

The most basic use or function of "God" is to refer simply to the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence. It lies in the nature of this basic confidence to affirm that the real whole of which we experience ourselves and others to be parts is such as to be worthy of, and thus itself to evoke, that very confidence. The word "God," then, provides the designation for whatever it is about this experienced whole that calls forth and justifies our original and inescapable trust.

This is to say that "God" is the very meaning of "reality" when "reality" is defined in terms of our basic confidence in the meaning of life and the kind of questions and answers such confidence makes possible. We certainly need to inquire how the ground of our confidence is most appropriately understood or conceived, and whether any among the historical religions is justified in claiming to be its decisive revelation or representation. But to ask whether the word "God" in this most basic sense refers to anything objectively real is not a sensible inquiry. If the religious mode of reasoning is once assumed, there is no point in raising the question; and if such reasoning is not assumed, we can never hope to answer it. Cf. *The Reality of God* (rev. ed.): 37, 39.

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The argument that basic confidence in the meaning of life is faith in God in the most basic sense of the word is valid, but only insofar as "God" is understood in just such a completely general, heuristic sense to mean, simply, the objective ground of our basic confidence in reality itself. Still, the main point of the argument seems sound enough. To ask about the reality of God is not possible at all except in terms of the mode of reasoning established by our basic confidence in the worth of life. But because such confidence is a necessary presupposition not only of religion but also of human existence as such, the question of God is asked and answered implicitly by all that we think, say, or do, and it must also be asked and answered explicitly by any philosophy whose business it is to analyze the basic presuppositions of all our thought and speech. Thus, in this as in all other truly radical questions, the only issue that there is any point in discussing is not whether but in what sense—not whether we are to have confidence in life's meaning, but

in what terms we can most appropriately conceive and symbolize it. To this extent, Paul Tillich is right that the God who is the content of "absolute faith" is not "the God of theism." Because the God in whom we unavoidably believe is "the God who transcends the God of the religions," that God remains as the ground of our basic confidence even when all the particular claims of theism and the religions, including the Christian religion, are either questioned or denied. Cf. *The Reality of God*: x, xi.

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The same questions to which thought and speech about God function to give an answer may be given answers that are at least verbally different by not thinking and speaking about God at all but about something else instead. To be sure, the term "God" itself can be used so broadly, or heuristically, that it means simply ultimate reality in its meaning for us, whatever this meaning may prove to be, or—to speak less existentially and more metaphysically—it may mean simply ultimate reality in its structure in itself, however we may finally conceive this structure. But if "God" is used, as it commonly is, in some more restricted, specifically theistic sense, the questions it serves to answer, whether existential or metaphysical, may be answered at least verbally by thinking and speaking about something other than God. One may answer them by thinking and speaking, say, about Nature or the Absolute, one's Real Self or the Whole, Nirvana or the Form of the Good. Cf. *On Theology*: 122.

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The most basic use of the word "God" is to refer to the objective ground in reality itself of our basic confidence in the worth of life. It lies in the nature of this confidence to affirm that the real whole of which we experience ourselves and others all to be parts is such as to be worthy of, and thus itself to evoke in us, this very confidence. The word "God" most basically serves to designate whatever it is about this experienced whole that calls forth and justifies our original and inalienable trust in life's worth. Thus the meaning of the word may be appropriately paraphrased in the words once proposed by William

James: "You can dismiss certain kinds of fear," namely, the kinds of fear that sometimes overtake you and drive you to ask why your life is, after all, worth living. It follows that to be free of such fear by existing in this trust is one and the same with affirming the reality of God.

The principal objection to this approach to the problem of God goes something like this. The approach proceeds by first establishing the reality of humanity's common faith in the worth of life and then interprets the meaning of the word "God" as designating the objective ground (in reality itself) of this common faith. But to any such procedure there is the obvious rejoinder that it fails to establish that the word "God" has any referent independent of our trust itself. Perhaps God merely appears real to us, given our unavoidable confidence in life's worth, although the word "God" actually has no reference to an objective reality, and our affirmation of God's reality is an illusion. Despite the seriousness with which this objection is sometimes taken, it is not particularly impressive—for the following reasons.

It rests on a failure to observe the particular conditions that determine our use of the word "real" and other terms related to it, such as "illusory," "apparent," or "unreal." Analysis discloses that we never use the word "real" except by presupposing, tacitly or otherwise, some particular universe of discourse or mode of reasoning. Although the *meaning* of the word is constant—always being "what for the purposes of some particular mode of reasoning is relevant," or, as James proposed, "what we in some way find ourselves obliged to take account of"—the *criteria* determining the use of the word in particular cases are, by this very meaning, variable. Thus, whenever we ask about the reality of something, we must always presuppose *some* mode of reasoning, *some* context of meaning, *some* way of taking account of things through questions and answers, even to ask about its reality with any sense. Consequently, if we are to avoid disputes that in the nature of the case can never be adjudicated, we must take pains to see that the mode of reasoning we presuppose permits us to ^{judge} ~~decide~~ the issue of this particular thing's reality.

If we dispute the claim of a scientist friend, for instance, that the sun at sunset is "not red but really yellow," we simply show that our every-day, common-sense criteria of "reality" are different from those that he, as a scientist, quite properly takes for granted. By the same token, once we presuppose the mode of reasoning proper to religion, or to our experience of our own existence in its ultimate setting with others in the whole—remembering that not to presuppose it is to leave religious or existential issues in principle nonadjudicable—the question whether God is real at once becomes pointless. This is because the word "God" in its most basic meaning is simply a synonym for the word "reality" when the latter is defined in terms of our basic confidence in the worth of life and the kind of questions and answers that such confidence makes possible.

This is not to deny, of course, that we may—and even must— inquire how our confidence in life's worth is most adequately understood and whether this or that particular conception of God enables us to conceive its ground in reality itself appropriately. But it is to deny that the question whether the word "God" in its most basic meaning refers to anything objectively real is a sensible question. If the mode of reasoning proper to religion is once assumed, there is no point in raising it; and if such reasoning is not assumed, we can have no hope of ever answering it. Cf. "How Does God Function in Human Life": 3-4.