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Use of divine names is strictly regulated in the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Unlike most ordinary names, “God,” “Jesus,” and “Allah,” have a particular moral significance for the faithful. Misuse of the names constitutes a form of blasphemy—a sin. Tomes have been written about the origin of holy names in these traditions and the role that they play in devotional practices. I have no such grand theological ambitions here. Instead, in this short essay I will raise a few more narrow questions about the sin of blasphemy from the standpoint of contemporary philosophy of language. Until we have good reason to think otherwise, we should assume that the best semantic theory for ordinary proper names like “Obama” and “Aristotle” extends to names for God. In particular, I think we have reason to assume some causal theory of reference is true of divine names, since some version of it seems true of most every other name. From this assumption I will argue (i) that there are some puzzles for the sin of blasphemy as it is traditionally conceived, and (ii) that we can make progress toward answering the puzzles by acknowledging that divine names are vulnerable to a special kind of reference drift.

I. God and His Names

Assume for the sake of argument that one of the three Abrahamic religions is right and that God exists. The puzzles arise from three appealing principles about God and His names.

First, many believers assume God is morally perfect and worthy of worship. This moral perfection is manifest in how He judges acts to be sinful or right and agents to be sinners or righteous. Further, many assume the divine standard of justice is minimally comprehensible—it bears some relation to our ordinary standards for justice. These readily suggest the following principle:

Justice: Necessarily, for any two agents A and B performing any two acts x and y, if A and B have morally similar intentions and underlying characters, and if x and y have morally similar consequences, then either both acts are sins or neither is.

The motivations for the principle are straightforward. Intentions, character and consequences are the only factors possibly relevant to determining whether an action is blameworthy.1 God’s justice is not arbitrary. So if two actions are alike in all morally

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1. I disregard any theory which contends that particular actions are sins only because God deems them so.
relevant respects, God will judge the actions similarly, and He will do this in all possible situations.

Second, note that each of the Abrahamic faiths puts moral restrictions on how God is represented; these religions identify a host of representational actions as blasphemy. Stepping on a crucifix or icon, portraying holy figures in cartoons, burning holy books, or speaking flippantly or falsely about holy persons are examples of actions considered morally blameworthy. There is a very broad notion of blasphemy that cuts across these faiths, but here I am only interested in one of the paradigm cases—the case where an agent misuses one of God’s names. The most common way to use (or misuse) a name is in the context of an assertion. So I am interested in the status of the following principle:

Blasphemy: Necessarily, it is a sin to make a false assertion about God.

This narrow prohibition from blasphemy is a special case of the commandment in Exodus 20:7: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses His name.” Henceforth, I will refer to this as the Second Commandment. We can distinguish this sense of blasphemy from other distinctively linguistic sins that do not essentially involve a divine name. Denying a canonical teaching of one’s faith constitutes a heresy. Misusing the name for some holy person other than God is often classified as a type of sacrilege. For example, some Christians believe it is wrong to make false assertions about Mary or the saints. Muslims are very circumspect in invoking the Prophet Muhammad. Cursing is a linguistic sin if directed toward God but as an imperative, not an assertion. You curse when you ask God to do something improper given His perfect nature. For example, I curse if I ask Him to “Damn these crazy New Jersey drivers!” While I am not aware of a special category for improper imperatives directed towards other holy individuals, I am confident those are prohibited as well. Religious doctrines place many moral restrictions on language, and these restrictions raise many philosophically interesting questions, but I won’t consider these broader senses of blasphemy further.

Is the Blasphemy principle as I’ve defined it too broad to capture the spirit of the commandment? We might think that we often make false assertions about God, but not all of these assertions are sins. Indeed, so-called “negative theologies” contend that it is impossible to say something true of God, given His utter transcendence. These theologies raise problems for understanding divine names (and for conducting philosophy of religion more generally), but for present purposes I will assume it is at least possible to say something true of God. Further, for my purposes, assertion entails intention, so I suppose that any blasphemer intends for the content of her assertion to be believed by others, though she may or may not know that content is false. Differences in agent intentions may come into play in judging the severity of a given blasphemy, as may differences in consequences. I count any false assertion about God as a blasphemy of some sort or another and therefore a sin, but I grant that there is a wide spectrum of blameworthiness ranging from accidental or negligent blasphemies to intentional, highly morally objectionable ones. The gravity of a given blasphemy should be a function of the aims and character of the blasphemer or the consequences of his action; a good theory of blasphemy should admit and explain these gradations. But if this seems too harsh and you wish to distinguish a class of wholly faultless false assertions about God from blasphemies, then simply amend my principle with whatever additional moral distinction you deem fitting. Finally, why think it necessary that blasphemy is a sin? The modal strength follows from our conception of God’s justice. I assume God exists in every possible world. He is committed to judging like cases alike. So categories of action He counts as a sin in one world count as sins across worlds.

Justice and Blasphemy are the two distinctively moral assumptions that drive the puzzles to come. The third assumption is semantic. Kripke has convinced most of us that purely descriptive theories of reference for names are false, or at least in drastic need of amendment. The simplest descriptive theory of reference (Dtr) holds that a name \( n \) refers to an object \( o \) in the mouth of a speaker \( S \) if and only if \( S \) is a description (or an abbreviation for a description) that \( S \) associates with \( o \), and \( n \) applies to \( o \) and only \( o \). On a simple descriptive theory, “Aristotle” in my mouth means whoever satisfies is the philosopher who wrote the Nicomachean Ethics. I succeed in naming Aristotle with “Aristotle” only if Aristotle is the philosopher who wrote the Nicomachean Ethics. On a more sophisticated descriptive theory, the name refers to whatever object satisfies a weighted set of the descriptions that the name word abbreviates. For example, suppose I associate a set of predicates with “Aristotle”: was a student of Plato, taught Alexander, wrote the Nicomachean Ethics, and wrote De C ivitate Dei. The referent of “Aristotle” is whatever object uniquely satisfies most of those predicates or at least the most important ones. I can even be mistaken about some descriptions in the set (i.e. wrote De C ivitate Dei), so long as I get them mostly right.

Against the purely descriptive theories, it seems sometimes a speaker can be seriously mistaken or wholly unaware of the properties of an object but still succeed in naming it. The causal theory of reference (Crt) is an alternative explanation of how reference is fixed and transmitted. According to the causal theory, a name \( n \) refers to an object \( o \) in the mouth of a speaker \( S \) if and only if either (i) \( S \) “baptized” \( o \) with \( n \) (that is, \( S \) was in a position to uniquely describe or perceive \( o \) and \( S \) performed some speech act to bestow \( n \) on \( o \)), or (ii) \( S \) is part of a causal chain of speakers, each of whom intended to use \( n \) in the same way as the person they inherited \( n \) from and the chain ends with a speaker who baptized \( o \) with \( n \). Agents who receive a name through the causal chain need not be aware of any descriptions the referent uniquely satisfies. Kripke gives a now famous thought experiment in support of a causal theory of reference:

\footnote{This wording is from the NRSV, and I think it offers one of the most philosophically interesting formulations of the prohibition from blasphemy. The King James version states the commandment as a prohibition on using a name in a way that shows disrespect: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.” For Catholics and Lutherans, this is the Second Commandment. For Jews and other branches of Christianity, this is the Third Commandment. The numbering is irrelevant to my arguments. In Islam, the interpretation and status of the commandment is a bit more tenuous, but there are still clear prohibitions from blasphemy. Qur’an 4.140 forbids associating with anyone who makes false assertions about Allah. Qur’an 2.224 prohibits misuse of divine names in oaths. What matters for our purposes is that each of the Abrahamic religions holds that there is an important moral aspect to what we say about God.}
GÖDEL-SCHMIDT: Suppose I associate “Kurt Gödel” only with the description proved the second incompleteness theorem. And suppose that Gödel didn’t really come up with the proof—a different man named “Schmidt” did. Schmidt toiled his entire life in near obscurity until Gödel murdered him, stole the proof, and took the credit. Dr. predicts that the name “Gödel” in my mouth refers to Schmidt and that I have a true belief about Schmidt. But intuitively “Gödel” refers to Gödel, and I have a false belief. When I say, “Gödel was the greatest logician of the last century,” I am asserting something false of a thief rather than something true of his victim.3

Because of cases like GÖDEL-SCHMIDT, many are tempted to endorse the causal theory of reference. And—in for a penny, in for a pound—it seems we should endorse the causal theory of reference for any name. This suggests a third principle:

CtR-G: The causal theory of reference is true for divine names.

By CtR-C, the name “God” refers to God in a speaker S’s mouth if and only if either (i) S baptized God with “God” or (ii) S is a part of a causal chain of speakers, each of whom intends to use “God” in the same way as the person they inherited “God” from, and the chain ends with a speaker who baptized God with “God.”4

There are at least four benefits to adopting a causal theory over a descriptive theory for divine names. First, as already noted, the causal theory is widely popular for names generally. Why assume that divine names deserve an exception? It seems there is nothing special about names for God per se; what are special are the characteristics of the being from whom we receive the names and to whom they refer.5 Second, the causal theory fits well with a kind of theological humility. We might be radically mistaken about all of God’s attributes. So we may not have any unique, reference-fixing description of Him. But because prophets in the history of our linguistic community were able to baptize God, we are still able to speak and reason about Him, albeit often only metaphorically or analogically. I suspect this application of CtR-G particularly appeals to heavily revelation-driven theologies. Strong causal theories of reference put restrictions on what counts as a successful baptism. Such theories would force believers to stand in some kind of direct perceptual or causal—historical relationship to God in order to address Him, speak about Him, perhaps even to have thoughts about Him. God has to have revealed Himself somehow, in order for a community to have a name for Him. Speakers can’t simply invent a divine name from guesses about His attributes. Compared to the purely descriptive theories then, a strong causal theory seems to better reflect a dependence on God for divine names. Third, we’d like debates about the nature of God that occur among different faith communities to be substantive. For debates between Jews, Christians and Muslims to be substantive, “God,” “Jesus,” “Jehovah,” “Allah” and so on must corefer, even though speakers have quite different beliefs about the being that serves as their referent. CtR-G easily allows this, but purely descriptive theories will not. Finally, some philosophers of religion have used causal theories of reference to argue against more traditional views of divine essences. The old stand-by arguments in natural theology name God through His alleged essential attributes (being omniscient, being omnipotent, being all-good, etc). But all of these traditional essences raise puzzles. For example, if God is essentially omniscient and fully apprised of the future, how could He create free creatures? For Christians, how could God become human if He is essentially divine? An increasingly popular response to problems like these rejects the folk essences and instead holds that God has a “divine natural kind”—an essence that we track once we have named Him even if we are hopelessly unaware of what it is.6 A causal theory helps underwrite this kind of theology. A purely descriptive theory won’t.

II. The Principles are Inconsistent

I’ve identified three assumptions about God and His names: Justice, Blasphemy, and CtR-G. And I think many tempted towards orthodoxy in their religion and semantics will find these principles initially attractive. Unfortunately the package is inconsistent. To see why, consider a thought experiment. Imagine two speakers Alice and Bea who have morally similar character profiles—each is equally disposed toward vicious or virtuous acts. Alice grows up in an isolated village fortunate enough to have had a prophet in its distant history. The prophet met God once, learned His name, and shared the name with his fellow villagers. Alice inherits the name “God” from a long causal process leading back to this baptism. Members of Alice’s community nowadays have strayed from the prophet’s teachings. They go around idly saying things like “God gives sheep to only the most beautiful villagers” and “God begrudgingly permits us to worship graven images.”

Bea grows up in another isolated village that, coincidentally, nowadays makes all of the same utterances: “God begrudgingly permits us to worship graven images”, “God only gives sheep to the most beautiful villagers”, and so on. But speakers in Bea’s community started using the word “God” at the prompting of a false prophet, who introduced the word “God” as a name for a spectacular comet he saw one night. He began to tell anthropomorphic stories about the comet and attributed powers to it. The stories caught the imagination of the other villagers, and when the prophet died, they continued idly attributing features to it—it favors certain beautiful villagers with sheep, it begrudgingly permits the worship of graven images, and so on. The speakers in Bea’s community have long since forgotten the original teachings of their prophet.

One fateful day Alice and Bea both stab their toes, and both look to the heavens and angrily exclaim “God is capricious and unjust!” Each outburst is overheard by neigh-

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3This presentation is mine. See Kripke (1980, pp. 83–84) for the original.
4Alston is one of the first to propose a primarily causal approach to God’s names. See Alston (1989). More recently, Sobel makes the assumption in defense of the substantivity of theistic/atheistic debates. See Sobel (2004). The assumption is most theologically difficult for Islam. At least in classical Islam, there is a strong tradition of identifying divine names with divine essences. For some of the history of divine names and attributes in classical Islam, see El-Bizri (2008).
5Johnston contests this point for traditional Abrahamic faiths and their conception of names for God; see Johnston (2009).
6For example, Senor argues for such a solution to the divine attributes puzzles in Senor (1991) and Senor (2008). Gellman (1995) contends that a theory like this is in the background of many “perfect being” theologies, going back as far as Anselm.
III. Sticks and Stones

The puzzle in Section II should now lead us to consider the problem of blasphemy within the Abraham faith tradition. The sin of blasphemy is a sin of name-calling, it is not merely a sin of disrespect for God and the sacredness of His name, but it is also a sin of defiling His name through the use of His name in a way that is indecent, profane, or offensive. The question then becomes: how do we define disrespect for God's name, and how do we determine whether a particular use of God's name is respectful or disrespectful? This is a complex problem, and it requires careful consideration of the theological and semantical aspects of the sacred names used in connection with the divine and the human.

The Biblical Account of Blasphemy: There is nothing morally wrong with using divine names per se. Any moral wrongdoing in the use of blasphemy concerns the way in which the names are used. Unrespectful and profane uses of divine names are wrong only insofar as they are seen as morally objectionable attitudes toward God.

The well-meaning philosopher: Professor A., a philosopher-theologian, is concerned about the problem of abuse of divine names. She believes that God's name should be treated with respect and reverence.

Adopting the single false belief: Professor A. believes that the best way to answer the problem of abuse of divine names is by teaching people to respect God's name. She believes that if people are taught to respect God's name, they will not abuse it.

The dual false belief: Professor B. believes that the problem is not simply one of teaching people to respect God's name, but also one of teaching them to understand the significance of the names. She believes that if people understand the significance of the names, they will not abuse them.

But the account seems to face counterexamples. For example:

1. A dziea's name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward God.

2. A person's name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that person.

3. A species' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that species.

4. A class' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that class.

5. A genus' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that genus.

6. A species' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that species.

7. A class' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that class.

8. A genus' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that genus.

9. A species' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that species.

10. A class' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that class.

11. A genus' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that genus.

12. A species' name is wrong only insofar as it is a source of moral objectionable attitudes toward that species.
might come to develop many more true beliefs about God than they otherwise would have. Perhaps because of her assertion, they will continue enrolling in philosophical theology courses. There’s a lingering feeling that despite all of this, her teaching is objectionably blasphemous.

Moreover, even if we move to a purely belief/desire account of blasphemy, an adequate response to the sticks and stones problem must still explain the apparent moral importance of divine names in the different Abrahamic traditions. Why are there central teachings prohibiting misuse of divine names rather than teachings just addressing underlying attitudes? Consider some options. We might account for the importance of assertion by simply conflating it with belief. Surely there is some intimate connection between beliefs, desire, and assertion. Perhaps I cannot be truly said to have a belief if I do not take some action with regard to it. For example, maybe I don’t truly believe that a tiger is chasing me unless I get up and run out the door or yell out “Look, a tiger!” On this view, believing just is acting in some way. So I cannot have a morally evaluable attitude toward God if I do not act on it in some way. This would be a crudely behaviorist theory of blasphemy. It mistakenly assumes that merely thinking something falls short of being a morally evaluable action. But there may be a more refined version in the ofﬁng. Maybe asserting my disrespectful attitudes toward God affirms and strengthens those attitudes, raising them to moral salience. For example, I may merely entertain negative thoughts about God from time to time, but after I choose to tell you about them, the opinions become settled in my mind and harder to withdraw. On this theory, taking action sometimes turns whispers into robust beliefs. Think of a politician who is interviewed for the ﬁrst time about his opinion on some obscure Alaskan fishing legislation. He asserts to the interviewer, as conﬁdently as he can muster, “Alaskan ﬁshermen need greater legal protection.” He may have only weakly entertained opinions on the question before, but now he feels an impulse to maintain a stand on the issue. He keeps asserting it on the campaign trail and eventually wholeheartedly believes it. Maybe blasphemy works in a similar way. The more we assert falsehoods about God, the more disposed we are to believe them. These more robust beliefs are a greater strain on a relationship with God, and hence a greater sin. So the Second Commandment prohibits acts of assertion that tend to strengthen bad beliefs.

The more sophisticated response is still wanting. First, it seems to get the order of explanation backward. Often acting on a belief does not result in stronger conviction. Most of us believe in the phenomenon of “putting a foot in one’s mouth.” This happens when a speaker blurts out a false or otherwise improper assertion without thinking it through. Soon after, the speaker realizes the impropriety and experiences regret. (Confession: this happens to me with alarming frequency.) Often upon asserting a view we realize how badly formed or unsupported it is. But on the proposed view of speech acts, this phenomenon is deemed highly unlikely. It is difﬁcult to regret a statement if, by stating it, you tend to increase your belief in its content. Second, and more to the issue, the relevant strengthening seems too rare and too weak to warrant the explicit prohibition of blasphemy in the Ten Commandments. After all, there are many other ways someone can bolster her conviction, and none of these are prohibited in the commandments. We tend to be more ﬁrmly convinced of falsehoods when drunk, but injunctions against drinking seem relatively minor in the spectrum of morally prohibited activities; they don’t rise to the level of commandments. Whatever theory of blasphemy we ultimately settle on shouldn’t result in the Second Commandment seeming overly narrow, weak or contingent.

The proponent of the belief/desire account might take a still different approach. Assume doxastic involuntarism: agents have no direct control over their beliefs. Maybe God does not hold me directly morally responsible for my beliefs about Him, because responsibility entails voluntary control. But in choosing to act on a belief in some way—say, by asserting it—I do exercise a form of control. I endorse it. And this endorsing is morally evaluable, whereas my merely holding the belief is not. The blameworthiness of a blasphemous assertion is still intimately tied to the attitude it conveys, but an agent is only blameworthy for endorsing the attitude. This explanation seems more appropriate than any we’ve considered so far, though it is unclear whether there are sound theological reasons to assume we cannot be held directly responsible for our beliefs. Elsewhere in the Ten Commandments, God does seem to assume that we have voluntary control over much of our mental lives. In the Ninth and Tenth Commandments God prohibits coveting, a feeling of intense desire towards objects or people. Mere disbelief in many forms is treated as morally offensive in the scriptures of each of the three Abrahamic faiths, an offense that can sometimes merit severe punishments like exile and damnation.⁹

I ﬁnd purely belief/desire accounts of blasphemy are ultimately unsatisfying because they fail to explain the central moral role that divine names play in these different faiths. In the next section, I will offer an alternative theory of why blasphemy is a distinct kind of sin. The alternative supplements the belief/desire account and requires an amendment to the causal theory of reference. But it is an amendment that is independently justiﬁed. It offers a novel solution to these problems, and shows how agents play an important role in maintaining divine names. I propose that blasphemy is a special category of sin because it contributes to divine name reference drift.

IV. How to Destroy Names (Ordinary and Divine)

My launching point is a well-known criticism of Kripke’s account of reference. In “The Causal Theory of Names” (and later in The Varieties of Reference) Gareth Evans offers an alternative to Kripke’s theory.⁰ On the Evans theory, names are transmitted causally and depend causally on their referents, but descriptions nonetheless play a role in fixing reference at every stage of a name’s use, not just at the baptismal stage. Here is how it works. Every speaker is a member of a linguistic community. Names are introduced to and transmitted through a community in just the ways Kripke proposes. But subsequent users of the name do not inherit just the name word, they inherit a body of communal information surrounding use of the name. There is a set of predicates commonly associated with the name word. Call this the name’s dossier. A dossier starts to be compiled as soon as an object is baptized with a name word. A body of common knowledge

⁹For more on sin and involuntary states, see Adams (1985).

connects the dossier to the name word. For example, “Obama” has a rich dossier in our linguistic community, including predications like was elected President in 2008, is married to Michelle, and lives in the White House. The entries in the dossier were caused by Obama. When I use “Obama,” I defer to information that connects “Obama” to this dossier. Some of the entries in a dossier may be more dominant in the community than others. The more dominant the description, the more often it is relied upon by speakers to re-identify the referent. In the “Obama” dossier, is President is far more dominant than attended Columbia University. A dossier is passed on from generation to generation by causal processes, but it can be changed piecemeal over time as entries are added, dropped and become more or less dominant. Some of the entries in a dossier might even be false of the referent, and this is fine so long as they are still caused by the referent in a way that is apt to produce knowledge. Suppose Obama’s marriage is an elaborate hoax, “Obama” may still refer to Obama so long as he is somehow the appropriate causal source of the misleading entry is married to Michelle.

Call this causal-dossier theory the hybrid theory. The hybrid theory avoids GÖDEL-SCHMIDT objections because it requires an appropriate causal chain of use. In the case, Evans is committed to holding that “Gödel” either doesn’t refer at all for speakers in the community or it refers to the proof thief. It cannot refer to Schmidt, because there is no dossier causally linking use of “Schmidt” with that individual. So the hybrid theory preserves the main benefit of the causal theory of reference: meanings aren’t determined simply by speakers’ intentions—there must be a causal link between a name word, a dossier, and the intended referent.

The major upshot of the hybrid theory over the standard causal theory is its ability to explain the phenomenon of reference drift. Reference drift occurs when new objects cause entries to a name’s dossier. To motivate his theory, Evans gives thought experiments of names changing denotation. For example:

**DRIFTING “TURNIP”**: A youth A leaves a small village in the Scottish highlands to seek his fortune having acquired the nickname “Turnip.” Fifty years or so later a man B comes to the village and lives as hermit over the hill. The three or four villagers surviving from the time of the youth’s departure falsely believe that this is the long-lost villager returned. Consequently they use the name “Turnip” among themselves and it gets into wider circulation among the younger villagers. They may die off (without discovering their mistake), leaving a homogenous community using the name to refer to the man over the hill. I should say the way is clear to it (“Turnip”) becoming his name.

In the story, we can identify three distinct phases in the life of the name word “Turnip.” In the baptismal phase, the name was coined for Turnip and a dossier was started with entries like is redheaded and has great ambition. These contributions to the dossier are caused by the youth. In the second phase, when the name first comes back into wide use, the dominant descriptions remain in the dossier, but new, false descriptions like is a recluse also enter. The hermit is the causal source of these new entries. In this second phase, “Turnip” still refers to A, but the dossier surrounding its use is becoming polluted. In the third phase, after the old villagers have died off, the new entries become dominant, and the reference of “Turnip” drifts to B, because B is the cause of the most dominant entries in the dossier. The moral: change the dossier enough, and you can change the name.

It is clear that a good theory of reference should permit and explain various kinds of reference drift. And the hybrid theory turns out to be particularly useful for explaining the moral restrictions on divine name use. Consider another illustrative story:

**DRIFTING “GOD”**: In the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve knew many of God’s attributes and refer to Him by the name “God.” The Fall happens and God hides. People keep using the name “God” to talk about God as Adam and Eve had. For some time “God” successfully refers to God. But over time, cunning and malicious speakers add more and more entries to the dossier. Community members start to assert and believe for example, “God gave us all these sheep because we are beautiful” or “God permits us to worship graven images.” For some time, if the errors in predication were pointed out, the speakers would realize that they were speaking falsely of God. But the errors are never revealed. Instead, these bad entries build up, and eventually become dominant in the community. I should say the way is clear to “God” failing to refer to anything.

Again we have three phases. In the baptismal phase, Adam and Eve baptize God as “God” and the dossier is dominated by good entries like is Adam’s creator and is all-good. In the second phase, bad entries begin to pollute the dossier but are still not dominant. These bad entries might be caused by a miscellany of different sources—hallucinations, solar wind, or confused encounters with burning bushes. All that matters is they are not caused by God. In this phase, “God” still refers to God, but reference is starting to drift. As the bad entries become dominant in the dossier, we enter the third phase, where the name “God” does not refer to God. Perhaps some new object is the dominant source. More likely, nothing in particular is the single causal origin of the most dominant predicates in the dossier. Either way, nobody in the third phase ever says anything true or false of God when they try to use the word “God.” The word is no longer a name for anyone relying on the dossier. The moral: pollute the dossier enough, and you ruin the name.

Nothing in Evans’ theory prohibits names from drifting into complete reference failure, though admittedly, in most of his examples names come to rest on a new referent. But, if you are uncomfortable with the possibility of unmoored reference drift, then just suppose the reference is moving from an actual object to a fictional entity that causes

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11 For more on the conditions for causal processes, see Evans (1973, p. 15).
(in some expansive sense) the new entries in the dossier. There seem to be many fictional candidate referents for God’s name, because there are many stories about fictional gods. I worry that there might be too many fictional candidates. If we assume, as seems plausible, that every possible individual is a fictional reference candidate, then reference might drift any time a dossier becomes polluted. We lose another upshot of Evans’ theory—his somewhat tolerant persistence conditions for reference. This is why I favor allowing unmooted reference drift. But the argument will work equally well with a drift-to-fiction theory.

I propose we replace (Ct-G) with:

Hyt-G: The hybrid theory is true of divine names.

With a mechanism for reference drift in hand, we can now begin to answer our puzzles and rationalize some traditional teachings on divine names. Two features make divine names particularly vulnerable to reference drift. First, they name a hidden object: their referent is difficult to re-baptize and difficult to secure new information about. Second, they have long-lived dossiers that communities must maintain. Why is blasphemy a sin? A Blasphemy predicates something false of God. As such, blasphemy can only occur in the second phase above, when a name for God exists. If blasphemy becomes widespread in a community and sufficiently pollutes the dossier, then it promotes reference drift. If it enters the third phase, the name “God” is quite literally destroyed. It will fail to refer to God. It may fail to even be a name. Instances of blasphemy are thus specific attacks on divine names. Sustained attacks can destroy the name’s referential power and deprive subsequent generations of speakers of the ability to address or discuss God. So the blasphemous assertion is not morally special merely because it belies the speaker’s disrespect for God or incites disrespect in others. God holds us responsible for this directly. Instead, the special sin in blasphemy stems from the violence it does directly to God’s name and the ways in which this violence harms future recipients of the name word. A blasphemy is sinful (at least in part) because of its direct consequences—it promotes the destruction of a great good for a community, a divine name. And this residual sin explains why blasphemy is wrong even in cases like WELL- MEANING PROFESSOR.

Here are just two specific ways reference drift for “God” could have deleterious consequences. First, if we have knowledge of God, it most often issues from testimony. If the dossier becomes too polluted, testimony about God becomes impossible. So future generations will not be able to acquire beliefs about God through testimony. Having certain beliefs about God is a precondition for a good afterlife in many of the faiths we’ve considered. Rampant blasphemy could thus deprive future generations of a good afterlife. Second, petitionary prayer is linked to divine names. The Abrahamic God promises to acknowledge believers when they address utterances to Him using His name. If blasphemy overtakes a community, such petitionary prayer becomes impossible. So not only does rampant blasphemy rob future generations of a primary means of knowledge about God, it robs them of the primary conduit for requesting God’s aid. These are two very good reasons for a prohibition from blasphemy to be included among the commandments in these different faiths.

Recall Alice and Bea, the two women from our initial puzzle. They have similar aims and characters and perform acts with similar consequences, but only one commits a sin on the simple causal theory. The puzzle arises because on the simple causal theory, it is a matter of sheer luck whether a speaker inherits a functioning name when she is far removed from the baptism. On the hybrid theory, each is equally sinless. Bea never acquired the ability to refer to God. Alice’s community seems to be in the third phase of reference drift, where God’s name has been effectively destroyed. As a result, neither is able to talk about God in any context. A fortiori, neither is capable of blaspheming God. This seems the right result. But let’s not let Alice off on a technicality. Suppose that Alice still has a functioning divine name. In this case, we can draw an important moral distinction between the consequences of Alice’s and Bea’s assertions. Alice not only causes a neighbor to have a false belief, she also damages a divine name. Bea merely causes her neighbor to have a false belief. Alice’s assertion has more significant consequences than Bea’s assertion. So there is no longer a direct tension between Justice and Blasphemy.

The proposed theory also helps us to differentiate blasphemous speech acts. The gravity of a given blasphemy depends, in part, on how the false predication is incorporated into the dossier and how dominant the predication becomes. Suppose a blasphemer A asserts, “God never communicated with Enoch” and a blasphemer B asserts “God is not good.” If both of their assertions alter the dossier, B does worse damage to the divine name than A, given that is morally perfect is far more dominant than communicated with Enoch in the dossier associated with “God.” Blasphemer B hastens reference drift in a way that blasphemer A does not. The hybrid theory not only explains why blasphemy is a sin, it also offers a natural grade of moral distinctions between blasphemous speech acts.

If we adopt a theory for names that permits reference drift and assume that “God” is a name with the same semantic behavior as any other, then believers have a special responsibility with respect to divine names. This is just what we expect, taking the Second Commandment at face value. On the one hand, to preserve a divine name, the set of common knowledge associated with it must be passed through generations of our linguistic community. Believers are obliged to talk about God if they hope to preserve a linguistic practice associated with a divine name. Indeed, the most common way for a name to die is for it to fall out of use in the community. On the other hand, believers must be careful what they predicate of God. And they must struggle to identify and

14 In his note on Evans, Kripke admits that reference shift to fictions also poses an explanatory puzzle for the simple causal theory. Adverting to counterexamples from Evans and Lewis, he writes, “real reference can shift to another real reference, fictional reference can shift to real, and real to fictional . . . The matter deserves extended discussion.” Kripke (1980, p. 165).

15 Hence for Christians, John 14:13: “Whatever you ask in My name that I will do . . .”
correct bad entries, especially if they are at risk of becoming dominant in a dossier. Like any of the commandments, fully obeying the injunction to preserve divine names is immersely demanding.\footnote{Thanks to Tim Campbell, Scott Davison, Carlos Fasola, Jeremy Gwiazda, Jon Jacobs, Ricardo Mena, Ted Poston, Blake Roebber, Donald Smith, Dean Zimmerman, and audiences at Princeton Seminary, the 2010 UT-Austin Baylor Philosophy of Religion Conference, the 2010 ACPA Conference on Philosophy and Language, and Rutgers University for helpful comments on drafts of this paper.}

REFERENCES


10

GROUNDING AND OMNISCIENCE

Dennis Whitcomb

I’m going to argue that omniscience is impossible and therefore that there is no God.\footnote{For a survey of alternative arguments about the possibility of omniscience, see Wierenga (2010). As for what omniscience ultimately amounts to, I explore that issue in section III.} The argument turns on the notion of grounding. After illustrating and clarifying that notion, I’ll start the argument in earnest. The first step will be to lay out five claims, one of which is the claim that there is an omniscient being, and the other four of which are claims about grounding. I’ll prove that these five claims are jointly inconsistent. Then I’ll argue for the truth of each of them except the claim that there is an omniscient being. From these arguments it follows that there are no omniscient beings and thus that there is no God.

I. Stage Setting

The best way to get a grip on the notion of grounding—or more exactly, for our purposes, the notion of partial grounding—is by considering examples. (By “partial grounding” I mean “at-least-partial grounding”, just as mereologists mean “at-least-part-of” by “part of”; more on this momentarily.)

The first example hearkens back to Plato’s Euthyphro. Suppose that a theorist claims that as a matter of metaphysical necessity, a given act is morally right if and only if it is approved of by God. At first blush at least, it is plausible that this theorist owes us an answer to the following question: when acts are right, are they right because God approves of them, or does he approve of them because they are right? We all understand this question right away, right when we first hear it. In understanding it, we grasp the concept of grounding. The question of whether the act is right because God approves of it, or vice versa, is a question about grounding. Is the fact that an act is right partly grounded by the fact that God approves of it? Or is it the other way around, with the fact that God approves of the act being partly grounded by the fact that the act is right?

A second example concerns compound states and their constituents, in particular the compound state true belief and its constituent state belief. It is a fact that I truly believe that I have hands. It is also a fact that I believe that I have hands. The former fact is partly grounded by the latter fact, but not vice versa. The fact that I truly believe that I have hands is partly grounded by, obtains partly in virtue of, the fact that I believe that I have hands. But the fact that I believe that I have hands is not partly grounded by, does not obtain partly in virtue of, the fact that I truly believe that I have hands. The fact that I truly believe is partly grounded by the fact that I believe, but not vice versa.