

Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality

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Hamartia in its New Testament sense of moral fault retains the flavor of its older sense of missing the mark. And if we ask against that biblical background, "who sets up the moral mark that *hamartia* is the missing of?" the question answers itself. My main concern in this paper grows naturally out of that question and its obvious answer, for I want to consider just what is involved in God's establishing of moral principles. Every reply to *this* question is at least the beginning of a theory of religious morality, and at least three such theories will be examined in this paper.

The relationship I want to explore between God and morality is especially well-endowed with concrete examples in the world's great literature, and the story of Abraham and Isaac is surely the most familiar of them. But because I will want to refer to one or two of its details, I will refresh the reader's memory by presenting the whole story here:

The time came when God put Abraham to the test. "Abraham," he called, and Abraham replied, "Here I am." God said, "Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the hills which I will show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass, and he took with him two of his men and his son Isaac; and he split the firewood for the sacrifice, and set out for the place of which God had spoken. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his men, "Stay here with the ass while I and the boy go over there; and when we have worshipped we will come back to you." So Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and laid it on his son Isaac's shoulder; he himself carried the fire and the knife, and the two of them went on together. Isaac said to Abraham, "Father," and he answered, "What is it, my son?" Isaac said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the young beast for the sacrifice?" Abraham answered, 'God will provide himself with a young beast for a sacrifice, my son.' And the two of them went on together and came to the place of which God had spoken. There Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then he stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son; but the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham." He answered, "Here I am." The Angel of the Lord said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him. Now I know that you are a God-fearing man. You have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up, and there he saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it as a sacrifice instead of his son. Abraham named that place Jehovah-jireh [that is, the Lord will provide]. [Ftn. 1: Genesis 22: 1-14, New English Bible. Subsequent quotations from Scripture are from this translation, with italics added for emphasis.]

It is clear that Abraham loved his son — not only from God's reference to Isaac as "your only son, whom you love," but also, I think, from Abraham's answer to Isaac's question, an answer that seems intended to shield Isaac as long as possible. But it is equally clear that Abraham was prepared to carry out God's command: "he stretched out his hand and took the knife *to kill* his son." How are those two facts to be reconciled? I want to consider just three answers that might be drawn from the story. One of them fits the story best, but neither of the others is wildly implausible at first glance.

The first of these answers is that Abraham was prepared to kill his only son, whom he loved, because he was afraid of what God would do to him if he disobeyed or hopeful of some reward for his obedience. And in fact the story goes on to tell that Abraham *was* rewarded, gloriously. There are good philosophical reasons to deny that even God could know ahead of time what Abraham would freely

decide to do, and it should be noted that in the story God says, "*Now I know. . .*" [Ftn. 2: See Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (1981), pp. 429-58, especially the discussion of ET-simultaneity beginning on p. 434.] But there is no reason to suppose that God would not know what Abraham was thinking simultaneously with Abraham's thinking it. And so if this first answer is to be taken seriously, God is showering Abraham with incomparable blessings for obeying him while thinking along these lines: "I know that what I'm about to do is horrible, but who knows what awful thing might happen to me if I don't do it, or what marvelous things God might do for me if I go through with it?" God need not even be particularly good to be repelled by such a character, and it is strictly incredible that Abraham should be singled out for such a blessing on the basis of obedience rendered in such a spirit. Behavior of the sort attributed to Abraham in this first answer is prudent, and there are of course many circumstances in which prudent behavior is just what's wanted. But prudent behavior is not to be confused with moral behavior, and when a moral issue as stark as the one in this story is overridden by considerations of prudence, prudent behavior is immoral behavior. It seems clear to me, then, that the very fact that the story ends with God's rewarding Abraham as he does is powerful evidence against taking this first answer seriously. And, anyway, since obeying commands, even divine commands, out of fear of punishment or hope of reward cannot count as *moral* behavior, the first answer would make the story of Abraham and Isaac irrelevant to our investigation of the relationship between God and morality.

A second initially plausible answer to the question why Abraham was prepared to kill his beloved son at God's command is that he believed that the horrible act had been made morally right simply by the fact that God had commanded it. This answer is relevant to our purposes as the first one is not, and I will have a good deal more to say about it and about the theory of religious morality it represents. It is also harder to reject as an interpretation of the story; there is, for instance, nothing in the fact that God blesses Abraham that is obviously at variance with this answer. It will be easier to say what I think is wrong with this answer in the light of a consideration of a third answer, which I think is the right one.

The third answer is that Abraham was prepared to kill Isaac because, throughout his ordeal, Abraham firmly held all four of these beliefs: God has commanded me to kill my son; God is good and altogether worthy of my obedience; for me to kill my son, even as a sacrifice to God, would be horribly wrong; God is good and will not allow me to do something horribly wrong in obedience to his commands. Those four beliefs certainly strain against one another, but they are not incompatible. Abraham could hold them all without being inconsistent, and if he did hold them all, his trust in God was unconditional. That it was indeed unconditional can be seen in the line "he stretched out his hand and took the knife *to kill* his son." Obviously Abraham's state of mind was not that of an ordinary decent God-fearing father, who on finding himself in such harrowing circumstances might think "Surely God won't let me actually do this horrible thing; so I'll go along with his command, at least until the last minute. But if there's no divine reprieve by then, I'll know God wasn't good after all, and I'll save Isaac myself." A conditional trust of that sort would have been sensible as well as decent, but it would have fallen far short of the religious heroism with which Abraham was credited by St Paul and St James. [Ftn. 3: 3 Romans 4 and Galatians 3: 6; James 2: 21-3.] So if Abraham trusted God's goodness, he trusted unconditionally: he took the knife to kill his son, not merely to raise his arm as if to kill his son. But where is the evidence that he did, in fact, trust God to save Isaac (and thereby to save Isaac's father from wrongdoing)? When it was all over, Abraham named the hilltop with a name that means "the Lord will provide"; I think that that name was intended to blazon out in triumph what he had been steadfastly, silently saying to himself for three whole days: "The Lord *will* provide." And for further evidence of his trust in God's goodness, look again at the exchange between the boy and his father:

Isaac said to Abraham, "Father," and he answered, "What is it, my son?" Isaac said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the young beast for the sacrifice?" Abraham answered, "God will provide himself with a young beast for a sacrifice, my son."

The writer of the story leaves it to us to understand the emotions in this scene, and surely all of us can do so. But when this scene is viewed against the background of the *second* answer, according to which Abraham thinks that he will in fact be sacrificing his son quite soon, the father's reply is not only intended to shield the boy for a few more minutes, it is also a little *joke* — a joke the point of which will be the last thing Isaac ever sees. Cruel irony at the boy's expense is incompatible with Abraham's love for him, however, and so Abraham's reply must be no joke but rather the straightforward expression of

his trust. Only the third answer provides an interpretation that fits the story, one that also provides a basis for Paul's assessment of Abraham as "the father of all who have faith." More important for my purposes is the fact that this third answer provides us with an instance of a second theory of religious morality — the view that *God's goodness (together with his knowledge) entails that the actions he approves of are morally right and the actions he disapproves of are morally wrong.*

Before these competing theories (encountered in the second and third interpretations of the story) can be evaluated, they need to be more fully presented and more clearly distinguished. Happily, the classic clarification and differentiation of views like these takes place in the setting of another good story, the one told in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*.

Socrates meets Euthyphro outside one of the Athenian courts of law and learns that Euthyphro is there to prosecute his own father on a charge of murder. Socrates is shocked: "most men," he says, "would not know how they could do this and be right." [Ftn. 4: *Euthyphro*, 4A, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, tr. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, 1975). Subsequent citations of the dialogue are from this translation, with italics added for emphasis.] And so he supposes that the explanation for Euthyphro's otherwise bizarre behavior must lie in the fact that the victim, too, was a member of Euthyphro's family. Here is Euthyphro's reply:

It is ridiculous, Socrates, for you to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative. One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, even if the killer shares your hearth and table. The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice. The victim was a dependent of mine, and when we were farming in Naxos he was a servant of ours. He killed one of our household slaves in drunken anger, so my father bound him hand and foot and threw him in a ditch, then sent a man here to enquire from the priest what should be done. During that time he gave no thought or care to the bound man, as being a killer, and it was no matter if he died, which he did. Hunger and cold and his bonds caused his death before the messenger came back from the seer. Both my father and my other relatives are angry that I am prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer, as he did not even kill him. They say that such a victim does not deserve a thought and that it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. But their ideas of the divine attitude to piety and impiety are wrong, Socrates. (58-E)

Without suggesting that I know anything about Athenian law or even much about law generally, I think Euthyphro's charge of murder would be dismissed, and I think Euthyphro thought so, too. What matters to Euthyphro is not that his father should be convicted, or even that he should be tried; what matters is that Euthyphro should, by bringing the case to the judges, publicly acknowledge that an injustice has been perpetrated by his father (and that much is obviously true). And although he is indignant that Socrates should think that the relationship of the *victim* to Euthyphro might motivate his prosecuting his father, the *perpetrator's* relationship to Euthyphro clearly does motivate him. He says that if the killer acts unjustly "one should prosecute, even if the killer shares your hearth and table," but he has no doubt fallen into the habit of putting it that way because of the flaming row he's having with his family, who plainly cling to the ancient Greek principle of filial piety. The way Euthyphro the moral innovator sees it, one should prosecute *especially* if the killer shares one's hearth and table; for what worries Euthyphro most is not the violation of the criminal code or even the injustice, but "*the pollution*" to which you are subjected "if you *knowingly keep company with* such a man and do not *cleanse* yourself *and* him *by* bringing him to justice." What drives Euthyphro, then, is the ideal of moral or spiritual purity, and he undertakes the legal case against his father in the service of that ideal and with a care for his father's purification as well as his own. Poor Euthyphro! People who have heard what he's up to think he's crazy, as he himself reports to Socrates (4A), but it is the attitude of his own father and family that is especially hard to bear. "They say ... that it is *impious* for a son to prosecute his father for murder," thereby revealing that they have completely missed the special, even radical, filial piety underlying Euthyphro's admittedly bizarre behavior as well as failing utterly to understand the nature of religious piety: "But *their* ideas of the divine attitude toward piety and impiety are wrong, Socrates."

Socrates picks up the implication: "Whereas ... you think that *your* knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, is so accurate that ... you have *no* fear of having acted impiously in bringing your father to trial?" (5E) And Euthyphro responds in the expected way, in the way that invites a Socratic examination: "I should be of no use, Socrates, and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge of all such things" (4E-5A). "Tell me then," says Socrates, "what *is* the pious ... ?" (5D)

Like most of Socrates' interlocutors in similar circumstances, Euthyphro finds it very hard to say what he thought he knew perfectly well, and he makes a couple of false starts along the way to expressing his view in a definition that Socrates takes to be worth examining as at least the beginning of a theory of piety. But throughout Euthyphro's trial by dialectic all his attempts to say what he thought he knew stay close to the idea already suggested in his repudiation of his family's attitude: the knowledge of what is pious and what is impious rests on a knowledge of "the divine attitude." Thus his third answer, the one that receives Socrates' most detailed philosophical analysis, is that "the pious is what all the gods love" (9E) — an answer which might as well be expressed monotheistically, for purposes of the discussion in the dialogue as well as for our purposes: *Piety is what God approves of*.

Piety is one of the virtues regularly recognized by Socrates and the people with whom he talks, the others being justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation (or temperance). And since piety is the virtue specifically appropriate to a human being's relationship to God, it is neither surprising nor illuminating to be told that piety is what God approves of. But Socrates draws a distinction regarding this definition which is illuminating, as well as perfectly general in its applicability to definitions of that sort. Socrates introduces his distinction in the form of a question (10A), which I can paraphrase in this way: *Does God approve of what is pious because it is pious, or is it pious because God approves of it?* The effect of that question on Euthyphro's definition of piety is marvelous to see (as long as you happen not to be Euthyphro), but we are not going to look at it now. The drama of the stories, even the dialectical drama of the dialogue, must now be left behind so that we can get down to work.

I can make Socrates' distinction more directly relevant to our consideration of God's role in the basis of morality by applying it to Euthyphro's answer generalized from a single virtue to morality in general: *Moral goodness is what God approves of*. I will call this claim the general thesis of religious morality. It is taken for granted in the stories of Abraham and his son and of Euthyphro and his father: in both stories God approves or disapproves of certain human actions, and human beings have ways of knowing which ones he approves of and which ones he disapproves of. And we are, of course, not talking about just those two stories; the general thesis of religious morality has been incorporated into the doctrine of most — perhaps all — of the world's theistic religions. I want to apply Socrates' distinction to the general thesis in order to extract clarified versions of the two theories of religious morality we have encountered in our discussion of the story of Abraham. (They are present also in Plato's dialogue, but not noticeably in Euthyphro's story, the only part of the dialogue presented in detail here.) It will be convenient to work with a fuller version of the general thesis applied to actions alone: *Right actions are all and only those God approves of, and wrong actions are all and only those God disapproves of*. Applying Socrates' distinction to that general thesis of religious morality, we can extract from it two theories of religious morality. For either

(TO) God approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong; or

(TS) Right actions are right just because God approves of them and wrong actions are wrong just because God disapproves of them.

I call these two theories theological objectivism (TO) and theological subjectivism (TS), for reasons that will emerge if they are not already obvious.

We have seen an instance of (TS) in the second possible explanation we considered of the fact that Abraham was prepared to kill Isaac, whom he loved: Abraham might have believed that the horrible deed was *made morally right* just *because* God *commanded* it. And if this Abraham was a *thoroughgoing* adherent of (TS), he would have believed three days later that that same deed was then *made morally wrong* just *because* then, at the last possible moment, God *prohibited* it. For reasons I have already given, I think that taking Abraham to have been an adherent of (TS) doesn't fit the story. But to reject

(TS) as an interpretation of Abraham's state of mind is not (yet) to reject (TS) as a theory of religious morality, and so I want now to consider the theory itself.

There are good philosophical reasons for rejecting (TS) as a basis for morality, two of which I will be mentioning shortly. But it would be a shame to permit (TS) to perish peacefully of refutation alone when it richly deserves execration. For taking (TS) seriously means taking seriously the possibility that absolutely any action could be made morally right simply in virtue of God's commanding or approving of it. If a father's killing his innocent son, whom he loves, is not an example horrible enough for you, you may be left to your darkest imaginings. But do not suppose that the adherent of (TS) can extricate himself from this terminal embarrassment with the pious rejoinder that God is good and so can be relied on not to approve of moral evil. The only standard of moral goodness supplied by (TS) is God's approval; and so to say within the context of (TS) that God is good comes to nothing more than that God approves of himself — which is easy to grant but impossible to derive any reassurance from.

The execration (TS) deserves was never more forcefully delivered than by John Stuart Mill, who, happily for philosophical polemic and English prose but unhappily for Mr Mansel, encountered in that Mr Mansel an adherent of a version of (TS). Here is part of what Mill has to say about Mr Mansel and his theory of religious morality:

If in ascribing goodness to God I do not mean what I mean by goodness; if I do not mean the goodness of which I have some knowledge, but an incomprehensible attribute of an incomprehensible substance, which for aught I know may be a totally different quality from that which I love and venerate — and even must, if Mr Mansel is to be believed, be in some important particulars opposed to this — what do I mean by calling it goodness? and what reason have I for venerating it? If I know nothing about what the attribute is, I cannot tell that it is a proper object of veneration. To say that God's goodness may be different in kind from man's goodness, what is it but saying, with a slight change of phraseology, that God may possibly not be good? To assert in words what we do not think in meaning, is as suitable a definition as can be given of a moral falsehood. Besides, suppose that certain unknown attributes are ascribed to the Deity in a religion the external evidences of which are so conclusive to my mind as effectually to convince me that it comes from God. Unless I believe God to possess the same moral attributes which I find, in however inferior a degree, in a good man, what ground of assurance have I of God's veracity? All trust in a Revelation presupposes a conviction that God's attributes are the same, in all but degree, with the best human attributes. If, instead of the "glad tidings" that there exists a Being in whom all the excellences which the highest human mind can conceive, exist in a degree inconceivable to us, I am informed that the world is ruled by a being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, nor what are the principles of his government, except that "the highest human morality which we are capable of conceiving" does not sanction them; convince me of it, and I will bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms that I will not. Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing which he shall not do: he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go. [Ftn. 5: *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 4th edn (London, 1872), ch. VII: "The Philosophy of the Conditioned, as Applied by Mr Mansel to the Limits of Religious Thought," pp. 128-9.]

There is good argumentation in this passage along with the denunciation, but Mill's vehemence in the second half of it strikes me as altogether warranted. Although he was not a theist himself, the passionate tones of his condemnation of (TS) ought to resonate in the heart of every self-respecting theist. Submitting to the moral authority of God as envisaged in (TS) would be inadequately ridiculed as a case of *buying* a pig in a poke, for it amounts to *selling yourself* to a pig in a poke.

It is not only for the damage it does to the concept of God that (TS) is to be rejected, but also for its destruction of the basis of morality. For present purposes I will have to content myself with simply mentioning two of the more important, more obvious failings of (TS) as a putative basis for morality. In

the first place, and most importantly, morality rests on objectivity. Part of what that means is that if an individual action is really right at some time or other, then it always was and will be right. But (TS) does not preserve objectivity, as can be seen from the (TS)-interpretation of the Abraham story. In my view, this consideration alone is enough to disqualify (TS) as a theory of religious morality. In the second place, if (TS) is conjoined with a doctrine of divine rewards and punishments, as theories of religious morality usually are, it will be difficult or impossible to distinguish morality from prudence in the context of (TS). If God's command is all that makes the action right and I believe that God will punish me for disobedience, how can I convince myself that I perform the action because it is right rather than simply out of fear?

By this point (TS) should look disintegrated in disgrace, and the keenness of the reader's anticipation of (TO) must be almost painful; so I will delay the consideration of (TO) no longer than it takes to announce that, incredible as it seems, (TS) will rise again.

(TO) the theory which did seem to fit the story of Abraham, obviously has the strengths corresponding to the shortcomings of (TS): (TO) does provide the objectivity necessary for morality, and it does preserve the possibility of drawing a clear distinction between morality and prudence. Furthermore, in Mill's attack on Mr Mansel's version of (TS), the theory of religious morality that is clearly (if implicitly) advocated by Mill is (TO). According to (TO), God disapproves of treachery just because it is really wrong to betray someone who trusts you. According to (TS), on the other hand, if it is wrong to betray someone who trusts you, it is so only because and only as long as God disapproves of treachery; and if we should learn tomorrow that it is approved of by God, then tomorrow it will have become *right* to betray someone who trusts you. And so it looks as if every self-respecting theist should, with a clear mind and an easy heart, repudiate (TS) and embrace (TO) with the sense that a danger to religious morality has been averted and a firm foundation for it has been secured.

But now consider (TS) and (TO) in the light of our main question: What does God have to do with morality? These two theories offer two radically different answers to that question, and those answers are "Nothing essential" and "Absolutely everything." But "Absolutely everything" is the answer provided by the just-repudiated (TS), and "Nothing essential" is the answer entailed by (TO), which has been looking like the theory that would explain how morality could be based on religion.

Think of the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Moses is often called the law-giver, but since the story has him receiving the Commandments from God, that epithet is misleading; Moses was only the law-*transmitter*. God is the one who is properly described as the law-*giver*. But is he? According to (TS) he is, but according to (TO) God himself is really only a law-transmitter. For according to (TO) certain actions are really wrong and God knows which they are; and so, when he tells Moses to tell the people not to steal, he's not *legislating*, he's *teaching*. Of course such teaching on the basis of divinely expert authority may well have been invaluable at an early stage in the moral development of mankind, but if (TO) is right, there is every reason to suppose that the objective truth about morality is there to be discovered in more and more depth and detail by human beings using their reason, without the aid of further revelation. If (TO) is right, God's "giving" the Ten Commandments to the people through Moses is just what it would have been for God to have "given" them the principles of arithmetic — not to disclose to them his sovereign will, but to provide them with a starter-kit for the discovery of great truths. And so, if (TO) is right, the answer to the question "What does God have to do with morality?" is "Nothing essential." Of course, nothing essential need not be nothing at all. The person who first taught you arithmetic certainly has something to do with arithmetic, but nothing essential; there would be arithmetic even if that person had never existed. And, even more obviously, your first arithmetic teacher has something to do with your knowing arithmetic but, again, nothing essential; you could have learned arithmetic from someone else, and you could even have figured out quite a lot of it by yourself as you grew older and discovered the need for it. And so, if (TO) is right, it is just as absurd to consider God to be even a part of the basis for morality as it would be for you to expect to find a discussion of your first arithmetic teacher in a book entitled *Foundations of mathematics*.

(TO), which made its entrance into this discussion looking like the overwhelmingly preferable theory of religious morality, turns out to be not really a theory of *religious* morality at all, evidently cutting off any need morality might have been thought to have for a foundation in religion. And (TS), its only rival on the scene, has already proved not to be a theory of *morality* at all. At this stage of our investigation

reasonable people might be excused for thinking that, since the one theory of religious morality gives God everything to do with what turns out not to be morality, while the other theory preserves the essence of morality at the cost of giving God a walk-on part that could easily be written out of the play, religious morality has been shown to be, at best, not worth any further serious thought. But even such reasonable people ought to be at least vaguely worried by the fact that the concept of God, which I began by describing as an essential ingredient in this discussion, has so far been given no attention. Of course, I have said quite a lot about God, but God as I have been talking about him is God as he appears in the stories we have been looking at and in the bit of religious-cultural background we all share. It is time now to consider the concept of God....

That concept of God, the one in which I am interested, is the concept of an absolutely perfect being. Among the attributes included in that concept are some that everyone has at least heard of: omniscience, omnipotence, and eternality, for instance. Perfect goodness is another familiar attribute of an absolutely perfect being, and one that will obviously be important if the concept is to have an essential role in a theory of religious morality. But the attributes that will concern us to begin with are less familiar and less obviously relevant to our main topic, and the first of these is absolute independence.

It is easy to see that nothing that could count as absolutely perfect could be dependent on anything else for anything. So anything absolutely perfect is absolutely independent; and if God is conceived of as an absolutely perfect being, then God is conceived of as absolutely independent. That line of thought, short and simple as it is, has a devastating effect on theists who might have been willing to accept (TO) after all, abandoning the project of a religious morality and settling for a religion that simply coexists with morality. For if God is an absolutely perfect being, then (TO), with its implication of moral principles on which God depends for his knowledge of good and evil, seems to be false. Even when (TO) was looking its best, it was likely to have given theists the uneasy feeling that it impugned God's majesty; but what corresponds to God's majesty in perfect-being theology is absolute independence, and absolute independence cannot be merely impugned. Like everything else about an absolutely perfect being, it's all or nothing. And so, on the basis of everything we've seen so far, no theist who conceives of God as an absolutely perfect being . . . can take refuge in the apparent safety and sanity of (TO). Perfect-being theology is incompatible with (TO) as we have been reading it. It is not incompatible with (TS), but (TS) has been shown to be so bad on other grounds that no self-respecting theist can have recourse to it at this stage of our investigation.

It may look as if the emerging conclusion is that perfect-being theology is just incompatible with morality altogether.... But there is one more attribute I want to introduce, one that I think will save the day. It is the hardest of all the attributes to understand, and it is called simplicity.

To say that an absolutely perfect being is absolutely simple is to say that it is altogether without components of any kind, and so simplicity can be derived from independence. For whatever has components is dependent on those components for being what it is, and so perfection entails independence, which entails simplicity. As Anselm puts it, "everything composite needs the things it is composed of in order to *exist*. Moreover, *what* it is it owes to them, since whatever *it* is it is in virtue of them, while they are not what *they* are in virtue of *it*. And so [whatever is composite] is not completely supreme [or absolutely perfect]" (*Monologion*, XVII). Obviously an absolutely simple being cannot be a physical object, and there are other interesting implications of simplicity that are not hard to see. But the one that concerns us now might easily be overlooked in a first consideration of the concept of absolute perfection; to see it is to see how drastic a simplicity absolute simplicity has to be....

To say that God is absolutely simple is not merely to say that God cannot have any parts in the ordinary sense; it is also to say that God cannot be thought of as distinguishable from any of his attributes. And if God and each of his attributes are identical, then all of God's attributes are identical with one another. Before we can make use of this notion of simplicity, we have to make sense of it.

Attribution is, of course, ordinarily expressed in subject-predicate sentences, even when the subject is God. So we would ordinarily attribute goodness and power to God by saying "God is good" and "God is powerful." According to this notion of simplicity, however, such sentences are imprecise. If God is conceived of as an absolutely perfect being and thus as absolutely simple, then the precise versions of

such sentences will be either "God is identical with his goodness" and "God is identical with his power" or, even more simply, "God is identical with goodness" and "God is identical with power." Let's say that the first of these pairs of more precise sentences presents *cautious* simplicity and the second pair *bold* simplicity. Since it follows from the cautious pair that God's goodness is identical with God's power and from the bold pair that goodness is identical with power, it seems fair to say that absolute simplicity presents us with a more or less dire identity crisis, one that must be resolved before we try to apply the notion to the problems of religious morality. Because cautious simplicity presents the less dire identity crisis, it is only sensible to try to make do with it as an interpretation of the notion of simplicity.

As Frege has taught us, there are two kinds of identity claims, uninformative, as in $9=9$, and informative, as in $9=3^2$. The identity crisis in the notion of simplicity (whether cautious or bold) obviously has to do with informative identity claims. There are plenty non-mathematical examples of such claims, but we may as well stay with Frege's classic example involving the morning star, the evening star, and the planet Venus. Since the morning star is identical with Venus and the evening star is identical with Venus, it is true and informative to say that the morning star is identical with the evening star. At the same time we want not to ignore the fact that they are also different — two different ways of seeing one and the same thing. If we focus on their designations rather than on the phenomena themselves, we say that the designations "the morning star" and "the evening star" differ in sense although they are identical in reference. And whenever we have a true informative identity claim, we will have two expressions with one and the same referent and two different senses. What happens when these basic distinctions are applied to cautious simplicity?

As analogues to the morning star, the evening star, and Venus, we have God's goodness, God's power, and God, respectively. And so we should be able to say correctly that the designations "God's goodness" and "God's power" have one and the same referent — God — and differ only in sense. Putting it that way certainly satisfies the notion of cautious simplicity, but can we make sense of putting it that way? If we bear in mind the analogy with Frege's paradigm, it is not hard to make sense of cautious simplicity. It might be said that, because of differing circumstances that apply only to us and not at all to that being itself, the absolutely simple being that is God is perceived by us sometimes in a way that leads us to perceive divine goodness, sometimes in a way that leads us to perceive divine power. Divine goodness and divine power are no more really distinguished from each other or from God than the morning star, the evening star, and Venus are three in reality rather than one. Obviously there is more to explain and more to worry about in connection with even cautious simplicity, but there is no point in our considering cautious simplicity any further as a possible route to a third theory of religious morality. The reason for abandoning it we have already seen in dealing with (TS) and in considering Mill's attack on Mr Mansel: as long as we are focusing on God's goodness, the question will and should always arise whether *God's goodness* is really *goodness*. And so, despite the fact that it is easier to make sense of cautious simplicity initially, we have to consider bold simplicity if the doctrine of simplicity is to provide a preferable theory of religious morality.

According to the small portion of perfect being theology I am presenting in this paper, perfect goodness must be an attribute of an absolutely perfect being; and in the light of the notion of simplicity in its bold form, God conceived of as an absolutely perfect being *is* perfect goodness itself. If we momentarily ignore the question whether the consequences of bold simplicity are tolerable, we can see that applying it to the difficulties in religious morality has a dramatic effect. **When God is conceived of as identical with perfect goodness, the kind of distinction that was crucial as between (TO) and (TS) becomes a mere stylistic variation.** Here are the bold-simplicity counterparts of (TO) and (TS):

(PBO) God conceived of as perfect goodness itself sanctions certain actions just because they are right and rules out certain actions just because they are wrong.

(PBS) Certain actions are right just because God conceived of as perfect goodness itself sanctions them, and certain actions are wrong just because God conceived of as perfect goodness itself rules them out.

If there is goodness itself, as there is if there is an absolutely perfect being, then obviously it is and must be the sole criterion of moral rightness and wrongness. **And so (PBS) involves no subjectivity, as**

did our original (TS), nor does (PBO) involve principles independent of and criterial for God, as did our original (TO). (PBO) and (PBS) are just two ways of saying the same thing: actions are right if and only if goodness certifies them as such, and goodness certifies actions as right if and only if they are so.

It may look as if this third theory of religious morality transforms God from the ultimate judge of morality into no more than the abstract ultimate criterion; but, of course, God conceived of as an absolutely simple being is conceived of as the ultimate judge who is identical with the objective ultimate criterion itself. And so, once the crucial contribution made by bold simplicity to this third theory is taken into account, the theory could safely revert to the judgmental verbs "approve" and "disapprove" found in (TO) and (TS) and could even be expressed in new versions of (TO) and (TS) in which slight linguistic revisions would mark fundamental changes in interpretation. We can designate these new versions (TO') and (TS'):

(TO') God conceived of as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness itself approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong.

(TS') Right actions are right just because God conceived of as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness itself approves of them and wrong actions are wrong just because God conceived of as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness itself disapproves of them.

When God in the story of Abraham swears a solemn oath, he swears by himself (what else?); when the God of perfect-being theology makes a moral judgment, he judges by the objective criterion of perfect goodness which is himself. And so (TO') and (TS'), unlike (TO) and (TS) but like (PBO) and (PBS), are just two ways of saying the same thing.

So far so good; but what about the fact that bold simplicity apparently requires us to say that goodness is identical with power, which means that wherever there is power there is goodness, which is blatantly false? Well, taking bold simplicity seriously requires us to recognize that the identity claim at issue is, strictly speaking, not "Goodness is identical with power" but "Perfect goodness is identical with perfect power," which means that wherever there is perfect power there is perfect goodness, which is not blatantly false and may very well be true.

Such a glancing inspection is by no means enough to certify bold simplicity as free from paradox, much less to show that bold simplicity and the rest of perfect-being theology provides a basis for a theory of religious morality preferable to those ordinarily encountered. But I hope it is enough to suggest that even bold simplicity might be made sense of, with dramatic results for the association between morality and theology. God knows it needs work, but it's worth it.

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