

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 3 | Issue 4

Article 1

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10-1-1986

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### Recommended Citation

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1986) "Which God Ought We to Obey and Why?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

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# WHICH GOD OUGHT WE TO OBEY AND WHY?

Alasdair MacIntyre

Claims that some god has commanded human beings to behave in a variety of ways have been treated as authoritative in many cultures. What conditions must be satisfied for it to be rational for someone to treat such a claim as authoritative? In this paper I shall argue that there are at least two such closely related conditions. The first concerns the identity of the god for whom authority is being claimed. We need to know precisely who it is to whom we ought to yield obedience. The second concerns the nature of that god. For I shall argue that unless that god is just and is justly owed obedience by us, such obedience cannot be justly required of us.

The position which is partially defined by the arguments specifying these two conditions is incompatible with all those moral theories according to which divine commands provide a standard for right conduct independently of and antecedently to any nontheological knowledge of what justice requires. I shall therefore in the latter part of this paper consider what is involved in defending the view that we have a knowledge of justice prior to and independently of our knowledge of divine commands.

## I

Consider first a psychologically primitive version of the relationship between beliefs about right and wrong, justice and injustice, and beliefs about divine commands, one to be found in many social orders in which the father plays a dominant authoritarian role in the life of the young child. This is the version of that relationship identified by Freud, in which what is heard in later life as the commanding voice of god is in fact a numinously and unconsciously disguised echo of the commanding voice of the father. What renders deference to such ostensibly divine commands objectionable is in part the arbitrariness of their content. For whatever the father had in the past happened to have commanded, no matter how contrary to the requirements of justice or of the other virtues, will now be reproduced as the content of the seemingly divine commands. Even if in a particular case what someone's father had in fact commanded was nothing other than what justice and the other virtues require, it would nonetheless be true of that father's offspring that, if his or her father had commanded what was



contrary to justice or to any other virtue the same unjust or otherwise vicious content would now be attributed to the divine commands. So believers in a god thus conceived, the god who functions as deified superego, the god whom William Blake named Nobodaddy (see Poems XX and LII from the Notebook, c. 91-2, and 'When Klopstock England Defied' pp. 155, 168 and 467 in *The Poems of William Blake* ed. by W. H. Stevenson London: 1971), will if they become aware of the logical relationships informing their beliefs have to acknowledge that if their god had commanded them to perform unjust actions, for example, actions of those kinds that we and they now call 'theft' or 'adultery,' then those commands would have the same authority, would impose upon them the same kind of requirement as do the commands which their god actually utters.

Believers in Nobodaddy will reply that I have seriously misrepresented their theology in one key respect. I ought, they will say, not to have characterized their views in part by the clause "if their god had commanded them to perform unjust actions . . ." For nothing that their god commanded could on their view truly be called unjust, since their rule of right conduct is and has to be: *that what Nobodaddy (under whatever name they give to him) commands, whatever it may be, is right* and whatever is right cannot truly be called unjust. They will not however be able to deny without inconsistency that it is on their view possible for their god to command what we—or some of us at least—now call unjust. That is to say, they are committed to acknowledging that Nobodaddy's commands could involve the infliction of unmerited harm upon human beings of a kind incompatible with what some of us now call justice, the justice of desert.

This distinguishes Nobodaddy significantly from any god whose essential identifying attributes include not only that he is just, never inflicting unmerited harm in a way incompatible with the justice of desert, and that his only departures from the justice of desert in cases where desert is relevant to actions are actions of mercy, but also that, just because these are essential attributes, he could not be otherwise. The difference between such a god and Nobodaddy emerges most clearly in the difference in the canon of interpretation which believers must use in interpreting divine actions directed towards them. If a believer in an omnipotent Nobodaddy is apparently confronted by a divine action which seems to him or her from the standpoint which he or she has hitherto adopted the infliction of an unjust gratuitous and unmerited harm upon him or her by Nobodaddy, he or she has no good reason to rule out the possibility that matters just are as they seem to be: Nobodaddy has inflicted or has commanded the infliction by someone else of just such a harm.

It is quite otherwise with the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. When in the fable constructed by the author of the *Book of Job* Job confronts the harms which have befallen him, the one canon of interpretation of God's will which is presupposed both by Job's so-called comforters and also by the utterances of

God Himself is that what has happened to Job cannot be, necessarily is not, unmerited harm of a kind incompatible with the justice of desert. Job's so-called comforters argue from the premises that Job has undergone harm and that God could not ever inflict unmerited harm. They conclude that Job has done something to merit such harm. When God speaks, His message is that Job is owed nothing by Him, for no question of desert arises; Job like the rest of creation owes everything to Him. What we learn—among other things—from the portrait of God in the *Book of Job* is that the divine infliction of harm of a kind incompatible with justice is not a possible state of affairs.

The essential characteristics then which distinguish the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures from any of the Nobodaddies whose worship is part of the psychopathology of religious life are that He is just and that He cannot possibly not be. And this is a kind of impossibility which is not derived from defining or partially defining 'just' as meaning 'commanded by God.' The concept of justice and the standard of justice which are required in order to characterize God so as to distinguish him adequately from the class of divine pretenders whom we have been considering are and have to be a concept and a standard elaborated independently of our knowledge of God. It follows that God as conceived by Occam is inadequately distinguished from such pretenders. For of Occam's God, like Nobodaddy but unlike God, a set of counterfactual conditionals are true, conditionals which assert that were God to command us to perform actions which we now take to be unjust, for example, such types of action as those which we now call 'theft' and 'adultery,' then those types of action would become just and obligatory. To suppose otherwise is, on Occam's view, to treat the divine will as determined and constrained by considerations of justice and injustice independent of that will. But to suppose this is incompatible, on Occam's view, with belief in God's omnipotence. (See Occam *Super quatuor libros Sententiarum* II, 5, H and II, 19, O, P in Vol. IV of *Opera Plurima*, reprinted Farnborough: 1962 and Philotheus Boehner O.F.M. 'Introduction' to *Ockham: Philosophical Writings* Indianapolis: 1977, pp. xlviil-l. I am not of course imputing to Occam himself any failure to distinguish between God and Nobodaddy. I am suggesting that his theory precludes us from so distinguishing adequately.)

It is not to my present purpose to provide an answer to Occam's subtle and wide-ranging position on divine omnipotence, one that he puts to work on problems as various as the status of future contingents and the nature of moral obligation. But were I to do so, it would in substance be derived from what Aquinas says when he asserts that God necessarily wills his own goodness, but that in so doing He is simply being himself and so His will is unconstrained, as it is also in willing all the goods that flow from His goodness. God's justice is one aspect of that goodness, a distributive justice which accords to everyone

what he or she needs. (ST. I, xix, 2,3, xxi, i.) But if it proved to be impossible to justify such an answer, the consequent difficulty in distinguishing God from Nobodaddy would seem to render Jewish and Christian theism dangerously vulnerable to a Freudian critique.

Another god from whom it is important to distinguish God is Jupiter. In the *Aeneid* Virgil represents Jupiter as sending Mercury to convey his command to Aeneas to leave Dido and to sail on to Italy (IV, 237). Aeneas does obey the divine command, but he is divided not only in his feelings, but also in his will (IV, 361; VI 460). And Virgil makes it clear that this division of feeling and will does Aeneas credit. The divine command gives Aeneas a good, indeed an overridingly good reason for doing what Jupiter commands, but Aeneas also has good reasons for doing what is contrary to the divine command. It can on Virgil's view be right for someone to obey Jupiter and yet also to have justified regrets for so doing.

Jupiter is not the only god of whom this is true. But a god of whom it is signally false is once again the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The story of Abraham's response to the command of God to go to a hill in Moriah in order to sacrifice Isaac (*Genesis* XXII, 1-18) makes this clear. What was required of Abraham was not obedience compatible with his also holding that there were bad aspects to the action of sacrificing Isaac, aspects which provided reasons for doing otherwise, which were however outweighed by the divine command. What was required of Abraham was to show his faith that what God commanded was best in every respect for everyone involved. This God requires the service of undivided mind, feelings and will. Had Abraham said, like Aeneas, "*non sponte sequor*" or that he acted "*invitus*" he would not have exhibited the faith for which he is praised. That is to say, it is incompatible with the nature of this God that he should ever command anyone to do what it would be right for that person to do with a divided mind, feelings or will, in which obedience to the divine command was combined with a justified judgment that in some respects it was bad to do what God commanded. Anyone who takes this to be logically possible when the God spoken of is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has failed to distinguish adequately between God and Jupiter.

Yet that just this may be logically possible is argued by Robert Merrihew Adams in 'A Modified Divine Command-Theory of Ethical Wrongness' (*Divine Commands and Morality*, ed by Paul Helm, Oxford: 1981 pp. 83-108). I say "may be" rather than "is," because Adams says of the theory which he is expounding that he believes it to be defensible, but is not sure that it is correct (p. 83). That theory involves a rejection of what Adams calls the unmodified divine command theory—in essence, Occam's theory—according to which it is logically impossible that it should be true of any action both that it is commanded by God and that it would not be wrong not to do it; it allows by contrast that

“there is a logically possible situation which [the modified divine command theorist] would describe by saying ‘God commands cruelty for its own sake’” (p. 92). So on this view there is the logical possibility of a situation in which the divine command’s prescription is incompatible with what the believer, on other grounds, judges to be wrong. But such a situation would be one in which the believer would be justifiably divided in feelings and will. And thus it would be one in which God would not have been adequately distinguished from Jupiter. (As in the case of Occam I am not of course suggesting that Adams himself does not distinguish adequately God from Jupiter, but only that the theory which he is expounding precludes an adequate distinction.)

Let me now formulate a more general claim. It is that moral theories of the type advanced by Occam and Adams are unlikely to be able to distinguish adequately between the claims to human allegiance made in the name of a variety of different gods who allegedly issue commands to us, because they approach these claims with too meagre a set of resources, conceptual and otherwise, with which to evaluate such claims. And this meagreness is itself surely due to the attempt to make divine commands in some way foundational for morality. Adams’ discussion is instructive on this point.

On Adams’ account ‘It is contrary to God’s commands to do X’ only implies ‘It is wrong to do X’ when conjoined with statements about God’s nature, more particularly about God’s love for human beings (p. 86). It is because believers encounter God as loving that they call Him good. But what, on Adams’ view, are we doing when we call God good? We are “normally expressing a favorable emotional attitude” towards God and we are also often saying that God has done things which we regard as beneficial to us (p. 100). If we ask what it is to regard something as beneficial, nothing is said to carry this account of goodness any further. Adams presumably does not mean to assert that from the premises ‘God commands us to do so’ and ‘God is loving and confers benefits’ we can somehow derive the conclusion: ‘We ought to do what God commands.’ For that conclusion, derived from those premises, would at best express a piece of prudential advice and not at all any strict obligation to obedience, such as we are under in respect of God’s commands. What would have to be added to these premises for there to be such an obligation?

## II

The crucial concept that is characteristically missing from divine command theories, modified or unmodified, is that of just authority. It is when, and only when, effective power is wielded so that the ends of justice are served by the exercise of power, that authority is justly ascribed to whomsoever it is who wields that power. And the ends of justice are only served when power is

exercised in accordance with and by means of a duly promulgated law. So it is only insofar as the commands of just authority are themselves just, that is, are in accord with the justice expressed in justly promulgated law, that the utterance of commands imposes any obligation. Power without justice may give us reasons to obey commands because we fear to do otherwise; beneficence without justice may give us reasons to obey commands either from gratitude or because we have been provided with expectations of future beneficence. So that if we know of some god, such as Nobodaddy or Jupiter, that he is powerful, or if we know of God that he is beneficent, we may indeed have good reason to obey the relevant set of commands, but not at all the kind of reason that we need to treat obedience as obligatory. Hence any account of divine commands as foundational to morality, as antecedent to and partially or wholly definitive of justice, such as we are offered in one version by Occam, in another by Adams, has to fail. It is noteworthy that when Adams lists those human virtues to which he takes it that there are analogues in God's attributes, he omits all mention of justice (pp. 100-101). And Occam is precluded by the whole tenor of his theory from appealing to any conception of a justice not itself derived definitionally from the divine commands. It would follow that since divine commands cannot be identified as those of a just authority, except tautologically, they cannot be treated as obligatory, as binding. And if and insofar as we follow Occam and Adams in also explaining such notions as those of "right" and "wrong" by appeal only to divine commands or to divine commands and attributes other than justice, it will be the case that "It is wrong to commit theft" or "It is right to honor one's parents" will not be binding rules.

To this it may well be replied that it is not true that only where and when some authority has been truly characterized as just in terms of some antecedently established notion of justice is there an obligation to obey the commands issuing from that authority. Some legal positivists have argued that the existence of a sovereign authority, holding a monopoly of power and able to exact obedience, issuing and enforcing laws in accordance with some fundamental norm of law-giving, is sufficient to constitute a legal system. The notion of a legal obligation is internal to such a system; that such-and-such an individual has an obligation to do so-and-so is true if that individual is effectively subject to that legal system *and* either it is the case that some law directly requires of that individual that he or she do so-and-so or it is the case that both some law authorizes some designated type of official to command that individual to do so-and-so and such an official has so commanded. Yet if we characterize divine commands in terms of an understanding of divine authority derived from legal positivism, the consequences for our conception of divine authority are drastic and surely unacceptable.

Consider how in the terms provided by legal positivism a situation is to be

characterized in which two rival powerful authorities both claim jurisdiction over the same set of subjects. How is the issue between them to be settled? It cannot of course be by appeal to a legal verdict; it can only be by the successful exercise of power by one of the two authorities, so that the other is thereby deprived of effective power over the relevant set of subjects. It follows that the legitimacy of any authority in prevailing over its rivals is wholly a matter of its success in wielding power and that the illegitimacy of those rivals is wholly a matter of their lack of success. If the divine authority were to be conceived in these terms, we should be committed to holding not only that God's commands are binding only because his power is such that we cannot escape the penalties of disobedience, but also that the only reason why Satan does not deserve our allegiance lies in his lack of success in overthrowing the divine power.

If then Occamists and postOccamist theologians or philosophers cannot derive the obligatoriness, the bindingness of divine commands either from God's justice, which their own view of the matter precludes them from doing, or from some conception provided by legal positivism (although A. S. McGrade has suggested that Occam was in his political writings at least a legal positivist, p. 764, chapter 39, *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* ed. by N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny and J. Pinborg, Cambridge: 1982) whence can they derive it? The answer that some theologians of this kind at least seem to presuppose is that the obligatoriness of divine commands cannot be derived or justified in any way. For if it were derived or justified, either in one of the two ways that I have discussed, or in some other way, then we would have to say that it is right to obey the divine commands because they are the just commands of a just authority or because they are the effectively enforceable commands of a legal sovereign power or because . . . . But on the view taken by such theologians it cannot be right to obey the divine commands for any reason. We are not to be obedient because . . . . We are simply to be obedient. Karl Barth has written that "Christian philosophy, which starts by hearing God's word . . . cannot indeed view the good other than as obedience. An action is obedience, however, when its goodness obviously lies not in doing it or in doing it in a particular way but in doing what is commanded because it is commanded . . ." (*Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, New York: 1981, pp. 42-3).

If there is nothing to the good other than obedience *qua* obedience, then we can indeed have no conception of goodness in terms of which to justify obedience to the commands of any one god rather than of any other. For the question of why we should obey divine commands has been decisively separated from the question of what attributes a god must have whose commands are to be worthy of obedience. Nobodaddy, Jupiter, Satan and God all compete for our allegiance on equal terms—apart, that is, from inequalities in their power. There are of course Christian theologians who have not blanched at accepting a conclusion



very like this. We, on their view, do not and cannot choose to obey the divine commands, and so the question of our justifying our choice of one good rather than another does not arise; we are either chosen by the most powerful of the gods to be his subject or we are rejected and those rejected are handed over to the sovereignty of some lesser power, such as Satan. Such theologians however also want to assert that the damned still owe God their allegiance and that they are unjustly disobedient to God. But there appears to be no way in which they can intelligibly and coherently make both sets of assertions.

What engenders this type of collapse into theological unintelligibility? Generally and characteristically, I suggest, it is the outcome of the posing of a dilemma in which the unacceptability of the only apparent alternative to this resort to incoherence makes incoherence itself acceptable. The dilemma is as follows. Either we can characterize divine claimants to our allegiance in terms of standards of goodness and more particularly of justice in the light of which their claims to our obedience can be shown to be justified or unjustified, or we cannot. The former alternative is judged unacceptable because it seems to involve subjecting the divine commands to judgment by means of a merely human standard, thus treating that standard as in some way superior to the divine commands. "One of Barth's basic presuppositions," Bernard Ramm has written (*After Fundamentalism* San Francisco: 1982, p. 61), "is that if something external to the Word of God is necessary to establish the Word of God as true, then it is greater than the Word of God . . . But there can be nothing greater than the Word of God. Therefore the Word of God establishes itself." And Barth would hold in a precisely parallel way that if something external to the Word of God were necessary to establish that Word as good, then it too would be greater than the Word of God. In saying this, however, Barth relies on another presupposition, one never clearly articulated either by Barth himself or by commentators such as Ramm. It is that any appeal to a standard of truth or goodness, established independently of our knowledge of God's revealed Word and will, is and must be an appeal to something external to that Word and will. It is this presupposition which I wish to challenge.

### III

When we first acquire some concept, it is characteristically, perhaps always, in terms of its application in some restricted context. When we learn how to apply the same concept correctly in other different contexts, this often, although not always, involves some alteration in our understanding of the concept. Moreover sometimes this more adequate understanding involves a correction of some feature of our previous understanding. So that in many types of case concept-acquisition and concept-possession is a matter of more-or-less, rather

than all-or-nothing. Moreover this process whereby a concept is extended in its application from one type of context to others and whereby one and the same concept is differently understood at different stages does not merely characterize the intellectual development of individuals; it also is a feature of the development of cultures. Concepts, that is to say, their acquisition, their understanding and their transformations have a history both in the life of an individual and in that of a culture. And at some later stage in the history of a concept, we may be able to recognize both that some earlier stage in our understanding of that same concept was indispensable to the conceptual education which has issued in our present formulation of that concept, but that nonetheless that present formulation also embodies a correction either of some degree of misunderstanding or of some inadequacy at that earlier stage. So it is, for example, with the concept of justice. And so it is also with the related concepts of goodness and of the divine. For the history of these three concepts over long periods is one single complex history. From that history I select three types of episode—understood for the moment as ideal types—for particular attention.

The first is that in which the members of some community have already come to share a conception of justice which they justify by relating it to their conception of the human good. That good, on their view, consists in the achievement of a form of life in which the goods and excellences of a variety of types of human activity have been integrated into an overall good, the realization of which is the end of political activity. To act justly is in key part to give to each person what that person deserves in respect of their contribution to that overall good, both in the distribution of public offices and in that of honor and of other rewards. Justice in exchange is governed by a scale of worth consistent with that same conception of overall good. And the rules which define just actions and transactions are constitutive of that form of life in and through which the good and the best is achieved. So the conception of justice is inseparable from that of the good and the best. And so too is the corresponding conception of the divine.

For to achieve the good and the best at this type of stage involves more than those goods to the achievement of which the social and civic virtues, and most notably justice, are so essential. It involves too a transcending of the social, so that that for the sake of which everything other than itself exists, and in terms of which everything other than itself is to be explained, may be contemplated as the perfected completion of both activity and enquiry. Of the divine thus conceived little can be affirmed, but rather more denied. And among what must be denied is the possibility of the divine exhibiting imperfection by engaging in injustice. But if the perfection of the divine thus conceived excludes injustice, this is partly because the divine thus conceived is incapable of actively engaging in any transaction with human beings whatsoever.

It is one of the marks which distinguish a second quite different type of stage

in the history of these conceptual relationships—I am not suggesting that any culture in this second type of stage must necessarily have passed through the first as a preliminary—that the divine is now conceived of as initiating transactions with human beings, by in the first instance creating them and later by entering into covenants with some of them. When and if it happens that those who have been educated into the conceptual scheme of the first stage encounter the theological claims made for God so understood in this second way, (when, for example, those who have been educated by Plato and Aristotle encounter Yahweh), the question of how to judge the justice or otherwise of Yahweh becomes inescapable. For at both types of stage the evaluation of the claims of rival claimants to the place of divine supremacy has involved the use of standards which make reference to justice. The rational grounds for the rejection of Zeus/Jupiter as unjust in favor of the Unmoved Mover and for the rejection of the Unmoved Mover insofar as it is necessarily incapable of either justice or injustice impose constraints upon the acceptance of Yahweh. And what has to be learned is both in what way the standards of justice involved in those rejections are applicable to Yahweh and in what way they are not.

Yahweh, as partner in covenant puts Himself into a relationship in which the standards of the justice of exchange not only can be employed without inappropriateness, but ought to be so employed. And Yahweh presents Himself as one who certainly will not fail in his pledges just because he cannot so fail, and who thus has to be judged as just or unjust, as deserving or undeserving from those with whom He has covenanted, in respect of his truthfulness. And in calling Yahweh just or truthful in these respects we are evaluating Him by the same standards as each of us would another human being. But if we suppose that we can with equal appropriateness judge God by these same standards when we confront Him not as partner in covenant, but either as creator or as law-giver and judge, we shall have to learn that we err.

It is from the *Book of Job* that we have to learn, as I said earlier, that our creator owes us nothing and that we owe Him everything (Job is a Kedomite and not in a covenant relation with God). And about God as creator we can only learn from what is revealed in the scriptures. But it is not only from the scriptures, but also from our own rational reflection upon our own natures, that we are able to learn to recognize that the standards of justice which we have used in judging God as well as each other have themselves the force and authority of law, and that the law-giver who makes them law by promulgating them is God. We learn this by following through two lines of argument. One of these begins by subjecting the standards of justice, which were originally acknowledged as constituting the life of particular political communities, to enquiry in order to discern how they must be reformulated if they are to be the standards necessary to constitute *any* form of human association in and through which the good and the best is to be

pursued. A second begins by criticizing the conception of the good and the best which was originally acknowledged, and moving from a conception of that type of human life which is the good and the best as consisting in the life of the political virtues, supplemented in its later stages by the contemplation of the Unmoved Mover, to a conception of it as consisting in rational friendship and therefore ultimately in friendship with God. We move, that is to say, from Aristotle to Aquinas. And in so doing of course we not only reject certain aspects of our earlier conceptions, including conceptions of justice, as inadequate, we reject certain aspects of them as false. But we also learn that part of what we took to be true is indeed true and that the justice in terms of which we judged God's claims, in order to distinguish them from those of Jupiter and Nobodaddy, is a justice which is commanded by God Himself. This I take it is why, even although Job had misunderstood the relationship between himself as creature and God as creator he had not been mistaken in calling God to account in terms of justice, something that God himself affirms in saying that Job, unlike Eliphaz, had spoken as he ought (42, 7-8).

The concept of justice which we use in speaking of God is therefore an analogically and historically ordered concept, which in some of its uses is no different from those in which it is applied by human beings to each other and in others very different indeed, although not so different as not to preserve the core unity of the concept. J. S. Mill asserted against H. L. Mansel that "I take my stand on the acknowledged principle of logic and morality, that when we mean different things we have no right to call them by the same name, and to apply to them the same predicates, moral and intellectual. Language has no meaning for the words Just, Merciful, Benevolent, save that in which we apply them to our fellow-creatures . . . . If in affirming them of God, we do not mean to affirm these very qualities, differing only as greater in degree, we are neither philosophically nor morally entitled to affirm them at all" (p. 102 *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* edited by J. M. Robson, Toronto: 1979). Mill's doctrine in this passage is defensible only if generalized into a denial that any concept can be justifiably used in an analogically and historically ordered way. If enforced, it would deprive us of the linguistic means necessary for rational progress in a number of areas and not just in theology. In the natural sciences, for example, we should have been prevented from speaking *both* of particles of perceptible substances, such as mud or bread *and* also of particles which have zero mass, but spin. And I take it that it is in consequence of these consequences of Mill's doctrine having been well understood that almost no philosopher—perhaps no philosopher at all—now holds it. But it seems still to exert an influence upon a certain type of theology.

The contention that, were we to define and to understand our key evaluative terms independently of any knowledge of God or of His commands and then

proceed to apply them to God, we should be treating God as if He were a merely finite being, is surely true only if something very like Mill's doctrine is presupposed. So when Barth denies that, apart from God's self-revelation, we have any power to frame concepts which have genuine application to God (*Church Dogmatics*, II, i, 27, 1, trans. T.H.L. Parker, Edinburgh: 1957), and yet goes on to say that God can reveal himself in the very same concepts which we have framed to apply to him, he entangles himself in contradiction quite unnecessarily. For it does seem to be the theological doctrine which Ramm ascribes to Barth which causes Barth to treat one and the same set of concepts both as having and as not having application to God. And the identification of Mill's mistake has now put us in a position to see what is mistaken in this theological doctrine.

From the fact that we can at one stage in our progress towards God evaluate the divine claims, using a standard of justice acquired and elaborated independently of the knowledge of God, it does not follow that in so doing we are judging the Word of God by something external to it. This may indeed seem to be the case if we restrict our attention to that preliminary stage. But if we progress beyond it, something we are able to do rationally only because and insofar as we first assented to the divine claims because we judged them to be just (and also, of course, true), then we discover, as our analogically and historically ordered concept of justice develops, that the standard by which we judged God is itself a work of God, and that the judgments which we made earlier were made in obedience to the divine commands, even although we did not and could not have recognized this at that earlier stage. God, it turns out, cannot be truly judged of by something external to his Word, but that is because natural justice recognized by natural reason is itself divinely uttered and authorized.

#### IV

The argument of this paper embodies three theses. The first is that in order to distinguish between the claims to our allegiance which are and have been advanced in the name of a number of different purported deities, we need standards of justice independently of and prior to any acknowledgment of the authority of any particular set of allegedly divine commands. It follows that if and insofar as divine command metaethical theories preclude this possibility, they will prevent us from adequately distinguishing between false gods and the true God. A second thesis is that we ought in any case to acknowledge an obligation to obey no one unless and until we have adequate rational grounds for believing that person to be in possession of just authority over us and that supreme authority requires the possession of justice in supreme measure by the person exercising that authority. It follows that any theory which entails a denial that we can have adequate rational grounds for so believing in the case of God

prevents us from distinguishing between divine authority and tyrannical authority. A third thesis is that one presupposition, which in some cases at least leads to an inability to make these necessary distinctions, derives from a view of concepts which is blind to their historical and analogically ordered character.

That all that I have achieved here is the barest kind of sketch of the relevant types of argument I am well aware. But I suspect that the problem of how to distinguish the true God from false gods is of sufficient importance—not only because some who take themselves to be worshipping the true God may actually be serving pretenders and idols, but also because some modern atheists, who believe themselves to have considered the claims of the true God and to have rejected them, were in fact rejecting the claims of some counterfeit deity—that it is worth advancing these arguments, if only with an eye to the possibility that they may be supplanted by better ones.

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