INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF BEING

The basic theological question is the question of God. God is the answer to the question implied in being. The problem of reason and revelation is secondary to that of being and God, although it was discussed first. Like everything else, reason has being, participates in being, and is logically subordinate to being. Therefore, in the analysis of reason and of the questions implied in its existential conflicts we have been forced to anticipate concepts which are derived from an analysis of being. In proceeding from the correlation of reason and revelation to that of being and God, we move to the more fundamental consideration; in traditional terms, we move from the epistemological to the ontological question. The ontological question is: What is being itself? What is that which is not a special being or a group of beings, not something concrete or something abstract, but rather something which is always thought implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, if something is said to be? Philosophy asks the question of being as being. It investigates the character of everything that is in so far as it is. This is its basic task, and the answer it provides determines the analysis of all special forms of being. It is "first philosophy," or, if the term still could be used, "metaphysics." Since the connotations of the term "metaphysics" make its use precarious, the word "ontology" is preferable. The ontological question, the question of being itself, arises in something like a "metaphysical shock"—the shock of possible nonbeing. This shock often has been expressed in the question, "Why is there something; why not nothing?" But in this form the question is meaningless, for every possible answer would be subject to the same question in an infinite regression. Thought must start with being; it cannot go behind it, as the form of the question itself shows. If one asks why there is not nothing, one attributes being even to nothing. Thought is based on being, and it cannot leave this basis; but thought can imagine the negation of everything that is, and it can describe the nature and structure of being which give everything
that is the power of resisting nonbeing. Mythology, cosmogony, and metaphysics have asked the question of being both implicitly and explicitly and have tried to answer it. It is the ultimate question, although fundamentally it is the expression of a state of existence rather than a formulated question. Whenever this state is experienced and this question is asked, everything disappears in the abyss of possible nonbeing; even a god would disappear if he were not being-itself. But if everything special and definite disappears in the light of the ultimate question, one must ask how an answer is possible. Does this not mean that ontology is reduced to the empty tautology that being is being? Is not the term “structure of being” a contradiction in terms, saying that that which is beyond every structure itself has a structure?

Ontology is possible because there are concepts which are less universal than being but more universal than any ontic concept, that is, more universal than any concept designating a realm of beings. Such concepts have been called “principles” or “categories” or “ultimate notions.” The human mind has worked for thousands of years in their discovery, elaboration, and organization. But no agreement has been reached, although certain concepts reappear in almost every ontology. Systematic theology cannot, and should not, enter into the ontological discussion as such. Yet it can and must consider these central concepts from the point of view of their theological significance. Such consideration, demanded in every part of the theological system, may well influence the ontological analysis indirectly. But the arena of ontological discussion is not the theological arena, although the theologian must be familiar in it.

It is possible to distinguish four levels of ontological concepts: (1) the basic ontological structure which is the implicit condition of the ontological question; (2) the elements which constitute the ontological structure; (3) the characteristics of being which are the conditions of existence; and (4) the categories of being and knowing. Each of these levels demands a special analysis. Only a few remarks concerning their general ontological character are necessary at this point.

The ontological question presupposes an asking subject and an object about which the question is asked; it presupposes the subject-object structure of being, which in turn presupposes the self-world structure as the basic articulation of being. The self having a world to which it belongs—this highly dialectical structure—logically and experientially precedes all other structures. Its analysis should be the first step in every ontological task. The second level of ontological analysis deals with the elements which constitute the basic structure of being. They share the polar character of the basic structure, and it is just their polarity that makes them principles by preventing them from becoming highest generic concepts. One can imagine a realm of nature beside or outside the realm of history, but there is no realm of dynamics without form or of individuality without universality. The converse also is true. Each pole is meaningful only in so far as it refers by implication to the opposite pole. Three outstanding pairs of elements constitute the basic ontological structure: individuality and universality, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny. In these three polarities the first element expresses the self-relatedness of being, its power of being something for itself, while the second element expresses the belongingness of being, its character of being a part of a universe of being.

The third level of ontological concepts expresses the power of being to exist and the difference between essential and existential being. Both in experience and in analysis being manifests the duality of essential and existential being. There is no ontology which can disregard these two aspects, whether they are hypostasized into two realms (Plato), or combined in the polar relation of potentiality and actuality (Aristotle), or contrasted with each other (Schelling II, Kierkegaard, Heidegger), or derived from each other, either existence from essence (Spinoza, Hegel) or essence from existence (Dewey, Sartre). In all these ontologies the duality of essential and existential being is seen, and the question of their relation to one another and to being-itself is asked. The answer is prepared by the polarity of freedom and destiny on the second level of ontological analysis. However, freedom as such is not the basis of existence, but rather freedom in unity with finitude. Finite freedom is the turning point from being to existence. Therefore, it is the analysis of finitude in its polarity with infinity as well as in its relation to freedom and destiny, to being and nonbeing, to essence and existence, which is the task of ontology in the third level.

The fourth level deals with those concepts which traditionally have been called categories, that is, the basic forms of thought and being. They participate in the nature of finitude and can be called structures of finite being and thinking. To determine their number and organization is one of the infinite tasks of philosophy. From the theological point of view four main categories must be analyzed: time, space, causality, and sub-
Categories like quantity and quality have no direct theological significance and are not especially discussed. Other concepts which often have been called "categories," like movement and rest, or unity and manifoldness, are treated implicitly on the second level of analysis, movement and rest in connection with dynamics and form, unity and manifoldness in connection with individuality and universality. The polar character of these concepts puts them on the level of the categories. Finally, it must be stated that two of the transcendentalia of scholastic philosophy, the true and the good (verum, bonum), usually combined with being and oneness (esse, unum), do not belong to pure ontology, because they are meaningful only in relation to a judging subject. Their ontological foundation, however, is discussed in connection with the duality of essence and existence.

Since it is the purpose of this section of the theological system to develop the question of God as the question implied in being, the concept of finitude is the center of the following analysis, for it is the finitude of being which drives us to the question of God.

First, however, it is necessary to say something about the epistemological character of all ontological concepts. Ontological concepts are a priori in the strict sense of the word. They determine the nature of experience. They are present whenever something is experienced. A priori does not mean that ontological concepts are known prior to experience. They should not be attacked as if this were meant. On the contrary, they are products of a critical analysis of experience. Nor does a priori mean that the ontological concepts constitute a static and unchangeable structure which, once discovered, will always be valid. The structure of experience may have changed in the past and may change in the future, but, while such a possibility cannot be excluded, there is no reason for using it as an argument against the a priori character of ontological concepts.

Those concepts are a priori which are presupposed in every actual experience, since they constitute the very structure of experience itself. The conditions of experience are a priori. If these conditions change—and with them the structure of experience—another set of conditions must make it possible to have experience. This situation will persist as long as it is meaningful to speak of experience at all. As long as there is experience in any definite sense of the word, there is a structure of experience which can be recognized within the process of experiencing and which can be elaborated critically. Process philosophy is justified in its attempt to dissolve into processes everything which seems to be static. But it would become absurd if it tried to dissolve the structure of process into a process. This simply would mean that what we know as process has been superseded by something else, the nature of which is unknown at present. In the meantime, every philosophy of process has an explicit or implicit ontology which is a prioriistic in character.

This also is the answer to historical relativism, which denies the possibility of an ontological or a theological doctrine of man by arguing as follows: since man's nature changes in the historical process, nothing ontologically definite or theologically relevant can be affirmed with regard to it; and since the doctrine of man (i.e., his freedom, his finitude, his existential predicament, his historical creativity), is the main entrance for ontology and the main point of reference for theology, neither ontology nor theology is really possible. Such a criticism would remain unanswerable if the ontological and the theological doctrines of man claimed to deal with an unchangeable structure called human nature. Although such a claim often has been attempted, it is not necessary. Human nature changes in history. Process philosophy is right in this. But human nature changes in history. The structure of a being which has history underlies all historical changes. This structure is the subject of an ontological and a theological doctrine of man. Historical man is a descendant of beings who had no history, and perhaps there will be beings who are descendants of historical man who have no history. This simply means that neither animals nor supermen are the objects of a doctrine of man. Ontology and theology deal with historical man as he is given in present experience and in historical memory. An anthropology which transcends these limits, empirically toward the past or speculatively toward the future, is not a doctrine of man. It is a doctrine of the biological preparation for, or the biological continuation of, what in a special stage of the universal development was and is and perhaps will be historical man. In this case, as in all others, ontology and theology establish a relatively but not absolutely static a priori, overcoming the alternatives of absolutism and relativism which threaten to destroy both of them.

This agrees with a powerful tradition in classical ontology and the-
ology represented by voluntarism and nominalism. Even before Duns Scotus, theologians rejected the “realistic” attempts to fix God to a static structure of being. In Duns Scotus and all ontology and theology influenced by him—up to Bergson and Heidegger—an element of ultimate indeterminacy is seen in the ground of being. God’s potestas absoluta is a perennial threat to any given structure of things. It undercuts any absolute apriorism, but it does not remove ontology and the relatively a priori structures with which ontology is concerned.
thought as well as in reality. To look for causes means to look for the power of being in a thing.

This affirmative meaning of causality, however, is the reverse side of its negative meaning. The question of the cause of a thing or event presupposes that it does not possess its own power of coming into being. Things and events have no aseity. This is characteristic only of God. Finite things are not self-caused; they have been "thrown" into being (Heidegger). The question, "Where from?" is universal. Children as well as philosophers ask it. But it cannot be answered, for every answer, every statement, about the cause of something is open to the same question in endless regression. It cannot be stopped even by a god who is supposed to be the answer to the entire series. For this god must ask himself, "Where have I come from?" (Kant). Even a highest being must ask the question of its own cause, indicating thereby its partial nonbeing. Causality expresses by implication the inability of anything to rest on itself. Everything is driven beyond itself to its cause, and the cause is driven beyond itself to its cause, and so on indefinitely. Causality powerfully expresses the abyss of nonbeing in everything.

The causal scheme must not be identified with a deterministic scheme. Causality is removed neither by the indeterminacy of subatomic processes nor by the creative character of biological and psychological processes. Nothing in these realms occurs without a preceding situation or constellation which is its cause. Nothing has the power of depending on itself without a causal nexus; nothing is "absolute." Even finite creativity cannot escape that form of nonbeing which appears in causality. If we look at a thing and ask what it is, we must look beyond it and ask what its causes are.

The anxiety in which causality is experienced is that of not being in, of, and by one's self, of not having the "aseity" which theology traditionally attributes to God. Man is a creature. His being is contingent; by itself it has no necessity, and therefore man realizes that he is the prey of nonbeing. The same contingency which has thrown man into existence may push him out of it. In this respect causality and contingent being are the same thing. The fact that man is causally determined makes his being contingent with respect to himself. The anxiety in which he is aware of this situation is anxiety about the lack of necessity of his being. He might not be! Then why is he? And why should he continue to be? There is no reasonable answer. This is exactly the anxiety implied in the awareness of causality as a category of finitude.

Courage accepts derivedness, contingency. The man who possesses this courage does not look beyond himself to that from which he comes, but he rests in himself. Courage ignores the causal dependence of everything finite. Without this courage no life would be possible, but the question how this courage is possible remains. How can a being who is dependent on the causal nexus and its contingencies accept this dependence and, at the same time, attribute to himself a necessity and self-reliance which contradict this dependence?

The fourth category which describes the union of being and nonbeing in everything finite is substance. In contrast to causality, substance points to something underlying the flux of appearances, something which is relatively static and self-contained. There is no substance without accidents. The accidents receive their ontological power from the substance to which they belong. But the substance is nothing beyond the accidents in which it expresses itself. So in both substance and accidents the positive element is balanced by the negative element.

The problem of substance is not avoided by philosophers of function or process, because questions about that which has functions or about that which is in process cannot be silenced. The replacement of static notions by dynamic ones does not remove the question of that which makes change possible by not (relatively) changing itself. Substance as a category is effective in any encounter of mind and reality; it is present whenever one speaks of something.

Therefore, everything finite is innately anxious that its substance will be lost. This anxiety refers to continuous change as well as to the final loss of substance. Every change reveals the relative nonbeing of that which changes. The changing reality lacks substantiality, the power of being, the resistance against nonbeing. It is this anxiety which drove the Greeks to ask insistently and ceaselessly the question of the unchangeable. To dismiss the question with the correct assertion that the static has neither a logical nor an ontological priority over the dynamic is not justifiable, for this anxiety about change is anxiety about the threat of nonbeing implied in change. It is manifest in all great changes of personal and social life, which produce a kind of individual or social dizziness, a feeling that the ground on which the person or group has stood is being taken away, that self-identity or group identity is being destroyed. This anxiety reaches its most radical form in the anticipation of the final loss of substance—and accidents as well. The human experience of having to die anticipates the complete loss of identity with one's
found anxiety connected with this anticipation. The question of the unchangeable in our being, like the question of the unchangeable in being-itself, is an expression of the anxiety of losing substance and identity. To dismiss this question with the correct assertion that the arguments for the so-called immortality of the soul are wrong, that they are attempts to escape the seriousness of the question of substantiality by establishing an endless continuation of what is essentially finite, is unjustified. The question of unchangeable substance cannot be silenced. It expresses the anxiety implied in the always threatening loss of substance, that is, of identity with one's self and the power of maintaining one's self. Courage accepts the threat of losing individual substance and the substance of being generally. Man attributes substantiality to something which proves ultimately to be accidental—a creative work, a love relation, a concrete situation, himself. This is not a self-elevation of the finite, but rather it is the courage of affirming the finite, of taking one's anxiety upon himself. The question is how such a courage is possible. How can a finite being, aware of the inescapable loss of his substance, accept this loss?

The four categories are four aspects of finitude in its positive and negative elements. They express the union of being and nonbeing in everything finite. They articulate the courage which accepts the anxiety of nonbeing. The question of God is the question of the possibility of this courage.

9. FINITUDE AND THE ONTOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

Finitude is actual not only in the categories but also in the ontological elements. Their polar character opens them to the threat of nonbeing. In every polarity each pole is limited as well as sustained by the other one. A complete balance between them presupposes a balanced whole. But such a whole is not given. There are special structures in which, under the impact of finitude, polarity becomes tension. Tension refers to the tendency of elements within a unity to draw away from one another, to attempt to move in opposite directions. For Heraclitus everything is in inner tension like a bent bow, for in everything there is a tendency downward (earth) balanced by a tendency upward (fire). In his view nothing whatever is produced by a process which moves in one direction only; everything is an embracing but transitory unity of two opposite processes. Things are hypostasized tensions.

Our own ontological tension comes to awareness in the anxiety of losing our ontological structure through losing one or another polar element and, consequently, the polarity to which it belongs. This anxiety is not the same as that mentioned in connection with the categories, namely, the anxiety of nonbeing simply and directly. It is the anxiety of not being what we essentially are. It is anxiety about disintegrating and falling into nonbeing through existential disruption. It is anxiety about the breaking of the ontological tensions and the consequent destruction of the ontological structure.

This can be seen in terms of each of the polar elements. Finite individualization produces a dynamic tension with finite participation; the break of their unity is a possibility. Self-relatedness produces the threat of a loneliness in which world and communion are lost. On the other hand, being in the world and participating in it produces the threat of a complete collectivization, a loss of individuality and subjectivity whereby the self loses its self-relatedness and is transformed into a mere part of an embracing whole. Man as finite is anxiously aware of this twofold threat. Anxiously he experiences the trend from possible loneliness to collectivity and from possible collectivity to loneliness. He oscillates anxiously between individualization and participation, aware of the fact that he ceases to be if one of the poles is lost, for the loss of either pole means the loss of both.

The tension between finite individualization and finite participation is the basis of many psychological and sociological problems, and for this reason it is a very important subject of research for depth psychology and depth sociology. Philosophy often has overlooked the question of essential solitude and its relation to existential loneliness and self-seclusion. It also has overlooked the question of essential belongingness and its relation to existential self-surrender to the collective. The merit of existential thinking in all centuries, but especially since Pascal, is that it has rediscovered the ontological basis of the tension between loneliness and belongingness.

Finitude also transforms the polarity of dynamics and form into a tension which produces the threat of a possible break and anxiety about this threat. Dynamics drives toward form, in which being is actual and has the power of resisting nonbeing. But at the same time dynamics is threatened because it may lose itself in rigid forms, and, if it tries to break through them, the result may be chaos, which is the loss of both
dynamics and form. Human vitality tends to embody itself in cultural creations, forms, and institutions through the exercise of creative intentionality. But every embodiment endangers the vital power precisely by giving it actual being. Man is anxious about the threat of a final form in which his vitality will be lost, and he is anxious about the threat of a chaotic formlessness in which both vitality and intentionality will be lost.

There is abundant witness to this tension in literature from Greek tragedy to the present day, but it has not been given sufficient attention in philosophy except in the "philosophy of life" or in theology except by some Protestant mystics. Philosophy has emphasized the rational structure of things but has neglected the creative process through which things and events come into being. Theology has emphasized the divine "law" and has confused creative vitality with the destructive separation of vitality from intentionality. Philosophical rationalism and theological legalism have prevented a full recognition of the tension between dynamics and form.

Finally, finitude transforms the polarity of freedom and destiny into a tension which produces the threat of a possible break and its consequent anxiety. Man is threatened with the loss of freedom by the necessities implied in his destiny, and he is equally threatened with the loss of his destiny by the contingencies implied in his freedom. He is continuously in danger of trying to preserve his freedom by arbitrarily defying his destiny and of trying to save his destiny by surrendering his freedom. He is embarrassed by the demand that he make decisions implied in his freedom, because he realizes that he lacks the complete cognitive and active unity with his destiny which should be the foundation of his decisions. And he is afraid of accepting his destiny without reservations, because he realizes that his decision will be partial, that he will accept only a part of his destiny, and that he will fall under a special determination which is not identical with his real destiny. So he tries to save his freedom by arbitrariness, and then he is in danger of losing both his freedom and his destiny.

The traditional discussion between determinism and indeterminism concerning "freedom of the will" is an "objectified" form of the ontological tension between freedom and destiny. Both partners in this discussion defend an ontological element without which being could not be conceived. Therefore, they are right in what they affirm but wrong in what they negate. The determinist does not see that the very affirmation of determinism as true presupposes the freedom of decision between true and false, and the indeterminist does not see that the very potentiality of making decisions presupposes a personality structure which includes destiny. Speaking pragmatically, people always act as if they consider one another to be free and to be destined simultaneously. No one ever treats a man either as a mere locus of a series of contingent actions or as a mechanism in which calculable effects follow from calculated causes. Man always considers man—including himself—in terms of a unity of freedom and destiny. The fact that finite man is threatened with the loss of one side of the polarity—and consequently with the loss of the other, since loss of either side destroys the polarity as a whole—only confirms the essential character of the ontological structure.

To lose one's destiny is to lose the meaning of one's being. Destiny is not a meaningless fate. It is necessity united with meaning. The threat of possible meaninglessness is a social as well as an individual reality. There are periods in social life, as well as in personal life, during which this threat is especially acute. Our present situation is characterized by a profound and desperate feeling of meaninglessness. Individuals and groups have lost any faith they may have had in their destiny as well as any love of it. The question, "What for?" is cynically dismissed. Man's essential anxiety about the possible loss of his destiny has been transformed into an existential despair about destiny as such. Accordingly, freedom has been declared an absolute, separate from destiny (Sartre). But absolute freedom in a finite being becomes arbitrariness and falls under biological and psychological necessities. The loss of a meaningful destiny involves the loss of freedom also.

Finitude is the possibility of losing one's ontological structure and, with it, one's self. But this is a possibility, not a necessity. To be finite is to be threatened. But a threat is possibility, not actuality. The anxiety of finitude is not the despair of self-destruction. Christianity sees in the picture of Jesus as the Christ a human life in which all forms of anxiety are present but in which all forms of despair are absent. In the light of this picture it is possible to distinguish "essential" finitude from "existential" disruption, ontological anxiety from the anxiety of guilt which is despair.  

9. The material discussed in this chapter is by no means complete. Poetic, scientific, and religious psychology have made available an almost unmanageable amount of material concerning finitude and anxiety. The purpose of this analysis is to give only an ontological description of the structures underlying all these facts and to point to some outstanding confirmations of the analysis.
10. ESSENTIAL AND EXISTENTIAL BEING

Finitude, in correlation with infinity, is a quality of being in the same sense as the basic structure and the polar elements. It characterizes being in its essential nature. Being is essentially related to nonbeing; the categories of finitude indicate this. And being is essentially threatened with disruption and self-destruction; the tensions of the ontological elements under the condition of finitude indicate this. But being is not essentially in a state of disruption and self-destruction. The tension between the elements does not necessarily lead to the threatened break. Since the ontological structure of being includes the polarity of freedom and destiny, nothing ontologically relevant can happen to being that is not mediated by the unity of freedom and destiny. Of course, the breaking of the ontological tensions is not a matter of accident; it is universal and is dependent on destiny. But, on the other hand, it is not a matter of structural necessity; it is mediated by freedom.

Philosophical and theological thought, therefore, cannot escape making a distinction between essential and existential being. In every philosophy there is an indication, sometimes only implicit, of an awareness of this distinction. Whenever the ideal is held against the real, truth against error, good against evil, a distortion of essential being is presupposed and is judged by essential being. It does not matter how the appearance of such a distortion is explained in terms of causality. If it is acknowledged as distortion—and even the most radical determinist accuses his opponent of an (unconscious) distortion of the truth which he himself defends—the question of the possibility of such a distortion is raised in ontological terms. How can being, including within it the whole of its actuality, contain its own distortion? This question is always present even though it is not always asked. But, if it is asked, every answer openly or secretly points to the classical distinction between the essential and the existential.

Both of these terms are very ambiguous. Essence can mean the nature of a thing without any valuation of it, it can mean the universals which characterize a thing, it can mean the ideas in which existing things participate, it can mean the norm by which a thing must be judged, it can mean the original goodness of everything created, and it can mean the patterns of all things in the divine mind. The basic ambiguity, however, lies in the oscillation of the meaning between an empirical and a valuating sense. Essence as the nature of a thing, or as the quality in which a thing participates, or as a universal, has one character. Essence as that from which being has "fallen," the true and undistorted nature of things, has another character. In the second case essence is the basis of value judgments, while in the first case essence is a logical ideal to be reached by abstraction or intuition without the interference of valuations. How can the same word cover both meanings? Why has this ambiguity persisted in philosophy since Plato? The answer to both questions lies in the ambiguous character of existence, which expresses being and at the same time contradicts it—essence as that which makes a thing what it is (ousia) has a purely logical character; essence as that which appears in an imperfect and distorted way in a thing carries the stamp of value. Essence empowers and judges that which exists. It gives it its power of being, and, at the same time, it stands against it as commanding law. Where essence and existence are united, there is neither law nor judgment. But existence is not united with essence; therefore, law stands against all things, and judgment is actual in self-destruction.

Existence also is used with different meanings. It can mean the possibility of finding a thing within the whole of being, it can mean the actuality of what is potential in the realm of essences, it can mean the "fallen world," and it can mean a type of thinking which is aware of its existential conditions or which rejects essence entirely. Again, an unavoidable ambiguity justifies the use of this one word in these different senses. Whatever exists, that is, "stands out" of mere potentiality, is more than it is in the state of mere potentiality and less than it could be in the power of its essential nature. In some philosophers, notably Plato, the negative judgment on existence prevails. The good is identical with the essential, and existence does not add anything. In other philosophers, notably Ockham, the positive judgment prevails. All reality exists, and the essential is nothing more than the reflex of existence in the human mind. The good is the self-expression of the highest existent—God—and it is imposed on the other existents from outside them. In a third group of philosophers, notably Aristotle, a mediating attitude prevails. The actual is the real, but the essential provides its power of being, and in the highest essence potentiality and actuality are one.

Christian theology always has used the distinction between essential and existential being and predominantly in a way which is nearer to Aristotle than to Plato or Ockham. This is not surprising. In contrast to Plato, Christianity emphasizes existence in terms of creation through God, not through a demiurge. Existence is the fulfilment of creation;
existence gives creation its positive character. In contrast to Ockham, Christianity has emphasized the split between the created goodness of things and their distorted existence. But the good is not considered an arbitrary commandment imposed by an all-powerful existent on the other existents. It is the essential structure of reality.

Christianity must take the middle road however it deals with the problem of being. And it must deal with the problem of being, for, although essence and existence are philosophical terms, the experience and the vision behind them precede philosophy. They appeared in mythology and poetry long before philosophy dealt with them rationally. Consequently, theology does not surrender its independence when it uses philosophical terms which are analogous to terms which religion has used for ages in prerational, imaginative language.

The preceding considerations are preliminary and definitory; only by implication are they more than this. A complete discussion of the relation of essence to existence is identical with the entire theological system. The distinction between essence and existence, which religiously speaking is the distinction between the created and the actual world, is the backbone of the whole body of theological thought. It must be elaborated in every part of the theological system.

D. HUMAN FINITUDE AND THE QUESTION OF GOD

II. THE POSSIBILITY OF THE QUESTION OF GOD AND THE SO-CALLED ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

It is a remarkable fact that for many centuries leading theologians and philosophers were almost equally divided between those who attacked and those who defended the arguments for the existence of God. Neither group prevailed over the other in a final way. This situation admits only one explanation: the one group did not attack what the other group defended. They were not divided by a conflict over the same matter. They fought over different matters which they expressed in the same terms. Those who attacked the arguments for the existence of God criticized their argumentative form; those who defended them accepted their implicit meaning.

There can be little doubt that the arguments are a failure in so far as they claim to be arguments. Both the concept of existence and the method of arguing to a conclusion are inadequate for the idea of God. However it is defined, the “existence of God” contradicts the idea of a creative ground of essence and existence. The ground of being cannot be found within the totality of beings, nor can the ground of essence and existence participate in the tensions and disruptions characteristic of the transition from essence to existence. The scholastics were right when they asserted that in God there is no difference between essence and existence. But they perverted their insight when in spite of this assertion they spoke of the existence of God and tried to argue in favor of it. Actually they did not mean “existence.” They meant the reality, the validity, the truth of the idea of God, an idea which did not carry the connotation of something or someone who might or might not exist. Yet this is the way in which the idea of God is understood today in scholarly as well as in popular discussions about the “existence of God.” It would be a great victory for Christian apologetics if the words “God” and “existence” were very definitely separated except in the paradox of God becoming manifest under the conditions of existence, that is, in the christological paradox. God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.

The method of arguing through a conclusion also contradicts the idea of God. Every argument derives conclusions from something that is given about something that is sought. In arguments for the existence of God the world is given and God is sought. Some characteristics of the world make the conclusion “God” necessary. God is derived from the world. This does not mean that God is dependent on the world. Thomas Aquinas is correct when he rejects such an interpretation and asserts that what is first in itself may be last for our knowledge. But, if we derive God from the world, he cannot be that which transcends the world infinitely. He is the “missing link,” discovered by correct conclusions. He is the unifying force between the res cogitans and the res extensa (Descartes), or the end of the causal regression in answer to the question, “Where from?” (Thomas Aquinas), or the teleological intelligence directing the meaningful processes of reality—if not identical with these processes (Whitehead). In each of these cases God is “world,” a missing part of that from which he is derived in terms of conclusions. This contradicts the idea of God as thoroughly as does the concept of existence. The arguments for the existence of God neither are arguments nor are they proof of the existence of God. They are expressions of the question of God which is implied in human finitude. This question is their truth; every answer they give is untrue. This is the sense in which theology must deal with these arguments, which are the solid body of any natural
theology. It must deprive them of their argumentative character, and it must eliminate the combination of the words "existence" and "God." If this is accomplished, natural theology becomes the elaboration of the question of God; it ceases to be the answer to this question. The following interpretations are to be understood in this sense. The arguments for the existence of God analyze the human situation in such a way that the question of God appears possible and necessary.