

Ought God Be in Webster's Third?*

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ACCORDING TO PHILIP B. GOVE, any term omitted entirely from *Webster's Third* is to be called *nonlexical*. The difference between the nonlexical and the lexical is chiefly the difference between the proper noun and the common noun.¹ The only part of speech that is to be considered nonlexical is the proper noun.² *Webster's Third* "confines itself strictly to generic words . . . as distinguished from proper names that are not generic."³ Hence proper names are to be omitted entirely from the dictionary.

It is evident that Mr. Gove is following the venerable tradition of defining proper names as individual names. For example:

1. Jespersen says, "every time a proper name is used in actual speech its value to both speaker and hearer is that of denoting one individual only, and being restricted to that one definite being."⁴

2. Bloomfield: "*Names (proper nouns)* occur only in the singular number, take no determiner, and are always definite: *John, Chicago*. The class meaning is 'species of object containing only one specimen.'" Whereas "*common nouns* occur in both categories, definite and indefinite. The class-meaning is 'species of object occurring in more than one specimen.'"⁵

3. Gove: "Proper nouns are definite and singular and usually take no determiner (there are exceptions)," whereas "common nouns may be both definite and indefinite."⁶

According to this view, proper names can be distinguished syntactically by the absence of a determiner or article because these

¹ "The Nonlexical and the Encyclopedic," *Names*, 13: 2 (June, 1965), p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Preface, 6a.

⁴ O. Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Language* (London, 1935), p. 65.

⁵ L. Bloomfield, *Language* (London, 1935), p. 205.

⁶ P. B. Gove, "The Nonlexical and the Encyclopedic," *op. cit.*, p. 111.

names refer only on the condition that one and only one object satisfies their sense.

Given this characterization it is difficult to understand how *God* could be anything but a proper name. Consider the utterance *God exists*.

The expression *God* in that utterance is evidently a noun; furthermore, it is not a count noun (like *bean*) since it does not require an article. This is not to deny that there is also a count noun *god* in English. Thus one can say *If God exists then a god exists* or even *God is a god*. This indicates that *God* is not a noun like *man* in *Man is a rope stretched over an abyss* for one cannot say *Man is a man*.

That *God* is neither a proper nor a mass noun in the utterance 'God exists' is indicated by the fact that it is neither a pronoun nor a mass noun in English religious discourses; that it is neither a pronoun nor a mass noun in these discourses is indicated by various facts; e.g., that it does not occur in such environments as *How much . . . exists? A quantity of . . . exists*; that it takes *he* as an anaphoric substitute as in, *That God exists may be doubted but that some men think he exists, that cannot be doubted*; that the *wh-* form employed in connection with *God* is generally *who* and so forth.

Hence it is reasonably clear that *God* in *God exists* is a proper noun, i.e., a proper name, or, for short, a name.⁷

And if we realize that *God* in *God exists* is the same expression as² *God* in *Webster's Third* (viz., "the supreme or ultimate reality: the Deity variously conceived in theology, philosophy, and popular religion . . ."), then it is also clear that² *God* is a proper name.

The difficulty is this: if we accept Mr. Gove's characterization of a proper name then it follows that *God* is a proper name. But if *God* is a proper name, and if there should be no proper names in the dictionary, then it follows that *God* ought not be in *Webster's Third*.

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⁷ Paul Ziff, "About God," in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. S. Hook (New York, 1961), p. 195.