CHAPTER FIVE

‘GOD EXISTS’ AFTER WITTGENSTEIN AFTER ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

The statement ‘God exists’ expresses the most basic doctrinal belief in theistic religions. However, it means different things to different theological and philosophical schools of thought. In philosophical theism it is taken to be a substantive statement: i.e. a statement with a subject term or phrase that refers to a (purported) substantive entity or entities and a predicate term or phrase that provides information about that which the subject term or phrase refers to; or a statement that states (correctly or incorrectly) that such and such is really the case; or simply, an empirical statement (albeit with an out-of-this-world referent).¹ So, accordingly, the subject term ‘God’ must be a

¹ One can get stuck in finding a watertight once-and-for-all definition of ‘substantive statement’. The logical empiricists called substantive statements “empirically significant.” Their (failed) search for the criterion of cognitive significance was in effect a search for such a definition. First they proffered the verifiability criterion: “A sentence is cognitively significant if and only if it is not analytic and is capable, at least in principle, of complete verification by observational evidence” (Hempel 1965, 105). Seeing that this criterion rules out sentences which they were not prepared to dismiss as cognitively insignificant, such as ‘All storks are red-legged’ and ‘For any substance there exists some solvent’, they shifted to the falsifiability criterion which goes thus: “A sentence has empirical meaning if and only if its negation is not analytic and follows logically from some finite logically consistent class of observation sentence” (Hempel 1965, 106). Again this criterion rules out sentences they were not prepared to dismiss as cognitively meaningless, like universal statements such as ‘All swans are white’. Then they came up with the confirmability criterion: “A sentence S has empirical import if from S in conjunction with suitable subsidiary hypotheses it is possible to derive observational sentences which are not derivable from the subsidiary hypotheses alone” (Hempel 1965, 106). This criterion is so liberal that it accommodates the obviously non-empirically meaningful statement ‘The absolute is perfect’ so long as it is coupled with a clearly empirically meaningful statement such as ‘The apple is red’: the statement ‘The absolute is perfect and the apple is red’ makes possible the deduction ‘This apple is red’. To make a long story short: The logical empiricists failed in their venture. But that does not necessarily make ‘substantive (or empirically significant) statement’ a vacuous notion. The problem was not with the notion itself but with the definitions proffered, or maybe with the demand for a watertight once-and-for-all definition. Wittgenstein acknowledges that there cannot be a watertight once-and-for-all definition of the notion ‘game’ by refusing to give one; and yet such notion cannot be dismissed as vacuous. So should the case be with the term ‘substantive statement’.
The nomenclature of an entity and the predicate term says something about the status of what is named by the predicate term. This view had since come under a cloud of suspicion after Immanuel Kant pointed out that the second word in it is not a logical predicate. What is not often said, though, is that the statement at issue may not be a substantive statement. And this is the Wittgensteinian take on it: it cannot function properly as a substantive statement. What follows below is a grammatical explication a la Wittgenstein of the paragon theological statement ‘God exists’. The aim of this chapter is show that the statement at issue does not function as substantive statement but is grammatical one. Section I shows from the Wittgensteinian point of view why ‘God exists’ cannot function as a substantive statement. Section II argues that ‘God exists’ is a grammatical statement. Section III suggests that St. Thomas Aquinas had anticipated to a significant extent Wittgenstein’s position. Section IV concludes that St. Thomas’s position is an endorsement of sorts of Wittgenstein’s take of ‘God exists’.

I. ‘God exists’ after Wittgenstein

Notwithstanding what Kant had said, it is nonetheless still most widely thought that the function of the statement ‘God exists’ includes being a substantive statement. It is taken to be a knowledge-claim and is deemed bi-polar. As such, it is understood to refer to a state wherein a being named ‘God’ supposedly exists as a matter of fact, and its truth thought to stand or fall on whether or not it is a fact that God exists: ‘God exists’ is true if and only if God exists. On these points both the philosophical theist and atheist are in agreement. Both, notwithstanding their polar disagreement about the ontological status of God, more or less take for granted that the word ‘God’ refers to an entity which is knowable even if disembodied and can be proven to exist (or not to exist). The theist claims to know that God exists because (as one may say) God revealed Himself (e.g. to Moses through the burning bush), or that God’s existence explains best the origin of the universe and the order and purposefulness in nature. The atheist claims to know that

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2 The principle of bi-polarity goes: “Every proposition must be capable of being true, and capable of being false” (Glock 1996, 63)—which is to say that the proposition’s negation is perfectly meaningful.