

Online Appendix A, Supplement 3

What's In It For Them? The Backfiring Structure on the Consumer Side

We have tried to discern a kind of backfiring structure operating in the history of monotheistic religious innovation, when viewed from a certain angle: a way in which each of these innovations can be seen as expressing an impulse to eliminate something oppressively limiting in the purposive rule of the world by divine beings, but which in every case ends up backfiring, instead intensifying the invasiveness of divine purpose and control, narrowing even further not only the scope of ordinary human engagement with the world, but also, and especially, the truly religious dimension of experience. Here I'd like to consider a similar structure on the "consumer" side rather than the "producer" side, as it were: how the desiderata that might motivate belief in the monotheistic God end up undermining themselves.

For however dismal one may find the entailments of monotheism to be, one must respect and come to terms with the undeniable fact that lots and lots of people do adore some variant of this system of belief--thirst for it, want to keep it going and going, are willing to make great efforts to hang on to it. Many people feel they cannot rest until they have done their utmost to spread precisely this belief to every corner of the world. Why? It is important for someone who has trouble finding much that is intuitively attractive about the idea of God to try to feel his way into what it is the everyday believer actually likes so much about having his God around all the time, and why he might be so attached to it. For I take it as axiomatic that the belief in God must be giving someone some kind of *pleasure*, broadly construed. Here we look for motives, not only like a detective on a murder case or like a modern depth-psychologist, but also in accordance with the ancient Buddhist understanding of what a "view" (*dr̥ṣṭi*) of the world is. The Buddhists consider the "mind" to be the sixth sense organ, operating, like the other five, on the basis of a pain/pleasure index. Ideas are the mind's objects, and it caresses, fondles, wallows in ideas in the same way the eye savors pleasing colors or the ear pleasing sounds. To someone who finds the idea of God appalling, its continued popularity becomes inexplicable unless he can

empathetically imagine his way into the mindset of the aficionados of this particular delicacy. This is rather like trying to empathize with a highly specific erotic obsession that one does not share. One is up against immense inner resistance, and indeed a kind of kneejerk revulsion; one also feels an unchangeable kernel of one's own dispositions that cannot be directly influenced by means of conscious will. But the effort to temporarily suspend these dispositions in imagination is indispensable if we are to make any progress at all in understanding our fellow humans and their favored ideas, and how those ideas of theirs which seem manifestly repellent to us continue to flourish and spread. That is potentially helpful for expanding the imaginative reach and adequacy of intuitions of us atheists; but we may conceive the value of this exercise in another way, perhaps even more importantly, as an attempted outreach to believers. I don't mean to suggest that my feeble attempts to imagine the sentiments and motivations of God-yearners and God-believers will be accurate or will ring true for them—but at the very least my failure will help believers get a glimpse at what must seem very strange and incomprehensible to them: it may help answer the question, why are some people *not* delighted by God? Why would anyone instinctively hate such a great thing? What is it about it that bothers them (us) so much? To understand that, it might be useful to see how the God idea seems, to us others, to destroy everything beautiful, even its own desiderata, in everything it touches. Will this perhaps help us understand each other better, perhaps even to empathize a bit with one another?

So I ask myself, why would anyone *want* God? Why on earth would anyone want to believe in such a thing?

We can make some educated guesses.

God as Companion: For one thing, it seems to serve as a bulwark against loneliness: God is related to as an intimate and an interlocuter, a companion. John Updike has a very Updikean character exclaim, “Oh God, dear God, tall friend of my childhood, I will never forsake you, although they say terrible things...”¹ (That “tall friend” is pure Updikean genius.) Whitehead suggests, even of his much reformed concept of God, that he is “a companion, a fellow sufferer who understands.”² God is someone to talk to, someone to complain to, who might sometimes

¹ Where?

² Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 351.

even exert some power in making things go one's way, or bring consolation and companionship simply by being there to listen, and to understand what one is going through.

God as Ally: "I'm outnumbered and overwhelmed, but I'm in the right, dammit!" Or at least I truly feel I am right; I am doing my best. God is my shield, my ally as long as I keep in his good graces—and to some extent, insofar as I'm created in His image and am loved by Him, He is always on my side, rooting for me.

God as Purpose-Giver: What's the point of all this? Things are supposed to have a point, a purpose. All this hustle and bustle, and for what? We may not know what the purpose of all this is, but if God exists, we can be sure there *is* some purpose. Fortunately God is there, and He knows what He's doing, knows what the point is, even if we don't—and it's enough if we know that He knows it. He gave the world purpose; He created it with a job to do, and, somehow or other, we must be doing something that contributes to that, doing our part.

God as Guarantor of the World's Sense-making: Expanding on the previous point, but put another way, somewhat more broadly: Everything seems so senseless and random. It's good to know someone is flying the plane, someone guaranteed to be responsible and on top of it. What's going on now may seem weird, but it's all going according to plan, it will all turn out ok, it's all being taken care of. It's under control. There's an actual story here, not just a bunch of random blips and crashes.

God as Loving Fashioner and Carer-about Every Numbered Hair and Every Fallen Sparrow: God as full-blown absolute creator *ex nihilo*, and as omniscient and omnibenevolent, provides an idea unknown to the ancient world: God standing at the beginning of every causal chain and wanting every little thing, down to the last detail, for the best possible purpose. If it came into being, that means it was wanted—and wanted by the greatest mind, the most loving being, the greatest power, the most caring carer, the most meticulous inventor. What ever is is *loved*, down to the smallest hair. Whatever has come to exist is supposed to exist, and has a reason to exist, the best possible reason serving the best of all possible purposes. Every existent thing, every individual thing and every individual part of every thing, is wanted, is needed, and further is *known* top to bottom, is designed with loving care and enduring concern—at least at its beginning. That means we can feel ourselves down to the soles of our feet in every atom as

suffused with the attention and love lavished on its creation, as the very principle of our being, as the foundation of our existence in the world. The loving and nothing-neglecting mind of God is present in some modality, in every detail of existence, and in every fiber of our beings.

God as Bestower of Equal and Infinite Value, Dignity and Rights: This is an idea often floated by apologists for the long history of monotheism in Europe, even secularist ones, in an attempt to claim that, even though they may feel that Christianity is obsolete and must now be discarded, it had an indispensable role to play in that other European invention (so they say), the infinite value of the individual, and the derivative ideas that each individual human has inviolable and infinite rights. This is because of two features not found as such in pre-monotheist notions, even the very similar ones of ancient pagans. The first is the idea that man was created in the image of God. This is taken to imply that this makes the bearer of that image inviolable, since the image itself, and that of which it is an image, is inviolable. The second is the creation *ex nihilo*. This is sometimes adduced as a decisive amendment to the pagan proto-monotheisms that depended on the uncreatedness of matter and hence the failure of the divine dignity to reach the particularities of every individual: every form was divine indeed for these pagans, but individual beings are not just form but also matter. Form is of the nature of the divine, which is Form of Forms, End of Ends, Thought of Thought; but form is manifest in creatures only as their species-being, shot through with other forms and other species beings which may be divine in their own ways considered separately, but nevertheless this does not amount to the individual, a mismatch of conflicting Forms at odds with one another and therefore mortal, is himself divine. A man has the divine species form of humanity, but unfortunately also the divine species form of water and earth and air, which get in the way of the full expression of humanity in each individual human, which thus is not divinely sanctioned as such. The divine creation of matter is thus supposed to mean that each individual is bestowed with value by the divine not only in its species-being—the ideal towards which it strives as its substantial form—but in its whole individuality, both matter and form.³

³ For an engaging and impressively lucid modern presentation of this view, in a work that shares certain ambitions and many of the same atheist heroes with the present work but with wildly different premises and wildly different conclusions, see Anthony Kronman, *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan*.

God as Parent: God is, as Freudians say, a substitute parental figure, who will take care of me, even if he's stern and demanding sometimes. This is an added affective dimension to the idea that God is a guarantee that everything will work out all right, even if it's not in my own power to make it work out. God is lovingly holding my hand through life, protecting me, looking out for me, sometimes disciplining me with obstacles, sometimes withholding information from me, but always out of love for me and for my own good.

God as Guarantor of Justice: Closely related to the above. Someone is oppressing someone else. The fortunate, the strong, the empowered are taking advantage of the unlucky, the weak, the dispossessed. Someone even stronger than the strong can now be appealed to to set things right. A king, more powerful than both contending parties, shows no favoritism to either, prevents the stronger from abusing the weaker. A parent intervenes when big brother tortures little brother. Apparent inequality, the flourishing of the cruel, the selfish, the proud, is just a temporary thing. In the final analysis, God rules, and he will enforce justice. This can be either a comfort when we are powerless to act, or a buttressing of our courage when we must fight for justice ourselves.

God as Guarantor of Immortality: In modern times, as against the materialist consensus of science, God is held out as a grand exception to the ultimacy of mechanical causation that seems to imply that our consciousness will die when our bodies die. If everything starts in the mind of God, if he created us for a reason, and in his own image, in order to love or obey him, it seems much more likely that He will preserve us in spite of the death of our bodies, for He has both the power and the motive to do so. He can break the apparently iron-clad dependence of our souls on our fragile material brains, since all natural law serves only at his pleasure, and He would want to do so, since the whole point of creating the world was to be known and loved by these creatures he made in his own image for expressly that reason, for all eternity. That's our ticket to eternal life.

God as Explicit Big Other and Trump Card: A little less obviously, we can see the positive value of all this in terms of the Lacanian notion of unconscious belief in God as the Big Other, to which we have already alluded. Making this creeping feeling of being watched and judged explicit, and concentrating it into the figure of one particular self-revealing Being, who

even offers specific hints and instructions on how his judgment might be influenced, would be a powerful means to relieve the anxiety of the slippery, non-thematized Big Other, whose nature I am always having to guess about, sometimes without even being aware of it: my very struggles to be someone or something in particular, to assume some identity, which lies behind all my activities and desires, is geared to this unrecognized viewer. Now that I have given Him a name and a story, I can begin to bargain with Him. I have opened a channel of communication with the unseen ground of my identity, and I have some clues about what it is he might want of me.

And this God is not just a concretization of the Big Other encoded into the symbolic order: in the very process of being named and storied, he is given a promotion. He is bigger and better than any other version of “how the world sees me,” has more power than it, can overrule it. Every other judgment and threat may now be dismissed. So even if the social world misunderstands, condemns or rejects me, I can rely on this bigger Big Other whose viewpoint alone matters. The same goes for any particular concrete group or person who might serve as a candidate for the Big Other’s proxy--the state, my peers, social norms: I can go over their head. Žižek has picked up on the way the fear of God, in this way, confers fearlessness: “I fear God, and thus fear no other thing.” In effect, one has taken all of one’s smaller fears, fears of particular, finite things, and rolled them up in a big ball, totalized them, thereby altering their form decisively and decathecting the fear of the finite things. So while the cringing rhetoric of fear that we find everywhere in monotheistic scriptures—aptly parodied by Michael Palin in Monty Python’s *Meaning of Life*: “Oh Lord God, you are so very very big, we’re all really impressed down here, honestly”—far from making for a slavish personality, instead creates an intrepid state of being, an almost Faustian power and courage.

God as Opening of Possibilities: There is another possible gain to the idea of God, one which stands even closer to our purposes here. God is the necessarily paradoxical thought of what is not thinkable. God is “the non-contained par excellence,” what is always other to its idea, which can never be grasped in the ontology of consciousness, which therefore implants itself in man only as the revelation of his own passivity rather than his active grasp. Whatever we may think is true of the world, of being, God means that this is not all there is to it. As such, God is

what breaks open the closed horizon of Being construed merely physically or metaphysically. “With God, all things are possible.”

God as Obscurely Felt Source of All Beauty, Knowledge, Form: Having had experiences of love and beauty and knowledge which we value highly, we begin to notice how fragile and intermittent these have been, and long for an even more intense and sustained version of them. God is pegged as pure beauty, knowledge, love, order, and the source of all the more pale moments of these that we now and then stumble across. Those moments when things become clear to us, or when we are transported by a beautiful form or attracted by a beautiful person are thought of here not as exceptions, barely surviving against the general surrounding formlessness, chaos, incoherence and ugliness, but rare glimpses of what’s really behind everything. Our goal in life is to take these hints, present in our own highest moments, and work toward a fuller realization and embodiment of them in the world and in ourselves. This is the position we call that of the “Emulative Theist” in the main body of this book.

God as Object of Erotic Surrender: God is here the ultimate “dom”: one surrenders one’s own will to the greater power of God, and suffers willingly because this pleases Him. Far be it for me to suggest that masochism is somehow pathological or even pathetic; on the contrary, with Freud and Nietzsche and Bataille, and more precisely with Tiantai Buddhism, I believe masochism, in some sense or other, is something primary, ineradicable and profoundly important. There seems to be a deep human need to be tortured in particular by someone you love, and it could be argued that many many psychological difficulties of human beings can be addressed only by means of some sort of voluntary surrender to torture in the name of love—for whatever else it might be, torture seems to be one of the deepest strata of that mess of human confusions called love. This is far from a peripheral phenomenon—it seems instead to be one of the central engines of the very best of the mystical effusions to be found in the monotheist traditions. And I am far from wanting to condemn or ridicule it. Very possibly this is one of the best things to be said about God.

So all this sounds pretty good. At least we can vaguely discern, with some effort, that much of this corresponds to some recognizable human impulses and needs. Let us bracket for the

moment the question of whether these assumed desiderata are really worth wanting. Assuming that they are, the question becomes, how well does the idea of God do the job for which it is thus enlisted? I want to explain here why it seems to me to fail so epically in its assigned task. For this idea does seem to have some structurally self-undermining structure that obstructs its full success in these goals. That is, the satisfaction provided by the idea of God for these desiderata, tailored specifically to delineate the God-shaped hole in human life, is structured in such a way that, when thought through to the end, it tends to undermine its own purpose, failing to fulfill its apparent goals, even foreclosing their full satisfaction. It will be one of the themes to which we must return again and again: the way the idea of God backfires on itself. I do not mean to claim, of course, that it is impossible to embrace the idea of God and also enjoy any of these satisfactions. Many many people do so. Rather, I would like to explain why it seems to me that these satisfactions depend on managing to ignore certain entailments of that very solution, and thus why the God idea would remain a Trojan Horse, even if these desiderata are the only relevant ones for human spiritual satisfaction (although it is these very desiderata which I will sometimes want to call into question later in this book). Let's take them up one by one, in the order just considered:

God as Companion: This is one of the few features of the God-effect that we will find quite prevalent even outside the sphere of monotheism. Socrates had his daimon, who at least talked to him and seemed to keep him company, also standing by his side when everyone else seemed to be against him, providing the strength of a team effort (although only to tell him what not to do). Children often have an imaginary friend who does much the same work. Ancestor worshipers often feel their dead forebears to be walking with them, advising them, listening to their gripes, helping out in magical ways, and analogous practices are common among polytheists of all sorts, cultivating special relationships with particular gods. And we will see a similar use of the notion of the transcendental Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in some Mahāyāna systems. But this widespread sense of another presence is actually somewhat complicated, even undermined, when the characteristics of God in the proper monotheistic sense are added. God is omnipotent: that means that if things don't go your way, you may have reason to suppose he's not entirely on your side, at least not right now. It's no longer a team effort, with the invisible

friend doing everything in his necessarily limited power to help; rather, there are complicated reasons why he's ignoring you for awhile. The omnipotence of God puts certain severe constraints on the kind of companionship that is possible with this entity; it excludes the "partner in crime" form of camaraderie, the bond of collusion, the distinctive kind of fraternity and honor and respect that emerges from the mutual recognition among thieves. The kind of friend this God can be is restricted to the "big brother" kind of friend, the friend who stages an intervention on your addiction, the one who won't let you drive drunk, who denies your desires to save you from yourself—and who feels no temptation for and has no history of the specific forms of weakness or uncontainably defiant exuberance which you might be either suffering from or delighting in. The forms of companionship one can have with the trusted grown-up-in-the-room, the save-me-from-myself buddy who knows how to say no, are valuable too, of course—but they aren't everything, and arguably they can never be a complete cure for the real core of existential loneliness. In this sense, an omnipotent and purely benevolent God cannot really be "a fellow sufferer who understands"—which is perhaps why Whitehead, like William James before him and Norman Mailer after him, has to opt for a finite, non-omnipotent God to retain the term God at all—which is, from that point on, a somewhat mendacious misnomer. To suffer requires finitude, some degree of powerlessness. God runs the show, and one is willy-nilly put in the position of a supplicant begging a favor from the boss. It is in the nature of the relationship that his aims may not be the same as your aims, and furthermore that in every case where there is such a conflict, His aim is by definition the only correct and legitimate one. Moreover, as opposed to the polytheist, ancestor worshipper or Buddhist, the monotheist has nowhere else to go: there is no other alternate power to whom one might appeal, one can form no alternate alliance with a god whose interests might be more resonant with one's own—except the Devil. God (or God's corporation, composed of those saints he has approved as toeing the party line without deviation) holds a monopoly on invisible companionship. "Let thy will, not mine, be done" is the only possible response to this (this surrender of will might itself might be the desired effect, replacing your own will with God's, but this also ends up being a cure that is worse than the disease, as we'll see in a moment).

In a certain sense, Christianity may be seen as an attempt to address this difficulty—but one that backfires horribly, as it must as long as God remains in the picture. Process theologians, starting with Whitehead himself, have tried to do away with the “command and obedience” dimension of God, replacing it with some talk about reform by gentle persuasion, which Whitehead tried to link somehow, I kid you not, to what he coyly referred to as “the brief Galilean episode at the origins of Christianity,” dwelling on “the tender elements in the world” which “slowly and in quietness operate in love.”⁴ This is perhaps not very convincing, certainly on the prima facie textual evidence found in the Gospels. A naïve reader with Whiteheadian (or Tolstoyan) good intentions will always find himself pretty shocked and disappointed when she actually cracks open the New Testament, as we explore in detail in online appendix A, supplement 7, “Why So Hard on Love Incarnate.” Even all those touching oft-quoted lines about love and sacrifice end up coming in the context of the usual rhetoric of reward and punishment (everywhere in the Sermon on the Mount, for example) and command, far intensified by the new concept of eternal hell for disbelief that seems to be one of the few truly original contributions of the “brief Galilean episode.” This brings us face to face with the heart of the matter. God as companion is often associated with the idea of God’s love. But what can love mean, what in the world can love be, in the context of omnipotence and command and punishment? It was, I think, Tolstoy, who toward the very end of his life, in his last diaries, came face to face with a simple, seemingly obvious observation about this in Schopenhauer, which reveals the real problem with God, whom Tolstoy had been doing his best to salvage for decades: “Love cannot be commanded.” This is almost a tautological definition: whatever is commanded and enforced cannot be love, whatever is love cannot be commanded and enforced. A command is directed at the will, which can either decide to obey or disobey. If it obeys, it goes ahead and does what was commanded. But spontaneity, lack of deliberate control, seems commonsensically to pertain to the very definition of love. This alone is, for most of us, what makes it sincere. Love willed has already ceased to be love; it has become duty. I cannot be commanded to be delighted by Steven Segal movies; either I am or I’m not. I could perhaps be trained to appreciate them, if I were inclined to subject myself to that discipline; but my willingness to so subject myself would have

⁴ *Process and Reality*, 343,

to be based on some spontaneous, sincere desire, delight or affection I already possess: since you love this person, and she (for her own perverse reasons) loves Steven Segal movies, you try to learn to love them. If I don't love God already, on the basis of what prior, more sincere love, can I be induced to train myself to love him? And how could I train myself to love him above all else—with all my heart, all my soul, all my spirit—if I have to be commanded to love him, implying some more ultimate love which could motivate such training? Love cannot be commanded because love is not subject to will. God's command for love proves him a bumbling charlatan, or a creepily demanding kind of stalker who becomes dangerous when snubbed. Love me—or else! What sorts of sensitivities must we close off to completely deafen ourselves to the overtone of rape in this demand? But perhaps that is less disturbing than the corollary: Love each other—or else! It may strike some as willful malice to associate such commandments with the image of a child pornographer barking his orders from behind the video camera. But in any case, many a man and woman who has been in a contractual love relation, even one that begins as consensual, will know just how well this tends to work out. Can the resulting “love” ever be anything other than a rarefied form of fear, resentment and brownnosing, a minefield of anxieties, tantamount to a training course in mendacity? Can this fear fail to kill any real love? If love is sincere, it requires no commandment, and conversely, if love is commanded, it cannot be sincere—and hence cannot really be love.

We might conclude that this commanded love cannot really refer to an emotional state, but rather to the kind of contractual loyalty demanded of an ancient slave for a particularly lenient master or an employee in a Japanese corporation with a particularly generous benefits package. It is almost poignant to see how Christian writers, right back to the New Testament, attempt to get around this impossible dilemma. Might there perhaps be other meanings of love? May we make some distinction, mining the great pagan traditions, between *eros*, *philia*, *agápē*—a love which somehow is compatible with a command, with obedience, with prudent surrender to superior force, which might be an active deed of the will instead of a passive affection? The Greek disjunction between activity and passivity becomes quite an obstacle here, as in so many other places; and whatever it is that one might come up with under such conditions, calling it “love” of any type requires a bit of linguistic sleight of hand. The most heartbreaking example of

this sort of bait and switch, perhaps, comes in the Gospel of John, Chapter 15. The line is often quoted, out of context, and oh how moving it is: “For greater love hath no man than this, that that he will lay down his life for his friends.” Great! How loving! Self-sacrifice rather than commands and threats! But then you take a look at the whole passage: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do whatever I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” With (definitions of) friends like these, who needs enemies? One imagines, though, that if we all got to define friendship that way, we'd be very friendly indeed. We could all exclaim, with (the pre-Christian) Bob Dylan, “I got a million friends!” If you do what I command, you will remain in my love. If you obey me, you will be my “friends,” not servants, defined of course not as entailing any diminishment in the absolutely binding character of the command structure but only in terms of full disclosure of this very command structure: you're my friends because I tell you what you're going to have to do in order to remain my friend, rather than making you guess. Indeed, besides killing any possibility of real love, this makes things even worse than just being commanded to obey the outward demands for action: now you may not have autonomy even in your feelings, you not only have to serve me but you have to do it with a smile on your face, and much more, in your heart. The double-bind is palpable.

It has often been suggested, most emphatically by certain prominent Christians themselves, that the impossibility of this demand is thus the whole point: since you are being commanded to be in control of something which by definition is not under the control of your will—how you feel about something or someone, a passion and hence a passive affectation rather than an operation of the will—you get a nice new yield of inescapable guilt, constantly compounding, and we move into position for the crucifixion and the sealing of the unrepayable debt, about which we will add a few words below. But the frustrations of attempting to will,

enforce, institutionalize love are perhaps a key feature of monotheistic, particularly Christian, forms of life, which help explain a lot of their peculiarities.

But this is not only a Christian problem, of course, and the attempts to deal with it are not limited to late antiquity. All the Abrahamic religions have to struggle with this in one form or another. Again we think of Levinas' attempt to see obedience as compatible with love, some alternate form of love which is in this case not rooted in obedience, but reversing the relation: the obedience itself "derives from love of one's neighbor, a love without eros, lacking self-indulgence, which is, in this sense, a love that is obeyed."⁵ Here, with another stroke of deft sleight of hand, it is not that we are commanded to love—that absurdity, though manifest in the scriptures, has to be sidestepped. Rather, love itself is what is obeyed. Perhaps some such turn of thought is also evident in the New Testament's "God is love." Then we are able to restore the spontaneity of love: it is not what we are commanded to do, but what precisely cannot be commanded, what has, therefore, to be obeyed. But this clever move, for all its slipperiness, only makes things worse—yet again. The problem is again the unreflecting assumption of a dichotomy between active and passive, reinforcing the tendency of a mind which sees everywhere only the question of obedience and command. For the unspoken premise is: whatever you cannot command must be obeyed! Is obedience the only relationship possible to what one cannot control? Not at all; you might ignore it, you might resist it, you might recontextualize it, you might sail on it, you might utilize it to build something else, or hey, you might study it and try to learn from it. Do naturalists "obey" nature when they study it? Do sailors "obey" the uncontrollable wind? Here again is a thread that will be picked up by many of our atheist mystics, notable in the Spinozistic doctrine of freedom as adequately understood and internalized determinism and the Buddhist "Middle Way" between indulgence in desire and suppression of desire, namely, mindfulness of desire. And it is thus not surprising that this reconfiguration of love, at all costs keeping it somehow within the horizon of command and obedience, also requires that freedom too is redefined to be compatible with obedience. We find sentences like this put before us: "Obedience to the Most High is defined for me by precisely this

⁵ Levinas, in "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," *Levinas Reader* (Blackwell), p. 206.

impossibility of running away; through this, my ‘self’ is unique. To be free is simply to do what nobody else can do in my place. To obey the Most High is to be free.”⁶ Holy Orwell!

It may appear narrow-minded and mean-spirited of me to pick on these little interpretative adjustments; after all, have I not myself argued that free reinterpretation is the unavoidable and legitimate means by which time itself moves forward? It is not the mendacity that I object to here; in fact, I love and enjoy the ingenuity of it, there is no reason why anyone has to “be true to” the original meaning of anything, least of all the texts they live and die by. To the extent that it provides new thoughts, new angles, new lenses by which to see, I have nothing but praise for such casuistry. But what is happening in cases like this is far from innocuous. For by making these texts palatable, the unsurpassable horizon of the problematic of command and obedience is reasserted again and again. One is habituated not to know any other way to think. They are, as it were, given a justification. We might perhaps recall the structure and consequences of the New Testament’s anti-Judaism. In the Synoptics we are shown Jesus condemning “the Scribes and Pharisees” as hypocrites with unrestrained righteous bile; a charitable reading can certainly regard this as an intramural dispute among Jewish sects, with one school of interpretation of a shared set of scriptural sources registering urgent protest against another. That said, the level of vitriol put forth here seems radically elevated over the relatively mild style of mutual opposition we find among the Scribes and Pharisees themselves; the black-and-white language of furious prophetic condemnation typical of the apocalyptic and messianic milieu and inherited from John the Baptist is largely absent from their hermeneutic disputes. This dichotomous style of condemnation, rather than the content of the contending interpretative stances, is what becomes decisive in forming the character of this moral position as it takes its mature form: not what is considered right but the heated insistence on the absolute dichotomy between whatever fills that slot and whatever is outside of it, the angry demand for the absolute destruction and exclusion of whatever is identified as evil, becomes the formal concomitant of the level of moral authority attributed to the angry prophet. As long as this rage is directed against a specific historical situation or person, constrained to a particular time and place—and as long as the raging prophet is merely a temporary mouthpiece rather than the angry deity

⁶ Ibid., p. 202.

Himself—this invective serves only as a portable cudgel: in new historical situations, one can apply the term “Pharisees” to one’s enemies of the moment and thereby make a claim to the same level of moral authority and probity, but the target shifts along with the transfer of the cudgel from hand to historical hand. Things change dramatically when the named target identifies a group that continues to exist throughout future history, and when the critic is no longer regarded merely as a shifting mouthpiece, crafting and aiming the condemnatory rage as appropriate to one particular historical moment, but as the deity Himself, speaking from the perspective of eternity about what thus becomes an eternal enemy. The consequences of this become evident over in the Gospel of John, where a group of people now identified simply as “the Jews” (i.e., people of Judah, indicating the entire ethnos rather than any specific persons) are, without further ado, declared “sons of the Devil.” Now, if we assume Jesus is a good and just man, maybe even the best and most just man, maybe even God himself, and yet we see that he hates someone this much, the only reasonable conclusion is that these particular people, whoever they are (even if one has never met a Pharisee or a Jew), must really really deserve it. The rules of the game are “Jesus must be right.” That means that it’s more than ok to smear an entire race of people, to paint them with one brush, to characterize and demonize human beings by ethnic group, to think and judge in terms of masses and races instead of specific persons and their specific characters and deeds. Not only is it ok, it’s what the most far-seeing, most fair-minded, most loving soul in the universe does, so it’s almost obligatory. But in addition to the general procedure of judging by race or group affiliation, the specific judgment must be correct, since Jesus made it. So it follows that this group of people, “the Jews,” must be very evil indeed, and whatever the Jews do must be seen as justifying the rage of the most peaceful, patient and loving being in the universe. We thus *must* find something hateful about the Jews; whatever the Jews do, it *must* be found hateful. Similarly, the monotheistic framework of obedience and command “must be right.” This means the condemnation of disobedience, the notion of commanded or commanding love, *must* be reasonable, and even profound. Thus wherever we see the affect of disobedience or self-assertion, we have to see it as hateful. Are you disobeying? Do you dislike being subjected to commands and threats? *That means you’re against love.*

God as Ally: Much of what applies to the idea of companionship with God also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the idea of an alliance with God. The first case is wanted in times of peace, the second in times of war. And we are always involved in both: always we are forming our own peaceful intimate groups, our families and clans and clubs of buddies, and having to hold off against some social out-group or some hostile environment of elements. As in the previous case, it makes straightforward sense to want an alliance with an invisible force to help in fighting these battles. But here again the case changes decisively, and for the worse, when the invisible ally is not only an ancestor, or a particular spirit with whom one has formed some kind of close relationship, but also the creator and judge of everyone and everything in the world. The obstacles to me that I am fighting suddenly have to be read either as 1) deliberately created by God to oppose my will, either out of a) some malice toward me, or b) as a manifestation of the ways in which His will actually is at odds with mine, demanding my submission, or c) as a deliberate test; or 2) created by the free will of others of his creatures who are now disobeying him, making it potentially part of my job to do the Lord's work and smack them back into line; or 3) created by God out of love, as a training ground for me, to cultivate some quality of mine that will in the long run serve me well. All of these are pretty unappealing, with the possible exception of 3. If 1a, I am praying in vain, for God hates me and wants to destroy me: the alliance is all in my head, and I am constantly in danger of finding out that the rug has been pulled out from under me. If 1b, the alliance fails again, for we are at cross-purposes; I might as well forget about having any ally in this fight and concentrate instead on learning submission to God's will. If 1c, the alliance again fails, as we are working at cross-purposes again; I must renounce my initial struggle and redirect my efforts to the new task of passing the test. If 2, however, things are even worse. For there what had begun as my particular struggle against some other particular being, both of us playing as equal participants, serious but still basically potentially respectful rivals on an even playing field, has now become a situation where I represent the universal good and my opponent is pure evil who objectively deserves to be subjugated or destroyed. I disown my own particular hatred and have to start calling it universal good, and a new depth and breadth of antagonism emerges in my commitment to the fight, reflecting the universal validity and justice of what it is this miscreant, my enemy, opposes. It's

not just me who hates him, it's the very rocks and stones, the very earth and sky. Needless to say, I also provide him with a model for mimesis: soon enough he will regard me as universal evil, himself on God's side and myself the enemy of God. Besides the loss of innocence and of the possibility of respect for alternate points of view that this entails, it certainly seems to set the stage for increased viciousness and ruthlessness in the world. Above all, the alliance fails here most profoundly, because far from helping you win your battle, God has only doubled the number of battles you must fight, one of which is eternally and by nature never finished. For by definition, you can never know for sure whether you are right that you are on God side or whether it is your enemy who is right. The psychological cost of this situation is of course huge, requiring new heights of self-blinkering to push away all possible doubt that maybe, just maybe, what the other guy is saying is right in some way too. That doesn't always work so well. But in any case, the attempt to reduce the number of your opponents in the world through this alliance fails miserably. Now you have not one fight, but two. Now you have to fight to decide not only who will prevail, but also over who is right, and your opponent is not just a particular individual but a proxy for a universal evil which has an endless supply of other representatives.

As for 3—that God is using this obstacle to train and improve me in some way—is a feasible reading, and one that indeed is a real boon that may come from the belief in an invisible power behind negative experiences. But it is one of the features of God that is served better by a polytheist or, much more, a Mahāyāna version. For the polytheist, I may have a partner in a particular god or ancestor, and we have the same case as that discussed above in the section on “God as Companion.” In the Mahayana Buddhist version, we have a universal benefactor who is designing specific challenges to help me attain the qualities that will allow me to achieve freedom from suffering. On the Buddhist account, importantly, this was already my own goal in all my actions: no matter what I have been doing, however virtuously or viciously, however successfully or unsuccessfully, I have always been motivated by the goal of in some way reducing suffering—usually only my own suffering: that is just what “motivation” means. I am not asked to regard these as illegitimate, only to learn that they are self-defeating. In both the polytheist and the Buddhist case, the purposes are my own; in the case of God, the purposes must be ultimately not mine but God's, or that subset of my purposes that is in line with God's

purposes: these may be regarded as my true or original purposes, the purposes I was made for, but in any case I am required to make a sharp division between those purposes that presently accord with this sacred part of myself and those that, for whatever reason, do not. To whatever extent these clash, part of the training must be to get me to give up my own purposes and adopt His instead. As such, is God my ally or am I rather God's ally? By enlisting God as my ally in attaining my goals, I cease to have an ally whenever my ally and I disagree. So the desire for an ally, considered purely as such, is not fulfilled, but rather undermined, by enlisting God as my ally—unlike the polytheist gods or Mahāyāna bodhisattvas. In the latter case, it is true, part of the assistance granted may indeed be ways to wean me off my self-destructive and self-defeating desires, including the one for which I initially enlisted their help. But this similarity should not tempt us to read this situation, as is often done, through a monotheistic lens: the new purposes for which the alliance trains me is not a replacement of the old desires in favor of new universal ones, but a greater fulfillment of my own desire—to diminish my own suffering—and these new purposes receive justification and motivation only to the extent that they succeed in fulfilling this original desire. This bears some resemblance to the Emulative Theist position of Socrates in the *Symposium*, and elsewhere, except that the justificatory structure has a completely different metaphysical underpinning: the ontological primacy in the latter case lies with the Good, not the desire, while in the latter case this relation is reversed. Again, for the atheist, including the Buddhist, we call good what we desire, rather than desiring the Good.

God as Purpose-Giver: Purpose is of course a lovely thing to have. Without it, life gets boring and meaningless real fast. But fortunately it is not easy for a living being to get rid of purpose; it is unavoidable. There are always new desires and needs, and each provides purpose. But purposes are only a nice thing when they are one's own purpose. When you have to do what someone else wants one to do, it is not so fun—unless one can find a way to adopt the other's purpose as one's own. If one feels a purpose before being informed of one from outside, one doesn't need God to provide the purpose. Purposelessness provides one's own purpose, not one single purpose, but purpose after purpose, each one falling away as soon as it is not organically emergent from one's own state. But if one does need to find out externally what the purpose is, what God's purpose is—and this externality is essential to the idea of God as God; it must be

recognized as having a source that one does not simply recognize as an aspect of oneself—then it must confront one at first as a heteronomous purpose that one must serve. From there two options open up: 1) I recognize that this is my own deepest yearning too, which makes sense since it is what God created me for; 2) I fail to recognize anything appealing in it, but I submit to God's greater power and serve him. In the latter case I have two options again: a) erotic surrender to God, finding the very fact of being forced to accept a purpose alien to one's own to be one's own second-order desire and purpose, or b) grumbling surrender to God involving continual dislike, finding nothing in the experience that can be picked up and recognized with one's own purpose or desire. If 1) then God is a vanishing mediator, for what really mattered is that it is one's own deepest desire and purpose. God helped one discover what it was; but what really made it desirable was whatever of that purpose was then discoverable in one's own being (this is the *Euthyphro* problem in another form). In that case, God can only stand in the way—for He can change his mind about the purpose, or reveal something other later about one's actual purpose, something that does not accord with one's own sense of discovered purpose. One must always live under the threat of Him changing the rules. If that does happen, one is in situation 2. 2a will be discussed below as a separate item. 2b is definitionally undesirable.

God as Guarantor of the World's Sense-making: The premise behind this item is that sense is something that must be imposed on or added to a prior chaos, that senselessness is the default that requires an intervention to be dispelled. This premise itself seems to me to be a consequence of monotheism, as I try to show in the body of this book. Monotheism spreads the disease and then sells the cure. For in the absence of monotheistic premises, I would argue, with Bergson, that the only thing that can interfere with a given coherence, a given sense of things, is another sense. "Chaos" is actually a word for the class of alternate orders. As Spinoza will say, "order" is just a word for an array of things that is relatively easy for us to imagine and predict, as compared to other arrays of things that are harder for us to keep in our mind's eye. But in all cases we have some sense of what is happening, some story, some coherence—we are condemned to meaning, as Merleau-Ponty put it. Thus the question is just how many chunks of such coherence there are, and if and how they clash with one another. The monotheist contention thus amounts to saying that all the small coherences, all the little senses of things, even when

they are threatened or disconfirmed or destroyed by clashing with an alternate sense, will all turn out to be parts of one larger sense (including even the threat and disconfirmation and destruction, for those too are “senses” of things, intelligible situations). To say “sense” here then means that the array of the whole will be somehow analogous to the array originally called “sense” and “order” by the human person, which was threatened or disconfirmed or destroyed by some alternate array: it will end up being something intelligible to him as sense, as modeled on his initial sense. But this forecloses the (for us) more satisfying possibility that sense as such, infinite senses, are intrinsic to being, that whatever we are experiencing as nonsense is being experienced by other moments and points of being, as just what we experience subjectively here as sense, in ways unimaginable to us—true omnipresence of sense and of nonsense, and of the inescapable copresence of both. What we get instead with a single order modeled on our initial sense of order is just the limitation of sense to a narrow meaning: the intelligibility of all being to us signifies that the types of intelligibility are limited, that the particular range of intelligibility available to us has a special relationship to the ultimate level of being, into which all other possible forms of intelligibility must ultimately collapse. This is a loss: we lose the infinity of types of sensibleness, each as sensible to itself as ours is to us. This includes the foreclosure of the development of our present sense of sense into radically alternate types of sense; God opens that up within certain limits (I see now through a glass darkly, but then I will see face to face, and so on), but this is a concealed limitation of a much more radical prior default state of the inescapability of an infinity of senses, unloseable sense, new senses encountered with every possible alteration, even those we currently consider completely senseless. More on this elsewhere in the body of the book. I’ll add also that as long as the sense of things is rooted in something other than our own innate sense-making, we are always susceptible to a sense that is radically unfavorable to our current interests—as happens in many forms of monotheism, e.g., when the sense of the world is to make sure that people like myself are punished and destroyed. There is indeed some satisfaction to be derived from one aspect of things that accords with the demands of my being, my need for order and sense, but this is bought at the high price of a much larger frustration of many other demands of my being. Paranoia, conspiracy theory, also satisfies this need for things to make sense, albeit one that is stacked against me or my conception of the

good. As long as God is in charge, the sense of the world wavers between the possibilities of happy ending and conspiracy.

God as Loving Fashioner of and Carer About Every Numbered Hair and Every Fallen Sparrow: At the back of every fact is the master's hand: all of them are precious to him, his own products. His care and attention are embodied in them. He wanted them here, which is why they exist. He wanted them to be this way, which is why they are this way. So you had better not mess with them. But this protection cuts both ways: there is nowhere you can go, not into any level of detail where you can be free from the surveillance from His panopticon. For his love and care are what created them, i.e., got them to the point they are when they first begin to exist. Once they come into your hands, anything that happens to them must accord with that original intention. Two intentions now come into a potential clash: His in creating the thing and getting it as far as its first moment, in its original state, just as he wanted it; and then you, picking it up from there, either to clash or to accord with that intention. You are now walking a tightrope, and everything you do will either be ruining or preserving the intention embodied in the thing. The dichotomy of either/or now becomes the principle of the cosmos. Everything is either one or the other, right or wrong, helping or hurting, according with or violating the single original intention for this thing that brought it into being. "Caring" here means that "right and wrong" now become both inescapable and irreducibly heteronomous: submission or failure to submit to the master now becomes the sole interpretative lens through which to view all aspects of existence. Wiggle your toes in the sand, watch the sparrows hop around: you stand accused. To paraphrase the Coen Brothers' film *Barton Fink*, the worst thing possible has happened: He's taken an interest!

No! says the believer. You don't understand! It is a gift—haven't you ever been given a gift? The gift of life, the gift of the world, the gift of being, the gift of each being. God fashions each thing and hands it over to each of us like a gift; from that time on his only joy is to see in what ways we will play with it. He is proud of us for having such ingenuity in the ways we come up to play with the things he made—that brings greater glory to his creation, shows how great a toy-maker he really is, and he takes joy in the joy we have in messing it all up and finding new ways to chew and shred and manhandle the creation. The same goes for our lives: they are a gift,

like a mouse toy to a cat, which He loves to watch us tear to shreds. That's what we're supposed to do.

Such a theology is possible, I admit, and I can well see its attractiveness. It seems to undermine the ethical demands of the historical monotheisms, and thus as far as I know has never been tried. But unfortunately even this beautiful apotheosis of play and multiplicity is ruined by the presence of God. For nothing ruins play like knowing you are supposed to play, are being watched and given marks on the playfulness of your play. That ipso facto turns play into work. The demand "Enjoy!" is indeed the most damaging of all demands—what matters is the form of the demand, the command, rather than the content (whether it's "work!" or "enjoy!"). In either case, one is serving a master, by the very structure of the God idea, which is what makes all things work, even enjoyment. Enjoyment-work is the worst work of all. Ask any prostitute, son of an oversolicitous mother, or sadomasochist dom stalked by a bottom.

God as Bestower of Equal and Infinite Value, Dignity and Rights: This was supposed to derive from the image of God and the creation ex nihilo. But these two monotheistic ideas undermine one another on precisely this point. The image of God is divine. But this does not make the bearer of the image of God divine. On the contrary, he is prevented from being divine by the creation ex nihilo; the separation between image and bearer of image is enforced with the full fury of the separation of creator and created, which must be absolute for "creator" to be truly creation ex nihilo. For the creator must entirely pre-exist his own creations, and thus be ontologically absolutely distinct from them, to be the sole and absolute creator, which is what creation ex nihilo requires. The upshot of this is either that no human can be fully divine, or that that only one human can, the Incarnation. In either case, the image of God present in every individual (or every *other* individual) is imperfectly realized. What obstructs its full realization can no longer be Matter as such, or alternate forms at cross-purposes within the same individual, since all of these are now divinely created and pronounced "good" from the beginning. But obstructed it must be, precisely because of the creation ex nihilo. What obstructs it must now be something else. In the logic of most monotheisms, the prime candidate for this is sin, conceived in various ways, but always connected to the relation of disobedience of the Will of God. This may also connect to corruption, i.e., the despoiling of the originally good body and mind through

its misuse. These hardly seem like improvements if what we are looking for is the infinite value of the individual. Indeed, only now does it become possible to consider some individual persons worthy of complete destruction, as entirely without value for the future Kingdom of God—for there is now a way to fall out of favor with God, which is not available when Form per se—any form of intelligibility at all—is ipso facto divine. We should note also that the image of God is identified with precisely that one aspect of the person which reflects the particular monotheisms values, and ipso facto renders worthless the rest of the person, or any other aspect of the person not measuring up to that one part. The most usual candidate is Reason itself, but Faith or Obedience or Holiness or Consciousness or something else can just as easily be plugged in there; the structure of singling out one aspect of the human being and concomitantly devaluing all others remains the same. It is for the same reason that this “equality” and “dignity” now become increasingly limited to only human beings, excluding all other animals and all other objects except to the extent that they serve humans, where the image of God is located. Equality comes with a restricted definition which excludes most of creation—but also sets up a standard by which to judge other apparent humans as not really fully human and not really protected by infinite dignity, to whatever extent they are regarded as lacking the full or proper development of whatever identifying feature was singled out as image of God. Because of the monotheist premise, it can never be possible to simply assert that human beings *are* God; it must be only an image. Being merely an image of divinity rather than divinity itself requires that there be some difference between some aspect that is godlike and some other aspect that is not. Different Biblically inspired sects may draw the line in different places, taking Faith, or Goodness, or Reason, or the intact human (male?) body itself, as the divine image, but they all must draw a line somewhere. Any human beings showing a preponderance of whatever lies on the wrong side of that line will thus be devalued, sometimes even dehumanized, sometimes even enslaved. Justifications for human slavery are of course extraordinarily complex, and slavery can certainly exist and perpetuate itself with alarming vigor even without a robust metaphysical justification. But an argument can be made the *imago dei* motif in Biblical monotheisms actually ups the ante on the classic Aristotelean notion that some human souls are intrinsically born to be slaves, because they lack the capacity to Reason. The latter idea, after all, is a direct transposition of the

values encoded in the *Noûs as Arché* premise into social theory, and it is these values that we have argued define the field of monotheist thinking. If Reason is identified as the *imago dei*, whatever degree of lack of Reason is perceived in another will be perceived as that exact degree of lack of divinity. The greater the holiness and value and power of the divinity involved, the greater will be the effects of this disparity in value between those displaying the divine attribute and those failing to do so. If the deficit is regarded not as intrinsic but as acquired after an initially equal starting point, the case becomes still worse, for now in addition to lacking the full manifestation or endowment of a particular divine attribute, one is *responsible* for the failure to develop one's intrinsic divinity, possibly even due to the wicked misuse and corruption of it, and thus blameworthy and justifiably in need of chastisement and correction. In any case, it is certainly striking how many colonial projects of Europe quite naturally, and with completely good conscience in what they were doing, regarded all native populations that did not display "Reason" as they conceived it to be quite worthy of slavery (see Columbus' diary within days of landing in the New World: unblinkingly and without any sugar-coating he reports how lovely the weather is, the customs of the locals, and what good slaves they would make). Not that other groups with different kinds of ideological baggage did not also enslave others, and not that there were not special economic and historical circumstances that occasioned the explosion of enslavement in the colonial expansionist context. But it is still somewhat amazing how *immediately*, how *unhesitatingly*, and how *sustainedly* the right to enslave was asserted in this case.

God as Parent: Cuts both ways: if we do accept the Freudian story, with whatever modifications, we will surely find all the craziness associated with our relation to our parents reproduced and indeed absolutized in the relationship to God, whether that God is loving or violent. The neurotic relation to the parent now becomes a neurotic relationship to the world.

God as Guarantor of Justice: Whether distributive (addressing inequality in the distribution of goods and privileges) or retributive (addressing inequality in the consequences for the same actions, or between the action and its consequences), the idea of justice has something to do with impartiality, fairness, non-preference for any particular viewpoint. The demand for justice was in the simplest case a protest against the domination of one viewpoint over another,

one being's interest over another's: the strong wants to rape and pillage; the weak wants to not be raped and pillaged. These two viewpoints are in conflict, and only one of them is getting what it wants. This is less obvious but equally pertinent in the case of a law which, although universally and impartially applied, is nonetheless considered "unfair": it might be felt, for example, that capital punishment for all cases of whistling in public is an "unjust" law, even if it is enforced equally to all agents. But this is still a question of conflicting viewpoints; the makers and enforcers of the law presumably thought it was desirable, while those upon whose heads it is applied are somewhat less enamored of it. Different agents want different things, and some third viewpoint is brought in to "adjudicate" between them. God is brought in as an enforcer of justice, presumably because he is not beholden to any of the participants in the dispute. This can be tied both to his status as creator (he has an equally intimate "kinship" relation with every person, since he created them all) and his omnipotence (he is too powerful to need favors from anyone, to be bribed, to be bought). Let us leave aside the fact that the canonical sources on this judge often assert that some persons are especially dear to him (particular clans, or believers in particular creeds about himself); even if this potentially embarrassing favoritism for persons is left behind, it seems close to the essence of the idea of God, as in any way personal and/or endowed with a will, that he has a preference for certain actions over others. These actions are done by particular persons; the difference between a preference for persons and a preference for actions is just a question of duration, or even of description. We still have a conflict of viewpoints above all else; these may be the viewpoints of different individuals, or of a single individual at different points in time. For we may assume that when person X committed action A, his viewpoint was that action A was in some way good and desirable. A judgment against action A is also a judgment against the viewpoint that regards action A as desirable, that is, the viewpoint of person X at time T. What if I have a disagreement with God about what is right (not at all unlike the objection to the death for whistler's law, many have felt that the law which threatens eternal damnation for suspending judgment about God's existence is rather unjust)? We have a conflict of viewpoints. God has a viewpoint, I have a viewpoint. God, as long as He has a viewpoint, has a preference for a viewpoint—His own viewpoint—and is thus by definition unjust. Justice is postponed into an infinite regress, unless it collapses into a Machiavellian

tautology: whatever God’s viewpoint asserts is, by definition, right. Another way out is to assert that, since God is the ground of my own being, and of the being of every other conflicting viewpoint, in acceding to his viewpoint both I and my opponent are really just fully assuming our own “true” viewpoints. But the difference between my “true” and my “merely apparent” viewpoint persists, and the adjudication of which is which is once again tautologically handed over to God’s view of the matter. The point is that the very thing God was wanted for here is prevented to exactly the extent that God is real: the more real God is, the more active, the more he has a viewpoint of his own, the more impossible justice becomes. As God becomes more virtual, more conceptual, less palpably present, less sincerely believed in, new possibilities for justice arise. But however much God persists as someone or something real, He remains to that extent an obstacle to any possibility of justice.

Another point needs to be made about God as guarantor of justice. The yearning for justice on the part of the woefully oppressed is certainly nothing to sneer at, and I very much appreciate the fact that my indifference to and even distaste for this dimension religious sentiment has a lot to do with having lived a life without any direct experiences of monstrous oppression visited on my person or my loved ones in my lifetime. When I see people who have been robbed, raped, tortured, exploited, enslaved out of the runaway greed of the powerful, I can understand that they may lust for supernatural revenge, and I cannot at all blame them for this lust. I do not doubt that I would feel it too if anything remotely similar happened to me. Far from blaming them, my sympathies are entirely with them: I feel what everyone feels, immense compassion and empathy for their plight. But my sympathy is not only for their suffering; what seems even worse to me is the way the trauma they’ve endured has affected their view of the world, locking them into an obsessional concern with justice, with comeuppance, with retribution, with getting even. I don’t say this is merely thirst for revenge masked in a smokescreen of fine-sounding words like “Justice,” as some cynics do: rather, I think that the Justice, which is one virtue among many, has become the object of a woeful monomania here, not due to any fault on the part of the monomaniac but as a result of the trauma suffered through his or her oppression. The sad result is a black-and-white world of right and wrong. It is the narrowness of this view of the world, which sees all events in terms of who is right and who is

wrong, that is the saddest thing of all, the worst damage done by oppression, much more horrifying than the direct suffering inflicted. The suffering hurts bodies, but the reaction to the suffering in the form of moral monomania hurts minds and spirits, makes of human beings one-dimensional spiritual dwarves. Conscience becomes the only interpreter of life. A human mind is reduced to a mechanism that asks first and foremost in any situation What is the right thing to do? Whose fault is it? Who is responsible? How can justice be restored? Ethics becomes the be-all and end-all of human subjectivity. This is, for me, the real tragedy, and the real focus of legitimate sympathy. We behold a spectacle like that of the crazed heroine of Tarantino's rather tedious film *Kill Bill*: a person to whom something so outrageous has been done that their entire existence has been colonized by a single fixed idea: revenge, settling scores. Both the wound and the resulting obsession deserve our pity, and her ability to wreak bloody justice is understandably met with the audience's sympathy, for we are looking at a person who has really been ruined, mentally, by the damage done to them, and their rage is understandable: not just rage at having been buried alive and left for dead, or falsely imprisoned, but rage at having had their lives and their minds hijacked by a single obsession, having been thereby turned into a kind of monochrome robot who sees life only in terms of right and wrong, the richness of the world in all its shades of ambiguity and all its dimensions reduced to a single issue. Those who are fortunate enough not to have been damaged in this way, who through no virtue of their own have happened not to have to live through terrible historical traumas of injustice and oppression, have a responsibility to maintain the survival of a less narrow outlook, to offer reports from outside those unfortunate prison gates, to keep a somewhat less obsessional view of the world alive, and not to let the understandable excitement and glamor of the two-toned world become the only value available. Needless to say, the idea of God as final judge and moral guarantor of justice does just the opposite: locks the question of right and wrong into the supreme place, makes the world one long drama of justice and revenge, allows the unfortunate monomania of the most damaged to define and restrict the story of the universe. Whether or not this is the result of only a particular sort of supreme God, the moral God as envisioned by extreme sufferers, as Nietzsche thought (sometimes jokingly imagining an alternative artist-God instead), or whether it pertains to any idea of an ultimate personal God, due to the very nature of the personal, as I tend to

suspect, the value of the comforts provided by God specifically as guarantor of justice are clearly, from where I sit, immensely surpassed by the price paid for them.

God as Guarantor of Immortality: The immortality of human souls is really not in any way intrinsic to the notion of God—indeed, as is often noted, it seems to be glaringly lacking in the earliest assertions of full-fledged monotheism in the Hebrew Bible. There are many conceptions of immortality that do not involve a god of any sort, and many conceptions of an omnipotent creator God that do not involve human immortality. Immortality does not follow from the idea of God, and God does not follow from the idea of immortality. God comes to be grafted to the idea of our personal immortality through a very specific set of connected ideas: God’s purpose in creating us, rooted in God’s love and desire to be loved by us, construed as a love that specifically desires us to live forever, praising and loving Him. But both love and God could be interpreted quite differently, in such a way as to require no such move on God’s part. If God loved according to Wilde’s dictum—as entailing the desire to destroy the thing loved—we would have a very different picture—and really, the notion of God stands in irresolvable tension with the assurance of our immortality, for it is ultimately in His hands; he could simply change his mind about the whole thing at any moment (after all, he’s done that kind of thing before!). God decides whether our souls are to live on or to be destroyed, ultimately the power and the decision belong to Him—because our souls themselves quite literally belong to Him. This intrinsic instability lent to the idea of immortality by the idea of God is perhaps something perceived by our earliest atheist mystics, the Jains: there we have a decision for the immortal soul, which is seen as necessitating the rejection of God. God would compromise the autonomy of the soul, and it is only this autonomy, extended to a metaphysical principle, that really guarantees its immortality. So an assertion about the specific nature of God and the specific nature of love are needed to graft the idea of immortality to God, and even then it can never be a stable transplant. More to the point, it is empirically demonstrable that we can have the idea of immortality without God, and the idea of God without immortality. Immortality is a separate issue. It may or may not be desirable, and hashing that out requires an entirely separate discussion. For the record, I would put this belief with the other unverifiabiles listed earlier: like reincarnation, like astrology, like the Loch Ness monster. It does not stand and fall with the idea

of God; more to the point, the particular objections we have to the idea of God are not the objections we might or might not have to the idea of immortality. Bataille notes that the notion of the eternal soul—i.e., souls that are eternally separate in exactly the way they are in life—is certainly of a piece with the purpose-rules-purposelessness defeat of the oceanic, and we would have to concur with that judgment. However, there are many other options available for imagining postmortem conditions. The exact religious valence of each, and how they slot into the general parameters of atheist mysticism as we've sketched it out here, would be quite interesting to explore. But that would require an entirely different book.

God as Explicit Big Other and Trump Card: This is an important point, and indicates a crucial structural feature of totalization, its necessary power of reversal, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere, and of course it is this structure, rather than God per se, which actually interests Žižek when he notes the fearlessness of all finite things that comes with fear of God. We see another instance of a similar structure in certain deployments of what is called Great Doubt in Chan Buddhist *gongan* literature and practice (or in the more familiar Japanese form, *Zen kōans*), where doubt is deliberately enhanced, intensified, exacerbated; where all particular, finite doubts and worries are gathered up and moved over into the *kōan*. But in that case, the thing into which the fear and doubt and anxiety is moved is subsequently itself exploded—and in *kōan* practice, exploded precisely by virtue of this totalization itself. The problem with God is that this is never allowed to happen. God remains real, and really to be feared. The energizing of our courage, of our fearlessness in the face of finite things, is bought at a price: if God remains in any way real to us, we are just more deeply, frustratingly enslaved in our apparent power, the more beholden in our apparent lawlessness, the more terrified in our apparent courage. The only way this really has a positive yield for the individual is if God is no longer really taken seriously. And this is what makes Žižek's generous reflections possible: as long as God is just a joke, it's a really useful and positive thing. God is a joke to Žižek, and thus God is really quite good. A palpable irony, because Žižek has long railed precisely against this sort of cynical half-belief in favor of life-and-death commitments and deeds. For those who really believe, the effect is just the opposite: you just get something even worse, more powerful, more inescapable, to be afraid of—and it, He, can make a much worse mess of you than any finite thing can. If the opposite

effect does sometimes seem to occur, might that perhaps mean that those who think they believe in God might be mistaken? In a formula, I am suggesting: if belief in God does you any good, that simply means you don't really believe in God.

God as the Opening of Possibilities: For the moment I will not dwell on the question of how appropriate the Levinasian implicit or explicit allusion to idea of "God" is; in the discussion of Daoism in the main text, we will see that, *prima facie* at least, the notion of the "uncontainable," the "always more than whatever you grasp" pertains much more closely to the term Dao, that is, the exact opposite of God. There too we find this constitutional ungraspability connected with certain implications not only about cognitive matters, but also about the efficacy of the active will for mastery. In the case of Levinas, this is used as a segue to the traditional attributes of both God as creator and God as Goodness, what makes us, in Levinas' own phrase, hostage to the other—in sharp contrast to the Daoist conclusions, be it said (for there is no less "ethical" book in Levinas' sense than the *Daodejing*, which Confucians have so often and with some justification accused of being a handbook of deceit, camouflage and tactical selfishness). In this way, the idea of God is, for Levinas, a kind of escape hatch to the closed horizon of being, the eternal otherwise, what overflows any attempt of human consciousness to actively master its world, the absolute otherness which undermines the reduction to sameness which underlies both the philosophy of Being and the enjoyments of the ego. This is an insightful and important point, and one which we will find playing a very central role in some of our key atheist systems. And Levinas' is not wrong to identify this as precisely what is, to certain types of people, truly liberating about religious discourse. It was again Updike, a close and candid student of monotheist experience, who has a character report the similarity of his beatitude when reading abstruse theological tracts on the one hand and pornography on the other.⁷ And indeed, both of these are thrilling precisely for the type of escape they provide from the close horizon of the everyday world, the incompatibility of the images invoked and the roles we are forced to play in daily life, the powerful aesthetic contrast between this other realm and the known vicissitudes of our plodding existence. Both of these genres, moreover, tread a similar line between radical otherness and radical immanence: this revelation of obscenity or of sublimity is unlike

⁷ Roger's Version, probably? Or A Month of Sundays?

everything we actually get to experience, but also is most intimate, claims to be what underlies the ordinary flow of events, what is hidden just below the line of vision. But once again, the very fact that this is identified with anything like the biblical God, however convolutedly, undermines its very efficacy. The obligatory command structure that intervenes in this notion of ethics is once again our best clue to how this happens—as if the effacement of active conscious will could only be understood as a type of subservience to a command! As if passivity were the only alternative to active mastery! Levinas, surprisingly adopts this active/passive dichotomy uncritically from traditional metaphysics, of which he is otherwise such an astute critic. This is the crux of the matter. For a command is someone else’s mastery imposed on my lack of mastery. Because Levinas confuses the idea of Dao with the idea of God, if you like, he simply displaces the closed totalization of being to some unseen other site, which then comes to have a binding power over the seen and the known. We have already seen something similar in Nancy. Far from a “beyond of being,” these thinkers have simply placed being eternally elsewhere. While seeming to smash through the closed borders of being, he ends up positing an alternate, constitutively inaccessible “no exit” realm. (And to continue the analogy, without getting too explicit, we may note that when the fantasies of pornography, like those of theology, become present realities, they would seem to lose the better part of their liberating power—ask your neighborhood porn star.) You can exit whatever is here but only to someplace else that can never be escaped or surpassed. In place of the bondage to the tyranny of the sameness of being, we are handed over to bondage to ethics. Is this supposed to be an improvement? Is Being still opened up into possibilities beyond closability in this case? Just the contrary. As usual, everything is closed down all the more thoroughly, the borders have been sealed with armed guards. Is this exteriority really an escape from the violence of reduction to sameness? Not at all: instead we end up with the infinitely repeated sameness of subjection to otherness. We know in advance how every encounter must proceed. Here we might reconsider the old Hegelian critique *avant la lettre* of Levinas’ notion of the infinite. Levinas’ infinite would be for Hegel the very model of the “bad infinite”: the endlessly repeated, monotonous positing of yet another “more” to whatever is posited, the same operation repeated endlessly. One thinks one is doing something “other” each time this happens, but in fact just the same thing is done again and again: not this,

not this, not this. As Hegel has shown, besides not getting anywhere, this procedure yields a fixed opposition between the infinite and the finite, which contradicts the very notion of what “infinite” is supposed to mean: the infinite now has something it excludes: it is not just the non-contained, it is the non-containing. No finite interests any longer have any rights to exist. One-sided transcendence is no improvement over one-sided immanence. This is of course just the sort of “metaphysical” critique that Levinas devotes all his efforts to foreclosing. He is well aware that his position is incompatible with the standpoint of Being in any form. But the point here is rather that his very attempt to use this as an alternative to the closed horizon of being fails miserably, backfires: by trying to exclude Being, he simply enmeshes himself the further in the very thing he initially found objectionable about it: subjection to sameness of a closed horizon; the repressed returns, and with a vengeance. For indeed, vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.

God as Obscurely Felt Source of All Beauty, Knowledge, Form: I critique the premises of this view at length in the print version of this book: it is the classic inversion that slanders the oceanic, seeing it only from the side of the personal, as what impinges upon the personal, what undermines the person’s own desires, values, preferences, ideas. It is the attempt to subordinate the purposeless to the purposeful, the precise target to be decried by our baseline atheists like Bataille and the Daoists. We can question this view both for its accuracy and for its desirability, which is the central topic of this book. But here let’s just accept its premise, accept that assumption that this maximization of the intelligible is precisely what is most desirable, and show how it fails even to fulfill its own goals. I believe I have an eminent precursor in attempting to do this: Plotinus. I might even say that this is where Plotinus, who provided the blueprint for so much monotheist theology, ironically assumes such immense importance for the history of world atheism. Plotinus may be seen as the thinker whose entire lifework is devoted to demonstrating precisely this point. Plotinus lives and breathes the premises of Middle Platonism, which places the enhanced Anaxagoran *Noûs* of the *Timaeus* at the origin of the world, as the account for everything in the world that is intelligible, formed, complete, beautiful, harmonious. It is the entire Intellect at the source of the world, the totality of all the Platonic Forms, which we find obscurely poking through in our sensory experience, and which is what we are really loving in anything we love. It is now upgraded from creator to the Unmoved Mover and Self-Thinking

Thought of Aristotle, toward which all things are drawn, which moves the world purely through its own beauty. And yet for Plotinus—who sees every experience as having value only as a springboard for this ascent of the soul to the world-soul, thence to the Forms of the Intellect, and thence to the beatific vision of the One Mind that all souls desire and that makes the world and that is present everywhere as the form and the beauty and the being of each thing, that Intellect that he also calls God—there is necessarily something beyond this Intellect, beyond God, beyond the *Noûs as Arché*, beyond even the already not very personal Mind which moves the world via its own beauty and perfection. That is the One, which is what is genuinely beyond even Being, which is neither a knower nor a known, involved in no demands, but which the Mind which is God is itself beholden to, is itself a pale reflection of, is itself attempting to emulate, is itself an emanation of. The formed, the known, the personal and the purpose-giving (already in this case itself beyond any semblance of real-time personhood and purpose-pursuing) is not ultimate, it is rather an offshoot of the more-than-form, the more-than-known, the more-than-personal, the more-than-purposeful. Now Plotinus does not want to simply call this the Unformed, the Unknowable, the Impersonal, the Purposeless—for these are exactly what he says about Matter. As discussed at length in the main body of this book, Plotinus has an identity-of-indiscernibles problem here: he should say, as Spinoza does, as the Daoists do, that the One, which is beyond Being, is just another name for Matter, which is, as it were, below Being.⁸ This is what ultimately separates negative theology from atheism, separates Plotinus from Daoism. But even leaving this issue unresolved, Plotinus clarifies why the theistic solution cannot be the final word even for what I will be calling an “Emulative Theist,” who sees value only in form and intelligibility and purpose. For form and intelligibility and purpose are desired only to the extent that they are versions of Oneness, expressions of Oneness, that they overcome a prior diffuseness or imprecision or scatter, that they bind and harmonize a desire with an object, a means with an end, a purpose with a satisfaction. To be formed is to bring elements into a unity, a harmony, a consistency with one another; to be intelligible is to be readable all at once as a single thing with

⁸ In Spinoza’s case, “below Being” in the sense of being the indeterminate (infinite) a priori premise for all determinations. This is a plenum in one sense, but, so I would argue, this plenum must be understood precisely as equally a deficit: it is precisely the lack of limitability, determinability, content, that makes it the source and premise involved in all content. In other words, there is no other fact besides its lack of definite content (infinity as such) that gives it the power to be all contents.

no dissonance insisting on another reading; to be purposeful is to bring the means into unity with a future end, to bind past and future together into a unified story. To be is to be a One. But any specific Being is not quite completely being, is not quite completely One—if it were, it would thereby cease to be intelligible, cease to be formed, cease to be a being! Plato had already given the game away in his *Parmenides*, but no one until Plotinus knew what to do with this result and how to harmonize it with the rest of the Platonic, and later Aristotelian, commitments (what we are calling the Emulative Theist commitments). For Plotinus, our souls are already part of the world-soul, and our contemplation of the Ideas are already part of and participation in the eternal Intellect’s eternal contemplation of itself. Already we are very far from the personal God that later usurps the best ideas of this sublime vision (partially recovered in Spinoza’s atheist “intellectual love of God,” via a detour through Averroes and Maimonides). But Plotinus considers even that a step short of the real goal, the passing beyond of all goals, of all forms, of all separation. The beauty of the formed, of the intelligible, of love, of purpose ceases to be beauty if it is ultimate! Its beauty is recognized by Plotinus to be a gesture toward what is beyond form, beyond intelligibility, beyond love, beyond purpose. By making the purposive ultimate and subordinating the oceanic and the purposeless to it, the purposive and the formed and the intelligible themselves lose their beauty, lose their value: they are marred by the eternally unbridgeable separation and thus deficiency in being that thus results. (A more detailed discussion of this important distinction between Plotinus and monotheistic Platonism and monotheistic negative theology can be found in online appendix A, supplement 8, “Negative Theology and Why it Doesn’t Help Much.”) Whereas if the Intellect is again subordinated to the One, seen as a reflection, albeit the most complete possible reflection, of what is Non-Intellect, what is Unintelligible, what is Unformed, then the Intellect is indeed the best possible reflection: we get both, the full satisfaction of this “Emulative Theist” impulse to enjoy the glories of the Formed and the Purposive, and also what lies beyond it. Personality and purpose and intelligibility and intellect are only valuable, and are supremely valuable, when they are understood to be non-ultimate--that is, through the convergence with atheism.

God as Object of Erotic Surrender: Every other advantage of belief in God easily proves to be self-contradictory, to be undermined by its very premises, as we’ve briefly tried to show

above. But this one is different. The difficulty of finding any flaw in the effectiveness of God as sadomasochistic dominatrix reveals a certain perfection of design, and suggests that we have hit the bottommost essence of the idea of God. For here it seems, at first, that we have not merely a poorly thought-through wedge to unseat other obstructions, which becomes less efficacious the more seriously it is taken. Rather, it seems at first glance, a real belief in a real God would make for the fullest and most undiminished joy for a human being who needed to feel himself enslaved, dominated and humiliated in order to feel any satisfaction. One might think that the invisibility and therefore the necessary indirect agency of God's torture, the fact that it can never come palpably from his own hand but must always be issued through an intermediary—sometimes the victim himself—would diminish the full joy of the submission, since it interposes a level of interpretation which is necessary always in the hands of the victim himself, implying a degree of agency and consent. Or one might suspect that the all-pervasiveness of God's torture would be self-limiting, that its inescapability would undermine a necessary premise of erotic torture. But this is not the case. The victim's agency and consent are necessary components of erotic submission, the active will to read the master's hand into every frustration, the cruelty of the master is enhanced by his indirectness and slipperiness, and it is precisely a horizon of escapability that the victim most devoutly wishes to avoid. Again, it is not my intent to be ironic or dismissive about this dimension of human desire. Here we seem to have some real good that God does in the world: God is the perfection of the ideal of the loving torturer, perhaps the sole way to satisfy the desire for such.

But in the end, even this is not the end of the matter. What is really loved in erotic surrender to a cruel lover is quite complex, involving many simultaneous dimensions, but let us at least hazard a few guesses here. Perhaps most obvious is the relief of relinquishing control and responsibility. But control and responsibility are themselves functions of the interpersonal matrix, of personhood as such, as we will see in more detail elsewhere in this book. In surrendering to a cruel controller, we are in the position of what in these pages is called the “the Compensatory Theist”: what we hate is really the whole idea of purpose and control, but a first step to wedge it away from us is to transfer it into the hands of another. However, as long as this “other” is still a “person” in any sense, it merely reinstates the very conditions we were trying to

overcome: we are still in the world of purpose and control and responsibility. That means that here too we may see the God move as an abortive first step toward a truly atheist move. We may note the sublimity of the transpersonal that is nonetheless shining through the beloved person. As long as the love and the cruelty are divided, as long as there is any delay between them, we have an imperfection in the masochistic surrender to the beloved torturer—but this the division between the lovableness and the cruelty of the torturer is just another word for the ultimacy of personhood of the torturer. It may seem that the torturer—God, in this case—must remain a person for the cruelty to exist, and thus for the love of cruelty administered out of love, to exist. But we must understand what is wanted when a convergence of these two is wanted. To understand why the idea of God remains a problem even if we admit the legitimacy and wholesomeness of this desire will require a much more involved exposition, after we have explored our atheist mystics in more depth. We will return to attempt such an exposition in the Conclusion.

Prison Camp, Slave Plantation, Hostage Situation, Sting Operation, or Strip Mall?

All of the above is an attempt to think through how well or poorly the notion of God actually does the job it seems to be enlisted for by those who want it. But now let us turn to the viewpoint of those who don't want or like this God; why is it so much worse to them than every other unverifiable superstition? It is not hard to see at least one reason why the God idea might be, to some, more revolting than the belief in the Loch Ness monster: the latter affects a very restricted patch of experience, leaves most of one's bearings unaffected, whereas the idea of God existing would require that every single particle of experience must be reevaluated, reconfigured, rethought. It would mean that everything one has assumed to be true was, if not false, at least partial and misleading in a very profound and indeed dangerous way. All one's decisions, values, orientations and actions would have to upended. For if this notion is true, it would be impossible to live well in the absence of acknowledgement of it, unlike the existence of the Loch Ness monster. But what may seem strange is that the same nausea—perhaps boredom and disappointment come closer to describing the feeling—does not accompany belief in things like astrology or karma. For these two are also globally relevant beliefs: if either is true, it would be

impossible to live very well without taking them into account. All one's deeds would misfire in the absence of recognition of this crucial fact about all actions and consequences. And yet, for some people, including myself, these notions are not at all as soul-killing as the idea of God. I report this as an experiential fact for myself, in the hope and anticipation that some others may experience the matter in a similar way. One of the things I hope to accomplish in this work is to fish out some of the reasons for this. What else is it about the idea of God that makes it so uniquely unpalatable to the figures examined in this study, and to myself, such that the exclusion of this idea is the sine qua non of an acceptable existence, and beyond that, such that the exclusion of the idea of God is what uniquely enables true "mystical" experience—i.e., the direct experience of infinity present as each and every finite thing?

The concept of God that is our target here is one that, unlike any other idea, brings together the following seven features:

- 1) Creation ex nihilo;
- 2) conscious purpose;
- 3) command and obedience;
- 4) ultimate exceptionless omnipotence;
- 5) ultimate determinate omniscience;
- 6) reward and punishment.
- 7) *Noûs as Arché*

When these seven characteristics come together, assembled in a single entity, we have a special type of problem on our hands. Some further clue of why this is so can be proposed here. If karma or astrology is true but I ignore it, my life may go terribly wrong. But this wrongness is still my own business. It is my affair whether I succeed or fail, whether I suffer or enjoy, whether my actions work out well or not. I don't owe it to anyone to make good on my life. Moreover, it remains for me to judge whether a particular outcome is to be considered going well or going badly; I have the option of applying an alternate standard of success to my own life. I may decide, for example, yes, I am roasting in hell, but at least I was not disloyal to my rationalism, which would not allow me to accept the concept of karma, and I count that a success. Arguably that in itself would make hell a good deal less hellish. But in the case of God, I have no such

option: God's standard is, by definition, the right standard, and I both owe it to him to make a success of the soul he has given me and am beholden to whatever standard of success he might assert. If I continue to think what I thought was right is right, even after learning for sure that God doesn't think so, I am not just foolish or stubborn; I am considered literally diabolical, satanic. God made you, you are his product, designed for a specific purpose, and from beginning to end he owns you; as the manufacturer and proprietor, he has absolute rights over what the product is supposed to do. What he says about the purpose it was designed for, and to what extent it is fulfilling its original goal, its reason for being there, is non-gainsayable. As many scriptures are pleased to say, we belong to God. You owe him full functionality, according to his definition, whatever it might be. Suffering a consequence is not the same as being punished: the latter implies that a conscious being is involved, making a judgment, imposing a punishment, with an intent—to make you regret or reform, or indeed merely to make you suffer. Karma and astrology have no intention to make you suffer if you ignore them and therefore come to harm, much less to repent or reform yourself, for they have no intentions at all, they are not conscious beings. With God, an intersubjective aspect is involved, a consciousness that either approves or disapproves of you. Even if some conscious beings are involved in the administration of karmically determined effects, conceived mythologically as laws, as is the case in many popular representations of underworld gods serving as judges from Ancient Egypt to Imperial China, the judgments made by these beings are in principle completely different if they are themselves merely administrators of this law but are not also the lawmakers. These moral functionary gods themselves stand under this law, rather than making it, and rather than making you, who are judged by it. They don't make you, they don't own you. Their disapproval of you, their judgment of you, might still be annoying. But there can still be other consciousnesses in the universe who might come along and reverse their judgment—and much more importantly, there are still some possible pockets of existence which are beyond the reach of any conscious judgment: the non-personal unconscious law itself, the impersonal cosmos of which these moralistic consciousnesses are merely one part, one expression, however empowered they may be. They say this is what the law is; someone else can say something else, and you are someone else. Neither you nor they made the law, and thus neither you nor they can ever be a hundred per cent

sure. The universe remains at least minimally open in its fundamental nature. This makes the belief in God in principle different from and much more invasive even than those other globally relevant beliefs.

But is it really true that, in the absence of this notion of God, I don't owe it to anyone to live a certain way, or to make good on my life? Even without God, some might claim that it is not only my own business how my life goes, and what feel like very heteronomous standards about what counts as "going well" may be applied, with or without my consent. There are other candidates for inescapable creditor: my parents, my ancestors, society, my country, the world—famously, "the Other" lurking everywhere in the face of my fellow man in general. This is quite true, and of course the transference of one of the complexes onto others is probably the most obvious place to hunt for the motor power behind the God idea: the debt to mom and, especially, dad. These are notoriously hard to overcome, and I might even be willing to agree that the whole idea of escaping this pervasive sense of inborn responsibility to others so thoroughly is itself a symptom of bad modernity and individualism and so on. But there is still an enormous difference between these cases. First, the going-well of my life that I might feel I owe to my parents or anyone else will be containable, or shall I say, quarantinable: it will apply to some subset of the totality of my experience, but not to my every thought and deed. My parents or ancestors may, I feel, demand that I attain some sort of glory, or fame, or wealth, but it is unlikely that I will feel that they are monitoring my every thought and impulse in search of unglorious, unfamous or unwealthy tendencies. There is a lot that will be neutral to whatever outcomes are of interest to, or even perceivable by, these finite, non-clairvoyant creditors. Even if one is living in North Korea, there will be at least the possibility of not being seen or heard in one's non-compliant thoughts and deeds.

Another point about finite creditors: there is arguably some dismantling of the oppressive weight of their claims in the symmetry of the situation. As my parents oppress me, so may I oppress my own child. As the mob pressures me when I disobey it, so may I carry my torch and join the mob when it comes time to torture another dissident. These are of course particularly unlovely behaviors, one of the more depressing dimensions of human nature. But they allow us a way to balance the ledger to some degree, in a way that I can never do with God. I have no rights

to demand anything of him. And one of the more plausible atheist psychological critiques of God has been to point out how this asymmetry is played out in the relation between the believer and his fellow man: one of the pathologies of monotheism would seem to be the venting of the non-reciprocal sense of demand onto the heads of other humans. God demands something of me, but I cannot demand something of him: instead, I demand something of everyone else, in the name of God. This becomes something very different from the kind of compensatory oppression that emerges from the prior oppression from a finite source. The unbearable absoluteness of the unequal demand is transferred onto the horizontal relation: I make absolute demands on my fellow man. There are, so I hear, some monotheists and post-monotheists who think this is a good thing. Others are not so sanguine. I vote with Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "The sting of conscience teaches one to sting."

And speaking of conscience: do we not have an omniscient and non-negotiable observer and judge installed in us when conscience appears? Even if parents or society—the "big Other" in the psychoanalytic parlance we have adopted above—are less horrible than God because they are not omniscient, it might be asked, when this big Other is internalized, it is endowed precisely with a rabid omniscience. It can read our thoughts, all of them without exception, it never sleeps. And its demands are unconditional. But this is still a far cry from the situation that pertains to God. First, there is again the question of creation and ownership. If the existence of an internal faculty of self-reproach is linked to the idea of God, interpreted as God's representative, then its demands do indeed start to function as do those of God's, with the full force of the owner's manual. But as soon as it is disengaged from that interpretation—in any way whatsoever (a naturalist or evolutionist interpretation stressing the survival value of internalized group solidarity; the Freudian internalization of the parents; even a brute psychological fact)—the absolute character of its demands is instantly denuded. It is bracketed; it might still function, but we have the capacity to have a view on it: we can watch and interpret the watcher and interpreter. It is, in other words, surpassable, reinterpretable, even if, as seems likely, it is not actually eliminable. For these and other reasons, even "source of one's being and hence

ownership” claims from parents, ancestors or society are not as bad as those made on behalf of God, because these agents lack omniscience, omnipresence and unsurpassable creator’s rights.⁹

Again, I try to remain alive to the argument that I might find these kinds of ideas less horrifying than the monotheist God idea because I haven’t had to live in an environment where people take these ideas seriously, where all around there are people running their lives and even demanding that I run my life accordingly, where it saturates the literature, the culture, the media, the brains and spirits of living humans around me. But I’d argue in response that this is not exclusively an accident of birth environment; it’s also arguably a fact that ideas like astrology and karma are just less conducive to the kind of all-or-nothing fanaticism that would monopolize a culture. There is a difference between cancer cells and the cells of a mole or benign tumor, even if they do pretty much the same thing in the specific place they happen to be; the difference is just whether they are programmed to expand and take over everything else around them. A

⁹There are also omniscience claims that lack “source of one’s being and hence ownership” claims. Even if you are a Mahāyāna Buddhist of a particular type, for example, who believes that the celestial Buddha knows all one’s thoughts, that Buddha did not create you, and at the very least in any school that accepts the Madhyamaka anti-realist ontology of Emptiness, the kind of “knowing” involved here will have just the opposite role to play from that of a bivalent omnipotent knower, a judge, like God—a point made elegantly and emphatically at the very dawn of Chinese Buddhist speculation, in Seng Zhao’s essay, “Transcendental Wisdom Knows Nothing.” (般若無知論). In other words, the claim of omniscience goes hand in hand with an anti-realist, anti-bivalent conception of what “knowledge” itself is. For a fuller discussion of this work, see my “Seng Zhao’s *Prajña is Without Knowledge*”: *Collapsing the Two Truths from Critique to Affirmation* in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. Volume 47 (2019), pp. 831-849. Even in those versions of this idea where some sense of “fatherhood of the Buddha” is strongly asserted, the doctrine of karma, and the infinite horizon of verdict postponement, the idea that the Buddha became the Buddha after previously being something other than a Buddha, and other beings who are now not Buddhas will be so in the future, and above all the idea that you yourself will also become a Buddha who is “a father of the all living beings in the world,” and “the owner of the entire world,” (for the only places where the fatherhood of the Buddha are asserted—e.g., the *Lotus Sutra*, to be discussed in online appendix B)—are also emphatically those that assert in the same breath the equal Buddhahood of every sentient being, all destined to play the same role: every single sentient being is the father and owner of the world), among many other factors to be discussed in detail below, circumscribes the sense in which this can be understood, so that it can never be construed as implying that this Buddha is the sole and exclusive source of one’s being, to whom one is being disloyal by ending up a certain way—if indeed “ending up” any certain way is still possible under the premises of this system. I don’t say that some of the Mahāyāna writers didn’t want to set things up in a way that would create something like what we might call the “God effect.” But I do say that the premises underlying their work made it impossible for any such intention to succeed. If one chooses to go to perdition by ignoring the Buddha’s directives, however omniscient and fatherly he may be, it is still ultimately one’s own business. The only sense in which it is not one’s own business is the sense in which it is literally impossible to go to perdition: again, and very notably, the “fatherhood of Buddha idea” goes hand in hand with the “eventual attainment of Buddhahood by each and every being” claim.

benign lump and a cancerous lump may feel exactly the same qua lump, but it is not the lumpishness that is terrifying about them.

This points us back to the real heart of the matter, the way in which the existence of God would really ruin the world: this omniscient creator God made things for a purpose. This is where the real nightmare begins. Purpose: the idea or plan of the thing is prior to the thing, and has a causative role in making it exist and be what it is. The thing is assembled according to the plan: nothing about it is spontaneous, playful, undecided. That means, by definition, that its existence is work. To be is to have a specific job to do. The value of the thing lies outside the thing; nothing can be its own justification. A vestigial remnant of beauty can only be saved here by allowing at least that we don't know what the purpose is, even if we must admit purposivity as such. This is again where the unknowability of God's plan, pushed to the extreme, starts to tilt us toward a liberating atheism. But the worst thing about things existing for a purpose is not just the decentering of every process, entity and creature, its subordination to the job it is made to do, endemic to the concept of "purpose" as such. The worst thing is that things are created for *one* purpose—one and not more. The decentering of purpose can actually lead to astonishing beauty, as long as it is allowed to proliferate unrestrictedly: each thing as serving myriads of conflicting purposes, always ek-static, always reaching beyond itself. We will find such an idea in many of our atheist mystics. The problem with the creator's purpose is that there is only one of them. That means, simply stated, universal, ontologically inherent slavery. To be is, quite literally, to be a slave. The universe becomes a factory, or rather a plantation.

God-less religiousness allows us to see clearly, by contrast, these limiting consequences that come with an uninterrupted relationship to an omnipotent, omniscient creator of one's self and the world: above all, it locks the human subject into an impoverished notion of unity, the narrow type of unity resulting from purpose and intentional control, the unity of a personality as a cumulative, unchanging, consistent mastering of opposed elements (rather than, say, a transformation and relinquishing and regaining of selves), a unity of personality constructed around a single relationship with a consistent master of infinitely superior power, infinite demands, and infinite rights over one, exerting constant surveillance. Man becomes only his conscious self, only his intentions, only his purpose-driven control, only his work, a monster of

monolithic duty. God is in this sense a *war against play*--against multiplicity of identity, against masks, against chance, against ironic distance from oneself, against unity as transformation of opposites into each other, against the unity of the rhythm of being oneself and being otherwise. It is not seriousness per se that this relationship locks one into (for Confucians and Buddhists, and even Daoists, can be serious in their own way), but rather an impoverished notion of seriousness. What is foreclosed in this impoverished notion of unity and seriousness is the possibility of a self that is personal, transpersonal, multipersonal, enacted in multiple roles as multiple partial selves that are inseparable but not subsumed into a higher unity, mutually accessible but not summative, in the ideal of “the sage of timeliness” (*sheng zhi shizhe ye* 聖之時者也, as Mencius (5B10) says of Confucius), for whom “that was one time, this is another” (*biyishi, ciyishi* 彼一時，此一時， Mencius 2B22), unified by attentiveness to totalities of reversal and transformation rather than by subordination to principles and purposes.¹⁰ To make such a multifarious being compatible with any scriptural form of monotheism, if postmortem judgments are involved at all (the very idea of which, of course, is itself a symptom of the problem here) would require that the many selves that emerge in my experience may have *different postmortem fates*: instead, we find judgment of the person as a whole imposed, all of what one is is *either* saved or damned, *either* a good person or a bad one. Also foreclosed is the self for whom the origin of all things, as what is intrinsically unreifiable as any determinate thing, is something to playfully float and swim and perhaps splash around in (*fuyou* 浮游), rather than something to serve or love or study or obey or submit to or aspire to or be accountable to, something that makes him “become now a dragon and now a snake, transforming along with the times, unwilling to pursue any one course exclusively,” (*yilong yishe, yushi juhua er wukenzhuanwei* 一龍一蛇，與時俱化而無肯專為； Zhuangzi, Ch. 20) in “the radiance of drift and doubt” (*guyizhiyao* 滑疑之耀； Zhuangzi Ch. 2). Also foreclosed is the self that is a maximally multifarious non-cumulative responsive

¹⁰ It is possible that this sort of unity as reversal and transformation was what Herakleitos meant by *Logos*, when first elevating it to the status of a philosophical principle, rather than the sort of intelligibility as consistency and accountability and control that would come to be associated with the word in its Platonic and Christian usages. If so, he is truly the great exception in the history of Western Philosophy, as Nietzsche claimed—and would deserve to be called our first atheist mystical hero (or perhaps pre-theist, since his road-not-taken precedes the Platonic revolution soon to come).

purposeless function, ala Chan Buddhism, or the self that is always purposed but always also cross-purposed, ala Tiantai Buddhism.¹¹

Of course, some surface modifications can be made, to try to escape the full indignity of this ontological slavery (although the founding texts stress it so thoroughly that periodic fundamentalist relapses are more or less inevitable). The ancient Gnostics tried to posit a higher God beyond this planning, purposive, creator God, who could help us escape his clutches. Of course, this handed us over to another, still higher purpose, but one defined purely negatively, as the undermining of the world-creator's purposes. Here we have real progress: the universe is transformed from a slave plantation into a hostage situation. More upbeat revisions have sometimes arisen within the ranks of the orthodox. First, of course, it will be objected that the God idea does not entail slavery at all. This is in a sense true: slavery is the ideal, but the starting condition is one of wretched human freedom. For many traditional monotheist theologies do make a point of forefronting the idea of freedom; in fact, the very notion of free will, in its full ontological sense—the completely uncaused arising of volitions breaking into the natural causal sequence from a supernatural source—seems only to arise in the context of monotheistic religion. There is a simple reason for this. It is only monotheism that needs this absurdly exaggerated notion of what “freedom” might mean. And why? The most obvious answer, not for that reason to be brushed aside, is to absolve God of responsibility for man's sins. The absoluteness of man's freedom is increased in direct proportion to the absoluteness of God's claims for both omnipotence and goodness. Ironically enough, if God is both omnipotent and good, man must be absolutely, metaphysically free; his actions must arise completely without dependence on the God's creation, which he himself had declared “good” (and what possible reason could he have to lie about a thing like that?). But this freedom, for all its metaphysical radicality, is somewhat restricted in duration. In the People's Republic of China of the mid 1950s, Chairman Mao proclaimed what came to be known as the “Hundred Flowers Campaign,” under the slogan, “Let a hundred flowers bloom, let the hundred schools of thought contend!” It was a call for absolute freedom of thought, for all dissident groups to express themselves fully

¹¹ For more detailed discussion of this problem, see online appendix A, supplement 4, “The Limits of Teleological Unity.”

and without restraint, for each man to do be his own intellectual master and to give full development to his individual viewpoint, and to criticize the Communist Party freely and sincerely if his conscience so demanded. A few months later, after everyone with anti-party sentiments had joyfully made his or her views known, Mao had them all arrested. The “freedom” was a way to expose who was against the authority of the ruler. Man’s freedom under God, as understood in the monotheistic systems that embrace it, seems to be of exactly the same type, designed for exactly the same purpose. We are given freedom so that we can show what we’re made of, which is to say: to show whether ultimately we are on God’s side or against him, whether we are disposed towards obedience to him—freely, of course!—or not. With this refinement, we have not a plantation or a hostage situation, but human life as entrapment, a test of loyalty to a totalitarian regime—a sting operation.

We could list—and caricature—many more refinements of the monotheistic premises, various ways in which we would have God’s absolute rule but with a human face, a kinder and gentler autocracy. We elsewhere in this work explore the vexed matter of God’s “love.” But the point is, in a nutshell, that as long as God remains God, we can never get away from the basic idea of planning and single-purpose, premised on creation and sole right of ownership. But even leaving aside the really egregious matters of command and obedience, together with reward and punishment (and the extraordinarily offensive idea of worshipping the one who executes the punishment, singing the praises of the hangman—a case of cosmic Stockholm Syndrome), all of which seem pretty damn hard to get out of the idea of God, the apparently innocuous matter of God the planner, the creator who does things for a purpose, still persists. We can whitewash all the barbarity of the original idea as much as we want, but the best we can hope for, as long as this planning, purposive God exists, is a universe that is no longer conceived as something so cruel and depressing as a prison camp, a slave plantation, a hostage situation or a sting operation, no, no, but as something much more pleasant and civilized—the best case scenario for a God-created universe is perhaps something like a strip mall or a “planned community.” The *mysterium tremens* of the otherness of the terrifying unplumbable God with no respect for persons simply means we are not the sorts of beings for whom this particular strip mall was designed, perhaps like liberals strolling aghast through an elaborately prepared gun show, or like

Andrea Dworkin trapped in a het porn arcade: it wasn't designed for us, it doesn't care about us, but it is designed nonetheless, and it cares about *something*. If that universe-as-strip-mall-or-gun-show/porn-arcade isn't something that serves us well intellectually, spiritually, morally or aesthetically, what other alternatives are there? Our endeavor in these pages is to take a glance at what might have gotten us thinking of the universe this way, and what attractions might lie in the chaos out beyond the parking lot.