

God and Human Attitudes: 33 Years Later

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Bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. – 2 Cor. 10:5

Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. – John 8:32

Thirty-three years ago, James Rachels published an article titled “God and Human Attitudes.”¹ In that article, Rachels argued that the existence of God is impossible, on the grounds that God, if there were one, would *by definition* have to be worthy of worship, yet, Rachels maintained, “[n]o being could possibly be a fitting object of worship.” (p. 45)

I shall argue that Rachels’ argument does not succeed in proving the nonexistence of God, but that it does succeed in proving something. Specifically, it succeeds in proving the *existence* of God. However, the sense in which it proves the existence of God is a sense that is entirely compatible with atheism. Having made this strange advertisement, I begin.

Why does Rachels think that nothing can possibly be a fitting object of worship? The answer turns on the nature of worship. While criticising the view, attributed to Wittgenstein, that religious language is expressive *rather than* descriptive, Rachels does nevertheless place its expressive character front and center. For Rachels worship is not “an isolated act ... with no necessary connection to one’s behaviour,” but rather expresses a “commitment to a role which dominates one’s whole way of life.” (p. 41) The role in question, Rachels suggests, is one of subordination: “Worship presumes the superiority of the one worshipped.” (p. 40) To worship someone, then, is both to treat that person as superior to oneself, and to treat her superiority to oneself as conferring

¹ James Rachels, “God and Human Attitudes,” *Religious Studies* 7 (1971), pp. 325-37.

meaning and direction on one's own life. To worship someone is to acknowledge, to embrace, to *live* the role of subordination to her.

Living this role carries obvious implications for one's attitudes toward any commands issued by the being one worships: "we cannot recognise any being *as God*, and at the same time set ourselves against him." Abraham, for example, had to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac, because he "could not, consistently with his role as God's subject, set his own will and judgment against God's." (p. 42) Defiance and disobedience to God are inconsistent with living a life whose central meaning is one's subordination to God; thus "in admitting that a being is worthy of worship," we thereby recognise that being "as having an unqualified claim on our obedience." (p. 44) There are no safety words in this bondage lifestyle.

Yet a tension exists, Rachels argues, between the worshipper's commitment to unconditional obedience, and the requirements of moral agency. A virtuous person, a "man of integrity," he reminds us, is *inter alia* someone who "acts according to precepts which he can, on reflection, conscientiously approve in his heart" – and who thus will *not* obey *any* commands, divine or otherwise, *except* on the condition that he can so approve them. Whether or not obedience to one's conscience is sufficient to fulfill one's moral requirements, it is surely necessary. And even if the person one worships never actually commands anything that one's conscience forbids, the question can still be raised what one *would* do if one's role as conscientious moral agent and one's role as God's subject were to come apart. The problem, according to Rachels, is that the role of moral agent requires of us an *unconditional* commitment to choosing moral duty over anything else:

[T]o deliver oneself over to a moral authority for directions about what to do is simply incompatible with being a moral agent. To say 'I will follow so-and-so's directions no matter what they are and no matter what my own conscience would otherwise direct me to do' is to opt out of moral thinking altogether; it is to abandon one's role as a moral agent. (p. 44)

But the role of worshipful subject to God likewise requires an *unconditional* commitment to obedience to the divine will, in preference to any other consideration. Even if God's commands and one's moral conscience never clash in the *actual* course of things, so long as their clashing is *possible*, no one can be unconditionally *committed* to serving both;

there is thus “a conflict between the role of worshipper, which by its very nature commits one to total subservience to God, and the role of moral agent, which necessarily involves autonomous decision-making.” (p. 45)

The theist’s obvious response at this point is to deny that such clashes are so much as logically possible. If God is necessarily good, her commands not only will not but *cannot* conflict with moral duty, and so the tension between religious and moral commitments dissolves. Rachels anticipates this objection, however, and replies that, precisely because God is necessarily good, we “cannot determine whether some being is God” until we first know “whether his commands to us are right” (p. 46); thus no purported divine command can override a moral agent’s conscientious judgment, since any doubt about the morality of the command’s content must immediately translate into doubt about the divinity of the command’s author. To put Rachels’ point another way: even if morality and the divine will necessarily recommend the same action, morality requires us to do the action *because* we think it’s moral, while the role of worshipper requires us to do the action *because* we think it’s divinely commanded, and these cannot be the same motive. (Rachels assumes the falsity of the divine command theory of ethics. So do I, for the usual reasons, so I won’t pursue that issue.)

Rachels’ argument does not succeed – or, more precisely, it does not succeed in showing what he thinks it shows – because there is at least one traditional conception of God (one might even call it *the* traditional conception of God) that will allow the theist to escape ... sort of. On the mediæval Scholastic view, God was regarded as identical with truth, being, and goodness; these were not merely properties that God possessed, they were what God *was*. This view was influenced not only by Greek philosophy – Plato’s Form of the Good and the Stoics’ cosmic *Logos* – but also by such Biblical passages as “I am who am” (Exod. 3:14), “The *Logos* was God” (John 1:1), and “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). St. Augustine writes:

If, now, we could find something which you could unhesitatingly recognize not only as existing but also as superior to our reason, would you have any hesitation in calling it, whatever it may be, God? ... You will never deny that there is an unchangeable truth which contains everything that is unchangeably true. You will never be able to say that it belongs particularly to you or to me or to any man, for it is available and

offers itself to be shared by all who discern things immutably true, as if it were some strange mysterious and yet public light. ... Do you, then, think that this truth of which we have already spoken so much and in which we behold so many things, is more excellent than our minds, or equal to our minds, or inferior? If it were inferior we should not use it as a standard of judgment, but should rather pass judgment on it. ... We pass judgment on our minds in accordance with truth as our standard, while we cannot in any way pass judgment on truth. ... I promised, if you remember, to show you something superior to the human mind and reason. There it is, truth itself. (Augustine, *Free Choice of the Will* **.)

In other words, God is something like the logical structure of reality. On this view, the requirements of morality, as well as of logic, are neither the products of an arbitrary divine will nor external constraints on such a will, but are simply part of God's nature. (Hence God cannot violate the laws of logic or morality – not because she creates those laws by her arbitrary will, nor yet because she finds them already written in an independent, pre-divine logico-moral order, but because she is those laws.) So when the conscientious moral agent tries to figure out what morality requires, this is the *same thing* as trying to figure out what God requires; thus no division arises between acting from duty and acting from worship.

It's easy to see why theists have found this conception attractive. For if God is *not* the logical structure of reality, then in what relation *does* God stand to that structure? One possibility is that God stands *outside* that structure, as its creator. But this "possibility" is unintelligible. Logic is a necessary condition of significant discourse; thus one cannot meaningfully speak of a being unconstrained by logic, or a time when logic's constraints were not yet in place. The other possibility is that God stands *within* that structure, along with everything else. But this option, as Wittgenstein observed, would downgrade God to the status of being merely *one object among others*, one more fragment of contingency – and she would no longer be the greatest of all beings, since there would be something greater: the logical structure itself. (This may be part of what Plato meant in describing the Form of the Good as "beyond being." It is certainly part of what Wittgenstein meant in resisting the view that religious language is straightforwardly descriptive.) Moreover, if the structure were there independent of God, than theists who pursue mathematics, philosophy, praxeological economics, or any other conceptual, *a priori* enterprise could no longer think of their work as a glorification of God.

On the Scholastic understanding, the role of worshipper does indeed require a life of subordination to something “superior to our reason” – but this is simply subordination to logical and ethical principle. Is subordination to such principle an intolerable constraint on a moral agent’s autonomy? Nietzsche, or Stirner, or Dostojevski’s Underground Man may find it so, but that is arguably because they are thinking of logical principle as a *constraint*. What Wittgenstein shows us, however, is how little sense it makes to talk of constraint here. To say that something is *constrained* to be a certain way is to imply that, but for the constraint, it would be different; but what could this mean when the constraint is logic itself?

It used to be said that God could create anything except what would be contrary to the laws of logic. – The truth is that we could not *say* what an ‘illogical’ world would look like. ... It is as impossible to represent in language anything that ‘contradicts logic’ as it is in geometry to represent by its co-ordinates a figure that contradicts the laws of space, or to give the co-ordinates of a point that does not exist. (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 3.03-3.032.)

Once God is conceived of as, essentially, logical and ethical truth, the requirements of conscientious moral agency no longer clash with the requirements of worship. A moral agent sacrifices no autonomy in worshipping reason and morality.

Rachels considers a possibility close to the one I am urging – namely, that “the voice of individual conscience *is* the voice of God speaking to the individual” – but he dismisses any such view because he interprets it as claiming that “in speaking to us through our ‘consciences’, God is merely tricking us” by “giving us the illusion of self-government while all the time he is manipulating our thoughts from without.” (p. 47) But if God is simply the “space of reasons,” then investigating what one has most reason to believe or to do is not a *distinct* enterprise from investigating what God requires, and so no trickery is involved.

One might wonder, though, whether this counts as a conception of *God*. After all, while traditional theists have identified God with pure being and goodness and truth, they have not *stopped* there, but have gone on to attribute to God various further properties not obviously compatible with this identification, such as personality and will. It’s hard to see how the logical structure of reality could possess personality and will; and since

theists are surely committed to thinking of God in terms of personality and will, one might be tempted to infer that no theist can *really* identify God with the logical structure of reality.

Historically, however, theists of such impressive orthodoxy as Thomas Aquinas have come down on the other side, insisting that the attribution to God of personality, will, and the like must be understood *analogically*. On this view God does not *literally* possess personality and will, at least if by those attributes we mean the same attributes that we humans possess; rather she possesses attributes *analogous* to ours. When forced to choose between God-as-principle and God-as-person, then, many theists of the severest respectability have chosen God-as-principle and jettisoned God-as-person. Of course other theists have made the reverse choice; all I wish to maintain is that choosing God-as-principle over God-as-person is defensible and recognisable as a form of theism.

One might worry that Aquinas and similar theists, though officially committed to the view that talk of God's personality and will is merely analogical, often slide in practice into treating such talk as literal. I think this worry is well-founded, but I don't think it affects my argument. The fact that Aquinas slides back and forth between a personal and an impersonal conception of God doesn't show that there's anything incoherent about maintaining a consistently impersonal conception of God.

One might object that God, as understood by theists, has to create and sustain the universe, and it's hard to see how the logical structure of reality could do this. But both halves of this objection are mistaken. First, there have been many conceptions of God, such as Plato's and Aristotle's (and perhaps including, depending on how one punctuates the Hebrew, the opening lines of Genesis) that deny God such a role; and second, since the existence of the universe surely depends on its logical structure and couldn't exist for so much as an instant without it, the logical structure of reality arguably *does* count as creating and sustaining the universe (if X's creating Y can be understood, as Aquinas assures us it can, as Y's timelessly depending on X for every aspect of its being).

One might further object that the logical structure of reality is not something that one could sensibly *pray* to. But there are many conceptions of prayer. Obviously it makes no sense to petition the logical structure of reality for favours; but this is not the only conception of prayer extant. In Christian Science, for example, the activity of praying is

described not as *petitioning* a principle but as *applying* a principle; the founder of that religion writes:

Who would stand before a blackboard, and pray the principle of mathematics to solve the problem? The rule is already established, and it is our task to work out the solution. Shall we ask the divine Principle of all goodness to do His own work? His work is done, and we have only to avail ourselves of God's rule in order to receive His blessing, which enables us to work out our own salvation. (Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health* **)

In light of Christian Science's famously high estimate of prayer's effectiveness, this can hardly be accused of being a watered-down or "naturalistic" conception of prayer. Hence even if one assumes that God is by definition something you can pray to, there is a viable conception of prayer that allows logical truth to play the role of God.

I've said that the possibility of identifying God with logical truth prevents Rachels' proof of God's nonexistence from going through. But a still stronger conclusion can be drawn. What Rachels' argument shows is that identifying God with logical truth is the *only* defensible version of theism, because it is the only version that reconciles a moral agent's unconditional duty of conscience with God's unconditional right of obedience. Further still, Rachels' argument shows that there *is* something worthy of worship, namely, moral duty – since the moral agent owes unconditional subordination and obedience precisely to this. But what is moral duty if not part of the "space of reasons," or logical truth?

What Rachels' argument proves, then, is that logical truth, and only logical truth, is worthy of worship. But we've also seen that logical truth possesses all the *other* attributes requisite to Godhood – it is the highest and best being, the creator and sustainer of the universe, and so on. What else can we infer from Rachels' argument, then, but that logical truth is indeed God, and so (since we cannot doubt the existence of logical truth) that God exists?

An obvious reply is that this sort of theism works only if one thinks of reality's logical structure in *realist* terms, as an independent reality in its own right. But if one instead thinks, in *nominalist* terms, that there's nothing to this logical structure over and

above what it structures, then isn't it atheism rather than theism that has been established?

This objection assumes, however, that the distinction between realism and nominalism is a coherent one. But from a Wittgensteinian standpoint it isn't: conceptual realism pictures logical structure as something imposed by the world on an inherently structureless mind (and so involves the incoherent notion of a structureless mind), while nominalism pictures logical structure as something imposed by the mind on an inherently structureless world (and so involves the equally incoherent notion of a structureless world). If the realism/antirealism dichotomy represents a false opposition, then the theist/atheist dichotomy does so as well. The difference between the two positions will then be only, as Wittgenstein says in another context, "one of battle cry."

Once again, to think of logic as *constraining* something is to imagine, or try to imagine, how things would be without the constraint; but as Wittgenstein says, "in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)." (**) Since neither talk of an illogical world nor talk of illogical thought can be made sense of, the whole question cannot be meaningfully asked and so may be dismissed in good conscience.

Thus it's true that, in one sense, the logical structure of reality is *nothing at all* – and it's in that sense that the position I've defended counts as a kind of atheism. But in another sense the logical structure of reality is a very *peculiar* sort of nothing-at-all. In thinking about logic we are often tempted to say that there already exists, somehow, an *ethereal pattern* to which any use of signs must conform if that use is to constitute thinking, speaking, acting, etc.; the *possibility* of logic seems like a kind of logic already. Yet, as Wittgenstein insists, when we try to describe that pattern, we end up babbling tautologies – "things are what they are," "if we do something then we do it" – and the pattern seems to exercise no *constraint*, since we can't identify anything that it rules out. So we vacillate between seeing the logical structure of the universe as a highly articulated metaphysical schema, and seeing it as nothing at all.

Is Wittgenstein plumping for the latter option? We might put it that way. But we might equally say: of course this metaphysical schema exists, the Platonists weren't

groping entirely in vain, but its existence *consists* in – is *nothing more* than – the difference between making sense and not making sense (rather than being something *behind* that difference, explaining it). In a way, this position is as much a concession to as it is a rebuke of Platonism. Platonists have always thought of logic as being *basic* and irreducible; and Wittgenstein agrees. But the Platonists' mistake was to treat logic as some sort of mysterious metaphysical *entity*, or realm of entities, about which more could be said – whereas in fact there is nothing to say *about* logic except what we say *in* and *with* logic. The framework of logic itself belongs to the realm of showables, not sayables. (Frege comes close to recognising this in his famous debate with Benno Kerry, where Frege denies the possibility of predicating anything of concepts, since to do so one would have, incoherently, to place a predicate-term in subject position.) “The logical structure of reality is nothing at all” is as *unsayable* as “The logical structure of reality is something in its own right.” As Wittgenstein observes:

A statement cannot be concerned with the logical structure of the world, for in order for a statement to be possible at all, in order for a proposition to be CAPABLE of making SENSE, the world must already have just the logical structure it has. The logic of the world is prior to all truth and falsehood. (*Notebooks* 18.10.14 **)

In that sense logic, ethics, and theology are all in the same unsayable boat.

Still, Wittgenstein, invoking the saying/showing distinction, can say by way of concession to Platonism:

Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we say is *a priori* bound to be mere nonsense. ... But the inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*. St. Augustine knew that already when he said: What, you swine, you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter! (*Vienna Circle*, pp. 68-9 **)

Wittgenstein's point is that such uses of language are perfectly legitimate – so long as we remain on guard against the temptation to misinterpret them as being more closely akin to ordinary declarative sentences than they really are. (Which is not to say, as Wittgenstein is occasionally tempted to say, that they are really, *e.g.*, exclamatory *rather* than

declarative; that would involve an equally serious distortion in the opposite direction, and Rachels correctly condemns it.) Such language is neither to be renounced nor to be indulged in thoughtlessly, but rather to be employed with vigilant awareness of its risks.

This notion of God as a kind of nothing-that-is-everything, about which it is in some sense impossible to speak straightforwardly, is by no means alien to the theistic tradition; and Plato of course maintained, as I've mentioned, that the Form of the Good, the cause of all being, is not itself a being, but is "beyond being," possessing no properties in its own right and capable of being characterised only in relation to other things. (To paraphrase Heraclitus, the *Logos* is both willing and unwilling to be called God – or indeed anything.) Maimonides and Eckhart famously deny that we can predicate *anything* of God, while Aquinas again insists we can do so only analogically. Part of the attractiveness, I claim, of the position I'm defending is precisely that it explains what would otherwise be a remarkable and puzzling coincidence: namely, the close similarity between the odd-sounding mystical things that theologians find themselves driven to say about God, and the equally odd-sounding mystical things that logicians like Frege and Wittgenstein find themselves driven to say about logic. And this adds weight to my claim that a God who was *not* identical with the logical structure of reality would fall short of God as traditionally conceived.

There is a way, then, in which Rachels' argument succeeds in making its case after all. For while there is a sense in which there exists just the sort of thing the theists believe in, there is another sense in which, as the atheists claim, this thing is nothing at all. It's customary to think of theism and atheism as contradictories; but once we see, as Rachels' argument shows us, that God can only be the logical structure of reality, then the *most defensible* version of theism and the *most defensible* version of atheism turn out not to contradict each other at all – turn out, in fact, to be one and the same position. (Of course one may have valid reasons, emotional or political, to prefer one label or the other. I myself, for example, am often tempted, when surrounded by dogmatic atheists, to describe myself as a theist, and when surrounded by dogmatic theists, to describe myself as an atheist. But that is a change of mood, not a change of position.)

One might worry that, on this sort of approach, any view will turn out to be consistent with any other view, since the most defensible version of any view is the one that makes

it true. But that would be a mistake. The most defensible version of a view still has to be a version *of that view*, and so must manage to preserve its central point or thrust – and sometimes that constraint will simply be incompatible with the view’s saying something true. The most defensible version of Nazism, for example, whatever it is, is still false. What I’m claiming is that *in the case of theism and atheism* there is a way to preserve the essential thrust of each view while still saying something true; but my case for this claim depends on the particular subject-matter involved and will not always be generalisable to other cases.

33 years ago, James Rachels set out to show that nothing is worthy of worship. He succeeded in showing that nothing but moral principle is worthy of worship. He thereby called us to the worship of something that is not a something, but not a nothing either. *For as we passed by, and beheld their devotions, we found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. What therefore they ignorantly worship, that declare we unto them.*

Amen. Or in other words: Q.E.D.