

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 11 | Issue 1

Article 6

1-1-1994

The Moralists' Fear of Knowledge of God

Douglas Drabkin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Drabkin, Douglas (1994) "The Moralists' Fear of Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol11/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

THE MORALIST'S FEAR OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Douglas Drabkin

What would life be like if we knew for certain that God exists? Some people think that it wouldn't be so good. Robert Merrihew Adams thinks that if we knew that God exists, and that he rewarded and punished us according to our goodness and badness, then we would inevitably fall into trying to manipulate God. Kant thinks that knowledge of God's existence would corrupt us in another way: we would find ourselves unable to keep from having an attitude of servility toward God. I argue that Adams and Kant are both mistaken. We should consider knowledge of God's existence a good thing to seek, and a blessing to achieve.

He shall be like a tree planted by waters,
Sending forth its roots by a stream:
It does not sense the coming of heat,
Its leaves are ever fresh;
It has no care in a year of drought,
It does not cease to yield fruit. (*Jeremiah 17:8*)¹

1. *Would it be Good for Us to Know that God Exists?*

What would life be like if we all knew for certain that God exists? Some people think that it wouldn't be so good. Kant, for instance, suggests in his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* that knowledge of God's existence would be a disaster for morality:

Hence our faith is not scientific knowledge, and thank heaven it is not! For God's wisdom is apparent in the very fact that we do not *know* that God exists, but should *believe* that God exists. For suppose we could attain to scientific knowledge of God's existence.... Then, in this case, all our morality would break down. In his every action, man would represent God to himself as a rewarder or avenger. This image would force itself involuntarily on his soul, and his hope for reward and fear of punishment would take the place of moral motives. Man would be virtuous out of sensuous impulses.²

And Robert Merrihew Adams has recently suggested that if we knew that God existed, and that he rewarded and punished us according to our goodness and badness, then we would inevitably fall into trying to manipulate God.³ We would do what's right because we saw that doing this would cause God to give us what we want.



If Kant and Adams are right (or if either of them is right, as they see the problem somewhat differently), then to know that God exists is to be in grave moral danger. We ought to give thanks, therefore, when arguments attempting to prove God's existence fail. Kant of course thinks that no such proof ever could be successful, and so he sees no point (after we subject our intellect to criticism) in our attempting to discover one. But if Kant is right about what would happen to us if we ever succeeded, then the search for a proof of God's existence is worse than a waste of time. For what if—however impossible this may be on Kant's view—a successful proof were discovered? This would be knowledge we would have good reason to hush up, hide away, and forget. Kant and Adams both think that it would prove morally corrupting. (Incidentally, Kant thinks we should *hope* that God exists,⁴ but he never suggests that we should *hope to know* that God exists, now or in an afterlife.)

It seems to me that Adams and Kant are both mistaken. It seems to me that we should consider knowledge of God's existence a good thing to seek, and a blessing to achieve.

2. Adams on Having an "Attitude of Control" Toward God

In his essay "The Virtue of Faith," Adams asks, "Why should God set up a world in which it is faith rather than knowledge that is offered to us?"⁵ This is a good question. Why *doesn't* God make it obvious to us that he exists and that he will reward us if we live morally good lives? Adams offers the following suggestion:

Well, suppose we always *saw* what people were like, and particularly what they would do in any situation in which we might have to do with them. How would we relate to people if we had such knowledge of them? I think we would manipulate them. I do not mean that we would necessarily treat people in a selfish or immoral way, but I think we could not help having an attitude of control toward them. And I think the necessity we would be under, to have such an attitude, would be conceptual and not merely causal. If I pursued my own ends in relation to you, knowing exactly how you would respond to every move, I would be manipulating you as much as I manipulate a typewriter or any other inanimate object. And if at some point I refrained from pursuing my own ends, in order to defer to some desire of yours, I would still be making the decision; I would be manipulating you in the service of your end that I had made my own. By the very nature of the case I could not escape from this manipulative role except insofar as I could forget or ignore what I knew about the responses you would make.⁶

If it were obvious to us that God existed, and that if we did such and such then he would see to it that we were handsomely rewarded, then, Adams thinks, "we could not help having an attitude of control toward" God. But having an attitude of this sort would be bad. Therefore it makes sense that God, a wise and benevolent deity, should leave us somewhat in the dark about his existence and his plans for perfect justice. We should be grateful for this ignorance.

It is true that having an attitude of control toward God would be bad, but Adams is mistaken in supposing that coming to know about God's existence would inevitably lead a person to adopt this attitude.

Let's suppose that a person saw perfectly clearly what God was like, and particularly what God would do in any situation having to do with him. How would the person relate to God if he had such knowledge? Adams thinks he would try to manipulate God. But consider: One thing the person would know is that God would know what was in the person's heart. The person would also know that, if he were to adopt an attitude of control toward God, then God would be perfectly aware of this, and would act accordingly. Are we to suppose that such a person would find it difficult to keep from having an attitude of control toward God?

In a poker game, if one person has magical knowledge of the other players and is able to correctly predict what they will do from moment to moment, the person may be tempted to take advantage of the other players. But if the players are known to be omniscient, then taking advantage of them is out of the question. Clearly, to have knowledge of another person is not the same thing as to have power over the other person.

Imagine a robber who is locked up in prison under the care of an omniscient jail keeper. Suppose that the robber knows the jail keeper so well that he knows precisely what the jail keeper would do in any situation having to do with him. And suppose that this involves knowing that there is no situation in which the robber can trick the jail keeper and escape. The robber dearly wants to break out of jail, but he knows that he cannot trick the jail keeper. Since he knows he doesn't have power over the jail keeper, he doesn't have an attitude of control toward the jail keeper.

Adams predicts that the person who came to know that God exists wouldn't be able to keep from having an attitude of control toward God. But I suggest that the person who knew that God exists would know enough about God's nature to realize that God is omniscient. He would not adopt an attitude of control toward God, for he would know that trying to control God doesn't pay. He would see its foolishness.

But would this person, knowing that God rules over the universe, be able to keep himself from having an attitude of *servility* toward God? Here is a new problem. And it brings us to Kant.

3. Kant on being Unable to Act from the Right Motives

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant describes what he thinks would happen to us if we came to know a satisfactory proof of God's existence:

Now assuming that [nature] had here indulged our wish and had provided us with that power of insight or enlightenment which we would like to possess or which some erroneously believe they do possess, what would be the

consequence so far as we can discern it? In so far as our whole nature was not changed at the same time, the inclinations (which under any condition have the first word) would first strive for their satisfaction and, [147] conjoined with reasonable consideration, for the greatest possible and most lasting satisfaction under the name of happiness. The moral law would afterward speak in order to hold them within their proper limits and even to subject them all to a higher end which has no regard to inclination. But instead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes (for that which we can completely prove is as certain as that which we can ascertain by sight). Transgression of the law would indeed be shunned, and the commanded would be performed. But because the disposition from which actions should be done cannot be instilled by any command, and because the spur to action would in this case be always present and external, reason would have no need to endeavor to gather its strength to resist the inclinations by a vivid idea of the dignity of the law. Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of the supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it now is, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures.⁷

What knowledge of God's existence would do to us is make us unable to act from the right motives. For if God exists, then a being exists who is capable of accurately judging the goodness and badness of all persons, who is capable also of bringing about precise allotments of happiness for each person according to justice, and who is disposed (being morally perfect) to use these capacities to achieve justice. If we came to know that our good deeds would be rewarded and our evil deeds punished, then we would not be able to keep from being spurred to action by base thoughts of reward and punishment. Instead of being free to act morally ("from duty"), we would be condemned to live a false moral life—a servile "puppet show" in which we would "gesticulate well," but only because we can expect justice at God's hands. The true moral life would become impossible for us. Is this so?

Let's suppose that a great artist has for years been painting a magnificent series of frescos covering an entire church ceiling. She is being handsomely paid for the work, but she so loves the project itself that she would complete it if she got no more than bread, water, and a place to sleep. She realizes she possesses great talents, and that she ought to use her talents for good. And she can think of no better use of her talents than to complete these paintings and inspire people for hundreds of years to come. This is why she loves the project so. It is clear to her that completing the project is what she ought to do. "If I was put on earth for something," she thinks to herself, "this is it." What would happen to this artist if she came to discover a successful proof

of God's existence? What would happen to her if she knew with certainty that the universe is therefore just, and that, whatever reward she will or will not get for her virtuous actions on earth, she *will* be rewarded with her just allotment of happiness? Kant thinks that duty would cease to be the determining reason for her continuing to paint. Instead, as long as her nature remained the same, she would be forced into adopting a reward-seeking attitude toward her project.

But why should we believe this? Why should we suppose that this attitude would be forced on her? Why not suppose that, just as the artist needn't make her patron's money a determining reason for her work, she needn't make God's rewards a determining reason for her work either?

Kant recognizes that a person can act from duty in spite of the fact that the person's inclinations are pulling in the same direction.⁸ Kant would agree, for instance, that it is possible for someone to do an act of kindness from duty even though the person is, by disposition, kind, and enjoys doing kind actions. It would seem, then, that Kant ought to acknowledge that it is possible for this artist to continue to paint without being corrupted by the knowledge that her virtuous actions will be rewarded.

If, however, Kant were to acknowledge this, he might point out that people like her are of a rare moral type—the moral saint—and that, when it comes to less extraordinary human beings (nearly all of us), his claim still holds strong: we would be corrupted by the knowledge that God exists. Consider the less than saintly person who, because it is against his inclinations, sometimes doesn't want to do something that he ought to do, but manages to do it anyway after gathering “strength to resist the inclinations by a vivid idea of the dignity of the law.” If such a person were to come to know that God exists, he would no longer be able to act from the motive of duty. The vividness of his thoughts about God's rewards and punishments would overwhelm his thoughts about the dignity of the law. God's rewards and punishments would pull him like puppet strings. His freedom would be lost.

Is Kant right about this? Suppose a less than saintly person were to come to know that God exists, and therefore that good deeds will be rewarded and evil deeds punished. What might be expected to happen to this person? Presumably, he would end up doing good deeds more often, or at any rate, more willingly. Or in Kant's language, he would find himself drawn to “act in conformity with the law.” He would “gesticulate well” and be “empirically good.”

Would this be bad? If the person had previously been a mobster, engaged in day to day murder and extortion, then the change would not obviously be for the worse. He would at least have turned from murder and extortion to doing good deeds (i.e., “empirically good” deeds, acts merely “in conformity” with the law). And yet, as Kant would quickly point out, the person's motives

would remain base. He would not be doing good deeds for the best of reasons. Kant supposes that, if it came to be generally known that God exists, then all or nearly all of us would end up like half-reformed mobsters, apparently doing good deeds day after day, but acting for the wrong reasons. We would never achieve genuine virtue.⁹

One thing Kant does not consider is that this might only be a temporary state of affairs, and that, after doing good deeds day after day for the wrong reasons, we might begin doing them for the right reasons. He sees no reason to suppose that further moral growth is likely. Why is this? The answer concerns a peculiar feature of Kant's moral theory, a feature which is easier to see in its peculiarity when Kant's theory is considered alongside a rather different theory such as Plato's.

4. *Kant and Plato on Moral Education*

Consider how parents go about raising a child to be morally good. They always begin by encouraging the child to do some things and not do other things: by modeling the desired sort of behavior for the child, by recommending that the child act as desired, by praising the child when he does what's right, by reprimanding the child when he does what's wrong, and so on. In the moral education of a child, encouraging the child to "gesticulate well" seems to be required as a first step. Plato and Kant agree that this is so. But they disagree about why this is so.

On Plato's view, there is such a thing as what it is to be good, something he calls "the form of the good." The child who imitates his parents and teachers, carries out their recommendations, seeks their praise, and so on, does many things that are good to do (or so one hopes). This first hand experience of doing good deeds puts the child in a position to reflect on what it is that makes these deeds good. He is capable of discovering that they are instances of the form of the good, and therefore, good things to do. If the child comes to recognize that they are good things to do (which is of course on Plato's view something different from learning to call them "good"), then he comes to have a reason for doing these things—a reason sufficient to motivate his doing these things—besides the reasons that come from caring about what his parents and teachers think of him. So, on Plato's account of moral development, good gesticulation serves the purpose of helping steer the mind to the quality that makes the gesticulation good. Once the discovery is made, the person is capable of acting for the best of reasons: because it is good to do so.¹⁰

On Kant's view, the child, if he is to become morally good, must at some point begin acting from duty, where acting from duty means acting *autonomously*. But it isn't the common meaning of autonomy—being free of coercion and in control of what one is doing—that Kant has in mind. "Autonomy,"

as Kant uses the term, is a matter of the agent binding himself to obey practical laws of a certain sort: laws that the agent has himself authored, but which the agent has not been causally determined to author. In order for the child to be morally good, he needs to freely author laws binding himself to act morally. But the origin of these laws must be in the child himself. This is important, on Kant's view, because if the child were to end up acting in response to moral facts that were not the product of his own mind, then he would be acting, not autonomously, but heteronomously. His will would be determined by something outside of himself. As John Rawls puts it:

Kant's idea of autonomy requires that there exist no such order of given objects determining the first principles of right and justice among free and equal moral persons. Heteronomy obtains not only when first principles are fixed by the special psychological constitution of human nature, as in Hume, but also when they are fixed by an order of universals or concepts grasped by rational intuition, as in Plato's realm of forms or in Leibniz's hierarchy of perfections.¹¹

So the point of moral education is not, as it is for Plato, to help the child come to know what actions fall under the concept of *good*.¹² As Kant sees it, the point of moral education is to help the child become a person who freely gives himself the law.

How does one raise a child to freely give himself the law? This is where Kant thinks modeling, recommending, praising, reprimanding, and things of this sort come into play. To become autonomous, the child needs to gain control of his natural unruliness and the enslaving habits that his natural unruliness leads to. He also needs to become used to following rules. Discipline is necessary for the child to get his animal impulses under control. And training in obedience to rules is necessary for the child to become capable of following his own commands. The tasks of discipline and obedience training fall to the child's parents and teachers.¹³ The child is made to conform to certain standards of behavior. But the point of making the child conform to these standards is not that it is morally good for the child to live in accord with these standards—though living in accord with these standards may indeed be morally good. The point is to prepare the child for autonomy. Only if and when the child comes to act from autonomy will the child be morally good.

It is hoped that the child who has been trained to a life of subjection to laws will eventually start commanding himself to act morally. But when this time comes, what *reason* will he have to command himself to do one thing rather than another? Plato's answer to why a morally mature person does some things rather than other things is that the person has come to recognize some things as being good things to do—things *worth* doing—and we all naturally desire to do things that we recognize as being worth doing. But

according to Kant's theory, what reason does the morally mature person have to command himself to do any one thing as opposed to something else? Why, for instance, should he command himself to respect other persons? Why shouldn't he command himself, instead, to abuse them?

Kant would say that it is *irrational* to command oneself to abuse others. But what he would mean by this is not that it is in any recognizably prudential sense *stupid* to do so. (Prudence is a function of our desires, and therefore, he thinks, morally irrelevant.) On Kant's view, pure practical reason (which is to say the "good will," the source of moral value) is the exercise of autonomy. Autonomy is exercised in free acts. Free acts are noumenal events. Noumenal events are experientially inaccessible to us. Experientially inaccessible events are inconceivable to us. And so, on Kant's view, an explanation of the kind of irrationality involved in commanding oneself to abuse others—or, more generally, in commanding oneself to act contrary to any of the practical laws he calls "categorical imperatives"—is beyond the reach of our understanding.

Concerning the child's moral development, therefore, Kant would say that a "revolution" needs to take place in the child.¹⁴ The child needs to start commanding himself to act as he ought to act. But as for reasons why the child should command himself to do some things rather than other things, there is really nothing more to be said beyond the claim that there is a source of moral value, the good will, and it freely generates commands. We exercise our autonomy, it is a fact in our lives, but we cannot understand it.

In sum, Plato, on the one hand, thinks the child's moral progress is from ignorance (acting merely because it will win praise or avoid punishment) to knowledge (acting because it is good to do so). Kant, on the other hand, thinks the child's moral progress is from heteronomy (following rules the child himself did not generate) to autonomy (following rules generated freely—hence inexplicably—by the child himself).

We are now in a position to see why Kant might suppose that the person who knew that God exists would be someone unlikely to make moral progress. The person who knew that God exists would have a powerful reason to be virtuous. He would know that it is the surest way to happiness. But being virtuous, on Kant's view, is a matter of commanding oneself, autonomously, to act in particular ways. And a person cannot have a reason to command himself, autonomously, to act in any particular way—not, at any rate, if the reason falls within the scope of his understanding. For free acts cannot be motivated in any way conceivable to us. It follows that the person who knew that God exists would be trapped in heteronomy. Shackled to the knowledge that virtue pays, his moral progress would be frustrated.

On Plato's view, the knowledge that God exists would pose no such problem. The person who started out acting chiefly for the sake of rewards from

God would be like the child who starts out acting chiefly for the sake of praise from his parents. Such a person would be capable of making moral progress because he would be capable of discovering why good deeds are *worth* rewarding. He would be capable of coming to have essentially the same admiration for these ways of acting as God has.¹⁵

The problem for morality that Kant thinks would arise if we were to know that God exists is only a problem, I am suggesting, if one accepts Kant's moral theory. For the problem concerns something peculiar to this theory: the unmotivated free choice. If one accepts a moral theory which allows moral actions to consist in *motivated* free choices, and Plato's is one such theory, then the problem disappears.

5. *Why Have Us Start Out Ignorant?*

If we set aside Kant's problem about the corrupting effects of knowing that God exists as being a problem for people attracted to Kant's moral theory, it is still left for us to consider why God, if in fact he does exist, would have chosen to deny us knowledge of his existence. Why, if God exists, doesn't God take up his responsibilities as our Ultimate Parent and Teacher, reveal himself to us, and steer us with a firmer hand onto the path of virtue? Does God's apparent hesitancy to reveal himself give us reason to suppose that he *doesn't* exist?

Giving an adequate answer to these questions would require getting rather deep into speculative theodicy, and I am not prepared to do this. I will, however, offer the following suggestion: Perhaps the process of learning is itself something good, and not merely as a means to other things. If so, then there may well be a point in having us begin life ignorant of God's existence, born into a world where some people even appear to achieve happiness through wrongdoing: it would give us the opportunity to seek God and discover him for ourselves through a life of struggle (perhaps continuing endlessly into the future). It is not clear to me that the best of all possible worlds wouldn't be one that improved continuously and endlessly through the efforts of persons struggling against ignorance to do what they ought to do.¹⁶

Fort Hays State University

NOTES

1. *Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 808.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* [1783-84?], trans., Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 123.
3. Robert Merrihew Adams, "The Virtue of Faith" [1984], in *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 20-21.

4. There is reason to read Kant, when he says from time to time that we should “believe” that God exists (as in the passage above from the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*) or should “assume the existence of God” (as in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. [125]), to mean just that we should *hope* that God exists—and therefore just believe that God’s existence is *possible*. See M. Jamie Ferreira, “Kant’s Postulate: The Possibility or the Existence of God?” *Kant-Studien* 74 (1983) 75-80.

5. Adams, p. 20.

6. Adams, pp. 20-21.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* [1788], trans., Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. [146]-[147].

8. For a good discussion of this, see chapter 3 of H. J. Paton’s *The Categorical Imperative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

9. And so, we would never be genuinely deserving of rewards from God—although we would also presumably never deserve the harshest of God’s punishments.

10. For some of Plato’s thoughts on the “musical” side of education, see *Laws* II and *Republic* III. See also Julia Annas’s *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic*, p. 84 and thereabouts.

11. John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory: The Dewey Lectures 1980,” *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980) 559.

12. “The concept of good and evil,” Kant tells us, “must be defined after and by means of the law” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, p. [63]). So this concept is, for Kant, a “mere idea of reason.” Goodness can never be present to us in experience. Knowledge of the goodness of anything (i.e., “scientific” or “speculative” knowledge) is impossible for us.

Kant nevertheless thinks that we can have knowledge of good and evil. But he seems to have in mind a different kind of knowledge altogether, a kind of knowledge cut loose from experience—what he calls knowledge “from a practical point of view.” He is never clear in explaining what he has in mind, however, and it is difficult to see how, while admitting this kind of knowledge, he can prevent the re-entry into his philosophy of a full-blown rationalist metaphysics of morals. But let us keep this problem to one side.

13. See Kant’s *Education* [1803], trans., Annette Churton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), especially chapters 1 and 5.

14. Kant discusses the revolution needed to change from an empirically good man to a morally good man throughout *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* [1793], but especially in Book I.

15. And might this not serve as a grounds for friendship with God?

16. I would particularly like to thank two philosophers at the University of Virginia, James Cargile (who largely agrees with what I say here) and John Marshall (who has reservations), for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.