

Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse on the ignobility of worship

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Worship, because it involves blind submission, is not an attitude a person should ever take toward anything. Thus, it is not an attitude a person should take even toward God.

If this argument is sound, much practice in theistic religion is ignoble and debilitating. Many religious people, that is, would, within their own perspectives and values, live better were they to abandon the attitudes and practices of worship.

Despite its intrinsic interest, and despite its appearance now and again in the history of philosophy, this argument has not received the sustained attention it deserves. Recently, though, it has begun to turn up in popular critiques of theistic religion (Christopher Hitchens used it occasionally, for instance). Would that philosophers and other dispassionate intellectuals were to subject it to rigorous analysis and evaluation.

I'm sad to report, then, that Scott F. Aikin and Robert Talisse, the authors of *Reasonable Atheism*, have not done a particularly good job explaining and developing this argument.

Aikin and Talisse begin with the claim that the heart of theism is the doctrine that God is entitled to our worship. From this doctrine it follows, they say, that if God exists, we ought to worship God. (If a child is entitled to our comfort, we ought to comfort that child.) Given that God is entitled to our worship, one who believes that God exists would be making a mistake, a moral mistake, were she to fail to worship God.

Now worship, whatever form it takes in ritual and prayer, and whatever else it might include, involves love and adoration, trust, and deference. Indeed, as Aikin and Talisse insist, for one's attitude toward something to be worship, the adoration, trust, and deference one has must be complete and total. Trust, though, is not complete unless one lacks doubt absolutely, and deference isn't total short of submission and obedience.

So a worshipful person will trust completely that all that exists or occurs is as it should be, whatever pain or sorrow it brings, and she will submit totally to what she believes is God's will for her, however little she understands how submission to God's will serves the projects or the people about which or whom she cares.

Well, Aikin and Talisse note, this is to be slavish. This is to deny to oneself that one's flourishing through the projects one freely chooses for oneself is what is truly important in one's life. Now, if a worshipper cannot in fact deny that her freedom to choose and pursue her own projects is centrally important to her, she will live with a riven, split consciousness and experience the psychic and practical stresses and strains being at war with oneself necessarily brings.

That, then, is why worship is debilitating. It turns one away from one's own projects and alienates one from one's own life.

Clearly one serious problem with this argument is that its conclusion conflicts with the fact that many worshipful believers are leading lives of meaning and fulfilment. Or, at least, experience seems to confirm that not only atheists are to be counted among the happy.

What has gone wrong with the argument? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps the worshipful are slavish and, for that reason, unhappy. Our mistake might be in thinking that the worshipful are a sizable majority among, if not identical with, the faithful generally. Perhaps one can be faithful without being worshipful and being faithful is not psychologically debilitating.

Unfortunately, Aikin and Talisse simply neglect the suspicion that their conclusion is inconsistent with the facts. It never occurs to them that the existence of many religious people living happy lives of meaning and contentment might be at odds with their conclusion.

But let us return to the argument itself, or, at least, to Aikin and Talisse's presentation of it.

If God exists, then God is entitled to our worship. Aikin and Talisse add that if God is entitled to our worship, then we should worship him; failing to worship him would involve us in a moral or practical error, something worse, presumably, than living slavishly. So why, then, is God entitled to our worship?

Aikin and Talisse examine four answers to this question and find each wanting. The four are that God exists necessarily, that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and perfectly just, that God deserves our thanks, and that God commands us to worship him (while being omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and perfectly just).

Aikin and Talisse are no doubt correct to dismiss these answers. A fifth answer, though, one they fail to consider, seems promising. It is not so much the properties of God that enjoin us to worship him, but the functions God fulfils. God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists. (God performs these functions only by virtue of being omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and perfectly just. Yet it is the functions these properties make possible, not the properties themselves, that are salient in determining what attitudes we should take toward God.) Most important here, of course, is the function of redeemer (though only that which has created and sustains all that exists could function as redeemer). It is by virtue of being the origin and location of the significance and meaning of one's life, and of everything else, that God is entitled to one's worship.

Yet the difficulty remains: God's being the origin and location of the significance and meaning of one's life does not entitle Him to one's unquestioning trust and slavish devotion. The difficulty of finding what it is in virtue of which God is entitled to our worship seems intractable. Indeed, the sense that the difficulty is intractable encourages Aikin and Talisse to propose an argument that God doesn't exist. If God exists, God is entitled to our worship. God is not entitled to our worship, for nothing could be entitled to a person's unquestioning trust or slavish devotion. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

The problem with this argument, certainly, is that the second premise, that God is not entitled to our worship, tells against the first premise, that if God exists, God is entitled to our worship. Rather than maintain that both premises are true, and conclude that God doesn't exist, one would do better to reject the first premise on the grounds that nothing is entitled to our worship. The conclusion of this piece of reasoning would then be that even if God exists, He is not entitled to our worship.

Aikin and Talisse's argument that God doesn't exist works only if God by definition is entitled to our worship. The claim that God exists is false, then, simply because the idea of

God's existence involves the contradictory thesis that something entitled to our worship exists while nothing entitled to our worship exists.

Well, then, should we just take it as axiomatic that God is entitled to our worship, as Aikin and Talisse say theism does? ("God is entitled to our worship. This is the heart of theism" p. 148.)

Aikin and Talisse seem to treat as equivalent the claims that God is the unique proper object of worship and that God is entitled to our worship. But the claims are different and the first does not imply the second. If God merits or is worthy of our worship, then though it might be fine for us to worship God, we need not be making a mistake or shirking a responsibility should we decline to worship Him. Theism needs the doctrine that God is uniquely worthy of worship (by virtue of God's being the origin and location of the significance and meaning of everything) if it is to have a claim on our attention more profound than other theories of what exists. It doesn't need the doctrine that God is entitled to our worship.

How is it that nothing need be amiss in believing something to merit or to be worthy of one's worship while failing to worship it? That the sofa is worth the money the vendor is asking does not imply that one should buy the sofa, for one might want to spend one's money on something else. Or one might simply not want a sofa, for having a sofa would get in one's way. More relevantly, that Charles is worthy of your love does not imply that things would go better for you from the perspective of your various projects in living were you to love Charles. Loving Charles might not fit well with other of your loves and commitments, and you might judge that all things considered your life would go better were you to maintain the current patterns of your life than were you to love Charles and have to change them.

Let us revise Aikin and Talisse's account of what is essential to theism, at least if believing that God exists is to hold out possibilities for living that believing that, say, leptons or spirits or telekinesis exists doesn't. What is essential to theism is not that God is entitled to our worship but that God is worthy of our worship. I don't see how any of the subsequent reasoning is affected by this change. Given the rest of Aikin and Talisse's argument, we still arrive at the conclusion that worship is debilitating.

Aikin and Talisse do not, then, need the strong claim that God is entitled to our worship in order to give us a strong reason not to be worshipful, if everything else is sound. They are, though, deprived of the argument they advance that God does not exist. That's hardly a loss, since that argument involved a sleight of hand.

Another problem we should be feeling here might not find a solution so quickly in a simple friendly amendment. The problem is whether worship has to involve complete trust in God and slavish devotion to His will. So that we don't lose the real problem in a mere quibble about words, let us just take worship to be as Aikin and Talisse say it is. What we wonder, then, is whether we can construct from *Reasonable Atheism* a parallel argument that something much like worship—that is, an attitude we can have reason to take to God, but only to God, short of blind trust and slavish devotion—would be just as debilitating to take as worship is. If we cannot, then Aikin and Talisse's critique of religious belief might apply only to a scant few of the faithful.

Suppose that one believes that God exists and that God is the origin and location of the meaning and significance of one's life. Suppose also that one is inclined to think God uniquely worthy (not of worship but) of absolute trust and loving devotion. Can we find in *Reasonable*

Atheism practical reason for concluding that one should resist one's inclination to trust and love God absolutely?

No, I don't think we can. Whether one should or shouldn't resist an inclination will have everything to do with whom one is, with one's tastes and talents and condition and prospects. We might be able to say with some confidence (though I wouldn't) that slavishness or self-debasement is always debilitating, for there's enough that's constant in human psychology and the human condition to rule out the happy slave. For many of us, though, trust and love could easily be useful to living well, if not necessary.

Aikin and Talisse subtitle their book "A Moral Case for Respectful Disbelief," the "moral" here acknowledging that their argument for atheism has to do with values and the art of living, rather than with what we have evidence or reason for believing. I think it both true and important that a believer can have excellent reason to live as an atheist, but to show that a believer can will require an argument more attuned to particular psychologies than the abstract arguments in *Reasonable Atheism*. As for the idea that an argument whose premises concern what makes a life goes well could soundly imply that something—God, for instance—does or doesn't exist—well, I'm doubtful.

By all means, let us keep talking about the art of living and, specifically, about the prospects of living well or poorly through living religiously and through living irreligiously. Let us investigate what implications, if any, belief and atheism each has for how to live. But if we wish to determine whether God exists, I see no alternative than to turn to the theoretical arguments Aikin and Talisse attempt to bypass.