

Atheism, Morality, and the Kingdom of God

Atheism, Morality, and the Kingdom of God:

*A Philosophical and Literary
Investigation*

By

David K. Clark

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DEDICATION

This text is dedicated to my good friend and colleague, Professor Philip Fandozzi, without whom this book would not have been possible. Phil directed the Humanities and Liberal Studies Program at the University of Montana through 23 years of growth and prosperity. It was by his invitation that I taught in the Program, which became an invaluable part of my own philosophical and literary education. Following Phil's tenure, the Humanities Program soon became unrecognizable as it devolved into a mere shell of its previous glory, and became increasingly incapable of serving as an influential player within a rapidly deteriorating Liberal Arts school. As of this writing, UM has not recovered. With its commitment to the Arts now fully eroded, the Humanities and Liberal Studies Program has been eliminated. The University itself continues to rapidly decline in both enrollment and its capacity to deliver the rich educational experience that was vibrant and defining during the Fandozzi years.

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The text is an unflinching inquiry which takes up an enduring project of love and passion integral to the very meaning of the philosophical life. The discipline once famously pronounced by Kant as the Queen of the sciences, was by the mid-twentieth century relegated by Quine to mere clean-up—the janitorial tasks of science. The power of philosophy to inform and provide guidance to humanity was nowhere to be found.

But of course the perennial questions central to philosophy remain, and they loom with increased urgency. We not only lack improved insight about such questions, we have yet to fully appreciate that these questions are not scientific questions at all. Science cannot inform us about how we ought to live, or what constitutes the highest good—the *summum bonum*—of human existence, or how such is to be achieved. It cannot characterize the intersection, if any, of God and morality; or that of the role of faith, if any, in the good-life. Such questions are routinely relegated to unquestioned conventional norms, religious factions, or they are simply dismissed.

But such gritty themes, while not scientific, do lie at the heart of the philosophical enterprise. The defining commitment of this text is not only to insist that there are answers to these haunting philosophical issues, it is to illuminate these answers in a manner which reintroduces the impact of philosophical investigation into our lives. Philosophy, at its best, is not only both relevant and profound, it is necessary.

Its signature issues demand, and are worthy of, our best attentive efforts. Accordingly, they will find no purchase upon the idle or numbed mind. And philosophy itself cannot escape sharp indictment here. Highly specialized jargon and research protocols have isolated the professional philosophical endeavor from the very masses who are to be served by these efforts. Substantive philosophical discussion is at best stale, and has been supplanted by isolated, technical endeavors, comprehensible only to elite technicians. This text is offered as an effort to again remind us that pressing philosophical issues have long since insinuated themselves into vital human concerns. Absent the attempt to integrate philosophical and public discourse, philosophy is merely a pointless exercise in professional vanity.

The investigation initiated by this book (AMK) begins by formulating a compelling argument about the very nature of human virtue and its relevance to the life of genuine faith—not faith as mere belief, or a vague

hope of going to a better place after we are dead—but as full dedication to a deity. The reader will be able to appreciate the stunning result: the life of virtue and the life of faith are radically, conceptually, incompatible. We are then poised to discover for ourselves that the world is morally charged. With or without God, guidance about how to live rightly and well is embedded within the very fabric of the universe. So, both the *nihilist*—who believes that without God, morality is at best a human contrivance; and *the person of faith*—who believes that all morality either originates or is grounded in God, are profoundly misguided.

And now we are poised for the question: is the *summum bonum*—the highest good for humans—available only as an afterlife reward for the faithful, or is it instead a *real-time* domain which emerges solely as a committed and distinctive way of dwelling here and now.

Parts II and III provide an answer to this final question through a unique literary analysis of the biblical text itself. It is profoundly ironic that such careful examination is itself sufficient to decisively undercut the theology which has held the text hostage for two millennia. This scrutiny yields a long-sought prize: the principle of selection by which to discern the chaff from the wheat—*the authentic words of Jesus himself*. We will find that the genuine parables of Jesus—when tied to their inspirational and richly storied tradition—will present us with a vision of a kingdom of human flourishing which is inspiring and compelling, even if vulnerable. Its urgent message is that this domain—though worthy of a deity—must be achieved here and now or not at all. The best we can be is radically up to us; not even a God can save us. And it is the traditional stories together with the parables delivered from the mouth of Jesus himself, which show us the way.

Finally, I should here offer a comment to those who may harbor a deep suspicion about taking the step into literary analysis as an invaluable guide through the deep and often murky problems of human existence. My philosophical presupposition is as follows.

Philosophical Rationalism (the notion that we can have a priori knowledge about the world, i.e., constitutive knowledge of reality independently of our experience of it) has run its course. Not because philosophers are tired of it (although they are worn from tinkering about with all the implications for Philosophical Idealism and Relativism), but because it has been exposed. There is no a priori knowledge about the world, and thus no a priori knowledge about what the highlights of the good life for humans consists in. *Therefore, we must learn from our own experience.* And there is little which serves to illuminate the salient features thereof—thereby rendering these available for philosophical inspection—like great literature.

See if you don't agree.

David K. Clark

INTRODUCTION

ATHEISM, MORALITY, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

BY

PROFESSOR PHILIP FANDOZZI

How did Jesus become Christ? How did a Jewish rabbi become both human and divine, breaking a basic concept of Judaism? What historical forces and tendencies contributed to this deification?

Often the New Testament is described in an historical vacuum, as if Jesus was a unique and singular personality, offering a completely new conception of religion. Rather, this time was a great transitional period in the ancient world. Living in the midst of Hellenistic culture where so many varied influences thrived and competed with older traditions, Jesus and later the gospel writers were immersed in a rich and vibrant milieu of exciting ideas and aspirations. Rome had replaced the Greek empire, but had adopted in large part their Hellenistic culture, bringing with it mystery religions and cults, secret rites and rituals, paths to salvation and immortality, often based on a savior or messiah. Some espoused a virgin birth, others claiming miracles, resurrection from death and ascension into heaven. One striking example is found in the religion of the Great Mother where the man-god Attis is slain and hanged in a tree, later buried in a tomb which is found empty, having risen in three days.

Another significant aspect of this period was the Diaspora effect. Under Rome many peoples were displaced from their homeland, losing their connection to the old culture and even their native language. Cosmopolitanism replaced the old regionalism of 'land and blood'. Further, under Roman oppression, these peoples sought ways of escaping this world's misery by finding hope in otherworldly salvation, induced by epiphanies, secret rites and a savior. Rather than receiving a 'birthright' from their nation, they sought a more individualistic 'conversion' experience, one based on dogma, a set of beliefs, and faith in a savior. Religion offered them an escape from

this oppressive world to a kingdom of freedom and supreme happiness.

Over the centuries, these influences on Christianity have been debated without a final resolution, separating the people of faith from secularists who emphasize Jesus' earthly morality.

In his book, David Clark has chosen to focus directly on the Hebraic/Christian writings to find the essence of Jesus' morality, demonstrating how they are best understood independently of theological and supernatural assumptions. In doing so, he shows how this message is not weakened or less revolutionary, but rather achieves preeminence as it stands out in all of its power and significance. Rather than simply rejecting theism—in fact, a theistic view that Jesus most definitely espoused as a Jew—Clark brackets it and concentrates on those stories and parables that are cogent and consistent—a unifying comprehensive account of an inspiring morality that opens up Jesus' account of the good-life as accessible only here and now.

Philosophy can often be abstract and intimidating to the general public, off-putting and seemingly esoteric. This style of philosophy became prominent in recent times, developing a largely analytic approach that was divorced from everyday life and understanding. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Existentialism challenged this mode of philosophy by exploring literary and artistic sources to make philosophy more accessible and engaging. In his work, Clark has been able to combine a careful, analytic approach with a keen sensitivity to the existential layers of meaning within the biblical text. In a word, he has uncovered their living core. He invites readers to think and feel their way into the narrative, allowing them to search their own experiences; perhaps questioning their own assumptions and biases. He presents them not only with a vibrant interpretation of the Bible, but with a challenge to live life to the fullest on *this* earth.

Over the years I have had many lively conversations with David concerning these matters and perhaps played a small part in the development of his ideas. I have always been impressed by his determination and ability to combine philosophical acuity with a humanistic sensitivity. This book is a culmination of his lifelong effort to clarify and demonstrate a way of life that is both fulfilling and ennobling. It brings together many threads of his work over the years.

He writes from a wealth of experience in both the academic and practical world. This of course includes a PhD in philosophy, years of teaching both philosophy and humanities courses, published books and articles, including a memoir of his early life. This comes amidst managing a concrete construction business, and serving as a Justice of the Peace. He is also a forest steward versed in home repair and landscaping, and leads a vibrant

musical life—singing in choirs, playing piano and guitar and an outdoor enthusiast. Given this background, he always wants to make his works open to the public, accessible and invigorating. This can be seen in his writing style and in the way he has lived. From his *Empirical Realism: Meaning and the Generative Foundation of Morality* that defended a muscular realism and laid the grounding for his moral philosophy, to his memoir *Mile High Redemption: Evangelical Christianity and a Child's Quest for Truth*, that explored its implications in his early years, David Clark exemplifies the genuine philosophical life.

Philip Fandozzi is past director of the Liberal Studies and Humanities Program; Professor Emeritus of the University of Montana.

PART I:

FAITH, VIRTUE AND MORALITY

CHAPTER ONE

VIRTUE: THE PRICE OF FAITH

Part I: Introduction

At the time of this writing, it has been a major election year in America. And here once again, we find a time-worn issue raised with a familiar sense of urgency. Fundamental values need to be restored. Candidates fervently jockey to convince us that they will once again reestablish those commitments that are uniquely and wholesomely American. These claims are typically certified with reassurances about one's personal faith. Some deference to God—to the sanctity of our faith—is crucially at the heart of such proclamations. Is this an essential insight, or is it a debilitating and crippling confusion?

Let's find out; let us ask: what sort of person, what sort of dedication and commitment, is required in order to achieve moral virtue? Exactly what is moral virtue?

We'll start at the beginning—unfettered to any particular ideology or religion—assessing our progress as we go. Thereafter, we will be poised to answer the question about the role of faith in the life of the virtuous person.

Part II: The Conditions of Virtue

The classical portrait of the virtuous person is nicely framed by the leading virtue ethicists of our Western tradition. These formal conditions are seen as individually necessary and jointly sufficient to achieve virtue. My claim however is not that these ethicists expressly agree on these conditions, but that reflective equilibrium settles upon them.¹ Accordingly, the virtuous person can be defined as one who 1) knows what is morally right, 2) does the morally right, 3) does it for the right reasons (without undue struggle or overriding ulterior motives) and 4) authentically pursues the continuing development of the morally good life—is fundamentally

committed to extending one's knowledge of moral truth, and to living in accordance with conditions 1 – 3.

Let us now critically assess the above claim by examining this set of traits.

Why must we know the right? The answer is that virtue is an achievement—a matter of competence. The old saw about leaving a bunch of monkeys locked in a room full of computers who will eventually type out Shakespearean sonnets, illustrates the point. The monkeys may get it done—perhaps even sooner rather than later—but because they don't know what they are doing, they are certainly not competent practitioners of any artistic craft. In contrast, the virtuous person is a highly competent practitioner of the task of living well—living rightly. The right actions are understood, and can be justified as such, and explained and successfully defended to all those who honestly strive to achieve the same competence.

So, at the heart of the knowledge requirement lies the ability to *justify* our claims to have moral knowledge. This critical point must *not* be glossed as merely “giving reasons.” The reasons given must *actually succeed* in providing genuine justification for the action; it is precisely because the justifying rationale is correct that it can be appealed to by all, and appropriately applied, to relevantly similar situations.

Consider an example. Not long ago, this country was in debate with itself and with much of the world as to whether the torture of those accused (not convicted) of terrorism was morally justified. Many, to their credit, said that it was not justified. But moral competence requires much more than either truth or conviction. Competent leadership requires justification. So, consider three of the most compelling justifications offered for disavowing the practice of torturing such detainees. First up, we must refrain from torture in order to protect our troops from suffering the same fate if captured. Notice however that this rationale is entirely pragmatic.

We are here merely thinking of what is good for ourselves, not of how we may be morally obligated to treat others—and why. And now suppose we came to realize that none of our enemies had any interest in torturing American captives—however unlikely this may be. But then our “justification” is exposed. Given that it is not now against our self-interest to torture, then without a nailed down backup (which we would have given in the first place if we understood it), we now have no available rationale by which to withhold harsh treatment; whence suddenly torture of untried detainees looks quite permissible after all.

Or second, suppose our justification for prohibiting torture is that information received through such means is unreliable. Whoops. Well,

suppose that our resourceful and innovative leaders discovered a technique for discerning which torture-obtained information was truthful and which not. Then, absent the genuinely justifying rationale against torture, suddenly the torture program is back on again. Meanwhile, Cheneyans will continue to reassure us—torture does work, even now.

Or finally, suppose that we point out that torturing is against the law. But this objection is quickly disposed of as well. For, unless we know, i.e., can justify our assertion why, torture is morally wrong, then we do not know whether the law prohibiting it is morally justified. And unless we can correctly provide this account, then all Alberto needs to tell us is that the prohibitive conventions are “quaint,” and we will be silenced.²

Moral virtue requires the competence that is anchored in genuine knowledge. Otherwise, our leaders are like the Athenian leaders of Socrates’ time. They may sometimes have right opinions, but literally have no knowledge of what they are doing. They are not competent to lead their own lives, let alone lead a nation. The exposure of such incompetence led to Socrates’ execution at the hands of the Athenian city-state.³

On to the second requirement; we must act in accordance with what we know. This is mainly to insist that those who are virtuous have the courage, not of all their convictions, but of their *justified* convictions. Without the requisite courage, weakness outstrips our knowledge, and we will cave in to pressure from our peers, to the demands of convenience, to our pettiest peeves, and to the lures of seductive colognes or perfumes. The virtuous have the character (commitment and courage) sufficient to act on what they know.

The third condition trades on the distinction between a morally right *action* and the moral *character* of the person performing the right action.⁴ It demands that we act rightly for the appropriate (motivational) reasons. Notice: this is *not* the unrealistic insistence that our motives be uniformly pure. Our reasons for wanting to be a congressperson may include the desire to gain personal power, or be held in esteem by those closest to us, or to secure a good personal healthcare and retirement program. Yet, these motives must be tempered by and subordinated to the fundamentally overriding passion to get the right thing done because it needs to be done—regardless of the trimmings. Otherwise, when ulterior motivational features gain priority, we have already sold out to whatever else might be delivered on behalf of those same desires. If we are in it mainly for the reward—the benefits—virtue eludes us even though we act rightly.

The fourth condition is paramount. While the moral compass of some is innately more sensitive, responsive and astute, no one achieves virtue without a lot of hard, reflective, fact-seeking, soul-searching, work. It is

not easy to identify those unquestioned assumptions that make their claim upon us, and it is even more difficult to actually challenge them. For instance, Aristotle, for all his vision, saw nothing wrong with keeping slaves, or with shutting women out of the political arena. And we even have the testimony of Frederick Douglass to remind us that many of the slaves of his time believed that their own enslavement was a justifiable means of producing the best life for society as a whole. And Douglass himself, from amongst our very best, was a conflicted supporter of women's suffrage.⁵

Traditions, even when casting an eye to their possible shortcomings, invite us to confute the “normal” with the right. When we are immersed within our comfortable ways of life, absent the ambiguities that complicate our evaluations, we can just get on with business and not worry about the rest. We'll be struck by our leader's apparent wisdom.

*I guess you couldn't ask for a better way of life than giving it for something you believe in.*⁶

This advice, offered by a former president to a grieving mother, underscores the futility of the appeal to tradition. Without the moral principle of selection by which traditions are to be adjudicated, the solace reduces all traditions, all commitments, to the same level. The terrorists will reassure their own with exactly similar condolences. And citizens of all nations will nod in unison as their own version of Brittany weighs in:

*[W]e should just trust our president in every decision he makes, and we should just support that and be faithful in what happens.*⁷

But however attractive, this sentiment acquiesces in the “happy days” of our youth lived far beyond its time; it surrenders our most important decisions to authorities we really don't understand and have no right to trust.

So, with authenticity on the line, we will have to ask the right questions. Do we really seek the truth—work for it? Do we truly aspire to responsibility? Do we learn, however gradually? When we accept responsibility for our own ignorance, it finally won't matter what our mothers, our teachers, or military authorities have told us about right and wrong—about how to shape our economy, or how to treat animals, the environment, or detainees. And we will not settle for a survey merely to ascertain what it is that most Americans prefer, nor will we ever defer to any “authority” simply because this is what we have been taught to do. As an authentic person, we will settle for nothing less than knowing *for*

ourselves whether the guidance offered by another is true. The rest may be misleading, helpful, inspiring or maddening, but it is always *hearsay*.

Do we have that kind of grit? It seems that we'd better; for where moral virtue is concerned, our integrity—our authenticity—is all.

Part III: Initial Assessment

Did we get it right? That there is so much more to say is clear. But have we got the nub, the very heart of, what it is to be morally good? It is indeed extremely hard to see what could be deleted from among these conditions, or even what might be added to improve them. So, if you are reading on, let us assume that we have achieved at least a preliminary agreement; it looks as if we have successfully identified those conditions which accurately describe—which essentially define—the virtuous person.

Part IV: The Life of Faith

From here, let us now lay out those features definitive of religious faith. More generally, we will designate this stance as “the life of faith.” This term, ‘faith,’ must be carefully defined. There is no room for equivocation or sloppiness.

We will stipulate then that the “faithful life” is the life of absolute dedication—of total surrender—to a deity. While in principle the object of faith may be any deity at all—God, country, corps, lover or school—let us stick with the topic of immediate concern: religious faith. The paradigm of such faith can be located within fundamentalist Christian and Islamic traditions, and here we can say that the faithful life then is that life of absolute dedication to God.

Of course religious faith will always feature signature beliefs—e.g., for most Christians, those of I Corinthians 15: 1-6. But in its most basic meaning, faith is much more. For instance, faith is radically incompatible with the opportunistic agendas mimicked by Michael Corleone (“Yes Father, I do renounce Satan and all his works” as he becomes Godfather to his nephew while simultaneously orchestrating the murder of his enemies).⁸ Rather, faith requires that our lives be fully surrendered to God. One lives for the very purpose of glorifying God, of allowing God to work His will through our lives—to living out His commands. There is no seriously competing allegiance—not revenge, not the love of our lives, not money, and not power. *There are no other Gods before us.*⁹

It became the mission of the Apostle Paul then to convince us that it is the faithful—*all* of the faithful, and *only* the faithful—no one else—who

can achieve righteousness, and hence salvation. Through faith, not just belief, but *through the dedication which faith is*, God's Spirit is alive within us, and through the power of God's Spirit, we can achieve the obedience endemic to true faith, and thus become righteous—morally good.¹⁰

We need not pause here to ask about the tortuous details of the Pauline rationale. Let us rather ask: can Paul possibly, *just possibly*, be right?

Part V: Assessment

Three red-flags arise immediately. The first two have to do with knowledge and motive, alternatively.

Virtue requires knowledge of what is right. But the life of faith settles for, no, demands, something far less—viz., faith. Here, it is not necessary to know anything about a “justification” of God's proclamations—let alone actually evaluate these on our own (see Q/O8 below). *Faith solicits moral incompetence.*

And what is the motive for abandoning this search for knowledge? If we have surrendered to a moral God simply because we believe that doing so will cause Him to be merciful to us, virtue has escaped us. So what is our motivation? Is it virtue? Or, is it the virgins, the Promised Land, victory over our enemies, the obliteration of our strife, the love of our spouses, the streets of gold, the escape from Hell? Give us this and we'll act rightly? No, it's not? Then suppose these promises were completely removed—Heaven and Hell, and all questions of reward and punishment are pulled from the equation. Would we still dedicate our lives to God? For what possible purpose? The definition of virtue doesn't require it. Were we really in it for the money? Only you are in position to answer this question.

But the final and decisive problem is that the demands of faith are obviously directly at odds with the requirement that the virtuous person live authentically. The person of faith is dedicated to following God, no matter what. The person of virtue is dedicated to living rightly, no matter what. This incompatibility is as basic as it gets.

Yet as stark as this discrepancy is, it may not at first seem too serious, and in fact may seem exactly right. The notion that we should follow God, no matter what, sounds fine as long as we are shielded by the unquestioned assumption that what God tells us to do is itself morally good. We'll be uplifted if we believe that our God is a God of justice and love, and that His basic commandment is to love thy neighbor. So as long as we can feel warm and fuzzy about what God commands of us, we'll be

confident we are on the right path. We'll not be dissuaded by irrelevant atheistically tinged claptrap.

O.K. Love thy neighbor does sound good. But what if God commands: "Waste the motherfuckers!"?

What? Your God wouldn't say this? But evidently He did. Although the land of Canaan had been previously settled and occupied, the Israelites were informed that this was their Promised Land. Hence they were commanded to invade and lay waste to the communities of the heathen Canaanites, kill the men, rape the women, enslave the rest. And when they balked, they were themselves punished.¹¹ Neighbors? How about brothers? When Moses came down from the mountain, it was commanded that those who had worshiped the Golden Calf be slain; brother and neighbor must slay brother and neighbor.¹² "Brother shall slay brother." And after the murders, God sent a plague upon the Israelites to further convey his displeasure.

Well, perhaps there is some misunderstanding of the text. Perhaps. But it does not matter. If you are a person of faith, the retreat of "My God wouldn't do that" is unavailable. It is both confused and irrelevant. As a person of faith, you are dedicated to doing whatever God commands—regardless! You are *not* screening His dictates in order to assess their relative merits. You are either in it for whatever God commands, come what may, or you are a pretender—not a person of faith at all. Either your dedication is paramount, or you are an idolater living in the service of some other priority.

How do we know this? You have already said so. As a person of faith, you will do precisely as you are directed exactly because this is your defining commitment. For the rest, you'll find a mantra. Rather than be committed to virtue—to the authentic search for knowledge, courage, and purification of motive—you are committed to something else. This is your faith. You are committed to God no matter what.

But then, you are not a morally good person. You don't know what you are doing, you are in it for the wrong reasons, and you are scrupulously committed to doing all the wrong things if God so commands it.

And yes, make no mistake about it. You will, like USAG Jeff Sessions, waste the motherfuckers¹³—collateral damage be damned.¹⁴

Conclusions

What pressing questions/objections remain? And what final conclusions should we now draw?

Q/O1. — The definition of ‘faith’ under consideration here seems too narrow to be philosophically interesting. Is it?

I fear this line of concern trivializes the existence and influence of the deep and voluminous writings (which are presumptive of faith as total dedication) that absolutely dominate contemporary discussions. This same theme is endemic to the message of evangelicals, and most especially, the Christian right. It is precisely this notion of faith—as absolute dedication—which is rooted in the First Commandment. “Thou shall have no other Gods before me.” It is at the very heart of Paul, whose opening salvo of his most mature theological letter informs us that *faith is obedience*. (Rom. 1: 1-6) Only through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, which arrives solely through absolute dedication to God (which renders us “dead” to the powers of the flesh) can we be freed from the life condemned to idolatry and eternal damnation. For Paul’s reply to those who suggest that we can go on sinning and still be saved through grace, Paul shows no patience. (Romans 6)

So, the answer is “No.” Faith as absolute dedication is precisely what the Pauline scriptures exact of us. Indeed, this formulation of faith, as our most fundamental commitment, is just Tillich’s formulation of faith as ultimate concern, the scope of which is universal.¹⁵ And as we shall see in Part III, this is integral to the theological message of the gospels as well. Moreover, it is that to which our leaders too readily appeal as the definitive reassurance that their moral compass is correctly adjusted. It underlies Jihadist agendas and is complicit in the final exclamation of the flight 93 hijackers: “Allah is the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest!”¹⁶ Here faith, as an offer of the best that we can be, is the most fundamental of pretenses, and badly stands in need of full, uncompromising, exposure.

Q/O2. — Doesn’t my argument entail that, on the Pauline account, there will be no virtuous people in heaven?

Correct. Dante got this part of Paul exactly right.¹⁷

Q/O3. — Many Christians believe that love is the highest virtue. But isn’t the above discussion dismissive of this virtue while ignoring God’s command to love one another? Wouldn’t doing so be good, and sufficient to achieve virtue?

No, what we must realize is that the insight coming through the tradition of virtue ethics is sound. There can be no love-based ethics. Love, even though at times supererogatory, can be justifiably seen as a virtue only when the acts motivated by love conform to what is morally correct. Yet as Kant argues in Section 1 of the *Groundwork*, and as Steven

Cahn reminds us, love is notoriously exclusionary. Loved ones will be favored, or even pampered to their own detriment; and the unloved will be on the outside looking in. This will be corrected, not when we turn to even more love, but to principles of justice—principles which inform us as to how we ought to live—whether or not we actually love our neighbors.¹⁸ Love is morally subordinate to justice.

Q/O4. — Doesn't the above discussion simply ignore the good point made by Paul Ryan, during a recent VP debate? That is, guidance comes from faith—a faith that informs us every step of the way.¹⁹

No, faith informs us of nothing. It offers no knowledge. We don't even know whether God exists let alone whether He is good, or what is on His mind.²⁰ So the claim (that faith informs us) can mean little more than that we are dedicated to the very beliefs that the virtuous person understands we must scrutinize; yet, as members of the faithful, to which we will cling no matter what.

Q/O5. — Does it follow then that we know that all Christians, and everyone else who believes in God, is excluded from the life of virtue?

No, we know rather that the life of faith—of someone dedicated to following their deity—cannot possibly be a virtuous life.

Faith, not belief in the existence of God, is what corrupts us. It perpetrates all the misunderstandings conveyed through the dogmas about what God wants for us, and pretends to know these are somehow relevant to how we should live. It saps from us a commitment that betrays us—that steals from us the best that we can become as it strips us of our integrity. This is not merely a sometime dark shadow cast vaguely over the life of faith. It is rather that it is conceptually incoherent to suppose that faith breeds virtue. The life of faith and the life of virtue are logically incompatible.

Q/O6. — The “Incompatibility Thesis” (that the life of faith and the attainment of moral virtue are incompatible) fails because following God just is what it is to be virtuous.

This claim (call it the “Conflationary Objection”) offered by a reader, is false as it stands, since right action (whether or not following God constitutes such) is insufficient for virtue. The motivational condition must also be satisfied.

More importantly, one might well argue that the preceding discussion is already dispositive of the objection. Be that as it may, it is also true that a direct and sustained response to the objection is both instructive and

even critical to a deep appreciation of the power of the Incompatibility Thesis. Thus, the stage for discussion of this objection has been carefully orchestrated. And at first glance, this “go to” objection may well appear as a decisive blow to the Incompatibility Thesis, pommeling its perpetrators into a stunned silence. But in fact, I believe that after a bit of work we will be able to see that the objection, as bottom, is merely the result of confusions already addressed.

First, consider that to insist upon the Conflationary thesis (moral rightness *is* following God) simply begs the question. It is not itself an argument but is instead another illustration of how the attempt to secure moral integrity by means of a stipulation is to have already surrendered that integrity. For there is exactly one relevant issue raised here, and it is this. How do we know whether the claim (following God *is* to follow the moral mandate) is correct? Here, it is decidedly insufficient to argue, contra Hume, that the union of God and morality is a rationally defensible claim—i.e., coherent and for all we know even possibly true.²¹

Virtue requires knowledge, not question-begging assumptions. If we are to give ourselves to something unconditionally, authenticity requires that we have a “lock-down” justification for the act. Anything else is dogma. It is simply incoherent to insist that we are following the evidence when we have admitted that we follow God no matter what. The Conflationary stipulation is just an appeal to the very magic which authenticity seeks to unmask.

But now let us consider the earlier claim that it is surely *possible* that the Conflationary Thesis is ultimately correct. And if possibly correct, then surely it is possible that we could come to know that this is so. And if it is possible to know this, then it is possible to justify the stipulation—i.e., it is possible that we can come to know it to be true. If so, then doesn’t the surrender of our lives to God emerge as not only compatible with the life of virtue, but also necessary for its attainment?

No, this argument is again the result of the confusion we considered earlier. For if we surrender to God because we know that following Him is morally right, then our surrender is not unconditional. We are not members of the creed that requires dedication to God no matter what. When it is justice that emerges as the trait which commands our allegiance, then faith (as unconditional surrender to a deity) is no longer in play. Dedication is instead conditioned upon virtue.

Hence, in the end, the Conflationary Objection stands as merely an illustration which undergirds the very thesis which it targets.

Nevertheless, having proceeded this far, it is helpful to reflect further on whether the stipulation under discussion (following God *is* to follow