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God, Schmod, and Karma

A reply to Jason Adams

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I'm grateful to Opinions Editor Jason Adams for discussing my September 19 public lecture ("God: Enemy of Morality?") in last week's issue of the *Athenaeum*. Jason's generous and detailed evaluation of my presentation supplements other helpful feedback I've received; I hope my audience at the lecture gained as much from the experience as I did! God's relation to human morality is arguably the most important issue in the world right now, and I'm pleased to see it get the attention it deserves. Many millions of people think that morality absolutely depends on God. My lecture highlighted the reasons that have led me to a very different view: morality and God aren't even compatible.

In response to the points Jason raises in his column, I'd like to offer two clarifications and one challenge.

First the clarifications. Although Jason's discussion captures the gist of the argument I gave in my lecture, he implies at one point that I assume that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God would never "maliciously harm a human being." That assumption does look plausible (especially if we emphasize "maliciously"), but my argument in fact assumes something different: an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good God would never *exploit* or *sacrifice* an innocent person who didn't volunteer for it.

Consider the intense suffering of David Rothenberg, the six-year-old boy set entirely on fire by his abusive father. If the monotheistic God exists—and hence must have *allowed* David to suffer that way—the suffering must be for David's own good, or else in allowing it God would have been (at best) exploiting David to achieve some ulterior purpose. So my argument does not need to imagine God's maliciously harming someone, only God's exploiting an innocent non-volunteer by allowing him to suffer in a way that doesn't benefit the sufferer in the long run.

At another point, Jason seems to attribute to me the premise that "all suffering is the work of an all-knowing God." Again, I don't need such a premise. Let some of the suffering be the work of human beings like Charles Rothenberg. Rothenberg caused his son's suffering, but if God exists then God *allowed* it, which is all my argument requires.

Now for the challenge. In summing up his judgment of my lecture, Jason says, "I do not agree with his opinion." In fact, however, I think he *does* agree with the opinion I defended in that forum: morality is incompatible with the existence of the God described by traditional monotheism. Jason evidently rejects the monotheistic definition of "God"—the definition shared by traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims—but he seems to agree with me that God so-defined is indeed an enemy of morality.

In place of the monotheistic God, Jason offers his “perception of God” as “a spiritual presence that does not conform to this definition.” I don’t want to begrudge him the term “God.” Still, I think it’s misleading to use a term your opponents in a debate have already defined while you reject their definition of it, especially if your own definition is as unspecific as “a spiritual presence that does not conform to [their] definition.”

But the term itself doesn’t matter, and so to avoid confusion let’s just use “Schmod” to refer to the spiritual presence that Jason describes. According to Jason, belief in Schmod allows us “to believe that what happened to David is absolutely wrong and that Charles Rothenberg will eventually receive due punishment for his actions.”

One might question Jason’s emphasis on retribution, since an enlightened morality will care more about David’s restitution than about his father’s eventual punishment. But leave that aside. Here’s the challenge: How can we count on Schmod to guarantee retribution unless Schmod is perfectly knowing, powerful, and just—unless, that is, Schmod is God?

Jason mentions the law of karma, but even if it exists I can’t see how an unconscious law ensures that Charles in particular will get his comeuppance, let alone that all will be made right with David. The other conservation laws we know—the ones from physics—don’t work that way: they apply to whole systems, and they ensure only that a gain or loss by one individual in the system is balanced *some place or other* in the system. I guess the law of karma must work differently, by acting directly on individuals. But how?

Like anyone, I want it to be true that someone or something makes David’s suffering all worth it to David in the end. As far as I can see, only monotheism offers that guarantee. But, as Jason concedes, it’s a guarantee that comes at the total expense of human morality.