Imagine a picture in a gallery: a vast tableau, covering the whole of an enormous wall. The picture consists of seemingly countless human figures depicted in an immense array of different situations and circumstances. The title alongside reads: A Thumbnail Sketch of the Diversity of Human Culture (contemporary). And indeed there is depicted a bewildering, mind-boggling diversity. Yet despite the obvious range of differences between the figures in the picture, there is an equally obvious pictorial thread linking (almost) all of them: it is as though whatever mundane task they happened to be involved with, each had broken off from it for an instant and had struck a certain attitude. And the various attitudes struck by this myriad of multifarious figures can clearly be seen to define a kind of pictorial focus, a point in space, which however lies just outside of the top right-hand corner of the frame of the picture itself.

Many of the figures’ attitudes towards this focus are manifestly positive: their faces express a kind of yearning, as though towards a much-missed friend who might be about to enter into the picture. Indeed, it seems from these characters’ faces as though their yearned-for friend were already just about as good as arrived: as though this person were all but there with them - all but present in the flesh, and no longer merely in spirit. (It must be said, however, that some of these expectant faces seem simultaneously to show a distinct shadow of uncertainty.)

On the other hand, many of the figures in the picture adopt a profoundly negative attitude towards the focus of the others’ favourable attention. Many from this second group seem quite pointedly to refrain from looking towards that focus, and they laugh scornfully at those who pay positive attention to it; or they just turn haughtily away from that focus, with their arms tightly folded; or they busy themselves with something, their backs squarely turned. (Yet some of these, all the same, are peering back over their shoulder.) Or again, they look sneeringly in the direction of the focus, and they perhaps gesture with a dismissive flick of the wrist - where, before, the others from the first group might joyously have pointed a finger.

Moreover, in all the above cases (both positive and negative), it is very noticeable that the strong gestures appear to meet with the approval - in the form of affectation or mimicry - of others standing close by. And in these manifestly polar cases there is an evident hierarchy: the mimics seeming to compete with each other, yet with each cutting a lesser figure than does the apparent initiator of the gesture.
Then there is a third group of figures who seem really quite unsure. This third group seem unsure whether to turn towards, or away from the focus of the others' attention or avoidance of attention. And even when they are turned towards the focus, some from this third group seem to show distinct ambivalence - or even embarrassment (as though they weren't quite sure what precisely they were supposed to be looking towards, or not looking towards, but didn't like to admit it). Meanwhile, a tiny minority of this third group of figures seem pretty well indifferent to the extra-pictorial focus itself. Having momentarily broken off from their mundane tasks like the rest, their attention and very evident concern is directed unambiguously towards their neighbours in the picture, whoever their neighbours might happen to be.

There are many children in the picture, naturally. Most of the older children seem to be in the thrall of whatever group of adults they happen to be surrounded by: they copy them. (Some of the members of the first two groups, in particular, seem to be actively encouraging this.) These older children copy rather stiltedly: they may pay attention - either positively or negatively - to the focus of other's attention or avoidance of attention, but they appear to do this only by virtue of their sideways-glancing attention to their focus-attending or focus-avoiding adult neighbours. The younger of the children, meanwhile, are completely and utterly uninterested in the focus of the adults' and older children's attention and avoidance of attention. These younger children are very clearly the exceptional characters in the picture. They simply watch their elders: with keen attention they watch them all, very closely. And their bemusement is perfectly manifest.

Whatever its influence upon the figures in the picture - and the vast majority are indeed very markedly influenced - the focus of their attention or avoidance of attention does not itself lie within the frame of the picture; as I've said, this focus lies just outside the top right-hand corner. And since the picture fairly teems with figures, the gross pictorial effect of these multitudinous figures' individual and collective attitudes is strikingly suggestive of the issue of rays from an extra-pictorial sun.

If at this point you are able to say - more or less - what I'm now going to go on and talk about, then I could say that I have already succeeded in making my main point. (There's a clue in this paper's title: there's a problem addressed herein, and the main point is to instigate the resolution of that problem.) You may not agree with that judgement, however. That is to say, even if you do know what I've got in mind, you may not find yourself able to agree - you may not be able to see - that any significant point in relation to it has so far been made. But in that case I'd be bound to say that you yourself feature as a character in the picture described above: you are sitting there in the picture, sat in front of the screen you're now reading from, and perhaps frowning. As regards the attitude you strike - as you momentarily break off from reading - I must of course leave it open. That would be for you to declare, or otherwise show.

"The problems are solved," wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, "not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." (Philosophical Investigations, para. 109.)

"A picture held us captive," he went on, speaking of such linguistically mediated intellectual bewitchment, "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably." (Philosophical Investigations, para. 115.)

Now Wittgenstein never mentioned this specifically, but we do of course paint pictures with words: we paint pictures, sketch out ideas, make graphic descriptions; we depict, portray, delineate - all of this illustrative and illuminating stuff, sometimes visionary stuff, with words.

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Indeed there is a very much apparent connectedness between our language, our sense of sight, and our mental faculty of vision - if you see what I mean. (The intimate etymological association of English 'see' and 'say' - and 'association' itself, the underlying notion being 'to follow' - is very striking; cf. The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots.) Even our 'idea' comes from the Greek word idéa 'look, semblance, kind, form, ideal form, idea' - from the verb idein 'to see'. But this glaringly
evident *prima facie* association between human language, sight, and vision certainly should not surprise us. For sight is after all our primary distance sense. So of course the human mind and the human linguistic faculty might be expected to have evolved accordingly, with this being variously manifested by the form and the figures of language itself.

And if philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language - if a picture, painted with words, might hold human intelligence captive - then not only do the means of language bring into effect the problem of such intellectual bewitchment, they might also be used to effect the remedy. (I mean it should work both ways: the means of language being both the lock and the key.) In which case, the remedy is readily to hand if our culture is ready and willing to take it. And in order to break once and for all the sometimes quite untrammelled and absolutely overpowering capacity of the spell of such intellectual bewitchment, the first step to be taken must be for us to face up to our primary philosophical problem.

Our primary philosophical problem, naturally, is the one which occupies human minds and lives more than any other. Minds and lives worldwide are (seemingly) irremediably gripped by this philosophical problem, sometimes in apparently quite contrary ways. But strange to tell, perhaps, this problem has no name: you will not have heard of this philosophical problem before, and yet you know it well. Stranger still, the solution to the problem is dead simple. For to see and to acknowledge this philosophical problem is already to see its own solution. And so, since minds and lives worldwide are in fact held well and truly captive by it, then really it's no great surprise that this problem has no name!

We are all of us quite familiar with a certain question which is a standard aspect of our problem with no name. Indeed, since the turn of the millennium, a major renewal of our obsession with this question (not to mention certain sociopolitical issues that are more-or-less tacitly associated therewith) has become increasingly manifest at all levels of cultural traffic. Such facts are however very much part and parcel of our hitherto un-named primary philosophical problem. For this 'certain question' - the one with which we are all fully familiar - is itself, I repeat, very much an aspect of the problem. This 'certain question' is a metaphysical question.

The word 'metaphysics', we know, comes to us as a result of the fact that the rough and untitled notebooks of Aristotle were posthumously edited, catalogued, and entitled in a certain way. One of these sets of works came to be called *Ta Physika biblia* (meaning, 'the books of the things of Nature'), or simply *Ta Physika* - because, broadly speaking, they deal with the nature and properties of the world and of the things in it. And in fact, this very name is the origin of the English word 'physics'. The set of works placed by the editors after *Ta Physika biblia* came to be called *Ta Meta ta Physika biblia* ('the books which follow (the books of) the things of Nature'), or simply *Ta Meta ta Physika* - because, it seems, no-one could think of a better name for them. But in any case, it's certainly true that the place following *Ta Physika biblia* seemed somehow just the right sort of place for these works to be put. And so this was the rather uninspired and seemingly uninspiring way in which we got our word 'metaphysics'. Despite any initial appearance to the contrary, then, this word tells us absolutely nothing about what metaphysics actually is. Or does it? I mean, for a start you wonder why no-one was inspired to think of a better name. This was apparently a subject of study somehow closely connected with the subject of study which we'd now call 'natural science'. And yet, just what is this subject of study supposed to be studying? I mean: How does the name of this subject of study give indication of its subject matter? - as we might expect it to, if not in one way then in another. We are well over two thousand years down the line, and still no-one has thought of a better name. *Why not?* And more's the point, how come nobody thought there was anything much wrong with this name as it stands? How come, in spite of its unedifying origin, the word 'metaphysics' seems such a fitting name - has the appearance of being a fitting name - for a whole load of stuff since, and even before Aristotle?

"The characteristic of a metaphysical question," said Wittgenstein, "[is] that we express an unclarity about the grammar of words in the form of a scientific question." (*The Blue and Brown Books*, page 35.) And by 'grammar of words', I believe he meant simply the way in which words are used - except,
that is, for when we use words in unwitting expression of our unclarity about their use, as when we simply and unwittingly misuse them. So his insight about metaphysics was as follows: on certain occasions, and in some yet-to-be-understood-and-acknowledged way, we unwittingly develop and express an unclarity about language and its use - albeit a notably transient unclarity - in the form of an unclarity about reality. And so, such transient and unwitting expression of unclarity about the use of words (masquerading to us as an unclarity about reality) quite naturally and quite inevitably acquires the effective status of a use of words in its own right - albeit a strictly occasional, somewhat surreal, and constitutionally unclear one. Hence the phenomenon of metaphysics; and hence also the somewhat nebulous, yet somehow sort of super-real, or super-scientific, or (as we say) supernatural associations in the dictionary entries for this word. Hence moreover: the perceived aptness of the posthumous bibliographical placing of Aristotle's work (sc. following Ta Physika biblia; the editors' uninspired name for this work - a name perhaps not so uninspiring or unedifying after all; and the not-quite-so-happenstance-as-at-first-it-seemed apparent fittingness (with the apparent subject matter) of our consequently adopted word 'metaphysics' - the appearance of this word suggests, entirely falsely, that its etymology ought to be something like 'the science of that which transcends or is beyond the physical or natural'. (In his etymological dictionary Origins, under the entry for 'physic', Eric Partridge translates 'meta ta phusikai' as "after, hence beyond, the physical things (or Nature)"); but he admits to and corrects his error in the dictionary's Commentary section, on page 821.)

Now this seems like a bit of a comedown for metaphysics. But such an initial feeling of comedown is only to be expected. After all, if we can sometimes unwittingly develop and express a transient unclarity about the grammar of words - a transient unclarity about the unclouded use of our language - in the form of an unclarity about reality, then of course we would inevitably tend to be unclear about (and even completely oblivious to) the real nature of this unclarity and all of its manifestations. Our occasional and transient intellectual unclarity would tend to be absolute (as and when it occurs), and therefore quasi-pathological. But if we can gain insight and get clear about that - about our recurring and constitutionally unwitting state of intellectual quasi-pathology - then this may be the first step in the treatment of our condition. And so, what started as a feeling of comedown may yet turn into something quite uplifting.

Indeed, the question 'Does God exist?' certain does appear to have at least the form of a scientific question. Come to mention it, a sort of quasi-scientific talk of God has in recent decades become very much in vogue amongst Western scientists. For some of our more celebrated scientists have recently made quite vigorous quasi-professional pronouncements about the existence or non-existence of God, about knowing the mind of God (through the scientific understanding of the universe), about the sureness of paths to God (the path of science versus that of religion), and about a whole load of other God stuff besides. And whatever they might think of Wittgenstein's words on metaphysics, no philosophy academic, I suppose, is going to dispute that the question as to the existence of God is indeed a metaphysical question. (Someone once said to me, "It's a theological question." Okay, so theology sometimes gets itself involved in metaphysics; no surprise there.) How strange then, it seems, that in the discipline of philosophy there is no recognised and named problem of which this metaphysical question is an aspect. How strange that we had no 'God problem'. For the God problem is the problem of which all our metaphysical questions, answers, and pronouncements about God are but manifestations. How strange we had no name for this, our primary philosophical problem. And how strange nobody noticed that we did indeed have a primary philosophical problem. Well, perhaps really it's not at all strange. For if a picture could hold us captive - if words could effectively hold human intelligence bewitched - then this state of complete intellectual entralment, necessarily unwitting, would itself in effect be our necessarily unidentified problem.

So consider, then, the vivid picture which - on certain occasions - we very readily and innocently paint with our words about God. Consider this picture and ask yourself, for example: when is it that, according to this picture, I might expect to be seized of a definitive answer to the question about God's existence? When will belief and doubt about the matter become no longer an issue? Well, of course, that's when I breathe my last; when I peg out and pass away; when I throw a seven and cash my chips;
when I'm deceased and departed, dead and gone. That's all part and parcel of the picture, isn't it!?

Think of this picture then, with all its features, figures, and facets. To wit: transcendent creator and overseer God, life after death, belief and unbelief, theists, atheists, agnostics - the whole caboodle. Just think of the picture. Think of the picture with all of its manifold elaborations. Think of the picture and take note of your place in it. Think of the picture, and, as it were, step back a little. Step back in your mind, as though from a picture. Step back as though from out of a picture: a picture which before held you captive: a picture which therefore only now you can see. And if at this point you start to feel giddy, like as if the world were somehow turning on its head, then you could certainly say you're getting the picture.

But be careful now not to draw yourself straight back into that picture; the pencil, the brush, do not leave your hand! Watch your words, that is to say; in particular, be careful how you speak of God. For this is the crucial test of your sight of our primary philosophical problem, and also of its solution.

Though really this test is not so very testing. For pretty well absolutely without exception, and entirely aside from and in spite of the aforementioned 'certain occasions', we all quite commonly speak of God in ways which do not give rise to any problem at all - none whatsoever. I mean, just for example, God is our personification of the creative principle of the cosmos, and God is our personification of the good in the world. (That's according to the spirit of the letter, so to speak.)

But what have belief and unbelief got to do with that, for God's sake? There's no question there at all as to the existence of anyone or anything. 'God' is the name of a personification; 'God' is not the name of a person - not, at least, from the perspective outside of the captivating and wholly mythic picture previously described. In fact, God is our personification of certain transcendent (ie. conceptually abstract), apparently eternal, but in any case absolutely fundamental realities of the cosmos. So any questioning of the reality or of the existence of this personification is fundamentally confused. Indeed it's rather as though we had questioned the reality or the existence of mother nature, or mother Nature, or just plain Nature - which, to point up the striking difference, we are nothing like so readily inclined to do. Yet I believe these two personifications of reality are in fact perfectly complementary, and that they go naturally together hand in hand. (Brewer's Dictionary Of Phrase & Fable has an entry for a lesser personification, though one directly related to the whole of Nature - especially from an archaic perspective, which, never mind the ancients, we're really not so far away from ourselves: "Mother Earth When Junius Brutus ... formed one of the deputation to Delphi to ask the oracle which of the three would succeed Tarquin, the response was, 'He who should first kiss his mother.' Junius instantly threw himself on the ground, exclaiming 'Thus, then, I kiss thee, Mother Earth', and he was elected consul."

Faith, however, is another matter. For God is also our personification of a real power in the world, and famously so: it's a power in which faith can never be misplaced. (It's people, individuals like me, who sometimes let people down.) And faith in that power cannot but bind people together. Thus, here we might usefully consider the etymology of the word 'religion': from Latin religio, accusative form of religare 'to bind up, to bind together'. (Hate may also bind people together, of course; though with at least this difference: hate binds people together against others. It's no great mystery, therefore, that hatred of and domination over others should sometimes stand out as a major feature - more or less unofficial - of the orthodox religions of humanity.)

But to talk of a moral requirement of faith in God is to confusedly dissociate the personification of such reality - a personification which thereby, on such occasions, is surreally personalised in graphic myth - from the particular reality in us which our otherwise perfectly commonplace personification (constitutionally transcendent, though not after all so very unworldly) ordinarily serves to personify. And an important and perfectly natural brand of confusion this perhaps has been for human beings - in all its aspects, and throughout all its history. Yet the benefit of such confusion is quite manifestly all but exhausted; indeed it has long been positively backfiring. So it's only natural that we should come now
to face up to the confusion. And that means facing up to our own unwitting, though intimate, and sometimes active complicity in maintaining it. We have quite manifestly reached a watershed in our intellectual and cultural evolution.

A picture held us captive. But this was our doing; language is not at fault. And with care and attention we can undo it.

Be careful how you speak of God, then. But those still stuck in the picture will of course tend quasi-pathologically to misunderstand what you say; for they hold themselves captive, by means of language. These captives mark out two opposing poles in the picture: the poles of belief and unbelief, of theism and atheism. Those closest to either of these poles are the ones most tightly bound.

The believer and the unbeliever, that is to say - the theist and the atheist - are together and equally both pretty well bound to misunderstand what I write here. For they must somehow accommodate these words within the verbally mediated mythic picture in which they hold themselves unwittingly captive. This is a picture admitting only of metaphysical belief and unbelief, of metaphysical opinion and counter-opinion, about the existence of God. And their captivation is thus now clearly demonstrable. For I will inevitably be seen by them to be stridently expressing just such an opinion - an opinion, moreover, apparently antagonistic towards their own deeply held and perhaps fiercely defended convictions. What their mutually opposed yet equally metaphysical convictions jointly amount to is precisely what's in balance here, of course, and not any opinion of mine. But convictions they are and convictions they remain (for them, at least) just so long as a front is maintained. This front thereby becomes all-important. Come hell or high water it must be held against any encroachment; for any encroachment will inevitably be viewed as a threat to the strength and the courage of their respective convictions.

These convictions, however - apparently equal and opposite - now appear strangely to have become merged. For in the face of this current assault upon their respective fronts, the theist and the atheist must now fight together, equally and of a piece. That is to say: whereas before they were opposed, their respective battlefronts are now effectively become joined - against a commonly perceived threat. Their battlefronts are joined; but now these battlefronts must surely fall together, for this is an impossibly paradoxical situation for such unnatural allies to be in.

The theist and the atheist, then - the believer and the unbeliever - can now be seen to be but estranged metaphysicising kinsfolk. And the difficulty that has to be overcome (in order to bring them both back down to Earth, so to speak) is not one having so much to do with the intellect at all. Rather, it has to do with the will: the will to face, or to resist and fail to face something uncomfortable about ourselves - something manifested by our very unwillingness to face it. This was, for sure, in plain and open view before us all along. I've not supplied any new information, only laid things out carefully arranged for inspection.

1. The posthumously published collection of miscellaneous remarks also appears in (pretentiously entitled) dual-language form: *Culture and Value*.

REFERENCES

