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Gabe E. Kaminsky

God and Morality *Are* Compatible: An Argument for The Worshipper

In *God and Morality Are Incompatible*, James Rachels argues that one cannot have an individual moral compass if they worship a God. He detests that worship goes contrary to independent choice and makes the worshipper susceptible to lose his or her ability to decide what is moral. Rachels' three primary points about worshipping are that it dictates an individual's worldview, it breeds obedience to a stringent set of aphorisms, and it makes the individual assume inferiority, (as well as accept a given fate). He claims, "the believer's recognition of these 'facts' will influence his self-image and his way of thinking about the world and his place in it" (368). A big part of his argument rests on his perceived notion that, after submission to a ubiquitous and omnipresent authority, the worshipper has to modify his or her moral code, which intrinsically makes the person lose their moral guidance (367). Rachels contends that "the believer consults the church authorities" and subsequently has an altered idea of truth—which is a truth that has a significant "influence [on] his self-image and his way of thinking about the world and his place in it" (368). He argues that acceptance of an inferior role, in association with a higher being, makes the worshipper believe that they are morally 'good', when in fact the act of worshipping goes contrary to an individual's' attempt to do good acts and just makes someone robotic and essentially "fealty to a king" (371). However, I would argue that worshipping a higher being not only provides a baseline for generally advantageous and beneficial morality, but can be the proper choice for someone whose moral adherence to society aligns with the prescribed values of the given higher beings'.

Rachels spends a lot of time attempting to plead the worshipper's ignorance, in what he views as putting aside his or her morality in exchange for a larger groups'. But this argument is

flawed. To claim that followers of a given religion cannot think individually is inaccurate: can't a worshipper prescribe to a higher being that grants humans a loose morality? And similarly, can't the worshipper him or herself believe that the higher being of worship does not have an inflexible set of necessary moral adherence? While it is true that an individual has to semi or wholly modify their moral code after initial submission to God—the majority of religions provide an individual with a basis to be a favorable and moral person. Take the Ten Commandments, for instance; is it morally contrary for someone to honor their parents, to not murder people, to not commit adultery, or to not steal?¹ Surely Rachels does not intend to use this specific example or necessarily argue that *all* adherence to a religion is morally incorrect, however, the suggestion that a worshipper loses a moral compass is deflated when it is recognized that a worshipper's moral compass can *already* align with the values of a higher being. In this vein, someone may be perfectly content with revising their moral code, so as long as it makes them a better and more genuine person. Nevertheless, Rachels argues that there “is a conflict between the role of worshipper, which by its very nature commits one to total subservience to God, and the role of moral agent, which necessarily involves autonomous decision-making (373). Moreover, he fails to acknowledge the advantageous nature of being religious and the inherent good in belief in an afterlife, which propels an individual to carry themselves morally. If believing in an afterlife spurs someone to act congenial, or at a minimum propels them to be a law-abiding citizen, I see no legitimate loss in moral agency. What Rachels calls “total subservience to God” is a vague and frankly incomprehensible term. All people adhere to their notion of God in a different way. Those who adhere to God in a very literal sense, by following the given scripture verbatim, are fulfilling their individual right to free-will and not

¹ The Judeo-Christian Commandments paraphrased above are #5, #6, #7, and #8. The resource used for this example is provided in the Works Cited.

being forced into any moral conundrum. They are following a scripture that speaks to their humanness and sense of being.

Rachels asks, “What if God lets us go our own way, and issues no commands other than that we should live according to our own consciences?” (373). I ask him this; what would be the reason for people to act morally if they were bound by the inclination that there is no meaning? What would be the purpose of being selfless and not acting for personal gain? Surely, we would all like to deliberate that we are good people and that, regardless of religious affiliation, should have an obligation to be congenial. But without a shared understanding of what is *good* and what is *bad* behavior, the moral code of all societies will be dissipated and relative to the individual. Rachels may affirm that relativistic morality will fuel humanistic attempts to be good in relation to what is commonly shared, but I would argue that nihilism results in carelessness and wrongful acknowledgment that life has no purpose—which in effect makes people unethical and self-indulgent. Maybe Rachels does not specifically mention *nihilism*, however, his argumentation rests on ridicule for trust in God, and for an enduring belief in the idea that God’s judgment will always manipulate a person’s. He notes, “Therefore, we cannot trust our own judgment; we must trust God and do what he wills” (373). But can’t we trust God and also trust ourselves and the actions we endeavor to do, with the self-espoused knowledge that we are doing good? By trusting God, and by venturing to worship his commands, we are in effect believing in *more* than just a higher being, and likewise putting trust in a system of values and healthy morals, as perceived by the worshipper. God does not have to be strictly interpreted as this horribly overarching and manipulating figure that is pressing people to commit acts, as Rachels discerns.

The following point Rachels makes is that humans can never know our judgment is corrupt. He says, “we would have to know that (a) that some actions are morally required of us,

and (b) that our own judgment does not reveal that these actions are required (374). In regard to “a”, while humans may not be cognizant of what is “required” of us, we have a generally good idea; it is wrong to murder, wrong to kill, wrong to steal—and so on. Acknowledging that we may not wholly recognize what is required of us does nothing but suggest that acting in accordance with a given moral code is relative and cannot be proven right. But can we say that beheadings and murders by ISIS are morally relative? ² And if so, maybe this radical group recognizes that nothing is “required” of us, and therefore decides to act in accordance with their own perverse and criminal moral code. Secondly, individual judgment—to a worshipper—is the product of adherence to the religion’s moral code. If a worshipper believes that their actions are sound (assuming their actions are fueled by their religious adherence) personal judgment is preserved by worshipping, and therefore not separate from the determination and choice to live by certain measures. Rachels goes on to say: “God is merely tricking us: for he is giving us the illusion of self-governance while all the time he is manipulating our thoughts from without” (374). No religious scripture ever identifies a higher being as “tricking” its followers; Rachels may maintain this, yet I find there is no *illusion*—as he claims; the worshipper submits to the degree to which he or she feels necessary and is not necessarily granted the idea that God is manipulating our thoughts. In Christianity, believers think Satan is manipulating or rather *attempting* to manipulate them—not God. ³ Surely the author is referring to every religion, but this generalization fails to be rational and merely perpetuates that all higher beings, of all religions, are ominously working inside the worshipper’s mind (like some deceptive thing), when

² “ISIS” or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, had control over Raqqa, Syria for several years until the Second Battle of Raqqa of 2018, which resulted in a win for Syria and loss for ISIS. From 2014-2018, many murders and beheadings took place. Again, provided information to support this example is in the Works Cited.

³ Christianity is semi-rooted in the idea that Satan and his demons are working to manipulate worshippers. This is *not* the belief that God is manipulating thoughts, but rather potentially influencing them.

in fact every higher being varies in what they acknowledge as sound, and all worshippers do not believe in a God that necessarily involves himself so directly with his followers. Deism is a fine illustration of this: followers of Deism believe in a higher being, but do *not* believe that this higher being instructs its worshippers. They believe in the holiness of a God but reject that people are compelled by God's guidance.⁴ Therefore Rachels' point is misleading and contradictory for the reason that he previously claims that believing in a higher being forces the individual to lose their moral compass; Deists would say otherwise, as would any man-made and not widespread religion similar in this regard. I could technically create a religion tomorrow and state that the religion "believes in following our higher being to the degree to which we see fit."

The last point Rachels makes is that "the question of whether any being is *worthy* of worship is different from the question of whether we *should* worship him" (375). This is a notable point—but it also is hindered by the fact that humans have free-will. Because of our spread-out world, there are a variety of religions that have differing and distinct morals. Christianity varies from Hinduism, as Taoism varies from Judaism; Islam is distinct from Satanism and Scientology is different from Mormonism—you get the gist. At this point, it is fair to make the claim that *not* all religions are just in what they acknowledge as good or bad. The Church of Satan acknowledges the legitimacy of treating people cruelly and without mercy if they annoy you.⁵ Worshipping a being or religious group that advocates for violence is immoral, no doubt about it. But does Rachels discern that there is *any* moral objectivity, at least to the extent in acknowledging the perverse nature of religions that most sane people recognize as evil? To me, it is clear that the higher being of the Church of Satan is *not* worthy of worship and its

⁴ The religion Deism is used to explain why the Rachels argument on why the belief in a God does not mean that God is necessarily manipulating the believer's thoughts. Deists reject this idea.

⁵ The above example is the 4th commandment of the Church of Satan, founded by Anton LaVey.

believers should be criticized for such erroneous moral adherence. The two questions Rachels proposes as separate from one another merge into one when the faith is inherently wrong, or rather goes against the laws and customs we, as a generally civilized society, deem ethical.

There is merit to Rachels' argument, of course. The skepticism he displays is grounded in the unknowing—because we do not definitively and mathematically know *why* we are here and *what* our purpose is (but we all try to understand why and in varied ways). There is certainly a disparity between the standard worshipper and the atheist moral agent; the atheist moral agent is bound by a belief in nothing and is generally trusting of demonstrated evidence as support for existential questions. The worshipper, to some degree, submits to a higher being and believes that their faith is the correct one, so as to disapprove of any other religion which contradicts their own—even if some or nearly all moral standards in a differing religion's scriptures are synonymous. I would contend that everyone worships *something*. An atheist moral agent may claim to worship nothing and reject God, but if an Atheist does not worship a God, they are worshipping the cynical notion that God *does not* exist. They are worshipping their own ideology that God is a construct and essentially banking on this as the proper means of understanding our universe. You could say that an atheist moral agent believes in *nothing*, but they actually believe in a whole lot—just none of which happens to be concerned with a higher being. As to Rachels' central argument that religion is contradictory to morality, it can be acknowledged that religion is a baseline for a set of strict moral values and that these values—can in fact—propel an individual to be a worshipper out of fear of what happens to those who are damned (Hell, Jahannam, Naraka, etc.).⁶

⁶ Hell—Christianity. Jahannam—Islam. Naraka—Hinduism.

There is, however, a startling ambiguity to Rachels' piece. He may claim that worshipping dictates morality or that one's moral compass is tarnished by devotion to a higher being, but he does not offer any explanation as to why holding his view is remotely beneficial. I question the validity of his essay on many grounds—clearly—but almost chiefly because thinking so relativistic does nothing but promote lawlessness. There is nothing inherently *evil* about not worshipping a God, but there is something truly horrible in convincing people that, because they worship a God, they are not an individual with free-will and an ability to differentiate between things their religion as moral and what they individually do. There are Christians who support gay marriage, Muslims who take a day off fasting during Ramadan, and Jewish people who don't rest every Sabbath.⁷ Ultimately, every individual in every religion prescribes to their religions set of values to a completely varying degree, which makes Rachels' argument that the believer loses their morals baseless.

⁷ The **Christian** Bible regards Gay Marriage as a sin, The **Islam** Koran regards it a necessity to fast during Ramadan, and the **Judaic** Torah makes it clear that the Sabbath should be kept holy, which means rest. I did not cite the Judaism piece because I am Jewish and know this from significant experience in my religion. *Many religious folks do not follow these prescribed methods of worship but consider themselves still dedicated to God and their religion.

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