourselves on the physical (or spiritual) structure or composition of whatever is performing this function; our concept is neutral as to that. M-concepts, on this position, are functional in essentially the same way as the concept of a mousetrap. A mousetrap, by definition, is a device for catching mice; the definition is neutral as to the composition and structure of devices that perform this function. That is why it is possible to build a better mousetrap.[13]

To exploit this initial insight, the functionalist will have to find a way of specifying functional roles in the psyche. It is now generally assumed by functionalists that the basic function of the psyche as a whole is the production of overt behavior. That is why Functionalism counts as a form of LC. To understand the concept of belief is, at least in part, to understand the role of beliefs in the production of behavior. But "at least in part" is crucial; it is what enables Functionalism to escape the above objections to LB. Functionalism is thoroughly systemic. The vicissitudes of LB have taught it to avoid the supposition that each distinguishable mental state is related separately to overt behavior. It has thoroughly internalized the point that a given belief, attitude, or feeling gives rise to a certain distinctive mode of behavior only in conjunction with the rest of the contemporary psychological field. Therefore in specifying the function of an enthusiasm for Mozart, for example, in the production of behavior, we must specify the way that enthusiasm combines with each of various other combinations of factors to affect behavioral output. It also recognizes that intrapsychic functions enter into M-concepts. Our concept of the belief that it is raining now includes (a) the way this belief will combine with others to inferentially generate other beliefs, and (b) the way it will combine with an aversion to rainy weather, to produce dismay, as well as (c) the way it will combine with an aversion to getting wet, to produce the behavior of getting out one's umbrella. Clearly, a full functionalist specification of an M-concept would be an enormously complicated affair.[14]

With an eye to putting some flesh on this skeleton, consider this attempt by R. B. Brandt and Jaegwon Kim to formulate a functionalist analysis of the ordinary concept of *want*, conceived in a broad sense as any state in which the object of the "want" has what Lewin called positive valence for the subject.[15]

"*X* wants *p*" has the meaning it does for us because we believe roughly the following statements.

1. If, given that *x* had not been expecting *p* but now suddenly judged that *p* would be the case, *x* would feel joy, then *x* wants *p*.
2. If, given that *x* had been expecting *p* but then suddenly judged that *p* would not be the case, *x* would feel disappointment, then *x* wants *p*.
3. If daydreaming about *p* is pleasant to *x*, then *x* wants *p*.
4. If *x* wants *p*, then, under favorable conditions, if *x* judges that doing *A* will probably lead to *p* and that not doing *A* will probably lead to not *p*, *x* will feel some impulse to do *A*.
5. If *x* wants *p*, then, under favorable conditions, if *x* thinks some means *M* is a way of bringing *p* about, *x* will be more likely to notice an *M* than he would otherwise have been.
6. If *x* wants *p*, then, under favorable conditions, if *p* occurs, without the simultaneous occurrence of events *x* does not want, *x* will be pleased.[16]

In terms of our general characterization of Functionalism, we can think of each of these lawlike generalizations as specifying a *function* performed by wants. Thus a "want" is the sort of state that (a) together with unexpected fulfillment, gives rise to feelings of joy; (b) renders daydreaming about its object pleasant, and so on. (c) is the crucial connection with behavior, though in this formulation it is quite indirect, coming through a connection with an "impulse" to perform a certain action.[17] This is in contrast to PP, which would view a want for *p* as a certain kind of introspectable state, event, or process with a distinctive "feel"—for instance, a sense of the attractiveness of *p*, or a felt urge to realize *p*.[18]

Now let us turn to the way these views bear upon the applicability of M-predicates to an incorporeal being. I believe it would be generally supposed that our two views have opposite consequences: that on a PP view, M-predicates could be applied to an incorporeal being, but not on an LC view. However, I will contest this received position to the extent of arguing that neither position presents any conceptual bar to the literal application of M-predicates.

First, a brief word about the bearing of the PP view before turning to the debate over LC, which is my main concern in this section. Presumably, an incorporeal subject could have states of consciousness with distinctive phenomenological qualities, just as well as we could. Hence terms that signify such states of consciousness would not be inapplicable in principle to such a being. But though I believe this is correct, I do not feel that it is of much significance for theology, and this for two reasons.

First, the PP account is most plausible with respect to feelings, sensations, and other M-states which clearly have a distinctive "feel." It is much less plausible with respect to "colorless" mental states such as beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot hold an intention or a belief "before the mind" as we can a feeling of dismay, and thereby form a conception of "what it is like." But it is M-predicates of the colorless sort that are of most interest to theology. In thinking of God as a personal agent, we think of God as possessing (and using) knowledge, purpose, intention, and the like. Feelings and sensations either are not applicable to God at all, or they are of secondary importance. Theology quite properly avoids trying to figure out what it *feels* like to be God.

Second, suppose that one defends the applicability of M-predicates on a PP basis because he considers them inapplicable on an LC construal. This latter conviction would presumably be based on an argument similar to the one to be given shortly, to the effect that M-predicates, as analyzed in LC, are inapplicable to God because, as an incorporeal being, God is incapable of overt behavior. In that case, even if our theorist succeeds in showing that PP predicates can apply, he has won, at most a Pyrrhic victory. To secure application of M-predicates at the price of abandoning the idea that God acts in the world is to doom the enterprise to irrelevance. Whatever may be the case with the gods of Aristotle and the Epicureans, the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is preeminently a God who *acts*, in history and in the lives of individuals, not to mention His creation and preservation of the world. Hence even if, on the PP view, M-predicates are applicable to an incorporeal being incapable of overt action, that does nothing to

show that M-predicates are applicable to the Judaeo-Christian God.

Turning now to LC, let us look at a typical statement by one who is arguing from an LC position.

> What would it be like for an x to be just loving without doing anything or being capable of doing anything?... Surely "to do something," "to behave in a certain way," is to make—though this is not all that it is—certain bodily movement.... For it to make sense to speak of x's acting or failing to act, x must have a body. Thus if "love" is to continue to mean anything at all near to what it normally means, it is meaningless to say that God loves mankind. Similar considerations apply to the other psychological predicates tied to the concept of God.[19]

It will help us in evaluating this argument to set it out more carefully.

1. On LC, an M-concept is, at least in part, a concept of dispositions to overt behavior (perhaps through the mediation of other mental states).[20]
2. Overt behavior requires bodily movements of the agent.
3. An incorporeal being, lacking a body, cannot move its body.

∴4. An incorporeal being cannot engage in overt behavior.

5. A being that is, in principle, incapable of overt behavior cannot have dispositions to overt behavior.

∴6. M-concepts are, in principle, inapplicable to an incorporeal being.

This argument is certainly on sound ground in claiming that, on LC, an M-predicate is applicable to S only if A-predicates are so applicable. Its Achilles' heel, I will claim, is 2, the thesis that overt behavior requires bodily movements of the agent. My attack on that thesis will occupy the next section. Let us take the upshot of this section to be that, on the most plausible account of the M-predicates that are of most interest to theology, God can literally know, purpose, and will, only if God can literally perform overt actions. This result nicely mirrors the fundamental place of divine agency in Judaeo-Christian theology.

Before embarking on the discussion of A-predicates, I want to make two points.

First, there are forms of LC that do rule out the application of M-predicates to an incorporeal being. I am thinking of those views that put certain kinds of restrictions on the input, or output, of the psyche. Some forms of LB, for example, require that the behavioral output be specified in terms of bodily movements of the agent, and the input in terms of stimulations of the agent's sense receptors. Functionalist theories may also be so restricted. Clearly, M-predicates analyzed in this way are applicable only to beings capable of such inputs and outputs. But our concern in this paper is to determine whether any version of LC would allow the application of M-predicates to an incorporeal being.

Second, we should not suppose that the question of the applicability of A-predicates to an incorporeal being is prejudged by the fact that all cases of overt action with which we are most familiar involve bodily movements of the agent. A feature that is common to the familiar *denotata* of a term may not be reflected in the meaning of that term, even if this class of *denotata* is the one from which we learn the meaning of the term, and even if it contains the only *denotata* with which we are acquainted. It is doing small honor to human powers of conception to suppose that one must form one's concept of P in such a way as to be limited to the class of Ps from which the concept was learned. Surely we can think more abstractly and generically than that. Even though our concept of *animal* was formed solely from experience of land creatures, that concept might still be such that it contains only features that are equally applicable to fish. And even if that were not the case—even if the capacity to walk on legs is part of our concept of an animal—it may be that it can be easily extended to fish, merely by dropping out the feature just mentioned. The moral of the story is obvious. We cannot assume in advance that our concept of making, commanding, or forgiving includes the concept of bodily movements of the maker, commander, or forgiver. And even if it does, this may be a relatively peripheral component which can be sheared off, leaving intact a distinctive conceptual core.

Action Predicates and God

Let us consider, then, whether it is conceptually possible for an incorporeal being to perform overt actions. Our entrée to that discussion will be a consideration of the vulnerable premise in the argument, the thesis that overt behavior requires bodily movements.

To understand the grounds for this thesis, we must introduce the notion of a *basic action*. Roughly speaking, a basic action is one that is performed *not* by or in (simultaneously) performing some other action. Thus if I sign my name, *that* is done by moving my hand in a certain way, so the action is not basic; but if moving my hand is *not* done *by* doing something else, it will count as a basic action. Just where to locate basic human actions is philosophically controversial. If contracting muscles in my hand is something I do (in the intended sense of "do"), then it seems that I move my hand *by* contracting my muscles, and moving my hand will not count as a basic action. Again, if sending neural impulses to the muscles is something I *do*, then it seems that I contract the muscles *by* sending neural impulses to them, and so the contraction of muscles will not count as a basic action. Since I do not have time to go into this issue, I shall simply follow a widespread practice and assume that all overt human basic actions consist in the movements of certain parts of the body which ordinarily would be thought to be under "voluntary control," such as the hand.

It follows from our explanation of the term "basic action" that every nonbasic action is done *by* performing a basic action. If we are further correct in ruling that every human basic action consists in moving some part of one's body, then it follows that every human nonbasic action is built on, or presupposes, some bodily movement of the agent. The relationship differs in different cases: Sometimes the nonbasic action involves an effect of some bodily movement(s), as in the action of knocking over a vase; sometimes it involves the bodily movement's falling under a rule or convention of some kind, as in signaling a turn. But whatever the details, it follows from what has been laid down thus far that a human being cannot do anything overt without moving some part of the body. Either the action is basic, in which case it merely *consists* in moving some part of one's body; or it is not, in which case it is done by moving some part of one's body.

But granted that this is the way it is with human action, what does this have to do with A-*concepts?* As noted earlier, our concept of a ϕ never includes all the characteristics that are in fact common to ϕs we have experienced. So why should we suppose that our concepts of various human actions—making or commanding, for example—contain any reference to bodily movement?

Again it will be most useful to divide this question in accordance with the basic–nonbasic distinction. Our concepts of particular types of human basic actions certainly do involve specifications of bodily movements. This is because that is what such actions *are*. Their whole content is a certain kind of movement of a certain part of the body. That is what distinguishes one type of human basic action from another. Hence we cannot say what kind of basic action we are talking about without mentioning some bodily movement—stretching, kicking, raising the arm, or whatever. Clearly, A-predicates such as these are not literally applicable to an incorporeal being. But this will be no loss to theology. I take it that none of us is tempted to think that it could be literally true that God stretches out His arm or activates His vocal organs.

The more relevant question concerns the status of such human nonbasic A-predicates as "makes," "speaks," "commands," "forgives," "comforts," and "guides." In saying of S that he commanded me to love my neighbor, am I thereby committing myself to the proposition that S moved some part of his body? Is bodily movement of the agent part of what is *meant* by commanding?

One point at least is clear. Nonbasic human A-concepts do not, in general, carry any reference to particular types of bodily movements. There is indeed wide variation in this regard. At the specific end of the continuum, we have a predicate such as "kicks open the door," which clearly requires a certain kind of motion of a leg. But "make a soufflé" and "command" are more typical, in that the concept is clearly not tied to any particular *kind* of underlying bodily movement. I can issue a

command orally or in writing. Indeed, in view of the fact that no limit can be placed on what can be used as a system of communication, any bodily movements whatever could, with the appropriate background, subserve the issuing of a command. In like manner, although there are normal or typical ways of moving the body for making a soufflé, we cannot suppose that these exhaust the possibilities. In this age of electronic marvels, one could presumably make a soufflé by pushing some buttons on a machine with one's toes.

Thus, if any reference to bodily movement is included in such A-concepts as making and commanding, it will have to be quite unspecific. The most we could have would be along these lines:

> Making a soufflé—causing a soufflé to come into being by some movements of one's body.
> Commanding—producing a command by some movements of one's body.[21]

But can we have even this much? Is it any part of the meaning of these terms, in the sense in which they are applied to human beings, that the external effects in question are produced by movements of the agent's body? No doubt it is completely obvious to all of us that human beings cannot bring about such consequences except by moving their bodies. But to repeat the point once more, it does not follow that this fact is built into human A-concepts. Perhaps our *concept* of making a soufflé is simply that of *bringing a soufflé into existence*, the concept being neutral as to how this is done.

What we have here is one of the numerous difficulties in distinguishing between what we mean by a term and what we firmly believe to be true of the things to which the term applies—in other words, distinguishing between analytic and synthetic truths. These persistent difficulties have been among the factors leading to widespread skepticism about the viability of such distinctions. But for our purpose we need not decide the issue. Let us yield to our opponent. If we can make our case even on the position most favorable to our opponent, we can ignore the outcome of this skirmish.

Let us suppose, then, that all human A-concepts do contain a bodily movement requirement. It clearly follows that no *human* A-concepts are applicable to an incorporeal being. But that by no means shows that no A-concepts are applicable. Why should we suppose that the A-concepts we apply to human beings exhaust the field? We must at least explore the possibility that we can form A-concepts that are (a) distinctively and recognizably action concepts and (b) do not require any bodily movements of the agent.

In order to do this we must bring out the distinctive features of A-concepts that make them concepts of *actions*. Thus far in discussing human A-concepts, we have gone only as far as the thesis that every human A-concept involves some reference to bodily movement. But that by no means suffices to make them concepts of *actions*. The concept of a heart beat or of a facial tic involves reference to bodily movements, but it is not a concept of an action. What else is required?

I will continue to use human A-concepts as my point of departure for the exploration of the general field, since that is where we get our general concept of action. And I will continue to concentrate on concepts of *basic* actions; since they are relatively simple, the crucial features of A-concepts stand out more clearly there.[22] To focus the discussion further, I shall restrict attention to *intentional* actions—those the agent "meant" to perform.[23]

Now, as intimated above, although every human basic action consists in moving some part of the body, not just any bodily movement constitutes a basic *action*. It is possible for my arm to move without my having *moved* it, as in automatic twitches and jerks. In order for it to be the case that I performed the basic action of raising my arm, some further condition must hold, over and above the fact that my arm rose. Thus we can pose the crucial question about the constitution of human basic actions in the classic Wittgensteinian form: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?"[24] Or, putting it the other way round, what must be added to the fact that my arm goes up, to make it the case that I raise my arm?

The recent literature contains many attempts to answer this question, and I shall not have time for a

survey. Leaving aside views that, in my opinion, do not survive critical scrutiny (such as the "ascriptive" view, according to which it is an action because we hold the agent responsible for it[25] and the view that "It all depends on context,"[26] we have two serious contenders.

1. *Psychological causation (explanation) view.* What distinguishes the action from the "mere" movement is the psychological background of the movement, what gives rise to it, or issues in it.[27]
2. *Agent causation view.* A bodily movement is an action *iff* it is caused in a certain special way—not by some other event or state, but by the agent itself.[28]

The psychological causation view exists in many forms, depending on just what psychological factors are specified and just what relation to the bodily movement is required. As for the former, popular candidates have been the will, volitions, intentions, and wants-and-beliefs. On the second score, it is generally required that the movement occur "because of" the psychological factor in question, but there has been considerable controversy over whether to regard the relation as "causal." So as to have a simple form of the view to work with, let us focus on the position that what makes a case of my arm's rising into a case of my raising my arm, is that my arm rose because it was in accordance with my dominant *intentions* at the moment that it should rise.

So the model of a basic action that we get from the human case is:

1. bodily movement
2. caused by _____

To construct an analogous model for incorporeal action that will be an unmistakable model for *action*, we must (a) find a suitable replacement for bodily movements and (b) show that incorporeality is no bar to the satisfaction of a causal condition that will make the whole package into an *action*. It will prove best to begin with the second task, since that poses the more complex and difficult, as well as more controversial, issues. It shall proceed as I did with M-concepts—by considering, with respect to each of our contenders, whether that condition could be satisfied by an incorporeal being.

As for the agent causation view, the concept of agent causation may well be obscure, and it certainly runs violently counter to some deeply rooted contemporary prejudices, but at least it is clear that it does not carry a restriction to *corporeal* substances. The theory avoids, on principle, any specification of the internal machinery by which an agent exercises its causal efficacy—"on principle," since the whole thrust of the position is that when I bring about a bodily movement in performing a basic action, I am not bringing about that movement by initiating certain other events which, in turn, bring about the movement by "event causation." Rather, I directly bring about the bodily movement simply by exploiting my basic capacity to do so. Hence the agent causality interpretation is not restricted to substances possessing one kind of internal structure or equipment rather than another.

On the psychological explanation view, things are a bit more complicated. Let us recall that the "causal condition" on this view is that the bodily movement results from an intention, or the like. So our question divides into two parts. (1) Can an incorporeal being have intentions, or whatever kind of psychological cause is required by the particular version of the theory under discussion? (2) Can an intention cause whatever substitutes for bodily movement in incorporeal basic action? As for (2), it is difficult to discuss this without deciding what does play the role of bodily movement in incorporeal basic actions. Hence we will postpone this question until we specify that substitute.

That leaves us with the question as to whether an incorporeal being can have intentions and the like. And now we find ourselves in a curious position. For that is exactly the question we were asking in the previous section on M-concepts. The conclusion we reached there, on an LC position, was that these concepts are applicable to a subject only if A-concepts are applicable. And now we see that, on the psychological explanation view, A-concepts are applicable to S only if M-concepts are applicable. Where does that leave us? We obviously are in some kind of circle. But is it the vicious circle of chasing our own tail, or a

virtuous circle of the sort in which the heavenly bodies were once deemed to move?

Here it is crucial to remember the task we set out to accomplish. If we were trying to *prove* that M- and A-concepts *are* applicable to an incorporeal being, we would have reached an impasse. For since each application depends on the other as a necessary condition, we would not have established either, unless we had some independent argument for the applicability of one or the other. But in fact, we set ourselves a more modest goal—to determine whether the incorporeality of a being is sufficient ground for *denying* the applicability of such concepts. We are considering whether incorporeality renders their applicability impossible. And from that standpoint, the circle is virtuous. The reciprocity we have uncovered provides no reason for *denying* the applicability of either sort of concept. Psychological concepts are applicable only if action concepts are applicable, and vice versa. As far as that consideration goes, it is quite possible that both kinds are applicable. This circle leaves standing the *possibility* that an incorporeal being is such that actions and intentions fit smoothly into the economy of its operations.

Let us now return to the first condition of human basic action concepts, to the problem of finding something that could play the same role for incorporeal basic actions that bodily movements play for corporeal basic actions. I believe that the entrée to this question is an appreciation of the difference between the general concept of a basic action and specific concepts of particular human basic actions. Although concepts of the latter sort contain concepts of particular types of bodily movements, this is not because it is required by the general concept of a basic action. That general concept, as we set it out initially, is simply the concept of an action that is not performed *by* or *in* (simultaneously) performing some other action. This general concept is quite neutral as to what kinds of actions have that status for one or another type of agent. It is just a fact about human beings (*not* a general constraint on action or basic action) that only movements of certain parts of their bodies are under their direct voluntary control and that anything else they bring off, they must accomplish *by* moving their bodies in certain ways. If I am to knock over a vase or make a soufflé or communicate with someone, I must do so by moving my hands, legs, vocal organs, or whatever. But that is only because of my limitations. We can conceive of agents, corporeal or otherwise, such that things other than their bodies (if any) are under their direct voluntary control. Some agents might be such that they could knock over a vase or bring a soufflé into being without doing something else in order to do so.[29]

What these considerations suggest is that it is conceptually possible for any change whatsoever to be the core of a basic action. Movements of an agent's body are only what we happen to be restricted to in the human case. Just what changes are within the basic action repertoire of a given incorporeal agent would depend upon the nature of that agent. But the main point is that since such changes are not necessarily restricted to bodily movements of the agent, a subject's bodilessness is no conceptual bar to the performance of basic actions by that subject.

I believe that the case in which we are particularly interested, divine action, can be thought of along the lines of the preceding discussion. Of course, one can think of God as creating light by saying to himself, "Let there be light," or as parting the sea of reeds by saying to himself, "Let the sea of reeds be parted." In that case the basic actions would be mental actions. But what the above discussion indicates is that we are not conceptually required to postulate this mental machinery. We could think just as well of the coming into being of light or of the parting of the sea of reeds as directly under God's voluntary control.

This further suggests that all God's actions might be basic actions. If any change whatsoever could conceivably be the core of a basic action, and if God is omnipotent, then clearly, God *could* exercise direct voluntary control over every change in the world which he influences by his activity. However, I do not claim to have done more than exhibit this as a possibility. It is equally possible that God chooses to influence some situations *indirectly*. He might choose to lead or inspire Cyrus to free the Israelites, thus using Cyrus as an instrument to bring about that result. In that case, freeing the Israelites would be a nonbasic action. I am quite willing to leave the decision on this one up to God.[30]

Now let us just glance at the question I postponed—whether it is possible for intentions, and the like, to give rise directly to changes outside the agent's body (if any). I do not have much to say about this—it obviously is something outside our ordinary experience. But I can see nothing in our present understanding of the psyche and of causality that would show it to be impossible in principle. So, pending further insights into those matters, I am inclined to take a quasi-Humean line and say that what can cause what is "up for grabs." And of course, if it is an omnipotent deity that is in question, I suppose He could ordain that intentions can directly cause a parting of waters, provided this is a logical possibility.

Let me sum up these last two sections. Action concepts applicable to an incorporeal being can be constructed that would differ from human action concepts (on the most plausible accounts of the latter) only by the substitution of other changes for bodily movements of the agent in basic action concepts. Hence there is no conceptual bar to the performance of *overt* actions by incorporeal agents and hence no conceptual bar, even on an LC position, to the application of M-predicates to incorporeal beings.

As indicated earlier, this paper constitutes but a fragment of a thoroughgoing discussion of the title question. Other fragments would go into the question as to whether timelessness, immutability, and other traditional attributes constitute a bar to the literal predication of one or another kind of predicate. And of course we would have to discuss whether God is timeless, immutable, and so on. Moreover, we would have to scrutinize the classical arguments for the denial that *any* intrinsic predicates can be literally predicated of God. But perhaps even this fragment has sufficed to show that the prospects for speaking literally about God are not as dim as is often supposed by contemporary thinkers.[31]

Notes

1. This is a crude characterization of semantics, but it will have to do for now. There is no general agreement on what an adequate semantics would look like.
2. We shall not distinguish between *meaning* and *sense*.
3. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1959). I am far from claiming that this is the most adequate way to meanings. Indeed, it is far from clear what that way would be. But it is clear that "player" has the meanings thus specified, however lamely and haltingly, and that its having these meanings is (a small) part of what makes the English language what it is at this stage of its history.
4. I want this supposition to be compatible with the fact that most or all predicate terms have meanings that are vague, exhibit "open texture," or suffer from indeterminacy in other ways. This implies that an adequate formulation would be more complicated than the one given here.
5. Metaphor is a topic of unlimited subtlety and complexity, and the above formulation barely scratches the surface. For a bit more detail, see my "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology," reprinted in my *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 17–38.
6. This argument is developed more fully in "Irreducible Metaphors in Theology."
7. The question as to whether P-predicates could be applied to an incorporeal being presupposes that we can form a coherent notion of an incorporeal substance or other concrete subject of attributes. This has often been denied on the grounds that it is, in principle, impossible to identify, reidentify, or individuate such a being. See Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), chap. 2; Terence Penelhum, *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), chap. 6; Sydney Shoemaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), chaps. 4 and 5. If arguments like this were successful, as I believe they are not, our problem would not arise.
8. Note that the issue here concerns the content (character, correct analysis) of psychological predicates or *concepts*, not the *nature of* the human psyche or the *nature of* human thought, intention, etc. Obviously the divine psyche, if there be such, is radically different in nature from the human psyche. The only question is as to whether there are any psychological concepts that apply to both. Hence our specific interest is in what we are saying about a human being

when we say of that person that she is thinking, has a certain attitude, or whatever. Thus the classification to follow is not a classification of theories of the nature of human mind—dualism, materialism, epiphenomenalism, etc.

9. The PP view was espoused or presupposed by the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, and Reid. It surfaces as an explicit dogma in Book II of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, throughout Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, and in Essay I of Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*.
10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1953), nos. 258–70. In briefly indicating the main arguments for and against the PP view, I am merely trying to convey some sense of why various positions have seemed plausible. No endorsement of any particular argument is intended.
11. For an important statement of LB, see Rudolf Carnap, "Psychologie in physikalischer Sprache," *Erkenntnis*, vol. 3 (1932). English translation, "Psychology in Physical Language," by George Schick in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: The Free Press, 1959). Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949) is an influential work that is often regarded as a form of LB.
12. In this quick survey I am ignoring many complexities. For example, the most plausible LB account of feeling depressed would involve some categorical overt manifestations, such as "looking droopy," as well as response tendencies like those cited in the text. I am also forced to omit any consideration of the relation of LB to behaviorism in psychology.
13. I am indebted to Jerry Fodor, *Psychological Explanation* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 15–16, for this felicitous analogy.
14. The functionalist is not committed to holding that all functional relations in which a given mental state stands will enter into our ordinary concept of that state. Picking out those that do is admittedly a tricky job; but that difficulty is by no means restricted to Functionalism.
15. I follow Brandt and Kim in taking Functionalism, as well as the other views canvassed, to be an account of the ordinary meanings of M-predicates. Some theorists present it as a proposal for developing psychological concepts for scientific purposes, or as an account of the *nature* of mental states.
16. R. B. Brandt and Jaegwon Kim, "Wants as Explanations of Actions," *Journal of Philosophy*, 60 (1963), 427.
17. Different forms of Functionalism display special features not mentioned in this brief survey. Cybernetic analogies are prominent in many versions, with psychological functions thought of on the model of the machine table of a computer. Some, like the Brandt and Kim account, find a useful model in the way in which theoretical terms in science get their meaning from the ways in which they figure in the theory.
18. It may be doubted that "want" is a serious candidate for theological predication. It would not be if the term were being used in a narrow sense that implies felt craving or lack of need. But I, along with many philosophers, mean to be using it in the broad sense just indicated. To indicate how the term might be applied to God in this sense, Aquinas uses the term "appetition" more or less in the way Brandt and Kim explain "want." *Will* for Aquinas is "intellectual appetition," and he applies "will" to God.
19. Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 117. See also Paul Edwards, "Difficulties in the Idea of God, in *The Idea of God*, ed. E. H. Madden, R. Handy, and M. Farber (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), pp. 45 ff.
20. Let us define "overt" behavior as action that essentially involves some occurrence outside the present consciousness of the agent. This will exclude, e.g., "mental" actions such as focusing one's attention on something or resolving to get out of bed. The kinds of actions that are crucial to the Judaeo-Christian concept of God—creating the world, issuing commands, and guiding and comforting individual—count as overt on this definition.
21. These formulations raise questions that are not directly relevant to our concerns in this paper, e.g., how to think of a "command" in such a way that it might be "produced" by an agent. I should note, however, that the causation involved is not restricted to direct causation; intermediaries are allowed.
22. There is another reason for this procedure. Since nonbasic actions presuppose basic actions, and not vice versa, there could conceivably be only basic actions, but it is not possible that there should be only nonbasic actions. We shall see that it is a live possibility that all God's actions are basic.
23. Again, the basic (but not as obvious) point is that intentional actions are conceptually more basic. It seems that the analysis of action concepts is best set out by beginning with intentional actions and then defining unintentional actions as a certain derivation from that, rather than beginning by analyzing a neutral concept and then explaining intentional

and unintentional as different modifications of that. On the former approach it turns out that all basic actions are intentional. See Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), chap. 3.

24. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, no. 621.
25. H. L. A. Hart, "The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 69 (1949), 171–94.
26. A. I. Melden, *Free Action* (New York: Humanities Press, 1961).
27. Goldman, *Theory*, chaps. 1–3; Charles Taylor, *The Explanation of Behavior* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964), chaps. 2 and 3; W. P. Alston, "Conceptual Prolegomena to a Prolegomena to a Psychological Theory of Intentional Action," in *Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. S. C. Brown (London: Macmillan, 1974), pt. 2.
28. Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Descriptive Element in the Concept of 'Action,'" *Journal of Philosophy*, 61 (1964), 613–24; Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), chaps. 1–9.
29. Be careful to envisage this situation just as I have described it. The agent knocks over the vase not by doing anything else—even anything mental. Telekinesis is often thought of as an agent saying to himself something like "Let the vase be knocked over," and *this* causes the vase to fall over. But that does not make knocking over the vase a basic action. It is still a matter of knocking over the vase by doing something else, albeit something mental. In order for knocking over a vase to be a basic action, it would have to be just as immediate as is my raising my arm in the normal case, where I do this not by saying to myself "Let the arm rise," whereupon it rises; but where I just raise the arm intentionally.
30. It might be contended that if the physical universe, or any part thereof, is under God's direct voluntary control, this implies that the world is the body of God, which in turn implies that God is not an incorporeal being; that would mean that our case for *incorporeal* basic action fails. That is, the contention would be that in order to ascribe basic actions to S we have to pay the price of construing the changes in question as movements of S's body. This claim could be supported by the thesis that a sufficient condition for something to be part of my body is that it be under my direct voluntary control. So if the physical universe is under God's direct voluntary control, it is His body. Against this, I would argue that we have many different ways of picking out the body of a human being. In addition to the one just mentioned, my body is distinctive in that it is the perspective from which I perceive the world; it provides the immediate causal conditions of my consciousness; and it constitutes the phenomenological locus of my "bodily sensations." With multiple criteria there is room for maneuver. Holding the other criteria constant, we can envisage a state of affairs in which *something other than my body*, e.g., my wristwatch, is under my direct voluntary control. Thus I deny that my position requires God to have a body.
31. This paper grew out of material presented in my NEH Summer Seminars on Theological Language, given in 1978 and 1979, and more directly out of a lecture delivered at the 1978 Wheaton College Philosophy Conference. I am grateful to the participants in my summer seminars and at the Wheaton Conference for many valuable reactions.

Study Questions

1. Many thinkers, including many in this part of the book, argue that we cannot speak literally of God. Alston interprets them as holding that we cannot form subject-predicate sentences that are literally true of God. How does Alston respond to apparent obstacles to literal talk of God?
2. In showing that it is not impossible to speak literally of God, Alston selects two kinds of predicates for close analysis. Which types of predicates? Why are they so germane to the issue at hand? How do you evaluate the effectiveness of Alston's case?

Suggested Reading

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