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Response to Bishop's "How a Modest Fideism May Constrain Theistic Commitments"

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Abstract Bishop's main claims are: (I) that James' criteria on the admissibility of faith leaps need the addition of two moral criteria to be complete; (II) that a Kantian, at least, could not admissibly leap toward God, classically understood, and (III) that a Kantian, and anyone else, could admissibly leap toward God, understood his way. Here I will affirm (I) with a qualification; deny (II); affirm (III); and close with some reservations about Bishop's novel model of God. This paper was delivered at the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Models of God · James · Fideism · Problem of evil

Part I of Bishop's paper introduces and adopts for discussion a theory about what makes faith leaps admissible; Parts II and III use this theory to measure the moral adequacy of leaps toward God, conceived first classically, and second novelly, in a way Bishop develops at the close. Bishop's main messages, numbered by the parts in which they occur, are: (I) that James' criteria on the admissibility of faith leaps need the addition of two moral criteria to be complete; (II) that a Kantian, at least, could *not* admissibly leap toward God, classically understood, and (III) that a Kantian, and anyone else, *could* admissibly leap toward God, understood his way. Here I will affirm (I) with a qualification; deny (II); affirm (III); and close with some reservations about Bishop's novel model of God.

Part I

Bishop frames his theory about what makes faith leaps admissible by adopting James' epistemic criteria for how one acts – notably, that the option be (1) forced and momentous, and (2) essentially and persistently undecideable – and then arguing that, alone, these fail because they permit leaping to the Nazi gods, for instance. To rectify this problem, he

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introduces two moral criteria to add to James' epistemic criteria – (3) that the passional motivation for the belief be morally admirable, and (4) that the content of what is believed be morally acceptable. But two issues arise.

First, what, exactly, motivates the introduction of the moral criteria? Ostensibly, it is the Nazi gods thought experiment, but it proceeds too quickly to locate a connection between morality and faith leaps (i.e., I would recoil at the Nazi gods, whether I were leaping or not). Perhaps Bishop's deeper reason is that "practical commitment to religious beliefs is morally significant (otherwise they don't count as religious)." But this claim is too strong: fundamentally, what makes a belief religious is its concern with eternal things, not its concern with morality, even if the eternal and morality tend to go together. Moreover, think of arcane religious beliefs, such as limbo, which are not action-guiding at all.

The right reason for adding the moral criteria is that, even if not all religious beliefs are morally significant, the one of interest to us here is: leaping to a god is a moral act. In fact, at least for monotheists, leaping to God is an intensely moral act, maybe the most fundamental moral act of all, since it involves worshipping God, and this involves allying oneself to God above all else – above family, nation, self, other creeds – with all one's heart, soul and mind. We should assess whether a leap to God is moral, then, because it is germane to do so, and because, if we are in the business of being moral, there may be no more important juncture to be so.

Second, once the moral criteria are on board, a kind of Euthyphro dilemma arises, which Bishop mentions briefly ("It will be problematic if people's moral values remain wholly derivative upon their maintaining a specific kind of faith venture..."). For the voluntarist who takes what is right to be so because God loves it, the answer to the question: "is the God I leap to morally acceptable?" will always be yes, by definition. That makes Bishop's fourth criterion idle.

He attempts to resolve this problem by asking for "an appropriate tension between one's evolving faith commitments and one's evolving moral commitments." But this will not help, since, for the voluntarist, one's faith commitments just *are* one's moral commitments, and vice versa. To multiply the problem, even a non-voluntarist who accepts a distinction between faith and moral commitments might believe that faith commitments always trump moral ones (this is one reading of Abraham's sacrificing Isaac, for instance).

Bishop's best tactic here is to limit his audience. He should say that his new criteria on leaps are useful only for non-voluntarists who see a distinction but no conflict between their religious commitments and their moral commitments because, e.g., they take God to be moral, either as a matter of fact or necessarily. For this audience, his main point in Part I stands: that it is plausible to take faith leaps to be admissible only when they meet some purely moral constraints, in addition to the usual Jamesian constraints, since, by leaping, believers commit themselves to this God's moral programme as their own.

Part II

At the start of Part II, Bishop suggests a key move: that we should use these extended Jamesian constraints on admissible leaps to measure the adequacy of various faith ventures toward God, and derivatively, the adequacy of those models of God.

This is a brilliant idea. Bishop is offering a fresh criterion for judging a model of God. In addition to, say, asking for a model's fit with a particular tradition, or its internal consistency, or its usefulness in natural theology, etc., he wants us to consider: would it be permissible in practice to faith-venture toward God, so understood? This is prudent. The

ultimate point of weighing models is, for theists, to choose a model to adopt and use. We do well to identify and then ignore models whose objects we could not rightly leap to in the first place.

Bishop then applies his criteria to a classical God, and decides that a Kantian, at least, could not admissibly leap toward a classical God. There is much that is plausible here – that even a supreme good is ill-gotten gain if it took horrendous evils to get it, and that the process of getting the good from the evil involves too much manipulation vs genuine relationship. But, if these are all reasons for Kantians to wonder if the God in question is truly morally good, then, by definition, they cannot be wondering about omniGod. Thus, Bishop's discussion here just reframes the problem of evil. Its proper conclusion is not that it is unacceptable on his criteria to venture toward omniGod, but rather that, given the existence of horrific evils in our world, there is no omniGod to venture toward.

Part III

Having found that Kantians could not admissibly leap toward a classical God, Bishop sets his sights on identifying a God they – or anyone else – *could* admissibly leap toward. He starts by dropping personal agency in favor of supreme community – or, deeper, the concrete relationship a supreme community embodies ("Love active in the world," as he glosses it). He then recognizes that dropping agency alone will not free God of responsibility for evil, decides that dropping "creator and sustainer" will, and ends with an idea of God as (1) supreme Love active in the world, (2) which is not ultimate cause, but rather ultimate effect – not the source from which all things came, but the *telos* to which all things are going.

This is the start of a powerful view – one that raises many issues, as powerful views do. Let me focus on two here in closing. First, several criteria Bishop wants his God to satisfy surface quickly, without argument, in this section – e.g., that it must be worthy of worship, non-dependent, totally active, the ground of our hope. Criterion by criterion, Bishop is gathering together, and putting to work, a metatheory that models of God should meet. But what is the guiding principle of this metatheory, and why should we accept it and these criteria that spring from it? How, if at all, does it connect to the extended Jamesian fideism he argued for at the start?

Second, Bishop's novel model of God is not yet, in its early form, "religiously adequate to some living theistic tradition or traditions," to use his own words at the start of Part III. It is, of course, part of the burden of the collective work in this issue to discuss what makes for religious adequacy of models of God, but here I will use my own view argued elsewhere,[1] i.e., that a model of God is religiously adequate to a particular tradition if it vindicates central religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices about God in that tradition, as collected in a loosely functional role, or "job description," for God. One such divine role implicit in the major texts of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in particular runs like this, in short: whatever God is like intrinsically, God must explain the existence of the universe, intervene both providentially and miraculously in it, generate or affirm some of our moral obligations, redeem us, deliver ultimate merciful justice, and cause numinous and religious experiences. God must also be the actual and proper object of the religious attitudes of reverence, gratefulness, hope, and love so plentiful in these texts, as well as the practices of

[1] See "A Proposal to Change the Tradition of Perfect Being Theology," *Southwest Philosophy Review 15* (1999), 231–40.

worship and prayer of all kinds, including penitential, petitionary, and communing prayers. Because we are fallible theorizers, this divine role (like other functional roles) has slack in it: that is, to occupy it, a thing does not have to do every single job exactly as stated, but rather some central subset of them.[2]

With this view in hand, we can determine the religious adequacy of Bishop's novel model of God by first asking how much of the job description it fills, and then judging whether that much is enough to be religiously adequate. So, what is the God Bishop describes actually doing? Though his model is still underdeveloped (he says he is "sketching" it, "pointing the way" toward it), the stuff of the model so far tells us (1) that the God in question is exhibiting perfect love among the three persons of the Trinity, and (2) something that it is *not* doing – that it did not create the world. In the last few paragraphs, Bishop adds two more broad activities – that (3) "nothing conceivably exceeds its active power to bring good from evil" and that (4) this divine love has and is "working among us" as revealed in a religious tradition. But I do not see the resources as yet in the model to support (3) and (4): if this God does not have the active power to create, for instance, why think that nothing exceeds its power to bring good from evil?

If Bishop *can* make good on (3) and (4), together they suggest two pieces of the divine role that are getting filled: providential activity, and, perhaps, a sort of cosmic redemption. Claim (1) suggests that another moral job is getting done – that the being is functioning as a moral exemplar, effectively affirming by its very being a standard for us to follow. However, (2), of course, means that the main cosmological job of creating the world is not getting done, at least not in a traditional way (more in a moment). Moreover, the fact that active Love is a concrete *relationship* versus an agent calls into question whether it can do any of the jobs that consist in being the actual and proper object of religious attitudes and practices, since these, on the usual interpretation, have a *person* as their intentional object. Can one pray to a relationship, praise it, commune with it, meet it in religious experience? Can one worship a relationship?

Bishop has the resources within his view to provide non-traditional renderings of many of these jobs. He has already offered one for the main cosmological job as final versus first cause. In the same vein, perhaps he can say that believers can petition the Supreme relationship as citizens petition Congress, or that they can have a personal relationship with it by becoming another member in it, etc. But such conceptual revisions put pressure on the project of showing adequacy: Bishop will have to capitalize not only on slack in the job description itself, but also on slack in our understandings of each job per se.

My fundamental question here is this: is the supreme Love Bishop envisions doing and being enough to be worth embracing with all our heart, soul and mind? God as supreme Love accomplishes what Bishop hoped – it is morally admissible to leap to it. But I need a fuller account before cashing in on this admissibility.[3]

[2] See, e.g., David Lewis, "Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy 50* (1972): 252; and Peter Railton, "Non-cognitivism about Rationality: Benefits, Costs, and an Alternative," *Philosophical Issues* 4 (1993): 47–8.

[3] My thanks to Paul Sludds for helpful discussion about this commentary.