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The Tribute of Faith: Theistic Commitment as Moral Gesture

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Abstract: In this paper I explore and defend the idea that those who struggle intellectually in theistic religious practice can be given a good reason to persist in it by treating their continuing practice as a way of paying tribute to people and projects and personal relationships and indeed to the whole moral dimension of human life, expressing how important and profoundly significant these things are to them. This ‘tribute of faith’ is a gesture that one makes with one’s life – a *moral* gesture. The key thought is that the sayings and other doings of a religious life allow one to treat the world as one in which the things, such as projects and people, that are, for one, most deeply imbued with moral value will achieve fulfillment – a fulfillment that without the truth of religious claims they would often be denied.

I

It may seem odd, for readers who know something of my background, to find me speaking in a positive tone of voice about a connection between morality and theistic religion. After all, I don’t believe in God; I’m not a theist. Indeed, I’m known as an atheist. And I’ve even developed moral arguments against theistic belief – various versions of the problem of evil among them. In my most recent book I argue that moral evolution is enabling new and even more forceful arguments of this kind by motivating kinder, gentler conceptualizations of a personal divine.¹

Of course I'm a *philosophical* atheist – rather than a biological atheist or a journalistic atheist or a non-philosophical atheist of some other kind – and this fact permits both the inference that I therefore deny the existence of the personal God of traditional theism *and* the awareness that this is quite compatible with remaining open to other religious possibilities. Though I am, in the sense indicated, an atheist, I am not a metaphysical naturalist. (The running together of 'atheist' and 'metaphysical naturalist' is just one of the annoying features attaching to the unsubtle thinking about religion that is still so widespread.) Indeed, on the wider religious question of whether there is some transcendent religious reality, I am only an agnostic, a skeptic. Moreover, I have defended a brand of skeptical *religion* compatible with my philosophical atheism.

As it happens, the reasoning I want to develop here originates in this defence of skeptical religion, which appears in the third volume of my trilogy on the philosophy of religion, *The Will to Imagine*.² In that book a much briefer formulation of the idea functions as one among many ways of supporting skeptical religion. What I have thought about for the present paper is whether this sort of reasoning can be made to support *theistic* religious practice too, for those who belong to one or another theistic tradition and struggle with doubt about matters theistic but who are left rationally unconvinced by arguments for atheism, whether mine or others. My proposal is that it can.

Developing this proposal has been interesting for me. What's more, writing the paper was for me, an atheist, an exercise in intellectual empathy and humility. Or at least I tried to make it so. It entailed a shift from the more abstract approach I customarily utilize when evaluating religious attitudes, which involves an attempt to identify the *type* of response to religious propositions that reason justifies, to the approach more common in the philosophy of religion,

which involves defending as already justified or as justifiable under realizable circumstances certain *token* responses – usually token *beliefs*, the beliefs of the author or of others in some religious community or in the broader community of inquiry. Notice that the difference here allows me, quite compatibly, to hold that atheism is justified at the level of response type *and* to empathize with theists, making my case in the present context for a moral sort of justification, available in realizable circumstances and applicable to certain token theistic psychological or volitional states. But I should concede that my motives are not entirely or equally virtuous. For I hope convinced theists in the philosophy of religion may be moved to reciprocate by giving more serious attention to the topics in our field that do not bear *immediately* on the intellectual propriety of token theistic or Christian beliefs. Heaven knows there are plenty of them.

II

Let me briefly state my main idea. Those who struggle intellectually in theistic religious practice can be given a good reason to persist in it, and others a good reason to approve their doing so, by the fact – if it becomes a fact – that they treat their continuing practice as a way of *paying tribute* to people and projects and personal relationships and indeed to the whole moral dimension of human life, expressing how important and profoundly significant these things are to them. This ‘tribute of faith,’ as my title calls it, is a sort of gesture that one makes with one’s life, and it counts as a *moral* gesture for at least three overlapping reasons. First, because of its object: it is a response to things with morally positive properties. Second, on account of how it activates morally positive dispositions, such as appropriate respect, in the subject. And third, because this tribute should win a positive moral evaluation: it deserves our moral approbation and our respect

in its own right. Don't confuse my idea with the idea, common enough, that the importance of morality and the profound significance of our personal relationships require, to be *explained*, the intellectual invocation of a God or some other religious object. The positive connection between God and morality I have in mind may hold even if that other one does not, and I don't think that one does hold: as George Mavrodes once put it, reporting a common view among moral philosophers, "morality stands on its own two feet, whatever those feet may turn out to be."³ On the reasoning I shall defend, it is precisely because morality is so impressive on its own, without any help from God to make it so, that the tribute of faith is elicited.

Before filling out these ideas, let me be more precise about the token faith situations that I shall particularly be focusing on here. Though perhaps many different theists in many different situations could avail themselves of the justification I hope to expose, what I have had in mind, while writing this paper, is a fairly specific sort of situation involving theistic faith, the situation of those who for some time have been theistic believers – whether Jewish or Christian or Muslim or of some other kind won't matter for my purposes – but who now have fallen on hard times, intellectually and perhaps emotionally too, on account of powerful arguments supporting doubt about the theistic propositions they have believed.

There are several different ways in which the story could proceed from here for these individuals. Let's imagine one of them and call her Esther. Esther might of course come out of this 'trial of faith,' as she would then call it, once again serenely a believer (perhaps due to self-deception, perhaps not) and continue with her religious practice as before. This is certainly a possibility. At the other extreme, we might picture her losing her beliefs and altogether giving up religious practice. But in between these extremes are at least two further ways things could go, both consistent with continuing religious practice. In the first of these what we see is Esther just

hanging on to belief, finding that disposition greatly weakened and barely making it from one manifestation of belief to the next – much as a swimmer who is floundering will emerge gulping air only intermittently. Needless to say, although religious practice might here continue, it would be challenged in many ways. The second scenario has Esther letting go the involuntary experience of *being represented to* characteristic of belief and voluntarily *representing to herself* the content of religious propositions through the power of the imagination, developing this behaviour into a steadfast disposition which in all or most relevant ways functions as her believing disposition did before. This sort of activity I have elsewhere defended as allowing for a *non-doxastic* kind of faith – propositional religious faith without propositional religious belief⁴ – that can serve as the cognitive core of a religious practice. Not much will hang on whether you agree with me that each of these two is a genuine faith option; this is not a paper on the nature of faith, and if you would like to configure the options differently, feel free.

Now, the moral motivation I have in mind could find a home in any version of Esther's story falling between the extreme options mentioned before, and in any actual person's faith story, should it do the same, helping to keep their faith practice alive and also justifying it. To see this more clearly, let's examine a bit more closely the notion of a *gesture* and the related notion of a *tribute*.

III

Presumably the original notion of a gesture is that of a simple external physical movement by a person – for example, a movement of the hands – that expresses a feeling or thought or other inner mental state. But the word translated into English as 'gesture' has in our languages been

extended so as to apply also to more complex behavioral phenomena when mental states are betokened by them. It is a thoughtful and kind gesture if, when transporting to a restaurant someone who has difficulty walking, you drop them off in front before parking the car. It can be a gesture of respect to a teacher if I contribute a paper that makes use of his ideas to a festschrift on his work. Or it could be a gesture of loving gratitude to your spouse if, after many years traveling the world in pursuit of career-related ambitions, you stay at home for the rest of your life so that the two of you can spend more time together. Here we see that, where its size is determined by how much of your life belongs to its expression, a gesture might be small but also might be very large.

Gestures even of a more complex sort need not be *deliberately* produced. They can be inadvertent or produced unconsciously, and in more than one way. I may be unaware of the sort of gesture I am making even though I take myself to be gesturing, or I may not realize that I'm making a gesture at all. For an example of the first case, take my disappearance for three weeks, which I regard as a gesture of anger and you – my therapist – realize to be one of fear. And the second case is exemplified by the infuriated husband, thrown out by his wife, who returned home with heavy equipment and physically removed their swimming pool (a true story!). Even though he may not have had what it took to realize that this was a gesture expressing such things as a belief about ownership and a desire for control, that's what it was. As these examples also show, a gesture need not express *positively*-toned mental states. But gestures may also be intentional and in every way understood by the gesturer. Furthermore, they may express a positive rather than a negative attitude. And this brings us to the related notion of a tribute.

A tribute, in the relevant sense, is something that someone deliberately does to express certain positively-toned mental states toward something distinct from themselves such as another

person. It is an intentional and positive gesture. Now not just any positive and externally directed mental state will do here. What's needed is a state of admiration or respect or devotion or gratitude, or some attitude sufficiently similar to these to make us want to use the word 'tribute' when we describe its expression in the context of the further condition required, namely, the intention to honour whatever it is that elicits the admiration or respect or devotion or gratitude. By 'honouring' I mean a display to any observer, even if that be only oneself, of the deep worth one finds in the object of the tribute. Now one might think that behaviours expressing attitudes such as admiration or respect necessarily already express an intention to honour, but that is not the case. If I move from the first pew to the third in order to leave the two pews at the front of the church for the family of the deceased, I show my respect for them but if I do it silently and unobtrusively instead of while bowing and scraping I do not express an intention to honour them and so do not offer them a tribute. A tribute might instead come later in the form of a statement I read at the funeral, and be directed to the deceased. This suggests what is true of many tributes – a certain element of formality and an episodic character. But neither of these two is a necessary condition. If in an informal conversation by the watercooler, I speak to my fellow employees of all that you, our employer, have done for me over the years, I can be paying tribute to you. And if, after you die of leukemia, I spend years developing an organization to fight leukemia, this whole long period of activity may be regarded as a tribute expressing a whole host of complex attitudes about and toward you, including those necessary for a tribute, generated by our life together.

As I've suggested, we often speak of *paying* tribute. Consider and compare the common expression 'paying our respects.' When paying respects one does something to or for someone

that expresses positive attitudes toward them including respect – and if the respects that are paid are one's *last* respects, one is honouring another and expressing the belief that what they have done in their lives – at least some of it – is deserving of honour and, of course, of respect. Something similar is true of paying tribute, though the latter notion is broader than the former, if only because the former is tied to persons in a way the latter is not.

This brings me to the first of a couple of other points about tributes that are important here. Although it may seem that a tribute must have a personal object, that is not the case. It follows from my definition, supported by our ordinary uses of the term, that so long as one is saying or doing something intended to show positive inner states of the relevant sort about some thing *x* as well as to honour it, one is making a tribute to *x*, whatever the filling for *x*. Even respect can be shown for a non-personal object. Here one might remember the Kantian injunction to respect the moral law. And so if one does something to show one's respect for the moral law while also intending by this action to display the deep worth one finds in it, one is paying tribute to the moral law.

The second point is this: When one pays tribute, the desire to pay tribute need not be the only motive behind one's words or actions. Despite Kant, there may be more than one motive behind any of our actions, even when they are morally creditable. Thus when one sings a song in tribute to a composer, one may also wish for one's family to notice one's gift for singing, or hope that a recording agent who was to attend will think well of one's singing, or have any number of other motivations in connection with the song. Other reasons for singing need not take anything away from the depth and authenticity of the tribute, provided that the mental states it is said to show are of the right sort and genuine.

IV

So what is the tribute of *faith* referred to by my title, and how might it be connected to morality and to the faith situations described earlier? What I mean by a tribute of faith is a very large gesture of the relevant kind, just discussed, that involves a significant part, or even the whole, of one's life. More specifically, it involves all the things that one says and does in the religious life – that mark its religiousness – which under this aspect are intended to express attitudes such as respect or admiration for or devotion to a number of things with positive moral properties, and also to honour them. What sorts of things? Quite a variety, from the most abstract – the right or the good or the moral law, which can be viewed as having the properties of profundity or sublimity – to the less abstract – the deepest commitments of my life – to the fairly concrete – a comrade's heroism or a sister's life with grace advanced through much adversity until snatched away in an untimely death, in relation to which one may feel fierce pride or even reverence.

But there is something, you will rightly insist, that has not yet been made clear here. How exactly are the things one says and does in a religious life supposed to *express* such feelings of respect or admiration or devotion and the associated intention to honour? Not just anything I say or do can make for a well-formed gesture or a tribute, properly understood. I would simply be confused if I thought I could pay a decent tribute to you for all that you've done on my behalf – for which I am ever so grateful – by kicking you twice in the shins, or by reading out aloud the American Constitution, or handing you some dead flowers. Now, granted, I might have some false factual beliefs that explain such actions and allow them to *be* gestures. I might think, for example, that you have always desired to be kicked in the shins, or would love nothing more than to hear the American Constitution read out aloud, or that the dead flowers I give you are just

the ones you need for an art project but could not find. I suppose there are even possible worlds in which such beliefs aren't false! But the central point to take away here is that for a tribute to deserve our approbation, which is what I have claimed will, at the end of the day, be the case for the tribute of faith, the action involved – the 'something' one does – needs a certain quality of *appropriateness* or *fittingness* – and it is not yet clear how the things said and otherwise done in a religious life, which mark it as religious, could be regarded as an appropriate or fitting tribute to the morally-coloured things I have mentioned.

Fortunately, there is a clear and satisfying answer to this question. The key thought is that the sayings and other doings of a religious life allow one to treat the world as one in which the things, such as projects and people, that are, for one, most deeply imbued with moral value will achieve what we may broadly call *fulfillment* – a fulfillment that without the truth of religious claims they would often be denied. Their *value* is assured. No God is needed to make or keep that the case. Morality, as I have said I will assume, stands on its own two feet, whatever those feet should turn out to be. But the fulfillment of things we value is quite another matter. However impressive things imbued with moral value are, the world may conspire to prevent their full potential from being realized. As F. R. Tennant memorably put it, "The 'thinking reed' may face the world as a judge rather than as a suppliant; but so far as moral ideals alone can inform us, the world may expunge both him and them, however intolerable the thought may be."⁵ The moral ideal of justice, for example, deserves our stoutest allegiance and respect whether there be a God or not, but of course it may not be fully realized. In such a case, it can be precisely because of how deeply something is valued quite on its own, whether there be a God or not, that the thought that there *should be* a God, to *allow* for its fulfillment, is elicited. And this in turn allows for the possibility of living as though there *is* a God, in tribute to its value.

Take moral virtue, for example. Perhaps it is an aim of mine to develop moral virtue fully. Now the moral virtue of a finite being like me is not developed fully after a mere seventy or eighty years. If I die and that's the end, then the impulse to develop it fully will not be satisfied. But if religious claims are true, then it may be satisfied, in one or another region of an afterlife. So by living religiously I can express my respect for the moral project and honour its place in my life. I do so when, through such a life, I treat the world as one in which the impulses animating that project can be fulfilled. By doing this I pay a deep tribute to moral virtue and to the project of embodying it.

This example provides a sort of template for other cases. Consider the respect and admiration or devotion one may feel toward other people who have developed over time into paragons of wisdom and virtue. To think that they and the world should have gone to all this trouble only to have all those wonderful and rich arrangements and integrations of properties dissolved in death – from a certain moral vantage point, this can seem almost too much to bear. John Stuart Mill has a similar thought in one of his neglected *Three Essays on Religion*, where he considers the utilitarian value of religious hope.⁶ But what Mill does with this thought is different from what I suggest we do. He is concerned with the avoidance of demoralization: sustained by religious hope we may continue doing good, and the world will be the *better* for it. I have in mind something more focused on the loved and lost themselves. If religious claims are true, then the impulse to see these people live on and flourish can be fulfilled. And so I can use religious words and actions to treat the world as one in which what *should* be *will* be, thus paying tribute to them.

Many variations on this theme are imaginable. Perhaps the person in question was never

allowed to develop very far, prevented from doing so by an early death. Or perhaps she lived on long enough to experience much sorrow and many horrors. Perhaps he sank into drug addiction or mental illness, from which there was no recovery this side of the grave. Perhaps she was a sister or a mother or a friend. Perhaps he was a son or a brother, or only the perfect stranger one sought but failed to help. It doesn't really matter. Any of these cases, and many others, have features that generate for morally sensitive human beings a great variety of moral feelings and attitudes which can be expressed in a religious life, which is used to pay respectful tribute to the conspicuous value of ever so many things human that do not appear to come to a good end. Of course, we might expect that for morally sensitive human beings a religious life would also be a context within which every effort is made to improve the world right here and now. There is nothing in my argument to suggest otherwise. I am identifying but one way, compatible with others, in which a connection between religion and morality may be made – one, however, that seems to me to have been largely overlooked.

In speaking about what religion offers in relation to human brokenness, we are of course venturing close to that part of the intellectual landscape in which one finds the problem of evil. And I want to note in passing that the moral motivation for religious living I have been describing – this way of using a religious life as a deep and extended act of moral tribute – provides a way for the religious to deal with the problem of evil that has not been much noted, if at all. The existence of God is seriously called into question by horrors, for example. I have argued this on more than one occasion. But what a theist may say who adopts the approach to religion that I am exploring is this: “Yes, the existence of God is called into question by horrors. But the very religious notion that is called into question by such events can serve, at another level, to do justice to the moral impulses that led me to call it into question in the first place. If

God exists, then the world may be redeemed and horrors do not have the last word, and I find it hard to see how any full redemption is possible otherwise. So I carry on in the religious life, behaving as though this is how things *shall* be, as a way of paying tribute to all the value seeking realization in our broken world. What this means is that similar moral considerations to those that have put pressure on me to abandon religious faith, found in the problem of evil, are here instrumental in my keeping it.”

As John Stuart Mill notes in the same connection mentioned before, though again with a utilitarian twist, a religious picture of the world also gives to morality in general, the moral dimension of life, a greater *solemnity* than it would otherwise enjoy. Again, this doesn't mean that somehow we now have more reason to follow morality's demands – no, those are independently grounded. But religious faith does allow us to think of morality as having a deeper place in the total scheme of things than it could otherwise have. Indeed, if some religious claim such as theism is true, then an unlimited good and the possibility of an unlimited moral fulfillment lie at the heart of reality. One could not pay morality a bigger compliment – show it any more respect – than by picturing it thus *out* of respect and living accordingly.

These ideas about morality-in-general receive some illustration from the work of George Mavrodes. Mavrodes speaks of how moral demands would be “superficial” in a naturalistic world. As he says: “Something that reaches close to the heart of my own life, perhaps even demanding the sacrifice of that life, is not deep at all in the world in which [on a naturalistic view] that life is lived.” What is deep in a naturalistic world must, instead, be such things as “matter and energy, or perhaps natural law, chance, or chaos.”⁷

What Mavrodes describes as entailed by the naturalistic view may indeed be odd, though

this of course does not show that it is false, as he himself seems to think it has some tendency to do. What I am inclined to emphasize is rather that someone with a deep and sensitive respect for morality will think it truly *wonderful* and most *fitting* for facts about value to be deep in the nature of things. And she may therefore take a religious picture of the world, which allows for them such depth, as something to live by as a way of expressing these feelings and paying tribute to morality. In doing so, she may say, we can do justice to the importance of morality and moral goals in our lives. It is a gesture we make *with* our lives.

V

I turn now to make the connection between this idea of religious faith as moral tribute and the situations embedded in our stories about Esther from before. I placed Esther in two situations: one of faltering belief, and another of non-doxastic faith. I said that the central idea of this paper could be applied in either of these situations, and in others like them. How would that be done? Well, we need to picture Esther at the point of giving up, ready to turn away from religious practice, but suddenly noticing that her pro-attitude towards the content of theistic propositions includes rich emotions of a moral nature. She has, for example, often sung with deep feeling of the coming kingdom of God in which the upside down values of this world will be turned right side up. If she continues singing thus, and more generally continues with all the formal rituals and informal behaviors of the religious life, she can continue in this way to express these deep moral feelings and pay tribute to all the morally tinged features of human life to which they respond. If she gives up the religious life, then one avenue for such a response to morality – arguably the most prominent to which she has access – will be shut down.

What we see here is how Esther is faced, given the circumstances of her life, with a

unique moral opportunity: she can take the inchoate gesture detected in her former behaviour, make it intentional and precisely focused, morally speaking, and thus turn it into a religious tribute to things moral. This would be a costly and expensive tribute, but that should only make us admire it all the more and see it as a display of virtue when it is realized in Esther's ongoing religious life. Put in rational terms, what we see here is how Esther is provided with a *reason* – with justification – to continue with the religious life, and how *we* gain a reason to approve her doing so. If one intends one's life of faith to be a moral gesture of this sort, and the living of it is at least in part a consequence of this fact, then that life is at least partially explained by that intention, and at least one of the motives one has in carrying it on is a moral motive. That is why we see here a connection between God and morality. It is a connection to which a struggling religious person might appeal when asked to defend her continuing faith (which need not for all that *cease* to be a struggling faith), one which, other things being equal, should lead her critics to retreat in respect.

What sort of reason or justification, exactly, do we have here? Applying the epistemic/pragmatic distinction, we might bring a little more clarity by saying that it is a *pragmatic* justification: Esther continues in the religious life and can be justified in doing so not because she has a new reason to believe the claims of her theistic tradition to be true. A goal other than the goal of truth beckons: the goal of paying a rich tribute to morality. And the religious life is instrumental in its attainment. By the same token, it will be clear that the justification we have is not, most fundamentally, the justification of any specific proposition or attitude toward a proposition. We do indeed acquire for Esther, in the two scenarios in which we have placed her, a reason to persist in her struggling doxastic condition or to persist with her

non-doxastic faith attitude, but this is derivative from the larger justification she receives for a continuing religious life.

Philosophers of religion have often spoken disparagingly of pragmatic justification. But I think we often forget, perhaps because of our own deep interest in what I have called the religion-to-philosophy (or R-to-P) direction of activity, which has us investigating the philosophical potential of religious ideas, considering, for example, what could be done in metaphysics given the established truth of a religious proposition such as theism – we often forget, I say, that it is also part of our job to pursue the *philosophy-to-religion* (P-to-R) direction of activity, which is instead focused on understanding and rationally evaluating religious practice. Moreover it is easy for us to conflate things inappropriately here even when at some level we recognize that there are these two aims. An important example is the way many philosophers moving P-to-R and evaluating religious attitudes focused on propositions that happen to have a wider philosophical potential – for example, the proposition that there is a divine Ultimate – have mistakenly assumed that those propositions *must have* such potential for religious attitudes focused on them to receive a positive evaluation in that connection, which means looking for specifically epistemic justification. By clarifying, distinguishing, and explicitly endorsing the *two* aims we avoid this, making room for religious attitudes and practices to have any number of philosophically-endorsed justifications, including pragmatic justifications, while also leaving plenty of room for – indeed, clearly rationalizing – the familiar focus on belief and *epistemic* justification. We will see the latter now as appropriate to the other aim: R-to-P. And my reference to practice is not adventitious. Another reason that pragmatic justifications have seemed underwhelming is that we have, too narrowly, assumed that the only way religious people get justification for their practice is via justification for religious

propositions or religious propositional attitudes. This is not the case. It can be the other way around, and here pragmatic justifications like the one discussed in this paper come into their own. By the same token, when a more balanced treatment of obligations and opportunities in the philosophy of religion arrives, we will be hearing at least as much about the ethics of religion (or, more broadly, the axiology of religion) as we presently do about the *epistemology* of religion.

VI

But for now – here and now – the Tribute View discussed in this paper is only a proposal, and we should think about the cautions and criticisms to which that proposal may be subject.

(1) Let me admit at once what someone will surely wish to have noted: namely, that not all actual lives of struggling theistic faith display such a moral character or, therefore, are afforded such a moral defense. What we see here is a way for theistic faith to *become* more rational and morally approvable, an opportunity that may make the future dialogue between theistic faith and reason more interesting and perhaps also more profitable for the former than it frequently has been. Having said that, I think in many lives of theistic faith one may detect the ‘inchoate gesture’ to which I have referred, which could easily become an explicit and conscious tribute were the relevant intention to be formed and acted upon.

(2) I should also acknowledge again that this moral dimension of faith, where it appears, need not be the only thing holding the religious life together and keeping it going. One may have other pragmatic reasons to continue in faith when it is tried, including of course the eminently religious desire to be rightly related – in this case – to any God there may be. As we have seen,

the actions one uses to make a tribute may be variously motivated. There is therefore no reason to fear that my argument portends some reduction of religion to morality, and the evacuation from religion of everything that makes it religious. Indeed, in order for religious faith as moral tribute to be realized, not only must the moral domain remain autonomous and regarded as important in its own right, but religion too must retain its character as conceptually distinguishable from morality. If it did not, we would have nothing distinguishable from morality *by which* the tribute to morality is paid. Each of these two – morality and religion – must have its separate dignity if the dignity they together can create is to come into being.

(3) Moving on to a sharper criticism: should we really contemplate such unrealistic metaphysical outcomes as are imagined by the religious? Is this not just wishful thinking of a perniciously unproductive sort, made all the more pernicious – and ironically so – by the fact that it prevents a true moral engagement with the ills of the world?

To this critic one might respond by pointing out the key word of her criticism: ‘unrealistic.’ I am imagining a situation in which the theist is *reasonably* unsure, undecided, in doubt, about the existence of God and the truth of her other religious beliefs. Though her belief is in jeopardy or has been lost, it has not been replaced by disbelief. And yet this would need to have happened, and in a rationally approvable manner, for the present criticism to have any bite. Here I would also suggest the need for a bit of charity. We can easily imagine that our theist is deeply engaged with the ills of the world in every way the critic would endorse, merely adding to these commitments the religious structure that enables the motive I have described, also deeply moral, to receive expression. Notice that it is not at all obvious that a moral engagement with the ills of the world could be more effectively pursued outside such a structure than within, when the structure is such as potentially to provide encouragement and support for such an endeavour.

(4) It may further be objected that there are other and quite non-religious ways of making one's life a moral gesture or tribute of the general sort I have in mind. But there is no reason for the advocate of my argument to question whether this is so. It may not be as easy to *show* that it is so as the critic imagines – how can one imagine what might be called morality's inner impulses fulfilled without the thought of something like a religious outcome? Certainly, a humanist orientation may involve picturing and acting on the assumption of a much better future for humanity and other creatures, but it will still leave the past and present unredeemed. A variant of this objection however can add that there are also other *religious* ways of making one's life a moral gesture or tribute: there is for example the life of skeptical religion, focused on simple ultimism rather than on theism, to which I originally applied the thought of this paper. Perhaps we might even apply it in the context of the discussion of religious *fictionalism* that is heating up in contemporary philosophy of religion.

But which way we go on all these issues really doesn't matter here. The central point to be made will remain the same. This is just 'to each her own.' By this I mean that the circumstances of different lives will afford different opportunities for morally strenuous activities. Our realist theist, faced with a decision as to whether to throw overboard the religious commitment that has shaped so much of her past life but becoming aware of how the continuation of her religious life can be made a moral tribute, has a unique opportunity. Her situation is not that of the humanist, or at least not that of the non-religious humanist. It is not that of the skeptical ultimist or fictionalist. And it isn't obvious that trading her religious life for that of the non-religious humanist or that of the religious ultimist or that of the fictionalist, if such were possible at all, would mark an improvement in her moral character or in the depth of

her moral tribute, especially if for her the most natural, the deepest, the richest moral feelings come packaged theistically.

(5) A final worry I want to raise concerns the possibility of a *subtle denigration* of morality and of things with positive moral properties that may seem to come with the application of my proposal. In this process one's attention, so it may be said, is taken from the moral and shifted to the religious, which means that (quite ironically) one has become distracted from the moral value whose perception initiated the process.

But one reason to suppose that this at any rate need not occur is that most of us will always remain more sure of the importance of morality and of the truth of some of our central moral evaluations than of virtually anything else, including religious propositions. This is especially the case for theists like Esther, whose religious beliefs are fluctuating or who have fallen into religious doubt. If one were as certain of religious propositions as of anything else, then the splendour of the latter might be inordinately preoccupying and distracting. But it is not clear how this could be the case when one is in doubt. More to the point, even when assessing the content of religious propositions as splendid and glorious and wonderful, one is not leaving the moral domain behind but still right in the thick of it! Only the morally sensitive person can really appreciate, for example, what theistic religion is all about, what with its central idea of an ultimate reality instantiating unsurpassable moral goodness, and its hope of a new heaven and a new earth in which "justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Any call for a shift to the religious realm that is properly understood therefore cannot be taken as permitting a distraction from the moral domain.

VII

I expect that many connections between theistic faith and morality, both positive and negative, may wait to be revealed. I don't hold that the view I have proposed – call it the Tribute View – specifies the only connection, or the most important one. But the Tribute View may specify *a* connection, and if it is a connection at all, I believe that it could be an important one.

Notes

1. J. L. Schellenberg, *Progressive Atheism: How Moral Evolution Changes the God Debate* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
2. The trilogy consists of *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) and *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).
3. George Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, eds. *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 214.
4. See, for example, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion*, chap. 6.
5. F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology, Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 95.
6. See John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875), 249-250.
7. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," 224-225.