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How a Modest Fideism may Constrain Theistic Commitments: Exploring an Alternative to Classical Theism

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Abstract On the assumption that theistic religious commitment takes place in the face of evidential ambiguity, the question arises under what conditions it is permissible to make a *doxastic venture* beyond one's evidence in favour of a religious proposition. In this paper I explore the implications for orthodox theistic commitment of adopting, in answer to that question, a modest, moral coherentist, fideism. This extended Jamesian fideism crucially requires positive ethical evaluation of both the motivation and content of religious doxastic ventures. I suggest that, even though the existence of horrendous evil does not resolve evidential ambiguity in favour of atheism, there are reasonable value commitments that would preclude those who hold them from satisfying extended Jamesian fideist conditions for committing themselves to classical theism. I then begin a discussion of a possible revisionary theistic alternative (in the Christian tradition) which – one might hope – may meet those conditions. An earlier, shorter, version of this paper was delivered as a keynote address at the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Fideism · Theism · Faith-venture · Faith · Justifiability of religious beliefs · Ethics of belief · Reformed epistemology · Concepts of God · Problem of evil · Social doctrine of the Trinity · Greatness qua being

Explicating and Motivating a Modest Fideism

I begin with the assumption that legitimate practical commitment to the truth of any religious beliefs will always involve a *faith-venture*. A faith-venture is taking a proposition to be true

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under conditions of *evidential ambiguity* – that is, under conditions where our total available public evidence neither shows the proposition's truth nor its falsehood to be significantly more probable than not, and where that total evidence is systematically open to viable overall interpretation, both on the assumption that the proposition is true and on the assumption that the proposition is false. To put it more popularly, my assumption is that acceptable religious commitment always involves a cognitive 'leap of faith'. I do, in fact, believe that this assumption holds generally – but I restrict it here to theistic religious beliefs.

This 'Faith-venture' assumption needs qualification. As so far stated, it is clearly false. Orthodox Christians hold, for example, that, after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into Heaven, and they hold this belief on the basis of supporting evidence – namely, the account of this event found in Scripture. But, of course, what I mean by my assumption is only that *our most foundational* religious beliefs involve faith-ventures: clearly, once one accepts as foundational (for example) that God exists and is revealed in Jesus Christ as related in the canonical Scriptures, one then does accept certain religious beliefs – such as belief in the Ascension – on the basis of evidence. But one's practical commitment to the truth of Christian beliefs is still ultimately subject to a faith-venture, since its being supported by evidence of this kind – according to a Christian *evidential practice* which incorporates various norms including hermeneutical principles applicable to Holy Scripture – is itself within the scope of what may aptly be called Christian *framing principles*, and the truth of these can be committed to only by a faith-venture beyond the support of one's evidence. Or so the Faith-venture assumption maintains.

Philosophers who think that our total available public evidence makes it (much) more probable than not that the God of theism does *not* exist will, of course, maintain that practical commitment to the truth of any religious belief that presupposes God's existence involves a venture *against* the evidence. And, if it is wrong for people to commit themselves to foundational religious truths *against* the recognised force of the evidence, then those philosophers will be able to conclude that such faith-ventures are illegitimate. I endorse that normative claim. The assumption that theistic religious commitment involves taking certain foundational propositions to be true under conditions of evidential ambiguity is an assumption about *legitimate* religious commitment. I concede that if a rational assessment of the total available evidence counts against the truth of a given foundational religious claim, then practical commitment to its truth is *not* legitimate – though it may certainly still be possible. Legitimate faith-ventures require evidential ambiguity, and, of course, there is no evidential ambiguity when the evidence decides against the truth of a claim.

So, on my Faith-venture assumption, if there is to be any legitimate theistic religious commitment, arguments that claim to disambiguate in favour of atheism must all be flawed. And, of course, it is controversial whether that is the case. Furthermore, my assumption also requires that all arguments that claim to disambiguate *in favour of theism* must be flawed as well. For, if any such arguments succeed, the evidence will tell in favour of theistic religious commitment and no venture beyond the evidence will be required.

Now, I have no intention of trying to argue that the Faith-venture assumption is correct. But I do maintain that it is plausible enough for its implications to deserve serious consideration. The view that theism is evidentially ambiguous – and that, therefore, those who commit themselves to its truth venture beyond the evidence – does seems initially plausible in the light of religious diversity, and, also, as a response to the long history of unresolved debate between theists and atheists, given that thinkers of equal intelligence and integrity are manifestly to be found on each side. It is a view that may be bolstered by case studies of the arguments both of natural theology and of natural atheology that show them to be circular – deeply so, perhaps, but circular none the less. Arguably, such arguments

succeed only under hidden assumptions that assume the truth of their conclusions. (For example, arguably the 'necessity' version of the cosmological argument assumes that there must be an explanation for the fact that something exists rather than nothing – and that assumption may be compelling only for someone who is already thinking within an implicitly theistic perspective. For another example – on the side of natural atheology – the argument from evil arguably rests on the 'noseeum' assumption that our inability to discern a reason God could properly have for letting fawns die lingering deaths when caught in forest fires entails that there is no such reason.[1]) An additional, potentially powerful, way of supporting the claim that theism is evidentially ambiguous would be to show that such ambiguity is more than historical and contingent (as one might still suppose it to be if offered just as an explanation for the unresolved debate between theism and atheism). The ambiguity would turn out to be necessary if foundational theistic beliefs constituted *highest-order framing principles* in terms of which all else is to be interpreted. There would then *necessarily* be no wider framework within which any question of external evidence for or against a foundational belief such as belief that God exists could be assessed.

There is a currently influential position in the epistemology of religious belief that would concede that theism is evidentially ambiguous *at the level of arguments* for and against the claim that God exists, yet strenuously deny that legitimate theistic commitment involves a leap of faith beyond one's evidence. This is, of course, the position of Reformed epistemology, which holds that foundational theistic beliefs can be properly basic. That God exists can be supported by one's total available evidence just because it is evident *in itself*, without needing to have its truth inferred from other justifiably held beliefs which provide the evidence for it. This is not to say that God's existence is *generally* self-evident, but just that, *for believers*, it may be evident basically, non-inferentially. And the standard comparison is with basic perceptual beliefs, where it seems entirely sensible to accept that we find their truth to be evident non-inferentially, provided certain potentially overriding conditions are excluded.[2] A person for whom God's existence is basically evident, it may seem, can hardly be committing herself beyond her evidence if she takes it to be true that God does indeed exist.

I concur with those philosophers who have argued that Reformed epistemology is, in fact, a fideist position – even though its chief defenders stoutly reject this description.[3] Or, at least, I believe that Reformed epistemology is a fideist position in the sense in which the Faith-venture assumption I have been explicating is a fideist one. The view that legitimate religious commitment involves cognitive venture beyond (though not against) one's total available evidence does, I think, deserve to be classed as a fideist position – though it is a modest or moderate fideism, certainly, by comparison with views that build into the idea of fideism the acceptance of commitment wholly independent of (and therefore potentially counter to) rational assessment of one's evidence in accordance with the norms of a public evidential practice. Yet the view that reason needs to make room for faith, and that authentic theistic commitment must require a risk that would be eliminated if the truth of theism had

[1] The reference is to a much-discussed example due to Rowe (1979). The term 'noseeum' is due to Wykstra (1996).

[2] Perhaps what is basically evident is not so much God's existence as such, but other claims that presuppose God's existence, such as God's comforting me, God's speaking to me, etc. I will here ignore this qualification, however. The most fully worked out defence of Reformed epistemology is to be found in Plantinga (2000).

[3] See, for example, C. Stephen Evans, who argues that fideism is implied by the commitment of Reformed epistemology to externalism. See Evans (1998), pp. 45–47. For Plantinga's rejection of the charge that his Reformed epistemology is fideist, see Plantinga (2000), p. 263.

adequate rational evidential support, could, it seems, be adequately accommodated by a modest, *supra-evidential*, kind of fideism and need not require accepting fideism of an irrationalist, *counter-evidential*, variety.

Reformed epistemology is fideist, I think, because it has to recognise that the status of foundational theistic beliefs as basically evident can apply only within the perspective of the believer. People generally do not find theistic beliefs basically evident (indeed, for that matter a large number of committed theists do not find any of their religious beliefs basically evident either). There is thus a real question for reflective believers who do find their belief that God exists to be basically evident *whether it is properly so*. (For, notoriously, someone *could* find basically evident his belief that the Great Pumpkin returns to the pumpkin patch each Hallowe'en.[4]) Alvin Plantinga's famous appeal to externalist epistemology (in his theory of 'warrant') yields at best the conditional claim that, *if Christian theism is correct,* then basic belief in God is highly likely to have warrant, that is, to be properly basic belief. But this does not suffice to satisfy the reflective believer that what he finds basically evident is *in fact* properly, warrantedly, so – not without epistemic circularity, anyway. And the upshot seems inescapable: given that Reformed epistemology admits the *inferential* evidential ambiguity of theism, Christian believers *do* commit themselves beyond their evidence. For, even those believers for whom God's existence *is* basically evident go beyond their evidence in taking it to be *properly, warrantedly, so*.[5]

Notice that I have here appealed to the situation of the *reflective* believer. Clearly enough, believers who find God's existence basically evident need not even be conscious of, let alone concerned about, any venture beyond their evidence – any more than anyone outside of the Philosophy classroom is concerned about venturing beyond their evidence in taking their perceptual experience to be of an independently existing external world. In Philosophy of Religion, however, we have to consider *reflective* believers who do become concerned about the issue of the *justifiability* of their beliefs. But what precisely is that issue of 'justifiability'? This is a vitally important meta-question – and Plantinga, again famously, has argued at length for his answer which is that the only issue worth debating is the question whether theistic beliefs have warrant, where warrant is his name for a kind of epistemic worth that a belief may have in virtue of being caused in the right sort of way.[6] I will not here discuss Plantinga's answer: I wish only to state what seems to me a more immediately appealing answer to the meta-question. And that is this. Religious beliefs count as such only because practical commitment to their truth makes a significant difference to how one acts and lives one's life.[7] Practical commitment to the truth of religious beliefs is thus a *moral* issue. What reflective believers are concerned about is whether they are *morally* justified in taking their religious beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning. And this, of course, is something over which believers do have direct control: they do not have any (direct) control over whether they *hold* certain religious propositions

[4]This example is discussed in Plantinga (1981, 1983). More serious examples do come to mind, of course: the basic beliefs of a suicide bomber, perhaps, or of nationalists convinced they are specially favoured by God.

[5]For a fuller presentation of this line of argument see Bishop and Aijaz (2004).

[6]For the definition of Plantinga's notion of warrant, see Plantinga (2000), p. 156. For useful discussion, see Kvanvig (1996).

[7]I thus accept the straightforward implication that any belief that God exists that does *not* make such a practical difference is not a religious belief, but rather some purely theoretical or 'thin' metaphysical belief. Compare Paul Helm's distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' beliefs (Helm 2000, pp. 103–110).

to be true – but they do directly control whether they *take* those propositions to be true in practical reasoning when they come to act.

So my modest fideist assumption is that practical commitment to theistic religious beliefs involves venturing beyond what is supported by the total available public evidence, and can yet be morally justifiable. And, as I say, I am not claiming to be able to show that this assumption is actually true: only that it is sufficiently plausible for its implications to be worth exploring. This modest fideism thus opposes the kind of moral evidentialism that maintains that one may commit oneself practically to the truth of a religious proposition only to the extent justified by one's total available evidence. Not that there is any dispute about the general importance of weighing one's evidence when one comes to act on a belief: all the modest fideist maintains is that *under certain conditions* it may be morally permissible to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition beyond the recognised rational support of one's evidence, and that this can apply, in particular, to the foundational framing principles involved in the cognitive content of religion. There is thus a need for an account of the conditions under which faith-ventures are morally justifiable. How are we to distinguish, in other words, between good and bad 'leaps of faith'? How do we avoid conjugating the following irregular verb: *I* am a knight of faith, *you* are an ideologue, *they* are fanatics?

I have recently attempted to articulate and defend a modest fideist position that builds on William James's 'justification of faith' in his famous 1896 lecture 'The Will to Believe.'[8] I thoroughly agree with James that faith-ventures can be justifiable only under quite severe constraints: there is no basis for the common objection that James is simply giving *carte blanche* to wishful thinking. The first constraint is that faith-ventures may be made only when it matters for how one acts and leads one's life whether one does or does not commit oneself to the truth of the religious (or relevantly similar) proposition at issue. The second constraint I have in effect already canvassed: faith-ventures may not be made *against* the rational weight of one's evidence as established under the applicable public evidential practice. There is to be no 'believing six impossible things before breakfast', or any other time for that matter.[9] Furthermore, the question of the truth of the proposition concerned must be *essentially and persistently* evidentially undecidable: it cannot be the case that there could be future evidence that might decide the matter. These constraints are essentially Jamesian (on a certain interpretation of his views, anyway). But there are further constraints, I think, about which James is not explicit.

Under Nazism, some people were motivated to believe the truth of the Nazi religion – for so, I believe, it may be regarded.[10] Yet, arguably, the existence of 'the Nazi gods' was indeed essentially and persistently evidentially undecidable. Furthermore, it was of vital importance for many of those people whether they did or did not commit themselves to the truth of Nazi religion: trying to maintain a neutral position of suspended judgment was *in*

[8] See Bishop (2002, 2007). James's famous lecture is to be found in James (1956), pp. 1–31.

[9] The question why people make religious faith-ventures can, of course, be treated as an empirical scientific question, and there has recently been considerable interest in evolutionary psychological explanations of religious belief. See, for example, Boyer (2001) and Dennett (2006). Wolpert's (2007) recent book on this subject uses in its title the White Queen's remark to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*: "Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." But the implicature – that religious beliefs are (always, or even typically) held counter-rationally – is evidently contestable. On the question whether our current understanding of the natural, evolutionary, causes of religious belief has implications for the normative issue of whether one ought to commit oneself to religious beliefs of any kind, see Bishop (2007), 204–205.

[10] See Burleigh (2000).

practice effectively equivalent to rejecting Nazi religion as false. Now, on the Jamesian constraints stated so far, a faith-venture in favour of the existence of the Nazi gods would seem morally permissible. But that surely cannot be right.

So further constraints on faith-ventures are needed – and those constraints are *moral* constraints. Where epistemic, evidence-based, assessment of faith-commitments gives out, moral assessment takes over. And that moral assessment recognises moral constraints of two kinds. First, there are constraints on *the kind of motivation* we have for making a faith-venture. Since, necessarily, we are not motivated to take our faith-propositions to be true by our assessment of our evidence, we must have some other kind of *non-evidential* (or, in James's terminology, *passional*) motivation. And the possible types of motivation here are morally evaluable. Many people may have been motivated to take Nazi religion to be true by a desire to conform, or by fear of not doing so. Understandable though such a motivation may be, it is not a motivation of a morally admirable type: and, on those grounds, one may reject as morally impermissible faith-ventures that are so motivated. On the other hand, some may have been motivated by the sincere conviction that a world in which the divine perfects humanity through the coming to power of a racially pure master race was indeed the best kind of world. And there seems nothing morally wrong with that *general type* of non-evidential motivation for belief – there is nothing wrong as such, that is, with a motivation for belief that evaluates what is believed as realising a high ideal. So, to exclude the faith-ventures of Nazis of this ilk, it will be necessary to reject as impermissible ventures whose *content* is morally objectionable. To commit oneself justifiably beyond one's evidence to a religious (or similar) view of the world, that view of the world must conform to correct morality. That view of the world must be a view of a morally good world, judged by the correct moral standards. So, since any morally acceptable passional motivation for sincerely held Nazi religion is directed at a morally flawed object, the Nazi faith-venture is accordingly ruled out here also.

Reflective believers who wish to satisfy themselves, so far as they can, that their religious commitments are indeed morally permissible must thus satisfy themselves of the moral probity both of their non-evidential motivation for, and the content of, their commitment. So they will need to appeal to their own theory of what correct moral values are. That theory might, of course, be wrong. Our sincere Nazi may agree that faith-ventures must meet these moral constraints, and go on to judge that his faith-venture does indeed meet them – because he judges the framing principles of Nazi religion to conform to what he takes correct morality to be. *We* will say, of course – and rightly – that his account of correct moral values is distorted and wrong. But the fact remains that any judgment of the moral permissibility of a faith-venture will rest on in principle fallible moral judgments.[11] Faith-ventures should therefore not be made in a close-minded or dogmatic spirit – though it does not follow, I believe, that they can therefore be only half-hearted or tentative. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that it will be problematic if people's moral values remain wholly derivative upon their maintaining a specific kind of faith-venture – for then any potential for them to make an independent moral critique of that faith-venture will be excluded. Morally acceptable religious faith-venturing requires, I believe, an appropriate tension between one's evolving faith-commitments and one's evolving moral commitments, with neither becoming purely subordinate to the other. What I mean by this claim may, I hope, become clearer as I come to the point of this paper – which I am just about to do.

[11] Indeed, it is worth remarking that judgments as to the applicability of the previously mentioned, non-moral, constraints on permissible faith-ventures will *also* be fallible.

What I want to do is to add to the exploration and assessment of potentially religiously viable alternatives to orthodox classical theism a perspective that emerges from the modest, extended Jamesian, fideism I have been outlining. If we do accept that theistic commitment requires a venture under conditions of evidential ambiguity, and that it may yet be legitimate, what are the plausible constraints on commitments of this kind? I have sketched a Jamesian answer – and, again, I appeal only to its being plausible enough for its implications to be worth considering.[12] What I now want to observe is that once we have such a theory of the constraints on admissible faith-ventures, we have a set of criteria against which we may measure the moral adequacy of classical theistic faith-ventures and of faith-ventures in favour of any proposed alternative to classical theism.[13]

Applying Extended Jamesian Fideism to Classical Theistic Faith-ventures: A New Perspective on the Problem of Evil?

I shall now consider how classical theism may fare under extended Jamesian fideism. If the truth of classical theism is evidentially ambiguous (as this position assumes), then the existence of evil and suffering does not provide adequate evidence for the non-existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect God. Nevertheless, I believe that considerations about actual concrete instances of evil may still lead to the conclusion that a faith-venture in favour of classical theism is not permissible.

Suppose we focus on a concrete case of truly horrendous evil.[14] There might, for all we know, be a higher good that is both (a) logically unobtainable without the given evil (or, at least, without an equally bad or worse evil) and (b) of sufficient value as to outweigh the disvalue of the evil. The evidence that we have is consistent with the truth of this claim. We might, nevertheless, reasonably reject the view that the truth of such a claim would give God a morally sufficient reason for permitting the evil. *That will depend on what normative ethic we are assuming in relation to which God counts as morally perfect.*

If we are utilitarians, then the horrendous evil's being logically necessary for an overall outweighing higher good *will* provide a morally adequate reason for God to permit it. But perhaps we are not utilitarians: in which case, trading off evils for the sake of outweighing higher goods may count as inconsistent with God's moral perfection. Arguably, God may be morally perfect only if, furthermore, God is good to each of the creatures whose

[12] As Imran Aijaz has pointed out to me, the evidential ambiguity of theism may impose constraints on justifiable theistic commitment independently of those arising from the conditions imposed by an acceptable fideism. Aijaz cites, for example, the implication that acceptable expanded theistic beliefs can hardly include the claim that it is a matter of great importance to God that humans should have very specific beliefs (e.g. that Jesus died for their sins) [private communication]. I agree that this may well be the case: my present interest, however, is just in the constraints that arise from the need to justify a fideist position in order to defend faith-commitment under evidential ambiguity – and, in particular, from accepting that the right fideist position is the modest extended Jamesian variety I have been sketching.

[13] By 'classical theism' I here mean a theism that takes God to be the omnipotent, omnibenevolent, supernatural personal Creator *ex nihilo* of all else that exists.

[14] I do mean here to evoke Marilyn McCord Adams' notion according to which horrendous evils are "evils the participation in which ... constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole" (Adams 1999, p. 26). My present argument is not, however, committed to this definition, and would go through, I believe, with 'horrendous evil' understood less precisely.

suffering is necessary for achieving the outweighing higher good, treating them as ends in themselves, perhaps by compensating them abundantly *post-mortem* in ways which satisfy a requirement of at least virtual consent to their suffering.[15] *Pace* the Kantians, I do not think it possible to show that such a further requirement is *rationally* required and utilitarianism rationally excluded. I take the view, that is, that it is consistent with our total available evidence that the correct normative ethic from which to assess God's perfection is indeed utilitarianism, and the evidential argument from evil thus fails since, for all we know, there is a higher good which both outweighs and renders logically necessary the worst historical evils. Nevertheless, for those who reject a purely utilitarian view of divine moral perfection and whose values imply that a perfect God would need to do more than simply bring outweighing good out of horrendous creaturely suffering, a faith-venture in favour of classical theism will count as permissible only if an appropriate further condition (such as the one just canvassed) is held to be satisfied. For, from the perspective of those value commitments, a world in which the Creator did not ensure that He was good to creatures who suffered for the sake of a higher good would not be a morally adequate world – or, at least, certainly would not be a world whose Creator possessed moral perfection – even if the evil of the suffering was indeed, to use Marilyn McCord Adams' term, *balanced off* by the value of the higher good.

It is now possible to see, I think, that *there could be value-commitments which would exclude a faith-venture in favour of classical theism.* I am taking the – Humean – view that fundamental value-commitments are not rationally determined, and that there is room for people of equal rational integrity to differ in those commitments, at least to some extent. I thus accept that one may indeed be a utilitarian, and that, if one is, one may have good reason to regard as acceptable a faith-venture in favour of the existence of a morally perfect omnipotent Creator. I also accept that those whose values require of a morally perfect Creator that he do more than merely outweigh the horrendous suffering of His creatures may still have good reason to regard as acceptable a faith-venture in favour of classical theism. For, they may think (for example) that 'the more' that is required to defeat the evil of horrendous suffering is the provision of adequate compensation (in the form, for instance, of an incommensurably good eternal relationship with the divine), and they may believe that this is indeed provided.[16]

It may be possible, however, that one might reasonably have values according to which certain horrendous sufferings are *simply uncompensatable*, so that nothing God might do could ensure that He is overall good to the creatures who participate in them. Anyone with *those* values will *not* be able to regard as legitimate a faith-venture in favour of the existence of a morally perfect omnipotent Creator, given that there also exist horrendous sufferings that count as uncompensatable and which are thus such that no conceivable higher good could serve as a justification for permitting them.[17]

The idea that some finite creaturely sufferings are uncompensatable might be thought, however, to exhibit a failure of imagination, given that God has infinite resources for

[15] For a defence of the importance of the notion of virtual consent in theodicy see Forrest (1996), pp. 226–230.

[16] Adams (2006) endorses a view of this general kind. Here she elaborates her view that a God who loves individual created persons will not merely *balance off* but *defeat* horrendous evils, and proposes a detailed three-stage account of how such defeat is possible. Adams' distinction between 'balancing off' and 'defeating' evil has significantly informed my present argument.

[17] This is the view Dostoyevsky (1958) puts into the mouth of his character Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 286–288.

compensation. Yet there may nevertheless still be *something* morally problematic about the kind of world that the classical theist envisages – a world, that is, in which an omnipotent and omniscient Creator is ultimately responsible for horrendous evils which (in ways inscrutable to us) are somehow logically necessary for the achievement of a supreme good that includes providing effective compensation to those creatures who participate in the evils. Causing, or not preventing, evil that good may come is always a morally delicate business – and there is a case for concluding that the scale on which an omnipotent creator and sustainer *ex nihilo* of the entire universe would have to be engaged in such delicate business is not consistent with such a creator's being morally perfect.

In human terms, causing others harm in order to do them an otherwise impossible good is always to put oneself (at least temporarily) into a manipulative relationship with those others. Of course, it is sometimes justifiable to behave like this – for example, when parents can obtain a vital good for their children only by causing them suffering. The highest form of loving interpersonal relationship, however, is not consistent with an overall situation in which one party to the relationship is constantly manipulating the other party – even with the best of intentions – for that other party's good. Human parents, of course, may manipulate their children in this way (when the occasion demands it) and still have the best kind of loving relationship with their children: but that depends crucially on the opportunity for genuinely mutual relationship between parent and child as their lives continue. When it comes to the Divine Parent, however, the same kind of opportunity does not seem generally available – not *within* human history, anyway, where participants in horrendous evils typically have no inkling of how their participation may be logically related to defeating higher-goods. *Post-mortem*, we may be assured, the compensation will come, and *then* we will be able to do the same kind of 'growing up' into mutual relationship with our Divine Parent that children do with their human parents when they later come to understand how well they were in fact being treated when earlier caused to suffer for the sake of an otherwise unobtainable good.

The world as the classical theist envisages it, then, is arguably a world where God-to-creature personal relationships remain manipulative throughout the historical order.[18] The classical theist's world might accordingly be judged to be morally flawed because it devalues historical human existence in favour of a putative life to come.[19] And then, for those committed to rejecting such devaluation, a classical theistic faith-venture will be excluded by the moral constraints of extended Jamesian fideism.

Certain apparently sensible value-commitments may also exclude venture in favour of classical theism in the following way. According to classical theism, God's act of creation is freely chosen. And God has the freedom to choose, not just what kind of world to create, but whether to create at all. If we accept the basic premise of theodicy that the supreme good logically requires horrendous evils of the kind we find in the actual world (if not just those evils, then different ones of equal seriousness), then God had a choice between

[18]Furthermore, it might also be argued that it is a world where historical creature-to-creature personal relationships must also fall short of the highest ideal of mutual loving personal relationship because those relationships cannot but be contrived by supernatural omnipotence. That conclusion will be resisted by appeal to the libertarian free will of created persons – but it may threaten if scepticism about the possibility of created libertarian free will turns out to be justified. For further discussion, see Bishop (1993).

[19]Though this general line of criticism is reminiscent of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, the postponement of 'real life' until the hereafter might also be rejected by Christians who maintain that fully mature relationship with God is possible for the redeemed *within* the historical order. (Is Christ's assurance that we are to be his friends and no longer servants – John 15:14–15 – a promise realisable in historical existence, or only in a future *post-mortem* state?)

creating a world where the supreme good would be realised along with unavoidable horrendous evils and leaving well alone – avoiding ultimate responsibility for evil at the cost of abandoning the chance of realising the supreme good. Now, I suggest that it is genuinely morally moot which choice accords with moral perfection. On the one hand, there is a strong intuition that holding back from enabling the supreme good to become actual would be sheer cosmic wimpishness. But when one considers in full detail what God as creator apparently has to do in order to achieve the supreme good – in every episode of torture and abuse, sustaining not only the torturer's capacities to inflict suffering but the victim's capacity to endure it – and when one reckons the scale on which God has actively to sustain dreadful suffering, there seems an equally strong intuition that this is just not something which a perfectly virtuous moral agent could bring himself to do, even though the supreme good be at stake. Indeed, it somehow makes it even more sickening to reckon that all the while God sustains terrible suffering within history he does so recognising that ultimately he will make everything come right as all the participants in horrendous suffering are reconciled in eternal relationship with him. Not that there is any reason to doubt that, overall, it is better for the supreme good to be realised at the cost of horrendous evils than for there to be no created order at all (indeed, to reject that evaluation would be to misunderstand what 'the supreme good' means). But the correctness of that evaluation from a detached perspective does not entail that God would be morally justified in doing all that needs to be done if the supreme good is achievable only through multiple horrors. Indeed, arguably there is a case for denying that God would be justified *as a participant* in carrying out what undeniably counts *from the perspective of the detached observer* as the best plan.

Doubts such as these about whether an omnipotent creator and sustainer of a Universe like ours could be morally perfect will thus block the acceptability of a faith-venture in favour of classical theism *for those who endorse the value stances which sustain these doubts*. This is not say, of course, that no one could ever reasonably regard themselves as morally justified in venturing to take the world to be a classical theist one – as we have seen, certain utilitarian theists may well so regard themselves. Nor is it to maintain that our total available evidence does after all favour God's non-existence. One may retain the view that the truth of classical theism is evidentially ambiguous while nevertheless regarding faith-venture in its favour as *ethically* excluded, *relative to* a certain set of value-commitments. No disproof of God's existence results, however, since no proof is available that rationally requires the relevant value-commitments.[20]

How this Fideist Critique of Classical Theism may Point the Way to a Revisionary Theism

What of alternative understandings of the God of theism? Might those whose value-commitments preclude their continuing faith in the God of classical theism nevertheless properly regard as acceptable faith-ventures in God alternatively understood?

Perhaps they might. The sorts of ethical concerns raised about a classical theistic world may point the way, I believe, to alternative understandings of the divine that are at least worth considering as potentially adequate to theistic religious tradition.

[20]My account is here equivalent to the view that it is the *logical* version of the Argument from Evil that succeeds (contrary to the currently widespread view that only 'evidential' versions of the Argument could possibly hope to succeed) – but then *only relatively to* prior specific value commitments which are not themselves rationally required.

When we reflect on what seems morally problematic about classical theism, I think we find a basic assumption coming under severe pressure – namely, that God is *both* the supreme individual personal agent on whose creative activity all else depends *and also* the One who actively brings good from evil, redeems, restores, forgives, reconciles. If retaining this assumption yields a worldview of questionable ethical status (even if it can be sustained as one viable total interpretation of all our generally accepted evidence), then progress may perhaps be made by revising it. The question will then be, of course, whether any such revisions can yield a concept of the divine that may be defended as religiously adequate to some living theistic tradition or traditions, even if it transgresses what has come to be accepted as orthodoxy within that tradition or traditions. In the remainder of this paper, I will do no more than sketch one line of thought about how this problematic assumption of classical theism might be revised. It is a line of thought driven by an interest in trying to take metaphysically seriously the New Testament claim that God is Love.[21]

In theistic religion, God is the sole object of worship: and that mightily constrains what can count as a viable concept of God.[22] Anselm's formula articulates this constraint: God is that than which a greater cannot be conceived, where the kind of greatness at issue is greatness *qua* being. Recent philosophical discussions of classical theism typically take this greatness to be the greatness of a supreme individual person.[23] But this assumption is contestable. Greatness *qua* being is not *merely* an ontological notion – *it is also ethical*. And we do seem able to think of something *ethically* greater *qua* being than a morally perfect individual, namely a society of individuals in morally perfect mutual relationship – that is, in perfectly loving relationship with one another. No individual personal agent, however powerful and good, could be that than which a greater cannot be conceived: a supremely good society or community of personal agents is arguably more fitted to that status.[24]

So far as Christianity is concerned, such a shift from God as supreme individual agent to God as supreme community is congenial: on one possible interpretation of the social doctrine of the Trinity one may say that what is truly divine is the dynamic relationship amongst the Persons, for which the individuality of each Person is equally required, so that each Person is God only in the – strictly, derivative – sense that He equally participates in the Godhead. But why stop with a Trinity of persons? Surely a vast plurality of interrelated persons will be greater *qua* being than a mere threesome? To have a perfectly loving society one needs only as many individual persons as that requires: and there is a Trinitarian argument for the conclusion that, while two is not enough, three is quite sufficient. For, perfect love amongst three persons requires that each pairing makes room for the third, thus

[21] I John 4:16.

[22] This is, of course, a constraint independent of those imposed by extended Jamesian fideism.

[23] For example, Richard Swinburne defines God as "[a] *person* without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is prefectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the Universe" (Swinburne (1977), p. 1, my emphasis). And Alvin Plantinga introduces his account of the theistic component of Christian belief thus: "Classical Christian belief includes, in the first place, the belief that there is *such a person as* God" (Plantinga (2000), p. vii, my emphasis).

[24] A community of personal agents a greater than which cannot be conceived is not, of course, equivalent to a community of individual personal agents each unsurpassingly great. For, very plausibly, there cannot be more than one individual personal agent such that none greater than it can be conceived – see, for example, H. P. Owen's discussion of Aquinas's argument for the oneness of God (Owen 1971, pp. 5–8). Rather, the idea is that what can count as unsurpassingly great *qua* being *isn't any kind of individual at all*, but some kind of society of individuals instead.

transcending the simple mutuality of regard and concern that would be all that was possible with just two persons. Perfectly loving relationship (on this view) can exist amongst three persons, when they relate to one another in the *perichoretic* dynamic – literally, where each 'goes round making place for the other.'[25] Of course, there will in one obvious sense be 'more' of the good of loving relationship the more persons there are who participate in such relationship. It does seem intelligible, however, to hold that a larger community characterised by loving perichoresis is not greater *qua* being than the Trinity itself. (Greatness *qua* being is not increased by *mere* addition.) Arguably, once perfect love exists in such a Trinity, there is nothing conceivably greater than it, however indefinitely further it may be extended. Nevertheless, it clearly is a good – a great good, indeed, the supreme good – that it should be extended, and there is, therefore, a supremely good reason for a Trinity of Love to engage in creation even though it is itself already that than which a greater cannot be conceived.[26]

Does this Trinitarian understanding of God's being as that of the most economical perfectly loving society of persons provide a viable alternative to thinking of God as a supremely perfect individual person? Even if the doctrine of the Trinity ought arguably to provide a corrective, many Christians do continue to think of God's perfect being as the being of a perfect individual person. In particular, when God is thought of as creating and sustaining the world, as issuing commands, and generally as exercising personal agency, there is a tendency effectively to collapse the Trinity into God the Father, even if this is officially heterodox. I think the explanation for this is straightforward. Divine being, if it is to be that than which a greater cannot be thought, does indeed have to be being whose moral excellence could not conceivably be exceeded. But that is not enough: recognising the ethical dimension of greatness *qua* being should not result in neglecting the ontological. Supremely great being has to be supremely *non-dependent* being, and it has to be supremely *active* being. And the natural way to accommodate this is to think in terms of a supremely great personal substance – an agent, not himself dependent on anything else for his exercise of agency, and upon whose agency all else depends: in other words, the omnipotent, omniscient, creator and sustainer *ex nihilo* of all else that exists.

So we seem to face a dilemma. The ethical dimension of greatness of being points to divine being as essentially relational; the ontological dimension, however, seems to require a supremely powerful, free and active individual personal agent. This dilemma may perhaps be resolved, however, if we take seriously the idea that the supremely powerful activity of the Divine is the activity, not of any individual agent, however great, but the activity of perfect community, of perfect relationality – the activity, that is, of Love itself, where 'Love' with a capital 'L' signifies not an abstract universal, but the concrete reality of divine existence as perfectly loving interpersonal relationship.

Many philosophers will no doubt maintain that any talk of *a relationship's* being active must reduce to, or be elliptical for, talk about the activity of the related persons. But what I am suggesting is needed here goes against that reductionist thought. What is needed is the

[25] This description of perichoresis rests on the most fundamental meaning of the root verb $\chi\omega\rho\varepsilon\omega$ ('to make room for another'): my attention was drawn to it (*via* Robin Angus) by Professor John Richardson (St Columba's-by-the-Castle Episcopal church, Edinburgh).

[26] For a succinct account of recent theological advocacy of the social doctrine of the Trinity, and the use of the notion of perichoresis to characterise the divine nature, see Kilby (2000). Kilby herself questions whether the historical point of the doctrine of the Trinity is to give insight into the nature of God. Even if her doubts are well founded, the doctrine of the Trinity might yet provide useful resources for the revisionary Christian theist who has come to reject the classical theist understanding of God.

notion that there can be activity that is *irreducibly* the activity of a community of interrelated persons. While it is clear that human corporations and groups may perform actions, it is not clear whether the ontology of such group action involves commitment to anything more than individual agents acting as (properly constituted) representatives of the corporation or group. It is also unclear whether human groups can act as groups other than in virtue of legal or other customary conventions under which group agency is constructed. So it is quite a conceptual stretch to suggest that personal relationships might themselves have active powers that transcend the agency of the persons so related (as if, for example, a child might be acted upon by *the relationship* between her parents, without that action belonging to either parent, or even to both parents jointly). Yet this stretched notion seems what we need if we are to retain the – ethically desirable – notion that Divine Being is the being of persons-in-relationship while accommodating the ontological requirements of supreme greatness *qua* being. That it makes possible this welcome accommodation may then tell in favour of insisting that the idea of the irreducible agency of a relationship is an intelligible one, even if its only application is in this particular theological context.

The alternative to classical theism I am canvassing, then, takes literally the New Testament claim that God is Love and identifies Divine Being with the concrete relationality of the divine persons (in accordance with one possible interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity). To the allegation that this model of God neglects the vital ontological dimension of supreme greatness *qua* being that God must possess to be worthy of worship, I have suggested in reply that the model may preserve God's supreme agency if it can be accepted that divine agency belongs irreducibly to the relationality which, on this view, constitutes the Divine Being.

That reply may seem inadequate, however. God's supreme greatness *qua* being surely requires that God should have totally uncreated being – being that is not in anyway dependent on the being of anything else, but is, rather, that upon which everything else ultimately depends. If, as my alternative model proposes, Divine Being is essentially relational – constituted by persons-in-relationship – then surely it follows that Divine Being (so conceived) is metaphysically dependent, since the being of any relation is dependent on the being of its relata? My alternative model may thus seem to fail to meet all that we require of that than which a greater cannot be conceived.

Perhaps there is no need, however, to accept in general the ontological priority of relata over the relation to which they belong? Some relations could be such that relata and relation are mutually dependent: neither the relation itself nor its relata could be what they were without the other. One might, perhaps, make a case for this as a view of human personal relationships – by contrast to the widespread tendency to treat individuals as ontologically prior to relationships amongst individuals. Arguably, becoming and being an individual person can be possible only within a network of interpersonal relationship. But, in any case, a proponent of the model of Divine Being as perfectly loving interpersonal relationship will of course have to insist that the divine persons are not ontologically prior to the relationship into which they enter: the relationality of the divine persons is as eternal as the persons themselves. On this view, then, the identification of divine being with perfectly loving relationship amongst the divine persons will not render divine being ontologically dependent on something prior, namely the being of each person taken individually.

There is, however, a further difficulty in defending this model of the divine as a genuine alternative with the potential to overcome ethical concerns about classical theism. The absolute ontological priority of the divine surely requires that God be creator and sustainer *ex nihilo* of all else that exists? Now, of course, this requirement can be accommodated on the model I have been developing by ascribing the role of creator to the agency of the

eternal Trinity *qua* community (rather than to God *qua* individual person). But then, even if classical theism has hereby been somewhat revised, it has not been revised enough to break free of the ethical problems canvassed earlier. There remain all those difficulties that flow from God's ultimately being responsible for the very horrendous evils from which ultimately he rescues his creatures, achieving an otherwise unachievable supreme good that transcends the historical order. Those who reject a classical theistic world because of these problems will also reject a world where the role of supernatural creator and sustainer is played by the Trinity *qua* community.

The only remedy, I believe, will be to make the bold move of detaching the Divine altogether from the role of creator and sustainer *ex nihilo*, at least as it is usually understood in terms of ultimate efficient causality. Such a move may seem to render any alternative model of God thereby produced clearly religiously inadequate to any theistic tradition. Surely it is essential to a religiously adequate God-concept that whatever fills it should provide the ultimate explanation for all that is, with God's being the ultimate source for all else that exists? Indeed, that does seem to be so. Nevertheless, it may be that notions of God as ultimate explanation and as ultimate source have enough flexibility to allow their retention in recognisable form even if the idea of an eternal and necessary First Cause is rejected.

To see how that may be so, let me re-introduce the alternative concept of God I have been sketching in positive terms as apt to fulfil a crucial function that belief in God plays within the conceptual economy of the religious theist – namely, to be the ground of our hope. It is in God that we base our hope that evil, suffering and brokenness can indeed be overcome – our hope that trying to live a morally good, loving, life is not merely a great ideal, but has real point, despite the limitations of our finiteness, our tendency to selfishness, our mortal vulnerability, and the awful cycles of violence, exploitation and abuse that seem inseparable from our communal, national and institutional lives – including our religious institutional lives. If we understand the Divine as concrete interpersonal being of the most conceivably excellent kind, and if we affirm of that concrete loving relationality that nothing conceivably exceeds it in its active power to bring good from evil – if we affirm all this as what we find revealed in the concrete experience of the theistic religious traditions, then we arguably do have a concept of God fit to serve as grounds for our hope. There may indeed be Good News here – provided, that the presence of the Divine Love active in human history can strike us as no mere wonderful fantasy but as a viable interpretation of concrete human experience in the midst of suffering and evil. There must then be an *incarnational* element in theistic religion in the sense that the activity of God has to be made concrete within human history – though whether this requires the God-Man (the one substance with two natures) of orthodox Christianity is, however, a decidedly moot point.[27]

For belief in God to ground our hope, then, divine activity in overcoming evil, suffering, death and hopelessness needs to be made concrete. This is not to require, of course, that it should be rationally certain, on the evidence, that God's love is active and ultimately victorious in the world: whether that is so seems clearly enough to be evidentially ambiguous. But it does require that there be historical events that can justifiably be

[27] Even if they are cautious about orthodox understandings of the divinity of Christ, theists in the Christian tradition will still need to give some content to the claim that the divine is incarnate. For example, they may affirm that in Jesus they have experienced the power of divine love working among us, that Love's means of confronting evil is revealed on the Cross, vindicated in the Resurrection, and then made into *our* means of dealing with suffering and evil through the outpouring of the Spirit. I do not assume, however, that Christianity has a monopoly on incarnational insights.

interpreted in this way, and that people should have the (non-evidential, passional) motivation to make a faith-venture in favour of such an interpretation. And that requirement gives theistic religion a vitally important further cognitive dimension beyond the articulation of ethical ideals.

Under classical theism, of course, the God who is active in human history overcoming evil with good is also the God who created human history (and the entire Universe) 'in the first place'. As already argued, from the perspective of certain value-commitments, anyway, this dual role is ethically uncomfortable. And it therefore seems worthwhile at least to try the experiment of making no attempt to attribute to God understood as Love active in the world any additional role as creator and sustainer *ex nihilo*. Contemporary 'Big Bang' cosmology finds no *scientific* need for any notion of an overall ultimate efficient cause of the Universe. Maybe a viable alternative theism can follow suit by allowing that there is no *metaphysical* need for such a cause either? Maybe philosophical theism can break with the long-established ontology of necessary being by accepting that the contingency of the Universe is a *radical* contingency that does not stand in need of any necessary ground? Indeed, perhaps such a break would enhance the spirituality of wonder at a universe that did not have to exist but gloriously does?[28]

On the alternative theism I have been sketching, the Universe is such that Divine Love comes to exist within it. So, in marvelling at the Universe, we are marvelling not simply at material existence, but at that which – looked at from the perspective of efficient causality anyway – gives birth to the Divine. As already noted, this may seem to violate the required ontological supremacy of the divine. But such a violation follows only on the assumption that *it is the order of efficient causality that determines the order of ontological supremacy.* And that assumption seems contestable. From the perspective of final causality, God is the *telos* of the Universe. And the only *ultimate* explanation we can give for the existence of the Universe will be a teleological one: the Universe exists so that the supreme good (which is the existence of dynamic interpersonal love) should come to exist and ultimately be victorious. There may be a temptation here to take the path of John Leslie's extreme axiarchism, by arguing that it is the Good which *brings itself* into existence.[29] I prefer, rather, to try to unite the ontological and ethical aspects of greatness *qua* being by emphasising that, even if the existence of the divine is ultimately contingent, it is not contingent *upon* some other necessary being, and retains ontological supremacy by being the realisation of the supreme good *for the sake of which* all that has come to exist has come to exist.

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[28] Compare Wittgenstein's (1963) remark that 'it is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.' *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.44.

[29] Leslie (1989). It is not clear to me how understanding the Universe as the active self-realisation of the Good can avoid a problem of evil similar to that which faces classical theism.

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