the top of a wheel; immediately we try to cling to that moment, to that particular point of the wheel, it is no longer at the top and we are off our balance. Thus by not trying to seize the moment, we keep it, for the second we fail to walk on we cease to remain still. Yet within this there is a still deeper truth. From the standpoint of eternity we never can and never do leave the top of the wheel, for if a circle is set in infinite space it has neither top nor bottom. Wherever you stand is the top, and it revolves only because you are pushing it round with your own feet.

The Language of Metaphysical Experience

THERE IS AN AREA OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE FOR which we do not have any really suitable name in our Western languages, for while it is basic to such matters as religion, metaphysics, and mysticism, it is not identical with any one of them. I refer to the perennial type of experience which is described as a more or less immediate knowledge of God, or of the ultimate reality, ground, or essence of the universe, by whatever name it may be represented.*

According to the ancient spiritual traditions of both Europe and Asia, which include ways of life and thought as widely different as Buddhism and Catholicism, this experience is the supreme fulfillment of human life—the goal, the final end, toward which human existence is ordered.

According, however, to modern logical philosophy—scientific empiricism, logical positivism, and the like—statements of this kind are simply meaningless. While it is admitted that there may be interesting and delightful experiences of the "mystical" type, logical philosophy finds it altogether illegitimate to regard them

*I have not simply equated this experience with "mysticism" since the latter frequently contains symbolic and affective elements which are by no means essential to the order of experience I am discussing.

as containing any knowledge of a metaphysical character, as constituting an experience of "ultimate reality" or the Absolute.

This critique is based not so much upon a psychological analysis of the experience itself as upon purely logical analysis of such universal concepts as God, Ultimate Reality, Absolute Being, and the like—all of which are shown to be terms without meaning. It is not the purpose of this paper to describe the steps of this critique in any detail, since it should be familiar enough to every student of modern philosophy, and since there seems no need to take issue with the logical argument itself. The starting point of this paper is one which—perversely, it may seem—regards the basic argument of modern logical philosophy as a highly important contribution to metaphysical thought—enabling us to evaluate the true character and function of metaphysical terms and symbols far less confusedly than has hitherto been possible.

This evaluation, however, is not the sort of devaluation which the individual exponents of logical philosophy, such as Russell, Ayer, and Reichenbach, propose. For the positive contribution of logical philosophy to metaphysics and religion has been obscured by the fact that such exponents were not content to be logicians. Because of a certain emotional bias against religious or metaphysical points of view, this logical critique has been used as an instrument in a polemic, even a propaganda, with emotional rather than logical motivations.

It is one thing to demonstrate that the concept of Being is without logical meaning. It is quite another to go on to say that this, and similar metaphysical concepts, are not philosophy but poetry, where the term "poetry" carries a very strongly implied "pooh-pooh." The implication is that the "poetry" of religious and metaphysical symbols may be cause or effect of very exquisite and inspiring emotional experiences, but these, like "the arts" in wartime, are among the nonessentials of life. The serious philosopher regards them as charming toys—as means of decorating life,

not of understanding it—in somewhat the same way as a physician might adorn his office with a medicine mask from the South Seas. All this is merely damning with faint praise.

While the exponents of logical philosophy have, on their side, sought to devalue the insights of metaphysics and religion, the would-be defenders of Faith have for the most part looked around somewhat ineffectually for means of defeating logical philosophy at its own game. On the whole, the more successful counterattack has seemed to be returning one pooh-pooh for another; as, for instance, the quip that Ayer, Reichenbach, and company have exchanged philosophy for grammar.

Yet in the context of Western philosophy and religion this situation is not at all surprising, for we have always been under the impression that religio-metaphysical statements are of the same order as scientific and historical statements. We have generally taken it for granted that the proposition "there is a God" is a statement of the same kind as "there are stars in the sky." The assertion that "all things have being" has always seemed to convey information in the same way as the assertion that "all men are mortal." Furthermore, "the universe was made by God" has seemed as much a statement of the historical type as that "the telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell."

Dr. F.S.C. Northrop is thus perfectly correct in pointing to the essential similarity between science, on the one hand, and the Hebrew–Christian religious tradition, on the other, insofar as both are concerned with "truth" as a structure of objective reality, whose nature is determinate even if unseen. Indeed, the scientific spirit has its historical origins in the type of mentality which is concerned to know the supernatural and the unseen in terms of positive propositions, which wants to know *what facts* lie beneath the surface of events. Thus Christian theology and science stand in somewhat the same historical relation as astrology and

astronomy, alchemy and chemistry, both constituting a body of theory to explain the past and predict the future.*

But Christianity did not disappear with the alchemists. Since the rise of modern science, theology has played a most problematic role. It has taken many different attitudes to science, ranging from denouncing it as a rival doctrine, through conciliation and adaptation, to a sort of withdrawal in which it is felt that theology speaks of a realm of being inaccessible to scientific inquiry. Throughout, there has been the general assumption on the part of both theologians and scientists that the two disciplines were employing the same kind of language, and were interested in the same order of objective, determinate truths. Indeed, when some theologians speak of God as having "an objective, supernatural reality, independent of our minds and of the sensible world," it is impossible to see how their language differs from that of science. For it appears that God is some specific thing or fact—an objective existence—supernatural in the sense that He or It is imperceptible within the "wave band" of our sense-organs and scientific instruments.

Where this confusion between the nature of religious or metaphysical statements, on the one hand, and scientific or historical statements, on the other, remains unclarified, it will, of course, be difficult indeed to see how modern logical philosophy can make any positive contribution to metaphysics. In a theological system where God plays the part of a scientific hypothesis, that is, a means of explaining and predicting the course of events, it is easy enough to show that the hypothesis adds nothing to our knowledge. One does not explain what happens by saying that

*Of course, there are other interpretations of the proper functions of alchemy and astrology, representing their aims as utterly different from those of science. Deeply understood, neither alchemy nor astrology have to do with the prediction and control of *future* events, but are rather a symbolism of *eternal* "events" and the process of their realization in the *present*.

God wills it. For if everything that happens is by divine intention or permission, the will of God becomes merely another name for "everything that happens." Upon logical analysis, the statement, "Everything is the will of God," turns out to be the tautology, "Everything is everything."

To cut a long story short, thus far the contribution of logical philosophy to metaphysics has been entirely negative. The verdict seems to be that, under logical scrutiny, the entire body of metaphysical doctrine consists either of tautology or nonsense. But this amounts to a total "debunking" of metaphysics only as it has been understood in the West—as consisting of meaningful statements conveying information about "transcendental objects." Asian philosophy has never been of the serious opinion that metaphysical statements convey information of a positive character. Their function is not to denote "Reality" as an object of knowledge, but to "cure" a psychological process by which man frustrates and tortures himself with all kinds of unreal problems. To the Asian mind, "Reality" cannot be expressed; it can only be known intuitively by getting rid of unreality, of contradictory and absurd ways of thinking and feeling.

The primary contribution of logical philosophy in this sphere is simply the confirmation of a point which has long been clear to both Hindus and Buddhists, though perhaps less widely realized in the Christian tradition. The point is that the attempt to talk about, think about, or know about ultimate Reality constitutes an impossible task. If epistemology is the attempt to know what knows, and ontology the attempt to define "is-ness," they are clearly circular and futile procedures, like trying to bite one's own teeth. In a commentary on the Kena Upanishad, Shankara says:

> Now a distinct and definite knowledge is possible in respect of everything capable of becoming an object of knowledge:

ENERGY / ELECTRONS

but it is not possible in the case of That which cannot become such an object. That is Brahman, for It is the Knower, and the Knower can know other things, but cannot make Itself the object of Its own knowledge, in the same way that fire can burn other things but cannot burn itself.

In the same way, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says:

Thou couldst not see the seer of sight, thou couldst not hear the hearer of hearing, nor perceive the perceiver of perception, now know the knower of knowledge. (iii, 4. 2)

Or in the words of a Chinese Buddhist poem:

It is like a sword that wounds, but cannot wound itself;
Like an eye that sees, but cannot see itself.*

A similar difficulty exists for physics in any attempt to investigate the nature of energy. For there is a point at which physics, as much as metaphysics, enters the realm of tautology and nonsense because of the circular character of the task which it attempts—to study electrons with instruments which are, after all, electrons themselves. At the risk of quoting a source which is somewhat passé, the classical statement of this problem is in Eddington's *Nature of the Physical World:*

We have perhaps forgotten that there was a time when we wanted to be told what an electron is. The question was never answered. . . . *Something unknown is doing we don't know what*—that is what our theory amounts to. It does

*Zenrin Kushu—an anthology of Chinese poetry employed in the study and practice of Zen Buddhism.

not sound a particularly illuminating theory. I have read something like it elsewhere:

The slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.

There is the same suggestion of activity. There is the same indefiniteness as to the nature of the activity and of what it is that is acting.*

Eddington goes on to point out that, despite this indefiniteness, physics can "get results" because the electrons, the unknowns within the atom, are countable.

Eight slithy toves gyre and gimble in the oxygen wabe; seven in nitrogen. By admitting a few numbers, even "Jabberwocky" may become scientific. We can now venture on a prediction: if one of its toves escapes, oxygen will be masquerading in garb properly belonging to nitrogen. . . . It would not be a bad reminder of the essential unknownness of the fundamental entities of physics to translate it into "Jabberwocky"; provided all numbers—all metrical attributes—are unchanged, it does not suffer in the least.†

The point which emerges is that what we are counting or measuring in physics, and that what we are experiencing in everyday life as sense data, is at root unknown and probably unknowable.

At this point, modern logical philosophy dismisses the problem and turns its attention to something else on the assumption that the unknowable need not and cannot concern us further. It asserts that questions which have neither the physical nor the logical possibility of an answer are not real questions. But this

*Eddington, Sir Arthur Stanley. *Nature of the Physical World* (London, 1935), 280.
†*Ibid.*, 281.

assertion does not get rid of the common human *feeling* that such unknowns or unknowables as electrons, energy, existence, consciousness, or "Reality" are in some way *queer*. The very fact of not being able to know them makes them all the stranger. Only a rather dry kind of mind turns away from them—a mind interested in nothing but logical structures. The more complete kind of mind, which can feel as well as think, remains to "indulge" the odd sense of mystery which comes from contemplating the fact that everything is at base something which cannot be known. Every statement which you make about this "something" turns out to be nonsense. And what is specially strange is that this unknowable something is also the basis of that which otherwise I know so intimately—myself.

Western man has a peculiar passion for order and logic, such that, for him, the entire significance of life consists in putting experience into order. What is ordered is predictable, and thus a basis for "safe bets." We tend to show a psychological resistance to areas of life and experience where logic, definition, and order—that is, "knowledge" in our sense—are inapplicable. For this type of mind the realm of indeterminacy and Brownian movements is frankly embarrassing, and the contemplation of the fact that everything is reducible to something we cannot think about is even disquieting. There is no real "reason" why it should be disquieting, because our inability to know what electrons are does not seem to interfere with our capacity to predict their behavior in our own macroscopic world.

The resistance is not based on some fear of an unpredictable action which the unknown may produce, although I suspect that even the most hardened logical positivist would have to admit to some odd feelings in face of an unknown called death. The resistance is rather the fundamental unwillingness of this type of mind to contemplate the limits of its power to succeed, order, and control. It feels that if there are areas of life which it cannot

order, it is surely reasonable (i.e., orderly) to forget them and turn to areas of life which *can* be ordered—so that the sense of success, of the mind's own competence, can be maintained. The contemplation of these intellectual limitations is, for the pure intellectual, a humiliation. But for the man who is something more than a calculator, the baffling is also the wonderful. In the face of the unknowable he feels with Goethe that

> the highest to which man can attain is wonder; and if the prime phenomenon makes him wonder, let him be content; nothing higher can it give him, and nothing further should he seek for behind it; here is the limit.

In the type of metaphysical or mystical experience which we are discussing, this feeling of wonder—which has all kinds of depths and subtleties—is one of two major components. The other is a feeling of liberation (the Hindu *Moksha*) which attends the realization that an immense amount of human activity is directed to the solution of unreal and purely fantastic problems—to the attainment of goals which we do not actually desire.

Speculative metaphysics—ontology and epistemology—are the intellectual aspects of fantastic problems which are basically psychological, and by no means confined to persons of a philosophical or even religious turn of mind. As already indicated, the essential nature of this kind of problem is circular—the attempt to know the knower, to make fire burn fire. This is why Buddhism speaks of release, nirvana, as deliverance from the Wheel, and of seeking Reality as "like looking for an ox when you are riding on one."

The psychological basis of these circular problems becomes clear when we look into the assumptions upon which, for example, the problems of ontology are based. What premises of thought and feeling underlie men's efforts to know "being," "ex-

istence," or "energy" as objects? Clearly, one assumption is that these names refer to objects—an assumption which could not have been made if there were not beneath it the further assumption that "I," the knowing subject, am somehow different from "being," the supposed object. If it were perfectly clear that the question, "What is being?" is, in the final analysis, the same question as "What am I?," the circular and futile character of the question would have been obvious from the beginning. But that it was far from clear is shown by the fact that metaphysical epistemology could ask the question, "What am I?" or "What is that which is conscious?" without recognizing a still more obvious circle. Obviously, questions of this order could be taken seriously only because of some nonlogical feeling of the need for an answer.

This feeling—common, perhaps, to most human beings—is surely the sense that "I," the subject, am a unique, isolated entity. There would be no need whatsoever to wonder *what* I am unless in some way I felt strange to myself. But so long as my consciousness feels strange to, cut off, and separate from its own roots, I can *feel* meaning in an epistemological question which has no logical sense. For I feel that consciousness is a function of "I"—not recognizing that "I," the ego, is just another name for consciousness. The statement "I am conscious" is, then, a concealed tautology saying only that consciousness is a function of consciousness. It can escape from this circularity upon the sole condition that "I" is taken to mean very much more than consciousness or its contents. But, in the West, this is not a usual use of the word. We identify "I" with the conscious will, and do not admit moral authority or responsibility for what we do unconsciously and unintentionally—the implication being that such acts are not our deeds but merely events which "happen" within us. When "I" is identified with "consciousness," man feels

himself to be a detached, separate, and uprooted entity acting "freely" in a void.

This uprooted feeling is doubtless responsible for the psychological insecurity of Western man, and his passion for imposing the values of order and logic upon the whole of his experience. Yet while it is obviously absurd to say that consciousness is a function of consciousness, there seems to be no means of knowing that of which consciousness *is* a function. That which knows—and which psychologists call somewhat paradoxically the unconscious—is never the object of its own knowledge.

Now, consciousness, the ego, feels uprooted so long as it avoids and refuses to accept the fact that it does not and cannot know its own base or ground. But when this is recognized, the consciousness *feels* connected, rooted, even though it does not know *to what* it is connected, *in what* it is rooted. So long as it retains delusions of self-sufficiency, omni-competence, and individual free will, it ignores the unknown on which it rests. By the familiar "law of reversed effort," this refusal of the unknown brings the feeling of insecurity, and in its train all the frustrating and impossible problems, all the vicious circles of human life, from the exalted nonsense of ontology down to the vulgar realms of power politics, where individuals play at being God. The hideous contrivances of the police (the 100 percent safe and ordered) state for planning the planners and guarding the guards and investigating the investigators are simply the political and social equivalents of the quests of speculative metaphysics. Both alike have their psychological origin in the reluctance of consciousness, of the ego, to face its own limits, and to admit that the ground and essence of the known is the unknown.

It does not matter very much whether you call this unknown Brahman or Blah, though the latter term usually indicates the intention to forget it, and the former to keep it in mind. Keeping it in mind, the law of reversed effort works in the other direction.

I realize that my very substance, that which I am, is altogether beyond grasping or knowing. It is not "I"—a word which suggests that it means something, it is non-sense and no-thing, which is why Mahayana Buddhism calls it *Tathata*, of which a good translation might be "da-da," and *shunyata*, the "void" or indeterminate. Similarly, the Vedantins say, "*Tat tvam asi*"—"*That* are thou"—without ever giving a positive designation of what *that* is. The man who tries to know, to grasp himself, becomes insecure, just as one suffocates by holding one's breath. Conversely, the man who really knows that he cannot grasp himself gives up, relaxes, and is at ease. But he never really knows if he simply dismisses the problem, and does not pause to wonder, to feel, and to become vividly aware of the real impossibility of self-knowledge.

To the religious mentality of the modern West, this entirely negative approach to Reality is almost incomprehensible, for it suggests only that the world is based on the shifting sands of nonsense and caprice. For those who equate sanity with order this is a doctrine of pure despair. Yet little more than five hundred years ago a Catholic mystic was saying of God, "By love He may be gotten and holden, but by thought never," and that God must be known through "unknowing," through "mystical ignorance."* And the love of which he spoke was not emotion. It was the general state of mind which exists when a man, through the realization of its impossibility, is no longer trying to grasp himself, to order everything and be dictator of the universe.

In our own day, logical philosophy provides the same technique of negation, telling us that in every statement in which we think we have grasped or defined or merely designated Reality, we have uttered only nonsense. When the tongue tries to put *itself* into words, the most that may be expected is a tongue twister. For this reason, the procedures of logical philosophy will only be disquieting to those theologians and metaphysicians who imagine that their definitions of the Absolute actually define anything. But it was always perfectly clear to the philosophers of Hinduism and Buddhism, and to some fewer Catholic mystics, that words such as "Brahman," "Tathata," and "God" meant not something but no-thing. They indicated a void in knowledge, somewhat as a window is outlined by the frame.

*Dom Justin McCann, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London, 1943). The doctrine of "knowing God by unknowing (*agnosia*)" derives from the sixth-century Syrian metaphysician writing under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, and in particular from his *Theologia Mystica*, in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 3. A translation of the latter work is included in Father McCann's edition of the former.

Yet logical philosophy pursues its criticism further, and says that nonsense statements and exclamations of this order do not constitute philosophy because they contribute nothing to knowledge—by which they mean that they do not assist us to predict anything, and offer no directions for human conduct. That is, in part, true, though it misses the very obvious point that philosophy—wisdom—consists as much in its spaces as in its lines, in recognizing what is not and cannot be known as in the contrary. But we must go farther than this truism. Knowledge is more than know-how, and wisdom is more than predicting and ordering. Human life becomes a fantastic vicious circle when man tries to order and control the world and himself beyond certain limits, and these "negative metaphysics" at least convey the positive injunction to relax this excess of effort.

But beyond this they have a positive consequence which is still more important. They "integrate" logic and conscious thought with the indeterminate matrix, the nonsense, which we find at the root of all things. The assumption that the task of philosophy, as of human life, is fulfilled only in predicting and ordering, and that the "nonsensical" has no value, rests upon a sort of philosophical "schizophrenia." If man's work is entirely to go to war

on chaos with logic, to determine the indeterminate; if the "good" is the logical and the "evil" the whimsical; then logic, consciousness, and the human brain is in conflict with the source of its own life and ability. We must never forget that the processes which form this brain are unconscious, and that beneath all the perceptible orders of the macroscopic world lies the indeterminate nonsense of the microscopic, the "gyring" and "gimbling" of a "tove" called energy—about which we know nothing. *Ex nihilo omnia fiunt.* But this nothing is a very strange thing.

Logical philosophy does not seem to have faced the fact that "nonsense" terms, so far from being valueless, are essential to every system of thought. It would be quite impossible to construct a philosophy or a science which is a "closed system" rigorously defining every term which it employs. Gödel has given us a clear mathematicological proof of the fact that no system can define its own axioms without self-contradiction, and, since Hilbert, modern mathematics employs the point as an entirely undefined concept. Just as the knife cuts other things, but not itself, so thought uses tools which define but cannot be defined; logical philosophy itself by no means escapes from this limitation.

For example, when logical philosophy asserts that "true meaning is a verifiable hypothesis," it must recognize that this very statement is meaningless if unverifiable. Similarly, when it insists that the only realities are those "facts" which are elicited in "scientific observation," it must recognize that it cannot, and does not, answer the question "What is a fact?" If we say that "facts" or "things" are the segments of experience symbolized by nouns, we are merely shifting the irreducible element of nonsense in our definition from "fact" to "experience." Some basic nonsense is entirely unavoidable, and the attempt to construct a completely self-defining system of thought is a vicious circle of tautology. Language can hardly dispense with the word "is," and yet the

dictionary can only inform us that "what is" is "what exists," and that "what exists" is "what is."

If, then, it must be admitted that even one nonsense, meaningless, or undefined term is necessary to all thought, we have already admitted the metaphysical principle that the basis or ground of all "things" is an indefinable (or infinite) nothing beyond sense—always escaping our comprehension and control. This is the supernatural, in the proper sense of what cannot be "natured" or classified, and the immaterial in the sense of what cannot be measured, metered, or "mattered." In all its fullness, this admission is precisely *faith*—the recognition that one must ultimately "give in" to a life-source, a Self beyond the ego, which lies beyond the definition of thought and the control of action.

Belief, in the *popular* Christian sense, falls short of this faith, since its object is a God conceived as having a determinate nature. But to the extent that God can be a known object of definite nature, He is an idol, and belief in such a God is idolatry. Thus in the very act of demolishing the concept of the Absolute as a "what" or "fact" about which meaningful statements and determinations can be made, logical philosophy has made its most vital contribution to religious faith—at the cost of its antithesis, religious "belief." While the logical positivists unwittingly join forces with the Hebrew prophets in their denunciation of idolatry, the prophets are found to be in line with that grand metaphysical tradition which, in Hinduism and Buddhism, has taken the disuse of idols to its proper conclusion.

In sum, then, the function of metaphysical "statements" in Hinduism and Buddhism is neither to convey positive information about an Absolute, nor to indicate an experience in which this Absolute becomes an object of knowledge. In the words of the Kena Upanishad: "Brahman is unknown to those who know It, and is known to those who do not know It at all." This knowing of Reality by unknowing is the psychological state of the man

whose ego is no longer split or dissociated from its experiences, who no longer feels himself as an isolated embodiment of logic and consciousness, separate from the "gyring" and "gimbling" of the unknown. He is thus delivered from *samsara*, the Wheel, the squirrel cage psychology of all those human beings who everlastingly frustrate themselves with impossible tasks of knowing the knower, controlling the controller, and organizing the organizer, like *ouroboros*, the mixed-up snake, who dines off his own tail.

Good Intentions

IT IS AN OLD SAYING THAT THE ROAD TO HELL IS paved with good intentions. Those who believe that motive is the most important factor in any undertaking will be puzzled by this saying. For is not Right Motive the first step in the Buddha's Path, and is it not stressed again and again that each step is set about with danger if the motive for taking it is not pure? But beware of good motives. There are good intentions and good intentions, and things are not always what they seem. Nothing is easier than to give up the world because one is incompetent in the affairs of the world. There is no wisdom in scorning riches simply because one is unable to obtain them, nor in despising the pleasures of the senses because one has not the means of fulfilling them. If the desire for these things exists, and if that desire is thwarted by circumstance, to add self-deception to frustration is to exchange a lesser hell for a greater. No hell is worse than that in which one lives without knowing it.

For the desire which is scorned for no other reason than that it cannot be satisfied is the greatest of man's enemies. One may pretend that it does not exist, that one has surrendered it, but one must sincerely answer the question, "If I *could* satisfy that desire, would I?" If that is not answered, to make a show of giving up the world, to take up the ascetic life not of desire but of necessity and to pride oneself upon it, that is to hide one's face from