PERFECT BEING ETHICS

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In a 1987 paper Thomas Morris introduced the phrase 'perfect being theology' and argued that in our efforts to construct an adequate theistic conception of God the most fruitful procedure will be for us to engage in reflection and dialogue about what a maximally perfect being would be like ('Perfect Being Theology,' *Nous* 21: 19-30). To some of us that approach seems so obvious as to be without a significant alternative, but there are other approaches that have been followed – such as working up a conception of God solely from the statements in a purported repository of divine revelation, such as the Bible (for example, when I was in seminary in Yale Divinity School in the early 1960's, 'biblical theology' was the rage and 'philosophical theology' was looked down upon). Another approach has been to study a wide range of religious scriptures to see what common conception of the divine can be found in them or most plausibly constructed from them. Those approaches, Morris said, have left us with something unsatisfactorily incomplete, static, and perhaps self-contradictory. Morris argued, a la St. Anselm and René Descartes, that the notion of a maximally perfect being is the north star that has been at the heart of the theistic traditions of the world, and it is that notion that we must explore and elaborate in order that we might construct an adequate conception of God. I agree.

Morris has applied the perfect being approach to questions about the metaphysical attributes of God, such as omniscience and omnipotence, but to the best of my knowledge he has not applied perfect being theology to the questions of ethics. Years ago I encouraged him to do so, but, so far as I know, he has not. I still think it would be fruitful to do so. Consequently, I am grateful for this opportunity to share my thoughts about perfect being ethics.

Perfect Being Ethics

The basic idea of perfect being ethics is this: What is morally right and obligatory is what a supremely perfect being who

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is creator of the universe would command; what is morally wrong and forbidden is what a supremely perfect being who is creator of the universe would forbid; what is morally permissible is what a supremely perfect being who is creator of the universe would not forbid. Moral wrongness, then, is the property of being contrary to what God, the supremely perfect being who is creator of the universe, would will. This means that attitudes and intentions as well as actions can be morally wrong because they can be contrary to the attitudes and intentions that God desires and wills that we have. This is a position without a name except the one I have given it, so far as I know. Yet it may be that in my presentation I will do little more than give a name to and focus attention on a position that is not at all unfamiliar. For example, in the second edition of his *Philosophy of Religion*, in a discussion of the principle of credulity, William Rowe says the following: '...since God is a perfectly good being, we can from that fact alone discover some reason for thinking an experience that purports to be of God is delusive. For suppose someone reports an experience which he takes to be a perception of God commanding him to kill all those who sincerely seek to live a moral and holy life. We can be confident that God did not reveal that message and thus [we] have reason for thinking the experience to be delusive' [2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1993) p. 61]. I don't know that Rowe is a card carrying perfect being ethicist, but he certainly knows how they think. Consider also this reaction by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to the claim that in the Bible God forbids the members of the various human races to mingle with one another: 'If anyone were to show me that apartheid is biblical or Christian ... I would burn my Bible and cease to be a Christian.' [*Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981) p. 155]. To some that is a shocking statement to come from a Christian, especially from an Anglican *bishop* (well, maybe not coming from an *Anglican* bishop), but what enabled Tutu to make that statement, I believe, was a background belief on his part that God is a supremely perfect being, creator and lover of the universe and all its races, from which belief Tutu

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reasoned that God would not enjoin apartheid upon us (and, of course, Tutu knew the Bible well enough to know that it enjoins no such thing as apartheid).

Theocentric Ethics

Now I would like to put perfect being ethics into a genus so I can compare it to another species of that genus. Perfect being ethics is a species of theocentric ethics. Theocentric ethics says that in order to find out what is morally right and wrong we must look to God, an unsurpassably and uniquely powerful personal being who is the designer, creator, and sustainer of the universe. The most familiar species of theocentric ethics is divine command ethics. In the next section of this paper I will explain how perfect being ethics differs from it and is superior to it.

Divine Command Ethics

In its most basic form divine command ethics says there is nothing that is morally right or wrong in itself; there is nothing that is intrinsically morally right or wrong. It is the will of God that *makes* an attitude, intention, or action morally right or wrong. If murder is morally wrong, it is because God has commanded that we not commit murder – though ze could have commanded otherwise (n.b. Ze, Zer, and Mer are non-gendered personal pronouns. Ze is nominative. Zer is possessive. Mer is accusative. Because God is a person but neither male nor female, it seems appropriate in a philosophy paper to use pronouns which reflect that fact). If charity to the poor is morally obligatory, it is because God enjoins that we be compassionate – though ze could have commanded otherwise. Two of the virtues of this position, according to its advocates, are its recognition and exaltation of God as absolutely unrestricted, and its implication that our obedience to God should be unqualified. To say that God's will is restricted by what is good would be to reify the good and give it authority over God, which would be to depict God in a way that is inconsistent with God's unqualified absoluteness. A being worthy of the title 'God' will be beyond good and evil, not restricted by

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them; therefore, a being restricted by them cannot be God. Furthermore, to say or imply that we ought to obey God only when ze enjoins what *we* think is moral, and disobey God if ze wills what we think is immoral, would be blasphemous (not to mention 'stupid'). It would be to exalt the creature above the creator, which ought never be done, and which the Bible condemns in scathing images. In brief, there is no restriction on the absoluteness of God, say divine command theorists. Therefore, God is free to make anything morally right or wrong for humans. Therefore, our duty is to do without qualm or hesitation whatever God wills that we do.

A familiar expression of this line of thinking is Søren Kierkegaard's notion of a 'teleological suspension of the ethical', which requires in response to a command from God that violates ordinary moral norms (even norms that God has previously laid down), that we suspend our obedience to those other norms in order that we might do whatever God asks us to do now – like Abraham, who was asked to ritually slay his beloved son Isaac. (There is, of course, an ambiguity here. One possibility is that Kierkegaard was speaking as the kind of unreconstructed divine command ethicist whom I just depicted; another is that he was an ethical realist who was saying only that God would never command that we do what is intrinsically morally wrong, so since *we* can be mistaken but God cannot, we should do what God commands even when it conflicts with what we feel or think is right. I will leave resolution of this ambiguity to those of who know Kierkegaard's writings much better than I. See his *Fear and Trembling*, Problems 1 and 2.) Whatever scholarship indicates was Kierkegaard's justification for teleological suspensions of the ethical, it is deeply troubling and objectionable to many of us, given the human epistemic situation, to think that when a command purports to come from God, we should salute and obey without question.

In addition to the preceding difficulty concerning obedience, here is another troubling implication of divine command ethics: If nothing is morally right or wrong apart from God willing it, then it is possible for God to make anything morally obliga-

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tory, such as recreational infant torture, and it is possible for God to make anything morally forbidden, such as rescuing an infant from recreational torture. During the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, Garry Trudeau, creator of the cartoon *Doonesbury*, skewered this implication of divine command ethics in the following interview on a fictitious 'meet the press' television show. The cartoon character 'Mark Slackmeyer' sits slouched in an easy chair in front of a television and hears the interviewer begin by saying: 'Meet the Reverend Billy Bob, headmaster of the Billy Bob Christian Academy in Pickens, South Carolina. Dr. Bob, Mr. Reagan's reversal on tax exemptions was something of a setback for an all-white school like yours, was it not?' 'Yes, we're very disappointed,' says the Reverend Billy Bob. 'Our racial views are tied to strong religious beliefs. The government would have us go against the Holy Bible, which instructs us to maintain immaculate relations between the races.' The interviewer, wanting the Rev. Billy Bob to be explicit, says, 'You mean, segregation?'. The Reverend Billy Bob replies, 'Hey, personally I'm against it, but what can I tell you? It's God's word.' (Universal Press Syndicate: 2-4-82)

Robert Adams (who is not a cartoon figure) has attempted to save divine command ethics by adding an important qualification to it. He agrees with basic divine command ethics that moral right and wrong are not independent of the will of God, so he allows that it is not *logically* impossible for God to command cruelty for its own sake. However, Adams says, if God did so, it would not be wrong to disobey God. Why? Because if God were to issue such a command, Adams says his sense of what makes things morally right and wrong would break down because, on the one hand, he believes it is the will of God that makes things morally right or wrong, yet, on the other hand, God would have commanded something that he, Adams, could not recognize as morally obligatory. Adams believes that God is loving, and if God is loving, then, Adams says, God's will determines what is morally right and wrong, but if God is not loving – and Adams allows that that is possible – then morality cannot be based on the will of God.

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What does Adams mean by 'God'? He *seems* to mean 'the intelligent creator of the universe,' but, curiously, he does not say explicitly what he means by 'God' – at least not in his 'modified divine command' articles, and that raises a fundamental issue for us: What should we mean by 'God'? If, with Anselm and Descartes, we mean a supremely perfect being, a being than which none greater can be conceived, then it seems to follow that because God is the creator of the universe and will care about the well-being of that which ze creates, that therefore ze could not will cruelty for its own sake. If that is correct, then any command to exercise cruelty for its own sake could not have come from God, would be contrary to the will of God, and should be disobeyed for that reason.

The logic of the concept of a supremely perfect being is, I suspect, what drove Adams to say that in order for moral standards to be determined by the will of God, God must be loving. Why then, instead of engaging in his tortuous effort to save divine command ethics Adams didn't say that because God is perfect God *couldn't* issue such a command, I do not know. It seems to have to do with his fundamental conception of God, which apparently has no moral or axiological content or implications. Such a conception of God, I submit, does not fit with the notion of a supremely perfect being (nor, I think, does it fit with the majority of Biblical statements about God). Of course I do not think that the notion of a supremely perfect being and its ethical implications are perfectly clear, but I do not understand how it would allow for God to command cruelty for its own sake, and Adams does not say why he thinks it is logically possible that it could. He just says it could. So it seems that either (1) Adams believes that God is not essentially a supremely perfect being (since God could command recreational infant torture), or (2) he believes that God is a supremely perfect being but a supremely perfect being could command us to engage in recreational infant torture (in which case he owes us an explanation as to how that could be true), or (3) he should join perfect being ethics in concluding that the only being worthy of the title 'God' is a supremely perfect

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being, and that a supremely perfect being could enjoin no such thing as infant torture.

Because Adams adheres to a divine command ethic, he also believes that we cannot know what is morally right and wrong apart from finding out the propositionally revealed will of God. That points to two more significant differences between divine command ethics and perfect being ethics. *First*, the perfect being ethicist does not believe that without propositional revelation we are without a moral rudder. The perfect being ethicist believes that we can and should acquire moral direction from reflecting on what a supremely perfect creator of the universe would will that we do and not do.

Second, the divine command ethicist typically claims that if there is no God, then there is no moral right or wrong. Hence, we are forced to choose between divine command ethics and ethical nihilism; either there is a God who determines what is morally right and wrong or there is no moral right or wrong. Consider, for example, Dostoyevsky's familiar statement: 'If there is no God, then all things are permitted.' Then there is this statement by Emil Brunner, a mid-twentieth century protestant theologian whose influence in Europe was second only to that of Karl Barth: 'Moral seriousness is respect to the voice of conscience. If there is no God, conscience is but a complex of residual habits and means nothing. If there is no God, then it is absurd to trouble oneself about right – or wrong. It all comes to the same ultimate chaos. Scoundrel and saint are only phantoms of the imagination' (*Our Faith*, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d., p. 5). Finally, consider this statement by Robert Adams: 'If it is necessary that ethical wrongness is contrariety to a loving God's commands, it follows that no actions would be ethically wrong if there were not a loving God.' ('Divine Command Ethics Modified Again,' *The Virtue of Faith* [(Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 141]. Adams put that statement hypothetically, but it seems clear from all else that he says that he believes (or believed at that time) that 'it is necessary that ethical wrongness is contrariety to a loving God's commands [and that, therefore] it follows that no actions

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would be ethically wrong if there were not a loving God.' By contrast, the perfect being ethicist believes that whether God exists or not, whether we *know* for certain that God exists or does not, we still can and should get our moral bearings by thinking about and discussing how a supremely perfect being, who is or would be our creator, sustainer, and cherisher, would want us to live.

That means that with perfect being ethics, unlike with divine command ethics, it is possible and encouraged that theists, atheists, agnostics, indeed, all humans engage together in pursuit of moral truth. One doesn't have to believe that one has a revelation from God or even that God exists in order to make inferences about what God would will if God did exist – and does will if ze does exist. Moreover, perfect being ethics allows that even people who cannot abide the concept of God or cannot take it seriously can, nonetheless, engage fruitfully in ethical reflection without the aid of that concept. How? By reflecting on things that do follow from that concept, such as respect and compassion. However, perfect being ethics does hold that it is by reflecting on the concept of God that ethics can be done most fruitfully and completely. Moreover, if perfect being ethics is true, then it illuminates what is going on when people are doing ethics without conscious consideration of the will of God. What they are doing, without realizing it, is trying to figure out what a supremely perfect being would will that we do.

An issue that I suspect is on your mind by now is that of the implications of perfect being ethics for divine revelation of moral truths. Such revelation is an essential feature of divine command ethics. Robert Adams' modified divine command ethic requires, in his own words, that God's commands 'must have been issued, promulgated, or somehow revealed.' (140) If the 'somehow' includes being revealed to reason through the concept of a supremely perfect being, I have no problem. But if Adams means that *verbal* divine revelation is required for moral guidance, as it clearly seems he does require, then I do have a problem, because then either we must blindly accept and obey whatever claims to be a revelation from God or we

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must have a rational conception of moral right and wrong by which we can decide whether a purported revelation of the will of God is, or at least could be, the will of God and therefore is or may be obligatory.

Does this mean that perfect being ethics renders propositional revelation of moral truths by God worthless? Not at all. Some truths that we *could* figure out on our own or *have* figured out on our own might be sufficiently urgent that God wants to confront us with them explicitly. Here are six reasons why God might want to do this. *First*, God might reveal moral truths because of innocent but dangerous ignorance on our part; that is, God might want to provide external moral guidance to people who have not yet acquired the maturity or had the leisure to think their way through to the basic truths of morality. By comparison, parents begin telling their children what is morally right and wrong long before their children can understand why those things are morally right and wrong. *Second*, God might reveal what is morally right and wrong because of willful but dangerous ignorance. Some say God does that so that when ze sends those folks to hell, if they do not repent, ze can say they were warned. Others say that God's motive is not to exonerate merself but, out of love, to make every effort to bring us into free and eternal fellowship with mer and one another in zer eternal kingdom. *Third*, propositional revelation of moral truths might be meant to make it harder for us to forget what is morally right and give in to what is morally wrong when we are being ground down by temptation, fatigue, or trauma. *Fourth*, divine revelation of moral truths might be meant to help us understand more profoundly or subtly or inclusively what is morally right and wrong. *Fifth*, revelation of moral truths to those who have *already* understood by reason what is morally right and wrong might be meant to indicate to them that a purported prophet or body of scripture is veridical, is trustworthy and authoritative, because he, she, or it has asserted on the basis of revelation what we already know by reason. The dynamics might, of course, also work the other way around: we might encounter a purported revelation of moral right and wrong first, then come to understand by reason that it is true,

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and thereby acquire confidence (or more confidence) in the purported source or repository of revelation from which we first learned it. *Sixth*, in addition to the things that God would will because of zer nature and which we can know by reason, there are additional things that God might command for a good reason, and which, if God commanded them, we ought to comply with in recognition of God's wisdom, goodness, and status as our creator, sustainer, and lover. For that kind of reason Orthodox Jews believe they have an obligation to circumcise their male infants, and Christians believe they have an obligation to eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of their Lord. According to perfect being ethics, if such injunctions fall within the parameters of what a supremely perfect being could will, and have in fact been enjoined by such a being, then they are legitimate obligations.

Now I would like to respond to a valuable set of questions that were formulated by Robert Adams. These are questions, according to Adams, that any adequate ethic should answer satisfactorily. I will formulate and answer them, quite briefly, on behalf of perfect being ethics.

1) Does perfect being ethics say what moral wrongness consists of? Yes. It consists of contrariness to what a supremely perfect being would will or does will – and, of course, there would be no inconsistency between what is ethically implied by the concept of a supremely perfect being and what an actual supremely perfect being would will.

2) Does perfect being ethics account for many of our moral intuitions? Yes. It seems clear that a supremely perfect being, designer of all that exists, would care about the well-being of species and individuals and would, therefore, prohibit such actions as murder, torture, rape, and wanton destruction of species, would enjoin such virtues as honesty, justice, charity, and sensitivity to the needs and rights of other species, and would disapprove of callousness to the suffering of animals.

3) Does perfect being ethics give us a reason to be moral? Yes, at least two. First, according to perfect being ethics, moral right and wrong are determined by the will of a being whose will for our well-being and whose knowledge of what

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is necessary and sufficient for our well-being are so great that none greater could possibly be conceived. Surely obedience to such a being is right and good. Second, those who believe that there *is* such a being could be motivated also by (a) gratitude for the magnanimity of this being and (b) reverence for the grandeur of this being, as well as by (c) a desire to avoid displeasing this being – and whereas such a desire might be a desire to avoid divine punishment, it could also be a desire not to disappoint God (a notion that is captured beautifully in the Muslim concept of 'taqwa').

4) Does perfect being ethics explain why moral principles seem to transcend human authority and be sacred or unassailable? Yes. According to perfect being ethics, moral right and wrong are grounded beyond ourselves in the concept or will of a supremely perfect being who is perfectly good and wise.

5) Does perfect being ethics allow for moral autonomy and dignity? Yes. Perfect being ethics recognizes that we as individuals and as a community are responsible for understanding what makes actions morally right and morally wrong, and we are responsible for deciding whether specific moral injunctions, even those claiming the authority of divine revelation, genuinely are or could be injunctions from God. To conclude that a moral injunction is willed or would be willed by God is to understand that it is what is willed or would be willed by a supremely perfect being who cares more wisely and consistently about our well-being than we ourselves do. To intentionally disobey an injunction understood to be what a supremely perfect being would will would, it seems to me, be irrational and incomprehensible, since it would consist of intentionally acting contrary to what one understands to be best for one's own well-being (of course I am not using 'well-being' in a hedonistic sense; loyalty and integrity, as well as pleasure, are elements of well-being). Hence, because we understand that what a supremely perfect being would will for us is also what we will for ourselves, our compliance with the will of God will be a free action.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to perfect being ethics has been stated by Steven Cahn. In his frequently antholo-

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gized article 'The Irrelevance of Proof to Religion' (Paul Helm, *Faith and Reason*, 357-61) Cahn accepts for argument's sake the concept of God as 'the most perfect conceivable Being' who is 'the designer and creator of the universe.' Cahn then says, 'proofs for the existence of God provide us with no hint whatever as to which actions God wishes us to perform, or what we ought to do so as to please or obey Him. ... any moral principle is consistent with the existence of God.' Consequently, 'no man can be sure of how to obey God and do what is best in his eyes.' Cahn adds that even if we affirm that God is all-good, that would provide us with no way to know what the moral standards are by which God would have us live.

In response to Cahn I would like to point out first that there is, I think, a confusion in his discussion because he keeps saying that the *existence* of God is compatible with any principle of behavior, whereas the position that he seems to intend – and is all that he needs – is that any principle of behavior is compatible with the *concept* of 'the most perfect conceivable being ... who is all-good and is the designer and creator of the universe.' To be fair to Cahn, his focus on arguments for the *existence* of God seems to arise from a belief on his part that a lot of the energy that theists have poured into trying to *prove* the existence of God has been so directed because of belief on their part that in knowing that God *exists*, we will also know what is morally right and wrong. Cahn's argument is intended to undermine that motivation for trying to prove the existence of God. My point is simply that Cahn could have achieved a more powerful result by claiming that moral implications do not follow from the concept of God, and therefore, *a fortiori*, they would not follow from the existence of God.

The second thing I have to say about Cahn's position is that it leaves me speechless – at least momentarily – because it seems so obviously wrong. His position is, of course, a flat denial of my claim that from the perfection of God and God's role as creator, conclusions can be inferred for how we should live our lives and treat one another, other species, and the finite resources of the world. I suppose Cahn's position is a way of saying to theists, 'The emperor is naked,' when, as Cahn sees

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it, theists are standing around oohing and aahing about how snappy the emperor's clothes are. But as for me and my house (those who agree with me that moral guidance can be gained from reflection on what the will of a perfect creator God would be), I see no reason to think we are so benighted as Cahn claims. There will, of course, be disagreements among perfect being ethicists as to what God's will would be, but I think there is much more agreement than disagreement among theists as to moral implications that follow from the concept of God. For example, I think most theists would agree with Desmond Tutu's inference that God would not command apartheid. For a more extensive set of inferences, let's consider Linda Zagzebski's Divine Motivation Theory of Ethics (*Faith and Philosophy*, 15/4, Oct. 1998, 538-553).

Zagzebski argues along Thomistic lines that the following virtues exist antecedently and perfectly in God because God is 'both a moral agent and a perfect being': justice, benevolence, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, love, compassion, loyalty, generosity, trustworthiness, integrity, and wisdom. I think Zagzebski's divine motivation ethic would benefit from being integrated into the perfect being perspective, but I agree with the list of virtues that she thinks are embodied antecedently and perfectly in God, and I think that many theists would agree that those virtues, or at least most of them, are arguably implied by the concept of God, and that, as Zagzebski says, God would or does will that we seek to embody those virtues in *our* lives as fully we can. Moreover, there is some agreement between theists and non-theists as to moral implications of the concept of God. Recall, for example, the earlier quotation from William Rowe, who is an atheist.

The fundamental disagreement between Cahn, on the one hand, and Zagzebski *et al*, on the other hand is, I suppose, that Zagzebski *et al* believe that the virtues that she listed can be inferred from the concept of a supremely perfect being, whereas Cahn would claim that the concept of God is a morally blank tablet. Hence, as far as Cahn is concerned, Zagzebski *et al* have 'discovered' those virtues in the concept of God only after smuggling them in there in the first place. Obviously, if

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perfect being ethics is to survive and flourish, Cahn's challenge must be met, and perfect being ethicists must provide good reasons for the ethical implications that they draw from the concept of God. I believe that can be done, but enough has been said for now.

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