

Chapter Three

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"

Amoralists and religious moralists agree that "apart from religion" morality can be neither explained nor defended. The amoralist only adds that not even *with* religion can morality be explained or defended. Our job here is to find out how well the religious moralist can deal with the combined criticism and scorn of the amoralists and secular moralists. Religious moralists believe that the moral obligations and rights we have arise from the decrees and commands of God. An alleged moral principle or moral right without this divine backing appears to them to be 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 Gods 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. 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 counterthrust 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 authors provide a powerful assortment of challenges to any fair-minded theist. But there is no need for us to deal with any of that here because I plan is to argue that, even if 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 dialogue the *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 *amoralist's* problem with the *Euthyphro* question is that it presupposes the existence of both gods and rightness, and only asks about the relation between them. It may be useful to assume the existence of a commanding divinity just to see how plausible religious morality is, but an amoralist will see little value in asking about the relationship between a god, whose nature is unclear and whose existence is quite problematic, and a moral fact, the existence of which any amoralist must deny.

Incidentally, amoralists 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 says that since some things are good and others better, there must be something absolutely good to act as a standard, and that is God. Amoralists, who believe 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.

We can only approach (or attack or defend) religious morality by getting clear about what religious moralists believe. In **Section One** we will examine the acts of some of the alleged divine commanders. There is no better (and perhaps no other) way to meet them than to look at the things people have claimed about their actions in the world, and their interactions with humans. Religious moralists say that they are responsible for morality, but we are more likely to run into them first not as the creators of morality, but as its enforcers.

Whatever the source of morality, if gods enforce it, then it is safe to assume that we will have been given some way to find out what the rules are. Revelation and divination have long been understood to be two of the many ways to learn what we are supposed (or destined) to be doing, so in **Section Two** we shall examine these ways of getting the message. By the time we get to the soothsayers, it will be helpful to pause and, in **Section Three**, raise the question of how we might go about figuring out what to believe about all of this.

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 their demands. But why is obedience not only good policy, but also our moral obligation? This is the question we must ask the religious moralist. 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, expected, and appropriate 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 to this question, but, as we shall see in **Section Four**, each of these answers suffers from fairly obvious defects.

1. Gods as Enforcers. We begin, then, not by denying the existence of gods, but by looking at what people have believed about them, or at least at what people have claimed to believe. 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 no 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: rain at the proper time, peace in the land, victory over enemies, lots of children, and, as he said in Leviticus 26:3-12, “I will walk to and fro among you.” He also explained what was going to happen to those who “do not listen.”

But if you do not listen to me, if you fail to keep all these commandments of mine, if you reject my statutes, if you spurn my judgments, and do not obey all my commandments, but break my covenant, then be sure that this what I will do: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting disease, recurrent fever, and plagues that dim the sight and cause the appetite to fail. You shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat the crop. I will set my face against you, and you shall be routed by your enemies. Those that hate you shall hound you on until you run when there is no pursuit. (Leviticus 26:14-17)

Isaiah speaks of sinners who “have earned their own disaster,” and adds that all will go well with the righteous, who will “enjoy the fruits of their actions.” (Isaiah 3:9-11)

Jeremiah promises disaster if the “apostate children” do not return to the Lord. “Mend your ways and your doings,” he says, “deal fairly with one another, do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, shed no innocent blood in this place, do not run after other gods to your own ruin.” (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

The gods of Greece were more capricious and human-like than Jehovah, but they were capable of equally stinging retribution and ferocious anger. They were distinguished from humans only by having more power than even the greatest nobleman, and by being immortal. Although Homeric gods punished offences, they usually did so when they were offended by the offences. There was no question of a consistently enforced law. Later it came to be believed, or at least asserted, that the gods punish acts of injustice. 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 is to make the punishment reach beyond the grave to the agent in some future life here on earth or elsewhere.

By 2000 B.C. in Egypt it was believed that those who passed the judgment of Osiris, in which their hearts were weighed against the feather of *maat* (justice), could look forward to an eternity of luxury in “a delectable paradise with rivers, lakes, and islands, and fertile land ploughed by heavenly oxen and bringing forth its fruits in ever-

increasing abundance and perfection.” (James, 177) For the rest, at the foot of the scales there lurked Ammit, a “hybrid monster in the form of a crocodile, hippopotamus and lion.” (174)

In addition to divinely appointed punishments for sinners, the Greeks and Hebrews believed in punishments that fall upon the evildoers’ relatives, present associates, and future generations. The belief that God “punishes sons and grandsons to the third and fourth generations for the iniquity of their fathers” shares with the belief in karma an all-encompassing explanatory power. (Exodus 34:7; see also Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9) The Greeks placed the limit at five generations, but even three would give us material to construct an explanation for the most dramatic cases of the suffering of the just. This is a terrifying concept, but there is something paradoxical about using such an unfair device to promote justice. Human law came to discourage punishing children for the sins of their fathers, and eventually this higher standard filtered up to the gods. After mentioning the proverb that “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge,” Ezekiel, speaking for God, says “this proverb shall never again be used in Israel.” (Ezekiel 18:1-4)

It is the soul that sins, and no other, that shall die; a son shall not share a Father’s guilt, nor a father his son’s. The righteous man shall reap the fruit of his own righteousness, and the wicked man the fruit of his own wickedness. (Ezekiel 18:20)

Those who hope to bring order to society will use tools and techniques that promise results. Fear of a despot can restrain us if there are many informers and

severe penalties. Fear of the gods works when people believe in them, their power, their omniscience, and their requirements. Fear of assorted supernatural beings also has an effect. Some spirits are thought to be benevolent, but not those who have been neglected after death or wronged while alive. A tremendous amount of energy is spent in order to quiet these harmful beings. Mediums are consulted to discover what is bothering them, and invocations, charms, gongs, gifts and firecrackers are used to placate or drive them away.

The undesirable consequences that threaten evil-doers have begun to multiply. A violation can bring undesirable consequences for 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 nothing bad happens to him, we can say that he will pay in the next world, or that his descendents will pay in this one. If a good person suffers, or fails to prosper, 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 will always be served “in the fullness of time.”

The evil-doer grieves in this world, he grieves in the next; he grieves in both. . . . The righteous man rejoices in this world, he rejoices in the next; he rejoices in both. . . . Whoever does wrong to an innocent person or to one who is pure and sinless, evil recoils on that fool even as fine dust thrown against the wind (recoils on the person throwing it). (*Dhammapada*, 293 and 302)

He who inflicts punishment on those who do not deserve punishment and offends against those who are without offense soon come to one of the ten states. He may have cruel suffering, infirmity, injury of the body, heavy afflictions (dread diseases), or a loss of mind, or a misfortune proceeding from the king or a fearful accusation, loss of relations, or destruction of treasures, or lightning fire burns his houses and when his body is dissolved the fool goes to hell.

(*Dhammapada*, 303)

Those that deny Our revelations We will burn in Hell-fire. No sooner will their skins be consumed than We shall give them other skins, so that they may truly taste Our scourge. Allah is mighty and wise. As for those that have faith and do good works, We shall admit them to gardens watered by running streams, where wedded to chaste virgins, they shall abide forever. We shall admit them to a cool shade. (The Koran, 4:54)

2. Revelation and Divination. If the gods issue laws and determine penalties for offenses, then it is reasonable to expect them to inform those who are subject to the laws and penalties. Richard Swinburne, in his book *Revelation*, says 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, 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.

Suppose that the night after being offered a new position you dream that Jesus visits you and urges you not to take the job. What are you supposed to think when you wake up? Well, which is more likely: (a) that Jesus, from his throne in heaven, has taken this opportunity to save you from a really bad choice, or (b) that your own fears and reservations have manifested themselves in that symbol of omniscience and ultimate authority? Before we understood what the mind is capable of, the visitation hypothesis might have made the most sense. But this is the 21st century, and given what we all know about how dreams are constructed in our subconscious, what could make anyone choose (a) over (b)?

If it is hard for us to accept the idea that a dream in which we are advised to do something is a message from a god, it has to be much harder to believe this of *someone else's* reported dream. At least in our own case there can be no suspicion of fraud. But what if someone you really trust tells you that he has frequent dialogues with

God? What would it take to make you believe him? Certainly not his mere say so. Even the very honorable nature of the deeds commanded, or the noble content of the revelations given, do not guarantee a divine source. There are tests that could be performed that might help you decide whether to believe your friend. You could ask him to get God to tell him some very personal secret of yours, or to reveal the inventory of your wallet. But of course gods do not stoop to such crude tricks. People say that giving in to such a request would be undignified, but it is not easy to see why. The rest of us who make claims and demands are often asked for identification, and we are ready to provide it as a matter of course—and there is the story of Gideon to be considered.

When God told Gideon that he had been chosen to deliver Israel, Gideon, even after being granted one miracle, was not satisfied and put God to an interesting and astute test. He put down a fleece and told God that if he was serious, he should let the dew fall only on the fleece and not on the surrounding ground. The next morning the ground was dry but Gideon got a bowl of dew from the fleece. Then he said to God:

Do not be angry with me, but give me leave to speak once again. Let me, I pray thee, make one more test with the fleece. This time let the fleece alone be dry, and all the ground covered with dew. (Judges 6:36-40)

And that is what happened, so Gideon finally believed God had chosen him for the task. Like Gideon, we have plenty of ways to check things out and to verify what people (or gods) tell us, and unless the people (or gods) are prideful or trying to put something

over on us they will not mind. After all, God cooperated with Gideon rather than blasting him on the spot for his caution.

But we should remember that we are not Gideon holding a wet fleece, we are humans holding a book, and reading about stories that were told thousands of years ago. Our question is not whether to accept the evidence Gideon elicited from God, but how to understand, and whether to accept, the story. Sometimes stories of Biblical miracles alone are taken as evidence for the existence of God, or of the miracle, but they are really only evidence for the existence of the story-tellers.

Further problems emerge when the gods begin to speak in riddles, or abandon language altogether. Many people seem to think 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. Again, it is hard to see what value obscurity has, but the main problem with this style of revelation is that believers 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 (or the official, well-paid, and highly honored soothsayer) is then relatively free to interpret the message as he or she sees fit.

Most revelations are believed to arrive at the pleasure of the god, but divination is a more active attempt to elicit some advice or information about the future—either from a supernatural being, or by some non-standard process of information gathering. In the Old Testament, both Saul and Ahab visited seers, and at Delphi in Greece “the framing of laws, the founding of colonies, the launching of wars, the fortunes of dynasties, the

healing of disease and the legal suits of individuals, were referred to the judgment of the Pythian Apollo from the seventh century BC, and probably the famous shrine had been an oracular center long before this time.” (James, 232) Investigators believe that it is likely that what the ancient priestesses were huffing was the gas ethylene.

http://geology.about.com/cs/odds_and_ends/a/aa081901a.htm

Three popular forms of divination in ancient times were omens, sortilege, and augury. **Omens** are based on the principle that if B follows A once, it is likely to do so again. Important scientific discoveries have been made by following this principle, but all too often the connections recorded are arbitrary and the correlations a result of fear or wishful thinking. Consider these examples:

If a horse enters a man's house, and bites either an ass or a man, the owner of the house will die and his household will be scattered.

If a man unwittingly treads on a lizard and kills it, he will prevail over his adversary. (Jaynes, 237-38)

Perhaps these things happened once, or even twice, and thereafter the stories were repeated and eventually written down on one of the thousands of omen tablets found in the ruins of the library of King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh.

The use of omens is passive and simple. One notices a configuration of events and expects it again. The use of **sortilege** (or the casting of lots) is different. It is an active attempt to elicit information from the gods, and it is a neat trick. One way to explain how it works is this—since the gods control everything, they also control the fall

of the lots. This means that they will not let a “no” come out if the answer is “yes” unless they want us to be fooled. By throwing dice, sticks, or coins one forces the silent spirits to speak, but in the language of sortilege. The use of oracle bones in ancient China was a form of sortilege—priests wrote their questions on bones and then examined and “read” the shape of the cracks caused by heating. When the results of some divination were impressive—the prediction correct, the advice sound, the warning timely—it must have been nearly impossible to resist an explanation in terms of the supernatural. Failure, on the other hand, could be explained as a botched reading.

Another form of divination, **augury**, is more complex because the answer sought is more than a simple yes or no. Augury is described in cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia, where one technique was to pour oil into a bowl of water and then “interpret” the result as an answer to a question about war, the weather, illness, or any other thing of importance. Since reading the meaning of puddles of oil on water is not a skill possessed by everyone, a special priest class of augurers developed. Later types of augury were even more complicated and messy. “Extispicy” was the attempt to divine the future from the entrails (*exta*) of sacrificed animals. The priests and people seem to have believed that these entrails contained the “written” messages of their gods.

3. 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, which is far from its final chapter, 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 unreliable. In some Islamic countries, however, apostasy is still punished by death.

That 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.” 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 for ourselves and are forced to depend on the (intellectual) labor of others, whose orientation and interests are often very different from our own.

We are born with the ability to put together a relatively coherent story of what is happening. We quickly learn to identify objects and people, to come up with plausible explanations for what we see and hear, and to let go of false beliefs. This natural and effortless acuity is, in fact, our crowning achievement and a source of great hope. 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 are trying 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 our religion promotes. 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. It is widely considered 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 the most bizarre 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 here is neither whether belief in God is a good thing, nor is it whether or not God exists. All I want to touch on at this point is the question of what we can do to help ourselves develop the best account of what exists and of what is going on that we can. It is obviously not be holding on for dear life to our childhood beliefs.

If we really want to figure out what is going on in the world around us 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 trust our instincts. We are quite good at detecting liars and frauds, if we remain alert. When 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. Photographs can have learned to lie, 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 our first and very natural impulse

is to explain the unknown in terms of the known and the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. We are familiar with fraud, the power of hope, and the effects of oxidation.

What we come to believe about what we experience 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 we do this without being aware that this is what we are doing. Not only do we not *decide* what to believe, coming to believe something is not something we do, it is something that happens to us. 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, fossils, and fingerprints—we alter our theories and 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 struck or 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. 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.

4. Divine Commands and Moral Obligation. Almost everyone allows 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 assuming that no god exists. Instead, I shall suppose that there is an all knowing and powerful creator of everything but itself, and that this being issues commands to humans and enforces those commands with punishments and rewards. Then I will ask why we believe (as many of us do) that the thoughts, values, and directives of such a being generate moral values and obligations.

Crime may or may not pay, but nearly everyone would say that it ought not pay. 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 has received any divine commands, indeed, even if no one has managed to discover what God prefers. It is the Holy Attitude itself that makes them good.

The divine command theory faces serious difficulties even if we assume that a commanding god exists. Not all purported commands are real commands, and not all real commands generate moral obligations. So even if some commands are issued by God, we can ask if and why those commands apply to us. (The First Commandment seems to be directed at the people God brought out of slavery in Egypt.) Nobody thinks we are morally obliged to obey every command we hear or read of in some Holy Book. Since religious moralists claim that obligation is created by the commands of some god, we must be allowed to ask a most important question: **“What features of the god in question explain how and why the commands of that god create moral obligations?”** I will sometimes refer to this question as “The Question.” Here I will focus on a god’s commands as a source of obligation. 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. We can hope that in the real world the days of the all-powerful monarch are on the way out, and that soon the concept will live only in the minds of autocrats, potentates, despots, their stooges, comedians, and a few religious moralists.

Ownership and Creation. 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 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 *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 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 obligated to obey his commandments, 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 obligated 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 is any moral obligation not to shoplift ever thought to be a function of her parent’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).

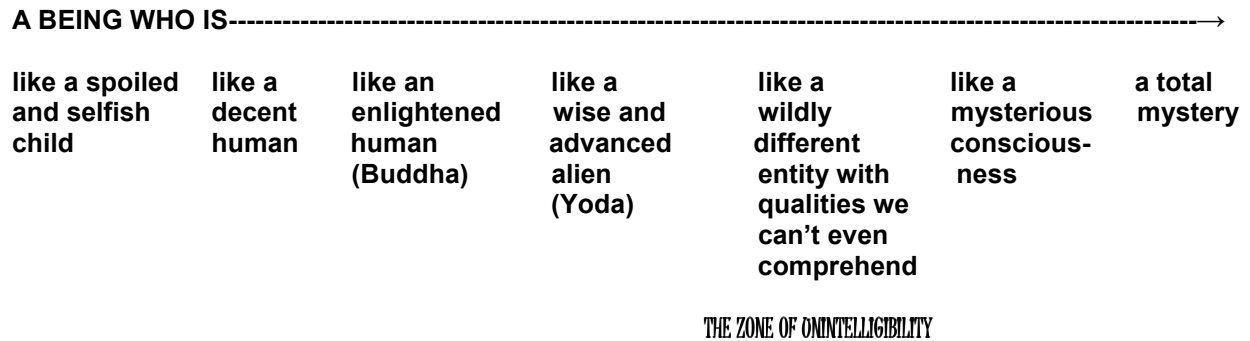
Goodness and Perfection. Among other things, God is said to be good, and perfect, and even perfectly good. The problem is that anyone who starts here will have already abandoned religious morality by having adopted a notion of goodness or perfection that is independent of god. But suppose we try to develop a “divine attitude” account of goodness, saying that something will be good when God has the right 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 value on the claim that God is good is the likelihood that he is not. 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. Amoralists would not say that God (or even Hitler) is *evil*, but how can a *moralist* withhold that term from any being who commands genocide, rape, and ethnic cleansing? <http://www.angelfire.com/pa/greywolf/biblegod.html> The four atheist books mentioned earlier are quite 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 of the world would be forced to call the “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.

5. 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 their ancestors, 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 our 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, eternity, 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 eternity, 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) For the believer they provide answers to

questions about the meaning of life, they guarantee protection against the terrors of the unknown and the known, they offer hope for a life after death, and they can be used to motivate the sociable behavior societies must ask from their citizens. According to Freud, gods offer those who believe in them the moral authority and the protection from danger that real fathers offer to 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.” Freud thought 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.