

The Significance of Religious Experience, and Other Essays

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recent times have seen the advent of a new atheism. A number of writers have weighed in—philosophers, scientists, literary people—people with little sympathy for traditional Judeo-Christian-Muslim religion with what they see as its metaphysical and epistemological pretensions. Even worse, from their point of view, are ethical pretensions that stand in contrast with its highly spotty ethical history. I share many of their concerns and yet I count myself among the practitioners of traditional religion. My return to Jewish religious life some 20 years ago was a response to a hunger for meaning, one to which life in the academy was, while not irrelevant, not quite adequate.

Since that time I've been on something of a mission, to understand what to make of religion, its truth, its mythological dimension, its monumental ethical successes and equally monumental failures, of the fact that while my orientation in philosophy is naturalistic, I find myself powerfully drawn to religious life. These essays represent my attempt to come to terms with the matter.

My inspiration and direction in this project derive from multiple and very different sources, some philosophical, some religious, others somewhere between. On the philosophical side, there is the sense that philosophy should have something to say about the large issues in human life. Religion—more generally the domain of

the sacred—is a prime candidate, one that did not receive much attention during the heyday of analytic philosophy.

A second factor, at once a kind of constraint on how to think about religion (and everything else), is the naturalism of which I spoke. The term “naturalism” nowadays brings to mind various trends—reductionist, eliminativist—that are not hospitable to religion. My kind of naturalism is quite different. One needs to return to the American naturalists of the first half of the twentieth century to get the flavor of what I have in mind, to philosophers like James, Dewey, and Santayana, thinkers who took religion seriously as a central human concern. Historically, my naturalism resonates with that of Aristotle, hardly a reductionist or eliminativist, and Spinoza.

Of the American naturalists, Santayana played a particularly important role for me. Santayana writes about religion, most directly in *Reason in Religion*, in a way that is difficult to characterize. Not a supernaturalist, he is hardly a conventional believer, indeed an atheist in that term’s most precise (metaphysical) meaning. At the same time he appreciates religious life so deeply that he appears to inhabit its fringes.¹ God himself is perhaps puzzled about where exactly to locate Santayana—so I have thought only half-jokingly: an almost-insider of independent spirit or an appreciative outsider.

An even more profound philosophic influence was Wittgenstein,² himself deeply reverent of religious tradition but never quite able to make personal contact. I avoided Wittgenstein’s writings for years, a reaction to his seemingly indulgent writing and the cliché-ridden discourse of many of his followers; too much easy talk of language games, meaning as use, forms of life....Some 30 years ago, however, I forced myself to make contact with Wittgenstein’s work, primarily as a challenge to my developing views in the philosophy of language. I had the impression—I came to see it as a misimpression—that Wittgenstein represented a radical alternative to the orientation I found so attractive. Alternative or not, it quickly became clear that I

¹ In this, Santayana, with Catholic roots, is of a very different sensibility than Dewey whose roots are Protestant. Dewey had no use for religious institutions, with their “historical accretions.” See his *A Common Faith*.

² Philosophical compatibility, like friendship, is hardly transitive. Indeed it almost amusing, or in the borderland between amusing and painful, to imagine Santayana and Wittgenstein in dialog. I am profoundly grateful to Wittgenstein’s writings for (what feels like) deepening my understanding of philosophical things more generally.

was in the presence of rare philosophical depth. Clearly I had much to learn here. And my thinking about language—more generally about philosophy and beyond—has never been the same. In *The Magic Prism*,³ I sought to bring Wittgenstein to bear on the late twentieth century debate in the philosophy of language. In the present context Wittgenstein makes occasional appearances. But throughout these essays I am trying to think through religious commitment in a way that reflects what I have learned from him.

Abraham Joshua Heschel⁴ served as a kind of mentor-in-print. Heschel's work sits between philosophy, poetry, and religious literature per se; he is perhaps best thought of as a philosophical poet of the religious life. During my first sojourn in religious life during my twenties I was too rigidly analytical to appreciate Heschel, or indeed to read poetry. Upon reaching an age accessible to my Jungian shadow, poetry opened up to me. It was as if I were graced with a new form of perception, as if suddenly I had taste buds in my fingertips. And with poetry came Heschel. He too makes occasional appearance in the papers represented here. But his spirit pervades.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the role of religious literature per se: the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and the subsequent tradition of commentary. From this oceanic corpus, I have learned more than I can say. Most important for the development of the view I articulate in these essays is the Talmudic era interpretive tradition of *Midrash/Aggadah*⁵, commentary that ranges from speculative filling in of missing pieces in the biblical narrative, to parable, homily, even humor.

Biblical narrative, parable, and the like, along with *Midrash/Aggadah* are in the Jewish context as close as one gets to theology—until the Middle Ages with its full-blown philosophical theology. And this earlier “theology” is largely literary in

³ Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴ See especially his *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976.

⁵ These two genres share the characterization in the text. Collections of *Midrash* are organized as commentaries on the biblical texts that they elucidate. *Aggadot* appear interspersed with legal materials in the Talmud. They are often not keyed to any particular biblical text but take up theological issues connected with the legal discussions or with the general project of the Talmudic tractate in which they appear.

genre, much closer to the arts than to the doctrinal theology of the medievals.⁶ The stark contrast between the earlier and later modes of theology came as a shock to me; they represent very different approaches to their project. Indeed I'm inclined to think that they fail to engage a single project. They appear to emerge from distinct religious sensibilities.

PART I: FIRST PHILOSOPHY

I turn now to the essays. "People Think, God Laughs," Essay 2 is an autobiographical entry point into the philosophical work of the volume. The domain of the personal and that of the philosophical are, for me, much closer than one might suppose. The essay is a brief exploration of how my work in philosophy conspired with a variety of human factors to induce a second look at religious life, abandoned many years earlier.

"Awe and the Religious Life," Essay 3, emerged from my transition from a Santayana-like appreciation of religion to residence inside traditional religious life. My reentry has required some refurbishing of the living quarters. It has been a labor of love—not without its rough spots—to see how I am to make sense for myself of a religious outlook that is conventionally understood in ways with which I cannot connect. The ordinary religious idioms, expressive of a distinctive way to approach life, have great appeal for me. The question has been what those idioms come to. And if they come to something quite different than ordinarily assumed, what happens to their initial, straightforward appeal? (Answer: it remains...but that's a long story.)

One point of difference concerns the contrast between my naturalism, already mentioned, and the more conventional supernaturalism. And then there is my emphasis on the earlier literary theology that I've mentioned, something I want to

⁶ The highly important personal religious influences of my teachers will make their appearance later, especially in the final essay.

champion, and the contrasting philosophical style of theology that has become virtually normative.

The latter approach places doctrinal belief at the very heart of a religious outlook. And yet the Hebrew Bible knows of no concept like our concept of belief.⁷ If belief is not focal, what is? Standing in awe of heaven, in awe of God, are the relevant biblical idioms. Affective matters, like awe and also love, constitute pillars of the relationship between people and God, pillars of religious life.⁸

Such affective matters, as opposed to metaphysical beliefs, are basic to the sort of religious way to which I'm drawn. And when I speak of things like awe and love, I mean to be speaking not of mere feelings but of attitudes realized in the life of the agent. One who loves and stands in awe of God is one whose life exemplifies such ways, albeit imperfectly. Nor should one suppose that such modes of living—I've referred to them as affective—do not have a cognitive dimension. One does not simply feel awe or behave in an awe-inspired fashion. One stands in awe of God.

Philosophy of religion in the 20th and 21st century has not attended much to concepts like awe, love, and gratitude, though things seem to be changing in this regard.⁹ The primary philosophical focus has been religious metaphysics and epistemology.¹⁰ In this paper, I begin my project of exploring these relatively neglected attitudes along with the distinctive conception of human flourishing that makes them focal. My focus in this paper is awe, itself a surprising constellation of humility and elevation (how do these go together?). I had hoped to write about love

⁷ See especially Essays 2 and 7. But the matter gets mention throughout the volume.

⁸ It occurs to me now, as opposed to what I say in the essays, that it's probably best to say that the Bible has no expression for our "religious outlook," since in the biblical purview God is about as controversial as the weather. In the biblical imagination, awe and love are best thought of as focal in religious life, that is in the sort of life appropriate to a world in which one stands, willy nilly, in a relation to God.

⁹ There are exceptions, e.g., the work of Eleonore Stump, who has devoted a great deal of attention to love and related affective matters. See, e.g., her APA presidential address and her recent masterful (and heavy) volume, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, 2011 (Oxford University Press).

¹⁰ Also theodicy, the critique of which is central to my project. See Papers 8 and 9.

next, but the topic proved too difficult. It is a topic on which I'm at work as I finish this volume.

The focus of this paper is awe, but there is also a kind of undercurrent obsession with the role of metaphysics. In this early essay I don't reject the metaphysical project as wrongheaded; I argue that religious life is viable in the absence of settled metaphysical beliefs. I do so by directing attention to other domains of human reflection and knowledge in which we get along quite well in the absence of clarity about what is in some sense fundamental.

Mathematics constitutes a striking example. Who is going to question the integrity of mathematics just because its epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings are less than entirely understood? Imagine the folly of first trying to solidify the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of mathematics, this as a preliminary to and justification for mathematical practice.

My attitude to religion and religious practice has similarities to the case of mathematics. I'm entirely confident about them. This is not to say that religion is for everyone, or that I cannot understand those to whom it does not speak. And my confidence is in part predicated on my leaving open the foundations, if that's what they are. Of course, intellectual responsibility mandates that I say much more about my claim to confidence; about why, how religion makes sense. This is the burden of the entire volume, and I address it directly in Essay 7.

To say that we should not start with metaphysical questions or, even more radically as I am now inclined to suppose, that the usual supernaturalist religious metaphysics provides a misleading picture of what the game is all about, is not to diminish the central role of God in religious life. (Compare mathematics: the centrality of numbers, sets, and the like does not depend upon one's metaphysical views, or lack of them.) At the heart of religious life are awe and love for God.¹¹

"Terra Firma," Essay 4, aims at clarifying my sort of philosophical naturalism, distinct from other views known by that name. Indeed, "religious

¹¹ And not only towards God; the sort of religious outlook I'm drawn to makes central awe, love, and (related attitudes like) gratitude towards one's fellows, towards the universe, towards life.

naturalism,” my overall outlook in this book, will seem to many an oxymoron. In this paper I illustrate my kind of naturalism with examples from epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of religion.¹² The focus of the essay is what I see as Wittgenstein’s kindred naturalism, specifically as exhibited in his treatment of our talk of pain.

Central to Wittgenstein’s way in philosophy is a wariness about philosophers’ handling of noun-phrases. We learn as children that nouns refer to—I can almost hear the words—“persons, places, and things.” It can seem a harmless philosophical rendering of this grammatical truism that the use of noun phrases entail “ontological commitment” to their referents. Talk of souls would then presumably involve commitment to the supernatural; talk of abstract things like meanings, numbers, and propositions would entail commitments to a realm of non-natural abstracta; talk of pain, a commitment to mental states or events.

One of Wittgenstein’s strategies is to explore the natural history, the evolution, of the sorts of phrases in question: nouns like “soul,” “meaning,” “number, and “pain.” Understanding this evolution, and clarifying what these phrases are doing for us, supposes Wittgenstein, may well render the usual metaphysical posits less attractive, even otiose. Needless to say, the matter is subtle and complex and deserves extensive exploration. My aim in this essay is the exploration of one suggestive case of the general phenomenon, the case of pain vocabulary.

Essay 5, “Theological Impressionism,” returns to religion per se and represents what was for me an important step, trying to sort out the nature and relative centrality of, and the relation between, religious imagery and religious belief. The title of the essay reflects the fact that the primary religious works—the Hebrew Bible, Talmudic literature—speak of God impressionistically. Their mode of description is as remote from definition as poetry is from mathematics. The contrast is with the classical picture of religion from medieval times to the present: religious life as living atop a system of refined doctrine.

¹² My take on religion is in Essay 4, as it was in Essay 3, subject to later, hopefully more adequate, articulation.

My anti-doctrinal outlook is (for some and only some readers) less shocking in the context of a Jewish religious sensibility than with others, because of the centrality of practice in Jewish religious life. Still, religious practice without religious thought would yield a mere shadow of that life. In denying philosophized doctrine a central place, I thus have much work to do articulating the role of religious thought on my approach. “Theological Impressionism” constitutes a beginning.

Essays 6 and 7, “Against Theology” and “The Significance of Religious Experience,” represent my most recent treatments of the philosophic fundamentals implicated in religious commitment. Essay 6 begins with a look at the history of theology. Think of the Israelite religious tradition, as represented by the *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible) as having progeny: first Rabbinic Judaism, then Christianity, and then Islam.

In the beginning—in *Tanach*—the dominant forms of talk about God were poetry, poetically infused narrative, parable, and the like. When talk of God¹³ undergoes something of a genre-transformation, from literary to philosophical, what take center stage are God’s *properties*, His *perfections* (omniscience, omnipotence, ethical perfection...) along with doctrinal propositions. In *Tanach*, and dominantly in the oral tradition codified in Talmudic literature,¹⁴ God’s *roles* get the emphasis: creator, judge, ruler, teacher, even lover, friend, and the like. Roles as opposed to properties; this highlights the contrast between the literary and philosophical. And when God’s properties are mentioned in the earlier tradition, they are typically ethical properties anthropomorphically characterized: long suffering, quick to forgive, and the like. The philosophical turn is evident first in late Christianity,¹⁵ then in Islam, and then in Jewish tradition¹⁶ for those living in Islamic civilization.

¹³ As opposed to “talk to God” (as in prayer), a very different matter. Jewish liturgy retains much of the poetic and narrative character of *Tanach*.

¹⁴ This tendency is continued in the early New Testament. The omni-properties seem unknown in much of *Tanach*.

¹⁵ Philo was an early Jewish philosophically minded thinker, but his way failed to have much sway among the Rabbis.

¹⁶ I avoid the term “Judaism” whenever I can. It’s the “ism” suffix that irks. I suggested in a talk on the subject in Jerusalem that we speak instead of *Cosa Nostra* (“our thing”), but my suggestion has not yet taken root.

This genre transformation is hardly a matter merely of style. Its enormous importance is related to the coming (and lasting) dominance of doctrine—theoretical propositions about the universe, now seen as at the heart of religion; and to our very way of thinking about religious people as “believers.” Its influence extends to how we conceive religious practice. Maimonides at his most philosophically bold surprisingly seems to attribute limited value to the ordinary modes of Jewish religious life: prayer, rituals, Talmudic learning.¹⁷ The arch religious moment, he suggests, is one spent in solitary, specifically philosophic reflection on divinity. Wittgenstein warned that philosophers tend to reinterpret subject matters in ways amenable to philosophical treatment. The transformation I have been exploring seems a paradigm.

If one uses the term “theology” for the earlier reflections on divinity, theology becomes a literary frame for religious practice, a way to emphasize and enhance the moral and spiritual significance of religious life, a way to add to the power of that life to edify and transform. This is dramatically different enterprise than philosophical theology with its theoretical aim of providing a metaphysical underpinning. What emerges (and persists to this day) are what have always seemed to me heroic epistemological constructions, these by way of shoring up, justifying, rationalizing the metaphysical commitments.

Essay 7, “The Significance of Religious Experience”: The paper’s local aim is a critique of William James’s argument for the existence of God from individual religious experience. As developed by a number of 20th century philosophers of religion, James’s argument constitutes one of the latest attempts to supply epistemic foundations. I am as skeptical of this modern proof for God’s existence as I am of the traditional ones.¹⁸

A more general and perhaps important aim of the paper is an exploration of the power and significance of religious experience. If such “gifts to the spirit”

¹⁷ See the last chapters of the *Guide*.

¹⁸ Which is not to deny that the various arguments for God’s existence appeal to genuine and important features of experience that are by no means irrelevant to the power and meaning of religion, like the order and beauty of the universe, the character of religious experience, and the like.

(James) fail to provide the makings of a demonstration of God's existence, what do they provide? What are we to make of the striking and powerful experiences reported by so many, representing different traditions and outlooks? Here the thought of the mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, as articulated by Rowan Williams, proves helpful.

The paper concludes with a still more general concern: How does one make sense of religious commitment? Some 20th century analytic philosophers of religion have tried, from my point of view, to square the circle, to emphasize belief in supernaturalist metaphysics and argue that somehow such belief is as plain as common sense. One way has been to emphasize the power of skepticism. Swinburne argues for example that skepticism about common sense is so powerful that the principles one needs to defeat it are sufficient to justify religious belief. Such an approach seems doubly dubious; for granting skepticism such power and for denying the intuitive gap between belief in the supernatural and common sense.

James, although he has a hand in encouraging such thinking, emphasizes religious experience. Following this side of James's thought, even deemphasizing religious belief, I want to think about making sense not of a theoretical position but of a form of life, in some sense more plain and intuitive than in Wittgenstein's use of that expression.

There is, however, a strong connection here to Wittgenstein. My approach parallels his more general reflections on "making sense" (and the transition in thought that he recommends) in *On Certainty*. His focus is the concept of knowledge; his aim, to set the concept of *knowing* at a distance from skeptical concerns, their defeat, and the like. Details of his approach aside, his aim is twofold (at least). First, to show that certain philosophical projects are off the mark, inappropriate: the project of defeating the skeptic, or that of providing a non-question begging intellectual justification of our ways. Second: to explore the naturalness of our ways in the world. I am trying to move our thinking about religion in a parallel direction.

Essay 8: So far the essays discussed focus on "first philosophy." It has seemed to both defenders and critics that religion requires substantial metaphysical and epistemological commitments. And I mean to be taking us in a very different direction. But there is another and very different sort of issue that that has seemed paramount, one that for many closes the books on traditional religion: the problem

of evil, the threat from unjust suffering. Specifically, the sheer awfulness that is so much with us presents enormous difficulties for traditional ideas about God, specifically the constellation of His goodness, knowledge, and power.

This challenge is so plain and so powerful that one might well wonder what could count as a persuasive, cogent answer. From ancient times, the best minds have been tormented by the problem, and answers one more brilliant than the next—the project dubbed “theodicy”—have been proffered.

But brilliance is one thing; plain talk another. Early in Essay 8, “Against Theodicy,” I recall the wonderful Talmudic turn of phrase: the question is better than the answer(s). The question in this case is made vivid by the biblical text itself: There are myriad passages that portray God and His universe as just, and reward and punishment (even in this world) accordingly meted out. Not only does such a portrayal violate our experience, the Bible is not shy in relating stories that on the face of it are inconsistent with justice. Job, just to mention one. Indeed, in Isaiah (45:7) God Himself is quoted as saying that He creates both good and evil.

A response to this crucial challenge needs to take its cue from Psalm 146 in which God is said to be the guardian of truth. What is needed is not theoretical facility, brilliance, but rather a natural way to think about the topic, one that does not engender the sense that our naïve instincts have been outsmarted.

Essay 8, largely a reflection on Job, is a brief on behalf of naïveté about evil and God. Marx had his own issues with religion. But his famous remark that religion is the opiate of the masses resonates when one thinks about theodicy. My aim in Essay 8, and I pursue the idea further in Essays 9, “God’s Struggles,” and 10, “Coming to Terms with Exile,” is the exploration of what I call non-opiate reflections of the problem of evil.

Essay 9, “God’s Struggles,” derives from my “Concluding Remarks” at a conference on the Hebrew Bible at the University of Notre Dame. The conference explored passages from *Tanach* in which God seems to mandate all manner of ethical evils, the killing of the inhabitants of the Promised Land, including women, children and animals. The “taking,” i.e. rape, of some of the women. Many of the papers by Christian philosophers proposed some form of theodicy—explaining, justifying

God's mandates. This was roundly rejected by atheists. Such moves, the latter argued, are both altogether expected from religious advocates and altogether unacceptable, a good reason (among others) to reject religion.

My talk reflected my distance from both perspectives. I began by introducing a related but even more devastating challenge to God's justice: God's treatment not of His/Israel's enemies but of his beloved. Two heartbreaking cases are that of Job, already mentioned, and Abraham in the *Akedah*, Abraham's response in Genesis 22 to God's command to sacrifice his beloved Isaac.

My approach to these issues is first and foremost to insist on, not to fudge on, what is morally plain. God's motivation for these things is unfathomable. Referring to these ordeals as "trials," as the text does, is hardly to explain their lack of ethical awfulness. C. G. Jung in an inspired if irreverent moment says that the Accuser (a heavenly roaming prosecutor, called "Satan" in the text of Job, but not to be identified with the Satan of Christian tradition) represents God's insecurity about Job's love. Does Job really love God? Would he remain loyal when pushed to the very edge, robbed of all he has achieved, including his family?

What is striking about the Book of Job, and also about the *Akedah*, aside from God's apparent cruelty to those he loves, is the eerie quality that there is something true and profound and universal here. Thinking about Job, one can hardly resist the thought that the universe—life—takes just as it gives. And, taking the Satan story at the beginning of Job as a parable, it does so with indifference. Life's gifts are transitory, fleeting. The Spinoza-flavored quality of the Whirlwind vision, shared by God with Job, may provide solace. But it certainly does not supply answers. Job is healed without being answered.

Turning to Abraham and the *Akedah*, it is customary to see Abraham as immediately choosing to follow God's command, hastening to the sacrifice of Isaac. This would be out of character for the Abraham we meet up with earlier in the text, in Chapter 18, for example, when he argues with God on behalf of Sodom. As I experience Chapter 22, Abraham faces an excruciating dilemma that under one description is hardly unknown to us: the universe forces a choice between our

greatest loves, between alternatives each of which is not negotiable.¹⁹ Abraham models for us a heroic response: he refuses to panic, refuses to choose between these non-negotiable alternatives, refuses too look too far into the future where a decision may need to be made. Such a glance ahead would be crippling. Instead of seeing Abraham as a willing accomplice, one can see him as holding on with his teeth to God and at the same time to his boy, marching, head down, virtually embracing Isaac, towards Moriah. I find great meaning—moral and religious—in both Abraham’s plight and his response.

In Essay 10, “Coming to Terms with Exile,” I explore a non-opiate religious resolution to the difficulties posed by exile, a pervasive theme in Jewish history, and in Jewish and Christian liturgy and theological reflection. In the Jewish context, exile is both a political idea (exile from the homeland) and a metaphorical one: dislocation as a focal aspect of the human condition. In the Christian context the metaphorical sense of exile takes prominence, the human being as fallen and in need of redemption. The shared sense of exile may be highlighted by reflection on the mythological past—Eden before the apple—and the mythological future—the Messianic era—when human existence was, or will not be, radically troubled and confused.

The Rabbis of the Talmud struggled mightily with what they saw as the exile of exiles, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and subsequent exile of the people. The Rabbinic comment that God went into exile with the people reveals the perceived depth, severity, and extent of dislocation. The Rabbis’ self-appointed task was nothing less than reconstruction of social and religious life that was quite literally on the brink of destruction. Their quest was to develop a manual, as it were, for the successful, meaningful, rich negotiation of life experience even when it does not go well; to take exile (in both senses) seriously, give it its due, but to use it as a sensitizing rather than stultifying force. The challenge is the darkness of life in both ordinary and dire circumstances; the project is largely non-opiate.

¹⁹ I owe to Harry Frankfurt the insight that, contrary to the understanding of many commentators, what makes the choice so excruciating is not that Abraham, if he is to follow God’s command, must violate morality but rather that he must violate his love for Isaac.

I say “largely” since there were also attempts at theodicy-flavored explanations of the tragedy, for example, the oft-repeated remark that the Temple’s destruction/exile is a result of the rise of baseless hatred within the community. But such remarks do not have great explanatory force, as opposed for example to political/military explanations in terms of, say, Roman military power. Such comments have a kind of ethical/homiletical power, but that’s another matter.

The Rabbinic response to the threat of cultural destruction and cosmic dislocation was largely quite a practical one; significant adjustments and accommodations in light of the lack of what had been the centerpiece of religious life, the Temple in Jerusalem. But there was a theological response as well, a largely non-opiate one I argue. Interestingly, during the period that Christians developed a theological response at once messianic and incarnational, the Rabbis, some of whom more than flirted with their own messianism, stayed with God in heaven, as it were, but enhanced their conception of divinity hyper-anthropomorphically. God, in the *Midrash* on Lamentations, is spoken of vividly human ways, as a mother bird whose nest has been destroyed, as a father who has beat and exiled his wayward sons, as one who confesses to not knowing how to mourn and asks for help from the Patriarchs. Mourning with God over the exile, and over the human condition, is a paradigmatically non-opiate Jewish response.

Essay 11, “Forgiveness and Moral Reckoning” a critical review of Charles Griswold’s seminal book, *Forgiveness*, takes us in a different direction. Here my concern is to reflect on this central notion in religious tradition, as theorized in a secular mode by Griswold. The paper derives from my participation in an American Philosophical Association symposium of Griswold’s book, a symposium to which Griswold invited me in part because I would bring a religious orientation to the subject.

Most of my discussion of Griswold’s theory does not presuppose a religious outlook. At the end, I return to what seem to me important aspects of forgiveness that are absent on Griswold’s reading, but central if one begins with a religious perspective.

Griswold’s is a classical analysis: he attempts to formulate conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for forgiveness, not in my view a formula for success. It seemed to me, though, that many of his conditions are not universally applicable;

indeed, they seem inapplicable to many garden-variety cases of forgiveness. Griswold's focus is on what he calls paradigm cases of forgiveness. However, these are not paradigms in the sense of standard, central cases of our actual practice of forgiveness. They are what Griswold considers "perfect cases," paradigms in a Plato-inspired sense. They are extreme cases, where extreme moral transgressions are involved, transgressions that require various extremes of forgiveness. Such a focus may skew our thinking about forgiveness, or so I argue.

What I call *legalism* is both central to Griswold's view and of concern to me. Bernard Williams and others have objected to what they call **scientism**, the (mis)application to various domains of philosophy of modes of thought and explanation that derive from the sciences. Parallel to such scientism is legalism, the imposition of legal categories on the ethical domain. *Justification, warrant, obligation* and *duty*: Are such ideas pivotal in potential forgiveness situations, as Griswold assumes? There are many examples; particularly striking was Griswold's contention that the moral community cedes to the offended party the *moral standing* to be the sole purveyor of forgiveness.

To return for a moment to Essay 7, "The Significance of Religious Experience," I note there the same legalizing tendency in epistemology: *warrant, justification, epistemic obligation* as central notions. In both domains, ethics and epistemology, my idea is to think less legalistically. In the epistemic realm we would do better, I think, to worry about whether we are being *responsible* in our beliefs than whether they are *justified*, the latter granting too much respect to the skeptic, or so I argue in Essay 7.

To turn to my interest in a religious perspective on forgiveness, I do not suppose that religion makes possible forgiveness of some special or superior sort. The Jewish sensibility that I inhabit domesticates forgiveness between people and God, a consequence of its domestication of love between those parties. Love is modeled, as in the Song of Songs, the Book of Hosea, and other places in *Tanach*, on love between human partners, each needing, even longing for, the other. Such intimacy—proximity as it were—makes friction inevitable; forgiveness becomes a focal virtue.

It is important, I think, to think about forgiveness not only as an act but as a virtue of character and Griswold agrees. I provide comments towards a model of the

virtue; God as forgiving partner proves to be of assistance. My characterization of forgiveness here makes strong contact with earlier hesitations about Griswold's approach. Love, for example, plays a large role, this in place of Griswold's emphasis on moral-duty as motivating the foreswearing of resentment.

Essay 12, "Ritual," a piece that appeared in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, confronts a prominent perplexity about the value of ritual. There is the sense that to routinize expressions of love, awe, and worship is to mechanize and constrict these things; to evacuate them of meaning. It is indeed striking that none of the prevailing approaches to ethical theory—Aristotelian, Kantian, Utilitarian, for example—make it easy to see how ritual might figure crucially in the ethical life. Yet both ethically and spiritually, ritualized ways are seen as crucially valuable within communities of practitioners.

Perhaps I can formulate a virtue of ritualized ways in a way I could not do when I wrote the encyclopedia piece. In any long-term love relationship, the participants develop ways to express intimacy. Think of nicknames and any number of practices that will inevitably seem idiosyncratic to the outsider but which have great meaning to the participants. Now think of religious rituals as ways the community expresses intimacy with the divine. The practices don't have to make sense; they are merely our ways with God. But that is quite enough. And so when a practitioner fails to observe the prescribed ways, she can feel a sense of letting the other party down, of not living up to her side of the relationship. Such feelings are indeed common among religious practitioners.

What I was able to point out at the time of writing the piece was the difference between a single individual's typically inarticulate expressions of gratefulness, awe, love, and the like, and expressing these things by making various passages from, say, Psalms, one's own. So traditional liturgies, for example, compare with spontaneous expressions of emotion the way Shakespeare compares with my poetry or yours. It's not as if there is no place for spontaneity, but insisting on the value of spontaneity should not blind us to the potential power of ritualized ways. This is of course not to deny that ritualized practice can descend into something purely mechanical.

Essay 13, "Man Thinks, God Laughs, Part II," is a concluding mini-essay in which I highlight what is perhaps most distinctive and most controversial in my

approach, the divorce between religion and metaphysics. One aspect is the idea that religious life can proceed in a way that is philosophically naïve, the pictures that the traditional texts encourage taken at face value. Another is the idea that religious conceptions not be seen as at the surface of an underlying metaphysical picture. Instead religious institutions embody procedures for the encouragement and development of a unique sort of responsiveness, related but not reducible to ethical and aesthetic responsiveness.