EUROPEAN JOURNAL
FOR PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

INDETERMINACY AND VAGUENESS:
LOGIC AND METAPHYSICS

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Vagueness is a special case of indeterminacy—semantical indeterminacy. It may be indeterminate whether a sentence is true or false, indeterminate whether a term denotes a certain object, and indeterminate whether a given set is the extension of a certain predicate. I take the word 'vague'— my universe of discourse here comprises only linguistic items—to be entirely appropriate only in application to predicates and certain of their constituents.[1] A predicate is vague if it is indeterminate, or, at any rate, *possibly* indeterminate, which set is its extension—or if it is possible that, for at least one object, it is indeterminate whether that object belongs to the extension of that predicate. In other words, a predicate is vague if it admits of (potential) borderline cases. In the case of one-place predicates, this comes down to saying that the term 'vague' applies primarily to verbs and adjectives and prepositions, the main constituents of predicates. (Of course, if it applies to verbs and adjectives, it applies to adverbs as well— that is, to representatives of the grammatical categories "takes a verb and makes a verb" and "takes an adjective and makes an adjective.")

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[1] I concede that we speak of *statements* as vague—but when we say that a statement is vague, we mean that it is insufficiently explicit about some matter, that it lacks relevant specifics that a statement on the topic in question might have been expected to include. For example, one might well complain that a statement made by a public official—"There appear to have been certain irregularities in the Minister's conduct of his office," let's say— was vague. But one would not be taken to mean that the statement was of indeterminate or indefinite truth-value: no doubt the speaker would be willing to grant that it was *definitely true* that there appeared to have been certain irregularities in the Minister's conduct of his office. And, while "appearance of irregularity in the conduct of a ministerial office" certainly admits of borderline cases, this fact would not be the fact that the person who complained about the vagueness of the statement about the appearance of irregularity in the conduct of a ministerial office was calling attention to.

I will restrict the application of the term 'vague' to items that belong to the grammatical categories I've roughly delineated—predicates, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, and adverbs. I deprecate, in particular, any attempt to describe sentences as "vague," and I deprecate sentence operators like 'it is vague whether' (or, worse, 'it is vague that'). I am, however, happy to concede that my distaste for such usages is more a matter of my respect for the niceties of traditional English usage than a matter of logic or philosophy. I might mention in this connection—I need to mention it somewhere, and this seems as good a place as any—David Lewis's statement that the truth-functional connectives and the "idioms of quantification" are *not* vague.[2] As I see matters, this is a sort of category mistake. Since neither the connectives nor the quantifiers have semantical values of any sort, I don't see what can be meant by saying either that they're vague or that they're not—or by saying that they do or that they don't exhibit indeterminacy. Possibly all that Lewis meant by saying that the connectives were not vague is that if a truth-functionally compound sentence is of indeterminate truth-value, this can only be because one or more of its truth-functionally simple constituents is of indeterminate truth-value. And that would certainly not be a category mistake. And, possibly, by saying that the idioms of quantification were not vague, he meant only that if one examines a sentence that starts with, say, an existential quantifier-phrase whose scope is the remainder of the sentence, and if one is convinced that that sentence is of indeterminate truth-value, one will have to say that it's of indeterminate truth-value because—and *only* because—it's indeterminate whether anything satisfies the open sentence whose variable the quantifier-phrase binds. I'll presently deny that thesis, but I certainly don't want to say that it exhibits any sort of category mistake.

Perhaps I should also say this: in restricting my application of the terms 'indeterminacy' and 'vagueness' to linguistic items, I don't mean to imply that these terms cannot be usefully applied to, say, attributes or relations or Fregean concepts and other non-linguistic abstract objects—particularly those that belong to categories that (like the three categories I've mentioned) are intimately connected with predicates.

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[2] *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 212.

To return to the topic of the vocabulary I recommend for discussions of indeterminacy, I would contend that the best sentence operator to employ when making an assertion to the effect that something or other is indeterminate is 'it is indeterminate whether'—or, at any rate, something very much like it. I suppose, however, that it is better for the primitive operator in any area of semantics or logic to have a positive rather than a negative form, so let the primitive operator be 'it is determinate whether'—despite the fact that 'it is indeterminate whether' seems a much more natural form of words than 'it is determinate whether'. It is determinate whether p just in the case that the proposition that p is definitely or determinately true or definitely or determinately false—or, if you like, if the question whether p can be answered Yes (without qualification) or No (without qualification).

Determinacy and indeterminacy obviously have a logic, and it is usual to use the methods of formal semantics to describe the features of a logic. Formal semantics is the discipline whose task is to assign semantical values to sentences on the basis of the semantical values assigned to their syntactical components.[3] When the operator 'it is determinate whether' ('DET') is applied only to closed sentences, its semantics is simple, and, I hope, uncontroversial. It can be presented in a simple value-table:

p	$\sim p$	DETp	INDETp [= $\sim$DETp]
0	1	1	0
½	½	0	1
1	0	1	0

In this table, '1' represents determinate truth or truth without qualification, '0' represents determinate falsity or falsity without qualification, and '½' represents the condition "being neither determinately true nor determinately false."

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[3] More exactly, that task is the "core" or central task of formal semantics. Once one has decided how to assign semantical values to sentences on the basis of the semantical values of their components, one may go on to assign semantical values to sequences of sentences (to arguments or inferences) on the basis of the semantical values of the syntactical components of the members of the sequences—values like 'valid' or 'invalid', for example.

It is certainly true—*determinately* true—that we make assertions that are neither determinately true nor determinately false. No one would deny that in many cases, no doubt in *most* cases, the fact that an assertion is of indeterminate truth-value has its ground in language. But is this *always* the case? I will try to answer this question. The first step of my attempt to answer it will be an outline of what I what I will call the "sensible" theory of indeterminacy.

The sensible theory of indeterminacy (*sc*. of truth-value) is that indeterminacy of truth-value is entirely a matter of the semantical values of the syntactic constituents of sentences being underdetermined by the conventions that govern the assignment of those values. Consider, for example, predicates. (From this point to the point at which I explicitly resume speaking *in propria persona*, I will speak in the voice of an adherent of the sensible theory.) To specify the meaning of a predicate is to give a set of instructions for its application, and it is well-nigh impossible for a set of instructions to cover every possible situation; in consequence, no matter how carefully we specify the rules for using some new predicate that we propose to introduce into our language, there will almost certainly be possible cases in which it is indeterminate whether that predicate applies. (And, as many writers have pointed out, when one introduces a new predicate, there will normally be good, practical reasons for leaving it indeterminate whether it applies in possible cases in which one *could* render its application determinate. As Lewis has said, no one has ever been fool enough to try to specify a precise portion of the surface of the earth as the referent of 'the outback'.[4]) It would seem, therefore, that all or almost all predicates will admit of possible borderline cases; and many predicates will have actual borderline cases. It is these actual borderline cases that account for *all* actual cases of indeterminacy—that is, all cases of assertions that are syntactically and semantically unobjectionable and are yet neither determinately true nor determinately false. (Someone's statement that Fred is bald, say, or that Mary is tall.)

I have said that "all or almost all" predicates will admit of possible borderline cases. Might *all* predicates have possible borderline cases? Pure mathematics provides a class of possible counterexamples to the

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[4] *Loc. cit.*

thesis that all predicates have possible borderline cases, as do theology and Platonic metaphysics and theoretical physics ('electron', 'neutrino'). I will not discuss cases of that sort. Those cases aside, there are certain special predicates that have and can have no borderline cases. These are the predicates that can be constructed using only the language of first-order logic—that is, first-order logic with identity, for it is only when the identity-sign has been added to the language of logic that it is possible to construct predicates entirely out of logical materials. Two important examples are '$x = x$' and '$x = y$'. (I'm not going to bother to distinguish between predicates and the open sentences that are their typical instances.) The former expresses the attribute of existence (being equivalent to '$\exists y \; y = x$', at least given the usual formulation of the rule of existential generalization), and the latter the relation of identity. *These* predicates have no borderline cases, for existence and identity have no borderline cases. "Identity, properly speaking, knows no gradation," says Quine,[5] and Chisholm has said more or less the same thing about existence.[6] It is predicates whose meaning is specified by a set of instructions (instructions that determine—insofar as anything determines this—whether that predicate applies to a given object or sequence of objects) that are vague, that have possible or actual, borderline cases. There can be no borderline cases of existence, because an object has to *be there* to be a borderline case of *anything*, and if it's there it exists. There can be no borderline cases of identity because an object x and an object y are either two objects or one; if they are two, they are not identical, and if they are one they are. If there were borderline cases of existence, there would be sets each of which was such that it was indeterminate whether it was the empty set or a unit set. If there were borderline cases of identity, there would be sets each of which was such that it was indeterminate whether it had one or two members. And these things are simply impossible. All indeterminacy is a product of vagueness (the vagueness that comes from vaguely drawn boundaries), and vagueness takes up only where logic has left off—and, therefore, indeterminacy takes up only where logic has left

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[5] *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 203.

[6] See his essay, "Coming into Being and Passing Away" in *On Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), especially the section entitled "Elanguescence," pp. 55-56.

off. Vagueness arises when we draw boundaries and arises because it is humanly impossible to draw any boundary such that every possible object falls either definitely inside or definitely outside that boundary. But in logic there is no drawing of boundaries.

Here endeth the statement of the sensible theory of indeterminacy. I resume speaking *in propria persona*.

In my view, the sensible theory of indeterminacy, appealing as it is, cannot accommodate a workable metaphysic of the material world. Any attempt to spell out in detail a metaphysic of the material world that incorporates the sensible theory of indeterminacy (which denies that there can be indeterminate cases of identity and existence) will demonstrably have consequences less appealing, or more appalling, than a rejection of the sensible theory of indeterminacy. There is a lot that could be said about this. I could write a book. Here I must content myself with an example. When we attempt to construct a metaphysic of the material world, one of the questions we must answer is the Special Composition Question: "When are things proper parts—when do things together compose some larger whole?" Suppose, just for the sake of having an illustration, that we say that things compose a larger whole when and only when they are in physical contact. (Thus, twenty blocks spread about on a floor compose nothing; when a child builds a tower out of them, they compose something: a tower of blocks.) Now suppose the world consists of two cubical blocks—each of exactly the same dimensions as the other—floating about in otherwise empty space; and suppose that at one time they are not in contact and that a moment later they drift together and are in contact. If current physics is correct, there must have been some moment *t* at which it was indeterminate whether they were in contact. (By "current physics," I do not mean quantum mechanics, or at least I am not thinking primarily of quantum mechanics—I am referring to facts about the structure of matter that were known well before the advent of quantum mechanics.) Now consider the moment *t*—a moment at which it is indeterminate whether the two blocks are in contact. Ask this question: Does anything *larger* than either of the two blocks exist at *t*? It cannot be definitely true that there then exists something larger than either block, for that could be the case only if there were definitely something the two blocks were parts of; and there

could definitely be something the two blocks were parts of only if the two blocks were definitely in contact. A parallel argument shows that it cannot be definitely false that there then exists something larger than either block. So we have a case of indeterminacy—from the point of view of our simple possible world, an actual case. According to the sensible theory of indeterminacy, this must be because there is, in our miniature world, something that is a borderline case of "is larger than either block." But what is it? It is not either of the blocks, each of which is a determinate case of "is *not* larger than either block." And if the two blocks have proper parts, it certainly isn't any of *them*. Could it be the fusion or mereological sum of the blocks, the thing they compose, the thing that has them both as parts and each of whose parts overlaps at least one of them? This suggestion will not do because it is not at *t* determinately true that there is such a thing, and we are thus not in a position to assert, "The sum of the blocks is at *t* a borderline case of 'is larger than either block'." (And, of course, even if we were in a position to make assertions implying the existence at *t* of the sum of the blocks, this would not enable us to explain the case of indeterminacy we want to explain, for the sum of the blocks would *not* be a borderline case of 'is larger than either block'; it would be quite definitely twice the size of either of the blocks.) Our little possible world seems to contain no other candidate for the office "is a borderline-case of 'is larger than either block'." It seems, indeed, to contain no even remotely plausible candidate for that office. It would appear, therefore, (a) that the assertion "There exists something larger than either block" is of indeterminate truth-value, and (b) that we cannot explain this indeterminacy by saying "There is something that is a borderline case of 'is larger than either block'."

It is instructive to compare this example with a case of indeterminacy in which the sensible theory seems to provide a correct explanation of that indeterminacy. Suppose that Socrates is "borderline wise," and that no one is determinately wise. Then it is indeterminate whether there is anyone who is wise, and the explanation is a straightforward one: there exists someone—Socrates—such that it is indeterminate whether the predicate 'is wise' applies to that person, and there exists no one such that the predicate 'is wise' determinately applies to that person. But in the "two blocks" case, I cannot make the assertion that corresponds to

"There exists someone such that it is indeterminate whether the predicate 'is wise' applies to that person": I cannot say, "There exists something such that it is indeterminate whether the predicate 'is larger than either block' applies to that thing."

If the sensible theory is correct, however, the *only* way to explain the indeterminacy of truth-value of 'There exists something larger than either block' is to assert the existence of an object such that it is indeterminate whether 'is larger than either block' applies to it. If our simple possible world is indeed possible, therefore, the sensible theory is wrong. In our simple possible world, *existence* is indeterminate: it is indeterminate whether there exists a mereological sum of the two blocks, and *not* because there exists something that is a borderline case of 'is a mereological sum of the two blocks'. And the idea of indeterminate existence is a mystery; we understand indeterminacy, at least to some degree, when it can be explained by reference to vaguely drawn boundaries; but cases of indeterminate existence cannot be explained by reference to vaguely drawn boundaries.

So: there are sentences in which one variable is free that have both the following properties:

- The existential generalization on those sentences is of indeterminate truth-value.
- Their existential generalizations' being of indeterminate truth-value cannot be explained by an appeal to objects that "borderline satisfy" them.

It is in that sense that existence is indeterminate—there are such open sentences. (Or there are at least sentences that, in certain possible circumstances, *would* have those properties.) When I contend that existence can be indeterminate, I mean only that much. I do not mean that there are or could be objects that are or would be borderline cases of existence. There cannot be an object that borderline-satisfies '$\exists y\, y = x$'. (At any rate, there cannot definitely or determinately be an object that borderline-satisfies this sentence—and, therefore, anyone who agrees with very much of what I have said will not be in a position to use the sentence 'There is an object that borderline-satisfies "$\exists y\, y = x$"' to make an assertion. One

might argue about whether this metalinguistic or semantical sentence might, if circumstances cooperated, be of indeterminate truth-value, but there are certainly no circumstances in which it would be determinately true.[7]) There are, therefore, sentences whose philosophical import can be summed up in the slogan "Existence can be indeterminate." There is, however, no reason to say that existence can be *vague* (or to use phrases like 'the vagueness of existence' or 'vague existence')—for the slogan "existence can be vague" strongly suggests that the sloganeer thinks that there are possible circumstances in which there would be borderline existents.

Since the case of indeterminacy—existential indeterminacy—we have considered cannot be grounded in language, it seems fair to describe it as a case of *ontic* indeterminacy.

I contend this: any carefully worked-out metaphysic of the material world will either present us with cases of existential indeterminacy or else will have consequences that embody even more unpalatable mysteries than the mysteries that attend existential indeterminacy. (For example, it may imply that there are no such things as you or I, or that for every material thing x, it is a necessary truth that for every moment t, it is either determinately true or determinately false that x exists at t.) Rather than accept any of these consequences and confront the mysteries that follow in their wake, I prefer to accept the reality of existential indeterminacy. If existential indeterminacy is a phenomenon that is not well understood (to borrow a euphemism from the sciences), it is certainly not the only one. After all, no one really understands such staples of philosophical discourse as self-reference, consciousness, time, and free will. If we do not understand something, the thing to do is to own up to that fact, and not to insist that that "something" does not exist.

If there are sentences whose philosophical import can be epitomized in the slogan, "Existence can be indeterminate," there are also sentences whose philosophical import can be epitomized in the following *two* slogans: "Identity can be indeterminate"; "Identity can be vague."

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[7] Return to the case of the two blocks. Consider the moment t at which the two blocks are in "borderline contact." It is plausible to suppose that the sentence 'There is an object that borderline-satisfies "$\exists y\, y = x$"' is of indeterminate truth-value at t. However that may be, there is *certainly* never a time at which that semantical assertion is determinately true.

An example of Terence Parsons's shows that there are such sentences:

> Suppose I am driving down the freeway, and suddenly swerve to avoid
> a pile of trash. The cleanup crews show up later, and push around a lot of
> stuff—some of which made up the pile I swerved around, as well as some
> other stuff. The next day I drive by a pile of trash. Is it the same pile as the
> pile that was there yesterday? In some cases of this sort, the question has
> no apparent answer.[8]

We can recast Parsons's metaphysical question as a semantical question.
Suppose that, having passed the pile of trash on "the next day," Parsons
utters the following sentence: "The pile of trash I swerved to avoid yes-
terday = the pile of trash I drove by today."

Is this sentence ("the Parsons sentence") true or false? Like the meta-
physical question, this semantical question may well have no apparent
answer. Let us suppose that it does not. If it does not, that is because it
has no *determinate* answer. (The question, 'Is the number of '7's in the first
trillion digits of the decimal expansion of π odd or even?' has no apparent
answer—no answer that is apparent to any reader of this paper, at any
rate—, but it has a determinate answer.) There are, therefore, identity
sentences of indeterminate truth-value.[9]

Can the indeterminacy of sentences like the Parsons sentence be
accounted for by the sensible theory of indeterminacy? Well, it can if
one is willing to adopt a perdurantist account of identity across time.
But that account involves its adherents in various mysteries (for example,
that each of us has a certain precise span of existence—like 81 years, 14

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[8] "Entities without Identity," *Philosophical Perspectives 1: Metaphysics* (1987), pp. 1-19.
See p. 3.
[9] Since I myself don't—in the ontology room—believe in piles of trash, since I believe
that, speaking strictly and ontologically, every pile of trash is *definitely* non-identical with
every pile of trash, in my own discussion of indeterminate identity I imagined an example
involving an indeterminate number of human beings and an infernal device called the
Cabinet. But the *logical* point Parsons's example was intended to make and the logical
point my example was intended to make are the same. My discussion of the possibility of
indeterminate identity can be found in *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,
1990), Section 18, pp. 228-270.

days, 11 hours, 53 minutes, and eight and one half seconds—*essentially*[10]).
I will not discuss that option. I will simply suppose that, for one reason
or another, one is *not* willing to adopt perdurantism; in *that* case, might
one account for the indeterminacy of the Parsons sentence in terms
acceptable to proponents of the sensible theory of indeterminacy? It
might seem so. For, if one is persuaded by Parsons's case, one will come
to the conclusion that the indeterminacy of the sentence can be traced
to the vagueness of a predicate that occurs in that sentence, to wit, the
identity predicate. After all, if one is persuaded to see things as Parsons
sees them, one will be persuaded that identity has borderline cases: the
objects the pile of trash I swerved to avoid on Tuesday and the pile of trash
I swerved to avoid on Friday constitute a borderline case of two objects
and therefore, taken together, taken as a pair[11], constitute a borderline
case of identity. But, as we have seen, it is an essential component of
the sensible theory of indeterminacy that the predicate '$x = y$' cannot
admit of borderline cases.

   If the Parsons sentence is indeed of indeterminate truth-value (we
are assuming, remember, that its right-hand term and its left-hand term
both definitely denote something), it presents us with a case of ontic
indeterminacy, indeterminacy whose ground is in the world and not in
language. Existential indeterminacy and indeterminacy of identity are
two kinds of ontic indeterminacy (the only two of which I am aware).

   If the Parsons "piles of trash" case is a case of ontic indeterminacy, it
is also a case of ontic *vagueness*—for if the Parsons sentence is of inde-
terminate truth-value (and if its right-hand term and its left-hand term

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[10] See my essay "Four-dimensional Objects," *Noûs* 24 (1990), pp. 245-255. The
consequence mentioned in the text can be avoided if one adopts an anti-realist account
of modality *de re* (such as counterpart theory with multiple counterpart relations). But
the idea that there is no fact of the matter as to what a thing's essential properties are is
a very mysterious idea—much more mysterious than the idea of indeterminate identity.
Or so say I.

   [11] "Taken as a pair" is, I concede, loose talk. A pair, I suppose, is a two-membered set.
But either there is no such set as {the pile of trash Parsons swerved to avoid yesterday, the
pile of trash Parsons drove by today}, or, if there is such a set, it is indeterminate whether
it has one member or two. In either case, it is far from evident what it could mean to
speak of taking the pile of trash Parsons swerved to avoid yesterday and the pile of trash
Parsons drove by today "as a pair."

both definitely denote something), then the identity predicate is vague. Although the existence predicate ('x = x' or '∃y y = x') does not admit of borderline cases, the identity predicate ('x = y') does.

It is true, of course, that the sensible theory of indeterminacy can account for *some* indeterminate identity-sentences—just as it can account for some indeterminate existential sentences. (Some early critics of Gareth Evans's famous argument for the impossibility of vague identity apparently thought that he was trying to prove the obviously false thesis that there could not be *any* identity-sentences of indeterminate truth-value.[12]) Suppose, for example that in 1792 it was indeterminate whether Louis XVI (or "Citizen Capêt") reigned over France, and determinately true that no other person did. If, then, someone had said in 1792, "The present King of France = the King of France in 1782," what that person said would have been of indeterminate truth-value. And, of course, the sensible theorists have no trouble accounting for that: there is a certain object such that, in 1792, at the moment the sentence was uttered, it was determinately true that 'the King of France in 1782' denoted that object *and* indeterminate whether 'the present King of France' denoted that object. But there is an important semantical difference between the "King of France" sentence and the Parsons sentence. It's indeterminate whether the phrase 'the present King of France' (uttered in 1792) denotes the King of France in 1782 (that is, denotes the man who held that royal office in 1782) because it's indeterminate whether it denotes *anyone*. (More exactly, because it has the following feature: There is some *x*—at least one—such that it's indeterminate whether it denotes *x*, and there's no *x* such that it determinately denotes *x*.) It's indeterminate whether 'the pile of trash I passed by today' (uttered by Parsons on a certain day) denotes the pile of trash Parsons had swerved to avoid on the previous day. But this fact cannot be explained by saying that it's indeterminate whether 'the pile of trash I passed by today' denotes anything at all. For it quite definitely *does* denote something—the unique pile of trash that Parsons passed on the day he used that denoting phrase. The identity-sentences whose indeterminacy the sensible theory cannot account for are those

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[12] See David Lewis, "Vague Identity: Evans Misunderstood," *Analysis* 48 (1988), pp. 128-130.

each of whose terms definitely denotes something—sentences like the Parsons sentence or the sentence that figured in my "Cabinet" example. (In the latter case, one of the terms of the sentence definitely denotes the person who entered the Cabinet and the other definitely denotes the person who emerged from the Cabinet.)

I alluded a moment ago to Gareth Evans's clever argument for the impossibility of vague identity.[13] *You* know: if Trashers is a pile of trash and Rubbers is a pile of trash, it can't be indeterminate whether Trashers and Rubbers are identical. For suppose it is indeterminate. Then Trashers has the property of being (only) indeterminately identical with Rubbers. But Rubbers obviously does *not* have the property of being (only) indeterminately identical with Rubbers.[14] It therefore follows from the premise that Trashers and Rubbers are indeterminately identical that Trashers has a property Rubbers lacks and is therefore not identical with Rubbers. Now the proponents of indeterminate identity will want to assert the sentence 'It is indeterminate whether Trashers is identical with Rubbers'. And one should be willing to assert anything one recognizes as validly deducible from something that one is willing to assert. The friends of indeterminate identity, therefore, should be willing to assert that Trashers is not identical with Rubbers. But one should be willing to assert something only if one regards it as determinately true. The friends of indeterminate identity should, therefore, regard 'Trashers is not identical with Rubbers' as determinately true and 'Trashers is identical with Rubbers' as determinately false—and should, in consequence, regard 'It is indeterminate whether Trashers is identical with Rubbers' as determinately false. Therefore, anyone who accepts the thesis that Trashers is indeterminately identical with Rubbers is committed—if only pragmatically—to accepting the denial of that thesis. If the friends of indeterminate identity are indeed in this position, it is unlikely that they will regard themselves as in a state of philosophical equilibrium.

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[13] "Can There be Vague Objects?" *Analysis* 38 (1978), p. 208.

[14] Or, if you don't like the idea of properties that involve individuals, suppose that Rubbers contains an empty Blue Bull Bitter bottle and that Trashers does not. Then Trashers has the property of being (only) indeterminately identical with something that contains an empty Blue Bull Bitter bottle and Rubbers does not have that property.

The question this argument has always brought to my mind is: Which of the following two theses is the more plausible—that cases like Parsons's "piles of trash" case fail to establish the real possibility of indeterminate identity or that there is an invalid step (at least one) in Evans's deduction of 'Trashers is not identical with Rubbers' from 'It is indeterminate whether Trashers is identical with Rubbers'? And it has always seemed to me that the answer is obvious—at any rate the *prima facie* answer. The *prima facie* answer, the default answer, the answer one should accept unless there should turn out to be something seriously wrong with it—*demonstrably* seriously wrong with it—is that the thesis that there's something wrong with Evans's argument is the more plausible of the two. Evans's argument, in my view, is in much the same position as Zeno's arguments: in each case, we may ask, "For what is a man profited if he shall present an *a priori* demonstration of the non-existence of *x* and there's an *x* right before the eyes of his audience?" (No doubt there will be some rude people who will tell me that I'm the last person who should be appealing to *that* principle.) I don't see that it's up to me to identify the flaw in an argument whose conclusion obviously does not follow from its premises, but it will certainly strengthen my case if I can point to some feature or features of the argument that are viable candidates for the office "flaw(s) in the argument." (If I couldn't do that much, if *no one* could, if no one, after much effort by very able people, was able to make any halfway plausible suggestion as to what one of the alleged flaws might be—*that* would be a good reason to re-open the question whether Parsons had presented a convincing example of the indeterminacy of identity.) After all, as I've always insisted, if the idea of "the burden of proof" (the burden of being the only one in the local community of discourse who is required to prove things) makes any sense outside the law[15], here's the sense it makes: The burden of proof is borne by whoever it is that is trying to prove something. And Evans was the one who was trying to prove something, to wit, that indeterminate identity was impossible. The critics of Evans's reasoning were not trying to prove that indeterminate identity *was* possible or to

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[15] In a criminal trial, for reasons that have nothing to do with dialectics and have everything to do with the necessity of constraining the power of the state, the burden of proof falls upon the state (or the Crown or the prosecution) and not upon the accused or the defense—the "burden," that is, of having to prove its assertions.

prove anything else—or nothing beyond, "Evans's argument does not demonstrate the impossibility of indeterminate identity." The critics of Evans's reasoning were not even trying to prove that that reasoning was invalid—but only that one didn't *have* to regard it as valid.

My own candidate for "flaw in the argument" was the following (adapted to the informal presentation of the argument I presented a moment ago).[16] The reasoning included this assertion: "Rubbers obviously does *not* have the property of being indeterminately identical with Rubbers."[17] *Is* it "obvious" that Rubbers lacks the property of being indefinitely identical with Rubbers? Let's back away from this question for a moment, and ask a more general question: How should the friends of the possibility of indeterminate identity answer *this* question: Suppose that x has the property F and that y is indeterminately identical with x; can it be determinately true that y *lacks* F? I say, as one who takes the idea of indeterminate identity seriously, that it seems entirely plausible to say that the answer to this question is No. I can't prove that the answer is No, but, then, in the present dialectical situation, it's not incumbent on me to prove that thesis or any other thesis; it's rather up to Evans, or to the proponents of Evans's argument, to prove that the answer is Yes. And he—or they—will *want* to prove that. For suppose the answer is No. Let F be the property of being indeterminately identical with Rubbers. We have supposed for the sake of argument that Trashers has that property. But then, if the answer to our question is No, Rubbers cannot *determinately* lack the property of being indeterminately identical with Rubbers—since it is indeterminately identical with something that has that property. And, therefore, the proponent of Evans's argument is not in a position to affirm the "obvious" premise of the argument that I mentioned a moment ago: that Rubbers lacks the property of being indefinitely identical with Rubbers. Obviously that premise is not

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[16] *Material Beings*, loc. cit.

[17] In my informal presentation of Evans's reasoning, this statement isn't deduced from anything. It's just put forward as pretty obviously true. If I were being more faithful to Evans's text, I'd have got to this statement by deducing it from the perhaps even more evident statement 'It is not indeterminate whether Rubbers is identical with Rubbers'. In the discussion that follows in the text, I'll continue to represent Evans's argument in this way.

determinately false—but it is not determinately true, either, and thus cannot properly be asserted.

In my discussion of Evans's argument in *Material Beings*, I used the intuitive idea illustrated in this informal reply to Evans to construct a formal semantics for a simple little language (a very simple language indeed, but Evans's argument could be formulated in it). The philosophical lessons of the semantics were perhaps not negligible, but they were not as important as the intuitive idea behind it: if x has the property F, and if y is indeterminately identical with x, then it cannot be determinately true that y lacks F. [18]

I'll close by remarking that this formal semantics has attracted some very strange—so it seems to me at any rate—commentary. Here is a typical example (from an article by Nicholas Smith) of the kind of commentary I have in mind.

> Van Inwagen seems to be presenting a standard sort of set-theoretic model, and indeed makes free use of the relation of identity with which any ordinary set comes pre-equipped (both in specifying that pairs be genuinely two-membered, and when he says "If x and y, $x \neq y$, are members of a pair …")—but this is then in tension with the later claim that "The objects with which an object is paired are to be thought of as the objects such that it is indefinite whether that object is identical with them." We have been explicitly told that in a pairing $\{x, y\}$, x and y must be non-identical. Now we are told that x and y are to be thought of as indefinitely identical. I cannot make sense of this. If we are working with a standard set-theoretic model, then x and y are simply non-identical; if we are not, then unless we are given some other way to understand the presentation, we do not understand it at all. The ordinary

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[18] I will mention two features of the semantics that were not exhibited in my statement of the "basic idea" because I think they're of some interest. First, although the semantics refuses to confer definite truth on 'It is not the case that it is indeterminate whether Rubbers has the property of being identical with Rubbers', it insists on conferring definite truth on 'It is not the case that it is indeterminate whether Rubbers is identical with Rubbers'. (See the previous note.) And, secondly, it insists on conferring definite truth on 'It is not the case that it is indeterminate whether Rubbers has the property of being identical with *itself*'. (The property of being a thing that is identical with Rubbers is not the same property as the property of being a thing that is identical with itself. For one thing their extensions are rather different. Graduate students are always telling me that these two properties somehow become identical "when Rubbers has them." If you understand that, I hope you'll explain it to me, because I don't.)

understanding of set-theoretic models rules out van Inwagen's proposed interpretation of his construction—yet no other way of understanding the construction is presented.[19]

I will remark that this criticism ignores long passages in the work Smith is discussing that, I would guess, are devoted to the very points he raises—although I can't be sure because I'm not sure what those points are. But let that pass—for it has more to do with the boring (to you anyway) and entirely non-philosophical question whether Smith was fair to me than it has to do with any philosophical problems about indeterminate identity.

Let us turn to the philosophical points. What *is* the charge that Smith is bringing against me? I don't know because I don't know what is intended by the phrase 'van Inwagen's proposed interpretation of his construction'. The "construction" was supposed to divide the inferences expressible in a certain simple formal language into two classes, classes I labeled "valid" and "invalid" (it of course consigns some of the inferences comprised in Evans's argument to the class I called "invalid"). It certainly does that, and insofar as that is its purpose, it doesn't need an interpretation. What *else* did I do or say that the charge might be directed against? Well, having laid out the semantics, I presented some philosophical arguments intended to show that the friends of indeterminate identity should find the division the semantics produces at least plausible—I mean that they should find it plausible to suppose that the arguments the semantics classifies as valid and invalid have just those properties. (The arguments were of the same sort as the "Trashers"-"Rubbers" argument above.) But Smith does not mention these arguments.

In the end, I think I have to say that Smith's criticism of the semantics is no more than a reaction to certain heuristic idioms I used—the most important of which is the phrase 'are to be thought of'. (The core of his argument seems to be these three sentences: "We have been explicitly told that in a pairing $\{x, y\}$, x and y must be non-identical. Now we are told that x and y are to be thought of as indefinitely identical. I cannot make sense of this.") If I am right about this, Smith's criticism is an artifact of his taking this phrase more seriously than I intended it to be taken,

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[19] Nicholas J.J. Smith, "Why Sense Cannot be Made of Vague Identity," *Noûs* 42:1 (2008), pp. 1–16. The quoted text is on p. 7.

of his placing more dialectical weight on it than it was designed to bear. And why did I use this phrase, this phrase that was not designed to bear much dialectical weight? Well, it's quite common for philosophers who are trying to convey the intuitive motivation for a formal semantics to use the phrase 'are to be thought of'—*knowingly* to use it—in ways that, on analysis, can be seen to make no sense.

The most obvious example is provided by its use by writers on the semantics of quantified modal logic when they are trying to give their readers an intuitive grasp of what is "going on" in the model theory. Consider the following sentence: "The members of the universal domain that are not assigned to the actual world by a model are to be thought of as the things that, according to that model, do not actually exist but exist in other possible worlds"—a sentence I have made up but which is typical of things that are said in textbooks of modal logic.[20] In my view, the idea of things that do not actually exist (whether they exist in other possible worlds or not) is nonsense. And, therefore, the sentence I have imagined is nonsense, for an invitation to "think of" certain of the objects contained in a model "as" so-and-sos is nonsense if the definition that has been provided for 'so-and-sos' is nonsense. But if sentences like my imaginary sentence are nonsense, they're very *useful* nonsense: like it or not, it's an empirical fact that nonsense of that kind helps students of the semantics of quantified modal logic to keep their bearings while they are picking their way through the complexities of the model theory.

I think that the critics of my semantics who have said something along the lines I've been discussing—Smith is not the only one—must think that the purpose of the semantics is somehow to *explain* the idea of indeterminate identity or to make it intelligible to an audience of its

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[20] Here's a real and rather famous example of this sort of talk, although it does not contain the words 'are to be thought of'. In "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic" [printed in Leonard Linsky (ed.) *Reference and Modality* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press: 1971), pp. 63-72], Saul Kripke wrote (p. 65): "Intuitively, ψ(H) [the domain of the world H] is the set of all individuals existing in H. Notice that ψ(H) need not be the same set for different arguments H, just as, intuitively, in worlds other than the real one, some actually existing individuals may be absent, while new individuals, like Pegasus, may appear." I think it is obvious that Kripke might just as well have written 'ψ(H) is to be thought of as the set of individuals existing in H' as 'Intuitively, ψ(H) is the set of all individuals existing in H'.

cultured despisers or to show that it's a coherent idea. And they suppose that a certain bit of heuristic whistle-talk ('The objects with which an object is paired are to be thought of as the objects such that it is indefinite whether that object is identical with them')—a mere *aside*, a throwaway line—was an essential part of that project.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Explaining what indeterminate identity *is* is not what the formal semantics is for. And it's not for making the idea of indeterminate identity intelligible, either, or for demonstrating that that idea is coherent.[21] Those things are what the piles of trash and the Cabinet are for: Consider those cases (we, the friends of indeterminate identity, whisper seductively to the cultured despisers), and you'll gain some degree of understanding of the idea of indeterminate identity—and you'll see that it's a coherent idea, since you'll see that there are possible cases of it. The *semantics* is simply a device for dividing the arguments expressible in a certain formal language into two exhaustive and exclusive classes. The task of convincing students of the semantics that one of those classes is "the valid ones" and that the other is "the invalid ones" falls to the informal philosophical commentary on the semantics. And, if that task has been accomplished, we friends of indeterminate identity can point out to the cultured despisers that Evans's argument is to be found among the invalid ones.[22]

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[21] At one place (p. 6), Smith quotes a passage in which I define certain terms used in the model theory and describes it as "van Inwagen's attempt to make sense of vague identity." At many places he refers to attempts (mine supposedly among them) to "model vague identity" or to "model vague identity within set theory." These two phrases call for comment, since it's not clear what they mean. It's true that I gave a model-theoretic definition (a definition couched in terms of ordinary set theory) of the predicate 'valid' as applied to the arguments expressible in a language that includes an "indeterminacy" operator and the identity sign. Does that mean that I attempted to "model vague identity"? Owing to the vagueness of that phrase, the question has no answer. But if my definition of validity *was* an attempt to "model vague identity," my attempt to model vague identity was not an attempt to explain or make sense of vague identity.

[22] This paper was presented and discussed at a workshop called "Metaphysical Indeterminacy: the state of the art" at the University of Leeds in May of 2009 and was composed for that occasion. I thank the other speakers at and participants in the conference for many helpful comments. I am particularly grateful to Elizabeth Barnes, Ross Cameron, Katherine Hawley, Daniel Nolan, and Robert Williams.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE SOME-ARE-EQUALLY-RIGHT VIEW

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Abstract. In this essay I identify and develop an alternative to pluralism which is overlooked in contemporary debate in philosophy of religion and in theology. According to this view, some but not all of the great world religions are equally correct, that is to say, they are just as successful when it comes to tracking the truth and providing a path to salvation. This alternative is not haunted by the same difficulty as pluralism, namely the problem of emptiness. It is therefore more rational at least for many Muslims, but probably also for many Christians and Jews, to embrace it rather than to embrace pluralism. Whether it is also to be preferred over exclusivism and inclusivism is a topic which I will not address in this essay.

The classic attempt to deal with religious diversity within contemporary philosophy of religion is to defend exclusivism, inclusivism or pluralism. In this essay I shall try to show that there is an alternative which is overlooked.[1] It is an alternative which is not haunted by the same problem as pluralism (which I shall, due to limitation of space, take to include primarily John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis) and it is therefore more rational at least for many Muslims, but probably also for many Christians and Jews, to embrace it rather than to embrace pluralism. Whether it is to be preferred over exclusivism and inclusivism as well is beyond the scope of this essay to answer.

I shall start by suggesting a typology which lists the options that religious believers face in a situation of religious diversity. I shall then identify an objection against pluralism, the problem of emptiness, which undermines

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the view. It is the main objective of this essay to point out that there is an alternative which typically is not considered in the philosophical and theological debate—an alternative which can successfully handle this objection.

THE ALTERNATIVES

It is helpful to start by identifying the actual options we have in a situation of religious diversity. If we look at the previous research in the area, it looks as if religious believers have the following choices. We could as a result of an encounter with other religions choose:

(1) to abandon our religion and replace it with one of these other religions (*the conversion alternative*),

(2) to abandon our religion and decide not to have any religion at all (*the naturalistic alternative*),

(3) to continue to hold on to our religion and believe that only it is correct (*the-only-one-is-right alternative*),

(4) to continue to hold on to our religion and believe that it is more correct than these other religions (*the one-is-more-right alternative*),

(5) to continue to hold on to our religion and believe that the great world religions are equally correct (*the many-are-equally-right alternative*),

(6) to continue to hold on to our religion and believe that all religions of the world are equally correct (*the all-are-equally-right alternative*), or

(7) to decide not to take a stand on which of these alternatives 1 to 6 we should embrace (*the agnostic alternative*).

If I as a Christian encounter Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or any other great world religion, I could choose to convert to one of them, say Islam. I then consider Islam to be the religion that I actually should embrace and act accordingly. This is alternative 1. Or perhaps I am overwhelmed by the differences that seem to exist between the religions of the world and draw the conclusion that neither Christianity nor any other religion is correct, and therefore no religion is worth being a practitioner of. This is the

second option we can choose in a situation of religious diversity. A third alternative is that despite these encounters I continue to be a Christian and believe that my own religion is after all the only one which is correct and everyone should therefore strive to become a Christian. Alternative 3 is often called exclusivism. Yet there is a possibility, alternative 4, that I think that the best thing to do is to remain a Christian but believe that it is not completely wrong or incorrect to be a Muslim or a member of some of the other world religions.

Alternative 5 is that I reach the conclusion that it will do just as well— it is equally correct—to be either a Christian or a Muslim or a member of any of the other great world religions. This is religious pluralism or at least the view of which John Hick is perhaps the most well-known defender.[2] He defines it as "the name that has been given to the idea that the great world religions are different human responses to the same ultimate transcendent reality."[3] But sometimes pluralism is understood more in terms of alternative 6, which would mean that I continue to hold on to my religion but believe that not merely the great world religions but all religions of the world are equally correct. Gary Kessler writes that "according to pluralism, all religions are valid paths to salvation."[4] Paul Griffiths claims that "an upshot of all forms of pluralism with respect to salvation is that no benefit, so far as the attainment of salvation is concerned, is provided by belonging to one religious form of life rather than another."[5] Whether or not we call both of these views "pluralism," the distinction between the many-are-equally-right view and the all-are-equally-right view is important because the latter view seems quite difficult to defend and Hick's pluralism should not be confused with it. Anthony F.C. Wallace estimates that humans have produced 100 000 religions.[6] Perhaps he exaggerated a bit, but still, how could all of the

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[2] John Hick, "Religious Pluralism," Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

[3] John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: an Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 77.

[4] Gary E. Kessler, ed. *Philosophy of Religion*, Belmont, CA. Wadsworth, 1999, p. 529.

[5] Paul J. Griffith, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p. 142.

[6] Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View*, New York: Random House, 1966, p. 3.

religions which have existed on earth possibly be equally right? What a convincing argument for that conclusion would look like is hard even to imagine. Hick's claim is anyhow more restricted. It is that the great world religions are ways of salvation. They are equally successful in transforming human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.[7] He is therefore an advocate of the many-are-equally-right view.

A last possibility, alternative 7, is that we postpone our decision about which of the six alternatives we should choose, and think that this is the most rational thing for us to do in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is the agnostic view.

There are, however, some reasons that show fairly conclusively why some of these options can be rejected more or less immediately.

Suppose that I as a Christian, according to alternative 1, choose to convert to Islam and become a Muslim. After my conversion I still have to make up my mind whether my new religion is the only correct one or whether it is merely more correct than Christianity. But this means that the conversion alternative becomes, in the next stage, either alternative 3 or alternative 4. Alternative 2 is immediately ruled out. Alternative 6 is also ruled out because I could not at the same time convert to Islam and reject taking a stand on whether Islam rather than Christianity is to be preferred. Alternative 6 could become a possibility if I came into contact with yet another religion. Moreover, there is no point after the conversion in accepting alternative 5 or 6. Because why should I as a Christian convert to Islam if both should be considered to be equally correct?

What should we say about alternative 2? I call it the naturalistic alternative since it means that I, when encountering other religions such as Islam, should stop being a religious believer and start to believe that both Christianity and Islam and all other religions are incorrect and therefore not worthy of my commitment. How should we evaluate this alternative? Is it a reasonable position to take as a result of an encounter with other religions? The answer is no if we merely focus on the fact that there is a diversity of religions. I think it is fairly easy to see why if we raise the same kind of question in another context. Suppose I believe that a particular political party is the best one. It turns out however that

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[7] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Yale: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 240.

there are a lot of people who think that parties other than my party are best. Should this give me a good reason not merely to abandon my own party but actually to start believing that no party whatsoever is worthy of my commitment? If I give an affirmative answer, I am immediately in a situation similar to the one I was in before, because when it comes to this new standpoint (that one should not be a member of any political party at all) there are also a lot of people who disagree with me. Therefore I should also abandon this view. In other words, we end up in a vicious circle that we cannot get out of. Therefore there must exist a reason other than merely the fact that people adhere to different religions or different political parties, for it to be rational for me as a religious believer or a member of a political party to draw the conclusion that no religion or political party at all is worthy of my commitment. Religious diversity *per se* does not constitute a good reason to abandon one's religion and start to believe that all religions are incorrect.[8]

What about alternative 7? The agnostic alternative can be understood in at least two different ways. Either I am agnostic about the whole spectrum of views or I am agonistic about alternative 3, 4, 5 and 6. In either case it is a rational position to take, I think, at least sometimes. Not surprisingly, except perhaps for alternative 7, the discussion in philosophy of religion has focused on exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, that is alternative 3, 4 and 5. I shall claim, however, that there is at least one important alternative missing from this debate, which for many Muslims in particular, but also for practitioners of other religions, constitutes a better alternative than pluralism.

So far I have not said anything explicitly about a very important question, namely, concerning what, exactly, it is that religions are supposed to be correct. What do I mean by the term "correct" in the list of alternatives? There are certain obvious candidates and I shall also pick two of these but I think it is often wise to leave it open to people, depending on which religion they endorse and how they understand their religion to fill out for themselves what "correct" actually means. For certain religious

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[8] This parallel also shows that the naturalistic alternative, in a similar way to the conversion alternative, actually is a version of either alternative 3 or 4, it is just that "the court of the game" has, so to speak, been expanded. You can see this if in the scheme you replace the word "religion" with "worldview."

believers it might be the rituals, for others it might be ethical norms or moral behaviour or it might be salvation, and for others still it might be truth, and so on. There are religious people who hold non-cognitive or non-propositional views of religion and there are those who hold cognitive or propositional views of religion. The list of alternatives is meant to be neutral in regard to this choice. However, in contemporary philosophy of religion the focus has been on two of these, namely *truth* or *cognitive success* and *salvation* or *soteriological success* so for instance alternative 3 could be stated in two different ways:[9]

(3´) After an encounter with religions other than our own, we still continue to hold on to our religion and believe that only it contains true religious beliefs.

(3´´) After an encounter with other religions, we still continue to hold on to our religion and believe that only this religion's path to salvation is efficient and actually leads to salvation.

The other alternatives could be explicated in these two different ways as well, either in terms of cognitive or soteriological success. For my purpose in this essay it is not of great importance, but it follows of course that these answers could be combined in different ways. So although (3´) and

(4´) After an encounter with other religions, we still continue to hold on to our religion and believe that these other religions contain true religious beliefs but that our religion contains a larger number of them.

are incompatible options, one could embrace (3´´) and (4´), and so on.

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[9] An analogy might explain the difference between the two: one might have found a medicine that works, that cures people from a disease without one actually knowing much at all about the disease (that would be the equivalence of soteriological success), or one might know many true things about the disease but still lack a medicine that cures people (cognitive success), or one might of course have been successful in both of these regards.

My claims will be that whether we explicate the alternatives in terms of truth or salvation, there (a) is a missing alternative and it (b) is more reasonable, at least for many Muslims, but probably also for many Christians and Jews, to embrace it rather than to embrace pluralism.

THE PROBLEM WITH
THE MANY-ARE-EQUALLY-RIGHT VIEW

A problem many, if not all, versions of pluralism seem to have is that of locating a common referential success that all religions covered by the view are supposed to achieve. So something like what I shall call the "problem of emptiness" might obtain for all of them. I do not have the space here to develop such a case but will, as I stated at the beginning of the essay, limit my critical remarks to Hick's pluralism.

Hick maintains that the most rational thing for religious believers to do in a situation of religious diversity is to continue to believe that the infinite Real exists (which is the source of our religious experiences) but to start to believe that "the infinite Real, in itself beyond the scope of other than purely formal concepts, is differently conceived, experienced and responded to by people in at least the great religious traditions of the world."[10] These traditions include for instance Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. We should believe that they are all equally soteriologically and epistemically successful. Any of them tracks the truth and offers a valid path to salvation/liberation as well as any other.

A number of problems connected to Hick's interesting proposal have been discussed in recent years. However, the most severe difficulty, in my view, is the problem of emptiness.[11] The great world religions seem to make conflicting claims about God, the Real or ultimate reality. For some believers the infinite Real is personal, loving, powerful and the

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[10] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 14.

[11] It has been developed in slightly different ways by, for instance, Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 65-79, Philip L. Quinn, "Towards Thinner Theologies", Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds., *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 226-242, and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 43-63.

creator of the world. For others the infinite Real is non-dual, impersonal, transcending the illusory world in which we live and think, and so on. How could all of the great world religions be equally true and offer equally valid paths to salvation if this is the case? Hick's well-know solution to this problem is to appeal to Kant's distinction between reality in itself or *un sich* (noumenal reality) and reality for us or *für uns* (phenomenal reality). Just as my belief that the car over there appears to me to be blue and your belief that it seems to you to be black do not contradict each other since both can be true (because that is the way the car appears to us) so, similarly, the beliefs of the great world traditions do not contradict each other. The different religious understandings of the Real in terms of Jahve, the Trinity, Allah, Brahman, Shiva or Tao contradict each other only if the believers claim that the way the Real appears and is experienced by them corresponds to the Real as it is in itself, but Hick suggest that believers should not make such claims.

Suppose I accept Hick's pluralistic hypothesis and start to maintain that my belief in God as personal, just and compassion is true only in the sense that this is the way that the Real appears to and is experienced by me, but it does not say anything at all about how the Real or God is in itself. But how could I then know or be rationally entitled to believe that I and all the other believers of the great world religions experience and talk about the same thing or try to establish a relationship to or insights about the same greatness?

Let us again go back to the analogy to identify the problem. How do you and I know that we are talking about the same thing when I say that the car appears to me to be blue and you say that it appears to you to be black? The answer is of course that we also see that it has a certain shape; it has tires, doors, windows and so on (and it is against this background we can understand our disagreement). Now Hick's idea is that even these impressions should be understood phenomenologically, that is, they do not really say anything about how the car is in itself but only something about how it appears to us. What we should actually say is not merely that the car appears to me to be blue and to you to be black, but that it appears to have a certain shape, tires, doors, windows and so forth. We do not know anything about how the car is in itself—what it should be like if we were not there to observe it. It is a complete mystery.

Maybe we could live with this since we agree on what many of these properties are, which also make it possible for us to describe and treat the object as a car. But our problem is in fact greater than this. It is not just the case (if we stick to the analogy) that you and I do not agree on the colour of the car but where I see window, you see mirrors, where you see tires, I see stones. We even have different beliefs about the very structure of the object.

Hick's suggestion is that we should understand our claims about the object not as expressing contradictory but contrary properties. What characterizes the object is that it does not have any of the substantive properties you and I believe it to have, but some other properties that none of us know anything about. Our claims are therefore not mutually exclusive and they do not contradict each other in this sense. His second proposal is that we should not talk about a car anymore (or in the actual case, we should not talk about God, Brahman, or Tao anymore) but about the "Real." It is real because you and I agree that it is the object that causes our experiences.

But how, then, could we know or be rationally entitled to believe that what we originally called a car (and now call the Real) is a car or even has anything at all to do with cars, since it could just as well have to do with a tree, a mountain, a poster or a house. How could we even know that it has to do with one object? It could be many objects. The Real itself could be any thing (or at least have any property other than those you and I claim characterizes it or on an alternative interpretation have no substantive properties at all). It is an unknowable and unidentifiable X.

Let us now go back to religion again. If, as Hick admits, the acceptance of the many-are-equally-right view (or pluralism) entails that the Real "cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or nonpurposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating" since these are mutually exclusive but not exhaustive properties, why should I as a Christian or say you as a Muslim believe that this X, what Hick calls the Real, has anything at all to do with our religions?[12] How could Christians and Muslims be rationally entitled

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[12] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 350.

to believe that their experiences of God as personal, just and compassion have anything in particular to do with this *X* rather than say their experiences of art, food, football, vacationing or car driving? This is the *problem of emptiness*.

Perhaps someone might object and say that what is important is after all the transformation that the great world religions cause in peoples' lives and not their experiences and beliefs. These religions start a process of transformation in which people go from selfishness and self-centeredness to a life that is characterized by love and compassion. For this reason we should also expect them to offer equally successful paths to salvation. Here the same problem comes back to haunt us again but in a different shape. Why should we believe that the paths to the Real have anything to do with unselfishness, love and compassion? If the Real cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or nonpurposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating, why should we then believe it to be connected to what is good rather than what is evil? The answer is that it is not any more connected to the good than the evil because it is not in any special way connected to anything of which we have a conception. So the conclusion would still be the same, namely that an acceptance of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis entails that the religious ultimate is emptied of content and that its relation to the good life erodes. This gives us a good reason not to embrace the many-are-equally-right view, at least in its Hickian version, or, which is more to the point, gives philosophers of religion, theologians or religious believers who have accepted or advocated Hick's pluralism a good reason to look for an alternative. Is it then possible to formulate a fall back position for the pluralist? I believe it is and I shall also claim that it can avoid the problem of emptiness.

THE SOME-ARE-EQUALLY-RIGHT VIEW

In a sense it is obvious that religious believers can respond to the content of other religions in different ways, but it is something which seems to have been forgotten in the discussion about exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in philosophy of religion or in theology for that matter.

The idea of Hick and other pluralists' is that we should believe that all the great religions of the world are equally successful when it comes to tracking the truth and providing a path to salvation.[13] But why not believe that *some* but not all of these great world religions are epistemically and soteriologically equally successful?

Suppose that you are a Muslim, in that case, it is part of your tradition to believe that Jews and Christians are also "People of the Book." They possess their own revealed scriptures and worship the true God. They are in this sense privileged in a way that for instance Buddhists and Hindus seem not to be. In the Qur'an we can read that "Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right—shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret" (Surah 2:62). In the comment to this Surah in the Swedish translation of the Qur'an, Muhammad Asad writes that here only three conditions for salvation are listed: to believe truly in God, to believe in the Last Day and to live a righteous life.[14] Mahmut Aydin agrees and claims that the conditions of acceptability to God, are "believing in God and the Hereafter, and performing righteousness."[15] His conclusion is that "the Qur'an calls all people to follow the 'Abrahamic Religion' whose essence is to reject all forms of idolatry and to obey the will of the Lord of the worlds by submitting to Him."[16] According to Sane M. Yagi and A. R. Rasheed there are "numerous verses [like Surah 2:62] in the Qur'an which unequivocally define salvation in non-exclusivist terms and extend it to Jews and Christians."[17] The same kind of understanding cannot be found in the Qur'an when it comes to polytheists, for instance, because it is a serious sin (*shirk*) to associate partners with God (Surah 4:116).

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[13] See for instance Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism*, London: MacMillan Press, 1995.

[14] *Koranens budskap*, Stockholm: Proprius förlag, 1998, p. 13 n. 50.

[15] Mahmut Aydin, "Is There Only One Way to God? A Muslim View," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 10 (2000), p. 152.

[16] Aydin, "Is There Only One Way to God? A Muslim View," p. 153

[17] Yagi, Sane M. and A.R. Rasheed, "Exclusivism in the Gospels and the Qur'an," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 7 (1997), p. 10

So it seems to be quite possible for Muslims to believe that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are equally right at least in the sense that they all provide an equally valid path to salvation, while deny that this is the case with respect to the other great world religions. It is not just possible, but even much more in line with their Holy Scripture than Hick's pluralism.

This position, the *some-are-equally-right view,* could also be extended to truth claims. One would then maintain that Christianity and Judaism contain on the whole as many true beliefs as Islam does. None of these three world religions does any better epistemically speaking than the others; although they all do better in this regard than the rest of the great religions of the world.

A possible objection is of course that I have wrongly interpreted my Islamic sources, at least when it comes to the second point about equal cognitive success. It seems quite clear from the quotations given that Aydin, Yagi and Rasheed maintain that not only Islam but also the Religions of the Book, Judaism and Christianity, provide a valid path to salvation. However, salvific effectiveness and cognitive success are two different things, and it is doubtful that they would accept also the latter. This may be true, but it is hard to determine given the texts I have referred to. Nevertheless it is beside the point, because all I am saying here is that it is possible to extend the some-are-equally-right view in such a way that it also includes cognitive success and that it is more likely that Muslims would accept that view than pluralism.

The some-are-equally-right view should then be distinguished from Hick's pluralism. It could of course also be defended by advocates of any other religion, but the way in which the view would be expressed and justified would probably be different. We have identified a missing alternative, which means that we could as a result of an encounter with other religions also choose:

(8) to continue to hold on to our religion and believe that some of the great world religions are equally correct (*the some-are-equally-right alternative*).

Could the some-are-equally-right view deal with the problem of emptiness better than the all-are-equally-right view? I think the answer is "yes"

and this is the reason why. What according to Hick characterizes the Real in itself is that it does not have any of the different properties which advocates of the great religions of the world believe it has. It is neither one nor many, person nor thing, conscious nor unconscious, purposive nor nonpurposive, substance nor process, good nor evil, loving nor hating, just nor unjust, but is characterized by some other properties—properties which for human beings are completely unknown and impossible to conceptualize. In other words, what creates the problem of emptiness is that the Real is experienced by religious people in such radically different ways. This together with the idea that the object does not have any of these properties but is characterized by some other unknown properties creates the problem of emptiness. The Real becomes without content and it is not possible to sustain its logical connection to the good life.

But a Christian and a Muslim understanding of God are not that different. Many Christians and Muslims agree that there is a God and that this God is mighty but also just and compassionate. There seems therefore to be no need to make a distinction between a phenomenal and a noumenal reality to be able to handle contradicting religious beliefs. Instead the advocates of the some-are-equally-right view could claim that on those issues where Christianity and Islam contradict each other, it is reasonable to believe that sometimes neither of the religions is right, sometimes it is one of them and sometimes it is the other one, but generally speaking they are equally successful in tracking the truth. They would then also maintain that to the extent that Buddhism, Hinduism or any other great world religion claims that God is not one but many, not a person but a thing, not conscious but unconscious, not purposive but nonpurposive, not good but evil, not loving but hating, not just but unjust, they are or probably are wrong.

Defenders of the some-are-equally-right view could, just like Hick, refer to the negative theology which is part of their religious traditions but give it a less radical interpretation. Hick claims that negative theology offers support for the idea that the Real is such that we cannot say anything about it. Its nature cannot be grasped in human thought and language.[18] But they can on this point hold the more moderate position

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[18] John Hick, "Ineffability," *Religious Studies*, 36 (2000), pp. 35-46.

that God goes beyond our conceptions in the sense that our thoughts about God do not fully capture who God is. God is above reason and therefore there are things about God that we do not know or even cannot know. It also means that some of the things we believe that we know or at least are rationally entitled to believe about God could very well be wrong or just partly true. But God is not thought to be a complete mystery. God has through revelations (such as the Bible or the Qur'an) revealed some things about Godself. We have received moral guidelines and some knowledge about who God is so that we can obey, serve, and worship God in a correct way. The Qur'an states that God in his omnipotence is also omnipresent and "close" to every creature (Surah 34:50, 50:16). God is compassionate, eternal, just, holy and forgiving without any equals (Surah 5:98, 59:23). God is self-subsistent, unchanging, the sustainer of the world, the Lord of all and his work is prefect. Many Christians would also claim that all of these attributes characterizes God.

At the same time many Christians would probably express doubts about some of ideas found in the Qur'an, namely that God "leaves in error whom He will" (Surah 13:27) and is the one who deceives both the good and the bad (Surah 14:4); the one who is responsible for peoples' ignorance (Surah 6:35), idolatry (Surah 16:35-36) and unbelief (Surah 10:99). One of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God is the "deceiver" or "misleader" (*al-mudill*). Muslims on the other hand might question the idea that humans are created in the image of God since there would then be something of God beside Himself and the idea that humans have a fallen nature—that they are supposed to be exposed to some kind of original sin which corrupts their nature.

Advocates of the some-are-equally-right view could take seriously these different views of God and human beings better than a pluralist like Hick. They do not have to deny these differences or try to explain them away (by for instance adding a distinction between a phenomenal and a noumenal reality). Advocates of the some-are-equally-right view could also maintain that some of their religious beliefs are closer to the truth than some of the beliefs which could be found in another religion. What they must claim, if they want to avoid their view becoming a version of the one-is-more-right view or inclusivism, is that although their religion on certain issues might be closer to the truth than the other religion, they

are both epistemically speaking equally successful, that is, on the whole they both deliver the same amount of true beliefs.

In this essay I have identified an alternative to pluralism which is overlooked in contemporary debate in philosophy of religion and in theology. According to the some-are-equally-right view, some but not all of the great world religions are equally correct, that is to say, they are just as successful when it comes to tracking the truth and providing a path to salvation. This alternative is not haunted by the same difficulty as pluralism or at least Hick's pluralism, namely the problem of emptiness. It is therefore more rational, at least for many Muslims, but probably also for many Christians and Jews, to embrace it rather than to embrace pluralism. Whether it is also to be preferred over exclusivism and inclusivism is a topic which I have not addressed in this essay.[19]

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[19] Some of my ideas about exclusivism can be found in "Exclusivism, Tolerance and Interreligious Dialogue," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 16 (2006), pp. 100-114.

REVISITING THE 'REFORMED OBJECTION' TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract. In the present paper I address two significant and prevalent errors concerning opposition to natural theology within the Reformed theological tradition. First, contrary to Alvin Plantinga, I argue that the idea of properly basic theistic belief has not motivated or otherwise grounded opposition to natural theology within the Reformed tradition. There is, in fact, a Reformed endorsement of natural theology grounded in the notion that theistic belief can be properly basic. Secondly, I argue that late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Reformed criticisms of natural theology do not constitute an objection to natural theology as such but rather an objection to natural theology construed in a particular way. I explore the nature of this objection and its compatibility with an alternative understanding of natural theology.

The so-called 'Reformed objection' to natural theology has been the focal point of a plethora of essays in Anglo-American philosophy of religion since the emergence of the Reformed epistemology movement spearheaded by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff in the early 1980s. 'Natural theology' in this context refers to the project of developing rational arguments for the existence and nature of God. The 'Reformed objection' refers to opposition to this project associated with the Calvinistic or Reformed streams of the Protestant theological tradition. In this paper I will revisit the Reformed objection to natural theology.

My primary goal in this paper is to put the Reformed objection to natural theology in proper perspective, and this requires correcting two significant and long-standing misunderstandings concerning Reformed opposition to natural theology. First, contrary to what Alvin Plantinga has argued, the thesis of properly basic theistic belief has not motivated or otherwise grounded *any* Reformed objection to natural theology. Quite the contrary, I will argue. The idea that human persons have

a natural disposition to believe in God in a basic way has actually inspired a Reformed *endorsement* of natural theology—a frequently overlooked aspect of the Reformed tradition. Secondly, Reformed criticisms of natural theology have typically not targeted the project of natural theology as such but rather a certain construal of this project. At any rate, this is true of what is arguably the central Reformed objection to natural theology, what I will designate the *autonomy objection*. This objection targets natural theology as system of theology entirely separate from or independent of dogmatic theology, but I will argue that natural theology may be (and has been) otherwise construed and so insulated from the autonomy objection. In the latter part of the paper I outline a model of natural theology according to which natural theology is a vital element within the discourse of dogmatic theology. Consequently, the autonomy objection should be viewed as a call to recontextualize natural theology as opposed to being a demand that we reject it altogether.

THE REFORMED OBJECTION TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

A. The 'Reformed Objection' in Perspective

Since the 1980s it has become increasingly fashionable in Anglo-American philosophy of religion to associate the Reformed tradition in general with opposition to natural theology, as if the majority of Reformed theologians have rejected theistic arguments or such a rejection has been the dominant position of the tradition. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have popularized this idea, but earlier twentieth-century thinkers, for example Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Robert Leet Patterson, suggested it as well.[1]

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[1] See Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 15 (1980): 49-63; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition" in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 166; Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1940), 23–5, 172; Robert Leet Patterson, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Holt and Company, 1958), 142.

Plantinga has written:

> Suppose we think of natural theology as the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God. This enterprise has a long and impressive history. . . . Many Christians, however, have been less than totally impressed. In particular Reformed or Calvinistic theologians have for the most part taken a dim view of this enterprise. A few Reformed thinkers—B.B. Warfield, for example— endorse the theistic proofs; but for the most part the Reformed attitude has ranged from tepid endorsement, through indifference, to suspicion, hostility, and outright accusations of blasphemy.[2]

Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff has said, "Characteristic of the Continental Calvinist tradition has been a revulsion against arguments in favor of theism or Christianity."[3] Wolterstorff has spoken of the rejection of the possibility of natural theology by "the bulk of Reformed theologians"[4] and linked this to the work of contemporary philosophers of religion in the Reformed tradition:

> One of the most salient features of contemporary philosophy of religion in the Reformed tradition of Christianity is its negative attitude toward natural theology—this negative attitude ranging all the way from indifference to hostility. In this regard, the philosophers of the tradition reflect the dominant attitude of the theologians of the tradition, going all the way back to its most influential founder, John Calvin.[5]

It is important to emphasize at the outset that Reformed thought has not opposed natural theology to the extent that contemporary philosophers of religion have suggested. Up until the latter part of the nineteenth century, natural theology was widely endorsed within the Reformed

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[2] Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicolas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 63. A portion of this essay was originally published as "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 15 (1980): 49–63. Since the 1983 reproduction of this material in "Reason and Belief in God" is more widely accessible than the original 1980 article, references and quotations will be taken from the 1983 article.

[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, 7.

[4] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Reformed Tradition," 166.

[5] Ibid., 165.

tradition. Rev. John Platt has carefully delineated the endorsement and development of theistic arguments in early Reformed scholasticism, and Richard Muller has explained its development from the Reformation period through eighteenth-century Reformed scholasticism.[6] It is also worth noting that several of the major nineteenth-century works on the history of natural theology do not describe any Calvinistic or Reformed objection to natural theology, though they consider religious objections to natural theology in some detail. Calvinists, when mentioned, are depicted as supporters of natural theology.[7] As a widespread phenomenon in the tradition, the Reformed rejection of natural theology appears to be a latecomer on the Reformed theological scene. And even here we must proceed with caution, as the legitimate lines of dispute, where they exist, have typically been drawn around the function of theistic arguments not their basic acceptance. As I'll argue later in this paper, this is true even in the viewpoint of the harsher nineteenth- and twentieth-century Reformed critics of natural theology.

B. Plantinga's 'Reformed Objection'

While contemporary philosophers of religion have exaggerated the extent of objections to natural theology in the Reformed tradition, we must still recognize that some prominent representatives of the tradition have objected to natural theology. Nineteenth-century Dutch neo-Calvinists

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[6] Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1575*, 2nd edition (4 vols, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), vol. 1, 270–310, vol 3, 153–226; John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: the Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982). See also my *Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), chapter 1.

[7] See Alfred Caldecott, *The Philosophy of Religion in England and America* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), 105–45, 400–415; Thomas Flint, *Theism*, 7th edition (1877; reprint, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 323–9; E.H. Gillett, *God in Human Thought* (2 vols, New York: Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1874), vol. 2, 422, 468–71, 487–93, 508–16, 676–79; Lewis Ezra Hicks, *Critique of Design-Arguments, A Historical Review and Free Examination of the Methods of Reasoning in Natural Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), 164–74, 187–95, 243–77, 283–87, 309–30; Bernard Pünjer, *History of the Christian Philosophy of Religion from the Reformation to Kant*, trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1887), 125–58.

Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, for example, were highly critical of 'theistic proofs.' Reformed criticisms of natural theology have been widespread in twentieth-century Reformed thought. Auguste Lecerf, G.C. Berkouwer, G.H. Kersten, Karl Barth, William Masselink, and Cornelius Van Til are six such prominent critics.

In several articles since 1980 Alvin Plantinga has examined the critical appraisal of natural theology among three representative Reformed theologians: John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, and Karl Barth.[8] Plantinga's main conclusion has been that these thinkers rejected natural theology primarily because they held that theistic belief is properly basic, that is, theistic belief can be rational (and even constitute knowledge) for a person, even if the person does not have arguments or evidence for theistic belief, indeed, even if no such arguments are available.

> In rejecting natural theology, therefore, these Reformed thinkers [Calvin, Bavinck, and Barth] mean to say first of all that the propriety or rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form the natural theologian's stock in trade. I think this is their central claim here, and their central insight.[9]

Furthermore, according to Plantinga, adhering to the proper basicality of theistic belief as these thinkers did, they were led to an inchoate rejection of classical foundationalism. Classical foundationalism is the epistemological view that all chains of inferentially justified beliefs ultimately terminate in properly basic propositions that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible. Since theistic belief does not satisfy any of these criteria of proper basicality, if theistic belief is supposed to be properly basic, classical foundationalism must be mistaken. So, as Plantinga sees it, the alleged rejection of natural theology by Reformed theologians is closely connected to their at least implicit rejection of classical foundationalism.

Plantinga raises three additional points, largely in connection with Dutch Calvinist Herman Bavinck. As Plantinga sees it, Bavinck

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[8] In addition to "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" and "Reason and Belief in God," "The Reformed Objection Revisited," *Christian Scholar's Review*, 12 (1983): 57–61.

[9] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 72.

maintained that we cannot come to a knowledge of God's existence by way of arguments because theistic arguments simply do not work. Secondly, the Bible does not argue to God's existence but rather presupposes it; therefore, the Christian should start from belief in God rather than reason to God's existence. Or, as Plantinga subsequently states the matter, theistic belief ought not to be based on arguments. Finally, belief in God is analogous to belief in the existence of the self and the external world. We typically do not have, and do not need, arguments for the latter kinds of beliefs. We hold them, and properly so, in a basic way. The same is true of theistic belief.[10]

PROPER BASICALITY AND NATURAL THEOLOGY

The first thing to see here is that Plantinga is correct that the Reformed tradition has asserted the proper basicality of theistic belief, or at any rate, something closely approximating it. Calvin's *sensus divinitatis* is plausibly interpreted as a non-inferential, spontaneous conviction of the existence of God. Bavinck, as Plantinga points out, held that theistic belief does not originate with argument, but it is spontaneously formed, just like our belief in the self and the external world. Bavinck, though, is following an established tradition originating with the Reformers and developed by the Reformed scholastics. The latter spoke of the *cognitio dei insita*, that is, the naturally implanted knowledge of God. This knowledge stands in contrast to knowledge of God acquired by way of reasoning or inference.

As Louis Berkhof described the *cognitio dei insita*:

> It denotes a knowledge that necessarily results from the constitution of the human mind, that is inborn only in the sense that it is acquired spontaneously, under the influence of the *semen religionis* implanted in man by his creation in the image of God, and that is not acquired by the laborious process of reasoning and argumentation.[11]

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[10] See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 65, 72.

[11] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th edition (1939; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 35.

It is a frequently overlooked fact that Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield, otherwise known for their endorsement of natural theology, held that the existence of God is an intuitive truth, not something belief in which originates from argument or a process of reasoning.[12] William Shedd and Augustus Strong similarly held that we know that God exists by means of a rational intuition.[13] The awareness of God's existence spontaneously arises in us with our self-knowledge and experience of the world. Since this knowledge of God is immediate, not the product of inference or argument, it involves theistic beliefs that are—in Plantinga's language—properly basic. So Plantinga is correct when he speaks of the Reformed commitment to the proper basicality of theistic belief. The above theologians illustrate a widely accepted idea within the Reformed tradition.

A. Proper Basicality and the Rejection of Natural Theology

What seems implausible, though, is Plantinga's idea that the Reformed commitment to properly basic theistic belief has motivated or otherwise involved a rejection of natural theology. I'll argue this in a preliminary way here and return to it in section III.C.

First, there is the following conceptual point: the proper basicality thesis does not entail a denial of the value or usefulness of theistic arguments, so it is exceedingly difficult to see how the proper basicality thesis can adequately motivate a rejection of natural theology in point of logic. This is true even if we restrict our focus to the epistemic value of such arguments. The proper basicality thesis, at least in its standard form, states that some theistic beliefs can have some (perhaps highly exalted) positive epistemic status for some people under certain conditions in the absence of natural theology. This is properly speaking a denial of certain strong forms

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[12] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), vol. 1, 191–203; B.B. Warfield, "God," in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (10 vols, 1932; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 110.

[13] William Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2nd edition (3 vols, 1888; reprint, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), vol. 1, 195–220; Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 52–70.

of theistic evidentialism, not natural theology. The project of developing theistic arguments, and the belief that such arguments are epistemically efficacious, must be distinguished from the epistemological view that there can be no knowledge of God without such arguments. Of course, natural theology might still be necessary in a more restricted sense. For example, natural theology might be necessary for people to be warranted in particular kinds of theistic beliefs, for example, of a theoretically robust sort. Or natural theology might be necessary for warranted theistic belief for some people under highly specific circumstances, for example, where people have acquired a defeater for theistic belief.[14] Moreover, theistic arguments may be useful to Christian apologetics for the purpose of showing that theism is true, however such arguments are implicated in the theist's knowledge of God.

Of course, Plantinga also says that according to theologians such as Bavinck belief in God *ought not* to be based on argument.

> In fact, they [Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, and Barth] think that the Christian ought not to accept belief in God on the basis of argument; to do so is to run the risk of a faith that is unstable and wavering. . . . The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; the correct way is to take belief in God as properly basic.[15]

This is a stronger claim than the standard proper basicality thesis. How should we understand it? I think the protest here is against inference being the *exclusive* source of belief in God. Or more precisely stated, a cognizer whose relevant cognitive faculties are functioning properly does not come to believe in God solely on the basis of argument, and for such a person belief in God will not be sustained solely by argument. We need only slightly adjust this to leave more room for natural theology. A believer who reflects sufficiently on the matter may derive more robust sorts of theistic beliefs by way of logical inference, for example, belief in divine simplicity or God's timelessness. *These* beliefs will depend on argument, perhaps

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[14] On defeaters and natural theology, see my *Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, 88–92.

[15] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 72.

exclusively so. I do not think that Bavinck in particular or the Reformed tradition in general is claiming that there is something improper about this. The believer may very well *need* arguments for these kinds of theistic beliefs. The idea here rather is that belief in God *simpliciter* ought not to be exclusively grounded in argument.

Secondly, Reformed theologians have in fact recognized inference as a source of natural knowledge of God. Following Reformers such as Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and John Calvin, Reformed orthodoxy has distinguished between knowledge of God that is naturally implanted in the human person (*cognitio dei insita*) and knowledge of God that is acquired by rational inference from observational features of the world, such as its order and beauty (*cognitio dei acquisita*).[16] Francis Turretin wrote: "The orthodox. . .uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the book of conscience by means of common notions) and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively)."[17] According to this model, the natural knowledge of God—generally speaking—is not exclusively immediate, nor exclusively inferential. Theistic inferences operate in tandem with immediate knowledge of God. We might even say that the former confirms and supplements the latter. We are also not committed to supposing that we first come to believe in God by way of inference.

Consider the testimony of four Calvinists at this juncture. Charles Hodge, optimistic as he was about theistic arguments, did not see such arguments as the origin of belief in God. After affirming that the existence of God is an intuitive truth, Hodge says: "We do not thus reason ourselves into the belief that there is a God; and it is very obvious that it is not by such a process of ratiocination, simple as it is, that the mass of people are brought to this conclusion."[18] Theistic proofs are the product of "the method by which that [intuitive] belief is confirmed and developed."[19]

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[16] On the distinction between the *cognitio dei insita* and *cognitio dei acquisita*, see Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. G.M. Giger (3 vols, Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.2.7, 1.3.1–6; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. J. Vriend (2 vols, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2004), vol. 2, 59–76; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 35–6.

[17] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.3.4.

[18] Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 200.

[19] Ibid.

William Shedd said that theistic arguments "assist the development of the idea of God, and contain a scientific analysis of man's natural consciousness of the deity."[20] Similarly, B.B. Warfield, "This immediate perception of God is confirmed and the contents of this idea developed by a series of arguments known as 'theistic proofs.'"[21] Finally, Calvinistic Baptist Augustus Strong wrote, "Although the knowledge of God's existence is intuitive, it may be explicated and confirmed by arguments drawn from the actual universe and from the abstract ideas of the human mind."[22]

Herman Bavinck held a similar view. Although he acknowledged a *cognitio dei insita*, he also maintained a *cognitio dei acquisita*. As Bavinck sees it, God reveals Himself to human consciousness in an intuitive manner by way of the *cognitio dei insita*.

> In the case of the acquired knowledge of God, human beings reflect upon that revelation of God. Their minds go to work, thought processes are set in motion, and with clear heads they seek by reasoning and proof to rise from the observation of creatures to [the reality] of God. The fact is, humans are not content with impressions and intuitions in any area of knowledge... They desire to explain the *how* and *why* of their knowledge. Common everyday empirical knowledge is always driven to achieve true, scientific, knowledge. That is also why faith aspires to become theology, and the innate knowledge of God seeks to complete itself in the acquired knowledge of God.[23]

Bavinck and these other Reformed theologians are representative of Reformed thought at this juncture. Commitment to immediate knowledge of God does not motivate the rejection of theistic arguments. Quite the contrary: theistic arguments are typically taken to represent the reflective elaboration of a more primitive, spontaneous knowledge of God, and the human impulse towards reflective knowledge is itself as natural as the impulse to believe in God. Natural theology is therefore a consequence of our constitution as human persons.

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[20] Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, 221.
[21] B.B. Warfield, "God," 110.
[22] Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 71.
[23] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 74.

B. The Reformed Endorsement of Natural Theology

The Reformed account of the natural knowledge of God confronts us squarely with an endorsement of the project of natural theology. The above Reformed theologians, including Bavinck, accept the project of developing theistic arguments. In this they are representative of the tradition as a whole. Bavinck confirms this in saying, "natural theology is upheld in its truth and value by all Reformed theologians."[24] Again, "Reformed theologians from the very beginning adopted a friendlier posture toward natural theology."[25] What is initially surprising here is that a *critic* of natural theology takes this position.

What, then, of Plantinga's claim that Bavinck thinks that theistic arguments don't work? ". . .[W]e cannot come to knowledge of God on the basis of argument; the arguments of natural theology just do not work."[26] There is a sense in which Plantinga is correct. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Reformed theologians have often been skeptical of theistic arguments as ostensible 'proofs' or 'logical demonstrations,' that is, as rationally compelling arguments for the existence of God. The arguments don't work *in this respect*. (Of course several of the leading natural theologians of our day would agree with this assessment of natural theology.)[27] Bavinck was explicit about the failure of theistic arguments as purported logical demonstrations,[28] but at the same time he maintained that these arguments are effective in other respects. First, they are stronger than arguments against the existence of God. As such they are apologetically relevant and useful.[29] Moreover, although weak as proofs, these arguments are strong as "'signs and testimonies' that never fail to make an impression on everyone's mind."[30] What Bavinck means to say here, I think, is that theistic arguments involve evidences that confirm the intuitive perception of God and are instrumental in developing this basic

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[24] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 87.

[25] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 66.

[26] Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 65.

[27] For example, Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 4–22, 136–37, 155, 329–30.

[28] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 89–91.

[29] Ibid., vol. 2, p. 59; cf. 91.

[30] Ibid., vol. 2, 91.

knowledge. For Christians in particular theistic arguments confirm and clarify their own religious consciousness and allow them to systematically reflect on the revelation of God in nature.

> For Christians these proofs signify that it is one and the same God who manifests himself in nature and in grace. . . .Collectively, the testimonies that God sends us in the world and are condensed in the so-called proofs are nothing other than a revelation of the name of the Lord by means of which he makes himself known to his creatures and gives us the right to address him.[31]

Bavinck is not alone in this regard. Several prominent twentieth-century Reformed critics of natural theology affirm the value of theistic arguments as testimonies or evidences—not logical demonstrations—of the existence of God. As such, they are sufficient to rebut atheism and instrumental in confirming and developing the Christian's knowledge of God.

Concerning theistic arguments, Berkhof wrote:

> They are important as interpretations of God's general revelation and as exhibiting the reasonableness of belief in a divine being. Moreover, they can render some service in meeting the adversary. While they do not prove the existence of God beyond possibility of doubt, so as to compel assent, they can be so constructed as to establish a strong probability and thereby silence many unbelievers.[32]

William Masselink argued that belief in God is not based on theistic arguments, either for the believer or unbeliever. The knowledge of God's existence comes to humans through the general witness of the Holy Spirit who makes the evidences of God in creation efficacious testimonies. But there is no process of logical inference at this level. Yet, Masselink still asserted the positive value of theistic arguments. "By means of these 'theistic proofs' it is not difficult to show the atheist not only the weak points of his system, but the hollow emptiness of his whole philosophy."[33] Moreover, since all people are endowed with an innate idea of God, the

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[31] Ibid., vol. 2, 91.

[32] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 28.

[33] Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 119.

theistic arguments can also be used as "a stimulus to bring back God-consciousness to the natural man. If the soul of the natural man then reacts to this stimulation, it can be a means to reawaken this God-consciousness within him."[34] Finally, Masselink says that theistic arguments "strengthen the faith" and enable the believer to "come to a closer knowledge of God."[35]

According to G.H. Kersten, theistic arguments cannot prove the existence of God, especially not to unbelievers since "those who willfully suppress the conviction that God exists will not be convinced by any argument."[36] However, these arguments are "not altogether worthless" if taken as testimonies. Kersten contends that theistic arguments can be of service simply to "entangle the atheist in his own statements."[37] He says that theistic arguments "are testimonies that exceed in power the denial of the atheist."[38] Similarly, Auguste Lecerf affirmed the apologetic usefulness of theistic arguments. According to Lecerf, since faith seeks understanding, faith has an internal tendency to answer objections that might be urged against it. This is important not merely to fortify believers but also to be used by God as instruments in the conversion of the elect.

> Apologetics does not endeavour to destroy the adversary's disposition to attack merely in order to comfort the believer; but, by the intellectual defence of religious truth which it presents, it seeks to become an instrument in God's hands, a means of grace, that shall produce in the opponent himself a deep and favourable impression of the truth of religious doctrine.[39]

Neither Bavinck nor his Reformed company here denies the value of theistic arguments, not even their epistemic efficacy.[40] And this seems

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[34] Ibid., 119.

[35] Ibid., 120.

[36] G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (2 vols, 1980; reprint, Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1981), vol. 1, 37.

[37] Ibid., 41.

[38] Ibid., p. 42.

[39] Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 208.

[40] Plantinga himself, while he expresses skepticism about theistic arguments being logical demonstrations, maintains that there are nonetheless *good* theistic arguments, and he asserts the usefulness of such arguments for various purposes, including confirming theistic

entirely right. We have a good deal of inferentially warranted beliefs and inferential knowledge based on arguments that fall short of being logical demonstrations. The same epistemic opportunities should apply to theistic belief. So we cannot infer that theistic arguments cannot be a source of positive epistemic status for theistic belief simply because such arguments do not work as logical demonstrations.

THE AUTONOMY OBJECTION

Seeing as Bavinck and these other Reformed critics of natural theology do not reject theistic arguments as such, in what sense *do* they object to natural theology? To be sure, they have a logical objection to theistic arguments. They believe such arguments fail as logical demonstrations. But is there more to their discontent with natural theology? Yes, but here is where we need an evaluation very different than the one Plantinga has provided.

A. Natural Theology as a Separate and Foundational Theology

In his *Principles of Sacred Theology* (1898) Abraham Kuyper expressed the following criticism of natural theology.

> If at first the Reformation fostered more accurate ideas [about natural theol-
> ogy], soon the temptation appeared too strong, to place *natural* theology as
> a separate theology *alongside* of special theology (theologia specialis)....With
> this division it became apparent that the real *Theology* as knowledge of God
> gave the lion's share to *natural* theology....This furnished natural theology
> the occasion to unfold its wings even more broadly; to expand itself and
> lessen the importance of special theology; until finally it has succeeded in
> stepping forth as a monarch and in contesting all right of utterance to special
> theology....It is, therefore, of the greatest importance, to see clearly, that

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belief and helping some people move from unbelief to belief. See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 73; "The Prospects for Natural Theology," in *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James Tomberlin (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991); and "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments" in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 203–27.

special theology may not be considered a moment without *natural* theology, and that on the other hand natural theology of itself is unable to supply *any* pure knowledge of God.[41]

Kuyper does not here object to the project of developing theistic arguments. In fact, elsewhere he explicitly endorses such arguments.[42] He is also quite explicit that special or scriptural theology cannot do without natural theology. The former presupposes the latter, as grace presupposes nature. The focus of the criticism is the construction of a theology *separate* from the theology based on Scripture. As Kuyper sees it, natural theology historically evolved into an independent theology that usurped the authority of Scripture and ultimately undercut the notion of scriptural theology. Without the revelation of God in Scripture, though, theology is unable to supply any pure knowledge of God, for such a theology must always view God from the perspective of fallen human reason. Kuyper takes the noetic effects of sin to be significant enough to undermine the reliability of human reasoning about God, that is, in the absence of the light given by Scripture.

> Natural theology can exhibit itself as a regnant power only when human nature receives the beams of its light in their purity and reflects them equally completely. At present, however, the glass has been impaired by a hundred cracks, and the receiving and the reflecting have become unequal, and the image that was to reflect itself is hindered in its clear reflection and thereby rendered untrue. And for this reason you cannot depend on natural theology as it works in fallen man; and its imperfect lines and forms bring you, through the broken image, in touch with the reality of the infinite, only when an *accidens* enables you to recover this defective ideal for yourself, and natural theology receives this *accidens* only in special revelation. . . .[43]

Bavinck expressed similar concerns:

> Now the Reformation indeed adopted this natural theology along with its proofs but, instead of treating it prior to the doctrine of faith, incorporated it

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[41] Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 372–73.

[42] Ibid., 243, 300, 302.

[43] Ibid., 307.

in the doctrine of faith. . . . Soon, however, Protestant theology started taking the road of rationalism. Whereas natural theology was initially an account, in the light of Scripture, of what Christians can know concerning God from creation, it soon became an exposition of what nonbelieving rational persons could learn from nature by the power of their own reasoning. . . .Natural theology became the real, the scientific and demonstrable theology by which revealed theology was increasingly marginalized and driven from the field.[44]

Like Kuyper, Bavinck's target here is natural theology as a system of theology developed in isolation from the content of Scripture. Bavinck is reacting to the actual evolution of natural theology in the history of Protestant dogmatics. As he sees it, natural theology as an independent theology supplemented by revealed theology quickly becomes an independent competitor to revealed theology. It ends up—as in English deism and German rationalism—thinking of itself as completely adequate and revealed theology as unnecessary.[45] Bavinck too operates on the assumption that reason, without the assistance of Scripture, is incapable of properly reflecting on general revelation. Consequently, any theology based *solely* on general revelation will involve a fundamentally distorted view of God.

These concerns have been widespread in twentieth-century Calvinism. Speaking of the various treatises on natural theology composed by Reformed thinkers under the influence of Cartesianism, Auguste Lecerf said, "Natural theology is considered in them as an autonomous discipline, constituted solely by the resources of the light of nature and leading to the living God, the author of positive revelation. The function of revelation begins, once this truth has been acquired."[46] Lecerf disapproves and adds, "Knowledge of God acquired by the spectacle of the universe, by the effect of reflection, if it is deprived of the help of positive revelation, is equally incapable of leading us to a correct theology."[47] Kersten wrote, "Those who separate the natural knowledge of God from the special revelation

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[44] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 78.
[45] See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 288, 306–20, 513.
[46] Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics,* 22.
[47] Ibid., 108.

in Scripture are wrong when they see a separate entity in the 'theologia naturalis.'"[48]

We see at this juncture a certain confluence of thought between these Calvinists and Karl Barth, for one of Karl Barth's objections to natural theology stemmed from the allegedly distorted view of God that results from creating an autonomous sphere of knowledge of God as creator that is wholly uninformed by the biblical doctrine of God.

> It is. . .hard to see how what is distinctive for this God can be made clear if, as has constantly happened in Roman Catholic and Protestant dogmatics both old and new, the question of who God is, which it is the business of the doctrine of the Trinity to answer, is held in reserve, and the first question to be treated is that of the That and the What of God, as though these could be defined otherwise than on the presupposition of the Who.[49]

In his *General Revelation*, G.C. Berkouwer also associated this sort of natural theology with Roman Catholicism. In a chapter devoted to a critique of the 'natural theology of Rome,' Berkouwer says:

> The question now arises *how* and *how far* God is known in this way [through natural theology]. We have already seen that this knowledge cannot be adequate because it proceeds through the medium of created reality and is also characterized by it. So, for example, one cannot by means of natural knowledge know that God is triune. The mysteries are entirely hidden from such knowledge. It is apparent therefore, that this is not simply an inadequate knowledge, but that one must really speak of a *partial* knowledge, even in an extremely dualistic way. By means of natural knowledge one knows only *that* part or "aspect" of God which is mediated through creation and relates especially to his *being*. The results of the theistic proofs demonstrate this. By means of these proofs reason comes to recognize the existence of a self-existent being. . . . Here the knowledge relation between Creator and creature is *ontologically* fixed. It results in knowledge of the formal *aspects* of

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[48] G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 5.

[49] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F Torrence (4 vols, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936–1975), vol. 1. pt., 1, pp. 300–301. T.F. Torrance and Alister McGrath each argues that Barth's objection to natural theology was fundamentally the autonomy objection. See Torrance, "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth," *Religious Studies* 6 (1970): 121–35; and McGrath, *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 267–86.

God's *being*, in an *independent* natural theology of the first article (God as Creator) which has nothing to do with the knowledge of God in the reality of his grace and mercy. . . .It is almost inconceivable that the Roman Catholic Church has not been repeatedly shocked by this *empty*, *abstract*, and *formal* God-concept of her natural theology. . . . At this point Roman Catholic theology has never been able to give a satisfactory answer to Reformed critique. In this formal and empty God-concept we see the heart of Rome's natural theology. [50]

Berkouwer, like Barth but unlike most of the other Reformed thinkers mentioned above, has *no* place for theistic arguments at all, except as testimonies to the degenerated status of the natural knowledge of God. However, it is clear that he rejects theistic arguments precisely because he equates the project of developing such arguments with the creation of a purely rational system of theology that is unable to present God as He is in the totality of his revelation to creatures. Focusing solely on one aspect of the divine being reached by the intellect alone, the idea of God in natural theology becomes an intellectual idol.

What underlies the above critique of natural theology, then, are suspicions about natural theology as an autonomous theological system divorced from the content of special revelation. Such a system of theology is bound to be defective either because it involves a distorted knowledge of God as creator or excludes the knowledge of God as redeemer. The concern here is not merely a concern about systems of *pagan* natural theology, but even ostensibly Christian dogmatic theology that is erected on purely rational foundations. When approached independently of scriptural revelation, general revelation is bound to yield a theologically inadequate doctrine of God and His relation to created beings. Consequently, as Louis Berkhof aptly put it, the Reformers "did not believe in the ability of human reason to construct a scientific system of theology on the basis of natural revelation pure and simple."[51]

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[50] Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (1955; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 69, 72–73.

[51] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 38.

B. Pre-Dogmatic Foundations Model of Natural Theology

It is important to see the above criticisms of natural theology as a reaction to a conception of natural theology that evolved out of the Enlightenment. The influence of Cartesianism on Protestant theology in the seventeenth century contributed to an expansion of the role of reason in theology.[52] Natural theology became an autonomous system of rational theology that was intended as a pre-dogmatic foundation for the Christian faith. For example, Jean-Alphonse Turretin presented natural theology as a system of purely rational truths accessible to reason apart from any supernatural revelation.[53] For Salomon van Til, natural theology was a prolegomenon in which a purely rational discourse on the divine existence and attributes, separated from Scripture, prepared the way for the system of revealed theology.[54] The idea of a distinct rational-theological locus upon which the biblical doctrine of God could be based further evolved during the eighteenth century under the influence of Christian Wolff and Wolffian rationalism.[55] In the works of Johann Friedrich Stapfer and Daniel Wyttenbach, a detailed discussion of the existence and attributes of God constitutes the first port of entry to the doctrine of God, only subsequently followed by a discussion of Scripture and the Christian doctrine of God.[56] In England, the Protestant response to Deism led many to erect a supernatural theology on the basis of a limited natural religion that encompassed the existence and attributes of God, as well as a range of moral duties accessible to reason,

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[52] On the modern transformation of natural theology in Catholicism, see G. de Broglie, "La vraie notion thomiste des 'preambula fidei,'" *Gregorianum* 34 (1953): 341–89. On shifts in Protestant orthodoxy, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 87–9, 104–108, 183–92, 287–89, 512–17, and Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 138, 150, 193–95.

[53] See Martin I. Klauber, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737) and the Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), chapter 3.

[54] Salomon van Til, *Theologiae utriusque compendium* (Leiden, 1704, 1719), I.i-iii, II.i-iii.

[55] See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 82–4, 174–76, 305–308, 396–98; vol. 3, pp. 121–29, 141–50, 193–95.

[56] Johann Friedrich Stapfer, *Institutiones theologiae polemicae universae, ordine scientifico dispositae*, 4th ed. (5 vols, Zurich, 1756–57), and Daniel Wyttenbach, *Tentamen theologiae dogmaticae methodo scientifico pertractatae* (3 vols, Frankfurt, 1747–1749).

as is illustrated in Richard Fiddes's *Theologia Speculativa* (1718) and Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion* (1736).

Bavinck nicely summarizes this intrusion of rationalism into Reformed thought:

> The conviction took hold that human reason, even apart from faith, could of itself produce all the truths of natural theology. Thus, natural theology, as the preamble of faith, became antecedent to revealed theology, and reason was emancipated from faith and revelation. Revelation and reason became independent entities standing side by side.... Natural theology was believed to provide a solid ground on which to stand, a purely scientific foundation, and revelation too was examined this way. [57]

The nineteenth century would inherit this pre-dogmatic conception of natural theology, adjusted in various ways to counter the Kantian and Darwinian critique of traditional cosmological and design arguments. This arguably reached its culmination in the famous Gifford Lectures established by Lord Gifford in 1888. Gifford's goal was to provide a platform for a purely scientific or rational treatment of the existence and nature of God, independent of any claims originating from an ostensible divine revelation. When late nineteenth and twentieth-century Reformed theologians objected to natural theology it is clear that most of them had this conception of natural theology in mind.

C. Returning to Plantinga

Earlier I had argued that Plantinga was mistaken to suppose that Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck rejected natural theology because they held that theistic belief is properly basic. We can now see another reason why Plantinga's diagnosis is mistaken. The central theme of Plantinga's analysis is the proper basicality thesis, namely the idea that theistic belief can have some positive epistemic status (e.g., rationality, knowledge) even in the absence of theistic arguments. But this is entirely compatible with the idea of an autonomous system of natural theology being the pre-dogmatic foundation for revealed theology. We have already

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[57] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 105. See also Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 41.

noted that the proper basicality thesis is compatible with the project of natural theology, but it is also compatible with viewing this project as an autonomous science that provides the rational foundations for revealed theology. The pre-dogmatic conception of natural theology may give the impression that proofs are preconditions for belief, but this is only an impression. One can affirm that, as far as personal belief goes, a person can be entirely reasonable in accepting God's existence in a basic way, even know that God exists in this way. The issue is really the proper logical starting point of *theology*, not the proper doxastic starting point for the individual believer. So the proper basicality thesis cannot be at the center of the Reformed objection to natural theology.

THE DOGMATIC MODEL OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

The autonomy objection is, I think, the central Reformed objection to natural theology. However, this objection clearly targets natural theology *construed in a particular way*. In contrast to the autonomous, pre-dogmatic conception of natural theology, there is what I will designate the *dogmatic model* of natural theology.[58] Roughly stated, according to this model of natural theology, theistic arguments represent a rational exploration and development of the content of natural revelation, but where this activity is situated in the context of dogmatic theology and thus guided by the data of scriptural revelation. Here natural theology would be part of the discourse of dogmatic theology not a preface to it. This was very much the way natural theology was originally conceived within the Reformed tradition.

A. The Role of Theistic Arguments in Dogmatic Theology

Theistic arguments made their first explicit appearance in Protestant theology in Philip Melanchthon's works. In his *Commentary on Romans*,

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[58] I have borrowed the designation 'dogmatic model' from Richard Muller. See Muller, "The Dogmatic Function of St. Thomas' Proofs: A Protestant Appreciation", *Fides et Historia* 24:2 (summer 1992): 15-29.

theistic arguments appear as an elaboration and development of Romans 1:19–20. In his *Loci Communes* they appear under the heading *de creatione*, a biblically based discussion of creation. In each case, it is clear that theistic arguments are directed to the Christian as a means of rationally reflecting on the data of biblical revelation. They represent a scripturally informed meditation on natural revelation, not an attempt to lay rational foundations for faith. Melanchthon develops theistic arguments in the course of articulating aspects of revealed theology, with the stated goal of strengthening the Christian's knowledge of God.[59] They are presented as Christian meditation on "the footprints of God in the nature of things."[60] Melanchthon says that God wants us to consider these testimonies since "it is useful for strengthening good opinions to hold fast to the true reasonings fixed in the mind, which testify that God is the founder and preserver of things."[61] There is no attempt here to construct a theology of God based solely on reason.

In sixteenth and many seventeenth-century Protestant dogmatic systems theistic arguments were typically presented under theological prolegomena or the *locus de Deo*.[62] In these systems, though, neither theological prolegomena nor the *locus de Deo* was pre-dogmatic in nature. Both exhibit a dependence on and integration with Scripture and the correlated Christian doctrine of God, even where the dogmatic system begins with the *locus de Deo*. This explains the reliance on Scripture in the *locus de Deo*, as is illustrated in the use of the "divine names" as a point of departure for articulating and systematizing the divine attributes.[63] It also explains the inclusion of the doctrine of the Trinity under the *locus de Deo*, for example in Andreas Hyperius, Wolfgang Musculus, Lambert

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[59] For a detailed discussion of natural theology in Melanchthon and Melanchthon's influence on subsequent Reformed dogmatics, see Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*, chapter two.

[60] Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. F. Kramer (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 77.

[61] Ibid.

[62] For a detailed discussion of theistic proofs in Reformed scholasticism, see Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 48–52, 153–95.

[63] See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 254–72.

Daneau, and Francis Turretin.[64] In some instances the *locus de scriptura* is prior to the *locus de Deo* so it is clear that the doctrine of God rests on scriptural revelation as its foundation, not reason. We find this, for example, in Amandus Polanus, Edward Leigh, and Francis Turretin.[65] Not surprisingly, we find no independent *locus* on natural theology, either within or prefaced to the theological system.

So, on the dogmatic view, natural theology is a dogmatically situated rational reflection on the Christian God as manifested in the works of creation and providence. One of the crucial functions of natural theology on this view is to assist in the enlargement and deepening of the Christian's knowledge of God specifically by reflecting on the content of natural revelation. Of course, such a function does not exclude the apologetic use of theistic arguments. Such a use was frequent among Reformed theologians of the early and high scholastic periods. In this context, though, theistic arguments would not be used to *establish* either theism or the Christian faith but simply to *refute* atheists and remove objections to the faith within the larger logical architecture of revealed theology. Francis Turretin and Edward Leigh, for example, used the proofs to refute atheists, but these arguments appear subsequent to the doctrine of Scripture under a biblically informed doctrine of God. This is, of course, entirely consistent with the instrumental use of reason in theology. There is a reasoned defense of the faith but no apologetically motivated theological prolegomenon in which natural theology is used to lay the foundations for subsequent claims about God derived from Scripture.

A dogmatic conception of natural theology also introduces the possibility of viewing theistic arguments as a way of justifying the instrumental role of reason within dogmatic theology.[66] From this vantage point, we can see theistic arguments as a way of exploring the nature of our knowledge of God and the possibility of a theological discourse in which there is a reasoned exploration and elucidation of the articles of faith. The proofs

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[64] See Hyperius, *Methodus theologiae* (1568); Musculus, *Loci communes* (1560); Daneau, *Christianae isogoges* (1583); Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (1679-85).

[65] For example, Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Geneva, 1617), Leigh, *Body of Divinity* (London, 1654), and Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Geneva, 1679-85).

[66] See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 153-9; Muller, "The Dogmatic Function of St. Thomas' Proofs."

provide reason to believe that reason itself can enter into the theological realm and elucidate the articles of faith. There is no need to establish the existence of God within the framework of the dogmatic system. Dogmatics presupposes the existence of God. There *is* a need, however, to establish the instrumental validity of reason for theology, to show that reason is fit for the task of being the handmaiden of sacred doctrine. On this view, while theistic arguments are intended as genuine arguments for the existence and nature of God, they are not foundations upon which revealed theology is built. They provide the Christian with a justification of the instrumental role of reason for the sake of the dogmatic elaboration of the articles of faith.

B. Natural Theology Guided by Scripture

According to the dogmatic model of natural theology, natural theological reasoning is situated within the context of scriptural revelation. It is important to emphasize that some of the Reformed critics of natural theology have explicitly endorsed this kind of natural theology, in addition to the apologetic function of theistic arguments.

Consider the following statement from Bavinck:

> The Reformers indeed assumed a revelation of God in nature. But the human mind was so darkened by sin that human beings could not rightly know and understand this revelation. . . . Objectively needed by human beings to understand the general revelation of God in nature was the special revelation of God in Holy Scripture, which, accordingly, was compared by Calvin to glasses. . . . Hence in the Reformation, natural theology lost its rational autonomy. It was no longer treated separately but incorporated in the doctrine of the Christian faith.[67]

How does Scripture guide natural theology? Fundamentally by providing a robust doctrine of God that will function as the framework for rational inquiry into the evidences for the being and attributes of God from created things. There are at least two closely related, complementary ways this framework can interact with natural theological reasoning.

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[67] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 304-305.

First, the biblical concept of God can function as the conceptual starting point of natural theology. Suppose one begins with the biblical view of God as an almighty, eternal spirit, perfect in goodness and knowledge, and creator and sustainer of all things. Given this biblical concept of God, one could move on to consider the extent to which the *existence* of this being is a cogent conclusion from various *a posteriori* and *a priori* starting points of argumentation. In other words, one could begin natural theology with a clear concept of God derived from scripture and seek from there to prove on rational grounds that such a being exists, rather than let the concept of God emerge as a consequence of the reasoning of the theistic proofs. This is one way in which the Christian construction of theistic arguments might presuppose the biblical view of God, while at the same time taking seriously the logical work of constructing cogent arguments for the existence and nature of such a being. Of course, beginning with the biblical doctrine of God also directs our attention to the creative and providential acts of God as He is revealed in Scripture. It therefore allows us to see the universe and its fundamental features—the starting point of the empirical theistic arguments—as the product of the creative act of the triune God of redemption.

Secondly, by providing a biblical concept of God, Scripture provides a background system of theological belief relevant to the derivation of defeaters to our natural theological reasoning. Here Scripture provides a negative constraint on natural theological arguments, a kind of 'veto power' over natural theological reasoning. While this may be used to identify faulty premises, it can more importantly help identify false conclusions about the nature of God. Aristotle reasoned to the existence of a single supreme being limited in knowledge and power, and wholly unconcerned with human affairs. Epicurean natural theology in ancient Greece and deistic natural theology in modern philosophy both arrived at conclusions inconsistent with the immanence of God and his providential control of the world. Stoic natural theology could justify the immanence and providence of God but only by adopting a principle of an organic continuum that entailed the identity of God and creation. A biblical theology of God leads us in a different direction. According to Scripture, God exercises providential care over the details of the Universe. Unlike Aristotle's unmoved mover or the many gods of Greek religion, the God

of the Bible is not finite in knowledge and power. But neither does God's infinite perfection make him identical to the universe. Scripture presents us with a clear ontological distinction between the creator and creation. God's immanence is not purchased at the price of His transcendence. While natural theology uncontrolled by biblical revelation has often resulted in a concept of God incompatible with the Christian concept of God, reason controlled by the deliverances of scripture can more consistently arrive at claims about God that are compatible with the biblical doctrine of God.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have addressed two significant misunderstandings of what Plantinga and others have designated the 'Reformed objection' to natural theology. First, there is no connection between the Reformed endorsement of properly basic theistic belief and Reformed opposition to natural theology. The crucial issue for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Reformed critics of natural theology has been the purported autonomy of natural theology, that is, its allegedly constituting a theology of God independent of dogmatic theology and functioning as a rational preamble to dogmatics. Secondly, once we are clear about the real Reformed objection to natural theology, it is apparent that it does not involve an unqualified rejection of the project of developing theistic arguments. Natural theology may be pursued as a dogmatically situated activity of rational reflection on the Christian God as manifested in the works of creation and providence. While this view of natural theology permits an apologetic deployment of theistic arguments, its primary goal is to enlarge the Christian's knowledge of God and justify the instrumental role of reason within the system of dogmatic theology.

MURDOCH AND LEVINAS ON GOD AND GOOD

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Abstract. Murdoch and Levinas both believe that our humanity requires us to suppress our natural egoism and to be morally responsive to others. Murdoch insists that while such a morality presupposes a 'transcendent background', God should be kept out of the picture altogether. By contrast, Levinas argues that, in responding morally to others, we make contact with God (though not the God of traditional Christianity) and that in doing so we become more God-like. I attempt to clarify their agreements and differences, and I offer some criticisms of their conception of humanity, God, and the relationship between them.

INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch and Emmanuel Levinas are concerned with the question of what it is to be human, and their interest in it is ethical. The notion of humanity is understood as an ethical notion: to call someone 'inhuman' is an intensive way of saying that they are not morally responsive to others. This is not intended to explain why it is bad to be morally unresponsive to others. They are addressing those who already agree that it is bad to the point of inhumanity to rape or kill indiscriminately or to refrain from so doing only from cold self-interest.

They both believe that the more divine we are, the more human we become.[1] This idea admits of various interpretations, some of which will offend the sensibilities of those who prefer an atheistic framework. Such objectors have nothing to fear from our protagonists: both have considerable sympathy for atheism and considerable antipathy for theism.

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[1] I take this phrase from Nicholas Lash's wonderful paper "The Impossibility of Atheism", in *Theology for Pilgrims* (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 2008), 27.

I shall, however, raise a further difficulty with this idea when we look more closely at their conception of humanity.

Agreements notwithstanding, their positive positions are harder to reconcile. They insist that being (fully) human involves standing in a relation to the Good, yet Levinas, unlike Murdoch, spells out this relation in God-involving terms. I shall argue that this disagreement is verbal, and it must remain to be seen whether Murdoch believes in God, whether moral realists believe in God, or whether Levinas is a closet atheist.

BEING HUMAN

Murdoch and Levinas's picture of human being is, at one level, profoundly bleak. Murdoch talks of the 'fat relentless ego'[2] who desires to 'dominate, possess, devour and absorb the other', to 'subject him to the mechanism of (his) own fantasy'.[3] Levinas refers to the monopolistic ego which conquers and dominates everything that stands in its way.[4] They agree that an egoistic mode of existence is morally deficient because it precludes the possibility of a genuine ethical relation to another person – a relation which involves appreciating her independent reality. Murdoch says that 'fantasy (self) can prevent us ... from seeing another person',[5] that our direction of attention must be turned outward, away from the self and towards the other, [6] and that this movement can 'bring us to what is good'.[7] Levinas claims that the other exists 'outside of the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches, and the senses one allays',[8] that by relating to the other 'I *am no longer able to have power*'[9], and that this relationship opens up the dimension of the ethical.[10]

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[2] "On 'God' and 'Good'", in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge: London, 1970), 52.

[3] *The Fire and the Sun*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1977), 36.

[4] See, for example, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite", in Adrian Peperzak, *To the Other* (Purdue University Press: Indiana), 88-120.

[5] "On 'God and 'Good'", 70.

[6] *Ibid.*, 59.

[7] *Ibid.*, 66.

[8] "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite", 114.

[9] *Ibid.*, 110.

[10] *Ibid.*

An egoistic mode of existence is also *metaphysically* deficient. It shields us from that aspect of reality to which we are responsive when we enter the dimension of the ethical – an aspect which provides an analogue for 'how things really are', and our responsiveness to which is required if we are to be fully human. Murdoch calls this dimension 'the real'.[11] She claims also that realism, as the ability to perceive reality, is a 'moral achievement', and that it requires a 'suppression of the self'.[12] True vision, she says, occasions right conduct. Plato's *Symposium* illustrates what happens when the ego fades and this vision is realized: we 'escape from the mean petty slavery of the particular case and turn towards the open sea of beauty'.[13]

Levinas agrees that the world of the personal ego is metaphysically deficient, and he likewise cites Plato in his account of the shift required as we move from the limiting framework of the egoist to one which involves an appreciation of the Good. He expresses this by saying that it situates the Good above Being, and he cites Plato's *Phaedrus* as the ancestor of this position.[14] Like Murdoch, he is gesturing towards a conception of reality which is irreducibly moral, and essentially refers to the needs and desires of others. We are moved towards an 'ethics of responsibility for the Other';[15] we are propelled towards Goodness.[16]

GOD

Murdoch holds that morality is unavoidable, that we forsake it only at the cost of our humanity. Morality is also central to genuine religion, but both religion and morality are compromised when defined in God-

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[11] "On 'God' and 'Good'", 59.

[12] *Ibid.*, 66.

[13] This claim is to be found at 210D of *The Symposium*.

[14] "Philosophy and the Idea of the infinite", 106.

[15] "The Thinking of Being and the Question of the Other", in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans., Bettina Bergo (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1998), 121.

[16] "God and Philosophy", in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 69.

involving terms.[17] She recommends that we 'remove' the traditional notion of God.[18]

> 'God' is the name for a supernatural person. It makes a difference whether we believe in such a person, as it makes a difference whether Christ rose from the dead. These differences do not generally, or do not yet, affect whether or not people are virtuous.[19]

Christianity can perhaps continue without this personal God, and 'without beliefs in supernatural places and happenings, such as heaven and life after death'. She approves of the way in which religion 'is detaching itself from supernatural dogma'.[20]

This implies that we should abandon 'God' for 'Good', and allow that religion is:

> a mode of belief in the unique sovereign place of goodness or virtue in human life. One might put it flatly by saying that there is something about moral value which goes *jusqu'au bout*. It must go all the way, to the base, to the top, it must be everywhere… It adheres essentially to the conception of being human, and cannot be detached; and we may express this by saying that it is not accidental, does not exist contingently, is above being.[21]

So we get the following picture: God is a supernatural person, and belief in God involves a commitment to supernatural dogma. Such belief is supposed to make some kind of difference, but it makes no moral difference, and is irrelevant therefore to what it is to be human. The dimension of reality to which God talk refers is 'detached' from human reality, because there is no evidence for the existence of such a being. It is also detached from Good because Good is internally related to human reality, and the existence of a supernatural being could have no bearing on moral conduct. As Murdoch insists, the moral person is good 'for nothing'. Being good 'for something' would involve some non-moral motive – the desire for

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[17] "The Ontological Proof", in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1992), 418.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*, 419.

[20] *Ibid.*, 425.

[21] *Ibid.*,.426.

salvation, for example – a motive which would be part and parcel of the egoism which the reference to goodness was intended to break.[22] Small wonder that Murdoch is happy to assume that there is no God,[23] and to defend a conception of religion and morality which dispenses with Him.

Karl Rahner attacks the kind of God taken for granted by Murdoch:

> *That* God really does not exist who operates and functions as an individual existent alongside other existents, and who would thus as it were be a member of the larger household of all reality. Anyone in search of such a God is searching for a false God. Both atheism and a more naïve form of theism labour under the same false notion of God, only the former denies it while the latter believes that it can make sense of it. Both are basically false: the latter, the notion that naïve theism has, because this God does not exist; and the former, atheism, because God is the most radical, the most original, and in a certain sense the most self-evident reality.[24]

From Rahner's perspective, Murdoch has a faulty conception of God. She supposes that God is just a god – a being on the same level as any other being in reality. More powerful, perhaps, but vastly inferior to the goodness which, like Rahner's God, is 'the most original, and in a certain sense the most self-evident reality', and that without which we would cease to be human.[25]

Rahner's position is now a commonplace in theology, perhaps it always was. Nevertheless, a long line of theologians and philosophers have sought to rescue us from the kind of misconception presupposed by Murdoch, and one such figure is Levinas. Levinas riles against approaches to the question of God which set it apart from the question of what it is to be human. They make the God question into something highly abstract, and sever the connection between religion and ethics. This leads one to suppose that the question of God is a theoretical question, and that

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[22] Compare: 'Almost anything that consoles us is a fake'. ("On 'God' and 'Good'", 59.
[23] "On 'God' and 'Good', 75.
[24] *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych, (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 1978), 63.
[25] *Ibid.*, p.63.

religion is a matter of theorizing about God. Wedded to the idea that God is divorced from anything remotely human, this can quickly lead to the conclusion that He does not exist, and that it does not matter much anyway (Murdoch). Even if we resist this sceptical response in favour of continued theoretical investigation, this can only compromise an idea which, for Levinas, is fundamental, namely, that God cannot be grasped by human thought. Finally, this approach ends up ignoring the question how we should treat others.

Even if we distrust a theoretical approach to God, this can give rise to an equally problematic alternative: surrender to mystical abandon. Levinas has no time for this 'human elevation'. 'The Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence', that is, it is 'contrary to the education of man'.[26] It is violent because it 'annuls the links between persons', and leads the individual to 'founder' in a false form of ecstasy in which feeling is given precedence and 'the conditions for action and effort' are annulled.[27] It is contrary to the education of man because it leads one yet again to ignore the demands of others. There can be no relating to God in such a context, and no possibility therefore of becoming fully human: it is an ecstasy which [violently] tears man away from his essence, from his human nature.[28]

A related criticism of surrender to God by feeling alone is that this 'consolation of divine presence' casts humanity in the role of a helpless child who turns to God in the way that one might turn to a parent.[29] Again, the requirements of ethics are silenced, and God's nature is seriously compromised – he becomes an inhabitant of 'the child's heaven', a consoling father figure who satisfies our need for security. Levinas concurs with Murdoch's complaint that 'almost anything that consoles us is a fake'. A God of this kind will never live up to our expectations. Prayers will go unanswered, consolation will give way to frustration, and atheism will follow quickly in its wake. For Levinas this atheist response

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[26] "A Religion for Adults" in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand, (The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore), 14.

[27] *Ibid,* 15.

[28] *Ibid,* 15.

[29] "Loving the Torah more than God", trans. Sean Hand, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism,*143.

is a positive step: we are freed from an infantile conception of God,[30] and the way is paved towards a religion which accords due weight to the ethical – a 'religion for adults'.

So Murdoch and Levinas have much in common. They reject a conception of God which sets Him apart from the realm of the ethical and which makes His existence irrelevant to the question how we are to fulfil our humanity. Both attest the liberating effect of atheism. For Murdoch, it accepts that there is no God, and, unsurprisingly, she is happy to embrace such a standpoint, believing that it holds out the prospect of defining a conception of humanity which can give more adequate expression to the insights which drive traditional theism. However, she warns of the dangers of a natural consequence of atheism – 'a stripped and empty scene'[31] in which morality 'is pictured without any transcendent background'.[32] On this way of thinking – typical of existentialist atheism - morality is 'essentially centred on the individual',[33] and 'however grandiose the structure may be in terms of which a morality extends itself, the moral agent is responsible for endowing this structure with value'. [34] The result is a 'false transcendence' in which 'value' is attached to the human will.[35] On her preferred alternative, the individual is 'held in a framework that transcends him, and towards which he is tentatively moving', [36] and discovering what is morally good is a matter of discovering that reality, and 'integrating himself with it',[37] however 'impossibly difficult' that task might turn out to be.

Here then is Murdoch's account of the available alternatives. First, we have the God-involving option. This panders to our all too egoistic tendencies and makes no sense of our capacity to be good. Second, we have an atheist option which has a similar dehumanizing effect. It involves a commitment to the same egoistic self, and assumes likewise that Good,

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[30] *Ibid.*
[31] "Metaphysics and Ethics", in *Existentialists and Mystics* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1997), 63.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] *Ibid.*, 68.
[34] *Ibid.*, 71.
[35] "On 'God' and 'Good'", 58.
[36] "Metaphysics and Ethics", 70.
[37] *Ibid.*

if it enters the picture at all, must be constructed from the resources of this self. Finally, her own preferred standpoint is that in which the self inhabits a moral framework which is not of its own making and which grants it the possibility of transcending its egoistic preoccupations in order to acknowledge and to act upon the moral demands of others.

Levinas's take on atheism is rather more complex. We must reject the conception of God which Murdoch discards. However, he would question Murdoch's claim that there is no God on three scores. First, it is the response of one who is simply rejecting an infantile conception of God. Second, this rejection can lead the way to the true God. Third, it is only by embracing the true God that we shall vindicate the kind of position which, for Murdoch, can be articulated only by reference to the idea of goodness. For Levinas, we must move beyond the egoistic framework which remains in place provided that God is no more than a consoling father in the sky, and acknowledge our responsibilities to others. This movement requires that the self initially finds himself 'outside of God',[38] and cast back upon himself. This is the starting-point for genuine ethical engagement (no more passing the buck to an interventionist God). Yet, he allows also (once more in agreement with Murdoch) that this movement outward is not inevitable, that one can remain embroiled in a mode of existence in which egoistic concerns are paramount. He assigns Heidegger to this level, citing his analysis of *care* in *Being and Time* – an analysis which, as Levinas sees it, ignores the ethical dimension.[39]

So Murdoch and Levinas agree that reference to God can impede moral development. They agree also that there are atheist alternatives which have a similar dehumanizing effect, and that a satisfactory position must give due weight to our moral relations to others. Murdoch believes that this becomes available once we trade in God for Good, whilst acknowledging that this move doesn't come easy.[40] Levinas agrees that the comforting position is the easier one, but describes his preferred

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[38] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1979), 58.

[39] See *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1978), 44.

[40] "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 100.

alternative in God-involving terms: it requires trading in a false god for
the true God.

MURDOCH ON GOOD

Murdoch has more time for God than she sometimes lets on. She claims
that moral philosophy should retain a central concept which has all of
the characteristics we associate with God, where God 'was (or is) a *single
perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*'.[41]
What is a real object of attention? How does it relate to Murdoch's claim
that by attending to it we attain a 'true vision' of reality? The metaphor
of vision is liable to mislead, and it is easy to conclude that Murdoch has
in mind the self-enclosed mystical abandon which Levinas rejects. She
insists, however, that true vision occasions right conduct, and that what
she is getting at belongs to the moral life of the ordinary person. It is
perfectly fine to say that the background to morals is 'some sort of mysti-
cism', provided that this is understood aright. It involves no 'complicated
secret doctrine', it is not 'removed from ordinary life', and there is no 'elite
of mystics'. It is an 'unesoteric mysticism'[42] involving 'a non-dogmatic
essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good'.[43] This faith
resists strict proof, but becomes intelligible and defensible insofar as we
can relate to others in moral terms.[44]

    What of Murdoch's claim that the object of attention is transcendent?
She tells us that the idea of the transcendent belongs to morality 'in
some form or other', but is difficult to interpret and readily assumes
false forms.[45] We have already considered the false forms at work when
the transcendent assumes the guise of a consoling God, or when value
is taken to be a construction of the individual human will. But what is
true transcendence? Murdoch's discussion operates on several levels. One
theme is that, in moral contexts, attention is directed away from the self

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[41] "On 'God' and 'Good'", 55.
[42] "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", 92.
[43] "On 'God' and 'Good'", 74.
[44] *Ibid.*, 74.
[45] *Ibid.*, 58.

and towards the other. Responsiveness to the other furnishes one sense in which talk of transcendence might be appropriate, that we can transcend or move towards another person, and in doing so, leave egoistic concerns behind. Furthermore, insofar as the world of the egoist is limiting and not 'fully real', such transcendence leads us away from a false reality, but not into some weird supernatural realm. We simply leave behind the self-enclosed world of the egoist.

What of the idea that the Good towards which we are transcending is itself transcendent? Murdoch says: " 'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is'.[46] It means no such thing, of course, but we can read between the lines and discern what it might mean to say that Good is transcendent. It transcends the realm of selfish consciousness, which means that it cannot be constructed from such a level. The idea that Goodness transcends the realm of selfish consciousness clarifies some other things Murdoch says about Goodness, for example, that it is not in this world, and that it is 'incorruptible'. [47] It is not in this world since it does not belong to the realm of selfish consciousness, and it is incorruptible because it resists all attempts to be possessed or destroyed.

Elsewhere Murdoch suggests a more radical interpretation of the claim that Goodness is not in this world. She claims that it is 'to some extent mysterious'[48], that it is 'not visible',[49] and that 'it cannot be experienced, even when we see the unselfish man in the concentration camp.[50] She then asks: 'what is it for someone who is not a religious believer and not some sort of mystic, to apprehend some separate 'form' of goodness behind the multifarious cases of good behaviour?' [51]The implication now is that Goodness transcends not merely selfish consciousness but also the dimension in which right conduct finds expression. What could this mean? Murdoch is clear enough about what it could *not* mean. This separate form of Goodness is not to be comprehended in the terms

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[46] "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", 93.
[47] "On 'God' and 'Good', 60.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.,* 70.
[50] *Ibid.,* 60.
[51] *Ibid.,* 61.

assumed by the religious believer, treating it as a supernatural person. It is not the object of an esoteric mystical apprehension. It is not, however, visible. Goodness's invisibility puts paid to the idea that it could be an object of mystical awareness, but what kind of apprehension is at issue? Murdoch claims:

> The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing'….That 'for nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself. [52]

We can begin to see what is going on here by focusing upon the idea of being good 'for something', of being good for some purpose specifiable in non-moral terms. For example, I help you out because you've promised me a nice reward, or because I think God has promised me an even nicer reward. In such a case Goodness becomes, if not visible, then at least something comprehensible. It is a matter of getting rewards, pleasure, or whatever. By contrast, when we are good 'for nothing', these explanations are unavailable, and all that we can say is that we are good for the sake of Goodness. Once we reach this point, we are led towards the idea that Goodness itself is invisible and non-representable.

Much of this recalls G.E. Moore's arguments about the indefinability of 'Good', and one interpretation of these arguments is that they reject any attempt to analyse Goodness in non-moral terms. However, this allows the possibility of elucidating Goodness in *moral* terms, and Murdoch herself seems happy to concede this, when she talks of how we might clarify our understanding of Goodness by spelling out the relations between different virtues.[53] However, she clearly wants to go further, and uses Moore to illustrate her position:

> Good is indefinable… because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality. Moore was in a way nearer to the truth than he realized when he tried to say both that Good was *there* and that one could say nothing of what it essentially was. [54]

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[52] *Ibid.*, 71.
[53] *Ibid.*, 57-8.
[54] "The Idea of Perfection", in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 333.

Clearly, the force of the claim that we can say nothing about Goodness is not simply that it cannot be captured in non-moral terms, but that its very nature exceeds *any* attempt to grasp it. Elsewhere she says:

> There is a magnetic centre. But it is easier to look at the converging edges than to look at the centre itself. We do not and probably cannot know, conceptualise, what it is like in the centre.[55]

Goodness is unknowable in itself, but we respond to its magnetic pull and resist the more consoling alternatives thrown up by the egoistic self. We respond to its magnetic pull by relating to others in moral terms, and then we have an apprehension of the Good. This apprehension is 'apprehension of the individual and the real'.[56] For Murdoch, '"the individual" is the central concept of morality', and given the emphasis she places upon our moral relations to others, we naturally suppose that she means human individuals. This is borne out by some of her remarks. Having said that morality involves attention to individuals, she offers 'human individuals' as a case in point.[57] However, the individual *qua* central concept of morality clearly refers also to the 'separate form of goodness which lies behind the multifarious cases of good behaviour', this 'single supreme value concept' which orders and unifies our moral world,[58] and exerts its authority from an unknowable and invisible 'beyond'.[59]

Murdoch draws a threefold distinction between a self-enclosed realm of egoistic consciousness, an ethical dimension of behaving well towards others, and a separate form of Goodness. The second two levels cannot be reduced to or constructed from the first, but the relation between the second and third levels is less clear. A separate form of Goodness behind our multifarious good behaviour suggests that Goodness is metaphysically distinct from the second level of reality. She insists, however, that it is not an object of experience or thought, and can be glimpsed only via our ethical relations to others. So, apparently, it is metaphysically distinct

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[55] "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", 100. See also "On 'God' and 'Good'", 75.

[56] "The Idea of Perfection", in *Existentialists and Mystics,* 333.

[57] *Ibid,* 334.

[58] "On 'God' and 'Good'", 57-58.

[59] *Ibid.,* 62.

from the second level of reality, but epistemologically dependent upon it. Our knowledge of it, such as it is, is irreducibly practical: true vision occasions right conduct.

LEVINAS ON GOD

'The vision of God is a moral act. This optics is ethics'.[60] In saying this, Levinas offers a version of Murdoch's claim that 'true vision occasions right conduct'. Like Murdoch, he dissociates talk of vision from mystical flights of fancy, insisting that the central concept of morality – God – can be apprehended only via our ethical encounters with others. That this mode of apprehension can never do *complete* justice to the nature of God is a necessary and welcome corollary of God's transcendence.

Like Murdoch, he deploys several notions of transcendence. The first is our moving or transcending towards a dimension of reality in which we are morally responsive to others. This movement does not have its origin in selfish consciousness whose 'totalizing' constructions are pitched at the level of 'being'. Rather, it is effected from without, from a realm which is 'otherwise than being', 'infinite', and 'ethical',[61] and our responsiveness to which liberates us from the clutches of egoism.

The idea that this new dimension of reality is 'infinite' and 'otherwise than being' introduces a second notion of transcendence: that the reality towards which we are moving is itself transcendent. We recall that Murdoch deploys two notions of transcendence in this further sense, the first referring to an ethical dimension beyond selfish consciousness, the second referring to something beyond this moral dimension – Goodness in itself. It is here that Levinas seems to part company with Murdoch. First, he denies that there is anything beyond the level of moral engagement with others, whether a separate form of Goodness or a separate God, and he applies the descriptions which Murdoch applies to Good - infinite, invisible, etc. – to the human other. Levinas has three reasons for denying

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[60] "For a Jewish Humanism", trans. Sean Hand, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, op.cit.*, 275.

[61] *Existence and Existents*, 31.

that God is to be set apart from the realm in which we interact morally with others. It compromises the reality of God, it severs the connection between religion and ethics, and it compromises our humanity. It sounds odd to say that the reality of God is compromised if He is taken to be distinct from the realm in which we interact morally with others. It would be natural to protest that His reality is preserved only by maintaining this distinction, and the alternative reduces religion to ethics without remainder.

Levinas is not seeking to reduce religion to ethics if this means that ethics involves no reference to God. However, he believes that it is essential that God is not set apart from the ethical realm, as He is when treated as the Supreme Being who can be apprehended in terms which bear no relation to this realm. Such treatment puts God at the service of egoistic consciousness – he becomes, at best, a God for us; the apprehension it presupposes, insofar as it ignores aspects of our being which come into play when we become morally responsive to others, profoundly dehumanizes us. It is only by becoming morally responsive to others that we fulfil our humanity and stand in a proper relation to God:

> I approach the infinite insofar as I forget myself for my neighbour who looks at me…. A you is inserted between the I and the absolute He.[62]

> "Going towards God" is meaningless unless seen in terms of my primary going towards the other person.[63]

> Without the significance they draw from ethics, theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks. [64]

God is not a something to be apprehended in non-moral terms, but it doesn't follow that he is nothing. We 'go towards God' by going towards

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[62] *Collected Philosophical Papers,* ed. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1987), 72-3.

[63] *Face to Face with Levinas,* trans. Richard Cohen (University of New York Press: Albany, NY, 1986), 23.

[64] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* 79.

the other person: 'a you is inserted between the I and the absolute He'. This model seems bound to fall short of taking us all the way to God. Not for Levinas, however, for he characterizes the other in terms which eliminate this distance. How is this supposed to work?

LEVINAS ON THE OTHER

The moral relationship in which I stand towards the other 'puts me into question, empties me of myself',[65] by releasing me from the confines of egoism. This disruption of the self occurs when I encounter the *face* of the other, and 'the dimension of the divine opens forth in the human face'.[66] Why the *face* of the other? Levinas is not interested in physical appearance, but in the way in which the other:

> (o)ppose(s) himself to me beyond all measure, with the total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes… Here is established a relationship with the absolute Other, with the resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance…We call a *face* the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly, to an I.[67]

The notion of the face captures the sense in which the other exists not simply as someone to be used or possessed, but, rather, as someone who forbids such treatment. Our encounter with the other involves a moral awakening in which I discover my responsibility for the other: 'I see myself *obligated* with respect to the Other'.[68]

The idea that I am obligated with respect to the other is intended to have important implications for a proper understanding of God and man. We recall that the picture of God as an indulgent father figure not only compromises His reality but our humanity too, by making us into helpless children who take no responsibility for ourselves and for others. Levinas counters this with a God who 'renounces all aids to manifestation,

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[65] *Basic Philosophical Writings,* ed., Adriann Peperzak, Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, 1964), 52.

[66] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority,* 178.

[67] "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite", 110.

[68] "A Religion for Adults", 21-2.

and appeals instead to the full maturity of the responsible man'.[69] We can fulfil our humanity only if God does not 'manifest himself in any way as a help' or assume our 'duties and responsibilities'.[70] So the true God does not manifest Himself in any way as a help, and can be approached only via moral relations with others. The other is 'invisible',[71] the 'vision of the face is not an *experience*',[72] and 'to see a face is already to hear 'you shall not kill'.[73] The other is 'situated in the dimension of height, in the ideal, the Divine, and through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God'.[74]

It begins to sound as if the other just *is* God. Yet if this is so, what of the 'you' inserted between the 'I' and the 'absolute He'? If the 'you' just *is* God, the step from human other to God is surely eliminated. Then we end up compromising the reality either of God – by making Him human – or of the human other – by making him God. The first alternative suggests that Levinas has reduced religion to ethics, and that he differs from Murdoch only in the sense that he has transposed her descriptions of Goodness on to the human person. The second alternative suggests that he has inflated ethics into religion, and left us with nothing but a theological analogue of Murdoch's separable form of Goodness.

When Levinas tells us that the vision of the face is not an experience, he follows this up with the claim that it is 'a moving out of oneself, a contact with another being and not simply a sensation of self'. So, the force of saying that the other is invisible is to lend emphasis to this outward movement and to the moral significance that it bears – to see a face is already to hear 'you shall not kill'! As Murdoch herself agrees, true vision can never simply stare.

Even if true vision does not stare – whether at the face of the other, Goodness itself, or God Himself – questions remain: how does my relation to the other put me in touch with God? Clearly Levinas is not claiming that the other grants me a beatific vision of God. So ethics

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[69] "Loving the Torah More Than God", 143.
[70] "A Religion for Adults", 20.
[71] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 51.
[72] "Ethics and Spirit", trans. Sean Hand, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 10.
[73] *Ibid.*, 8.
[74] "A Religion for Adults", 17.

is not inflated into religion in *this* sense. Nor would it make sense to say on his behalf that the other just *is* God. For not only does he insist upon the fundamental difference between Creator and created, but he describes the other in terms which emphasise not just to such God-like attributes as 'height' and 'invisibility', but equally those which express her vulnerability and neediness. The other for whom I am responsible is an ordinary human being.

So, the other does not put me in touch with God in any of these ways. Rather, she opens up a horizon in which I become morally responsive and responsible. It is only at this point that the 'God of heaven' becomes accessible, and does so 'without losing any of His transcendence' and 'without denying freedom to the believer'. [75] The idea that God becomes accessible only via our moral relations to others shows that our relation to Him can never be *direct* and can only be ethically mediated. A direct relation with God would compromise His transcendence, and it would imply that we can be in communion with God whilst ignoring our moral responsibilities. We ignore these responsibilities only at the cost of compromising our humanity, and our humanity *is* compromised the moment we relate to a less than transcendent God. We can now appreciate the force of his claim that God – the true God - becomes accessible without losing any of His transcendence and without denying freedom to the believer.

Although Levinas rejects any attempt to bring God down to earth, his characterization of what it is to be truly human narrows the gap between God and man in a further respect. For he implies that, in our ethical encounters with others, we ourselves become more God-like: an equality is established 'between God and man at the very heart of their disproportion'.[76] Talk of equality between God and man makes it look as if Levinas again risks undermining the distinction between God and man. Thus our responsibility for the other involves 'the transubstantiation of the Creator into the creature', '(t)he 'I' is the one who, before all decision, is elected to bear all the responsibility for the World'.[77] He insists also

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[75] *Ibid.*,18.
[76] "Loving the Torah More Than God", 145.
[77] "A Man-God?", trans. Michael B. Smith, in *Entre Nous,* (Continuum Press: London, 2006), 50.

that this responsibility cannot be annulled: 'The world in which pardon is all-powerful becomes inhuman'. [78] Such talk seems to turn the subject into God. It also recalls certain existentialists, whose stance Murdoch calls 'an irresponsible and undirected self assertion'. But the qualification that the equality of God and man is established at the heart of their *disproportion* rules out a straightforward identification of the two, and differentiates Levinas from Murdoch's existentialist. But how then is it to be interpreted? And can it be squared with his insistence– shared by Murdoch - that the idea of an incarnate God is a scandal?[79]

For Levinas, the God of Christianity is a false, indulgent God who assumes our duties and responsibilities, and encloses us in our wickedness.[80] The Incarnation throws up someone who takes responsibility for our sins, guarantees salvation by proxy, and leaves us to bask in our inhumanity. The interpretation is massively flawed,[81] but it explains instantly why he rejects such a vision, and guides us towards an understanding of his own preferred take upon the idea of an incarnate God. The essential require-ment is that our status as morally responsible beings be accommodated, and it is met with the claim that we 'bear all the responsibility for the world'. This sounds terribly austere, and I shall consider some related worries in the following section. For the moment, it suffices to note that this austere vision 'in no way leads to the inhumanity of despair', because God 'is patient…lets time pass, awaits the return of man, his separation or regeneration.' But this regeneration must take place 'without the intervention of extrahuman factors other than consciousness of the Good, and the Law'. [82]

Where does this leave the idea that the creator is transubstantiated into the creature? By assuming our responsibilities and offering ourselves up to the service of others – even to the point of self-sacrifice - we become

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[78] "A Religion for Adults", 20.

[79] See Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006), 158-162, for a helpful discussion of Levinas's conception of incarnation.

[80] 'A *New Version of* Jesus Narrated by the Wandering Jew', trans. Sean Hand, in *Difficult Freedom*, 104.

[81] See Frans Jozef Van Beeck, *Loving the Torah more than God: Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism*, (Loyola University Press: Chicago), part III.

[82] "A Religion for Adults", 20.

equal partners with God. Not by *becoming* God, but by becoming more *like* God, and in becoming more like God we become truly human. In this sense Levinas is committed to the idea that the more divine we are, the more human we become.

GOD AND HUMANITY, AGAIN

The idea that we become more God-like by giving ourselves to others seems to have important implications for an understanding of God. For our divinity, such as it is, is now a matter of giving – of being there for others: 'I *am* for (the Other)'. [83] Now if self-giving makes us more like God, then the obvious conclusion is that God Himself is the supreme giver. Not, of course, in the sense that He gives out little prizes from on high, but in the sense that He gives Himself. What could this mean?

Nicholas Lash has argued that this way of thinking about God leads us away from the temptation to suppose that He is a thing, and expresses the idea that, in Him, the distinction between 'is' and 'does' gains no application: [84] 'the holy mystery of God simply *is* the giving, the uttering, the breathing, that God is said to be and do'. [85] Lash cites God's meeting with Moses at the burning bush, and God's response when asked 'Who shall I tell them sent me?' God's reply is 'I am who I am'. It is generally agreed that this reply is not to be interpreted in ontological terms, if this would imply that God is some kind of being. Another suggestion – taken seriously by Franz Rosenzweig – is that it is best translated as 'the one-who-is-there' i.e. there for us, coming towards us. [86] This interpretation makes sense of God's earlier claim 'you cannot see my face'. [87] It explains also why this meeting assumes such importance for Levinas, and why

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[83] "Ethics and Spirit", 7.

[84] 'The Impossibility of Atheism', 23.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] This is the position taken by Franz Rosenzweig in his 'A Letter to Martin Goldner', in M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig: *Scripture and Translation,* trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1994). Quoted in Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, 174.

[87] Exodus 33: 20.

he turns to it in discussing God's invisibility and unknowability.[88] But what more can be said about God's movement towards us? How is this movement to be related to our moral movement towards others? And how does all this fit with Levinas's claim that we can know Him only via this moral movement?

That God moves towards us, when coupled with the idea that we glimpse this movement only by responding morally to others, suggests two things. First, we are capable of partaking in this movement; second, the movement is irreducibly moral. Our partaking in this movement amounts to our becoming more God-like, and this lends further substance to the idea that God is a giver. God gives Himself to us in the sense that He makes us more God-like, and we become more God-like, and hence, more in touch with God, insofar as we become morally responsive beings.

We can agree that a human being should be morally responsive to others. However, both Murdoch and Levinas imply that this responsiveness requires a total suppression of the self, where this seems to rule out the possibility of having any concern for our own well-being. They suggest that a proper human being is a total giver, rather being a mixture of giver and taker. This idea is difficult to accept. A total suppression of the self would leave nothing remaining but the activity of giving – a consequence which is difficult to square with the fact that those who do good deeds usually want to do them themselves. [89] If a total giver is no more human than the mixture of giver and taker, there are important implications for our understanding and assessment of the claim that the more divine we are, the more human we become. For, assuming that God is a total giver, this claim must be rejected: we become human by becoming more divine only up to a point.

One alternative is to reject the assumption that God is a total giver. It is of fundamental importance to Levinas that God does not reduce

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[88] See, for example, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition", in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Blackwell: Oxford, 1989), 204.

[89] Compare also Benedict XVI: 'Man cannot always give, he must also receive'. *Deus Caritas Est*, Encylical Letter, given on December 25, 2005. Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

people to dependency. God retains the distance required for us to do the required moral work, he allows us to stand on our own two feet and assume responsibility for self and world. This provides one way of denying that God is a total giver. And it has important implications for what is required if we are to be God-like in our dealings with others. We become God-like to the extent that we withhold goods from others which would reduce them to dependency. The idea is important, but reasonable self-interest surely goes further. I can keep something back for myself, even if others would get more out of it than I will.

The question whether God could be self-interested in *this* sense must remain unanswered. However, we have said enough to raise difficulties with the idea that being human requires total suppression of the self, and that this suppression makes us more God-like. Murdoch can sidestep the theological difficulties by discarding God. However, she shares Levinas's antipathy for self-interest, and she retains a version of the claim that the more divine we are the more human we become. Her version of divinity consists in partaking in Goodness. It remains to be seen whether we can find a significant disagreement between them.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Murdoch locates the source of true morality 'in an austere and unconsoled love of the Good'.[90] Goodness comes from a beyond which resists all attempts to comprehend it; it can be grasped, if at all, only via our moral dealings with others. Here then, Murdoch says nothing with which Levinas could disagree. Levinas transposes the properties she ascribes to Goodness – invisibility, infinity, and so forth - onto the human other. His intention, we recall, is to capture the sense in which the other opens up a dimension where we can become morally responsive and thus move towards God. Murdoch agrees that Goodness can be 'envisaged' only in practical terms. Yet again then, there is no obvious discrepancy. Crucially, however, Murdoch insists that Goodness is impersonal, even whilst ac-knowledging that a dissenter might say:

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[90] "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", 92.

> To speak of Good in this portentous manner is simply to speak of the old
> concept of God in a thin disguise. But at least 'God' could play a real consol-
> ing and encouraging role. It makes sense to speak of loving God, a person,
> but very little sense to speak of loving Good, a concept. 'Good'…is not
> likely to inspire, or even be comprehensible to, more than a small number
> of mystically minded people who, being reluctant to surrender 'God', fake
> up 'Good' in his image, so as to preserve some kind of hope. [91]

Murdoch has little time for a consoling God, nor does Levinas. She resists
reserving Goodness for the mystical minority, in favour of a mysticism
belonging squarely within the province of any decent human being: it
offers 'the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in
our reflections upon the moral life'. Levinas is no friend of corruptible
pictures, but he refuses to surrender the idea of God. So have we finally
identified a substantive disagreement, a disagreement over whether the
central concept of morality is to be described in personal terms? This is
what Levinas says:

> A personal and unique God is not something revealed like an image in a dark
> room! The text I have just commented upon shows how ethics and principles
> install a personal relationship worthy of the name. Loving the Torah even
> more than God means precisely having access to a personal God against
> Whom one may rebel – that is to say, for whom one may die.[92]

Levinas's God is a personal God, but not a consoling God. God does not
manifest Himself as a help. Is He an encouraging God? In one sense, He
is not. He becomes present in His absence, and in His absence discourages
our love.[93] But in another sense He *is* encouraging, for He 'fills us with
higher thoughts', and leads us to fulfil our humanity, to become more
divine. Again, there is nothing here with which Murdoch could take
issue, for she happily allows that we can be divine in *this* sense. Can we
love Him? We can love him, Levinas claims, in the only way possible,
namely, by loving the Torah, i.e. by loving His moral demands. This is

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[91] "On 'God' and 'Good'", 72.
[92] "Loving the Torah more than God", 40. See also "Revelation in the Jewish
Tradition", 195-6.
[93] "Loving the Torah more than God", 39-40.

surely what Murdoch is getting at when she entertains the possibility of loving Good. Any difference in their positions beyond this point is surely extinguished in that inexhaustible and infinite reality which, as they both believe, must ever elude our grasp.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Murdoch and Levinas hold that we fulfil our humanity by relating to others morally, and only by so relating do we gain a partial grasp of something whose nature is unknowable. Both figures take themselves to be articulating a true form of religion. They agree also that the 'vision' they offer is austere when placed alongside the more consoling alternatives. Does it matter whether we describe the position in God-involving terms? In one sense, it does not. We can see why Murdoch refuses to do so. The inadequacy of her reasons for refusal might also recommend sympathy for Levinas's terminology. On the other hand, one could protest that his own conception of God is problematic, and his criticisms of Christianity wide of the mark. This gains more credence once we acknowledge his own take on incarnation, and ask whether a further nod in the direction of Christianity would be so disastrous. I suspect not.

Even if we could defend such a move, the question remains whether the position – however we describe it – is correct. I have argued that Murdoch and Levinas are wrong to require total suppression of the self. Does the modification this suggests have important theological implications? Well, it might lead us to reject the demand to become more God-like, if this requires that we become total givers. As I have said, however, what it really means to be God-like is unclear as it stands. And given Murdoch and Levinas's agreement on all the important issues, the advantages and disadvantages of God-talk are negligible.

One way of developing the issue is to ask whether we should accept a form of moral realism, and, if so, whether moral realists should talk like our two protagonists. Murdoch assumes that a morality with no transcendent background can only be 'centred on the individual'. But it remains open that the framework which transcends the individual is the collective product of her community. On this account, morality is

a collective creation, irreducible to egoism, yet it requires no transcendental background. This gap in her argument can perhaps be closed: First, we can ask why the individual should follow the shared norms of her community. Presumably she will be motivated to do so only if she has respect for others, and if she lacks such respect she will do as she pleases. So, serious participation in the norms of a community *presupposes* respect for others, and such respect cannot itself be a collective creation. Second, a paradigmatic collective creation is etiquette, and we distinguish etiquette from morality. So, morality is distinguished from what we acknowledge to be collective creations.

This much might lead us towards moral realism, but we are returned to the questions how we are to interpret the transcendence of morality, and whether our protagonists' interpretation is acceptable. They locate the central concept of morality beyond our grasp: Goodness has a transcendent source. Contemporary moral realists allow that there is always room for improvement in our moral beliefs, but few would find the kind of difficulty which would arise if the ultimate object of our moral quest were transcendent in the sense implied by Murdoch and Levinas.[94] They would also reject the idea that this object is personal, but their reasons, I suspect, would be based upon similar misunderstandings to those we found in Murdoch.

So *are* there any good reasons for saying that the source of Goodness is transcendent, or, if you prefer, that Goodness itself is transcendent? Murdoch implies that if it is not, then the normative force of morality – the authority of moral requirements – is undermined. Most contemporary moral realists would disagree, although John Cottingham takes this consideration seriously.[95] Where this leaves us is unclear. But if the present investigation has shown anything it is that we must continue to press such questions and that both sides, or all sides, should be prepared to enter into open-minded dialogue, and to do so without prejudging the issue at the outset by assuming that their opponents are half wits.

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[94] For the idea that room for improvement in our beliefs about a given realm is not only compatible with the objectivity of that realm, but a requirement of its objectivity, see Robert S. Tragesser, *Phenomenology and Logic* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1977).

[95] "The Source of Goodness", forthcoming. A shorter version of the argument is to be found in *Why Believe?*, (Continuum Press, London, 2009), ch 2.

We may not have reached the stage where we can say with confidence that atheism is impossible, but we can surely allow that the possibilities remain open, and that the first step towards progress is to be as clear as we can about the nature of the relevant disagreements. I hope to have shown that one seemingly massive disagreement is really just a matter of semantics.[96]

MORAL ERROR THEORY
AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Abstract. Moral error theory claims that no moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true. Atheism claims that the existence of evil in the world is incompatible with, or makes improbable, the existence of God. Is moral error theory compatible with atheism? This paper defends the thesis that it is compatible against criticisms by Nicholas Sturgeon.

WHAT IS MORAL ERROR THEORY?

Moral error theory consists in the following four claims. (1) Moral sentences have truth conditions and purport to be descriptions of what is the case.[1] That is, moral sentences are apt to be true or false, and are true (false) if what they describe to be the case is the case (is not the case). Hence, the correct analysis of moral sentences is cognitivist (as opposed to expressivist or prescriptivist).[2] (2) Moral sentences presuppose that there are objective moral values. That is, moral sentences are true only if there are objective moral values.[3] (3) There are no objective moral

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[1] A definition of 'moral sentence' is given in the last section that is adequate for the error theorist's purposes.

[2] What this paper (following fairly standard current philosophical usage) calls 'cognitivism', Mackie calls 'descriptivism'. He distinguishes descriptivist from non-cognitivist analyses of moral sentences, and endorses the former analysis in (1977) p.23. He gives his reason for rejecting non-cognitivism about moral sentences on pp. 32-3.

[3] '... ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this' Mackie (1977) p.35. (Pp.30-5 of Mackie's book is an extended discussion of the thesis that moral judgements are objective). He sums up the thesis at the end of his first chapter by saying that 'a belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language' (pp.48-9).

values. Nothing is morally good or bad.[4] Claims (1) and (2) are claims about the correct analysis of moral sentences. Claim (3) is a claim about ontology.[5] A corollary of these three claims is: (4) No moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true.[6] The reasoning is as follows. Moral sentences purport to describe what is the case (claim (1)), and presuppose that there are objective moral values (claim (2)). But those sentences thereby make a false presupposition (claim (3)). Given that a sentence is true only if it does not make any false presuppositions, no moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true. Hence claim (4).

In general, an error theory about a region of discourse D has the following structure:

(1*) Sentences $S_1, \dots, S_n$ of D are truth-apt. (Conceptual claim)
(2*) Sentences $S_1, \dots, S_n$ of D presuppose the truth of sentences stating that there are entities of kind K. (Conceptual claim)
(3*) There are no entities of kind K. (Ontological claim)
(4*) Therefore, none of the sentences $S_1, \dots, S_n$ of D is true. (Error theoretic conclusion)

Since the only error theory under discussion in this paper is moral error theory, in what follows call it simply 'error theory'. Error theory raises many interesting issues; this paper will address just one of them.[7] Nicholas Sturgeon has raised a surprising difficulty for error theory. This paper seeks to overcome that difficulty.

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[4] '… values are not objective, are not part of the fabric of the world' Mackie (1977) p.1.

[5] Mackie is explicit that it is an ontological thesis, and not a linguistic or conceptual one: Mackie (1977) p.18.

[6] '… although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false' Mackie (1977) p.35.

[7] For instance, error theory needs to explain why many people believe that there are morally good or bad acts. This follows from the general requirement on any error theory that it needs to explain why people are under (what it takes to be) certain pervasive illusions.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Error theorists may claim, along with other philosophers, that the exist-
ence of evil is incompatible with, or makes improbable, the existence of
God. But is it coherent both to be an error theorist and to claim that there
is a problem of evil? There is a natural way in which the error theorist
can apparently set up the problem of evil without asserting any moral
sentences and without re-interpreting moral discourse. Whether this way
is genuinely available to the error theorist, however, faces an innovative
challenge from Sturgeon. This section will state the natural way in which
the error theorist might set up the problem. The next section presents
Sturgeon's challenge.

Typically, treatments of evil distinguish two kinds of evil: moral evil
and natural evil. An evil event is a moral evil if it is an evil brought about
by an agent, otherwise it is a natural evil. Call an event a 'gratuitous' evil
if and only if it is an evil event for which there is no morally sufficient
reason.[8] An omnipotent and omniscient being would be able to prevent
that event from occurring, and would not have been morally justified
in not doing so. The problem of evil concerns gratuitous evils, whether
natural or moral. To set up the problem, the error theorist arguably need
not assert any moral sentences and need not have any moral standards.
He can present the problem in an *ad hominem* form against the theist.
The theist is typically not an error theorist about morality but is instead
a moral realist. By taking the theist's own moral standards, and by taking
moral sentences that the theist would assert, the error theorist can present
the problem as follows.

The theist asserts that God is morally perfect, and so would prevent
any (moral or natural) evil occurring if he had the power and intel-
ligence to do so and if he believed that there was no morally sufficient
reason for its occurring. If the theist then admits that *prima facie* there
is gratuitous evil of at least one of the two possible kinds in the world,
the error theorist claims – and invites the theist to concede – that the
preceding assertions are mutually incompatible. (Or, at least that they
are jointly very improbable). The error theorist concludes that any theist

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[8] For further discussion, see OConnor (1993) pp.391.

who is not an error theorist should revise his belief that God exists, and should believe that God does not exist.

Two points should be noted. First, it will be a working assumption of the paper that the problem of evil remains unsolved. Given that assumption, the key issue for the paper is whether the error theorist can consistently take the problem of evil to be a problem for theism.

Second, it was stated above that typically the theist is not an error theorist about morality but a moral realist. In fact, all that the error theorist needs to run his *ad hominem* is the premise that the theist is not a fellow error theorist. Besides that, it does not matter what meta-ethical view a given theist holds. He may accept divine command theory, or ethical naturalism, or prescriptivism, or expressivism.[9] The *ad hominem* can be run in terms of these, or any other, non-error theoretic meta-ethic. Take expressivism. Theism is compatible with expressivism, and the problem of evil could be re-stated in terms of this conjunction of views. The problem would run as follows. The theist who is an expressivist about ethics asserts that God has a strong con-attitude to suffering whether this suffering is brought about by agents or by nature, and so would prevent such suffering occurring if he had the intelligence and power to do so, and if he did not have a correspondingly strong pro-attitude to any of the consequences of that suffering. But, as the theist presumably concedes, there *is* such suffering.

The point here is that the *ad hominem* against the theist does not even have to assume that the correct analysis of moral sentences is cognitivist, despite the fact that it is the preferred analysis of the error theorist. This tells us something about the depth of the problem of evil – that it faces the theist whatever meta-ethical theory he holds, short of error theory. It also tells us something about how easily the problem can be set up – that it can be set up even by someone who believes that no moral judgement is (non-vacuously) true.

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[9] Cf. Tooley (1991) p.100.

STURGEON'S OBJECTION

Sturgeon agrees that the error theorist can present the problem as an *ad hominem*.[10] But he thinks that this tactic cannot meet various replies that the theist might make. To illustrate this, Sturgeon focuses on one particular reply available to the theist. This is the view that 'God's goodness is different':[11]

> [The response is that] when the theist says that God is wholly good he does not mean that God has anything like the purposes and tendencies that would count as good in a human being.

Mackie's response is to say that:[12]

> In effect, God is being *called* good, while at the same time he is being *described* as bad, that is, as having purposes and acting upon motives which in all ordinary circumstances we would recognise as bad. . . . Now certainly if such motives as these are ascribed to God, there will be no difficulty in reconciling his omnipotence with the occurrence of what would ordinarily be called evils. But to argue in this way is merely to defend a shadow, while abandoning the substance, of the traditional claim that God is good.

Sturgeon claims that Mackie's criticism is not an *ad hominem*. Mackie is criticising the theist's response on moral grounds. But then whose moral standards are at issue? There are two options. Either they are

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[10] Sturgeon (1995) pp.160, 162. Of course, Sturgeon was not the first philosopher who thought that the error theorist might present the problem of evil as an *ad hominem* against the theist. See, for example, Nelson (1991) p.376. But Nelson and Sturgeon then go on to make quite different, and novel, claims. Nelson claims that the argument must contain the premise that if there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil in the world, and Nelson queries whether the theist need accept that premise. (For an effective reply to Nelson, see O'Connor (1993)). Sturgeon's novel claim is that if the theist makes certain responses to the problem, the error theorist cannot reply to those responses in the form of an *ad hominem*. Nelson and Sturgeon's claims appear to be logically independent.

[11] Mackie (1982) p.156.

[12] Mackie (1982) p.156, his italics.

the theist's moral standards, or they are Mackie's. Sturgeon rejects the first option:[13]

> [Mackie] explicitly concedes that *if* we accept the proponents' somewhat alarming standards for divine moral perfection, the problem of evil disappears.

Therefore, the moral standards that Mackie is appealing to must be his own. But now the error theorist faces the charge of bad faith: namely, that of making moral claims despite denying that any moral claim is (non-vacuously) true.

Recall that the error theorist faced this charge when he initially presented the problem of evil. To avoid this charge, the problem of evil was then presented as an *ad hominem* objection to the theist. Sturgeon claims that the charge simply recurs when Mackie tries to block the theist's 'God's goodness is different' reply. *Either* the error theorist has no objection to the response, and thereby has to concede that the problem of evil can be solved by the theist, *or* he meets the response by appealing to his own moral standards, and thereby compromises his error theory. Either way a philosopher cannot both be an error theorist and maintain that theism faces the problem of evil.

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[13] Sturgeon (1995) p.163, his italics. Sturgeon's ground for rejecting the first option would also be a ground for rejecting the problem of evil as formulated in O'Connor (1993). O'Connor seeks to show that the problem can be formulated *without* the premise that (a) if there were an all-good God, he would want there to be little or no evil. O'Connor's re-formulation of the problem is given by the following conjunction (b)-(d): (b) If God, as defined in traditional theism, exists, he would not want the world to contain unjustified natural evil, i.e. any natural evil which had no morally sufficient reason for existing; (c) claim (b) is basic in both theism and atheism and all formulations of the argument from (natural) evil; and (d) there exists types or tokens of *prima facie* gratuitous natural evil. (See O'Connor (1993) pp.391-2). Sturgeon's challenge would then be that, *according to the 'God's goodness is different' view*, (d) is false; how would the error theorist reply? Meeting this challenge takes us beyond what O'Connor establishes in his excellent paper.

HOW NOT TO DEFEND ERROR THEORY

How should the error theorist respond to Sturgeon's challenge? One suggestion runs as follows. The error theorist claims that there are no objective moral values because such values would have to be 'entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe'.[14] Such values would be, as Mackie puts it, metaphysically queer. Now, the argument continues, the concept of God is such that, if God existed, God would be morally perfect. But that is to say that if God existed, God would have a metaphysically queer property. The response concludes that Mackie's argument from metaphysical queerness against the existence of objective moral values carries over as an argument against the existence of God.

The above response has two demerits. First, it concedes ground to Sturgeon. Let's grant that the error theorist can make a case for atheism on grounds *other than* that of the problem of evil. What Sturgeon denied was that the error theorist can make a case for atheism on the basis of the problem of evil. There is nothing in the above response which challenges Sturgeon's denial. And, as will be argued below, Sturgeon's denial *is* open to challenge. Second, and more importantly, although the suggested response provides an argument for atheism, the argument assumes error theory about morality. That is not an assumption which any theist would accept. So the argument would have no force against the theist. In contrast, the strength of the problem of evil is that it depends on premises all of which (at least many) theists accept. So there seems to be a dialectical advantage in arguing against theism on grounds of the problem of evil rather than on grounds of error theory.

Sturgeon himself considers a different response on behalf of the error theorist. This involves distinguishing between what Sturgeon calls the theist's *express* standards – the standards by which the theist would sincerely judge the issue, 'perhaps after minimal discussion or questioning' – and his *implicit* standards – the ones by which he would judge the issue 'if he were to subject his views to an appropriate, perhaps quite

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[14] Mackie (1977) p.38.

idealized, process of reflection and rational adjustment'.[15] Mackie might then be seen as offering an *ad hominem* argument that appeals to the theist's implicit standards. But Sturgeon thinks that this suggestion fails because of its 'optimism about the rational resolvability of deep evaluative disagreements'.[16] That is, the suggestion optimistically assumes that reflection and rational adjustment would lead the theist to form just those standards that Mackie appealed to in his reply to the 'God's goodness is different' view. But such optimism, Sturgeon claims, would be alien to the error theorist.

It is unclear why Sturgeon makes this last claim. The optimistic suggestion is not incompatible with error theory. Nor does error theory make the suggestion more improbable than it antecedently is. The most that Sturgeon should claim is that error theory is not committed to the suggestion, and that there is independent reason to reject the suggestion. This independent reason would draw upon some of the reasons for rejecting pragmatist accounts of truth.[17]

A better reply is open to the error theorist. But before presenting this way, we need first to clarify various issues. That is the task of the next section.

CLARIFYING THE ISSUES

Call the theist's opponent 'the atheologian'. The atheologian may be a moral realist – call him 'the moral realist atheologian' – or he may be an error theorist – call him 'the error theoretic atheologian', or 'the error theorist' for short. Standardly, when the problem of evil has been presented by atheologians, it has been presented by moral realist atheologians. Theists have made various replies to these presentations. To focus matters, let's consider just one such reply: the view that God's goodness is different. Standardly, when atheologians have responded to this reply (and indeed to any others), the responses have been made by moral realist

[15] Sturgeon (1995) p.166.
[16] Sturgeon (1995) p.167.
[17] See, for example, Plantinga (1982) pp.64-7.

atheologians. What is non-standard is for error theorists to present the problem of evil and to respond to theists' replies to the problem. This dialectical situation raises the following three questions:

(Q1) What responses can the moral realist atheologian make to the 'God's goodness is different' view?
(Q2) How cogent are those responses?
(Q3) Can the error theorist consistently make the same (or relevantly similar) responses to the 'God's goodness is different' view?

(Q1) concerns a purely descriptive issue. The moral realist atheologian can make at least two responses to the 'God's goodness is different' view.

One response is the Objection from Bad Semantics. The objection runs as follows. The pattern of use of the predicate 'is good' among competent language users fixes the meaning of 'is good'. That same pattern of use is present in predications of that term of humans as it is in predications of that term of God. Those facts disconfirm the theist's claim that 'is good' is ambiguous between being predicated of human beings and being predicated of God. Therefore, the proponent of the 'God's goodness is different' view involves an incorrect view about the semantics of 'is good'. (Since a competent user of a language can be mistaken about the semantics of terms in his language, this conclusion does not imply that the theist in question is not a competent user of 'is good').

The other response is the Objection from Bad Methodology. Sturgeon notes that:[18]

> . . . it does often seem to atheists that theists, in these debates, bend their standards of evaluation unreasonably to save the deity and the deity's works from adverse judgment . . .

We should not focus on what Sturgeon calls the theist's express and implicit standards. Instead, taking a leaf from the above passage, we should focus instead on the standards that the theist uses outside of the debate, and the standards that he adopts during the debate. Call these the theist's *pre-debating standards* and his *debating standards*, respectively.

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[18] Sturgeon (1995) p.165.

(We can allow that the latter are what Sturgeon calls the theist's express standards). The Objection from Bad Methodology is that the 'God's goodness is different' view involves a case of double standards. Prior to the debate, the theist uses one set of standards in forming moral beliefs. These standards are used in stating what Mackie was quoted as calling 'the substance' of the traditional claim that God is good. But when the debate is engaged, and the problem of evil arises, the dialectical pressure is on. The theist who uses the 'God's goodness is different' defence shifts standards to side-step the problem. Prior to the debate, he uses one set of standards to judge human actions. To avoid the problem of evil, he uses another set to judge God's actions.

But what exactly is the objection? So what if the theist shifts his view of divine goodness as a result of the problem of evil? It is widely accepted that a theory may undergo revision or refinement as it undergoes experimentation. The revision can deepen our understanding. Can't the theist say something similar? Theists have long been aware of, and troubled by, the existence of apparently gratuitous evil. The concept of God is modified in full awareness of this.

It is moot, however, what modifications are available. Peter van Inwagen for one says that 'two features that God is supposed to have are "non-negotiable": that he is omnipotent and morally perfect'.[19] That aside, we should distinguish between the motivation for revising a theory and the methodological permissibility of doing so. Not all the revisions that might be made in a theory are methodologically permissible. In particular, *ad hoc* changes in a theory are methodologically impermissible. It is a generally accepted methodological principle that belief systems should not be defended on *ad hoc* grounds. Now there is an issue of when a defensive move is *ad hoc*. For example, it is not *ad hoc* for a theist to appeal to the free will defence as a response to the problem of evil, because, quite independently of that defence, it is a key claim of theism that human beings have free will. The Objection from Bad Methodology is that the 'God's goodness is different' view is *ad hoc*. The theist adopts the view only in order to defend his belief both that God exists and that gratuitous evil exists. This last claim can be supported in the following way.

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[19] van Inwagen (2004) p.59.

Suppose that T and T^* are rival theories. Suppose too that T faces a problem that T^* does not, and that T is changed solely in order to avoid that problem. Lastly, suppose that the change in question makes T more complicated than T^* without otherwise making T a better theory than T^*. Complicating a theory does not make the theory worse if the complication increases (say) the explanatory power of that theory. But complicating a theory without introducing any compensating benefit makes the theory worse. Such a change is what is meant by an *ad hoc* change in T. Now theism and atheism are rival theories. Initially, neither theory takes the phrase 'morally good' to be ambiguous between predications to human actions or to divine actions (if there are any). Theism then faces the problem of evil. The view that 'God's goodness is different' reinterprets 'morally good' as being ambiguous between predications to human actions and predications to divine actions. But the only reason for this reinterpretation is so that theism avoids the problem of evil. Moreover, atheism neither faces the problem of evil nor reinterprets 'morally good' as ambiguous. In this respect, the 'God's goodness is different' view makes theism a more complicated theory than atheism. Furthermore, it does so without otherwise making theism a better theory than atheism. Therefore, adopting the 'God's goodness is different' view would be to make an *ad hoc* change in theism.

This completes the answer to (Q1), the descriptive question of what responses the moral realist atheologian can make to the 'God's goodness is different' view. (Q2) is the evaluative question of how good those responses are. This paper does not attempt to answer that question. So it will not assume that the two responses just mentioned succeed. Indeed, at least for the sake of argument, the paper will assume that the *two responses completely fail, and that the theist can show why they completely fail*. The task of this paper is to meet Sturgeon's challenge. Whether or not those responses by the error theorist are good ones, Sturgeon claimed that the error theorist cannot consistently make those responses. That challenge was encapsulated in (Q3), the question of whether the error theorist can consistently make the same (or relevantly similar) responses to the 'God's goodness is different' view. It is to that question that we now turn.

HOW TO DEFEND ERROR THEORY

Sturgeon assumes that the error theorist cannot consistently make first-order moral claims – claims such as 'Torturing babies is morally wrong' or 'Giving to charity is good'. Indeed, he apparently assumes that the error theorist has to eschew moral language altogether. Those assumptions are debatable. It has been argued that it *is* consistent for the error theorist to assert first-order moral claims.[20] Alternatively, it can be argued that even if the error theorist cannot assert moral sentences, he need not eschew moral language.[21] The error theorist can be a fictionalist about morality: he can treat morality as a useful pretence. He can pretend to assert first-order moral claims without believing them, and still reap the benefits of participating in moral practice. Nevertheless, we need not press these points. It will simplify matters if we take Sturgeon's assumptions to be correct, and suppose that the error theorist cannot consistently make (or even pretend to make) moral claims, and that he must eschew moral language. Making this concession makes the defence of error theory even more difficult, and so more interesting.

The error theorist can straightforwardly and consistently co-opt the responses that the moral realist atheologian makes to the theist's replies to the problem of evil. As a test case, let's consider the two responses given above to the 'God's goodness is different' view. Take the responses in turn.

The first response was The Objection from Bad Semantics. This objection says that competent language users display the same pattern of use when they apply 'is good' to humans as when they apply it to God, and that this (alleged) fact about word usage disconfirms the theist's claim that 'is good' is ambiguous between the two kinds of predication. It follows that the 'God's goodness is different' view involves an incorrect view about the semantics of 'is good'. Now we have granted Sturgeon's assumption that the error theorist himself does not make any first-order moral claims. But it should be clear that the above objection does not require that he makes any first-order moral claims. In general, the objection does not require that

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[20] Burgess (1998).
[21] See, for example, Joyce (2001).

any proponent of it uses the predicate 'is good' in first-order moral claims. What it requires is that any proponents who are competent language users employ 'is good' with the same pattern of use when they apply it to humans as when they apply it to God. The error theorist abstains from applying 'is good' to anything. Therefore, it is vacuously true that he meets this requirement. Consequently, the error theorist can consistently level the Objection from Bad Semantics.

The second response was the Objection from Bad Methodology. This objection says that the only reason for adopting the 'God's goodness is different' view is to avoid the problem of evil, and that that makes the view *ad hoc*. An *ad hoc* view is thereby a complicated view, and such a view should not be adopted if a rival and simpler view is available (here: atheism). The objection concludes that the 'God's goodness is different' view should be rejected.

Again, we are not assuming that the error theorist has any moral standards. But he can consistently comment on what moral standards others have. In particular, he can comment on the (alleged) fact that the theist shifts between his pre-debating standards and his debating standards solely in order to avoid the problem of evil. That is, the error theorist can comment that, prior to the debate, the theist uses one set of standards to judge human actions, and, solely to avoid the problem of evil, he uses another set to judge God's actions. Such a shift of standards is *ad hoc*. By arguing in this way, the error theorist runs The Objection from Bad Methodology as an *ad hominem* argument against the theist. The error theorist does not illicitly appeal to moral standards of his own. He notes the moral standards of the theist, and criticises their shifting nature on the basis of the methodological standard that theories should not be *ad hoc*.

It might be replied that the above methodological principle is normative in some sense, and so it is not obvious that the error theorist can consistently employ the principle. But that reply makes a puzzling conflation of the normative with the moral. Granted, moral sentences are normative sentences, and the error theorist asserts that no moral sentence is (non-vacuously) true. But since moral sentences form a proper sub-set of the normative sentences, it does not follow that the error theorist is committed to asserting that no normative sentence is (non-vacuously)

true. The above methodological principle is a normative claim without being a moral claim. So, in appealing to that principle, the error theorist is not appealing to 'his own moral standards'.

But consider a worst case scenario for the error theorist. Perhaps Mackie's reasons for being an error theorist about morality – the arguments from relativity and from queerness – ramify and provide arguments for being an error theorist about normative claims in general. That is, there are no evidential, moral or prudential reasons.[22] All the same, the error theorist can still run an *ad hominem* against the theist. The theist thinks that belief systems should not be defended on *ad hoc* grounds. The error theorist can argue that, by the theist's own standards of argument, the 'God's goodness is different' view is defended on *ad hoc* grounds. By those standards, the theist should not accept that view.

As noted in connection with (Q2), it is further matter whether the Bad Semantics or Bad Methodology Objections are cogent – but that is not the issue here. Whether or not either objection is cogent, they are available to the moral realist atheologian if and only if they are available to the error theorist. Sturgeon's contention that the error theorist cannot consistently respond to various theistic replies to the problem of evil is mistaken.

THE PROBLEM OF EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

The previous section defended the error theorist's tactic of framing the problem of evil as an *ad hominem* objection to the theist. In closing, it should be pointed out that another tactic is available to the error theorist. He can argue as follows: 'Call an act of suffering gratuitous if the suffering was not the consequence of any human being's action or omission. Suppose God exists. As theists themselves typically agree, if God exists, God is an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly rational being. Such a God would have the overriding loving desire to prevent gratuitous suffering; would know how to prevent such suffering; would have the power to prevent it; and would have rational self-control sufficient to act

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[22] See Black (1989-90).

on that desire. Yet there is gratuitous suffering in the world, as witnessed by (say) cancerous animals. The preceding claims are mutually incompatible. (Or, at least they are jointly improbable)'. Stating the problem of evil in this way is to state it in non-moral terms. So the argument does not have to be construed as an *ad hominem* against the theist. The error theorist can consistently assert the conjunction of the premises and, on that basis, assert the conclusion. Perhaps it would be a misnomer to call this a statement of the problem of *evil*. But other labels are forthcoming. We might call it the problem of emotional neglect: the problem of why a supremely loving being would neglect emotionally distressed beings, despite having the knowledge and power to care for them.

The point here is that even if Sturgeon had shown that the error theorist cannot present the original problem of evil in an *ad hominem* form, there is a variant problem that the error theorist can devise that is neither an *ad hominem* nor vulnerable to Sturgeon's objection. Note that it would be irrelevant to respond to the variant problem by appealing to a morally charged view, such as the 'God's goodness is different' view, since the variant problem is presented without using any moral terms.

It might be objected that it is not obvious that a claim such as 'an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful being would prevent pain or injury occurring' is a non-moral claim. To address this concern we need to define what a moral sentence is. The following two-stage procedure is available. In the first stage, we identify the moral terms – the so-called 'thin moral' terms (of English).[23] These terms are defined by being listed. The list

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[23] The so-called 'thick' moral terms (of English) include such terms as 'courageous', 'nasty', 'considerate', and 'cheerful'. This paper does not define the class of thick moral terms. It seems to be an open issue whether an error theorist should hold that sentences ascribing thick moral terms to subjects are globally false. The reason for this is that it seems to be an open issue how thick moral terms should be analysed. For instance, it might be suggested that when speakers ascribe a thick moral term to a subject they both ascribe a non-moral property to the subject, and implicate that the subject has a certain moral property. The speakers can cancel the implicature by stating that they are moral error theorists. If this suggestion is tenable, then the error theorist can believe and assert sentences ascribing thick moral terms to subjects. Suppose an error theorist and a moral realist each utter the sentence 'Bullying is nasty'. They each say that bullying has a certain non-moral property. What is said by an utterance contributes to the truth conditions of that utterance. What is said by an utterance is (roughly) the statement made by that utterance. In that sense, the error theorist and the moral realist say the same thing: they make the same statement by

includes terms such as 'morally good', 'morally right', 'morally ought', and so on. This method of definition is familiar: logic texts frequently identify logical constants by listing them. In both cases, the moral and the logical, the list produced is a short finite one, and there is general agreement about what goes on the list and what does not. The method is valuable if it is agreed to be extensionally correct. Having completed the first stage, we proceed to the second stage: that of defining a moral sentence. This is done as follows. A sentence S is a moral sentence if and only if either (1) S is an atomic sentence consisting of the ascription of a moral term to an entity, or (2) S entails a sentence satisfying (1). The notion of an atomic sentence as used here is to be understood in the following intuitive way. A sentence is a well-formed sequence of syntactical items. S is an atomic sentence if and only if S is a sentence, and no sub-sequence of the syntactical items from which S is formed is itself a sentence. (A sentence such as 'It is morally good to be charitable' is elliptical for 'It is morally good to perform charitable acts', wherein a moral term ('is morally good') is ascribed to the members of a class of events, namely the class of charitable acts).

   Let us now apply the suggested definition of a moral sentence to the target sentence, 'an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful being would prevent gratuitous suffering'. The target sentence does not include any moral term as understood above. *A fortiori*, the sentence does not consist in the ascription of such a term to an entity. Nor does it entail any sentence that consists in the ascription of a moral term to an entity. On these grounds, the target sentence should not be classified as a moral sentence. Therefore, the problem of emotional neglect can be stated without using any moral sentences.[24]

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uttering the sentence in question. What is meant by an utterance may go beyond what is said by that utterance. In that sense, the error theorist and the moral realist do not mean the same when they utter the sentence in question. One of them preserves an implicature of the utterance that the other does not.

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ORDINARY MORALITY IMPLIES ATHEISM

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Abstract. I present a "moral argument" for the non-existence of God. Theism, I argue, can't accommodate an ordinary and fundamental moral obligation acknowledged by many people, including many theists. My argument turns on a principle that a number of philosophers already accept as a constraint on God's treatment of human beings. I defend the principle against objections from those inclined to reject it.

In his *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels remarks that "it isn't unusual for priests and ministers to be treated as moral experts.... Why [he asks] are clergymen regarded in this way? ... In popular thinking, morality and religion are inseparable: People commonly believe that morality can be understood only in the context of [theistic] religion."[1] This popular association of morality with theism may explain why atheists showed up as the single most distrusted minority group in a recent opinion survey conducted in the United States, much to the surprise of those who conducted the survey.[2] Despite that popular association, I'll argue that theism and ordinary morality are incompatible: theism can't accommodate an ordinary and fundamental moral obligation acknowledged by many people, including many theists. My argument turns on a principle that a number of philosophers already accept as a constraint on any plausible theodicy. I'll defend the principle against objections from those inclined

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[1] James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 3d. ed., 1999), 53–54. Although Rachels gives the title "Does Morality Depend on Religion?" to the relevant chapter of his book, he restricts his discussion of religion to (Christian) theism: "In discussing the connection (or lack of connection) between morality and religion, I will focus on one religion in particular, Christianity" (55).

[2] Penny Edgell, *et al.*, "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211–34.

to reject it. I won't *define* "ordinary morality." Indeed, I don't think it has a sharp definition. But I will indicate from time to time some of the obligations that belong uncontroversially to it. There are hard cases of course, but here I'm referring to cases we typically regard as easy, such as the obligation we at least sometimes have to prevent easily preventable, horrific suffering by an innocent person. To allude to an actual case, if you can easily and at no risk to yourself prevent the total immolation of a small boy who is about to be set on fire by his abusive father,[3] you ought to prevent it. That obligation is the sort of thing I mean by "ordinary morality," and it implies atheism.

THEODICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Ordinary morality conflicts with traditional theism when conjoined with a principle widely regarded as a constraint on any plausible theodicy. Jeff Jordan calls the principle "theodical individualism," which I'll use the initials "TI" to abbreviate. I formulate the principle as follows:

> (TI) Necessarily, God permits undeserved, involuntary human suf-
> fering only if such suffering ultimately produces a net benefit
> for the sufferer.[4]

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[3] In 1983, Charles Rothenberg lost a child-custody dispute with his ex-wife. In an attempt at revenge on her, Rothenberg then kidnapped their six-year-old son, David, and as the boy lay sleeping doused him with kerosene and set him on fire. David suffered third-degree burns covering ninety percent of his body and despite numerous surgeries remains terribly disfigured to this day. Had you been in a position easily, and at no risk to yourself, to prevent David's immolation, ordinary morality would have obligated you to prevent it.

[4] The modal operator "necessarily" signals the fact that TI isn't a merely contingent moral constraint on a perfect being. It also forestalls the objection posed by an anonymous referee that my argument jumps illicitly from the indicative conditional (a) "If we *don't* prevent undeserved, involuntary suffering, then that suffering will ultimately benefit the sufferer" to the subjunctive conditional (b) "If we *weren't* to prevent undeserved, involuntary suffering, then that suffering would ultimately benefit the sufferer." Granted that indicative conditionals don't in general imply subjunctive conditionals, that fact is irrelevant here: the necessity operator in TI implies that regardless of what we do (or were

TI contains the qualifier "undeserved" in order to satisfy retributivists who think people sometimes deserve to suffer; if you think people never deserve to suffer, simply ignore the qualifier. Jordan's formulations of TI don't explicitly exclude suffering willingly borne by human beings for altruistic or other reasons: for example, the pain of donating bone marrow to help an anonymous leukemia patient. With the qualifier "involuntary," I exclude such suffering from the scope of TI because I see nothing wrong with the idea of God's permitting undeserved suffering that people deliberately choose to endure for, say, the benefit of others without gaining for themselves a net benefit from it.[5]

As a constraint on theodicies, TI is meant to be read as neutral regarding the existence of God, and Jordan finds it endorsed by both theistic and anti-theistic philosophers of religion, including William L. Rowe, Marilyn McCord Adams, William P. Alston, Eleonore Stump, and Michael Tooley.[6] He regards Stump's view as representative of the consensus: "if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the

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to do) any undeserved, involuntary suffering that God permits will (or would) ultimately produce a net benefit for the sufferer.

[5] If you disagree and think that a perfect God wouldn't allow people willingly to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others but would instead intervene to make such sacrifice unnecessary, then you're committed to a constraint even stronger than TI.

[6] Jeff Jordan, "Divine Love and Human Suffering," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 169–78; 172, 177 nn. 13, 23. The case of Alston is a bit complicated. His position seems to require that the sufferer, on due reflection, would from her own perspective "joyfully endorse" the claim that the goods obtained were *worth* the suffering on her part that was necessary for obtaining them, a position that appears to allow for the combination of *willingly borne* undeserved suffering and *adequately compensated* undeserved suffering; see William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 97–125; 112. Because the sufferer willingly bears her suffering (at least retrospectively), I don't believe that Alston's position conflicts with TI as formulated here. Peter van Inwagen offers a theodicy that might be thought to deprive TI of any *application*: on van Inwagen's view, all human beings *deserve* the suffering they experience, by virtue of early humanity's "primordial act of turning away from God," which produced "ruin … in some way inherited by all of their descendants"; see "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 96–122; 99–100. Although I won't take time here to establish the claim, I believe that van Inwagen's historical account, even if accepted, fails to show that no human suffering is ever undeserved: TI has work to do after all.

evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not produce without the suffering."[7] Like Stump's use of it, TI's use of the word "produces" is significant, because otherwise we allow that God's mere compensation of the sufferer—say, in a blissful afterlife—can justify God's permission of suffering even if the suffering bears no necessary connection to the good that compensates for it. Without such a connection, the good may *compensate for* the suffering but can't *morally justify* God's permission of it. Consider an analogy to our ordinary moral practice. My paying you money after harming you may compensate for my harming you, but it doesn't justify my harming you. Only something like the necessity of my harming you in order to prevent your harming me or an innocent third party has a chance of justifying my behavior: some necessary connection must hold between the harm and the benefit.[8]

Because he sees the combination of TI and theism as potentially corrupting ordinary morality, Jordan advises theists to reject TI.[9] While I believe he's correct that we can't consistently accept theism, TI, and the demands of ordinary morality, it isn't at all clear that TI is the guilty member of that triad, and Jordan never in fact shows that it is. On the contrary, I'll argue, TI is just as plausible as it has been taken to be by the philosophers Jordan opposes, in which case we're left with a contest between theism and ordinary morality.

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[7] Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 392–423; 411–13, quoted in Jordan, "Divine Love and Human Suffering," 172.

[8] Ordinary moral practice allows my innocence in *accidentally* harming you to *excuse* my harming you but not, I think, to justify my harming you. In any case, however, the notion of accidental harm has no place in the present discussion, since we may presume that an omnipotent and omniscient God's permission of harm is never accidental.

[9] Others have offered the same advice, as Jordan acknowledges ("Divine Love and Human Suffering," 177 n. 20). They include William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 23–44. These philosophers recognize the inconsistency of the triad containing ordinary morality, theism, and TI. They try to resolve it by rejecting TI, but they fail to see that TI follows from the combination of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection attributed to God by traditional theism.

AN ARGUMENT FOR ATHEISM

Consider the following argument for atheism. We start with a premise that's plainly true given the content of TI:

(1) If God exists and TI is true, then, necessarily, all undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer.[10]

Next comes a conditional claim similar to one endorsed by Jordan:

(2) If, necessarily, all undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer, then (a) we never have a moral obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering or (b) our moral obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering derives entirely from God's commands.

As Jordan puts it, the antecedent of (2) in effect "guarantees the operation of a kind of fail-safe device that renders every instance of [undeserved, involuntary] human suffering an instrumental good for that sufferer."[11] We know that some vaccines can cause serious side-effects, but suppose that an abundantly available vaccine were, despite the painfulness of receiving it, known to produce a net benefit (the painfulness included) for everyone who receives it. Suppose, further, that no less painful procedure produces the same benefit. Under those circumstances, how could we ever have a moral *obligation* to prevent vaccination? I can't see how we could.

The same goes for undeserved, involuntary human suffering if we assume both theism and TI: we never have an obligation to prevent it

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[10] Where 'G' abbreviates 'God exists' and 'B' abbreviates 'All undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer', the reader may notice that my inference from TI to (1) is a case of inferring 'G ⊃ □B' from '□(G ⊃ B)'. While not in general valid, the inference is licensed in this case by the fact that G itself is a noncontingent statement: 'G' implies '□G'. In all standard modal logics, 'G ⊃ □G' and '□(G ⊃ B)' jointly imply 'G ⊃ □B'.

[11] Jordan, "Divine Love and Human Suffering," 174.

unless God's commands somehow give us such a duty. Consider the case (alluded to earlier) of David Rothenberg, the six-year-old boy set on fire by his abusive father. If God exists and TI is true, then necessarily David ultimately benefits whenever God allows him to experience undeserved, involuntary suffering of such an intense kind. Thus, even if we could easily prevent his suffering, our allowing it is *always* like allowing him a vaccination known to be for his own net good. Granted, it may be that God *wants* us to prevent the suffering, but if we fail to prevent it David will be better off as a result. I don't say that TI and theism give us either permission or an obligation to *cause* his undeserved, involuntary suffering—although a case can be made for that stronger claim—only that TI and theism relieve of us of any obligation to prevent it.

Some may object that our duty to respect the autonomy of persons sometimes gives us an all-things-considered obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering (even if we know it benefits the sufferer) precisely because the suffering is undeserved and involuntary. This objection fails, however. For suppose that David were unwilling to receive a vaccination of the kind I described above: abundantly available and known to produce a net benefit (painfulness included) for everyone who receives it. It is by no means clear that anyone has an ordinary moral obligation to *prevent* the vaccination, despite six-year-old David's unwillingness to receive it. Since we have an ordinary moral obligation to prevent David's immolation but no such obligation to prevent his vaccination, autonomy does no work here, for it's equally present (or absent) in both cases.

Others may object that ordinary morality imposes no "positive" duties at all, including a duty to intervene on David's behalf. While I think such a view seriously misrepresents ordinary morality, it poses no threat to my thesis in this essay, since if need be one can plausibly argue that TI and theism together give us permission, even perhaps a duty, to *cause* David's suffering—a result unacceptable even to those who admit only "negative" moral duties of non-interference.

One might suppose that disjunct (a) in the consequent of (2) holds only for those who *accept* the antecedent of (2): you lack an obligation to prevent suffering only if you *believe* that suffering always benefits

the sufferer. I won't try to settle here the complex issue of how our obligations depend on our beliefs. In any case, however, surely ordinary morality presupposes that our obligation to prevent suffering doesn't depend essentially on the *false* belief that suffering is often bad for the sufferer. On the contrary, we ordinarily recognize an obligation to prevent suffering at least partly *because* we presume that suffering often produces no net benefit for the sufferer, and thus ordinary morality *commits* its adherents to disbelieving the antecedent of (2). Hence, if theism implies the antecedent of (2), as I'll argue it does, then theism and ordinary morality conflict.

One might deny that theism implies the antecedent of (2) by arguing that theism accepts (i) our common presumption that suffering often produces no net benefit for the sufferer in *this* life but not (ii) the claim that suffering often produces no net benefit for the sufferer in *the next* life. But in the present context such a distinction marks no important difference: theistic views that posit an afterlife portray your afterlife as a stage in your entire existence, from which perspective it doesn't matter, as such, whether the benefit produced by suffering accrues to you here or hereafter; a benefit is no less yours because it accrues to you later rather than sooner. Positing an afterlife, then, won't weaken theism's commitment to the antecedent of (2).

Jordan's own version of (2) lacks disjunct (b), the disjunct deriving our moral obligation solely from God's commands. But for two reasons that difference doesn't matter. First, if his conditional is true, so is (2), since 'If P, then Q' implies 'If P, then (Q or R)'. Second, Jordan's conditional lacks (b) because he rightly regards that disjunct as false or at least inconsistent with ordinary morality:

> [T]he proposal that one should prevent suffering [only] because one is commanded to do so ... comes at the high cost of recalibrating commonsense morality. The recalibration comes in part with the replacement of concern and sympathy and compassion with the obedience to commands. One alleviates suffering not out of compassion for the sufferer, but rather because one is told to do so.[12]

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[12] Ibid., 175–6.

Indeed, the proposal that Jordan criticizes—disjunct (b)—is at least as bad as he suggests. For accepting (b) would put any theists who accepted TI in the puzzling position of believing that God has commanded them to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering, at least when they easily can, even though such suffering always ultimately benefits the sufferer. One might reply that God has commanded *sympathy* by commanding us to love one another, and sympathy on its own obligates us to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering. But presumably God hasn't commanded *misguided* sympathy—for instance, sympathy that compels us to prevent even those vaccinations that greatly benefit their recipients. By the same token, then, God hasn't commanded equally misguided sympathy compelling us to prevent suffering that, if TI is true, always produces a net benefit for the sufferer.

In any case, however, Jordan is correct that ordinary morality some-times expects us to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering and not *simply* because we're commanded to do so. The very basic commit-ments of what I'm calling "ordinary morality" are shared by theistic and non-theistic cultures alike. Ordinary morality doesn't presuppose the existence of divine commands because it doesn't presuppose the existence of God. Thus:

(3) We sometimes have a moral obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering, an obligation that does *not* derive entirely from God's commands.

Two subconclusions follow from the three premises just established:

(4) So: It isn't the case that, necessarily, all undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer. [From (2), (3)]

(5) So: God does not exist or TI is false. [From (1), (4)]

Now, as Jordan seems to concede, TI follows from what he describes as "the Kantian claim that it is wrong for anyone, deity included, to use

humans merely as means and [not] also as ends."[13] If God causes or even permits your unwilling, undeserved suffering primarily for the benefit of someone or something else, it does look as if God is, at least indirectly, treating you merely as a means. Despite the presence of the word "benefit" in TI, the basis for TI is deontological rather than consequentialist: TI serves as an absolute *constraint* on God's maximization of goodness or happiness. I don't claim that ordinary morality itself implies theological principles such as TI. Ordinary morality, as the name suggests, concerns our dealings with fellow creatures rather than our dealings with God. Nevertheless, I'm arguing that TI is *true* even if not itself a tenet of ordinary morality and that TI and theism jointly destroy a type of obligation that does belong to ordinary morality.

Regarding TI, one may ask, in order to avoid treating you merely as a means must God confer on you a *net* benefit—in this life or the next— for any undeserved, involuntary suffering you endure? Jordan thinks so:

> If Theodical Individualism is correct, then ... there is [an] *outweighing good for the sufferer*. The goodness of God requires, moreover, that this outweighing good isn't only compensatory, but is also a "necessary means or the best possible means in the circumstances to keep the sufferer from incurring even greater harm." God permits that suffering, in those circumstances, because that suffering provides the optimal benefit, in those particular circumstances, to the human sufferer.[14]

Again, as mentioned earlier, Jordan cites McCord Adams, Alston, and Stump among theistic philosophers who endorse TI, so construed.

But beyond its endorsement by some noted philosophers, the need for adequate divine compensation gains support from thought-experiments

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[13] Ibid., 172. Jordan's actual formulation of the Kantian claim contains what must be, if we read him charitably, a typographical error: "it is wrong for anyone, deity included, to use humans merely as means and *never* also as ends" (172, emphasis added). The presence of "never" turns the Kantian claim into a much weaker requirement than one finds in Kant, since on the weaker claim we avoid wrongness even if we only sometimes treat human beings as ends. Surely it isn't enough for Kant if we only sometimes treat human beings as he thinks we must always treat them.

[14] Ibid., emphasis added, notes omitted. The embedded quotation is from Eleonore Stump, "Providence and the Problem of Evil," in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 51–91.

such as the following. Suppose that God allows Jack to endure undeserved, prolonged, and unbearable pain because it's the only way to get Jack's crush, Jill, who has consistently ignored his affections, freely to send Jack a get-well card that he'll read just before he dies from his painful condition. Jack secures *some* benefit from the suffering—a freely sent get-well card from Jill—but suppose that his suffering is involuntary in that he wouldn't regard the benefit as remotely worth the suffering even if he knew that not even God could produce the benefit any other way. Surely God's conduct in that case falls short of moral perfection. It falls short even if we also suppose that Jack's suffering produces significant benefits for *others* obtainable no other way (perhaps news of his suffering triggers generous donations that his hospital wouldn't otherwise have received). It falls short of moral perfection because it's *unfair to Jack*, and this demand for fairness in the treatment of individual persons is what underwrites the Kantian claim. Jack gets some reward, but not enough: not enough because his reward fails, by any reasonable measure, to offset his undeserved, involuntary suffering.[15] The Kantian claim, in short, does imply TI, including TI's requirement of a net benefit for the sufferer:

> (6) If not even God may treat human beings merely as means, then TI is true.

Furthermore, whether God's merely using human beings would be *morally wrong* because it violates a duty that binds even God, or whether instead it is only in some *other* way inconsistent with God's moral perfection, it does look inconsistent with orthodox theism. To put it a bit differently, my argument presumes that a perfect being would never *sacrifice* an innocent person who didn't volunteer for it. In his attack on TI, Jordan never explicitly denies the Kantian claim, and indeed it's hard to see how

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[15] Must Jack receive a net benefit, or is it morally sufficient if God sees to it that Jack suffers *no net harm*? Jordan's formulation of his opponents' view ("outweighing good") and Stump's formulation of her own view ("keep the sufferer from incurring even *greater* harm") certainly seem to require a net benefit. But I don't see this issue as pivotal, since surely our ordinary moral obligation to prevent easily preventable suffering by innocent people would be threatened if it were the case that, necessarily, sufferers never realized a net harm from such suffering.

a being retaining all of God's perfections—in particular, omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness—*could* merely use a human being. We human beings sometimes exploit—that is, merely use—one another, and we thereby (but not only thereby) fall short of moral perfection. Some of the time, moreover, we merely use others at least partly because we lack the assets—the power and knowledge—necessary for avoiding such conduct. If, like God, we possessed limitless power and knowledge and nevertheless exploited others, our exploitative conduct would be even more blameworthy. Indeed, the superior assets at God's disposal only add to the support enjoyed by the next premise:

(7) Not even God may treat human beings merely as means.

It remains, then, only to draw the argument's final two inferences:

(8) So: TI is true. [From (6), (7)]
(9) So: God does not exist. [From (5), (8)]

FURTHER OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

1. Consequences of TI and theism

One might give the following deontological reason for denying my claim that TI and theism jointly undermine our moral obligations: "My knowing that another agent will more than make up for my failure to do my apparent duty doesn't always relieve me of my moral responsibility to do my apparent duty. For example, suppose I have promised to pay John $1000 for some work that he did for me, but I learn that John's uncle is about to leave him $1,000,000 on the condition that John doesn't have even $1000 of his own. I inform John of this, but John, who hates his uncle and doesn't want to get anything from him, insists that I pay him as I promised to do. Many deontologists would insist that I have a moral obligation to pay him the $1000, even if John would be better off if I reneged."[16]

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[16] I owe this objection, verbatim, to an anonymous referee. Another referee claims that redistributive taxation of a wealthy but unwilling taxpayer is a justified imposition

This analogy misfires, however, for three reasons. First, the obligation owed to John arises from a promise and depends on the institution of promising, whereas the obligation referred to in premise (2) of my argument—our obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering in at least some cases—doesn't depend on our promising to do so. Second, if John detests his uncle to a sufficient degree, we can see how John might *not* be better-off accepting $1,000,000 at the cost of his own self-respect (or how John might deserve to forego that money, as the cost of his spite), whereas, I assume, we can't begin to see how David Rothenberg might be better-off for having suffered immolation (or how he might deserve it). Third, and relatedly, John's case is irrelevant to the implications of TI because John *volunteers*, out of pride or spite, to accept the "suffering" that consists in his foregoing a net $999,000, whereas, again, TI applies only to involuntary suffering. It would surprise me to see a case in which an apparent duty we owe to John survives our knowledge that honoring it will make him suffer in a way for which he didn't volunteer.

Some philosophers who defend principles like TI nevertheless try to fend off the threat to ordinary morality that I've said TI and theism imply. About her own solution to the problem of evil, Stump writes,

> Someone might ... object here that this solution to the problem of evil prohibits us from any attempt to relieve human suffering and in fact suggests that we ought to promote it, as the means of man's salvation.... [But] God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot.... Therefore, since all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can. At any rate, the attempt to eliminate suffering is likely to be beneficial to our characters, and passivity in the face of others' suffering will have no such good effects.[17]

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of undeserved, involuntary suffering on that taxpayer, allegedly contrary to TI. But this example fails to touch TI. Even if we stretch things and describe the wealthy taxpayer as "suffering" by being taxed, those who regard redistributive taxation as justified typically regard it as fair, i.e., as something the wealthy deserve to face, rather than as undeserved. I should also emphasize, as I did earlier in the main text, that TI describes a morally perfect God, from which it doesn't follow that TI describes us.

[17] Stump, "The Problem of Evil," 412–13.

On further examination, however, Stump's response fails in two ways to address the objection to theism that I've raised. First, I've argued that theism and TI together *relieve us of a duty to prevent* certain kinds of human suffering,[18] whereas Stump's reply addresses only the stronger claim that theism and TI *give us a duty not to prevent* such suffering. Stump evidently wishes to preserve our moral *permission* to intervene even if theism and TI are true: note particularly her phrasing "it is reasonable for us." Yet ordinary morality regards it as not just reasonable but obligatory for us to intervene, at least on some occasions; ordinary morality imposes a *duty* to intervene, and preserving permission needn't preserve the duty. Indeed, Stump's more modest aim of preserving permission suggests that she may appreciate the oddity of a *duty* on our part to prevent suffering that we recognize we have no reason to think isn't for the sufferer's own net good.

Second, the final sentence of Stump's reply embodies two flaws. It allows that a respectable motivation for preventing suffering is the *benefit to one's own character*, regardless of whether the prevention deprives the sufferer of a net benefit. But such a motivation gets things exactly backward, giving the intervener's benefit higher priority than the sufferer's. More important, it simply begs the question against my view by presupposing that the suffering isn't a net good for the sufferer, since if it *is* a net good for the sufferer then entrenching in ourselves a disposition to prevent it won't count as good for our characters.

Although she doesn't manage to preserve (because she doesn't try to preserve) our ordinary moral duty to prevent the kinds of suffering at issue in TI, Stump does argue that such prevention is at least reasonable on our part. But whatever reasonableness it may have is constrained by the following perverse consequence: on theism and TI, the more extreme an innocent person's involuntary suffering, the more reason we have to believe that such suffering is for the sufferer's own net good, and thus the less reason we have to prevent it. Even if God needn't ensure that your last mild headache produced a net good for you, surely God guarantees that David's immolation produces a net good for David. Hence, on theism and

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[18] Stump refers to *relieving* rather than preventing human suffering, a difference that doesn't matter here, since to relieve suffering is to prevent *further* (or *worse*) suffering.

TI, even if it's reasonable for us to prevent some undeserved, involuntary human suffering, it becomes less reasonable as the suffering becomes more extreme, a consequence that plainly conflicts with ordinary morality. Hence, even if I'm mistaken and the combination of theism and TI does allow for a duty to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering in at least some cases, this inverse relationship between the degree of suffering and the reasonableness of our preventing it stands as an independent reason for rejecting that combination.

2. Libertarian freedom

One might suppose that step (7) of my argument ("Not even God may treat human beings merely as means") is in some way refuted by the *free will theodicy*: We human beings possess libertarian—or contracausal—freedom, a capacity so valuable that it justifies God's taking the risk that we'll misuse it to cause horrific suffering in innocent non-volunteers and also justifies God's choice not to interfere with such misuse on countless occasions. On this view, God may justly allow David to be burned alive merely as the price of his father's exercise of such freedom. Although philosophers have spilled plenty of ink already in attacking and defending this well-worn theodicy, it has come up so often as a specific objection to my argument[19] that I feel obligated to say something about why I think the objection fails in this case.

The free will theodicy encounters at least three serious problems. First, it assumes that libertarian freedom is a coherent concept and that only libertarian freedom makes possible the kind of moral agency we value as human beings. Both assumptions are highly controversial, to say the least, although I won't take time here to rehearse the controversy. Suffice it to say that many philosophers remain unconvinced that any responsible agent must possess libertarian freedom that not even God may ever curtail.

Second, it assumes that libertarian free choices, as such, have so much intrinsic positive *value* that God would rightly refrain from ever interfering

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[19] To cite just one example: appeals to libertarian freedom figured crucially in the comments on an earlier version of this essay that Charles Taliaferro delivered at the 2006 Eastern Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, comments I gratefully acknowledge.

with them, an assumption that both overstates the intrinsic value of free choices and may also contradict the biblical account of God's conduct. It overstates the intrinsic value of free choices because, as Derk Pereboom notes, from the ordinary moral perspective "the evildoer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration."[20] In assessing Charles Rothenberg's monstrous abuse of his son, ordinary morality assigns no discernible positive value to Rothenberg's having acted freely. Further, in claiming that God would never interfere with human freedom, the free will theodicy isn't easily squared with the scriptural portrayal of God as having manipulated human decisions such as the Pharaoh's: "And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel..." (Exodus 14:8a). Indeed, God may well have a regular *practice* of "hardening hearts" and thereby interfering with human free choice: "Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens" (Romans 9:18).[21] In any case, if God's hardening of hearts is consistent with the inviolable nature of human free will, then so too would be God's softening Rothenberg's heart so that he doesn't immolate his son.[22]

Third, because again our topic concerns the compatibility of theism and ordinary morality, we can ask what ordinary moral practice implies about the relationship between moral responsibility and contracausal

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[20] Derk Pereboom, "Free Will, Evil, and Divine Providence," in *God and the Ethics of Belief*, ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77–98; 84, citing and expanding on David Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" *Philosophical Papers* 22 (1993): 149–72; 155.

[21] Now, one might argue that TI itself is unbiblical, and indeed it may be; the Bible does portray God as committing or ordering the sacrifice of human beings for what appears not to be their own net benefit. However, I think it is dialectically more acceptable for me to rely on an unbiblical doctrine than it is for my theistic opponent to do so; on my view, there is no God for the Bible to be portraying, whereas defenders of the libertarian free will theodicy must maintain that there is a God whom the Bible, for some reason, misleadingly portrays as interfering with free will—a mistake significant enough to cast doubt on the accuracy of the rest of the Bible.

[22] The view that God's hardening of hearts deprives human agents of libertarian freedom is accepted by Peter van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 42–65. It is rejected by Eleonore Stump, "Sanctification, Hardening of the Heart, and Frankfurt's Concept of Free Will," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 395–420.

freedom. If we can regard Anglo-American criminal jurisprudence as reflecting the aspects of ordinary morality that are relevant here—if, in other words, the criminal law doesn't war with ordinary morality on this issue—then it's far from clear that we *hold* agents morally responsible only after we satisfy ourselves that they possess contracausal freedom. On the contrary, juries routinely convict defendants without even asking, let alone ascertaining, whether the defendants' actions were causally determined by the prior state of the universe. Likewise judges never, as far as I know, instruct jurors to satisfy themselves of the defendant's libertarian freedom before they issue a verdict. One might explain this omission by insisting that the presupposition of libertarian freedom is too obvious to need saying, but this explanation rings hollow. Judges' instructions to juries often include platitudes so obvious that only a lawyer would make them explicit, such as the admonition that witnesses don't always tell the truth.[23] In such a context, the persistent failure to mention libertarian freedom would be inexplicable, especially since the libertarian holds that defendants are *blameless* if they lack such freedom when they commit the crimes of which they're accused. In short, to the extent to which the criminal law embodies it, ordinary morality doesn't presuppose libertarian freedom. For all its considerable popularity, then, the libertarian free will theodicy carries too much controversial baggage to pose a significant threat to step (7) of the argument.

3. Compensation vs. justification

According to a theodicy I'll call "Heaven Swamps Everything," (7) is false because compensation paid to an exploited human being somehow

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[23] Indeed, when the issue of causal determinism *does* come up in the criminal law, appellate courts are apt to remind trial courts that the issue isn't relevant to criminal responsibility. See, for instance, the much-cited holding in *State* v. *Sikora*, 44 N.J. 453, 210 A.2d 193 (1965), 202–3: "Criminal responsibility must be judged at the level of the conscious. If a person thinks, plans, and executes the plan at that level, the criminality of his act cannot be denied, wholly or partially, because, although he did not realize it, his conscious [mind] was influenced to think, to plan and to execute the plan by unconscious influences which were the product of his genes and his lifelong environment. [C]riminal guilt cannot be denied or confined … because [the defendant] was unaware that his decisions and conduct were mechanistically directed by unconscious influences."

becomes justification for the exploitation if the compensation is big enough: God's allowing David to suffer immolation is justified by David's heavenly reward—eternal bliss—even if his suffering is in no way *necessary* for his attaining the reward. Again, however, such reasoning wars with ordinary morality because it *conflates* compensation and justification, and it may stem from imagining an ecstatic or forgiving state of mind on the part of the blissful: in heaven no one bears grudges, even the most horrific earthly suffering is as nothing compared to infinite bliss, all past wrongs are forgiven. But "are forgiven" doesn't mean "were justified"; the blissful person's disinclination to dwell on his or her earthly suffering doesn't imply that a perfect being was justified in permitting the suffering all along. By the same token, our ordinary moral practice recognizes a legitimate complaint about child abuse even if, as adults, its victims should happen to be on drugs that make them uninterested in complaining. Even if heaven swamps everything, it doesn't thereby justify everything.

Alternatively, one might suppose that, assuming everyone goes to heaven, everyone on due reflection eventually *consents* (after the fact) to any undeserved and otherwise involuntary suffering he or she experienced while on earth.[24] But this response does nothing to the diminish the theistic threat to ordinary morality: our ordinary moral obligation to prevent at least some undeserved, involuntary human suffering disappears if (we believe) its victims will always on due reflection eventually consent to that suffering.[25]

4. Open theism

One might object that TI presupposes the falsity of "open theism," a theological perspective claiming, among other things, that God lacks

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[24] Compare Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil," 112.

[25] Yet another view is that intense suffering is always a gift from God, a blessing, in part because it is an analogue of Christ's suffering. Christopher Hitchens attributes this view to Mother Teresa of Calcutta; see *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995), 41. Even if we ignore the highly questionable features of this view, it fails to blunt the theistic threat to morality for which I argue here, since if intense suffering is always a blessing in disguise, we never have an ordinary moral obligation to prevent it.

knowledge of the future, or at least the part of the future that depends on the all-important libertarian free choices of creatures. A first response would be that libertarian freedom is morally less important and philosophically less defensible than open theism supposes, a response that develops the admittedly brief criticisms of libertarianism I gave earlier. I lack the space to offer that response here. A second response would be to concede the point: my argument is meant to show that ordinary morality is inconsistent with the traditional kind of theism that attributes comprehensive foreknowledge to God. Open theists themselves admit that their brand of theism is nontraditional in its denial of comprehensive divine foreknowledge.

But I don't think I need to concede the point. As far as I know, open theism retains the traditional claim that God is almighty and morally perfect. Moreover, even if God lacks comprehensive foreknowledge, as open theism asserts, God surely possesses *more* foreknowledge—or propositional attitudes more nearly *like* foreknowledge—than any other being, and vastly more than any human being. If, as I've argued, moral perfection precludes exploitation, then a God of even this more modest description would permit undeserved, involuntary human suffering only if it's at least highly *likely* to produce a net benefit for the sufferer. The guarantee contained in TI as I originally worded it isn't essential to my argument; God's best guess about the outcome of a given case of suffering is quite likely to be correct. Hence even a version of TI containing the qualifying phrase "highly likely," when combined with open theism, is enough to threaten the ordinary moral obligation referred to in step (3) of my argument.

5. Answering the Regress Objection

Finally, in this context it's worth noting that features of our ordinary moral practice help answer an objection to the atheist's "evidential" argument from suffering that can otherwise seem unanswerable. Whereas the so-called "logical" argument from suffering claims that the existence of suffering logically rules out the existence of God, one standard version of the evidential argument claims that the *amount* of suffering in our world reduces the likelihood that God exists but doesn't rule it out altogether.

According to what Theodore Drange calls the "Regress Objection," however, the evidential atheist's demands on God are arbitrary or unsatisfiable: "if God were to keep ... reducing suffering in the world in an effort to make its residents satisfied, then at what point would they say, 'Stop, we're maximally happy now'?"[26] The atheist, it seems, will accept nothing less than paradise, yet arguably any ideal law-governed universe containing beings like us will contain some degree of suffering that's unavoidable if only because of natural regularities. So the complaint against God looks unreasonable.

But the principles motivating the Regress Objection break down when we apply them to everyday moral practice. According to the first of those principles, it's illegitimate to complain that the created order isn't paradise: you can't properly complain about God's permitting a case of horrific suffering unless there is *some nonzero amount* of suffering that you would regard as acceptable for God to permit. But consider the analogous principle in the context of human moral agents. Imagine someone so touchy that he complains, on moral grounds, about the slightest imposition; he regards it as unjust that other people dare to breathe the air around him. Even given the hypersensitivity shown by his unreasonable complaints, ordinary morality still allows him a perfectly proper moral complaint against anyone who tries to burn him alive. Hypersensitivity alone doesn't deprive you of reasonable complaints. According to the second principle motivating the Regress Objection, you can't properly complain about God's permitting a case of horrific suffering unless you can specify a precise *cut-off* between suffering you regard as acceptable and suffering you regard as unacceptable. Applied to ordinary moral agents, however, this principle implies that you can't properly complain about being burned alive unless you can precisely distinguish acceptable from unacceptable amounts of suffering. But we don't hold ordinary moral complainers to that impossible standard before we regard their moral complaints as reasonable. Thus, our ordinary moral practice rejects the reasoning behind the Regress Objection; one can press the objection only

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[26] Theodore M. Drange, *Nonbelief & Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 288. A similar objection is discussed in van Inwagen, "The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy," 103–4, where van Inwagen appears to recognize the objection's ill fit with ordinary moral reasoning.

by abandoning ordinary morality.[27] I don't say that this reply on its own refutes the Regress Objection, only that ordinary moral practice rejects the principles on which the Regress Objection seems to depend.

To conclude. Jordan argues only that accepting both theism and TI would corrupt morality, which of course leaves two ways of avoiding the corruption of morality, one of which is to reject theism. Something has to go from the triad containing theism, TI, and an obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering. In virtue of (6) and (7), TI looks secure, which leaves theists to choose between retaining their theism and accepting a core obligation of ordinary morality.[28] On one quite popular view, as Rachels suggests, ordinary morality *depends* in some way on theism, a view that has fallen into disfavor among at least many philosophers. But those who reject the claim of dependence nevertheless often regard ordinary morality as at least *consistent* with theism. I've argued against even that weaker position.[29]

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[27] Drange, *Nonbelief & Evil*, argues along similar lines, although he appeals to non-moral customs rather than to ordinary morality as such.

[28] One might note, either as an objection to my thesis or as an endorsement of it, that moral perfection imposes an awfully high standard on God: God must achieve the maximum total happiness that can be achieved without ever exploiting anyone. Nothing short of that ideal seems enough for genuine perfection, including a compromise position that allows God to achieve the best "balance" between maximizing total happiness and avoiding exploitation, since such a proposal respects neither the consequentialist nor the deontological intuition. Perhaps it is incoherent to demand that God be the perfect consequentialist *and* the perfect Kantian, but in that case perhaps the concept of a *perfect being* is incoherent. I leave open the possibility that ordinary morality as a whole reflects an incoherent mix of consequentialism and deontology, in which case *everything* would be inconsistent with ordinary morality: ordinary morality would imply atheism, theism, and everything else. This essay argues for the inconsistency of ordinary morality and theism, a point that I believe is noteworthy given widespread opinion to the contrary, regardless of the self-consistency of ordinary morality itself.

[29] For helpful comments, I thank Eric Chwang, Andrew Graham, Michael Murray, John Schellenberg, Charles Taliaferro, audiences at Dalhousie University and at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meetings, and anonymous referees who reviewed earlier versions of this essay.

JEAN PAUL SARTRE: THE MYSTICAL ATHEIST

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Abstract: Within Jean Paul Sartre's atheistic program, he objected to Christian mysticism as a delusory desire for substantive being. I suggest that a Christian mystic might reply to Sartre's attack by claiming that Sartre indeed grasps something right about the human condition but falls short of fully understanding what he grasps. Then I argue that the true basis of Sartre's atheism is neither philosophical nor existentialist, but rather mystical. Sartre had an early mystical atheistic intuition that later developed into atheistic mystical experience. Sartre experienced the non-existence of God.

Jean Paul Sartre called himself a "material" atheist, one who not only believes that God does not exist but is profoundly *aware* of God's absence. This is to be compared to a group of people who meet regularly at a coffee house in Paris. One evening Pierre does not come. The entire evening, those present feel Pierre's absence, his absence is tangible, part of the scene, like the tables and the chairs. Pierre is missing. Just so, for Sartre, God's absence is to be felt everywhere. God is missing. And since God *is* missing we are to feel the obligation to create ourselves in freedom.

Within his program of material atheism, Sartre enunciated a critique of Christian mysticism. In his book on Jean Genet, Sartre defined "mysticism," in general, as follows: "The quest for a state in which subject and object, consciousness and being, the eternal and the particular, merge in an absolute undifferentiation."[1] Elsewhere in the same book, Sartre characterizes Christian mysticism in particular as follows: "It is God who will attain himself in the mystical ecstasy, which is a fusion of the Subject and the Object. There is thus nothing to do but to await the sudden figuration that will fill us with *being…*" (p. 247). Here are some examples

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[1] Jean Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet*: trns Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1963, G. Braziller Publishers), p. 76. All references to Sartre's book on Genet are to this volume.

with which I am familiar of what Sartre had in mind when writing of the "fusion of Subject and Object." The early Christian mystic, Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) spoke of the experience of his self-emptying into God as akin to rivers flowing into the ocean. Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) wrote of his relationship to God as one of "iron within the fire and the fire within the iron," and Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) declared that, "God and I are one." In such cases, and others, the Christian mystic alleges that his true being is in God or identical with God. "The eternal and the particular, merge in an absolute undifferentiation."

In what follows, I will first present Sartre's objection to Christian mysticism. Then I will suggest what a Christian mystic might want to say in reply to Sartre. Lastly, I want to venture what was the true basis of Sartre's material atheism of which his rejection of Christian mysticism is a part. I will argue that at the bottom of Sartre's material atheism was a mysticism of a different sort – atheistic mysticism.

I.

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre articulates two exclusive ontological categories: One is the "in-itself," including bare phenomenological content and the non-human furniture of the universe. The in-itself has what Sartre calls identity with itself; it has self-substance in itself, by itself, possessing givenness like a stone. Not so human beings, who are "for-themselves." In virtue of our consciousness, we "have nothing of our selves." Brentano made a big deal of the intentionality of consciousness, this being the difference for him between mind and non-mind. Sartre made an even a bigger deal out of intentionality – for him a person is nothing other than a consciousness going out to the in-itself, a taking on of the content of the in-itself, and never having self-substantive existence. Thus, consciousness is always a going out from itself "to become what it is not." Human beings are thus free to become what they will. But "becoming" for a person is never achieving a substantive thickness, since a for-itself can never become the in-itself. Rather what a person becomes is precisely the accumulation of his actions, the sum total of directing himself toward the in-itself of the world.

In his later book, on Jean Genet, Sartre's ontological duality re-appears as a distinction between two modes, that of *being* and that of *doing*. In the mode of *being*, a person strives to be an object and acts in order to achieve object-hood. Sartre writes that in this mode a person wishes to "encounter this substance which defines him… One must be open to Being as the mystic is open to his God." (p. 75) In the mode of *doing,* a person aims to be a subject, a consciousness. Since these two modes co-exist in Genet, Genet steals in order to *be* a thief. But he also *is* a thief in order *to* steal. Sartre includes in this book an extensive presentation of how Christianity teaches a dual striving for both being and doing, a paradox of tension at the heart of Christian religiosity.

For Sartre, the universal bad faith of humanity is the desire to make of oneself the in-itself, to imagine that one is a substance like a stone. It is bad faith because each of us has an intuition of our freedom, of our lack of substantial being, of our being a for-itself. So I *know* that I am a for-itself. Thus I may not be satisfied simply to *wait* on tables, as in Sartre's example, I might want to *be* a waiter, to be a veritable *clump* of waiterhood. To this end I will adopt exaggerated, ingratiating acts towards customers, and will rush back and forth to the kitchen in great earnestness, to convince – myself - that I was *made* to *be* a waiter, cast in stone. I will try to be very *sincere* about my job, sincerity, for Sartre, being a mark of bad faith, involving my trying to be *true* to myself. As though I have an essence, an inner rock that I am. Thus do humans attempt to avoid the freedom of the for-itself by pretending to be the in-itself, at the same time preserving the for-itself of their own consciousness. This impossible task lies at the heart of human existential anxiety.

Now, we can understand Sartre's critique of Christian mystics. Christian mystics exemplify bad faith at its worst – pretending to have discovered that they belong to the substance of God sufficiently so as to receive for themselves a substantive, in-itself form of being. Listen to Meister Eckhart when he declares: "God's self-identity is my self-identity, nothing less nor more." "Self-identity," happens to be one of Sartre's favored phrases when characterizing the in-itself. The in-itself has self-identity in the sense that it is what it is. A for-itself has no self-identity in the sense that it is a going out of itself to the in-itself, taking on the content of the in-itself in consciousness. And listen to Augustine declare:

"I find stability and solidity in you." Christian mysticism, Sartre believes, is motivated by the profound bad faith of asserting oneself as the in-itself, indeed as the ultimate in-itself. In Sartre's eyes Christian mysticism is a succumbing to the mode of being in the most perverted way.

II.

Thus goes Sartre's critique of Christian mysticism. Now I want to suggest what a Christian mystic might say in reply. First of all, he will certainly question Sartre's ontological dogma that nothing can be both the in-itself and a for-itself. Perhaps this is true with regard to the *same* aspect of a being, but why can there not be both of these ontological categories in different aspects of the same being? There does not seem to be a good reason why the mystic should accept Sartre's dogma. Despite the sub-title of *Being and Nothingness* as: "An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology," others have pointed out before me that Sartre's dualistic ontology is not well founded in phenomenology, but seems to be a straight-out metaphysical assumption. If so, there is no good reason for the Christian mystic to think that a belief that one is ultimately one with the substance of God is a case of bad faith.

But there is much more that a Christian mystic could say here in reply to Sartre. I propose that such a mystic could see Sartre as grasping at important, true insights of Christian mysticism, but unfortunately letting them slip through his fingers. Here is what I mean.

Our mystic begins with the conviction that humans have an intuition of God, even if confused and subdued, even to the point of being subliminal. He will endorse what Aquinas writes at the beginning of the *Summa Theologica* (Q2:A1): To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature…. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching.

To the mystic, however, this dim intuition is more than simply to the effect that God exists. It is an implicit recognition of one's own self being included in the very being of God. It is *this* pre-mystical presentiment, dim

and amorphous, that comes to full realization in the mystical consciousness. And the Christian mystic might want to recognize that in Sartre this intuition has come close to the surface, yet Sartre misunderstands what it is he has seen.

Thus, our mystic will want to say that when Sartre asserts that a person has no *self*-substance, Sartre is seeing through a glass darkly what the Christian mystic has discovered – that a person has no distinct self-being, because he exists only in the encompassing being of God. Since Sartre is blind to God, however, Sartre interprets the emptiness of self-being as the exclusionary category of the for-itself, and misses the true import of his insight.

And when Sartre asserts that the human being has a universal desire to be the in-itself, Sartre prophesizes, knowing not what he is prophesying. For to the Christian mystic, the desire for substantive being is an expression of the vague human intuition of being included in the substance of God. Thus the search of human beings for self-substance is a seeking for their true nature – in God, which they know only obscurely. They see someone, as Aquinas said, but know not who it is. Since Sartre is blind to God, Sartre is unable to see what the Christian mystic sees, and can see it only as bad-faith.

Likewise, Sartre has it just right that human existential anxiety is rooted in the frustrated desire to be the in-itself. Since he has become blind to God, however, Sartre fails to see that this anxiety comes because ordinary attempts at being an in-itself are *misplaced* attempts at achieving substantive being in God. We want to *be* a homosexual, or to *be* a saint, to use Sartre's own examples, rather than achieving our substance by being absorbed in the being of God. Because one's true substantive being is in God, any attempt to supply *another* substantive being to oneself creates self-alienation and existential frustration. It is only when the mystic finds his own being in God that self-alienation is overcome and existential anxiety disappears in the tranquility of being.

Finally, our mystic would eagerly embrace Sartre's proclamation that we have an intuition of our freedom. But for the mystic this intuition is nothing other than an intimation of the infinite freedom of God, within whose being we have our being. Since blind to God, Sartre mistakenly assigns our intuition of our freedom to our exclusive for-itself ontology.

Thus I imagine the Christian mystic's reply to Sartre.

III.

So, we have two metaphysical outlooks here: one - theistic mysticism, and the other - atheism. And the question I now want to address is - what was the source, the basis, of Sartre's atheism? You will not find in Sartre an argument from evil, as in Voltaire. Nor will you find critiques of arguments for God's existence as with Hume. In *Being and Nothingness* we do find a proof against God existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre turned his dichotomous ontological scheme of the in-itself and the for-itself into a quick ontological proof of the non-existence of God. God is supposed to be both a substantive being, an it-itself, with givenness like a stone, and also possessed of the consciousness of a for-itself. But these two ontological categories are incompatible. It is not possible for anything to be both the in-itself and a for-itself. Hence, God does not exist. End of proof. But listen to what he says about this argument in conversation with Simone de Beauvoir: "In *Being and Nothingness* I set out reasons for my denial of God's existence that were not actually the real reasons."[2] In these conversations, Sartre tells de Beauvoir that he advanced his ontological proof only because he felt the need to vindicate his belief philosophically. (p. 436). So what *was* the starting place of his atheism? Sartre tells this story to de Beauvoir, which appears in a slightly different version in his autobiography of his youth, *The Words*:

> When I was about twelve … in the morning I used to take the tram with the girls next door... One day I was walking up and down outside their house for a few minutes waiting for them to get ready. I don't know where the thought came from or how it struck me, yet all at once I said to myself, "God doesn't exist."…. As I remember very well, it was on that day and in the form of a momentary intuition, that I said to myself, "God doesn't exist."

Sartre calls this realization an "intuition," and later wrote that God's non-existence had become "manifest" to him at that moment. Early in

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The Words, Sartre recounts an earlier problem with God when he writes that "as a boy I needed a Creator; I was given a big boss."[3]

Considering these passages, it would be easy to make light of Sartre's atheism as being the result of a flippant childhood whim. But that would be a mistake. Instead, I suggest that Sartre had an early serious intuition that led him to his own brand of mystical experience, just as mystical intuition leads the theistic mystic to experience God as the ground of his being. But Sartre's mysticism is not theistic atheism. Sartre was an atheistic mystic.

To flesh out my idea I take you to the definition of mystical experience given by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines a mystical experience as an alleged: "*unitive experience* granting knowledge of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somato-sensory modalities, or standard introspection." A "unitive experience" involves a phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity, where the noetic significance of the experience is deemed to lie precisely in that phenomenological feature.

The Christian mystic's experience of himself as included in the being of God, qualifies as mystical" because allegedly unitive in the way the definition specifies. The *Encyclopedia* calls this a "super sense-perceptual experience," allegedly involving non-sensory perception-like content, given by a "spiritual" sense, appropriate to a non-physical realm.

Now, the *Encyclopedia* recognizes a second category of unitive experience, "sub sense-perceptual experience," allegedly either devoid of phenomenological content altogether, or nearly so, or consisting of phenomenological content appropriate to sense perception, but lacking in the conceptualization typical of attentive sense perception. An example of this would be the Buddhist experience of "unconstructed awareness." In this, the lack of conceptual configuration affords the subject a unitive experiential knowledge of true reality. In Yogacara Buddhism, for example, the notion is prominent that *vikalpa*, or "conceptual construction," constructs a world of distinct material objects, of objects and properties, and of distinct selves, including one's own self. *Vikalpa* creates language,

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[3] Jean Paul Sartre, *The Words*, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York : G. Braziller, 1964), p. 61.

cementing division and classification into our awareness. In unconstructed awareness one comes to experience the utter "indescribability of things" as they are in themselves. Unconstructed awareness, *parinispanna*, is a unitive experience, allegedly conferring knowledge, disclosing reality as utter "tathata," or "thusness," seamless, without divisions. Therefore, the Buddhist claim for unconstructed awareness as unitive deserves to be called non-theistic mysticism.

There are also incipient, partial unconstructed mystical experiences, one kind of which Walter Stace called "extrovertive experiences." In these experiences, the subject has sensory perception in which distinctions blur, become elusive, and appear unreal. The unitive sense impinges upon the sensory data to provide what the subject takes to be a glimpse into the true nature of reality, namely the undifferentiated reality provided in fully unconstructed awareness.

Now, let's return to Sartre, the mystical atheist. In *The Words*, Sartre writes of his first major work and its central character: "At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing *Nausea*…. I *was* Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life." (Pp. 157-158). In the novel *Nausea*, Sartre tells the story of the existential travails of Antoine Roquentin, a young man, a writer, who resides temporarily in a small French town. Antoine's story revolves around the meaning, or lack of it, he finds in the historical research in which he is engaged. The central event of the novel takes place in a park that Antoine visits from time to time. This time, however, looking at a chestnut tree, Antoine has an experience he never had before. Here are some excerpts:[4]

(1) And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have *seen*. (p. 170)
(2) I had this vision. It left me breathless. (p. 171)
(3) And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had

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[4] All quotations are from Jean Paul Sartre, Nausea, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1964).

vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. (pp. 171-72)

(4) In vain I tried to *count* the chestnut trees….each of them escaped the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, and overflowed. (p. 173)

(5) And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence…. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word; I struggle against words. (p. 173)

(6) This moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless and icy, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But something fresh had just appeared in the very heart of this ecstasy. The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*….I believe there are people who have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. (p. 177)

(7) I *was* the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—yet lost in it, nothing but it. (p. 177)

(8) I knew it was the World, the naked World suddenly revealing itself, and I choked with rage at this gross, absurd being. (p. 178)

I cannot emphasize enough how much of this description is typical in reports of mystical experiences. The veil is lifted, one *sees*, an enormous truth is revealed, one has discovered the key to Existence, the absolute, one cannot move, there is ecstasy, things flow into one another, what one is experiencing is ineffable, there is talk of essential reality, the dissolution of the self into the content of the experience, and so on.

Compare Sartre's description of Antoine's experience to some of the expressions in the following theistic mystical experience reported by William James:

> I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer….I stood alone with Him who had

made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His, The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence, The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen, I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.

Antoine's was a unitive experience, in which distinctions blurred like colors running into each other in a washed garment. Antoine's mystical experience is an embryonic instance of an unconstructed awareness - distinctions becoming elusive to the point of disappearing, as in Antoine's saying that he *was* the chestnut tree. And from the nature of this mystical experience Antoine comes to *know* that there is no God. He has *seen* that reality has no character, no structure, no intrinsic meaning. But if there were a God, reality *would* have character, structure, and intrinsic meaning. So, by *experience* Sartre now *knows* that God is missing in the world, knows God's absence. No wonder that Sartre says of his writing of *Nausea,* "As a mystic, I attempted to reveal the silence of being by a thwarted rustling of words…." (p. 157).

Now, insofar as Antoine lives the texture of Sartre's life, as Sartre has testified, Sartre is not blind to God, as the Christian mystic charged. As far as Sartre is concerned, he has *seen* reality as it truly is, has *seen* that all of existence is absurd, superfluous, and utterly contingent. He has *seen* that all that *is* melts together unless the mind arbitrarily applies *vikalpa* to that which is "without form, and void." He has *seen* the in-itself and it is not God. All of this is *given* to him phenomenologically. And this, I suggest, is the real basis for Sartre's rejection of God and his rejection of theistic mysticism. Sartre is an atheistic mystic. His mysticism begins with an intuition at an early age that there is no God. Then, when mature, Sartre has an atheistic mystical experience. Thereafter he seeks philosophical vindication in his ontological proof against God's existence that he presents in *Being and Nothingness.*

There is a further aspect of Sartre's experience that parallels Christian mysticism – and that is the Christian mystic's "dark night of the soul." The Christian mystic's appropriation of his mystical knowledge is a long-term affair requiring great diligence. In his or her travails, the mystic is prone to the "dark night of the soul." The latter term was coined by the 15th century Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, to refer to a time of purgation leading the mystic to ultimate salvation. In Catholic theology the phrase has come to describe a tumble from the mystical knowledge that one has attained. It entails a dryness of the spirit, a losing of ground, and even the arising of doubts - doubts whether the experience was genuine. Just so, Sartre acknowledges that material atheism is a long drawn-out work, and he too goes through a dark night of the soul, that of a mystical atheist. Here are two examples. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre endorses an idea he attributes to Dostoyevsky, namely, that if God does not exist, all is permitted. Yet, late in life, Sartre told de Beauvoir that he no longer agreed with Dostoyevsky, because he was convinced that it was absolutely wrong to kill another human being. And in his late conversations with de Beauvoir Sartre makes this astounding declaration: "I don't see myself as so much dust that has appeared in the world, but as a being that was expected, prefigured, called forth… this idea of a creating hand that created me refers me back to God." (*Adieux*, p. 438). Sartre refers to these and similar sentiments of his later in life as "remaining traces of God." While I am not about to claim that underneath it all Sartre really *believed* in God, I do want to say that his atheistic faith, grounded in a mystical awareness of God's non-existence was challenged at various points in Sartre's life, in an atheistic "dark night of the soul."

To conclude, we have here two opposing mystical conceptions of life and of reality that nonetheless share some significant features. Each is rooted in a prior intuition, followed by mystical experience, and then followed by a dark night of the soul.

Sartre's deepest atheistic inclinations are not those of a philosopher or even those of an existentialist. They are those of a mystic.

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Hilary Putnam. *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein*. **Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.**

Hilary Putnam is one of the most important living analytic philosophers. The fact that he has now authored a book on Jewish philosophy as a guide to life is rather astonishing – disregarding some minor previous attempts to justify his religious attitude towards the world. The reason for the astonishment is that Putnam has been a strict adherent of a broad naturalistic worldview throughout his career. In addition, it is exceptional for him to adhere to a view in such a strict way, as he has come under attack from some colleagues for changing his mind too often. On many occasions Putnam has sharply criticized a view he himself earlier advanced. For instance, Putnam may have been the first to make a case for the thesis that the computer is the right model for the mind. Later on he became the sharpest critic of this understanding of the mind. He himself considers his many revisions of his own views as a vivid reflection of the fundamental philosophical attitude which is to put the search for truth higher than personal vanity. The commitment to this attitude may explain why Putnam is able to hold out a deep existential inconsistency between his naturalistic worldview and his religious practice in the Jewish tradition: "I am still a religious person, and I am still a naturalistic philosopher" (p. 5).

The value of Putnam's monograph lies not so much in what he has to say about the 3¼ Jewish philosophers Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein – "we count Wittgenstein as ¼" (p. 6). Rather, the book has great merit because of what it reveals about Putnam's own struggle with religion: "what did I make philosophically of the religious activities that I had undertaken to be part of me? The question has no final answer, because it is one I am still struggling with, and will very likely struggle with as long as I am alive" (p. 3).

The introduction is an autobiographical note. Putnam tells the story of his awakening to Jewish religious practice. The aforementioned struggle with the reconcilability of religion and naturalism functions as the explanation for the origin of the book. The book is qualified by Putnam himself as a focused introduction to the 3¼ big Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. The focus is on demonstrating how someone can read these thinkers with benefit, how those who are " religious but […] unwilling to see that [religious] attachment as requiring us to turn our backs on modernity can find spiritual inspiration in their different ways" (p. 7).

Chapter One opens with reflections on Wittgenstein in order to introduce the idea that religion is not a theory, or a system of beliefs. Hence religion cannot be the result of a conceptual confusion or an instance of pre-scientific thinking. Religion, therefore, cannot be criticized or defended by appeals to scientific facts. This reading of Wittgenstein has already been promoted by Putnam in previous writings. The overall idea behind this understanding of religion is that religion is not based on metaphysics. Religion is based on metaphysics if the constituting beliefs are justified by appeal to metaphysical reasoning. Putnam has a strong anti-metaphysical stance and emphasizes on every occasion that metaphysics is nonsense. One of the fundamental problems for Putnam scholars is, however, that it remains more or less unclear what exactly Putnam means by metaphysics. Instead of providing a clear-cut definition of metaphysics he prefers a method of criticizing certain philosophical views he considers metaphysical. This method also guides his interpretation of Rosenzweig in Chapter One. Rosenzweig is presented as a sharp critic of the idea of disconnecting religion from the religious life in order to give religion a solid philosophical foundation – either in the way of German idealism or essentialism. Chapter One is very abstract and leaves the reader wondering what the actual arguments are for rejecting the temptation to justify religion metaphysically. One reason for the puzzlement is that, according to Putnam, one cannot argue for the absurdity of metaphysics; the absurdity is rather something that Rosenzweig "tries to make us feel by ironic redescription" (p. 19). In this sense Rosenzweig "means to suggest that a proper relation to God" does not depend "on a theory, on an intellectual conception of what God 'really' is, or a grasp of the 'essence' of God" (p. 26). Consequently Rosenzweig is not against philosophy of religion but against a certain kind of philosophy

of religion. The appropriate philosophy of religion is "an existential phi-
losophy that Rosenzweig calls simply 'the new thinking'" (p. 30). Putnam
proceeds by characterizing this new thinking and concludes by objecting
to Rosenzweig's intolerance towards other religions as it is articulated in
The Star of Redemption but not in later writings of Rosenzweig.

Chapter Two focuses on Rosenzweig's theology. And dealing with
Rosenzweig's theology puts Putnam's reading of Rosenzweig under pres-
sure. For the question immediately arises how anyone can do theology
without any metaphysical ingredient? Isn't the main idea of theology to
grasp what God is like as a supersensible non-mathematical entity? For
most of the first half of the second chapter Putnam introduces central ideas
of Rosenzweig's theology until he reaches again the idea in Rosenzweig that
Christianity and Judaism somehow are superior to other religions. Putnam
objects to Rosenzweig's contempt for any religion other than Christianity
and Judaism, a contempt that is fortunately "not a contempt for the religious
life of the followers of those religions, or a claim for the superiority of the
religious life of the individual Jew or Christian" (p. 53). It is just a contempt
for the underlying metaphysics of these other religions. Therefore, this
contempt does not pose any challenge for Putnam's attempt to incorporate
Rosenzweig into his own anti-metaphysical philosophy of religion.

The reader is left somewhat puzzled. For it is as plain as day that
Rosenzweig's contempt results from a metaphysical discourse on revelation
and redemption. Something is missing that would relate Chapter One and
Two, reconciling the anti-metaphysical reading of Rosenzweig in the first
chapter with the reconstruction of Rosenzweig's central theological ideas
on revelation and redemption in the second. These central theological ideas
are presented as follows: "To sum up: the whole purpose of human life is
revelation, and the whole content of revelation is love. The love between
the Lover and the Beloved culminates in 'matrimony', that is, redemption.
And redemption has a personal aspect – it is something experienced by
each religious person; a communal aspect – it is something exemplified
and modeled by the Jewish religious community as a whole; and it has an
eschatological dimension, but it is not only eschatological because its future
occurrence is something that is 'present' to the individual Jew now" (p. 54).

It is clear that Putnam cannot agree with this theology insofar as the
central divine command of loving your neighbor implies any ontological

commitments with regard to God. According to Putnam's anti-metaphysical philosophy of religion, God is a human construct, and in endorsing this constructivism Putnam himself, therefore, is an atheist theologian, to use one of Rosenzweig's expressions (p. 103). Putnam defends Judaism only as a form of life but rejects Jewish theology as support for any beliefs which might be considered constitutive for Judaism. Putnam's God is a human construct that emerges from a certain way of living a life and this form of life might just happen to be shaped by a tradition which is considered Jewish. Of course the Jewishness of this tradition comprises certain beliefs about God. However, Putnam's conviction that God is a human construct is not supposed to mean that the notion of God as it functions in a certain religious life is without any cognitive value. Religion is about God, who is a human construct that we make in response to demands that we do not create. Thus it is not up to us whether our responses are adequate or inadequate (see pp. 6, 46, 93). A Jewish identity, therefore, cannot be anything but living a life in a way shaped by a certain tradition of responding to the demands of reality. Jewish identity does not consist in the affirmation of certain beliefs originating due to divine intervention in the natural course of the world. In a nutshell, in Putnam's philosophy of religion, religion is stripped of its vertical, i.e. transcendental or supernatural dimension.

Putnam's minimalist defense of religion is certainly not sufficient for religions that take their identity from revelation and understand revelation as the most outstanding instance of divine intervention in the natural course of history. That is not to say that the attempted justification of the rationality of a religious life fails. It is just that this defense is indifferent to Jewish identity as an essential identity of a religious life. On this view, the Jewish identity of a certain religious life is just a cultural coincidence. It is a kind of club membership by birth or choice without any significant cognitive superiority to any other form of religious life. Religious life is defined by a response to certain demands that we do not create, and the response can be judged objectively. Unfortunately, Putnam does not name those demands in particular.

Chapter Three aims at a correction of well entrenched misunderstandings of the Buber of *I and Thou*. Putnam addresses two misunderstandings: (1) I-You relations are always good and I-It relations are always bad; (2) the theology in Buber's *I and Thou* matters for the appropriate understanding

of Buber's philosophy of interpersonality. And of course, besides the correction of these widely entrenched misunderstandings, Putnam recruits Buber to his opposition to metaphysics. "For Buber, one comes to God by entering into relationship with God, and an I-You relation is never a relationship of knowledge" (p. 66) but can result in "the transformation of life in the world, life in the It-world" (p. 64). This reading of Buber is not convincing. For, this reading requires us to concede that Buber thinks of God as a person, which is clearly a metaphysical statement. The question Putnam should have addressed here is whether or not this instance of knowledge is of a kind that threatens an overall naturalistic framework by broadening the notion of knowledge. What does it mean to know that the cell cluster with a human face in front of me is a person, a You?

The last chapter defends the thesis that one cannot understand Levinas if one does not realize two facts: "(1) that Levinas is drawing on Jewish sources and themes, and (2) (paradoxically, since Levinas is an Orthodox Jew), Levinas is universalizing Judaism" (p. 84). This is no news. Nor is Putnam's criticism valid, when he states that Levinas goes too far in pushing the asymmetry of interpersonal relations, in favor of the other, to the point where the preservation of the alterity of the other demands almost a self-annihilation: "But the 'asymmetry' of the ethical relation need not be carried as far as Levinas carries it. […] It is […] because Levinas thinks of ethics as the whole of 'the true life' that he does so. But to be only ethical, even if one be ethical to the point of martyrdom, is to live a one-sided life" (pp. 97-98). Still, the chapter surprises us in that Putnam relates Levinas and Buber on many different occasions.

In his career Putnam has already posed many sharp-sighted challenges and puzzles in many different philosophical disciplines. With this monograph he has just added another one. Surprisingly enough, this time in philosophy of religion. The puzzle is the following: Undeniably, for very good reasons metaphysics has had a bad reputation in philosophy since the beginning of the 20th century – religion likewise. On the other hand, among philosophers, metaphysics has had a comeback in the second half of the 20th century – unlike religion. Why then endorse a non-metaphysical Jewish philosophy of religion?

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Dirk Evers. *Gott und mögliche Welten. Studien zur Logik theologischer Aussagen über das Mögliche* [God and Possible Worlds. Studies in the Logic of Theological Discourse on Possibility]. Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2006.

It is as remarkable as it is important that systematic theology – especially continental theology – has started dealing with the impact of analytic philosophy. While Catholic theologians seem to be shy in approaching analytic philosophy, some parts of Protestant theology (especially in Germany) are truly at the forefront of the reception of analytic philosophy. Dirk Evers' book looks, at first glance, like a most needed step towards closing the gap between the valuable discussions occurring in modal logic (especially the so-called possible worlds talk) and the different aspects of modal language within the theology of God. A variety of different topics related to modal semantics have been discussed in one way or another in systematic theology. Modal semantics has been used as a means to elucidate medieval discussions about 'possibilia' and the different perspectives on the Anselmian argument. Nevertheless, no systematic work has attempted to present the logical and metaphysical impact of possible worlds talk on the theology of God, or on the framework of the philosophy of religion.

Evers' monograph – published as a 'Habilitationsschrift' in the Tübingen book series *Religion in Philosophy and Theology* – seems to be an attempt at this most promising endeavour, though only at first glance. The book, as a result, is a riddle. The effort to write the book in question somehow gets negated by a theological point of view which makes it debatable whether possible worlds talk has any theological value at all. Considering this the reader is left with a puzzle. The book covers a huge area of modal discourse and modal metaphysics. Nevertheless, when it comes to the theology of God, it remains altogether within a Barthian framework. Thus, for instance, when it comes to the illustration of a difference between God and the world, Evers states that God cannot be an entity that exists in a possible world (or in all possible worlds), and that He cannot be regarded as an entity at all (p. 291). This conclusion is

as surprising as it is problematic, since it puts into question the whole of Evers' endeavour. One might ask: What is the purpose of the book? What is the lesson one should learn from it?

The book is not a fundamental critique of possible worlds semantics or a critique of modal metaphysics. Quite the opposite: For the most part the book's goal seems to be to introduce modal semantics and modal metaphysics into continental systematic theology. And *per se* this is a really praiseworthy undertaking, since large parts of Catholic and Lutheran systematic theology in the German speaking world still regard analytic philosophy as a threat, even as a disease, while they remain biased by the critique of religion that emerged in the earliest stages of analytic philosophy. Within this framework Evers' book, which arises out of Eberhard Jüngel's Tübingen school of Lutheran philosophical theology (which was brought into contact with analytic philosophy by Jüngel's student Ingolf U. Dalferth), is a much needed monograph on modal semantics and its impact on theological discourse. Yet some remarks, like the one mentioned above, seem to indicate that modal semantics has no real impact on theological discourse. Once one denies that God is an entity existing 'in' possible worlds, it is not at all surprising that the applicability of modal semantics to theological language disappears instantaneously. Beneath the ruins of this result the old debate on the 'analogy of being' seems to wait for further treatment.

Evers' book digs into the roots of modal semantics, starting with an impressive chapter on Leibniz (pp. 5–120). It offers a fine-grained overview of the basic concepts of Leibniz's philosophical theology insofar as they are relevant to modal semantics and possible worlds talk. Evers discusses the notions of truth, modal concepts, contingency and reality, as well as the problem of different realms of truth. He introduces the basic idea of possible worlds in Leibniz and the notion of 'compossibility'. The larger part of this chapter is dedicated to the concept of God, the notions of goodness, the problems of evil, and the place of creation within Leibniz's philosophical theology (pp. 31–104). Although Evers presents a very sound introduction to Leibniz, two aspects of this chapter remain noteworthy: There is almost no discussion of interpretations or debates concerning Leibniz in the secondary literature. Evers doesn't seem to care about secondary sources at all, so that the result looks like a systematization of

primary sources. This is surprising insofar as Evers' book served as a dissertation, which is meant to place itself into a certain realm of discourse. Secondly, it is hard to see the relevance of Leibniz for the rest of the book which deals with 20th century modal semantics. So the reader is left with the impression that the selection of topics presented in Evers' book is a tribute to a certain 'encyclopaedic' tendency which has been evident in the typical 'German Habilitationsschrift' for over three decades now.

The second chapter of the book is dedicated to contemporary modal metaphysics and modal semantics (pp. 121–264). It starts with a basic introduction to modal logic and the required semantics (pp. 123–152) in order to continue with a discussion of the metaphysical burdens of modal discourse. Evers presents Quine's critique of modal semantics (pp. 152–171), discusses David Lewis' modal realism (pp. 172–185), the concept of rigid designation developed by Saul A. Kripke (pp. 189–214), Alvin Plantinga's modal metaphysics as spelled out in *The Nature of Necessity* (pp. 215–233), and some alternatives to the possible worlds talk developed under the headline of 'possible situations' (pp. 234–253). Step by step Evers guides the reader into the basic ideas of modal metaphysics and some discussions related to it. However, it is again surprising that Evers' discussions remain at the introductory level. Specific discussions of modal metaphysics are pretty much left out of the picture. The chapter presents information which can be found in many introductory textbooks on logic and metaphysics. Some things are part of the history of 20th century philosophy. One might ask, in what sense is this chapter innovative? Or is it just meant to introduce theologians to a still more or less unknown domain of discourse? If the latter is the case, then Evers' book might truly serve as a splendid textbook which can build a bridge that leads contemporary students of theology to the adventurous realms of analytic metaphysics.

But again, it is noteworthy that Evers is not at all interested in discussions that have engaged these topics already. In German theology a number of Lutheran and Catholic authors have already approached Kripke's concept of rigid designation or Plantinga's modal metaphysics or epistemology. The fact that Evers does not connect his systematization to any Lutheran or Catholic author who has already treated and discussed the very same topics in the recent past severely brings into question the scientific impact of Evers's monograph. The reader is left wondering if

there is a specific point of connection with contemporary theological discourse that Evers' book is meant to allude to. Moreover, the fact that the author for the most part refuses to discuss Catholic authors who have treated the same topics is a highly problematic prolongation of a German Lutheran attitude: *Catholica non leguntur*. Given the situation of both theological camps, this attitude is a real shame, since the reception of analytic philosophy within theology, regardless of its denominational flavour, may be the only way to ensure the intellectual survival of theology as such given the academic challenges that lie ahead.

The third and final chapter of Evers' monograph is meant to delineate the theological outcome of possible worlds talk and modal metaphysics. It starts with a widening of the metaphysical horizon by dealing with Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Scholz and Hartmann (pp. 266–291). This section is followed by a rather Barthian discussion of the relation between God and reality (pp. 291–305). The third subchapter is dedicated to the ontological argument – especially to Hartshorne and Plantinga. But this is not the final chapter. Evers adds yet another, more philosophical one, on worlds and individuals (pp. 331–361), and a subchapter on faith and belief which predominantly deals with Plantinga's religious epistemology and the problem of theodicy (pp. 362–407). A summarizing chapter offers an overview of the core ideas of the book: the relationship between faith, belief and modality (pp. 408–412).

Evers' treatment of the ontological argument entails a harsh criticism of Plantinga's concept of God as 'maximal greatness' (p. 328). It seems that Evers' very own concept of God as self-determining ground of being, which seems, at face value, to stem from Leibniz, but which comes rather from Karl Barth, serves as the crucial standard for the assessment of any other philosophical concept of God. As a consequence Evers dismisses a clear logic of divine attributes in order to keep the idea of God as a self-defining being (beyond being).

Evers' subchapter on worlds and individuals tries to specify the concept of possibility by borrowing a number of ideas from Eberhard Jüngel. The possible should be distinguished from nothingness on the one side, and simple chaos on the other side. God has to be seen as the only one who is able to make a distinction between what is possible and what is entirely impossible. But it is not at all clear what this specification and

modification of modal concepts has to do with the modal semantics Evers has dealt with for most of the book. Jüngel's theological vocabulary is not easily compatible with the concept of modal semantics stemming from contemporary metaphysics. Evers' attempt at translation has failed at this very point.

Does this prove in the end that certain basic axioms of Lutheran theology (especially within a Barthian framework) won't fit into contemporary metaphysics? Or does it mean that the business of translation has not really started yet – despite the remarkable attempts of Evers and other authors linked to Jüngel's Tübingen school? It is revealing that Evers uses the concept of rigid designation to underline what is called a 'relational ontology' of persons (pp. 353–358). Evers' chapter on worlds and individuals uses philosophical concepts to dress up an old hat: that the justification of the sinner is the crucial point of identity even for the identification of the human person as person. At that point the so-called reception of analytic philosophy through German Lutheran theology becomes yet another case of 'the Emperor's new clothes'.

The final chapter which deals with faith and belief moves slightly from modal semantics to religious epistemology. A brief connection is made by means of a concept developed by Wolfgang Lenzen. According to this concept convictions can be interpreted as sets of possible worlds, which a person who holds beliefs treats as surrogates of the actual world (p. 363). But this concept is set aside to treat Plantinga's earlier religious epistemology which, actually, doesn't require the vocabulary of modal semantics. So, the move from Lenzen to Plantinga remains somewhat artificial, if not arbitrary. What is left is a very short introduction to Plantinga's Reformed epistemology. And again, it is noteworthy that Evers does not even touch discussions that can be found in the secondary literature. Instead, Evers ends with a rather theological critique of Plantinga's concept of belief by underlining the necessity of doubt within the framework of faith (pp. 387–396).

It is not at all surprising that Evers' treatment of theodicy (which is wrapped around Leibniz and Plantinga) ends with a very basic attack on philosophical rationalism as such (pp. 406–408) and seems to foster the message that any sort of rationalism has to be overcome by what Evers calls pragmatism and the perspective of the 'truly involved person'. But

this message seems to underestimate the extent to which the problem of theodicy remains an intellectual problem (as well as an existential one).

In his concluding remarks Evers finally proves what the reader has already glimpsed here and there: the Barthian framework doesn't allow him to start a real dialogue with modal metaphysics. Metaphysics as such seems to be just another case of the arrogance of human reason. Actually, we know this story already.

There is a huge task awaiting contemporary systematic theology, namely a dialogue between theology and analytic metaphysics. Evers, like other Lutheran authors in the German speaking world, is at the forefront of this endeavour. Unfortunately these authors are bound, even imprisoned, by their Barthian concepts which remain incompatible with rational metaphysics. As a result, this task is not fulfilled. Evers' book reveals the heart of the problem. It is necessary to take a step back and to develop strategies of translation which do justice to theology and analytic philosophy simultaneously. The mixture of metaphysical concepts and rather idealistic vocabulary – a mixture one will find in the more theological chapters of Evers' monograph – is not helpful for either side of the translation. To sum up: Evers' book proves that the true reception of analytic philosophy in systematic theology has not really started yet.

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Winfried Löffler. *Einführung in die Religionsphilosophie* [Introduction to Philosophy of Religion]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006.

The book under consideration, authored by the Innsbruck philosopher Winfried Löffler, has as its purpose, according to the goals of the WBG-series *Introductions to Philosophy*, to deliver a systematic overview of the philosophy of religion, focusing on the results of contemporary research and debates. In this respect the book is very different from other German introductions to philosophy of religion which, in most cases, are characterised by a historical approach or a method which deals predominantly with significant authors in the field. Löffler's book, thus, has more in common with monographs arising out of the Anglo-American analytic philosophy of religion.

This introduction starts with a very dense chapter, that serves as an overview, in which the author explains his specific method and the outlines of his monograph. The chapter is followed by a really informative section dealing with the concept of philosophy of religion and its scientific status.

Löffler starts with a deliberately vague question: whether philosophical tools can reveal anything significant about religion. Stressing the problem of the plurality of religions and religious phenomena, which he illustrates by discussing the so called essentialistic and functional attempts to define the concept of religion, Löffler arrives at the conclusion that a general concept of religion cannot be furnished. Instead, he proposes to work with an open concept of religion whereby the word 'religion' is meant to signify a multitude of complex phenomena bound together by some sort of 'family resemblance' (borrowing the phrase from Wittgenstein). For hermeneutical reasons, Löffler focuses in his book on monotheistic religions, especially Christianity. He argues that a good acquaintance with one example of religion – a knowledge of one specific religious tradition from the inside – is a condition for the awareness of the aforementioned family resemblance. Löffler aims at showing that philosophy of religion

is historically and factually dependent upon actual religions, although he seeks to underline the logical independence of philosophical arguments and truth-claims with respect to specific religious convictions. Despite the author's Christian affiliation, Löffler's book does justice to the proposed independence of philosophical arguments.

After distinguishing philosophy of religion from other disciplines dealing with religion – the history of religion, sociology of religion, and theology – Löffler places his approach within a spectrum of five types of philosophy of religion. His own approach is to be understood as a philosophical reflection on the reasonableness of religious convictions, especially with regard to their explanatory content and their truth-claims.

Consequently, the first two chapters of the main part of the book are dedicated to the question whether religious convictions are reasonable or not given their cognitive content, which resembles theories and which is expressed in propositions and truth-claims (cf. p. 46). Given Löffler's focus on monotheistic traditions, these theories coincide with proofs or disproofs of God's existence. Löffler treats a series of ten types of proofs for the existence of God. He considers several versions of the so-called ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments, and also the types of arguments that are based on experience, by which he means either 'public' supernatural experiences (miracles), or more common individual religious experiences (valued by Reformed epistemology) and transcendental experiences (as understood by Karl Rahner or Wolfhart Pannenberg). Furthermore, Löffler discusses the so-called cumulative strategies (as proposed by Richard Swinburne and Basil Mitchell), as well as other types of proofs of God's existence – like Immanuel Kant's moral-theological argument or Pascal's wager.

The variety of attacks on the reasonableness of religious convictions is systematized by Löffler according to an idea stemming from Rudolf Carnap. This systematization is presented alongside a move from the most basic to the more refined criticisms. Hence, one will find in this section of the book a treatment of the charge of cognitive emptiness (Carnap, Flew), the charge of falsehood (Findlay, the problem of evil, the Darwinian explanation of the origin of religion), the charge that religious convictions lack justification and scientific content (Russell, Flew, Clifford), as well as a discussion of those arguments that claim religious convictions to be the

result of failing cognitive faculties (Feuerbach, Marx, Freud), and finally the arguments suggesting that religious convictions are dangerous.

The main chapter of the book is devoted to analysis of the basic structure of each type of argument, in order to reveal its logical, ontological and epistemological prerequisites, which in turn makes possible the confrontation of these arguments with certain counter-arguments, leading to the assessment of their validity.

In doing so, Löffler offers an inspiring and very informative introduction to the topic in question. The benefit for the reader lies in becoming acquainted with contemporary discussions within a very complex area of research and debate. But Löffler's method has a price tag attached to it (of which the author seems aware). He removes the arguments from their historical contexts. In order to be able to clarify the structure of the arguments he has to clean up a certain vagueness which, perhaps, was a part of a given argument in its original form. The end result of such a clean-up looks more formal than the original argument itself. Still, Löffler is able to flesh out the discussion with a well-chosen series of illustrative examples.

However, what is left out of the picture are the arguments in favour of the reasonableness of religious convictions which have been developed within the framework of idealistic and Continental philosophy. For example, there is no mention of the notion of consciousness and self-consciousness (Klaus Müller, Dieter Henrich). The same goes for contemporary attempts to develop philosophies of religion following the idealistic traditions associated with the names of Hegel, Schelling or Peirce. Also missing are the arguments developed from the pragmatic standpoint, examples of which one might find in the most recent writings of Hilary Putnam. Although one might regret the fact that these elements of the debate are missing, Löffler's selective approach is understandable given the overwhelming abundance in this area of philosophy of religion.

The fifth chapter of the monograph starts with a summary of the main part of the book. Here, Löffler indicates that the debate over the reasonableness of religious convictions ends in a tie. According to Löffler, this does not imply that religion is bound to a non-cognitive realm altogether. Religion still has to deal with truth-claims and rational arguments, even if we have to concede that the reasonableness of religious convictions is different from that presupposed in scientific reasoning. Taking this as his

point of departure, Löffler reflects on the so-called rational - i.e. rationally conceivable - structures of religion which place religious convictions within a sphere of rational reasoning that serves as some sort of umbrella for partial systems of everyday orientation in life. In the process Löffler uses the idea of a 'worldview' – an idea fostered by his teacher Otto Muck in Innsbruck.

According to Löffler and Muck, a worldview is a system of implicit and explicit convictions which is affected by experience and knowledge coming from different sources. A worldview has as its core certain leading and guiding concepts which may happen to be somewhat vague and meta- phorical, but which still have the capacity to deliver a consistent general interpretation of reality. Religious convictions have the power to mould and to affect the concepts which are at the very core of a worldview.

In order to answer the question whether religious convictions can be rational, Löffler offers a set of criteria of rationality which he borrows from Frederick Ferré and Alfred N. Whitehead, and which he modifies, taking into account the specificity of theistic convictions. These criteria are: consistency, coherence, openness and being connected to experience. Löffler tries to justify the theistic worldview as something which is in ac- cordance with a certain (namely Aristotelian) metaphysics, and which may serve as an integrative explanation and interpretation of reality and which does not lack cognitive content. Thus he shows that theism as a worldview is in the same position as any other worldview and is, therefore, able to bring different areas of experience together and to tie them together in a consistent, unequivocal and universal framework. In this regard Löffler develops the notion of 'integrative explanation' while distinguishing this idea from the concept of explanation used by the natural sciences and scientific reasoning. Löffler calls the latter a 'covering law' explanation. In doing so, Löffler establishes different layers of rational explanation.

In his summarizing remarks Löffler deals with the relevance of phi- losophy of religion for the concrete and existential side of religions. He is careful in assessing the impact of rational arguments for and against the reasonableness of religion by distinguishing between personal and interpersonal arguments and by pointing to the fact that in relation to religion personal and experientially-based arguments will have a deeper impact. Löffler points out that as in other areas of human life which

confront philosophy, so also in the case of religion, there must be some sort of 'free certainty' which allows for personal application of certain types of arguments and for first-person involvement.

If this is the case, Löffler's discussion of various types of arguments serves two goals. On one hand, the discussion is meant to foster a reflection on religious convictions within the context of doubt and/or in the context of dialogue with other worldviews, in order to justify the reasonableness of beliefs in God's existence by providing inter-subjectively accessible arguments. On the other hand, this discussion contributes to a critical examination of the concept of God and of religious language as such.

Löffler's intellectually awake treatment of the reasonableness of religious convictions, based on the rationality of a worldview, is very inspiring. However, it is clear that Löffler's move to limit the discussion mainly to theism and to Aristotelian ontology (in order to illustrate the explanatory power of theism) itself shows that we are speaking about just one of various (historically valid) options. Given the different 'laws' governing theism and philosophy, one needs to be rather careful in mixing these two spheres of discourse. Instead, it might be necessary to clarify their connection based on more contemporary discussions within ontology and metaphysics.

Löffler's book is certainly a model of clarity. Its train of thought is persuasive and expresses a capacity to systematize a complex area of debate. Equally remarkable are the pedagogical skills which are revealed especially in the summaries at the end of each chapter, as well as in the recommendations for further reading. These hints allow for a deeper discussion of the topics and open up perspectives that go beyond the outlines of the book itself.

Having said that, the exclusive focus on the reasonableness of religious convictions reveals both the grandeur and the limitations of the book. For example, this focus tends to downplay the importance of various aspects of the concept of faith, as well as the impact of what one might call the 'religious form of life' and the so-called 'act of believing'. The problem of religious diversity and pluralism is also not considered. Despite these limitations, Löffler's monograph is an excellent textbook and can serve as an inspiring introduction to the contemporary philosophy of religion.