

THE NATURE OF A THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT

by Wolfhart Pannenberg

When in 1936 a volume of essays was published in celebration of Karl Barth's fiftieth birthday, the philosopher and mathematician Heinrich Scholz contributed an article entitled "What Is to Be Understood by a Theological Statement?" It marks the end of a discussion which took place between Barth and Scholz some years before, with reference to the possibility of scientific or scholarly claims for a protestant theology. In a lecture presented to Barth and to his students at Bonn and published in 1931, Scholz had spelled out the minimum conditions that every science in the broad sense of the word should meet.¹ Barth reacted in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics* in 1932, and his answer resulted in an uncompromising rejection.²

SCHOLZ AND BARTH ON THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A SCIENTIFIC THEOLOGY

Even the first of Scholz's postulates, the principle excluding contradictions from the sentences of a science, is, according to Barth, not unrestrictedly valid in theology. All the other postulates Barth

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qualified as “unacceptable.” This applies to the postulate for a unity of the subject matter of a discipline as well as those for a control of its statements, for their compatibility with the statements of other disciplines, and for independence from prejudices. With reference to all this, Barth wrote, “Without betraying theology, not an iota can be conceded here, for every concession at this point would mean surrendering the subject matter of theology.” In his article on the nature of a theological statement, Scholz took up the discussion once more and concentrated his efforts on an attempt to demonstrate that even theology cannot so easily escape the claims of logic.

According to Scholz, a statement is a sentence that can be either true or false. Thus, sentences without an existential reference to which they do or do not correspond need not be without meaning, but they could not qualify as statements. The specific theological character of a statement is said to depend on an agreement about terminology. For the purpose of his article, however, Scholz accepts Barth’s definition according to which a theological statement is a statement about God. This is certainly an understanding that is congruent with the prevailing perspective in the history of Christian theology. But here, for Scholz, the specific problem arises that according to Karl Barth not every statement about God is a theological statement. Barth accepts as theological statements only those statements on God that do not belong to a rational theology.

In Scholz’s view, the meaning of this distinction is far from being unequivocal, unless one takes rational theology to mean the theology of natural man and natural man to mean a man “who cannot see the evidence of a theological statement as conceived by Karl Barth.”³ But this, Scholz comments, would amount to an extremely circular definition. Thus, he reduces to absurdity Barth’s pretension according to which a theological statement would be a nonrational statement about God. Conversely, even a theological sentence cannot escape its logical implications. Scholz phrases this very carefully: “There is no sound way to prohibit a theological sentence from having some logical consequences.”⁴ Therefore, Scholz begs that we avoid using the validity or truth value of a statement as a criterion that it is *not* a theological statement.

Unfortunately, Karl Barth never reacted to this argument of Scholz. Barth, of course, glorified the irrational commitment of faith by calling it the “daring venture” of “a completely unwarranted obedience” to the Word of God, and suggesting that only in the act of such an obedience can we recognize the Word of God.⁵ According to Barth, all theological argument presupposes from the beginning

such a commitment. And this was not only Barth's conviction but also Bultmann's, and most of the renowned theologians of that period were of a similar opinion.

Therefore, William Bartley could bluntly speak of a "retreat to commitment" as being characteristic of all the different persuasions of modern protestant theology.⁶ By insisting on the commitment of faith, theology only tries to evade rational criticism. Some theologians, to be sure, attempt to justify such a position by pretending that all argument is finally based on unprovable assumptions. Bartley admits that this presumption proves true in the case of many positions which call themselves rational, but which establish themselves by deducing everything from apparently self-evident principles that, however, do not admit of demonstration in their turn. These positions, Bartley charges, are not better off than the irrationalists who point to them as evidence for their own claim that every position must start from an irrational basis.

The only rational argument that is safe against such suspicions concerning its own irrational presuppositions is one that proceeds by hypotheses and conjectures and does not call on supposedly self-evident certainties. Just such a procedure by hypotheses and conjectures, however, is typical for the spirit of modern science and characterizes the specific rationality of scientific discourse.

There is an element of hypothesis in the logical structure of every statement. Since a statement can be either true or false and, as long as it is not yet decided whether one or the other is the case, every statement functions as a hypothesis. It is the hypothetical nature of statements that accounts for the possibility of asking whether they are true or false and also for the possibility of checking their claim to truth. A statement that in principle cannot be checked would be no statement at all. As a statement, it would be meaningless.

This has been rightly emphasized by the logical positivists. The only qualification that has to be added to this admission is that the logical positivists have restricted the possible means for checking a statement in a prejudiced and unacceptable way by reducing the criteria for meaningful statements to sense data or protocol sentences. It is widely acknowledged today that on this point the position of logical positivism got involved in serious contradictions and was confronted with such unwanted consequences as the rejection as meaningless of even the statements of natural law.

But it remains true that there can be no statement without acknowledgment of some possible means of control. If this is not admitted, at least in principle, then its character as a statement—as

distinguished from other linguistic expressions—is surrendered, and, if such a sentence possesses any meaning at all, it must be of a quite different kind. It can no longer have a cognitive meaning, which is specifically required for it to be a statement. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in the face of theological stubbornness against most sorts of rational control of theological statements, it has been proposed that theological sentences are no statements at all but something quite different, for example, performative⁷ sentences. If one takes a sentence like the opening phrase of the Apostolic Creed as a performative sentence, then the phrase “I believe in God the Father, the almighty Creator of heaven and earth” would only intend the commitment of the believer and no assertion concerning the existence of God or concerning his attributes. All talk about God the Father and Creator would then have to be interpreted as expressing something about the commitment of the believer. If one looks more closely, of course, it is obvious that such a sentence contains a cognitive element within its complex intention, and this cognitive element constitutes the reality which the believer commits himself to. If there is no God in any sense at all, then precisely the commitment expressed in the sentence “I believe in God the Father” would be rendered meaningless. Against that, no intensity of commitment helps.

Therefore, in every belief sentence, or at least in every credal statement, there is one constitutive element that, if considered by itself, has the character of a cognitive statement and not merely that of a performative phrase. It can become the object of theological reflection, and, if this reflection will do justice to the nature of its object, it will also concern itself with the question whether the cognitive element in faith is true or false. At least theology has to admit as pertinent the criticism of the assertions of faith that is concerned with their claim to truth. And theology has to attempt to answer such criticism. It cannot legitimately evade such a rational discussion and control, since it is already implied in the structure of statements and of the cognitive claims that they are open to control.

Thus, the logical structure of a statement, according to Scholz, already implies the theoretical postulates concerning a scholarly discipline or science which he spelled out in his earlier article. The postulate that excludes contradiction is implied in the fact that every statement affirms something as true and thereby excludes falsehood. The postulate for possible control follows from the hypothetical character of statements. The third postulate also is related to this: it requires that the statements of a scientific discipline should relate

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themselves to a unified region of objects that, as such, is distinguishable from the statements about it that belong to that discipline, although not necessarily from all such statements. This is a more difficult point. But the possibility of distinguishing the object of a statement from that statement itself is implied in the hypothetical character of statements.

Although there is an apparent circle, one of the most amazing achievements of language is that it permits one to distinguish the subject matter to which a sentence refers to from the medium of language that serves to apprehend it. In this phenomenon, the reflexive nature of language comes to expression. And only since the subject matter is distinguishable from the statements referring to it, several and diverse statements can be understood as referring to the same subject. The integrity of the subject of a discipline further corresponds to the exclusion of contradiction from its statements, for only integrity of the subject as conceived within a given perspective discloses contradictory statements about it. Thus, the three minimum requirements of a scientific discipline, as Scholz formulated them, only explicate what is already implied in the logical structure of statements. Therefore, Scholz could continue his discussion with Barth on the requirements for a scientific theology by asking for the nature of a theological statement.

THE QUESTION OF CHECKING THEOLOGICAL STATEMENTS

The implications inherent in the logical form of a statement or cognitive sentence that are explicable as requirements for any scientific discipline are not easy to take for theology. This was indicated by Barth's reaction to Scholz's postulates, in his rejecting them as unacceptable. But, if theology does not choose to avoid the sort of self-criticism that after all is connected with self-awareness, then the postulates of Scholz are to be taken seriously, because they only make explicit what theologians are already involved in by uttering statements.

Among those postulates, the first one, which requires us to avoid contradictions, can be satisfied more easily than the others. It gets difficult only if it entails that the systematic avoidance of contradictions in theological argument should imply the divine reality itself as being finally uncontradictory—and that would mean subject to logic. There are many theologians to whom it seems forbidding to imagine the reality of God as being logical and not beyond logic, although it seems difficult to distinguish what is supposedly beyond logic from the simply irrational, especially since the same theologians

often confess to the Son of God as representing the divine logos. But be this as it may, for us there will certainly always remain unresolved difficulties in the subject matter of theology; yet even those difficulties should be susceptible to a systematic description that does not get involved in contradictions.

The next requirement—unity of the subject matter distinguishable from the statements about it—raises even more difficulties for theology. A recently widespread self-understanding of theology, for example, identifies the Word of God as its proper subject matter. But it does not seem unequivocally distinguishable from the statements about it. Even if theology presupposes the Word of God as promulgated by the proclamation or by the authority of the church, still the theologian himself has to decide as believer that he encounters in the proclamation or in the doctrine of the Church or in the Bible the Word of God and not only human words. Thus, the Word of God is not discernible as independent of the decision of faith.

Similar difficulties arise when God is understood as constituting the subject matter of theology. Again the question arises of how to distinguish God from the affirmations of theologians and of already-committed believers. It constitutes the crisis of the idea of God in our time that the reality of God seems inextricable from the affirmations of believers and theologians, so much so that it makes its appearance only as such an affirmation. The inevitable consequence seems to be that those affirmations are no longer to be taken seriously as statements, but appear as fictitious ideas of believers and theologians.

The question concerning the subject matter of theology or rather the question whether there is at all such a subject matter merges at this point into the question of appropriate methods of checking theological statements, especially with reference to their claim to truth. This is, for theology, the most difficult postulate, a postulate, however, that theology cannot escape by asserting the superiority or indemonstrability of the divine truth. Such assertions serve only to immunize theological talk against all sorts of criticism and thus represent it as meaningless, because statements which in principle do not allow for a critical inquiry are no statements at all and can no longer be taken seriously as claiming anything with regard to truth.

But how is an examination of theological statements at all possible? Statements that refer to God or to acts, words, or revelations of God are obviously not testable by immediate inspection of their subject matter in order to serve as a standard for judging human

statements. There are two reasons for this: first, the reality of God is still debated; and, second, it would go against his divinity as being the all-determining reality if he were at man's disposal like a finite reality which is available at man's pleasure. The reality of God is not accessible in such a way, whatever may be the case with it otherwise.

Statements about God, about his acts and his revealing himself are therefore not directly testable by a sort of inspection of their subject matter. *But* this does not mean that they are not testable at all: It is also possible to test statements by an examination of the consequences that can be derived from them. Statements about divine reality and actions are testable by reference to their implications for the understanding of finite reality insofar as God is maintained to be the all-determining reality.

In this sense, Bultmann was right in proposing that one should speak of man if one wants to speak of God. One should like to add, however, that not only man but also the world should be investigated by theologians if they want to speak of God in a meaningful way. Besides, the idea of God as all-determining reality that served as the basis for Bultmann's considerations does not exhaustively account for the reality of God—neither for the biblical God, nor for the God of any other religion or philosophy. But the idea of an all-determining reality specifies the basic condition of the biblical as well as of most strands of the philosophical tradition in speaking about God. It is characteristic of the monotheistic thrust in both traditions. At least within the scope of these traditions and of the process of their transmission, all other statements about God tacitly presuppose that this name refers to the reality that determines and rules everything.

But if this is so, then statements about God can be examined as to whether their content is really of determinative significance for all-finite reality as it is available to our experience. If this is so, then nothing real can be fully understood in its particular reality without reference to the presumed God; and, inversely, one should expect, then, that the presumed reality of God opens up a deeper understanding of all reality. To the degree that that is the case, one can speak of a corroboration or confirmation of theological assertions.

These considerations cast light on the difference between theological statements and the immediate expressions of piety: Because theological statements are testable with reference to their logical implications for the understanding of reality and thus because of their scientific status, they are related to their proper subject—that is, God—only indirectly and not directly as is the case with the

immediate assertions of faith. Even in the doctrine of God, theological statements are dealing with God in the context of a sequence of arguments and thus indirectly as much as they remain aware of that context. Otherwise, they turn into immediate and unwarranted statements of faith, and that, of course, is less than extremely rare in theology.

On the other hand, theological statements are related to the simple assertions of faith by making explicit the element of cognition inherent in them, since—as mentioned earlier—even the simple statements of faith do not merely express a personal commitment but also imply a cognitive claim. The explication and discussion of this cognitive element in faith constitutes the distinctive character of a theological statement, although it may concern itself also with other aspects of the life of faith and its expressions. Historical and psychological circumstances of the religious faith, however, do not belong to theology in the proper sense, except as they are themselves part of the object of faith or necessary for its exposition and evaluation.

Thus, theological reflection deals explicitly with the cognitive element in expressions of faith and concerns itself with the problems of their claim to truth. Therefore, it speaks indirectly of God in distinction from the pious immediacy of faith. In dealing with the cognitive element in the language of faith, theology has to treat this language as being problematic, due to the hypothetical status of cognitive assertions. But how is it feasible to judge their claim to truth? How can the totality of finite reality as implied in God language provide a practicable criterion for examining theological statements? And, especially, how can we judge the comparative value or importance of these or those particulars for the total reality as given in experience and as determined by God?

THEOLOGICAL STATEMENTS TESTABLE IN CONTEXT OF A UNIVERSE OF MEANING

Classical philosophy was originally a critical theology attempting to apprehend the cosmos to infer from that totality of finite reality its origin, its constitutive principle. Modern attitudes about reality, however, tend to take it incomplete. Today the universe is rarely regarded as constituting a completed whole, even in its general structure. Rather, reality is seen as a process still continuing. Therefore, the sum total of everything that has come into existence so far, should it be available to anybody, would still not represent the true

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universe. Rather, the system of reality as it is is a false universe (Th. W. Adorno) as long as reality is still in process and not yet complete.

Nevertheless, human beings cannot simply dismiss the idea of an ultimate, comprehensive totality, because even the particularities of experience have their significance only within the framework of the context to which they belong. Similarly, every limited whole of meaning has its significance in being a member within a more comprehensive totality. In apprehending any particular object as something distinctive, we already imply an awareness of the ultimate and comprehensive universe, of everything real, although that anticipation remains usually implicit. But that comprehensive universe is not yet complete as existing reality. The idea of it transcends whatever is at hand. That idea does not refer to the closed system of a completed cosmos, as it was assumed in the metaphysical tradition, but anticipates a totality of meaning and thus refers to a perfection not yet existing and to the power that inspires the expectation of such a completion of the world process and particularly of the history of the human race.

Such an anticipated universe of meaning that in reality is still incomplete is tacitly involved in every single experience. Its light is cast on what is given in our experience, and in that light we discern what is given as being this or that and bearing such and such a meaning. But it is something different when that guiding prospect of meaning, which in the process of experiences further develops and broadens, becomes a theme for itself. This happens in religious experience, as Schleiermacher has already pointed out when describing religious experience as awareness of the universe. Schleiermacher's universe, of course, did not mean the physical universe but the universe of meaning, although he did not use this terminology. Max Weber and Émile Durkheim have employed this terminology for a sociology of religion, as do Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger today, neither being aware of his affinity to Schleiermacher's concept of religion. They all seem on the right track, however. If anywhere, it is in religious experience that human beings relate themselves to the totality of their existence, to the universe of meaning that, according to Schleiermacher, is perceived in particular finite experiences as manifesting itself through them. The universe of meaning that is implicit in particular historical situations of individual and social experiences becomes explicit in religion, specifically with reference to the divine powers which are supposed to determine all reality. Similarly, the modifications and transformations of religious consciousness are occasioned by changes in the

experience of reality that cast new light on the universe of meaning and hence also on the nature of the divine powers.

An examination of theological statements seems to be most feasible if it relates itself to the context of religious changes in the history of religions. While it seemed to be difficult to use the universe of meaning that is implied in the totality of experiences as a criterion in a direct application, because that universe of meaning evades the disciplined procedure of methodology, it is accessible, although ambiguously, in the existence of religions and in their history. In the changes that occur in a religion in the process of its history, there is *in fact* taking place the same thing that would be accomplished in a methodical way by disciplined reflection in the examination of theological statements: In the ongoing process of religious life, traditional beliefs and rituals are continuously tested for the capacity of the traditional gods to integrate the continuously changing experience of reality. In this process, it is again and again an open question whether there arise strange powers which manifest themselves in concrete experiences and which the inherited traditions fail to explain. Such experiences induce modifications of the religious heritage or even a complete change of religious loyalties.

A study of religion should focus on these processes that could teach us how, in the process of history, the religious claims on the nature of the all-determining divine reality have been tested by confrontation with all sorts of experience for their determinative power in explaining it. Such a study of religions would deal with the religious claims on the divine reality that manifests itself in history and yet remains controversial. It would amount to a theology of religions and would not stop with a mere psychology, or sociology, or phenomenology of religion, all of which are useful but do not deal with the particular thematic substance of religion. Conversely, it is difficult to see how theology as a study of religious truth is possible except by way of a critical investigation of religions and their history, since the universe of meaning—because of the historicity and incompleteness of experience and perhaps of reality itself—does appear explicitly only in the form of religious anticipations, the word “religious” being used in a broad sense.

Such a critical theology of religions is to be applied, then, also to Christianity and to its history. It will investigate the changes in Christian history by the same standards as the historical changes of any other religion by asking how they testify to changes in diverse areas of experience and in the corresponding anticipations of the universe of meaning. In this way, the horizon for the problems of

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religious experience becomes accessible for description, as does the corresponding historical status of secular experience; and it becomes possible to judge theological statements by reference to that horizon of the religious problem, a horizon which, of course, is itself continuously changing although not always broadening.

Thus, statements on God as Creator can be examined, on the one hand, by reference to that experience which has been already accumulated in the traditional faith concerning creation, and, on the other hand, by reference to the problems that confront the different modifications of such a faith in an intellectual climate which is characterized by modern natural science and by particular anticipations of a universe of meaning as implied in the perspectives of natural scientists themselves. In such a procedure, the historical and the purely theoretical elements are inextricably related, and that must be so, because religion is a historical phenomenon. Purely theoretical discussions of religious problems, as some contributions of analytical philosophers and of other authors demonstrate, are often in danger of oversimplification, while a purely historical treatment that abstains from judgments on the religious truth of the investigated phenomena represents the corresponding abstraction.

The conclusion of this discussion is that statements about God, about his words or actions, cannot be examined by direct comparison with the reality of God himself, since that reality is not at hand as a standard and also because it is itself controversial. Statements about God, thus, are testable only with reference to their implications for the understanding of reality, since God is supposed to exist as the all-determining power. But the totality of experience that should be investigated for traces of being determined by that divine power is again not accessible in itself because it is not complete, as ancient philosophers in speaking of a cosmos assumed. The totality of everything real is given only in the form of an anticipation of the universe of meaning as implied in present experience. Such an anticipation is tacitly involved in all experience and is even constitutive for the definite content of individual experiences. But it is only in religious experience that it becomes thematic, and it has produced its enduring forms in the historical religions, including philosophies and ideologies that are historically rooted in the soil of religious traditions and have emancipated themselves from these roots. Thus, the totality of all finite reality that should provide the criterion for statements about divine reality is accessible only by subjective anticipations of the universe of meaning that tacitly and

by implication determines all experience but becomes explicit as subject matter in religions experience. Hence, the religions constitute the immediate object of theological investigation, since a science of God is possible not by direct approach but only indirectly. The religious traditions, however, are available for examination, because they express explicitly what is supposed to be implicit in all other experience. Therefore, a comparison is possible between what is explicitly stated there and what is implicit here. Theology, then, deals with hypotheses on the adequacy or inadequacy of religious traditions with relation to the implications of meaning in all other experience, first at the time of the historical origin of a particular religion and continuing until the present day.

SOME QUALIFICATIONS ON THE EXAMINATION OF
THEOLOGICAL STATEMENTS

The procedure of a theology as indicated here requires a treatment of the particularity of the Christian religion and of its distinctive truth claims as controversial at least in the beginning of theoretical investigation. Of course, a theologian may be personally convinced of the superiority and final truth of the Christian faith over all other religions and regarding all other views of experience, an assumption that might prove true or false, at least provisionally, in the course of his investigation. However, the theologian cannot base his argument on such a personal conviction unless he steps out of the context of a theological procedure of the kind described here. Such a procedure, of course, means dismissing the type of confessional or denominational theologies which used to start from a position of faith that decided everything in advance without the position of faith itself being openly discussed. It is hard to defend that kind of theology against the charge that it only rationalizes prejudices. Theology is to be taken intellectually seriously only on the condition that in the form of its procedure it takes into account the controversial nature of its subject matter.

The first requirement, then, is that theological statements are to be understood as proposing hypotheses that have to be tested by appropriate means of control and the truth of which is not established from the beginning. Otherwise, it will continue to be established for nobody but the theologizing individual who happens to be speaking. From a higher degree of self-conscious restraint, theology has to gain not only methodological legitimation but also a critical openness that is not obtained by surrendering its subject matter but

by a self-critical estimate of the difficulties in approaching it. Such an attitude should also favor the chances of a fair dialogue with non-Christian religions.

Finally, I want to comment on the question of in what formal sense theology admits of an examination or corroboration of its hypotheses. Verification in the strict sense of logical positivism by reduction of statements to sense data is certainly not attainable in theology. But even statements of natural law in the natural sciences do not satisfy such a requirement, since no general rule can be verified by a finite number of individual cases. Instead, as Karl Popper demonstrated, a single unequivocal example to the contrary is sufficient to falsify such a statement, if such an example can be established. Even Popper's principle of falsification, however, is not applicable in theology, nor does it work in certain other disciplines such as, for example, history, since the statements characteristic of those disciplines do not consist of propositions of general rules.

Now, it is not evident why the concept of a science should be restricted to those disciplines that concern themselves with general rules. Or, are we still assuming with Aristotle that the cognition of the contingent, the individual, and the unique is inferior to the cognition of the general? Nor is it evident why the concept of truth and that of verification, which is derived from the former, should be restricted to empirical observations, especially since it obviously implies an idea of a final unity of reality and of experience. Therefore, I agree with those who have spoken of verification in a broader and less precise sense, referring to a corroboration of hypotheses by all appropriate means of testing them.

In this broader sense theologians also have worked with the concept of verification, concerning which the proposals hitherto suggested are not fully satisfactory. When John Hick is referring to an eschatological verification that will happen on the day of the coming of God's kingdom, when the content and truth of his promises will be fully revealed, then in a certain sense this is true and expresses the attitude of the Christian faith to the eschatological future. But it helps little if somebody should want to make up his mind right now concerning the truth of the Christian tradition, even if such a judgment remained provisional. On the other side, Gerhard Ebeling proposed an intriguing reversal of the idea of verification to the effect that God verifies man by making him true. This proposal also includes an element of truth, since, for the faithful, the truth of God proves itself by its effects on his personal life. The only trouble is

that the limitations of Christian subjectivism are not to be overcome in this way.

The legitimacy of theological statements and the possibilities of their intellectual examination are not clarified by reference to such an existential verification. Certainly, a final verification of theological statements by whatever means will remain unattainable before the final advent of the kingdom of God. But a provisional corroboration of theological hypotheses seems to be within reach and will be possible to the same degree that they illuminate the problems of the religious traditions and the implications of meaning in present experience.

NOTES

1. Heinrich Scholz, "Wie ist eine evangelisch Theologie als Wissenschaft möglich?" *Zwischen den Zeiten* 9 (1931): 8 - 35.

2. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1932), 1(1):7.

3. Heinrich Scholz, "Was ist unter einer theologischen Aussage zu verstehen?" in *Theologische Aufsätze Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1936), p. 34.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

5. Karl Barth, "Die Theologie und der heutige Mensch," *Zwischen den Zeiten* 8 (1930): 384.

6. William Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

7. For the notion of the *performative*, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).