Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 1

1-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Robert F. (1991) "God's Ability to Will Moral Evil," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19918110

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol8/iss1/1>

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GOD'S ABILITY TO WILL MORAL EVIL

Robert F. Brown

Pike, Reichenbach, and others, correctly hold that a God whose very nature prevents him from doing evil cannot properly be regarded as morally good. But they fail to show just *how* God's moral goodness can be effectively independent of his ontological goodness, how God can be "significantly free" and so be morally praiseworthy. I argue that their contention calls for a greater modification of classical theism than they realize, i.e., for abandoning the traditional subordination of God's will to God's (supposedly necessary) goodness. I explore a way of reconceiving the relation of God's will to his nature, so that he actually can be morally praiseworthy, free either to obey or to violate his own moral law.

Nelson Pike, Bruce Reichenbach, and others have argued that classical Christian theism holds an inadequate view of God's goodness in relation to God's freedom and power to do what is morally evil.¹ The New Testament Epistle of James, verse 13, states that "God cannot be tempted by evil"; the Church Fathers elaborated this theme as the doctrine of divine impeccability. On this foundation arose the classical view that God lacks the ability or creative power to bring about any morally reprehensible state of affairs. Pike argues that a God who could not do evil also could not be morally good, for refraining from doing evil is morally praiseworthy only because the one who refrains is able to do evil. On a religiously adequate notion of divine goodness, God can do moral evil but refrains, or freely chooses not to do it.

Pike and Reichenbach have been subjected to thoughtful criticism.² I shall take brief note of such criticism, although it is not my main purpose to defend them against it. I believe their general approach (hereafter often referred to as "Pike's position") is viable, but not in its present form and without elaboration of its fuller implications for our conception of God's nature and will. My chosen task here is not so much to defend Pike's position as it is to *extend* it.

Pike and his supporters do not explain *how* to conceive of God as having the freedom to will, and the power to carry out, moral evil. After examining their views and a bit of the criticism, I shall explain why the traditional doctrine of God needs more extensive modification than they apparently realize. To make their conception of God's moral goodness feasible, they also need to revise the classical conception of God's will in relation to the con-

ceptions of God's immutability and of his own goodness, and to the goodness of other things that God wills.³ The argument of this paper shall, however, try as much as possible to remain within the general framework of classical theism rather than resorting outright to some modern position, such as process metaphysics or existentialism, that almost completely discards that tradition. Retained, among others, are the traditional assumptions that whatever God wills God wills efficaciously,⁴ and that God's causality operates not only directly but also indirectly, through the use of creatures as intermediate or proximate causes of the effects God wills to bring about. Nevertheless, the statement that "God can will what is morally evil" here refers not to God's permitting, or sustaining by creative power, the evil acts freely chosen by creatures; it refers instead to God's freedom directly to will, and thereby initiate, moral evil himself.

I. *Omnipotence and the Ability to Will Moral Evil*

Pike directs attention to an apparent conflict in the classical tradition between two divine attributes:

1. *Omnipotence*: God can bring about any state of affairs that is consistently describable, i.e., that is free of logical contradiction; as Aquinas says, God can do "whatever is possible absolutely" (ST1, Q25, A3).

2. *Perfect goodness*: God cannot sin, i.e., God cannot act in a morally reprehensible way (Aquinas, ST1, Q19, A9).

Their conjunction suggests that God both could and could not bring about certain consistently describable events. Pike's example is the avoidable and protracted dying from starvation of an innocent child, where its suffering and death has no value (as edification, punishment, etc.) for it or for anyone else. An omnipotent deity could surely bring about such a morally reprehensible event, whereas a perfectly good one could not (Pike, pp. 209-10).

How does classical theism solve this logical difficulty? Anselm, in discussing the possibility of God's being corrupted or telling lies, writes:

...when someone is said to have the 'power' of doing or suffering something which is not to his advantage or which he ought not to do, then by 'power' here we mean 'impotence,' for the more he has this 'power,' the more adversity and perversity have power over him and the more is he powerless against them.⁵

Aquinas agrees, for doing moral evil is "falling short of a perfect action," which is a defect incompatible with omnipotence (ST1, Q25, A3, reply to obj. 2).

Pike's counter argument is that being morally weak ("falling short in action") is *logically* compatible with being able to bring about any consistently describable state; that is, there is no logical or conceptual difficulty in the idea of a diabolical omnipotent being (Pike, p. 210). To this a Platonist might

retort that the perfect instances of all ontological perfections are inseparable and so must coincide in one being. From this ontological (but not logical) principle it would follow that an omnipotent being must also be perfectly good, and *vice versa*. Pike does not consider this option. Nevertheless, that general Platonic principle cannot sustain the specific contention that because God is omnipotent God lacks the ability freely to do moral evil. As we shall see shortly, it is dubious first to allow an *ontological* notion of goodness to control the meaning of omnipotence (as does Anselm), and from that privileged meaning of omnipotence then to restrict the scope of God's free will with regard to *moral* goodness. Subordination of the meaning of one perfection to that of another cries out for further justification, but the theological Platonist does not provide it.

It is important to note that, the title of his paper notwithstanding, Pike is not mainly concerned with the doctrine of omnipotence *per se*, nor does his discussion presuppose a highly technical or contentious conception of omnipotence. He is mainly concerned with a conception of moral freedom, and that is my main concern as well. Pike attacks a special Anselmian-Thomistic qualification imposed upon omnipotence that has the effect of curtailing God's moral freedom. His contention that an omnipotent God can bring about any consistently describable state amounts to rephrasing Thomas ("God can do all that is possible absolutely") minus the qualification ("except to will moral evil or to be morally evil"). But Pike's attack on the Anselmian-Thomistic view that omnipotence entails divine inability to will moral evil does not actually arise from a primary concern with omnipotence; it is not simply the contrary view that omnipotence entails the ability to sin. To argue in that way would require a full-dress analysis of omnipotence, far beyond what Pike provides. In drawing out the implications of Pike's position, I do not argue from a supposed logical incompatibility of divine impeccability with omnipotence; the pivotal attribute for the argument is not divine omnipotence but divine will. A divine ability to will moral evil is to be envisaged and defended as the consequence of a certain freedom of the divine will (which must, to be sure, be coupled with power sufficient to effect whatever it wills).

Consider the case of a strong man with the muscular power sufficient to lift a certain heavy object, but who has been hypnotized so that he could not want, or intend, to lift it. In one sense he has the ability to lift it, but in another he does not. Pike seems to be thinking of a divine ability somewhat analogous to both these senses taken together. He thinks that if God's acts are to count as morally good, then God must be without the Anselmian counterpart to the strong man's hypnotic block, that is, he must be genuinely free in a moral sense; he must not be prevented, by a necessary goodness of his own nature, from willing or intending certain kinds of acts.⁶

A different possibility (mentioned in passing by Aquinas, in *ST*1, Q25, A3,

reply to obj. 2) is that God can do what seems evil to us but is not really evil. However, Pike declares that it is illegitimate to shift the meaning of "evil" or of "morally reprehensible" just to protect one's flank philosophically, when God rather than a creature is said to be the actor. Aquinas himself teaches the "analogy of being," according to which God's own being contains to an eminent degree the same perfections present to a lesser degree in creatures (ST1, Q4, AA2-3). Accordingly, for Thomas God's moral goodness cannot really be different from ours *in kind* rather than just in degree (if we ignore the differences in means suitable to immaterial beings and material beings respectively, for carrying out their actions). Pike holds that the standard for measuring God's moral goodness cannot be different from the standard for measuring ours; the contrast is just that God regularly meets that standard (of truthfulness, justice, etc.) and we do not. On Thomistic grounds, moreover, we can be said to possess from revelation and natural reason a knowledge on the whole reliable as to what that standard is. According to Pike, therefore, if God were to act in a way that we would unhesitatingly call morally evil were a human agent the actor instead (such as by causing the death by starvation of an innocent child, as in the example above), it would be an evasion on our part to say that in this instance that act cannot be morally evil, solely for the reason that it is God who is doing it. Our moral conceptions and discourse should not be so elastic as that.⁷

Pike next introduces three distinct meanings of the statement "God cannot sin," i.e., cannot do something morally reprehensible:

1. *A logical impossibility*: "If X sins, then X cannot qualify as God." This meaning treats "God" as a title rather than as a common noun or a proper name, and it stipulates one qualification for bearing this title. It says nothing about limits on the power of X, but only says that if X were to sin then X would forfeit entitlement to be God.⁸
2. *A material concept*: "God lacks the creative power to sin." A being materially incapable of sinning cannot be morally good, since it lacks the power to be morally evil; nor can it be omnipotent, except on the mistaken view of Anselm and Aquinas.
3. *A morally praiseworthy status*: "God cannot bring himself to sin." This means that God is strongly disposed not to act in a morally reprehensible way, but is not actually prevented from doing so, not even by his own nature.

The religious believer is fully confident that God will freely choose to maintain a good character in the future. Nevertheless this third meaning of "God cannot sin" is logically compatible with the first one only, not with the second. According to Pike, the error of Anselm and Aquinas lies in confusing the second meaning with the third, in representing "unable to sin" as the correct meaning of "choosing not to sin"; it further lies in associating "unable

to sin" with omnipotence. Thus they mistakenly suppose that omnipotence and moral perfection entail a material inability or lack of creative power to do moral evil (Pike, p. 216).

These then are Pike's conclusions:

1. There is no logical connection between perfect moral goodness and omnipotence.
2. God has the creative power to do what is morally reprehensible, but freely chooses not to. To say that "God cannot bring himself to sin" is simply to attribute to God a certain character seen in the consistent way that God exercises free choice.

In this connection we might note William J. Wainwright's observations about one version of the argument that God cannot sin, an argument based at least in part on the assumption that "...*being God* is an essential attribute of the being who is God..."⁹ Wainwright remarks (p. 249) that "classical theism would, I think, reject the notion that it is merely a contingent fact that the being who is God, is God..." and he also observes that from the premiss that it is necessarily true that a being who is God does not sin, "it follows that classical theism is committed to the view that God is unable to sin" in the strong sense—it is a logical or a causal (i.e., material) impossibility. But Wainwright adds (p. 249):

Whether classical theism *needs* to assert the first premiss ['It is necessarily true that the being who is God, is God'] is another question. It is possible that the first premiss can be rejected without in any other way seriously modifying the theistic position.

Pike clearly rejects that premiss. His rejection can be expressed in the form of a third conclusion.

3. Perfect moral goodness may in the eyes of religious believers be logically connected with "being God," but it is only contingently connected with "the being who is God."

To accept these three conclusions evidently would require a significant modification of the framework of classical theism, though not its wholesale rejection.

II. *Ontological and Moral Goodness Distinguished*

Reichenbach's criticism of Aquinas further illumines the difficulty regarding God's goodness. He identifies two distinct senses in which God is said to be good. The first expresses an *ontological* conception: "God is good because of his nature." Aquinas bases this conception upon two points:

1. God alone is pure act (God's essence is to exist); thus God alone has the perfection of self-sufficiency (ST1, Q3, A4).

2. God is the good at which all things aim (the final cause of all things); thus God alone is his own end (ST1, Q5, A4, and Q6, A1).

Conceived in this way, God's goodness and God's being are coextensive. Hence God is said to be good essentially and necessarily. According to Aquinas, God wills his own goodness necessarily, and wills other things only as ordered to his own goodness (ST1, Q19, A3). Since God's transient acts, or acts *ad extra*, must accord with his own necessarily good nature, they must be good; their goodness is a necessary consequence of God's own ontological structure.¹⁰

The second sense expresses a *moral* conception: "God does, and is disposed to do, what is good." Reichenbach agrees with Pike that for this moral conception to be meaningful, "God cannot do evil" must not have logical or ontological force. God's refraining from moral evil must be due to God's freely maintained character and not to lack of power or opportunity. Reichenbach argues that the ontological conception cannot undergird the moral conception because it cannot satisfy at least one of the necessary conditions for an act to count as morally good. Aquinas insists that God is free to act or not to act in various ways; for example, God does not have to create a world and, if he does, it does not have to be the best of all possible worlds. But his God is not *significantly free* in Alvin Plantinga's sense. Plantinga defines an action as "...*morally significant*, for a given person at a given time, if it would be wrong for him to perform the action then but right to refrain, or vice versa"; he adds that a person is *significantly free* when he or she is free to do or not to do some morally significant action.¹¹ For Reichenbach, significant freedom of the actor is a necessary condition for an act to count as morally good, and this is a condition that cannot be satisfied if it is logically or ontologically¹² impossible for that actor to do moral evil (pp. 55-57). On Aquinas's account, God's acts cannot be significantly free, i.e., free qua the *rightness* of the acts. Reichenbach therefore says that we cannot appropriately call this God "good" in the moral sense (p. 59). Reichenbach concludes that for Aquinas divine goodness is exclusively ontological, and not moral. It only seems moral because of an equivocation between the two senses of "good."

One likely objection is that this appeal to significant freedom amounts to a substitution of a libertarian notion of freedom as the uncaused or unconstrained power of self-determination where alternatives are available to be chosen, in place of a very different notion held by classical theists. Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, *et al.*, depict the highest sort of freedom (that possessed by God, the good angels, and the blessed in heaven) as an utter inability to sin. This is not just a contingent freedom from being actually sinful, but a freedom from the possibility of ever being sinful (again, in the human case), an ontological immunity either possessed by nature (in the case of God) or

conferred by grace (upon good angels and blessed humans). On this view God's ontological goodness stands as an ideal toward which creatures in their efforts at moral goodness should aspire and strive. Their striving is morally praiseworthy but their ideal, God's own ontological goodness, is not. But that is no defect in God, whose moral praiseworthiness consists only in his freely willed acts of grace or supererogation. A fair response is that this objection is correct, that Pike's position requires that such a substitution be made. With that acknowledged—Pike and Reichenbach could be more forthright about the substitution and could give a fuller defense of the libertarian option—the issue is then the relative merits of the two rival conceptions of divine freedom.

It is a large task to defend the general superiority of a libertarian notion of freedom as applied to God's own goodness and will, one that lies beyond the scope of this paper, as already stated.¹³ Here I shall simply comment on one facet, the use of the term "morally praiseworthy." To say, as some defenders of classical theism do, that God need not be *morally* praiseworthy for the goodness of his willing (aside from acts of grace or supererogation) is to be insufficiently attentive to ordinary religious beliefs. To praise God for the way his guiding hand routinely affects human affairs is not, to the believer, like our (non-moral) admiration of the elephant for its strength, of the bee for its diligence, or even of Miss America Pageant contestants for their natural beauty. It is rather more like praising Jane Doe for the honest way in which she conducts her law practice. To "praise" without thereby giving credit for choices made and effort exerted, without imputing freedom and responsibility to the one praised, hardly seems to capture the main sense of the term as we use it in religious and other contexts. Not all such praise need be for moral acts. One could give due credit by praising an aesthetic accomplishment, for example, of a pianist who chooses to practice and study over many years in order to make a fine performance possible. It seems a bit odd to suggest that religious believers don't intend to give credit and impute responsibility to God in a comparable way for the things God does that are analogous to the moral acts of human beings, odd to deny that God is a moral actor (and so could do otherwise than he does). One way around this would be to declare arbitrarily that *all* divine acts of moral significance must be in fact supererogatory, so that God's omitting to perform them would not be morally wrong. That extreme stance would, I think, be unfaithful to the intention of most people's actual religious beliefs.

We have seen then that, on the views of Pike and Reichenbach, we cannot deduce the moral goodness of God's acts from God's nature as a given, and therefore God must be able to will moral evil. But someone favoring Pike's approach cannot rest content at this point. The relation between God's willing and God's being requires further scrutiny; we must take a still closer look at Aquinas.

III. The Deeper Problem

Christian Platonism and Aristotelianism not only mistakenly derive a material inability to do moral evil from the attribute of omnipotence (as Pike holds), and equivocate between ontological and moral senses of "good" (as Reichenbach holds). These philosophies also are burdened with a deficient view of will, one that leads to a religiously unsatisfactory conception of the relation of God's will to God's being and goodness.¹⁴

The difficulty becomes clear when we examine a progression of seven points found in Aquinas (*ST1*, Q19: "Will in God"), the first four of which are:

1. The objective of God's will is his own goodness (A1, reply to obj. 3).
2. God wills his own goodness with absolute necessity (A3).
3. God wills other things insofar as they have his own goodness as their end (A3).
4. "To be good" and "to be desirable" have the same signification (A9; cf. Q5, A1).

As we have seen, because divine goodness alone is perfectly desirable, God necessarily wills (read: "ratifies," not "originates") his own goodness, and freely wills other things only in such a way as to be ordered to his own goodness.¹⁵ From the Thomistic principle that all divine attributes are one in the unity of the divine essence (*ST1*, Q13, A12, reply), we might expect a reciprocity between God's goodness and God's will; instead we find an asymmetrical relation. On the one hand, the perfect desirability of God's goodness makes it impossible for God to will otherwise than harmoniously with it. On the other hand, however, God himself is not good *because of* willing his own goodness, for God's nature cannot be other than it is. Its perfect desirability makes God's goodness a final cause ineluctably drawing God's will to it; divine goodness determines divine will, and not *vice versa*. This way of thinking scarcely yields an acceptable notion of God's will as free, in the sense Pike and Reichenbach require for God's actions to count as morally praiseworthy.

In his transient acts God cannot command or act contrary to his own goodness, i.e., God is not free to will in a morally evil or reprehensible fashion, in the way that creatures can. Thus Aquinas continues (again, in *ST1*, Q19, A9):

5. An appetitive power can directly seek only what has ontological goodness, i.e., being and inherent desirability. Thus no evil can be directly wanted by natural appetite, or by the intelligent appetite that is will.
6. Creatures can will moral evil indirectly, concomitantly to their direct willing of some good lesser than they ought to will.

7. God can will (i.e., permit, and create the necessary conditions for,) physical evil or suffering for the sake of some greater good to which it is attached, but God cannot will moral evil at all, for God cannot upset the ordering of all things to the divine goodness.

Thus the supremely desirable ontological goodness of God's nature constrains God's will as appetitive power, so that in his transient acts God is materially incapable of willing contrary to that goodness, i.e., is materially incapable of willing moral evil.

This non-reciprocal relation between God's good being and God's will is deeply embedded in the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical heritage that Aquinas and other classical theists build upon. Pike and Reichenbach correctly point out the main symptom of this deficiency as it affects the doctrine of God. Theirs is just a cosmetic remedy that conceals a deeper problem, however, if they simply affirm that God, although ontologically good himself, is in his transient acts free to will in a morally significant sense, and leave it at that. For divine freedom to be actually moral, God must be self-determining in a way that classical notions of goodness as inherent desirability, and of will as appetitive, are incapable of expressing. A truly voluntaristic or libertarian conception of God's will is needed to carry through the program of Pike and Reichenbach consistently.

IV. *One Direction to Take*

The needed conception can be found in a minority viewpoint within classical theism itself. There is the curiously hybrid thought of Augustine, a Platonist when it comes to the doctrine of God, but also the chief architect of the theological conception of human free will. To him we owe the famous declaration that:

...unless the movement of the will towards this or that object is voluntary and within our power, a man would not be praiseworthy when he turns to the higher object nor blameworthy when he turns to lower objects, using his will like a hinge.¹⁶

This imprecise but suggestive comparison of the human will to a hinge that can turn itself either way, toward God or away from God, underlies our basic notions of human moral praiseworthiness and of sinfulness.

Can we represent God's willing in a comparable way, even though Augustine himself did not? I believe Pike's position should also directly oppose the classical assumption that willing has for its object only what has being and thus ontological goodness, because that restrictive assumption leads to the subordination of God's creative and originaive will to God's own being. It should also oppose the collateral assumption that objects of desire determine the will, not just influence it, and that when we don't pursue a particular desired object it is because another, even more desirable, object is attracting

us instead. Augustine speaks as if human beings will what they most desire or love because the object's desirability draws them to it. A consistent voluntarist should instead say that, in their willing, people can at least sometimes freely choose what *kinds* of things they desire or love, that they can choose their own basic dispositions, that at its root their willing has no determining cause but the willing itself. This libertarian thesis calls for qualification in the face of such factors as biological heredity, body chemistry, and environmental influences, which seem to circumscribe human freedom severely, at least for some individuals. But the case of God has no counterpart to this; a truly free God has no heredity or body chemistry, and no environment God might choose to create could circumscribe his freedom so as to make him materially incapable of willing moral evil. No factor of these kinds prevents us from attributing to God a will like a self-moving hinge, one that can turn away from, i.e., will incompatibly with, his own ontologically good being.

A bolder and perhaps reckless declaration appears in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, in his discussion of God's hardening of pharaoh's heart, and of God's allowing Adam to fall:

God is he for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God. What God wills is not right because he ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right, because he so wills it. Causes and grounds are laid down for the will of the creature, but not for the will of the creator—unless you set another creator over him!¹⁷

Pike's position need not go this far in order to give credibility to God's moral freedom. The very norms of moral goodness need not be arbitrary for God to be free in a morally praiseworthy sense; God just needs to have the capability to violate them.¹⁸

How might we modify the classical view of divine will so as to exploit the Augustinian theme without slipping into the perilous Lutheran overstatement? Let us look in more detail at two specific issues. One is the relation of God's will to time. According to classical theism, the timelessly eternal God wills certain events to occur in certain ways and at certain times in the world's history. God timelessly wills rain for today and clear skies for tomorrow. Such a God could timelessly will a moral good (e.g., the sparing of an endangered child) or a moral evil (e.g., the needlessly cruel death of an innocent child). A timelessly eternal will does not "change its mind," even though to a time-bound observer of its acts it might appear to do so. But mustn't a timeless will have a fixed character or disposition, albeit freely chosen, from which its transient acts flow in morally (or immorally) uniform fashion? We do not at the empirical level attribute a fixed character (wholly

good or wholly evil) to people as moral agents, and we need not attribute one to a timeless God either.¹⁹ The only insight into God's character we have derives from what God has done, said or promised; and a free being who promises can break those promises. That a free and eternal God can will moral evil means that God can timelessly choose not to be consistent regarding the moral quality of his acts in time. So we do not necessarily have to reject the classical view of a timeless deity for the sake of God's moral freedom. And even if we do reject it in favor of a view of God's temporal eternity, or of an even more radical temporality, "God cannot bring himself to do moral evil" need only mean that we do not think God has willed moral evil in the past, and we do not expect or fear that he will do so in the future, although he could.

A second issue is whether God can will evil for its own sake. Willing evil need not be the consequence of inappropriately willing a lesser good than one ought to will, because willing is not necessarily an appetitive act directed toward a desirable object. Disobedience of a moral law might be willed not for the sake of some other and lesser ontological good. A truly free agent can simply choose to disobey for no reason at all apart from the choosing itself; "perversity" is not a reason for deliberately willing evilly, but is just what we call doing so without a reason. (The overly intellectualistic tradition of classical theism, with its underdeveloped notion of will, cannot account for the event in which a person freely, deliberately, and irrationally wills moral evil just because he or she chooses to, and not because of being in the grip of bodily passions or the like.) This bold statement presupposes a basically Kantian, rather than Platonic-Aristotelian, view of human will (and, by extension, of divine will). A Kantian will freely and responsibly chooses the maxims in accord with which it then executes its particular choices, or further particular acts of will. Such a will is free to choose other maxims than the ones currently guiding it, i.e., it is free to change its basic cast from good to evil or *vice versa*. I have of course no *proof* that this view of will is the correct one for all free beings and contexts, although I believe that it is; nor have I proof that there truly is *akrasia* understood as irrational choice of some evil freely made after full deliberation, although I believe that there is. What I do contend is that Pike's position needs a view of the divine will along these lines if it is to carry through fully with its critique of traditional theism.

A necessarily good God of the Thomistic sort is a God with scarcely any "will" at all in a morally relevant sense of the term. A truly free God, however, could will a moral evil incompatible with the very moral law that the same God generally commands and himself obeys on other occasions. If he did that, it would seem silly to say (in Aristotelian language) that God appetitively disobeys his own law for the sake of some other and lesser good. Instead we should simply say that for this occasion God wills differently than

he usually does, and for that there is no cause other than God's free choice itself. A truly free God who can will irrationally is religiously preferable to a God who is not morally free and hence not truly moral at all.

V. *What Kind of God? What Kind of Good?*

The sort of God to be affirmed by a further development of Pike's position is one whose free will is at least coequal with his own ontologically good being. The requirement of a genuinely independent will seems to call for a bipolar deity. One model of such a deity appears in Schelling's essays, *Of Human Freedom* (1809) and *The Ages of the World* (1811-1815).²⁰ Despite its idiosyncrasies, Schelling's view of a bipolar God is worth a brief look here because it stresses divine freedom in a way that remains in lively conversation with the concerns of classical theism. It may serve to push Pike's position further in the direction it needs to develop.

The being of Schelling's God couldn't be other than it is, in the sense of having different attributes or ontological perfections. Yet it could "not be at all" if God didn't freely and timelessly will it. The fundamental elements, or what Schelling calls the "powers," of any being whatsoever admit of only one stable structure. Schelling's God freely wills that he have this order or structure himself, and by doing so he gives to himself a stable being. But God doesn't have to will it, for he could instead eternally choose to remain simply a will and a turmoil of disorderly powers. Schelling might rephrase Aquinas by saying that God freely wills his own being and ontological goodness, which is necessary with respect to its essence or what it is, but is contingent with respect to its existence or actuality. This God also freely wills a creation, in which each individual member must likewise have a measure of ontological order and goodness if it is to exist at all, with God's own structural perfections as its paradigms. Schelling's God is therefore not free to create any sort of creatures whatsoever, although he is free not to create at all. However, in his *dealings* with creatures once they are created, God is free to will howsoever he wishes, is even free to will moral evil contrary to their well-being. This God's free will is *not* subordinated to his own ontological goodness by some principle dictating that, for the existing creation, he can only will other things (events affecting the creatures) in accord with the perfect desirability or stability of his own being. One potentially worrisome feature of this type of position, however, is that it seems such a free God could have timelessly willed certain moral laws to be other than they actually are for our world. A radically free God might neither be bound to have just the moral laws he does will nor, having willed them, be restrained by a material incapacity to disobey them himself. Would that result leave us with a fideistic stance after all, one in which whatever God wills is good by definition, in which "morally good" means "whatever God wills"?

Is the moral law given somehow in God's realized being, i.e., is God's own ontological structure the basis of morality? Classical theism for the most part thinks it is, as Reichenbach has shown in his critique of Aquinas. Alternatively, might the moral law be an independent standard, whether ontological or of some other sort, against which the goodness of God's moral character and specific acts of will can be measured? When Aquinas and other classical theists speak about creation, they typically adopt the former perspective and say that God's being simply *is* the standard to which his acts of will conform. Some modern thinkers (e.g., Kantians) would find the latter perspective preferable. Indeed, it is hard to see how classical theism as well can avoid the latter perspective when speaking of God's goodness as moral, as a character trait. That is because it is not evidently the same thing to *be* a standard and to *meet* a standard; and a free agent who is good in a morally praiseworthy sense seems to be not a standard itself but one who measures up to a standard. It seems distinctly odd to call "morally good" a God who (in Spinozistic fashion) simply is what he is, without reference to something other than what he simply is and has to be, whether that something might be a standard freely decreed by him or one independent of him.

In any event, classical theism would not allow the content of "morally good" to be arbitrary, or will-dependent, nor would it allow that that content could have been other than it is. But suppose the moral law itself might have been different, had a truly free God (timelessly) willed differently than he does. "Is the good good because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good?"²¹ To say that "God wills the good because it is good" suggests, on one reading, that its goodness constrains God to will as he does. With a Thomistic God who is constrained to will his own (ontological) goodness with absolute necessity, and to will all other things (ontological and moral) in conformity with it, the immutability and necessity of God's own being as the sole standard of goodness is guaranteed, but at the price of depicting that God as morally unfree, as unable in the moral sphere (except for supererogatory acts) to be, to will, or to act, in a different manner than he does. To say instead that "the good is good because God wills it" would mean that the good's status as standard derives not from its own intrinsic nature, but instead from God's will and absolute power, which decree and establish it as the good. On this latter alternative we could place more stress on moral goodness and give full value to the conviction that God genuinely is or has free will, is truly morally praiseworthy. But we also risk making the content of the good arbitrary and changeable, for mightn't God have willed a different content instead? Are we stuck with a simple choice between these two options, or can we develop the implications of Pike's position in some third way?

If we develop those implications with no more disturbance to classical

theism and to moral reflection than is absolutely necessary, then we might say three things about the standard of moral goodness in relation to God.

1. The moral standard can be viewed as fixed rather than changeable, on a weaker and non-Thomistic reading of the first alternative above—i.e., that the good itself is the standard by which the goodness of God's particular moral acts is to be measured.

It would not follow automatically from this principle that the fixity derives somehow from the nature of ontological goodness *per se* (i.e., the factors productive of ontological stability, whether in God or in creatures). Perhaps it is a standard that, in Kantian fashion, is properly moral rather than ontological at its root. It also would not follow automatically that the standard would be wholly independent of God in all respects. Perhaps God timelessly decrees it, so that it both is unchangeable in actuality and could have been different (had God timelessly willed a different standard instead). Both of these issues are matters for further investigation.

2. We can conceive of God, in his willing *ad extra*, as free to adhere to that standard or to violate it for any given occasion since, as standard (even as standard timelessly willed), it wouldn't causally determine God's particular acts of will to conform to it.
3. God's freedom to violate the standard would be a prerequisite for God's goodness of will or of action being a moral goodness, being morally praiseworthy.

From these principles and from the argument of this paper, it would follow that a morally free God can do or command moral evil not just on or for a single occasion (e.g., command the sacrifice of Isaac), but also over an extended period. Examples of the latter sort (on the assumption that these actions truly are commanded by God and do not just follow from human misconceptions of God's will) might be the systematic destruction of Canaanite cities by the Hebrews, the medieval Christian crusades, and the Islamic military *jihad*. According to this view, religious believers ought to concede that a morally free deity could command such things (although of course they need not affirm that he has in fact done so nor expect that he will), and that his doing so would not make them morally right.

What then would it really mean to the religious believer to say that "God" is a title that could be forfeited? Suppose the supreme creator of the universe were to will moral evil for one or a few occasions. Suppose he truly did command Saul to "utterly destroy" the Amalekites, "man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" (I Samuel 15:3)? Would the believer cease on that basis to worship and obey that creator, and instead deny that he is "God"? Would that be a realistic course? Surely we must strive to keep our moral integrity by refusing allegiance to a devil who is utterly evil (especially when there is a good God available to turn to instead). But

would it make sense to refuse allegiance to a predominantly good creator who is the only God, but who is able to (and perhaps does) freely slip into moral evil once in a great while? Where else in such a universe would we turn for help, for grace, for salvation?²² To ourselves?

In sum, can Pike's first meaning of "God cannot sin" be modified in such a way that "God" remains a title but the logical incompatibility is removed, that the necessary connection between "God" and "good" is broken? That would require replacing "God cannot sin" in the first meaning with: "Morally, God is vastly superior to any other being." Then we could say: "If X is not vastly superior morally (as well as in other ways) to any other being, then X cannot qualify as God." A friend can act in an unfriendly manner once or twice without permanently forfeiting the title "friend." Religious believers might allow that God could will some moral evil without thereby ceasing to be "God." They might do well to acknowledge that God is morally free and really could sin although they don't expect him to, and that if God did sin (as an aberration) they would still worship him and call him "God." Is that too high a theological and philosophical price to pay for accepting the larger implications of Pike's argument about God's moral goodness? Perhaps not.

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NOTES

1. Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969), 208-216; Jonathan Harrison, "Geach on God's Alleged Ability to Do Evil," *Philosophy* 51 (1976), 208-215; Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Why Is God Good?" *Journal of Religion* 60 (1980), 51-66. Reichenbach's paper appears almost unchanged as chapter seven of his book, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982): page references to Reichenbach here are to the original article.

2. For one example, see Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in *The Concept of God*, edited by Thomas V. Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 134-67.

3. Use of "will" as a noun is not meant to endorse reification of will as a "faculty" in God or in humans. Here "will" refers to capacity for self-determined actions, and "free will" to the possibility of these actions being different from what they are, since they are not causally determined by external or internal constraints.

4. In treating salvation (which lies outside our topic), some say that God wills (actually: wants) the salvation of all persons but only acts to save some of them; see, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q19, A6. All citations of Aquinas in the body of this paper are from Part One of this *Summa*, hereafter abbreviated as "ST1."

5. *Proslogion* VII, translation by M. J. Charlesworth, *St. Anselm's Proslogion...* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 125. For a criticism of Pike from the Anselmian

point of view, see Joshua Hoffman, "Can God Do Evil?," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 17 (1979), pp. 213-20.

6. Flint and Freddoso criticize not only Pike but also Geach. In holding (in his *Providence and Evil*) that an omnipotent agent has to be able to act in morally reprehensible ways, Geach for that reason objects to the classical doctrine of divine omnipotence. Flint and Freddoso try to show, against Geach and through a complex analysis of omnipotence, that it is possible for an agent to be both omnipotent and impeccable. But they do not thereby show that an omnipotent being can be both free and also necessarily or essentially impeccable. Their God is not free with respect to whether or not he possesses impeccability (or immutability). See also note 13 below.

7. Pike, p. 214. In "The Concept of Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 11 (1975), 49-71, G. Stanley Kane rebuts two fideistic responses to the theodicy challenge that are typical of theologians such as Barth, Brunner, and Carnell. These are the "unintelligibility thesis" (that human reason is incompetent to evaluate the goodness of God's commands or actions) and the "impropriety thesis" (that it is contradictory, indeed arrogance and sin, to judge the commands or actions of the creator, who is under no obligation to us). If being is analogical (so Aquinas) and if God is *morally* good (so Pike), then fideism looks like an evasion of our problem rather than an acceptable solution to it.

8. Pike, p. 215. Some of Harrison's arguments involve recognition that "God" functions as a title, although he does not refer to Pike.

9. Wainwright, p. 249 in his "Christian Theism and the Free Will Defense: A Problem," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (1975), pp. 243-50.

10. Reichenbach, pp. 52-54. In his note 12 he argues in passing that this ontological conception of divine goodness yields a religiously inadequate notion of God's love as being in effect just self-love.

11. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 166. In his book, Reichenbach gives a much fuller account of the notion of significant freedom, in chapter three, "Presuppositions." Wesley Morriston, in "Is God 'Significantly Free?'" *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), 257-264, argues that Plantinga cannot reconcile his version of the Free Will Defense (and its "significantly free" God) with his version of the ontological argument (involving a God who is morally perfect in every possible world). Morriston tips his hat in Pike's direction by restating Plantinga's version of the ontological proof as demonstrating the existence of a being that is *capable* of being significantly free and morally perfect in any possible world (though it might not choose to be perfect).

12. Reichenbach says "logically" (p. 57); I add "ontologically." That it is logically impossible for God to do moral evil hinges on Pike's analysis of "God" as a title. The real force of Aquinas's position, however, is that it is ontologically impossible, since God is materially incapable of acting contrary to his own nature, which is necessarily good.

13. Thomas B. Talbott makes a thoughtful case for the application of a libertarian view of free will to humans (up to the point of the beatific vision), but of a Spinozistic concept to God, in "On the Divine Nature and the Nature of Divine Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), pp. 3-24. His thesis—"That God has the power to do something does not entail even the possibility that he would ever want to exercise that power" (p. 9)—is based

on a distinction "between the 'could' of power and the 'could' of logical possibility" (p. 9). God is free (uncaused by anything outside himself), and he both can have the ability (power) to will moral evil and yet could never (logically) exercise that power. However, Talbott assumes that God is morally perfect in every world in which he exists (p. 7), and that is his basis for affirming that (logically) God could never exercise the ability to will moral evil. Since Pike's position rejects that assumption, it cannot be led to accept Talbott's conclusion.

14. Plato and Aristotle alike are very intellectualistic and each has a very underdeveloped notion of will. Aristotle's view of choice as being moved by desire and its objects (see: *Rhetoric* I, 1362a 23ff.; *De anima* III, 433a 27ff.) builds upon similar themes in Plato (see: *Republic* 505d-506a; *Symposium* 204e-205a). The subsequent theological position of Aquinas on God's will represents a near-unanimity of the mainstream patristic and medieval tradition up through the thirteenth century, and of many religious thinkers thereafter. A comparable approach recurs in many non-theological doctrines of God in the modern period, in philosophers such as Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel. For them, God cannot be and act in other than a perfectly good fashion precisely because God is supremely rational, and it is reason that dictates perfect conformity to goodness. The purely philosophical traditions (both ancient and modern) are not directly party to our debate, because for them it seems unimportant that divine goodness might not be morally praiseworthy after all. Spokespersons for religious communities and traditions, however, should not be able to dismiss that consideration so easily.

15. A parallel discussion of divine will and goodness occurs in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book One, chs. 37-41, 72-88, 95. See chs. 81 and 88 for the distinction between the necessity by which God wills his own goodness and the "free choice" by which God wills the existence of things other than himself. Norman Kretzmann, in "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983), 631-649, discusses a sense in which Aquinas may not be able to say that God freely chooses to create at all, but only that God freely chooses which creatures to create (in the likeness of his own goodness).

16. *On Free Will* III, 1, 3. In *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Library of Christian Classics VI), edited and translated by John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.).

17. Translation by John Dillenberger, in *Martin Luther: Selections* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), p. 196. A more emphatic statement of the basis of a "divine command" theory of ethics could scarcely be found!

18. This is rather different from a "divine command" view that whatever God says to do is *ipso facto* right. God could command a specific action (e.g., the sacrifice of Isaac) that is wrong because it contravenes God's own moral law; then God would be in the wrong himself for having commanded it.

19. Some (for example, St. Paul) distinguish the morality of specific actions from the global motivation attributed to the actor, which motivation is then given a theological "all-or-nothing" evaluation with respect to eligibility for salvation or damnation. God's character is not appropriately evaluated in these soteriological terms.

20. *Of Human Freedom*, translated by James Gutmann (Chicago: Open Court, 1936); *The Ages of the World*, translated by Frederick de Wolfe Bolman, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942).

21. This famous question from Plato's *Euthyphro* 10A ("Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods") was posed in the form in our text by the nineteenth century Protestant theologian I. A. Dorner, in an essay treating divine immutability in the context of the philosophies of Schelling, Hegel, and Schleiermacher. Dorner acknowledges the late medieval version of the debate by attributing the one alternative to Aquinas and the other to Duns Scotus (but, curiously, not to Ockham). See my account of the discussion in the context of German idealism, in "Schelling and Dorner on Divine Immutability," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985), 237-249.

22. For a different position on the reasons for allegiance to God, one that is not fideism although it is insufficiently distinguished from it, see Charles Lewis, "Divine Goodness and Worship Worthiness," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983), 143-158. On the other hand, we cannot regard God's commands as good no matter what they may be, nor can we be barred in principle from finding, and objecting to, inconsistencies in those commands. On the one hand, however, we mustn't take the easy route of simply denying that anything we find disagreeable actually could be commanded by God.