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PRIVACY AND CONTROL

Scott A. Davison

In this paper, I explore several privacy issues as they arise with respect to the divine/human relationship. First, in section 1, I discuss the notion of privacy in a general way. Section 2 is devoted to the claim that privacy involves control over information about oneself. In section 3, I summarize the arguments offered recently by Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain for the conclusion that God respects the privacy of human persons by refraining from knowing certain things about them. Finally, in section 4, I shall criticize Falls-Corbitt and McLain's arguments and make some concluding remarks about God and privacy.

The concept of privacy has been receiving increasing attention in the past few decades (see the articles collected together in Schoeman 1984, for example). Naturally enough, these recent discussions typically concern privacy issues as they arise among human beings; very few people discuss privacy with respect to God. But in this paper, I shall explore several privacy issues as they arise with respect to the divine/human relationship. First, in section 1, I shall discuss the notion of privacy in a general way in order to get clear about the contours of the concept. Section 2 will be devoted to the claim that privacy involves control over information about oneself. In section 3, I shall summarize the arguments offered recently by Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain for the conclusion that God respects the privacy of human persons by refraining from knowing certain things about them. Finally, in section 4, I shall criticize Falls-Corbitt and McLain's arguments and make some concluding remarks about God and privacy.

1. *Privacy.*

In English, there are several different uses of the word 'private' and its cognates, uses which suggest that speakers of English possess several different concepts of privacy. In this paper, I shall focus on just one concept of privacy, albeit a central one (in my view). The use of this concept is most clearly illustrated in English when the word 'private' occurs as an adjective and modifies nouns signifying information of some kind. For example, consider sentences like these: "That file is private"; "I can't



answer your question about him because the answer is private"; and "Don't ask me questions about my private affairs." What does it mean to assert that a bit of information is private?

I have no analysis of the concept of privacy to offer here in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. But perhaps some general comments and an informative necessary condition will suffice for my purposes in this paper. First of all, the concept of privacy is person-relative, and doubly so. In other words, the locution "This information is private" is incomplete as it stands. For example, one person's annual income may be private while another's may be a matter of public record. This example shows that the same kind of information may be private for one person but not for another. In addition, the same bit of information about a single person may be private with respect to some people, but not private with respect to others. For instance, although my annual income may be private with respect to you, it is probably not private with respect to my employer. This double person-relativity of privacy makes careful descriptions of privacy a bit complex; when made explicit, they should take the following form: "This information about person S is private with respect to person P."

What else can be said about this concept of privacy? It seems natural to suggest the following principle:

(P) If a bit of information concerning a person P is private with respect to another person, then this other person has an obligation not to come to know about that bit of information concerning P without P's consent.

Unfortunately, this statement needs to be clarified and modified in several ways before it can be accepted. One clarification concerns the fact that the obligation here is only *prima facie*: although information about which prescription drugs you take may be private with respect to me, it is permissible for me to read your medical bracelet without your consent if I am a doctor trying to save your life in an emergency and you are unconscious.

Furthermore, to be even more precise, if a bit of information about you is private with respect to me, then not only do I have a *prima facie* obligation not to come to know that bit of information without your consent; I am also obligated not to come to believe justifiably that bit of information without your consent. (Although justified true belief may fall short of knowledge, it can certainly violate privacy in the right circumstances.)

Another modification to (P) concerns exactly what persons are obligated not to do: people are not really obligated not to come to believe justifiably private information concerning other persons without their consent. For example, if someone accidentally places a letter from your confidential personnel files on my desk (without your consent), I am not obligated not to come to believe justifiably the contents of the letter. Here it seems more accurate to say that your privacy has been *compromised* than to say that your privacy has been *violated*, in the same way that a person's right not to be harmed would not be violated by the com-

pletely accidental falling of a tree on his head (for a similar argument, see Schoeman 1984, p.4). Instead, if a bit of information about you is private with respect to me, then I have a *prima facie* obligation not to come to believe it justifiably *in a deliberate fashion* without your consent.

Another argument for this same modification of (P) stems from the claim that 'ought' implies 'can': if I come to believe justifiably something about you (without your consent) which is apparently private with respect to me and this happens in such a way that I could not have avoided doing so, then (by *modus tollens*) I cannot have an obligation *not* to come to believe this justifiably, which (by (P) and *modus tollens* again) implies the absurd conclusion that this bit of information is not private with respect to me after all. Qualifying (P) by claiming that persons are obligated not to come to believe justifiably private information about others without their consent *in a deliberate fashion* solves this problem because my obligation not to come to believe something justifiably in a deliberate fashion is still intact even if I come to know that same thing accidentally.

(A different kind of problem, which is suggested by these reflections, is not solved by this modification to (P). Suppose that I am compelled to come to believe justifiably something in a deliberate fashion: for example, imagine that someone threatens the life of my immediate family if I do not violate someone else's privacy. Then it seems at least plausible that I cannot be obligated not to come to believe justifiably something private about another person without that person's consent, in a deliberate fashion, and once again (by the double application of *modus tollens*, as before) it follows that the apparently private information is no longer private with respect to me. Since the resolution of this objection would take me too far afield, into questions about conflicting obligations, I shall simply set it aside here.)

Adding up all of these objections and clarifications, we arrive at the following principle, which is at least much closer to the truth than the original principle (P):

(P*) If a bit of information concerning a person P is private with respect to another person, then this other person has a *prima facie* obligation not to come to believe justifiably that bit of information concerning P in a deliberate fashion, without P's consent.

There are surely other criticisms which could be raised against (P*), but I shall not consider any of them here, since (P*) is sufficiently informative to locate the concept of privacy which interests me in this paper. Also, I am aware of the fact that by itself, (P*) does not tell us what makes certain kinds of information distinctively private; it does not identify the essence of private information. (The converse of (P*) is false, by the way, since a person could be obligated because of a promise not to come to believe justifiably some non-private bit of information about another person.) In fact, because of significant differences among individuals and cultures concerning what counts as private information, I am not optimistic about the prospects for locating a completely general characterization here. So instead I must rely here upon our intuitive under-

standing of the notion of private information, which should be sufficient for my purposes.

Finally, before attempting to assess the plausibility of connecting the notion of privacy with the notion of control over information about oneself, it will be helpful to offer a definition of the notion of violating a person's privacy which is approximately correct. (In this definition, the notion of private information is to be understood along the lines spelled out above.)

(V) A person P's privacy has been *violated* if and only if either (a) someone comes to believe justifiably some private bit of information concerning P in a deliberate fashion, without P's consent, or (b) someone brings it about deliberately that another person comes to believe justifiably some private bit of information concerning P without P's consent.

2. Privacy and Control.

For several reasons, it seems natural to connect the notion of privacy with the notion of having control over certain kinds of information about oneself. (Several authors make this connection explicitly: for example, see Fried 1968, p.209-210, Rachels 1975, p.292, and Falls-Corbitt and McLain 1992, p.370.) In this section, I will mention just two kinds of argument which could be offered in support of this connection before arguing against it.

First, if I freely tell you something private about myself, in circumstances in which I could have refrained from doing so, then my privacy is intact; it is not violated. In this respect, the right to privacy resembles the right to private property: if I freely give you an object which I own, in circumstances in which I could have refrained from doing so, then you will own that object and my right to private property will not have been violated. By contrast, if I am forced by another person to reveal information about myself (or to forfeit an object which I own), then my right to privacy (or my right to private property) has been violated. This comparison suggests that a person's privacy is violated if others come to possess private information about her by means of a process over which she had no control.

Here is another kind of argument which suggests that there is a connection between the notion of privacy and the notion of having control over information about oneself. Let's say that a being is *essentially informationally opaque* just in case it is not possible for knowing agents to come to possess any information about it, whereas a being is *essentially informationally transparent* just in case it is not possible for knowing agents not to know everything about it. (It may turn out that these notions are not even possibly exemplified, but it should be clear that the point of this argument does not depend upon the resolution of that question.) Clearly enough, there would be no point in ascribing a right to privacy to beings which were either essentially informationally opaque or essentially informationally transparent; the question would

never even arise. Why are we different from such beings? What makes it appropriate to ascribe a right to privacy to us? Perhaps the most obvious way to draw a distinction here would be to point out that whether or not other knowing agents come to possess information about us is a *contingent* matter, whereas whether or not knowing agents come to possess information about these strange beings is a *necessary* matter. But clearly enough, not just any contingent mechanism for revealing information about myself to other knowing agents will suffice to safeguard my privacy; instead, it seems that I must have control over such information in order for my privacy to remain intact.

These kinds of arguments (and others like them, which I cannot discuss here: see Fried 1968 and Rachels 1975, for example) make it natural to suppose that a person's privacy is intact to the extent that she has control over information about herself. In order to assess this proposal, it is important first to distinguish several different kinds of control.

First, let's say that a person has *imparting control* over information about herself just in case she can bring it about that others possess such information. By contrast, let's say that a person has *preventive control* over information about herself just in case she can prevent others from coming to possess such information. Finally, let's say that a person has *total control* over information about herself just in case she has both imparting control and preventive control over information about herself. (It would be possible to distinguish other kinds of control, of course, and to attempt to explicate the notion captured by the tricky word 'can' as it occurs in these stipulative definitions, but since my argument does not require that we do those things, it will be wise not to do them here.)

Consider the following principle, which concerns privacy and imparting control:

(PIC) A person's privacy is not violated only if she has imparting control over information about herself.

This principle is clearly false. If I am unable to move for some reason, then I may be unable to impart information about myself to others, but this by itself does not violate my privacy.

Consider instead the following principle, which concerns privacy and preventive control:

(PPC) A person's privacy is not violated only if she has preventive control over information about herself.

This principle is more plausible than (PIC), but it is also false. Suppose that I leave a briefcase at your house by accident, and you ask me over the phone what the briefcase contains, and I answer your question freely, thereby imparting information about myself to you in circumstances in which I could have refrained from doing so. Imagine also that unbeknownst to me, although you did not actually look in the briefcase yourself (in the "actual sequence" of things), still, had I refrained from answering your personal question (in an "alternate sequence"), then you would

have opened the briefcase yourself in order to see what was inside. In this situation, my privacy is not violated, even though I lack preventive control over this information about myself. (This kind of example was made popular by Harry G. Frankfurt in another context, and the helpful terms “actual sequence” and “alternate sequence” occur in John Martin Fischer’s insightful discussion of Frankfurt: see Frankfurt 1969 and Fischer 1982.)

(Of course, since both (PIC) and (PPC) are false, it is obvious (by *modus tollens*) that the following principle is also false:

(PTC) A person’s privacy is intact only if she has total control over information about herself;

hence I won’t bother to discuss this principle here.)

By way of conclusion, then, if there is a connection between privacy and control, it is not clear what that connection is. It seems much more promising to suggest that the violation of privacy essentially involves a lack of consent, rather than a lack of control, over information about oneself.

At this point, I would like to focus upon privacy issues as they arise in the context of the divine/human relationship; as we shall see, questions about the essence of privacy and control over information about oneself loom large in this context.

3. Falls-Corbitt and McLain.

In a recent paper (Falls-Corbitt and McLain 1992), Margaret Falls-Corbitt and F. Michael McLain defend the striking conclusion that God respects the privacy of human persons by refraining from knowing certain things about them. They begin with an argument about the connection between autonomy and privacy with respect to relationships among human beings, and then extend their analysis to the case of the divine/human relationship. In making this move, they claim to be making two assumptions, assumptions which I shall not challenge: (1) God grants libertarian freedom to human persons so that they may develop good character and relationships (with other human persons and with God); (2) reflection upon human moral obligation can illuminate divine action (either because God is bound by the same moral principles as we are, or because those principles which bind us reflect God’s free choice of what constitutes moral value: see pp.369-370). (For an example of someone who believes that God would not violate the privacy of human persons by knowing all about them because God has no obligations towards them, see Schoeman 1984, p.xx.)

Falls-Corbitt and McLain’s argument about the connection between privacy and autonomy begins with some explanatory remarks concerning privacy. After rejecting an analysis of privacy according to which privacy is the mere lack of information which others have about a person, Falls-Corbitt and McLain claim that

In its important moral sense “privacy” refers to our ability to control others’ access to information about us, to the intimacies of our lives, to our thoughts, and to our bodies (p.370).

As we saw above, it is not clear how control and privacy are related. But after making this claim, Falls-Corbitt and McLain suggest that since complete control over information about oneself is impossible, what is really important is that

. . . individuals retain control over when, where and to whom they make explicit self-revelations and over the conditions under which they put themselves in a position which risks inadvertently providing information (p.370).

This sounds more plausible as an account of what matters with respect to privacy, but it is surely insufficient. For example, if I break into your home and read your diary, then your privacy is clearly violated, even though you may still have control over whether or not you make explicit self-revelations (or whether or not you put yourself in a position to reveal information inadvertently).

At any rate, Falls-Corbitt and McLain's argument concerning the connection between privacy and autonomy warrants close scrutiny. First of all, they claim that we have a fundamental duty to respect the autonomy of persons, which involves allowing a person's "choices, especially her well-informed decisions, to be centrally determinative of what happens to her" (pp.370-371). (Although a complete analysis of autonomy along these lines surely must include some normative component concerning the kinds of choices in view here, I shall ignore this difficulty in what follows.) By itself, this duty implies that if a person desires that we should not come to know something about her, then we are *prima facie* obligated not to do so; in other words, respecting autonomy involves respecting privacy.

Falls-Corbitt and McLain then claim that ". . . this analysis of the moral value of privacy makes an initially strong case for the position that God shows *prima facie* regard for our privacy by allowing us to choose whether and when to make self-disclosure before God" (p.371). The rest of their paper is devoted to the examination and critique of three lines of objection to their central argument; in the next section, I shall discuss only their responses to the second line of objection, since the most interesting philosophical issues concerning privacy arise here.

Before doing that, though, it seems important to point out an obvious objection to their position which they simply do not consider. Although it makes sense to claim that God could choose not to exercise certain *powers* (for instance, the power of determining the choices of human persons), it is very hard to make sense of the claim that God could choose to limit God's *knowledge*. We understand how it is possible for human persons to limit their knowledge, but this is only because human persons typically come to know things by means of processes over which they have some measure of control. Sometimes we can avoid coming to possess perceptual knowledge of a given state of affairs, for instance, simply by not being in the right place at the right time. But does this kind of explanation make any sense when applied to God?

Here people are bound to disagree, of course, but traditional theists

seem committed to the claim that God is omniscient with respect to human persons for very straightforward metaphysical reasons. (Here I shall rely upon our intuitive understanding of the doctrine of omniscience; I shall not discuss the problem of future contingents, for instance, since nothing of substance here turns on our resolution of that question. Nor will I discuss the question of God's ownership or partnership in the free actions of created persons, since those cases are especially complex and privacy issues do not arise only in those contexts.) Traditionally, theists have held that God's creative activity with respect to the world includes the following contributions: (1) *Creation*, which refers to the original process whereby the world comes to be *ex nihilo*; (2) *Conservation*, which refers to God's sustaining the created world in being from moment to moment; (3) *Concurrence*, which refers to God's cooperation with the activity of secondary causes (including human persons as they act freely). A commonplace way of expressing the necessity of God's conservation is illustrated by the familiar claim that if God were to cease sustaining the world, then it would fall into nothingness. (This claim is echoed in many formulations of the so-called cosmological argument for God's existence.) If this traditional view of God's relationship to the created order is even approximately correct, then it seems extremely difficult to see how God could not know everything about every human person. After all, God is "present" in every place in which God acts, and God acts everywhere, at every time.

(Thomists have even stronger reasons for endorsing this conclusion, of course, since they hold that God's knowledge of the world is based upon God's knowledge of God's own essence (more specifically, it is based on God's knowledge of the divine ideas, which serve as perfect prototypes for God's creation). But one need not be a Thomist in order to be a traditional theist, so I shall not discuss the Thomistic view any further.)

If this argument shows that it is necessary that God knows the private details of all human persons (and I think that it does), then it is not even possible for God to respect the privacy of human persons in the way envisaged by Falls-Corbitt and McLain. Furthermore, since 'ought' implies 'can' (and 'logically impossible' implies 'cannot'), it follows that it is not the case that God is *prima facie* obliged to respect the privacy of human persons (so that something must be wrong with Falls-Corbitt and McLain's argument to the contrary).

What should traditional theists say about the connection between autonomy and privacy? Since God cannot respect our privacy in the way envisioned by Falls-Corbitt and McLain, should we conclude that God cannot respect our autonomy, either? No. First of all, there are other ways of respecting privacy, to be sure; for instance, God does not directly reveal the intimate details of our lives to other human persons, thank goodness. Second, there are other ways to respect autonomy besides respecting privacy, as illustrated by Falls-Corbitt and McLain's claim that God grants libertarian free choice to human persons and typically respects their choices by not interfering with them. (I shall say more about these things in the next section.)

By way of summary, then, I believe that the argument from God's creative contribution by itself is sufficient to defuse Falls-Corbitt and McLain's main argument for the conclusion that God respects the privacy of human persons by refraining from knowing about their private lives (at least for traditional theists). But their arguments concerning the relationship between privacy and character, trust, and intimacy are still worth considering in some detail, since they are very revealing and informative.

4. *The Instrumental Value of Privacy.*

Falls-Corbitt and McLain's arguments concerning the instrumental value of privacy occur in response to the second line of objection to their position which they consider. This second line of objection to their position concerns God's authority; roughly, the claim is that God's special authority over us and God's moral perfection override God's *prima facie* duty to respect our privacy (p.373). In response to this worry, Falls-Corbitt and McLain argue that God's purposes behind giving human creatures libertarian free choice (namely, the development of good character and intimate relationships) require that God respect the privacy of human persons. In order to make out this case, they defend the necessity of privacy for intimacy, trust, independent moral thinking, and morally accountable selfhood, and then they argue that similar considerations apply to the divine/human relationship. (Here I shall focus primarily on their comments concerning the divine/human relationship.)

Falls-Corbitt and McLain argue that if God knows all of the private details of a human person's life, then the kind of intimacy between God and that person which is possible is very different from intimacy among humans, which involves voluntary self-disclosure. Here it will be helpful to quote them at some length:

We argued that fundamental components of the experience of human intimacy require privacy because it allows a voluntary, self-determined giving of one's historical, psychological and philosophical story. It follows from this that if confessing before God what God already knows is all that is possible, then intimacy with God *of a sort comparable to what we know through human interaction* is not possible. . . . As long as our relationship to God lacks truly free and self-determining self-disclosure, then the sense in which that relationship is "intimate" has only a rather distant analogy to what the term means when we apply it to our experience with one another (p.378, italics theirs).

In response to this argument, several points should be made. First of all, just because privacy "allows" for voluntary self-disclosure, it clearly does not follow that privacy is *necessary* for voluntary self-disclosure (and hence for intimacy), and this is so whether "privacy" is used to denote control over information about oneself or the lack of God's knowledge about oneself (Falls-Corbitt and McLain seem to have both notions in

mind here: see pp.377-378). Privacy (in this odd sense) may be part of some situations of voluntary self-disclosure, but it need not be part of every situation of voluntary self-disclosure.

To see that this is so, consider first the claim that I can engage in voluntary self-disclosure only if I have control over information about myself. As the example discussed in section 2 shows, this is clearly false: I may voluntarily disclose something about myself even though that same information would have been disclosed by someone else had I not disclosed it myself. Hence voluntary self-disclosure does not require control over information about oneself (in the sense that one can prevent others from coming to know things about oneself).

The other claim which Falls-Corbitt and McLain seem to have in mind here is that voluntary self-disclosure of information about myself to another person is impossible if the other person already knows the information in question. Is this true? No. In fact, I can engage in voluntary self-disclosure to you even if *I know* that you already know what I will say before I say it. This happens very often in parent-child relationships, for instance: parents discover bad things which their children have done, and then question the children in order to give them the opportunity to engage in voluntary self-disclosure (instead of persisting in deceit). This often takes place even when the children know that their parents have discovered what they did. (Something like this is also suggested by the conversations between God and Adam and Eve after the Fall (and also between God and Cain after the murder of Abel) in *Genesis*.) Similar situations can occur with adults who are peers; in those cases, we typically describe voluntary self-disclosure by means of verbs like 'admit', 'confess', and 'come out into the open'.

Now some might dispute my description of these cases in terms of the concept of *disclosure*, arguing that true disclosure requires the imparting of information which is not already known. If this is right, then although the cases which I have mentioned above might involve other kinds of important interpersonal exchange, they should not be viewed as involving disclosure *per se*. (Here I should convey my thanks to an anonymous referee for disclosing this point to me.) In response to this worry, it seems appropriate to shift the focus onto the importance of disclosure *per se*: given that the kinds of intimate exchange which I have described do not require disclosure *per se*, why should we think that it is necessary for intimate relationships, whether human or divine? Again, it seems that the burden of proof falls to Falls-Corbitt and McLain to argue that this is the case. (Thanks again to the anonymous referee mentioned above, this time for disclosing this response to the objection previously disclosed.)

Hence I conclude that Falls-Corbitt and McLain are mistaken in thinking that my voluntary self-disclosure of some fact to you requires either my control over information about myself or ignorance on your part concerning the disclosed fact, and they have not shown that intimacy with God must be vastly different from the intimacy shared among human beings.

(Of course, if Falls-Corbitt and McLain were to insist upon the neces-

sity for intimacy of conveying private information to God which God has *never* known, then they could argue that voluntary self-disclosure would be impossible with an omniscient God, but such an insistence seems entirely without foundation, even in the human sphere.)

Even though this criticism of Falls-Corbitt and McLain seems correct, some may have lingering doubts about the value of voluntary self-disclosure before an omniscient God. Is there anything more informative which could be said about this? In a very interesting essay, C. S. Lewis offers the following remarks in response to a similar query:

We are always completely, and therefore equally, known to God. . . . But though this knowledge never varies, the quality of our being known can. . . . Ordinarily, to be known by God is to be, for this purpose, in the category of things. We are like earth-worms, cabbages, and nebulae, objects of divine knowledge. But when we (a) become aware of the fact — the present fact, not the generalisation — and (b) assent with all our might to be so known, then we treat ourselves, in relation to God, not as things but as persons. We have unveiled (Lewis 1963, p.21).

Lewis here presents a very attractive picture of the value of voluntary self-disclosure before an omniscient God: we have control not over whether or not God knows things about us, but rather over the way in which we are known by God. (If I had more time and space, I would attempt to develop this suggestion further and explore the connections between this account and accounts of freedom which are compatible with inevitability, connections which Lewis himself also noticed.) I conclude that the notion of voluntary self-disclosure before an omniscient God is tolerably clear, and hence that Falls-Corbitt and McLain have not shown that intimacy between God and human persons (of the sort which is found among human persons) is impossible.

Falls-Corbitt and McLain also argue that intimacy involves trust and trust requires privacy for its development. As before, it will be helpful to quote from them at some length:

If we act towards God as the moral author and judge who “sees” and “hears” all things, then it would seem impossible for us to learn either that God trusts us or that we are worthy of God’s trust. To become worthy of trust I must be able to recognize my situation as one in which I have been trusted. If we think God observes our every thought, then we do not know that God has ever trusted us or that we have ever met the test of God’s trust (p.378).

Is it true that in order to become trustworthy, I must be in situations in which the person trusting me does not know whether or not I will act in a trustworthy manner? I don’t think so. Becoming trustworthy and knowing that one is trustworthy require situations of trust, all right, but situations of trust need not involve ignorance of the outcome on the part

of the person trusting. Instead, a real situation of trust probably involves something like a lack of control over the outcome on the part of the one trusting. For example, I can trust my five year old nephew not to eat the candy on the table while I'm gone even if I know that he will eat it in my absence. When I return and find the candy gone, I would be speaking truly to him if I said the following: "I trusted you, but you let me down." This kind of feedback is essential for learning how to be trustworthy people. Similar considerations show that it is possible for me to trust another person when I know that the person will act in a trustworthy manner. As critics of arguments for the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom often point out, merely knowing in advance what someone will choose to do does not by itself imply that the person is not acting freely or is controlled by something external.

So although situations of trust may require a lack of control over the outcome on the part of the one trusting, they need not involve ignorance of the outcome on the part of the person trusting. But this lack of control over the outcome of a situation is exactly what God has granted human persons, according to Falls-Corbitt and McLain's first assumption about libertarian free choice. Hence I conclude that they are simply mistaken about the relationship between privacy and trust with respect to the divine/human relationship.

A third area which Falls-Corbitt and McLain address in this vein is the area of independent moral thought:

We need human respect for our privacy in order to value and encourage within ourselves autonomous moral reflection. Is this true in our relationship with God as well? A strong reason for answering in the affirmative is that independent moral thought that leaves no stone unturned must conceive the possibility that even the most repugnant ideas are true. This suggests that what is finally unthinkable before God must be open to exploration, and consideration of the unthinkable is bound to come more easily under a conception of God as listening only when asked (p.379).

In response to this argument, several obvious points should be made. First of all, there is no argument given for the assumption that the kind of independent moral thought required for trust must "leave no stone unturned". Second, even if it did require this, "consideration of the unthinkable" is clearly possible in the presence of an omniscient God. (In fact, there seem to have been actual cases of *adoption* of the "unthinkable" by persons who took themselves to be in the presence of an omniscient God.) The fact that such consideration would "come more easily" under a different conception of God seems quite irrelevant, unless Falls-Corbitt and McLain can show that it would be extremely difficult under the conception of God as omniscient. Hence it seems safe to conclude that Falls-Corbitt and McLain have not shown that an awareness of an omniscient God would preclude the development of independent moral thought.

Finally, Falls-Corbitt and McLain also argue that privacy with respect to God is needed in order for a person to become a morally accountable self. They claim that if we knew that God knew everything about us, then this would be

. . . to live in full and unbroken acknowledgement that our private mullings may be unwanted performances and, therefore, that the content of our consciousness is not uniquely ours. By right of access, it belongs as well to an Other. As a result, the sense of unique responsibility for one's thoughts which one might otherwise develop is severely attenuated; the opportunity to take possession of oneself, so to speak, is nullified. It is very doubtful that out of such a weakened sense of responsibility or self-possession there could come an agent who accepts full responsibility for her beliefs and actions and recognizes fellow humans as likewise accountable (p.380).

What should we say about this argument? I am not convinced. For one thing, is it true that knowing about awareness of my thoughts would attenuate my sense of unique responsibility for them? Once again, the opposite seems to me to be true: knowing that God is aware of my thoughts is likely to make me feel *more* responsible for those thoughts, not less, in the same way in which I feel more responsible for my actions among human persons if they know about those actions. (Indeed, if there is a danger here, I'm inclined to think that it lies in the other direction, namely, that a sense of God's awareness of our thoughts can make us feel overly burdened by personal responsibility for those thoughts.) And, of course, such a sense of responsibility for my own thoughts is bound to contribute to a sense that others are responsible for their own thoughts and actions.

In addition, a sense of responsibility for my thoughts implies ownership of them: I am responsible for them because they are *my thoughts*. (If I felt that they were someone else's thoughts, then I wouldn't feel responsible for them: I would be "off the hook", so to speak.) My thoughts do not become someone else's thoughts just because someone else knows about them. In fact, I may even develop a stronger sense of self than otherwise because of my belief that God is aware of my thoughts; other people who lack this belief, by contrast, may not reflect much upon their thoughts or feel responsible for them, and hence they may not regard their thoughts as parts of themselves in the way in which I do. In any case, Falls-Corbitt and McLain certainly have not shown that privacy with respect to God is necessary for the formation of a morally accountable self.

A final argument should be mentioned here. The person-relativity of privacy (mentioned in section 1) makes Falls-Corbitt and McLain's proposal seem quite strained when we try to think about it in any detail. For if Falls-Corbitt and McLain were correct, then it would be quite possible for the same type of information about two different human persons to be private with respect to God for one of them and not private

with respect to God for the other. Furthermore, whether or not a given fact about a given person is private with respect to God could itself be something which is private with respect to God. After all, what people regard as private about themselves is a very revealing thing; this is one reason why people respond to personal queries by saying "It's a long story" instead of "That's a private matter". But how is God supposed to know which things God can know without violating the privacy of human persons? And when is God permitted to "watch" what people do (since not every moment spent alone is spent doing private things)? These puzzles suggest that Falls-Corbitt and McLain's proposal might be impossible even for God to carry out.

How strong is this argument against their proposal? Well, perhaps there is a way to explain how all of this is possible, but I don't see what it is. It seems safe to conclude that Falls-Corbitt and McLain owe us some kind of explanation concerning these things before their proposal can be considered a live option.

By way of conclusion, then, Falls-Corbitt and McLain have not shown that privacy with respect to God is instrumentally necessary for intimacy, trust, independent moral thinking, or morally accountable selfhood. Much more could be said about these things, of course, but I shall not say any of it here. Since the argument from the traditional theistic conception of God's activity in the world (developed in section 3) provides traditional theists with a good reason for believing that God is omniscient, I conclude that Falls-Corbitt and McLain are mistaken in holding that God has a *prima facie* obligation to respect the privacy of human persons by refraining from knowing all about them. Finally, they are also mistaken in thinking that there is a clear connection between privacy and control over information about oneself, as the argument of section 2 shows.*

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