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GOD AND HUMAN ATTITUDES

Kneeling down or grovelling on the ground, even to express your reverence for heavenly things, is contrary to human dignity.

Kant

1. It is necessarily true that God (if He exists) is worthy of worship.¹ Any being who is not worthy of worship cannot be God, just as any being who is not omnipotent, or who is not perfectly good, cannot be God. This is reflected in the attitudes of religious believers who recognize that, whatever else God may be, He is a being before whom men should bow down. Moreover, He is unique in this; to worship anyone or anything else is blasphemy. In this paper I shall present an *a priori* argument against the existence of God which is based on the conception of God as a fitting object of worship. The argument is that God cannot exist, because no being could ever *be* a fitting object of worship.

However, before I can present this argument, there are several preliminary matters that require attention. The chief of these, which will hopefully have some independent interest of its own, is an examination of the concept of worship. In spite of its great importance this concept has received remarkably little attention from philosophers of religion; and when it has been treated, the usual approach is by way of referring to God's awesomeness or mysteriousness: to worship is to 'bow down in silent awe' when confronted with a being that is 'terrifyingly mysterious'.² But neither of these notions is of much help in understanding worship. Awe is certainly not the same thing as worship; one can be awed by a performance of *King Lear*, or by witnessing an eclipse of the sun or an earthquake, or by meeting one's favourite film-star, without worshiping any of these things. And a great many things are both terrifying and mysterious that we have not the slightest inclination to worship—I suppose the Black Plague fits that description for many people. The account of worship that I will give will be an alternative to those which rely on such notions as awesomeness and mysteriousness.

¹ Hartshorne and Pike suggest that the formula 'that than which none greater can be conceived' should be interpreted as 'that than which none more worthy of worship can be conceived'. Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery* (LaSalle, Illinois, 1966), pp. 25-26; and Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London, 1970), pp. 149-160.

² These phrases are from John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963), pp. 13-14.

2. Consider McBlank, who worked against his country's entry into the Second World War, refused induction into the army, and was sent to jail. He was active in the 'ban the bomb' movements of the fifties; he made speeches, wrote pamphlets, led demonstrations, and went back to jail. And finally, he has been active in opposing the war in Vietnam. In all of this he has acted out of principle; he thinks that all war is evil and that no war is ever justified. I want to make three observations about McBlank's pacifist commitments. (a) One thing that is involved is simply his recognition that certain facts are the case. History is full of wars; war causes the massive destruction of life and property; in war men suffer on a scale hardly matched in any other way; the large nations now have weapons which, if used, could destroy the human race; and so on. These are just facts which any normally informed man will admit without argument. (b) But of course they are not *merely* facts, which people recognise to be the case in some indifferent manner. They are facts that have special importance to human beings. They form an ominous and threatening backdrop to people's lives—even though for most people they are a backdrop only. But not so for McBlank. He sees the accumulation of these facts as having radical implications for his conduct; he behaves in a very different way from the way he would behave were it not for these facts. His whole style of life is different; his conduct is altered, not just in its details, but in its pattern. (c) Not only is his overt behaviour affected; so are his ways of thinking about the world and his place in it. His *self-image* is different. He sees himself as a member of a race with an insane history of self-destruction, and his self-image becomes that of an active opponent of the forces that lead to this self-destruction. He is an opponent of militarism just as he is a father or a musician. When some existentialists say that we 'create ourselves' by our choices, they may have something like this in mind.

Thus, there are at least three things that determine McBlank's role as an opponent of war: first, his recognition that certain facts are the case; second, his taking these facts as having important implications for his conduct; and third, his self-image as living his life (at least in part) in response to these facts. My first thesis about worship is that the worshiper has a set of beliefs about God³ which function in the same way as McBlank's beliefs about war.

First, the worshiper believes that certain things are the case: that the world was created by an all-powerful, all-wise being who knows our every thought and action; that this being, called God, cares for us and regards us as his children; that we are made by him in order to return his love and to live in accordance with his laws; and that, if we do not live in a way pleasing to him, we may be severely punished. Now these beliefs are cer-

³ In speaking of 'beliefs about God' I have in mind those typical of Western religions. I shall construct my account of worship in these terms, although the account will be adaptable to other forms of worship such as Satan-worship (see footnote 1, pp. 331).

tainly not shared by all reasonable people; on the contrary, many thoughtful persons regard them as nothing more than mere fantasy. But these beliefs are accepted by religious people, and that is what is important here. I do not say that this particular set of beliefs is definitive of religion in general, or of Judaism or Christianity in particular; it is meant only as a sample of the sorts of belief typically held by religious people in the West. They are, however, the sort of beliefs about God that are required for the business of worshipping God to make any sense.

Second, like the facts about warfare, these are not merely facts which one notes with an air of indifference; they have important implications for one's conduct. An effort must be made to discover God's will both for people generally and for oneself in particular; and to this end, the believer consults the church authorities and the theologians, reads the scripture, and prays. The degree to which this will alter his overt behaviour will depend, first, on exactly what he decides God would have him do, and second, on the extent to which his behaviour would have followed the prescribed pattern in any case.¹

Finally, the believer's recognition of these 'facts' will influence his self-image and his way of thinking about the world and his place in it. The world will be regarded as made for the fulfilment of divine purposes; the hardships that befall men will be regarded either as 'tests' in some sense or as punishments for sin; and most important, the believer will think of himself as a 'Child of God' and of his conduct as reflecting either honour or dishonour upon his Heavenly Father.

What will be most controversial in what I have said so far (to some philosophers, though perhaps not to most religious believers) is the treatment of claims such as 'God regards us as his children' as in some sense factual. Wittgenstein² is reported to have thought this a total misunderstanding of religious belief; and others have followed him in this.³ Religious utterances, it is said, do not report putative facts; instead, we should understand such utterances as revealing the speaker's *form of life*. To have a form of life is to accept a language-game; the religious believer accepts a language-game in which there is talk of God, creation, Heaven and Hell, a Last Judgment, and so forth, which the sceptic does not accept. Such language-games can only be understood on their own terms; we must not try to assimilate them to other sorts of games. To see how this particular game works we need only to examine the way the language of religion is used by actual believers—in its proper habitat the language-game will be 'in order' as it is. We find

¹ For example, one religious believer who thinks that his conduct must be very different on account of his belief is P. T. Geach: see his essay 'The Moral Law and the Law of God', in *God and the Soul* (London, 1969).

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Berkeley, 1967). Edited by Cyril Bartlett, from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees, and James Taylor.

³ For example, Rush Rhees, in *Without Answers* (London, 1969), ch. 13.

that the religious believer uses such utterances for a number of purposes, e.g. to express reasons for action, to show the significance which he attaches to various things, to express his attitudes, etc.—but not to ‘state facts’ in the ordinary sense. So when the believer makes a typically religious assertion, and a nonbeliever denies the same, *they are not contradicting one another*; rather, the nonbeliever is simply refusing to play the believer’s (very serious) game. Wittgenstein (as recorded by his pupils) said:

‘Suppose that someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don’t, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won’t be such a thing? I would say: “not at all, or not always.”

Suppose I say that the body will rot, and another says “No. Particles will rejoin in a thousand years, and there will be a Resurrection of you”.

If some said: “Wittgenstein, do you believe in this?” I’d say: “No.” “Do you contradict the man?” I’d say: “No.”¹

Wittgenstein goes on to say that the difference between the believer and the sceptic is not that one holds something to be true that the other thinks false, but that the believer takes certain things as ‘guidance for life’ that the sceptic does not, e.g. that there will be a Last Judgment. He illustrates this by reference to a person who ‘thinks of retribution’ when he plans his conduct or assesses his condition:

‘Suppose you had two people, and one of them, when he had to decide which course to take, thought of retribution, and the other did not. One person might, for instance, be inclined to take everything that happened to him as a reward or punishment, and another person doesn’t think of this at all.

If he is ill, he may think: “What have I done to deserve this?” This is one way of thinking of retribution. Another way is, he thinks in a general way whenever he is ashamed of himself: “This will be punished.”

Take two people, one of whom talks of his behaviour and of what happens to him in terms of retribution, the other does not. These people think entirely differently. Yet, so far, you can’t say they believe different things.

Suppose someone is ill and he says: “This is punishment,” and I say: “If I’m ill, I don’t think of punishment at all.” If you say: “Do you believe the opposite?”—you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite.

I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures.²

I will limit myself to three remarks about this very difficult view.³ First it is not at all clear that this account is true to the intentions of those who actually engage in religious discourse. If a believer (at least, the great majority of those whom I have known or read about) says that there will be a Last Judgment, and a sceptic says that there will not, the believer certainly will think that he has been contradicted. Of course, the sceptic might not think of denying such a thing except for the fact that the believer

¹ Wittgenstein, p. 53.

² Wittgenstein, pp. 54–5.

³ The whole subject is explored in detail in Kai Nielsen, ‘Wittgensteinian Fideism’, *Philosophy*, XLII (1967), pp. 191–209.

asserts it; and in this trivial sense the sceptic might 'think differently' from the believer—but this is completely beside the point. Moreover, former believers who become sceptics frequently do so because they come to believe that religious assertions are *false*; and then, they consider themselves to be denying exactly what they previously asserted. Second, a belief does not lose its ordinary factual import simply because it occupies a central place in one's way of life. McBlank takes the facts about war as 'guidance for life' in a perfectly straightforward sense; but they remain facts. I take it that just as the man in Wittgenstein's example 'thinks of retribution' often, McBlank thinks of war often. So, we do not need to assign religious utterances a special status in order to explain their importance for one's way of life. Finally, while I realise that my account is very simple and mundane, whereas Wittgenstein's is 'deep' and difficult, nonetheless this may be an advantage, not a handicap, of my view. If the impact of religious belief on one's conduct and thinking can be explained by appeal to nothing more mysterious than putative facts and their impact on conduct and thinking, then the need for a more obscure theory will be obviated. And if a man believes that, *as a matter of fact*, his actions are subject to review by a just God who will mete out rewards and punishments on a day of final reckoning, that will explain very nicely why he 'thinks of retribution' when he reflects on his conduct.

3. Worship is something that is *done*; but it is not clear just *what* is done when one worships. Other actions, such as throwing a ball or insulting one's neighbour, seem transparent enough. But not so with worship: when we celebrate Mass in the Roman Catholic Church, for example, what are we doing (apart from eating a wafer and drinking wine)? Or when we sing hymns in a protestant church, what are we doing (other than merely singing songs)? What is it that makes these acts acts of *worship*? One obvious point is that these actions, and others like them, are ritualistic in character; so, before we can make any progress in understanding worship, perhaps it will help to ask about the nature of ritual.

First we need to distinguish the ceremonial form of a ritual from what is supposed to be accomplished by it. Consider, for example, the ritual of investiture for an English Prince. The Prince kneels; the Queen (or King) places a crown on his head; and he takes an oath: 'I do become your liege man of life and limb and of earthly worship, and faith and trust I will bear unto thee to live and die against all manner of folks.' By this ceremony the Prince is elevated to his new station; and by this oath he acknowledges the commitments which, as Prince, he will owe the Queen. In one sense the ceremonial form of the ritual is quite unimportant: it is possible that some other procedure might have been laid down, without the point of the ritual being affected in any way. Rather than placing a crown on his head, the

Queen might break an egg into his palm (that could symbolise all sorts of things). Once this was established as the procedure to be followed, it would do as well as the other. It would still be the ritual of investiture, so long as it was understood that by the ceremony a Prince is created. The performance of a ritual, then, is in certain respects like the use of language: in speaking, sounds are uttered and, thanks to the conventions of the language, something is said, or affirmed, or done, etc.: and in a ritual performance, a ceremony is enacted and, thanks to the conventions associated with the ceremony, something is done, or affirmed, or celebrated, etc.

How are we to explain the point of the ritual of investiture? We might explain that certain parts of the ritual symbolise specific things, for example that the Prince kneeling before the Queen symbolises his subordination to her (it is not, for example, merely to make it easier for her to place the crown on his head). But it is essential that, in explaining the point of the ritual as a whole, we include that a Prince is being created, that he is henceforth to have certain rights in virtue of having been made a Prince, and that he is to have certain duties which he is now acknowledging, among which are complete loyalty and faithfulness to the Queen, and so on. If the listener already knows about the complex relations between Queens, Princes, and subjects, then all we need to tell him is that a Prince is being installed in office; but if he is unfamiliar with this social system, we must tell him a great deal if he is to understand what is going on.

So, once we understand the social system in which there are Queens, Princes, and subjects, and therefore understand the role assigned to each within that system, we can sum up what is happening in the ritual of investiture in this way: someone is being made a Prince, and he is accepting that role with all that it involves. (Exactly the same explanation could be given, *mutatis mutandis*, for the marriage ceremony.)

The question to be asked about the ritual of worship is what analogous explanation can be given of it. The ceremonial form of the ritual may vary according to the customs of the religious community; it may involve singing, drinking wine, counting beads, sitting with a solemn expression on one's face, dancing, making a sacrifice, or what-have-you. But what is the point of it?

As I have already said, the worshiper thinks of himself as inhabiting a world created by an infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, perfectly good God; and it is a world in which he, along with other men, occupies a special place in virtue of God's intentions. This gives him a certain role to play: the role of a 'Child of God'. My second thesis about worship is that in worshipping God one is acknowledging and accepting this role, and that this is the primary function of the ritual of worship. Just as the ritual of investiture derives its significance from its place within the social system of Queens, Princes, and subjects, the ritual of worship gets its significance from an assumed system of relationships between God and men. In the ceremony

of investiture, the Prince assumes a role with respect to the Queen and the citizenry; and in worship, a man affirms his role with respect to God.

Worship presumes the superior status of the one worshiped. This is reflected in the logical point that there can be no such thing as mutual or reciprocal worship, unless one or the other of the parties is mistaken as to his own status. We can very well comprehend people loving one another or respecting one another, but not (unless they are misled) worshipping one another. This is because the worshiper necessarily assumes his own inferiority; and since inferiority is an asymmetrical relation, so is worship. (The nature of the 'superiority' and 'inferiority' involved here is of course problematic; but on the account I am presenting it may be understood on the model of superior and inferior positions within a social system. More on this later.) This is also why *humility* is necessary on the part of the worshiper. The role to which he commits himself is that of the humble servant, 'not worthy to touch the hem of His garment'. Compared to God's gloriousness, 'all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags' (Isaiah 64: 6). So, in committing oneself to this role, one is acknowledging God's greatness and one's own relative worthlessness. This humble attitude is not a mere embellishment of the ritual: on the contrary, worship, unlike love or respect, *requires* humility. Pride is a sin, and pride before God is incompatible with worshipping him.

On the view that I am suggesting, the function of worship as 'glorifying' or 'praising' God, which is usually taken to be its primary function, may be regarded as derivative from the more fundamental nature of worship as commitment to the role of God's Child. 'Praising' God is giving him the honour and respect due to one in his position of eminence, just as one shows respect and honour in giving fealty to a King.

In short, the worshiper is in this position: He believes that there is a being, God, who is the perfectly good, perfectly powerful, perfectly wise Creator of the Universe; and he views himself as the 'Child of God,' made for God's purposes and responsible to God for his conduct. And the ritual of worship, which may have any number of ceremonial forms according to the customs of the religious community, has as its point the acceptance of, and commitment to, one's role as God's Child, with all that this involves. If this account is accepted, then there is no mystery as to the relation between the act of worship and the worshiper's other activity. Worship will be regarded not as an isolated act taking place on Sunday morning, with no necessary connection to one's behaviour the rest of the week, but as a ritualistic expression of and commitment to a role which dominates one's whole way of life.¹

¹ This account of worship, specified here in terms of what it means to worship God, may easily be adapted to the worship of other beings such as Satan. The only changes required are (a) that we substitute for beliefs about God analogous beliefs about Satan, and (b) that we understand the ritual of worship as committing the Satan-worshiper to a role as Satan's servant in the same way that worshipping God commits theists to the role of His servant.

4. An important feature of roles is that they can be violated; we can act and think consistently with a role, or we can act and think inconsistently with it. The Prince can, for example, act inconsistently with his role as Prince by giving greater importance to his own interests and welfare than to the Queen's; in this case, he is no longer her 'liege man'. And a father who does not attend to the welfare of his children is not acting consistently with his role as a father (at least as that role is defined in our society), and so on. The question that I want to raise now is, What would count as violating the role to which one is pledged in virtue of worshiping God?

In *Genesis* there are two familiar stories, both concerning Abraham, that are relevant here. The first is the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. We are told that Abraham was 'tempted' by God, who commanded him to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice. Abraham obeyed without hesitation: he prepared an altar, bound Isaac to it, and was about to kill him until God intervened at the last moment, saying 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me' (*Genesis* 22: 12). So Abraham passed the test. But how could he have failed? What was his 'temptation'? Obviously, his temptation was to disobey God; God had ordered him to do something contrary to both his wishes and his sense of what would otherwise be right and wrong. He could have defied God; but he did not—he subordinated himself, his own desires and judgments, to God's command, even when the temptation to do otherwise was strongest.

It is interesting that Abraham's record in this respect was not perfect. We also have the story of him bargaining with God over the conditions for saving Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction. God had said that he would destroy those cities because they were so wicked; but Abraham gets God to agree that if fifty righteous men can be found there, then the cities will be spared. Then he persuades God to lower the number to forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, and finally ten. Here we have a different Abraham, not servile and obedient, but willing to challenge God and bargain with him. However, even as he bargains with God, Abraham realises that there is something radically inappropriate about it: he says, 'Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes . . . O let not the Lord be angry . . .' (*Genesis* 18: 27, 30).

The fact is that Abraham could not, consistently with his role as God's subject, set his own judgment and will against God's. The author of *Genesis* was certainly right about this. We cannot recognise any being *as God*, and at the same time set ourselves against him. The point is not merely that it would be imprudent to defy God, since we certainly can't get away with it; rather, there is a stronger, logical point involved—namely, that if we recognise any being *as God*, then we are committed, in virtue of that recognition, to obeying him.

To see why this is so, we must first notice that 'God' is not a proper name like 'Richard Nixon' but a title like 'President of the United States' or 'King'.¹ Thus, 'Jehovah is God' is a nontautological statement in which the title 'God' is assigned to Jehovah, a particular being—just as 'Richard Nixon is President of the United States' assigns the title 'President of the United States' to a particular man. This permits us to understand how statements like 'God is perfectly wise' can be logical truths, which is highly problematic if 'God' is regarded as a proper name. Although it is not a logical truth that any particular being is perfectly wise, it nevertheless is a logical truth that if any being is God (i.e. if any being properly holds that title) then that being is perfectly wise. This is exactly analogous to saying: although it is not a logical truth that Richard Nixon has the authority to veto congressional legislation, nevertheless it is a logical truth that if Richard Nixon is President of the United States then he has that authority.

To bear the title 'God', then, a being must have certain qualifications. He must, for example, be all-powerful and perfectly good in addition to being perfectly wise. And in the same vein, to apply the title 'God' to a being is to recognise him as one to be obeyed. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of 'King'—to recognise anyone as King is to acknowledge that he occupies a place of authority and has a claim on one's allegiance as his subject. And to recognise any being as God is to acknowledge that he has *unlimited* authority, and an unlimited claim on one's allegiance.² Thus, we might regard Abraham's reluctance to defy Jehovah as grounded not only in his fear of Jehovah's wrath, but as a logical consequence of his acceptance of Jehovah *as God*. Camus was right to think that 'From the moment that man submits God to moral judgment, he kills Him his own heart'.³ What a man can 'kill' by defying or even questioning God is not the being that (supposedly) *is* God, but *his own conception of that being as God*. That God is not to be judged, challenged, defied, or disobeyed, is at bottom a truth of logic; to do any of these things is incompatible with taking him as One to be worshiped.

¹ Cf. Nelson Pike, 'Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, VI (1969), pp. 208–9; and C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, 1964), ch. 4.

² This suggestion might also throw some light on the much-discussed problem of how we could, even in principle, *verify* the existence of God. Sceptics have argued that, even though we might be able to confirm the existence of an all-powerful cosmic superbeing (if one existed), we still wouldn't know what it means to verify that this being is *divine*. And this, it is said, casts doubt on whether the notion of divinity, and related notions such as 'Christ' and 'God', are intelligible. (Cf. Kai Nielsen, 'Eschatological Verification', *The Canadian Journal of Theology*, IX, 1963.) Perhaps this is because, in designating a being as God, we are not only describing him as having certain factual properties (such as omnipotence), but also *ascribing* to him a certain place in our devotions, and taking him as one to be obeyed, worshipped, praised, etc. If this is part of the logic of 'God', then we shouldn't be surprised if God's existence, in so far as that includes the existence of divinity, is not entirely confirmable—for only the 'factual properties' such as omnipotence will be verifiable in the usual way. But once the reason for this is understood, it no longer seems such a serious matter.

³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), p. 62.

5. So the idea that any being could be *worthy* of worship is much more problematical than we might have at first imagined. For in admitting that a being is worthy of worship we would be recognising him as having an unqualified claim on our obedience. The question, then, is whether there could be such an unqualified claim. It should be noted that the description of a being as all-powerful, all-wise, etc., would not automatically settle the issue; for even while admitting the existence of such an awesome being we might still question whether we should recognise him as having an unlimited claim on our obedience.

In fact, there is a long tradition in moral philosophy, from Plato to Kant, according to which such a recognition could never be made by a moral agent. According to this tradition, to be a moral agent is to be an autonomous or self-directed agent; unlike the precepts of law or social custom, moral precepts are imposed by the agent upon himself, and the penalty for their violation is, in Kant's words, 'self-contempt and inner abhorrence'.¹ The virtuous man is therefore identified with the man of integrity, i.e. the man who acts according to precepts which he can, on reflection, conscientiously approve in his own heart. Although this is a highly individualistic approach to morals, it is not thought to invite anarchy because men are regarded as more or less reasonable and as desiring what we would normally think of as a decent life lived in the company of other men.

On this view, to 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. And it does not matter whether 'so-and-so' is the law, the customs of one's society, or God. This does not, of course, preclude one from seeking advice on moral matters, and even on occasion following that advice blindly, trusting in the good judgment of the adviser. But this is to be justified by the details of the particular case, e.g. that you cannot in that case form any reasonable judgment of your own due to ignorance or inexperience in dealing with the types of matters involved. What *is* precluded is that a man should, while in possession of his wits, adopt this style of decision-making (or perhaps we should say this style of *abdicated* decision-making) as a general strategy of living, or abandon his own best judgment in any case where he can form a judgment of which he is reasonably confident.

What we have, then, is 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. The point is that the role of worshiper takes precedence over every other

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Lewis White Beck (New York, 1959), p. 44.

role which the worshiper has—when there is any conflict, the worshiper's commitment to God has priority over any other commitments which he might have. But the first commitment of a moral agent is to do what in his own heart he thinks is right. Thus the following argument might be constructed:

- (a) If any being is God, he must be a fitting object of worship.
- (b) No being could possibly be a fitting object of worship, since worship requires the abandonment of one's role as an autonomous moral agent.
- (c) Therefore, there cannot be any being who is God.

6. The concept of moral agency underlying this argument is complex and controversial; and, although I think it is sound, I cannot give it the detailed treatment here that it requires. Instead, I will conclude by answering some of the most obvious objections to the argument.

(1) What if God lets us go our own way, and issues no commands other than that we should live according to our own consciences? In that case, there would be no incompatibility between our commitment to God and our commitments as moral agents, since God would leave us free to direct our own lives. The fact that this supposition is contrary to major religious traditions (such as the Christian tradition) doesn't matter, since these traditions could be mistaken. The answer here is that this is a mere contingency, and that even if God did not require obedience to detailed commands, the worshiper would still be committed to the abandonment of his role as a moral agent, *if* God required it.

(2) It has been admitted as a necessary truth that God is perfectly good; it follows as a corollary that He would never require us to do anything except what is right. Therefore in obeying God we would only be doing what we should do in any case. So there is no incompatibility between obeying him and carrying out our moral commitments. Our primary commitment as moral agents is to do right, and God's commands *are* right, so that's that.

This objection rests on a misunderstanding of the assertion that (necessarily) God is perfectly good. This can be intelligibly asserted only because of the principle that *No being who is not perfectly good may bear the title 'God'*.¹ We cannot determine whether some being is God without first checking on whether he is perfectly good²; and we cannot decide whether he is perfectly good without knowing (among other things) whether his commands to us are right. Thus our own judgment that some actions are right, and others

¹ See above, section 4.

² Of course we cannot ever know that such a being is *perfectly* good, since this would require an examination of *all* his actions and commands, etc., which is impossible. However, if we observed many good things about him and no evil ones, we would be justified in putting forth the hypothesis that he is perfectly good and acting accordingly. The hypothesis would be confirmed or disconfirmed by future observations in the usual way.

wrong, is logically prior to our recognition of any being as God. The upshot of this is that we cannot justify the suspension of our own judgment on the grounds that we are deferring to God's command (which, as a matter of logic, *must* be right); for if, by our own best judgment, the command is wrong, this gives us good reason to withhold the title 'God' from the commander.

(3) The following expresses a view which has always had its advocates among theologians: 'Men are sinful; their very consciences are corrupt and unreliable guides. What is taken for conscientiousness among men is nothing more than self-aggrandisement and arrogance. Therefore, we cannot trust our own judgment; we must trust God and do what he wills. Only then can we be assured of doing right.'

This view suffers from a fundamental inconsistency. It is said that we cannot know for ourselves what is right and what is wrong; and this is because our judgment is corrupt. But how do we know that our judgment is corrupt? Presumably, in order to know that, we would have to know (a) that some actions are morally required of us, and (b) that our own judgment does not reveal that these actions are required. However, (a) is just the sort of thing that we *cannot* know, according to this view. Now it may be suggested that while we cannot know (a) by our own judgment, we can know it as a result of God's revelation. But even setting aside the practical difficulties of distinguishing genuine from bogus revelation (a generous concession), there is still this problem: if we learn that God (i.e. some being that we take to be God) requires us to do a certain action, and we conclude on this account that the action is morally right, then we have *still* made at least one moral judgment of our own, namely that whatever this being requires is morally right. Therefore, it is impossible to maintain the view that we do have some moral knowledge, and that *all* of it comes from God's revelation.

(4) Many philosophers, including St Thomas, have held that the voice of individual conscience *is* the voice of God speaking to the individual, whether he is a believer or not.¹ This would resolve the alleged conflict because in following one's conscience one would at the same time be discharging his obligation as a worshiper to obey God. However, this manoeuvre is unsatisfying, since if taken seriously it would lead to the conclusion that, in speaking to us through our 'consciences', God is merely tricking us: for he is giving us the illusion of self-governance while all the time he is manipulating our thoughts from without. Moreover, in acting from conscience we are acting under the view that our actions are right and not merely that they are decreed by a higher power. Plato's argument in the *Euthyphro* can

¹ Cf. Geach, pp. 124-125: 'The rational recognition that a practice is generally undesirable and that it is best for people on the whole not even to think of resorting to it is thus *in fact* a promulgation to a man of the Divine law forbidding the practice, even if he does not realise that this is a promulgation of the Divine law, even if he does not believe there is a God.'

be adapted to this point: If, in speaking to us through the voice of conscience, God is informing us of what is right, then there is no reason to think that we could not discover this for ourselves—the notion of ‘God informing us’ is eliminable. On the other hand, if God is only giving us arbitrary commands, which cannot be thought of as ‘right’ independently of his promulgating them, then the whole idea of ‘conscience’, as it is normally understood, is a sham.

(5) Finally, someone might object that the question of whether any being is *worthy* of worship is different from the question of whether we *should* worship him. In general, that X is worthy of our doing Y with respect to X does not entail that we should do Y with respect to X. For example, Mrs Brown, being a fine woman, may be worthy of a marriage proposal, but we ought not to propose to her since she is already married. Or, Seaman Jones may be worthy of a medal for heroism but perhaps there are reasons why we should not award it. Similarly, it may be that there is a being who is worthy of worship and yet we should not worship him since it would interfere with our lives as moral agents. Thus God, who is worthy of worship, may exist; and we should love, respect, and honor him, but not worship him in the full sense of the word. If this is correct, then the argument of section 5 is fallacious.

This rebuttal will not work because of an important disanalogy between the cases of proposing marriage and awarding the medal, on the one hand, and the case of worship on the other. It may be that Mrs Brown is worthy of a proposal, yet there are circumstances in which it would be wrong to propose to her. However, these circumstances are contrasted with others in which it would be perfectly all right. The same goes for Seaman Jones’s medal: there are *some* circumstances in which awarding it would be proper. But in the case of worship—if the foregoing arguments have been sound—there are *no* circumstances under which anyone should worship God. And if one should *never* worship, then the concept of a fitting object of worship is an empty one.

The argument of section 7 will probably not persuade anyone to abandon belief in God—arguments rarely do—and there are certainly many more points which need to be worked out before it can be known whether this argument is even viable. Yet it does raise an issue which is clear enough. Theologians are already accustomed to speaking of theistic belief and commitment as taking the believer ‘beyond morality’, and I think they are right. The question is whether this should not be regarded as a severe embarrassment.¹

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