A PREFACE TO THEOLOGY

The mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in. Wittgenstein, Zettel, n.16.

Some preliminary remarks may be in order. By 'theology' in what follows is understood primarily Christian theology, though it is recognized that there are more or less legitimate derived uses of this term in connection with non-Christian religions. There are also more or less independent uses of the term, clearly so in Aristotle, say, to refer to some activity conceived of as in principle rational in its sources and in its practice - 'philosophical theology'; the relation between Christian theology and philosophical theology is problematic, and will only be glanced at here.

It should also be remarked that even within Christianity the term 'theology' or its Greek and Latin equivalents have had different uses. There has been a tendency in Greek Christianity to reserve the term 'theology' to reflection on God as three-in-one, and to use the term 'economy' for reflection on the Incarnation within the providential plan. Although St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century wrote a Summa Theologiae, he speaks in the first, methodological, question of this work rather of sacra doctrina, sacred teaching, than of theologia. However, it is convenient, and in accordance with current usage, to speak of theology when referring to the historically very various ways in which Christians have reflected on the whole meaning of what they accept in faith as a revelation granted them and in principle not accessible to reflection without this revelation. This is an ideal or technical use of the word 'theology', which, while it remains related to historical uses of the word, already adopts a perspective which selects for consideration a specified activity of Christians, regarding it as in some sense typical of and intrinsic to historical Christianity, even though this activity might not historically have been called 'theology'.

A third preliminary remark is more doubtfully in order, but may be desirable in view of the audience to which these reflections are addressed. I should like to make it clear that these reflections are intended themselves to be theological in the sense indicated, that is, as extending a tradition of reflection on the whole meaning of Christian revelation, and hence representing a typically Christian activity, however various the forms historically taken by this activity. Clearly the tradition, and representation of it, may be differently conceived even today. Historically, and even today, Christian tradition has been conceived of in different and divergent ways. However, it is, I think, true to say that today all the historically divergent Christian traditions have become aware of their limitations, and in particular of the limitations of what, within the traditions, has been conceived of as typically theological activity. Thus while I should make it clear that the reflections offered here are not in any historical sense (including, then, the contemporary scene) necessarily representative of any of the Christian traditions, the aim of the reflections is to sketch a version of theological activity which could be accepted by all Christian traditions as 'representative' in some prospective sense of what, from this discovered or invented point of view, might be seen retrospectively as typically Christian theology. To 'extend the tradition' in this way would be to re-unite, by proposing a new type, what have hitherto been conceived of as divergent. It has been extremely stimulating to embark on these reflections for an audience which, by assumption, is non-theological (and could very well be non-Christian), since it has forced me to attempt to offer an account of theology which

could take its place without too much embarrassment among accounts of other kinds of studies today. I ask here to be forgiven if in order to establish some kind of communication I blunder clumsily into areas of discussion for which I lack professional competence.

It will be convenient to begin with a remark made some years ago by Claude Levi-Strauss to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in the course of a discussion printed in the review Esprit (1):

> In your article you claim that La pensee sauvage makes a choice for syntax against semantics; as far as I am concerned there is no such choice. There is no such choice because the phonological revolution that you have invoked on several occasions consists of the discovery that meaning (sens) is always the result of a combination of elements which are not themselves significant. Consequently, what you are looking for ....is a meaning of meaning (un sens du sens), a meaning behind meaning: whereas in my perspective meaning is never the primary phenomenon: meaning is always reducible. In other words, behind all meaning there is a non-meaning (non-sens), while the reverse is not the case. As far as I am concerned, significance (signification) is always phenomenal.

It is of no special concern to me whether Levi-Strauss would still describe his position in the same way; what remains interesting is the opposition he discerns between, on the one hand, a view of meaning for which any instance of articulate meaning arises out of a prior, not necessarily articulate, source of meaning which as source is 'pregnantly' meaningful - a'meaning of meaning' - and on the other, a view (his own) for which meaning is a product of a structured combination of non-meaningful elements and is sustained by that structure alone. (I recognize that the opposition tends to seem even more abrupt expressed in terms of 'meaning' than in terms of 'sens', but again this does not deprive the remark of its interest as exemplary locus).

Now to pursue all the implications of this opposition would take me much further than I would care to go at the moment; but some fairly superficial observations may perhaps be made. The view which Levi-Strauss describes as his own depends of course on ideas of theoretical linguistics which have become in some ways increasingly fashionable as they have also in some ways become increasingly sophisticated. Writing in 1968, Chomsky describes amusingly the euphoria of the 1950's when it seemed that 'mathematics, technology, and behavioristic linguistics and psychology were converging on a point of view that was very simple, very clear, and fully adequate to provide a basic understanding of what tradition had left shrouded in mystery'(2). Even quite recently what would seem to be at best purely decorative allusions to 'information theory' and 'codes' appear in the writings of distinguished British scholars (3), and this in spite of reiterated warnings from professionals of information theory (4). The move in the direction of increased sophistication may be characterized by way of Chomsky's distinction of the two different levels of syntactic analysis, the level of 'surface structure' and the level of 'deep structure', the one generated from the other by complex transformations. Whether this distinction is so considerable an innovation as Chomsky claims is open to doubt; what remains clear is that structure remains the primary explanatory concept (5).

Three observations of decreasing generality may be made here. (a) 'Structure' seems to have become the paradigm for meaning in general throughout an increasingly wide range of investigations today; it is interesting that the word occurs in the title of Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions, to which I was alluding in my use of the word 'paradigm'. It seems as though it is no longer

possible to characterize the search for explanation, the pursuit of meaning, except in terms of 'structure', as though one were held captive by the language of 'structure'. We may compare Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations I, n.115): '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'. The Bild which held him captive was precisely picturing, something very close to 'structure'; so it is fascinating to find David Pears, in his recent book in the Fontana Modern Masters series, describe (inexorably) Wittgenstein's philosophy in both periods as an attempt 'to understand the structure and limits of thought' (p.12), in what seems to be the hendiadys 'structure and limits' (four times in this paragraph). And yet, if anything is plain in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, it is that limits need not be structured (6). For structures are in principle capable of being 'mapped', and the later Wittgenstein's 'limits' of language are only ever provisional boundaries, capable of indefinite expansion and contraction. How shall I say what it is I can't say except by saying it? Of course one can always try to show that what has been said, especially by philosophers, was mistaken in typical ways. A prison with rubber walls might be even more intolerable than one with rigid walls - but 'prison' would be the wrong metephor, and stretching can be a member of a group of transformations formalized in mathematics.

(b) It is of course in mathematics that the paradigm of 'structure' finds its clearest expression, that 'new mathematics' which seems now to be provoking a minor political crisis in France (7). But whereas mathmaticians themselves can be aware of the problems arising from the nature of formal systems (8), it seems possible in linguistics for exponents of 'transformational grammars' to embark on elaborate procedures of formalization in which it is difficult to decide which is more extraordinary, the triviality of the results or the naivety of the presuppositions. I shall support this rash attack by only a single instance (9). In his own essay on 'Generative Syntax' in the Penguin New Horizons in Linguistics (1970), the editor, Professor John Lyons, the author of another Modern Masters book on Chomsky and of a substantial Introduction to Linguistic Theory, expands a formalization of lexical entries associated with a formalization of syntactic properties as follows (p.136):

> These entries may be read as 'the lexical item sincerity is an uncountable, abstract noun' and 'the lexical item boy is a countable, common, animate, human noun'.

Now I must in a simple-minded way protest that no procedure of formalization on earth is going to persuade me to describe a noun as 'human'. More formally, if a system of formalization requires me, in order to make sense of one of its rules (not, certainly, of one of the propositions it generates), to lapse into a piece of non-formal muddle ('Ah well, I don't really mean "human" in the ordinary sense'), then there is something fundamentally wrong with the formal system (10).

(c) As this example shows, 'semantics' in this kind of treatment is specified in dependence on 'syntax', so that Ricoeur's appeal to a priority of semantics to syntax can be made to seem merely a technical alternative, and as such to be technically rejected. But what is odder still is that the formalized transformations which are said to exhibit the passage from 'deep structure' to 'surface structure' appear to be envisaged, by Chomsky, at least, as mental operations, psychological processes, and that linguistic 'competence' consists in the ability to perform these operations (cf.Chomsky, op.cit.,ch.2.). Now Chomsky's notion of 'competence', the native speaker's capacity to generate and understand an infinite number

of sentences in his own language, seems to be of fundamental importance. It was his recognition of it which led him to the distinction between 'deep structure' and 'surface structure'; what is more than dubious is whether 'competence' needs to be tied to notions of 'structure' at all.

What is at issue here, and brings us back to our point of departure, is whether 'structure' is not an undue restriction of notions of 'order' and 'context', which may in fact be given interpretations of a non-formal kind, such that 'meaning' is not held to be exclusively supported by 'structure' but to issue from a source of meaning, the 'meaning of meaning' (11). For Ricoeur, in the essay mentioned earlier, this source of meaning is not the 'myth' but something prior to it both chronologically and in principle: the 'symbol', which is 'over-determined' with potential meanings; and it is the function of 'hermeneutic' to recover and renew this primary and primordial meaning by expounding it as a meaning for the expositor and his contemporaries.

Now it must be admitted that Ricoeur's notion of 'symbol' is a rather romantic one, although he is aware of the need for 'structure' (or preferably context) in order that symbolism may disclose meaning. While he has written a major philosophical interpretation of Freud (12), he relies unduly on writers like Eliade for his view of symbols as somehow lying about charged with revelatory meaning, awaiting a sympathetic expositor, though again he is certainly aware of the function of (some) literature and art in generating meaning from symbols (13).

The point of all the foregoing discussion, both prolix and cursory, has been to indicate the possibility of a third alternative, for which meaning is not primarily either the resultant of a structured combination of non-meaningful elements, or a symbolic concretion in some absolute beginning, but primarily a non-formal, non-structured 'competence', which is the 'generating' source of both structure and symbol, and which remains irreducibly 'mysterious' (cf. Chomsky's remark above). On this view, the 'meaning of meaning' is a competence: the ability, capacity, power, actively to mean, the quick of human spontaneity.

How is it possible to support such a view argumentatively? Clearly it has been presented in this paper dialectically, by the choice (with a particular audience in mind) of a convenient topos offering an opposition of two views, which have then been reconciled in a 'higher unity' by manifest sleight of hand; I assume that the (relative) quickness of the hand has not deceived the eye. I should want to appeal to the later Wittgenstein for support; hence the remark impressionistically cited at the beginning of the paper. But the appeal to Wittgenstein itself would require substantiation of a sort which I would not care to try to offer here. It would involve interpreting Wittgenstein in a context which is neither his own, nor (still less) the context of current English philosophy, which probably owes more to Austin than to Wittgenstein himself. Wittgenstein himself is 'argumentative' in a distinctive way, in which the drift is more significant than the sequence, the printed words frequently demand an accompanying mimed performance, provisional instances are exhibited only to be collapsed. Nevertheless, as much on the basis of the experience of Wittgenstein's last year of lecturing at Cambridge as of the printed writings, I should want to claim that his later philosophy is a disclosure of mind in action, of 'mind' as an indefinitely fluid activity of meaning, where 'mastery of a language' is not a merely private affair, but involves membership of a linguistic community, so that the 'mystery' of competence, the mean-ing of meaning, is a sharing in the reciprocal world of human communication (14).

And after all, my purpose here is to sketch a version of meaning in theology; so anyone who wishes may read all the foregoing as 'background', an evocation of different styles of pursuit of meaning, against or alongside which the pursuit of meaning in theology might emerge more persuasively.

Thus abruptly, I pass now to the problem of meaning in theology. The writings collected in what is called the New Testament, whatever else they do or are, provide evidence that different groups of people claimed to share an experience of inner transformation, and that this claim was stated, in very various ways, in terms of an interpretation of the way in which a man Jesus, having lived and died and been himself transformed, continued to play an original part in their lives. On the basis of this formulation, we may make the following remarks.

(a) The intrinsic unity of the New Testament writings is an implication of the historical judgment, or series of judgments made over a considerable period of time (hundreds of years in some cases) by the successors of the first Christian communities, that these writings, and no others, were and are authentic witnesses to an experience both unique and universally available, shared by the first Christian communities in their diversity and by their successors in their even greater diversity. The unity of the New Testament writings is only superficially and inconsistently an historically empirical datum; their significant unity is provided only by the perspective of the experience.

(b) By 'experience' is not primarily meant a 'feeling', but a recognition of a radical change of life as a consequence of acceptance of an invitation to change (to 'turn', 'be converted'); hence not so much like a pain but rather like 'Now I see...' (the solution to a problem, say). A typical New Testament expression for the experience, subjectively (individually and communally) considered, is 'faith'; more commonly, perhaps, the experience is registered by statements (of all sorts, narratives, for instance) about the relational term of faith, the one inviting, Jesus. ('Jesus' is <u>primarily</u> the name for the subject of a human history at the beginning of our era).

(c) These statements of all sorts about Jesus are an interpretation of his significance. As answers to the question, 'Who (what) is Jesus?', they envisage him in a variety of contexts of interpretation, available in the Palestinian-Hellenistic-Jewish environment of the time. The primary context of interpretation is clearly the traditions of Israel, documented in Hebrew and Greek literature (the Old Testament). These traditions were themselves complex, and at the time of the New Testament writings include apocalyptic reinterpretations of the older traditions (as in the Qumran documents) and reinterpretations assimilating Hellenistic philosophy (as in Philo of Alexandria). The New Testament writings use these and other traditions, reinterpreting them so as to interpret the significance of Jesus; the primary horizon of interpretation, what claims and demands interpretation, <u>das Zu-Denkende</u>, was and is the significance of Jesus; the traditions were and are reinterpreted in the service of that primary effort of interpretation. 'Now I see! What do I see?'

(d) All the traditions reinterpreted by the New Testament writers included a view of 'God' or at least 'the divine', and some of the traditions included a view of the cosmos; all of them took for granted that God and cosmos were <u>real</u>. Consequently the Christian reinterpretations in their turn were 'theo-logical', cosmological, and ontological, in different ways and with varying degrees of explicitness. They were also, in view of the dominant Old Testament context, intrinsically historical in their form:

Jesus was the 'fulfilment' of a 'promise'. All Christian theologies since the time of the New Testament writings have continued to exhibit those characteristics in varying degrees; in the nineteenth century (some might say earlier) there began the process of adapting the ontological language of early Christianity in such a way that it could become a language of 'experience' in a subjective sense, and more recently some Christian theology has claimed to be non-theo-logical, proclaiming the death of God in the wake of Nietzsche's Zarathustra of awaiting a God of the future who has still to become himself fully.

The responsible practice of theology involves, then, the acceptance, in the perspective of faith, of the New Testament writings, with their claim to reinterpret the Israelite traditions (the Old Testament writings); and it involves acceptance of the New Testament writings as a uniquely privileged exemplar of how to reinterpret any tradition in order to interpret Jesus as Christ and Lord - historically, theo-logically, cosmologically and ontologically.

This theological activity of interpretation and reinterpretation depends on a single presupposition with two aspects. (a) The theologian as believer belongs to a community of believers; it is a presupposition of the faith of the believing community that its faith is the same faith as that of the first Christian communities, in spite of manifest historical discontinuities. (b) This faith must be not only subjectively (individually or communally) common to believers now and in the beginning; it must also be concerned with the same object, open to the same horizon, the significance of the one Jesus.

The theological presupposition is only a particular version of the presupposition on which all interpretation of texts depends (15). This general presupposition is simply that author and interpreter of the text share a common humanity. On the one hand this implies that author and interpreter share in that human competence which is the generation of meaning; on the other, it implies that the 'subject' of the text, its horizon or Woraufhin, is the meaning of what it is to be human. It seems no great step to holding that this presupposition holds good not only for texts, but also for any determinate way of life.

Naturally this 'mysterious' shared human community is also presupposed by theological interpretation. In fact - and this is the last step to be taken here - theological interpretation of Jesus in faith needs ultimately to maintain not only that it relies on the general presupposition of shared humanity and that it further particularizes it by introducing the shared condition of faith; theological interpretation needs to maintain that its particular version is the necessary particularization of the general version, such that the shared condition of faith and the significance of Jesus define intrinsically - 'realize' and 'fulfil' - the character and scope of shared humanity in general. Theology would then consist in the unending task of making this claim plausible.

Cornelius Ernst

Notes and References

1. November 1963, pp.628-53. I have used the translation in New Left Review 62, July-August 1970. Quotation from (French) p.637, (English) p.64. In a later issue of New Left Review, Ricoeur is referred to in a footnote as Catholic; as it happens, he is a member of the French Reformed Church. Ricoeur's article 'Structure et herméneutique', referred to by Lévi-Strauss, was printed in the same issue of Esprit, and has been reprinted in Ricoeur's collection, Le conflit des interprétations (1969).

2. Language and Mind, p.3.

3. For example, V.W.Turner, The Drums of Affliction (1968), Introduction, following Leach.

4. For example, Colin Cherry, On Human Communication, first edition 1957, second edition 1966. The misprint of the diagram on p.115 of The Savage Mind (1966) may perhaps seem even more innocent when it is further noticed that the English version has replaced Lévi-Strauss's '≠' sign (mathematically, 'not equal to'; La pensée sauvage, p.152) for diacritical boundaries by a '+' sign.

5. J.Piaget, as well as surveying mathematics and the natural and human sciences in his small book Le structuralisme (1968), has also edited a substantial volume of the Encyclopédie de la Pléiade, Logique et connaissance scientifique (1967), adding comments from the point of view of 'genetic epistemology'. Piaget's babies (Auden) have grown up.

6. Perhaps I may be allowed to refer here to my own now rather antiquated lecture to a foreign audience, 'Words, Facts and God', Blackfriars July-August 1963, pp.292-306.

7. Any reader who, like myself, is not a professional mathematician, will find both an excellent tool and an instructive piece of evidence in a text put out by a body calling itself 'The Centre for Structural Communication', meant for use in sixth forms and by first-year University students: Basic Ideas of Abstract Mathematics (1969), by R.M.Fyfe and D.Woodrow. The topics discussed are the standard ones: Sets, Mappings, Vectors, Matrices, Groups, Boolean Algebra, Rings and Fields; the basic vocabulary of 'structuralism'.

8. A fairly elementary account, in historical sequence, in C.W. Kilmister, Language, Logic and Mathematics (1967). P.F.Strawson's account of the relationship between the formal systems of logic and ordinary language, Introduction to Logical Theory (1952), remains a classic.

9. Readers are invited to consider whether they share the assumptions held to govern linguistic theory by the editors, J.A.Fodor and J.J.Katz, of the influential collection, The Structure of Language (1964), pp.5-6.

10. Mr. M.A.E. Dummett, Reader in the Philosophy of Mathematics in this University, has been kind enough to tell me that I am being neither obscurantist nor simply stupid in my views of this kind of theoretical linguistics, though he must certainly not be held to support these views himself.

11. The phrase needs to be rescued from its associations with that tedious piece of neo-Benthamite rationalism, a classic, no doubt, in its way, The Meaning of Meaning, by C.K.Ogden and I.A.Richards.

12. Now in English, Freud and Philosophy (1970).

13. He has a good phrase in a later essay about 'language en fête', Le conflit, p.97, and has written a remarkable study of symbols of evil (as part of a 'phenomenology of the will'), now translated as The Symbolism of Evil (1967). Mary Douglas's Purity and Danger may serve as a fundamental critique of this book.

14. It would be instructive to compare Wittgenstein's notion of 'following a rule', using the references on p.30 of A Wittgenstein Workbook (1970), by Christopher Coope et al., with Chomsky's 'On the Notion "Rule of Grammar"', in Fodor and Katz, pp.119-36. For an excellent example of how the later Wittgenstein and the later

Heidegger can be allowed to illuminate each other, see the rather inaccessible article by F.Kerr (of Blackfriars), 'Language as Hermeneutic in the Later Wittgenstein', Tijdschrift voor Filosofie (Louvain) 27 (1965),pp.491-520.

15. An essential piece in the recent development of theological hermeneutic is R.Bultmann's essay, 'The Problem of Hermeneutics', translated in Essays 1955 (German original 1950), so too the article by G.Ebeling, Hermeneutik, in Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart III^3 (1959), col.242-62. The fundamental treatment of philosophical hermeneutic is by H.G.Gadamer,Wahrheit und Methode (2 ed. 1965). An article by Karl-Otto Apel,which treats of Dilthey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Winch, is now separately published in English, Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften (Dordrecht- Holland1967). It may be interesting to recall that Bultmann's essay is put to good use by R.D.Laing in his study of schizophrenia, The Divided Self.