

Chapter Three (November 2011)

Divine Commands and Attitudes: Religious Morality

The attempts to found a morality apart from religion are like the attempts of children who, wishing to transplant a flower that pleases them, pluck it from the roots that seem to them unpleasing and superfluous, and stick it rootless into the ground. Without religion there can be no real, sincere morality, just as without roots there can be no real flower.

Leo Tolstoy, "Religion and Morality"

Moral error theorists and religious moralists agree that "without religion" there can be no real morality, but the error theorist adds that the addition of religion changes nothing. Religious moralists believe that the moral obligations and rights we have arise from the decrees and commands of God, and that an alleged moral principle or moral right without this divine backing is a mere human invention with no more authority over anyone than a request from a stranger or a demand from a committee of philosophers.

The most direct way to criticize religious morality is to show that there is no god; but the history of religious discussion does not encourage this approach. There are plenty of arguments for and against the existence of gods, variously conceived, but no

one from either side has ever managed to emerge with an undisputed victory. Like most philosophers, John Mackie was unconvinced by any of the proofs for God's existence. In his book, *Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong*, where he presented his defense of the moral error theory, he briefly considered religious morality and remarked that "there is no cogent positive argument for the existence of God," and then added that "the advance of scientific knowledge renders a theistic view . . . superfluous as an explanatory hypothesis and utterly implausible." (*Ethics*, p. 232) He later defended these claims in his lucid and convincing book, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (1982).

In the years since Mackie's books were published, philosophers seem to have been losing interest in these arguments, but at the same time public interest in religion has been on the rise worldwide. The arguments are no better now than they were 25 (or 2500) years ago, and in any case those who embrace religion do not usually arrive through the doors of an argument, but via tradition and personal experience. The rise in more conservative, activist, and politicized forms of religion has resulted in more pressure on atheist beliefs and on liberal behavior, and there has been an inevitable push-back by atheist writers. (See Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*). These authors glance at the traditional arguments for (and against) God's existence, but they treat them as relics of a less enlightened time. They have more interesting fish to fry. Dennett discusses the "natural

history” of religion and the taboo on forthright critical discussions of it, Dawkins emphasizes the evolutionary basis of religious beliefs, Hitchens reminds us how crazy and harmful religions can be, and Harris locates the real problem with the fact that we have elevated faith, which is belief in the absence of evidence, to the “highest place in the hierarchy of human virtues.” (p. 65) These “New Atheists” provide a powerful assortment of challenges to any fair-minded theist. But there is no need for us to deal with arguments about the existence of God here because I plan to argue that even if it should turn out that there is some all-powerful and all-knowing creator who issues commands, we may (and if we are reasonable we will) remain unconvinced that we are morally obliged to obey him, her, or it.

Discussions of religious morality often begin by taking a page from Plato’s *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates questions Euthyphro, a young man on his way to court to prosecute his own father for the death of a slave. Because the prevailing morality ranked family loyalties over justice for slaves, Socrates used the event to investigate Euthyphro’s claim to be doing the right thing. Euthyphro said that he was acting properly because he was doing what his religion requires. Over the centuries this debate has been boiled down, for our easy consumption, to what philosophers have come to call *the Euthyphro question*—“Is something right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?” If we choose the second answer we will have abandoned religious morality, and can be asked for a secular explanation of the nature of rightness. If we choose the first alternative, saying that divine commands create moral obligations, we can then be deluged with a series of really hard questions

to which there have never been any good answers. We can be asked if absolutely anything at all (genocide, torture, revenge, hatred, you name it) would be right if only it were commanded by a god, or your god, or God. We might bite the bullet and say that those things would be right, but that is a hard sell to all but the most fanatical of believers. The better answer to “the Euthyphro question” is “Neither the one nor the other.”

The problem moral error theorists have with the *Euthyphro* question is that it presupposes the existence of both gods and values, and only asks about the relation between them. Moral error theorists will see little use in asking about the relationship between moral facts and supernatural beings, both of which they take to be fictions.

Incidentally, error theorists are in a position to avoid two other popular arguments that involve questions of divinity, good, and evil. One is the “Argument from Evil,” according to which there can be no omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent being (that is, no god) because there is so much evil in the world. The other comes from Aquinas, who claimed that since some things are good and others better, there must be something absolutely good to act as a standard, and that is God. Anyone who believes that the world contains neither good nor evil, will not be interested in arguing for God’s existence from the one, or against it from the other.

If we assume that there are gods who issue commands and enforce those commands with rewards and punishments, then prudence may motivate us to obey them. But why is obedience not only good policy, but also our moral obligation? It may seem odd or irreverent to ask why we have a moral obligation to do as God commands,

but as we saw in Chapter One, when someone tells us that we ought to do or refrain from doing something, our natural and predictable response is to ask for reasons. When we are told that it is morally wrong to work on Sunday, we ask why. We may be told that the Third Commandment forbids it. “And why,” we ask, “are we morally obliged to obey that Commandment, or any other?” Answers have been given but, as we shall see in Section 3, each of these answers suffers from obvious defects.

1. Enforcement and Revelation. The story of the events and forces that eventually resulted in a near universal belief in deities is a story of ignorance, superstition, greed, lust for power, good intentions, altered states of consciousness, hopes, fears, dreams, delusions, and lies. Early humans understood next to nothing about the way nature works. Birth, death, the seasons, fire, storms, animals, and eclipses were shrouded in mystery and interpreted by myth. Goddesses and gods create worlds, weep rain, breathe life, eat sacrifices, and speak to mortals. They cause disasters, send prodigies, and make it possible to give simple, comprehensive, and utterly fictional answers to countless questions that troubled the developing minds of our curious ancestors.

Thanks to their fertile imaginations and to mind-altering substances (soma, sacred mushrooms, Greek wine, Mesopotamian beer) and practices (yoga, meditation, and fasting), our ancestors enjoyed a variety of altered states of consciousness about the causes of which they were completely in the dark. When even the ordinary is a mystery, the extraordinary—dreams, visions, hallucinations, powers—is either explained supernaturally or not explained at all.

Religious beliefs were reinforced by rulers and priests, who promoted the deities from whom their authority was supposed to flow. Hammurabi named Marduk as the source of the laws he promulgated, and in Exodus 32:15-16, Moses was said to have brought down tablets inscribed on both sides in the “handwriting” of God himself. In Egypt the pharaoh was believed to *be* a god. Chinese emperors claimed the Mandate of Heaven, and in India, *brahmin* priests cited the sacred *Vedas* to support their privileges. Clearly, a religious backing was valuable to have, easy to claim, difficult to refute, and available to anybody. Without it the word of a prophet, king, priest, or reformer carried little more weight than that of the next person.

The god who gave the laws to Moses made it clear that he would handsomely reward those who obey him, and rain horror on the disobedient. (See Leviticus 26:3-12, and 14-17) But because the distribution of good and ill fortune so often appears unrelated to what we do, this idea is easy to question and hard to defend. If one is to believe it, something must be done to explain the bad fortune of the good and the good fortune of the bad. One solution was to make the punishment reach beyond the grave to the agent in some future life here on earth or elsewhere, and another was to apply the punishment to the innocent descendents of the guilty party.

The undesirable consequences that have been imagined to threaten evil-doers were almost without limit. A violation could bring undesirable consequences to the agent, his family, or his progeny for generations. The harm may come through the agency of other humans, gods, ghosts or spirits, and it may come in this or another life, on this earth or in some suitable hell. If a person does some forbidden thing and

something bad then happens to him, we can take this as evidence that the system is working. If an innocent person suffers, the explanation will be that he had a secret crime, or that in another life he broke the rules, or that some ancestor of his did. If we give up all of these beliefs, we will find that we have also given up the comforting thought that justice is always served “in the fullness of time.”

If the gods do exist and do decree laws and mete out penalties for infractions, then it is reasonable to expect them to inform us, their subjects, of those laws and penalties. Richard Swinburne claims that it is “quite likely” that an all powerful and all good creator God would “intervene in human history to reveal things to us.” (Swinburne, *Revelation*, 70) Revelations come in many forms. Some arrive in dreams and visions from a deity or angel. God spoke to Moses, and through the prophets; Jesus addressed his disciples and those who would listen; Marduk presented laws to Hammurabi; the angel Gabriel spoke to Mohammed; and the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith.

But problems emerge when the gods speak in riddles, or abandon language altogether. Some say that divine direction comes through subtle signs and portents, and that it would deprive us of something valuable if God were to reveal himself in completely unambiguous terms. It is hard to see what value obscurity has, but the main problem with this style of revelation is that anyone can take just about any phenomenon at all—a breath of wind on the cheek, a sudden chill, a bolt of lightning, or the appearance of a toad—as a revelation. The recipient of the revelation, or perhaps the official interpreter, is then relatively free to interpret the meaning of the event as he or she sees fit.

2. What to Believe? We begin by believing what we are taught, and by striving to see what we are told is there. We assimilate the beliefs of those around us—from beliefs about what we can eat to beliefs about how the world came into being. We believe in the gods, ghosts, fairies, angels, portents, and stories that everyone else accepts. Eventually we realize that not everything we have been told is accurate, and that some of it is absurd. As we mature, we continue to improve our version of what is going on by adding new details and replacing false and inaccurate beliefs with true and accurate ones. But beliefs are not isolated atoms in a memory bank, subject to inspection and removal one by one. They interact and hang together in such complex ways that to add, delete, or change one is to introduce a spontaneous cascade of revisions into our ever-evolving understanding of the world.

In ordinary situations it is easy enough to find out if one of our beliefs is correct, but this changes when we turn our attention to religious beliefs. Of all our beliefs, the religious ones may be the most difficult to check and the most in need of verification, and yet they are almost invariably given a free pass. Like the Trinity, this is something of a mystery. Given the progress we have made in understanding our world and ourselves, how can people believe so many things that fly in the face of reason and common sense?

In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett argues that over the centuries the shepherds of religious ideas have managed to silence scientific and common-sense criticism of even the most peculiar religious claims. The sad history of persecution reveals that religious authorities have discouraged dissent and criticism with as much

force as their society would tolerate. Once infidels (unbelievers) were routinely tortured and burned alive, but now, at least in countries that have attained some freedom from religion, they are merely mocked and considered rude and unfit for public office. In some Islamic countries, however, apostasy is still punished by death.

That particular punishment is quite unreasonable because it is pretty clear that belief is not a matter of the will. We do many things voluntarily, but believing is not one of them. Even the threat of death or a promise of eternal life cannot make me believe in a god if I don't believe in a god. Most people, however, do believe in a god—or at least say that they do. Those who identify themselves as believers in a particular sect of some religion will claim to believe the doctrines of their sect, but few will be able to explain those doctrines with any clarity, and some won't even be able to list them. In June 2006, Georgia congressman Lynn Westmorland, who was sponsoring a bill to display the Ten Commandments in the Senate and the House, was a guest on the “The Colbert Report.” At one point Stephen Colbert challenged the congressman to list the commandments and, after some stammering, he was able to come up with only three. (The video may still be out there—you can just google “Ten Commandments Congressman.” I found it at <http://www.funnyhub.com/videos/pages/ten-commandments.html>)

As a child, I learned “The Apostle’s Creed” and repeated it every Sunday. Among other things, I avowed that I believed in “Jesus Christ . . . who . . . was conceived by the Holy Ghost..” In 2000 ‘ghost’ was replaced by ‘spirit’, the more natural translation of ‘spiritus’.) I remember wondering about this peculiar claim, but like almost everyone

else I was uncurious and just said what I was supposed to say. Since I would have been unable (and am still unable) to make sense of that Ghostly conception, can I say that I was speaking truly when I said that I *believed* it? It is more likely that what I believed was that the words in question expressed a truth that I did not yet understand. I was, in a usage embraced by Dennett, professing.

Many who do not understand the doctrines of their religion are satisfied to be professing, which is just as well, because most religious dogmas can neither be understood nor explained by those who profess them. Unfortunately, they can also neither be understood nor explained by the shepherds who urge us to accept them as mysteries. They insist that these truths are so deep and difficult it takes a specialist, a mystic, or even someone chosen by God, to understand them. By buying into this ruse we have outsourced the hard work of study and critical thinking to our priests and philosophers, and we are paying the predictable price—we are losing the ability to think about these things for ourselves, and this puts us at the mercy of those whose orientation and interests are often very different from our own.

We are born with the ability to put together a relatively coherent version of events. We quickly learn to identify objects and people, to come up with plausible explanations for what we see and hear, and to correct mistakes. This natural and effortless acuity is, in fact, one of our crowning achievements, and a source of great hope for our species. But somehow we have been talked into bypassing our natural wit when the issues involve the monumentally implausible ideas of religion. Then we just relax and take the existence and reported exploits of our favorite supernatural being as

axiomatic. If we reflect at all, it may be when we try to figure out how to cope with the conflict between the truths we have discovered in our lives and those false but not-to-be-questioned beliefs on which our religions are built. This exercise can do irreparable damage to our ability to make sense of things, depending on how many of our true beliefs, and how much of our logic, we have to sacrifice to feed and shelter the dogmas.

A popular way to insulate ourselves from the conflict between our good sense and what we have been taught by our religion is to declare discussions of religious topics out of bounds. Many people consider it rude to bring up questions about a person's religion, or to raise the topic before, during, or after dinner. Religious doctrines are so difficult to explain and defend, and so easy to question and attack, that a discussion between a believer and an even mildly talented skeptic may seem like an intellectual mugging. So it is natural for theists not to want to be subjected to constant intellectual scorn for not being able to answer bantering questions from the atheist's ample supply. However, if questioning and criticizing religious beliefs can be put out of bounds, or confined to coffee houses, bars, and philosophy classes, then many bizarre and dangerous superstitions will remain unchallenged. By getting us to think of religious questioning as impolite, the shepherds of religious ideas have found a way to protect their flocks from predation by doubters and critics.

Why are so many people so unwilling or unable to question what is questionable when the area is religion? Why are they so quick to believe and so slow to doubt? If Dennett is right, it is because they "believe in the belief in God."

People who believe that God exists are sure that God exists, and they are glad, because they hold God to be the most wonderful of all things. People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that belief in God exists (who could doubt that?) and think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be strongly encouraged and fostered whenever possible. . . . People who believe in belief in God try to get others to believe in God and, whenever they find their own belief in God flagging, do whatever they can to restore it. (221)

Everyone knows that much harm has been brought about by religion, and everyone knows that religion has helped countless people through hard times. It is also fairly well understood that a tendency to flirt with the supernatural is a part of our nature. But the question I want to deal with in this section is neither whether God exists, nor whether belief in God is a good thing. I want to ask how we can help ourselves hone our ability to make sense of what we experience and to arrive at a relatively accurate version of what is happening. It is obviously not by holding on for dear life to our childhood beliefs.

If we really want to figure out what is happening, then we must open ourselves to multiple sources of data and to alternative hypotheses. We should rely on first hand experience when we can, and when we can't, we need to be careful about the reports of others. We also need to know when to trust our instincts and our first impressions. If we hear a report of some supernatural or even unlikely event, unless we are already in

the thrall of some superstition, the first thing that will pop into our minds is a set of possible natural explanations. Miraculous cures can be explained by the placebo effect, and pictures of the Holy Family on bridges can be traced to rust and projection. Our species has got this far because when something odd or unexpected occurs, our first and natural impulse has been to explain it in terms of our own experience. This sometimes leads us astray, but what else can we do?

What we come to believe is not a result of what we decide to believe, or even of what we deduce to be true. We develop our evolving story of the world long before we acquire the skill to weigh evidence. Even when we try to eliminate bias and let the evidence speak for itself, we ourselves determine what to treat as evidence and how to weigh it. We *arrive* at belief, and few of us could trace the path that led us there. We might even say that it is the belief that arrives. What we can do is clear away some of the rubble, like greed, hatred and delusion, that blocks our path to true and undistorted beliefs—or their path to us.

Accepting a belief forces an unconscious correlation of what we have learned with what we already believe—a subtle reinterpretation of the world to make room for new information, and a subtle interpretation of the information to make it fit the picture. As we move about in the world, we pick up information which our brain automatically processes and merges with what we already know. When we discover hard data—letters, tapes, information about secret bank accounts, photos, fossils, and fingerprints—we alter our theories and our beliefs, if we are healthy, to incorporate what we have learned. This interpretation of experience, this understanding of what is going

on, is too deep and detailed to have been arrived at by conscious rational deliberation. Fortunately, nature has not assigned this important task to such a fragile instrument. We usually take in new information, and make it fit with the old, as naturally as breathing, and as automatically as we digest our food. Because so much of this activity takes place “offstage” we are occasionally surprised by the beliefs we develop and the changes we go through. One day it may simply occur to us that we no longer believe in the resurrection, the creation account in Genesis, the existence of Marduk, the truth of astrology, or the fidelity of a mate. Another time, like a Zen monk experiencing a satori, or like Saul/Paul falling from his ass, we may be jolted by some insight or conversion experience we had been unconsciously nursing for years.

So again, what are we supposed to do when we encounter some data or claim that goes against what we believe? It would be wise to begin by reminding ourselves that a claim is not automatically disqualified by contradicting something we believe. We are constantly being forced to revise our versions of reality, so we can expect to lose some of our favorite beliefs over time. This means that if we want to see things clearly, and to construct the most accurate version of reality we can, we will have to keep our minds open. If we allow ourselves to be exposed to new information, if we take a full and friendly look at what counts for and what counts against our beliefs, then the modifications in our belief-systems that result will help us find our way. But they will neither be worked out by reason nor decided by free choice—they will just happen.

3. Divine Commands and Moral Obligation. Many religious believers allow that the arguments for and against the existence of God are inconclusive, and yet almost everyone believes (or at least believes that they believe) in God. Some have never questioned what they have been taught, and others have had dramatic experiences resulting in beliefs too firm for any argument to dislodge. What I have to say here about religious morality does not depend on proving or even assuming that no god exists. Instead, I will argue that even if we suppose that there is an all knowing and powerful creator of everything, and that this being issues commands to humans and enforces those commands with punishments and rewards, there is still no good answer to the question of why the values and directives of such a being would generate moral values and moral obligations that “apply to” us.

Religious moralists, who give the first of the two answers to the *Euthyphro* question, say that acts such as eating lobster, stealing, and adultery are morally wrong because God has commanded us not to do them. This account of the source of moral obligation is referred to as the **divine command theory of morality**. A divine *command* theory is an attempt to answer a question about obligation or duty; but a related theory can turn up as an account not of obligation but of value. Someone may say that what makes kindness, mercy, and generosity valuable, or good, is the fact that they are liked, admired, cherished, or desired by God. These things would be good even if no one had received any divine commands or in any other way managed to discover what God prefers. It is the Holy Attitude itself that makes them good.

Nobody thinks we are morally obliged to obey every command we hear or read of in some Holy Book, so the question that naturally arises is this: **“What features of God explain how and why his commands create moral obligations?”** I will sometimes refer to this question as “The Question.” I will start by focusing on divine commands as a source of obligation, but later I will have more to say about value.

God’s Power. If there is an all-powerful and all-knowing being who issues commands, punishes the disobedient, and rewards those who submit, then we all have good prudential reasons to obey it. This sort of a god bears a suspicious resemblance to those autocrats who have ruled society with fear and violence from the beginning of recorded history. Both human and divine monarchs are usually quick to anger, sensitive to disrespect, callous in the treatment of their subjects, and suckers for lavish praise. They have immense power, but we would probably all agree that might, even infinite might, doesn’t make right. The power to punish those who cross him and to reward those who follow his orders does not make a god a moral authority any more than immense power made Adolf Hitler one. After Abraham demonstrated his complete obedience to God by being willing to kill his son Isaac, God said:

Your descendents shall possess the cities of their enemies. All nations on earth shall pray to be blessed as your descendents are blessed, and this because you have obeyed me. (Genesis 22:18)

Why are we not bothered by this tale? We would all be horrified (and moralists would feel *moral* outrage) if someone sacrificed a child to escape some difficulty, or to

win the favor of some powerful being. I suggest that, whatever the moralists among us might say, few if any of them really believe that something is right because it is commanded by some being with the power to give cities to those who obey, and to destroy those who do not.

God's Ownership and Creation of Everything. When we reflect on the story in Genesis, we may feel that God had a right to order Adam not to eat the fruit because it was God's tree and God's garden. He used his power to make the tree spring up from the ground. But he also used that power to form Adam from the dust, and Eve from Adam's rib (or whatever). Does this mean that Adam, Eve, and all their descendents, belong to God in the same sense in which the tree and its fruit belongs to God? Is this why the divine command theorist thinks we are morally obliged to obey God's every command? John Locke thought so. He claimed that it is wrong to harm one another in any way since we are all "the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business." We are God's property, "made to last during his, not one another's pleasure." (Locke [2], 9)

Property is a human concept, and a social one. It may have its roots in a territorial instinct, but as we now understand the concept, it is tied up with labor, occupancy and use, deeds, contracts, signatures, wills, exchange, and transfers. When we talk about God's tree we are relying on our human understanding of the human institution of ownership, and on the natural belief that if we have produced something, we own it. But the idea that a single being "owns" everything does not fit with the

concept of property as we understand it. God's ownership of everything may be too different from my ownership of something to allow us to use the latter to make sense of the former.

But even if it made sense to talk about a transcendent being owning the world and its denizens, it still does not follow that such a being has absolute authority over the persons who occupy its real-estate. We consider our children to be *our* children, and while we usually take ourselves to be responsible for their well-being, we do not feel that we own them as we own our furniture or our pets. As they grow older they remain ours, but any claim we make to ownership, and with it jurisdiction, becomes ludicrous.

The Mesopotamians looked upon themselves and their cities as the property of their gods, just as they looked upon their slaves as their own property. They were both masters and slaves, owners of other humans, and owned by their gods. The first duty of a slave is obedience, and as a slave-owner sees it, it is morally permissible to demand obedience from slaves, and to do what is necessary to secure it. Job, who was said to be a "righteous man," had 500 slaves, and God, who considered Job his "servant," treated the old man like a laboratory hamster. This slave mentality is no longer acceptable in most parts of the civilized world, but even when the institution of slavery was flourishing, it was, like the ownership of land, organized around certain procedures and rules by which some people became the property of others. There may have been a purchase or proceeding, and often there were documents. By what procedure and according to what rules, then, did we all become the property of God? The usual answer is that God's ownership is not based on conventional contracts or

laws, but on the fact of creation. He created the world out of nothing, Adam out of mud, and the natural laws that led from Adam and Eve to us. That is why we are his possessions, his property. That is why we are morally obliged to obey him.

But suppose that billions of years ago scientists from a distant galaxy performed experiments that resulted in the formation of our galaxy, our sun, the planets, and finally, life as we know it. Suppose that their life-spans are as great as their power, and that they have returned and insisted that since they created us, we are obliged to obey them and to serve as phaser-fodder in their imperialistic adventures. We might be forced to obey these aliens, but few of us will agree that it is our moral duty to obey their commands simply because they created us. Why, then, do we think that we owe obedience to some god, just because he, she, or it, set going the process that resulted in our short and often miserable existence? If there is anything about God that makes us morally obliged to obey his commands, it must be something other than his claim to be The Creator.

God as a Parent. Sometimes the analogy between God and a parent is used to support the claim that we are obliged to obey God. But there are very few respects in which God “the Father” is like anyone’s actual male parent. He doesn’t speak to us, and if one of us were about to fall off a cliff, he wouldn’t lift a finger to save our life. When you think about it, it makes more sense to call the earth our mother. At least we are grown out of her substance. But the earth doesn’t issue commands, or demand obedience.

Even if there were several similarities between God “the Father” and a father, we must remember that a parent’s order would rarely be thought to create more than a *prima facie* obligation—that is, an obligation that is overturned if the order is crazy, or even in conflict with the prevailing moral standards. A child is not morally obliged to shoplift because her father orders her to do so, nor would anyone say that her moral obligation *not* to shoplift is a function of her father’s will. The analogy between God and a father, therefore, is of very little value to the divine command theorist, who appears to believe that if God wants us to steal something (or to wipe out a rival tribe or a city) then we do have a moral obligation to do just that.

For the Love of God. Love is a difficult matter at best. It is not clear whether we are supposed to be obligated to obey God because we love him, or because he loves us, or both. If we love each other though, why aren’t we obligated to obey each other? It is hard to see what there is about love that creates an obligation to obey. If we love an ordinary person (not a god or a goddess) nobody thinks our love obligates us to obey his or her commands. Indeed, the idea that love requires obedience is a pathological understanding of love. It is true that love often inclines us to try to please those we love. It is therefore often effective to appeal to another person’s love when we want them to do something for us. So if we love God we may be inclined to do what we think he wants us to do—but the inclination to obey God is one thing and the obligation to obey God is something else (or nothing at all).

God’s Goodness and Perfection. Among other things, God is said to be good, and perfect, and even perfectly good. The problem is that anyone who starts here will

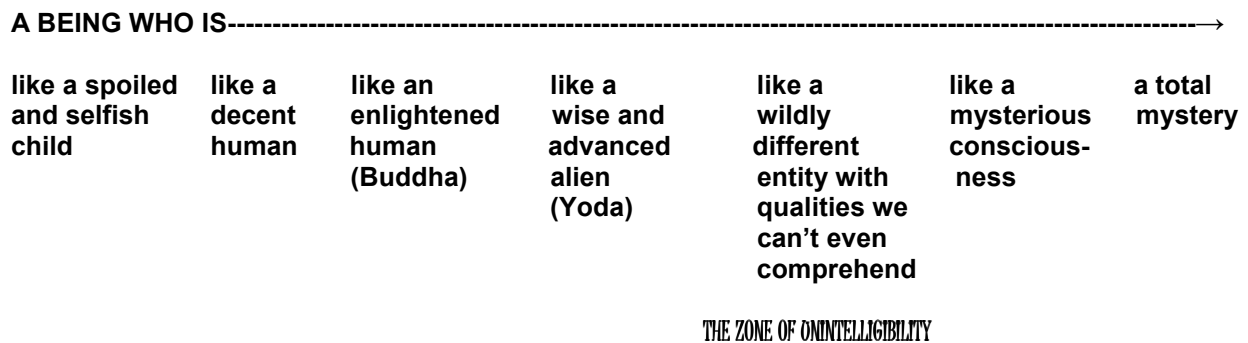
have already abandoned religious morality by having adopted a notion of goodness or perfection that is independent of god. But suppose we do try to develop a “divine attitude” account of goodness, saying that something will be good when God has a certain attitude (probably love) toward it. The trouble with this is that if something *becomes* good when and only when God loves it, then the claim that God is good will only be made true by the fact that God loves himself. That just seems absurd.

The other problem with basing the claim that God is good is the likelihood that he is not—on anybody’s definition. Most moralists would have a hard time reconciling God’s alleged goodness with all the things he has done and has ordered to be done in his name. A moral abolitionist would not say that God is *evil*, but how can a *moralist* withhold that term from any being who commands genocide, rape, and ethnic cleansing? (See <http://www.angelfire.com/pa/greywlf/biblegod.html>.) The four above-mentioned books by the New Atheists are clear about the double standard that allows gods to do things that mere humans are sometimes forbidden even to contemplate. They all emphasize what almost all of the moralists in the world would be forced to call the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad behavior of the gods and their minions.

We are no better off if we attempt to defend religious morality by insisting that God is, by definition, a perfect being. If a perfect being issued a command, it would be a perfect command, but we have no idea of what a perfect being, or a perfect command, might be. Even if we could understand what a perfect being is, and if one of them existed, we still wouldn’t know why its perfection would oblige us to obey its orders

or adopt its desires. One might think, rather, that its perfection would make it unnecessary for it to issue any orders, and impossible for it to have any desires.

4. Another argument—Intelligible and Unintelligible Beings. Imagine a line along which divinities are arranged in the following way. At one end are anthropomorphic gods who have human features, consort with other humans, lie, disregard private property, and suffer from emotions like anger, fear, jealousy, love, and impatience. They see, smell, feel, communicate, and rest. The more any particular divinity resembles a human, the more we humans can relate to it. Unfortunately, the more it resembles a human, the less plausible it is to suppose that its bare preferences create value, or that its mere word morally obligates us to do something.



As we move along the line we subtract human qualities like lust, brutality, pride, jealousy, and a bad temper. At the same time, we intensify qualities we find desirable in humans. These beings are quite a bit nicer than the ones we started with, but not really much nicer than enlightened humans. While we respect enlightened humans and, if we know what is good for us, listen to them when we have a chance, we do not think that their words or preferences give rise to any moral duties.

Perhaps we have not moved far enough along the line and it is time to bring in other standard attributes of gods—attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, perfection, atemporality, eternality, and infinite love, patience, and mercy. The problem is that when we start to add extraordinary super-qualities, the beings enter the Zone of Unintelligibility where the occupants are so remote from anything with which we have had experience that it is ridiculous to speak of them as if they engage in human-like thinking, suffer human-like emotions, give away real estate, or even issue commands. Their spectacular qualities make them inaccessible and unintelligible. We dare not speculate about their motives. How can they be the source of our moral laws? They are all mysteries, and the less said about them the better.

Finally, even if we were able to understand what such beings were like, and able to make sense of their issuing commands and having preferences, we would still have no reason to think that their super qualities make them the source of value and moral obligation. We have already noted that even infinite might (omnipotence) doesn't make right. Omniscience doesn't help either, though it would have a bearing on the quality of a (well-meaning) being's advice. Perfection is not a quality, and eternality, atemporality, and infinity, to the limited extent we understand them, seem not to bear on moral authority at all. Why should unending existence or the ability to experience things timelessly make one's word morally binding?

6. Conclusion. Without some rather special (and superhuman) characteristics, a god is no more qualified to be the source of obligation and value than an advanced or enlightened human. But as soon as we attribute some of these special characteristics

to a being, we push it into the Zone of Unintelligibility. At that point we no longer understand what such beings would be like or how they could be enough like humans to have preferences and issue commands. And even if we could manage to believe that these beings have preferences and issue commands, there is still no reason to suppose that any of their super qualities qualify them to serve as the source of value and moral obligation. Why did we ever think they did?

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud gave a psychological explanation of the persistence of religious belief in the face of embarrassingly minimal evidence. Religious beliefs, he said, are held because they are “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.” (Freud [2], 30) They offer the believer answers to questions about the meaning of life, they guarantee protection against the terrors of the unknown, they offer hope for a life after death, and they can be used to motivate the cooperative behavior societies must ask from their citizens. He said that gods offer those who believe in them the moral authority and the protection from danger that real fathers offer to their frightened but willful children.

Freud saw humans as instinctively selfish, aggressive, and inconsiderate. He thought that these “unserviceable” instincts “have to be tamed by acts of repression, behind which, as a rule, lies the motive of anxiety.” (Freud [2], 43) This anxiety produces childhood neuroses, most of which are outgrown “spontaneously in the course of growing up.” He believed that the development of society as a whole parallels the development of each of its members. Just as young children need (or at least often get) a stern father to drive them crazy with repression, young societies pass through a

similar stage and develop analogous forms of neuroses. In society at large the role of the father is played by God (“our father in Heaven”). Freud’s claim, then, is that religion is “the obsessional neurosis of humanity.” (Freud [2], 43) It is not necessary to agree with everything that Freud said to be impressed by the similarity between the roles gods and fathers are supposed to play. In any case, what we have seen here is that there is no reason to think that gods, or fathers, or even mothers, can, by their attitudes or commands, bring value or moral obligation into being.