



WORSHIPPING THE SAME GOD

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that if any one of Judaism, Christianity or Islam is true, then the adherents of each worship the same God as one another. The issue is primarily one of reference and on any plausible account of how “God” and what I call “cognate names” of God work, all refer to God if any refers to God. Thus, anyone who directs worship to what they suppose they refer with these names directs worship to God if there is a God. There is (perhaps surprising) scope for those with radically misguided views of the nature of God to nevertheless refer to Him and to worship Him should He exist.

KEYWORDS: God, worship, monotheism, reference, pluralism

Introduction

This paper argues that if any one of Judaism, Christianity or Islam is true, even if only in broad outline, then Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God as one another.¹ In the cases of each of the three Abrahamic faiths, the avowed intention of their adherents is to worship the same God as Abraham worshipped and each tradition supposes that it may trace itself back to him. Moses, a figure again revered by each tradition, is depicted in two of the traditions as having directly received the ancestor-name for the present-day English “God” from God Himself. If one is a follower of Saul Kripke (a Kripkean) in one’s views about the name “God,” all this is about as good as it could get for the thesis that if they use the term “God” in attempting to refer to the object of their religious devotion, then the adherents of each these religions refer by it to the same being as one another, presuming any refer by it. In short: if one of these religions manages to refer to God with “God,” they all do; if the followers of one of these religions worship God, the followers of all do. Through their interactions with

¹ I am grateful for the comments of Sophie Allen, Stewart Goetz, Richard Swinburne, Nick Waghorn and Mark Wynn. I am also grateful for the comments of the two anonymous referees for the journal.

Greek culture and with one another, each of these religious traditions has also come to share what is usually called the theistic concept of God. If, in contrast to Kripke, one takes more of a descriptivist approach to "God," then again this is about as good as it could get for the thesis that whether one is a Jew, Christian, or Muslim, if one directs one's worship to a being one calls "God," one is directing it towards the same being as the adherents of the other monotheistic religions, presuming the theistic concept of God is indeed instantiated. The bottom line is the same: if one of these religions manages to refer to God with "God," they all do; if the followers of one worship God, the followers of all do.

Whilst matters are not as clear-cut as this suggests, I shall argue that this line of thinking is fundamentally sound; and I shall close by pushing it a bit farther along the road, towards the claim that if Theism is true, then *all* who believe in any supernatural being(s) at all are believing of God that He exists and thus, if they direct worship towards this being or these beings, they are worshipping Him, at least if He has not created anything else supernatural.

The Issue

Many years ago now, I visited a conservative Islamic country and my local guide, a devout Muslim, at one stage asked me if I would like to accompany him to a mosque for prayers. I said that I would be honoured to pray alongside him. On the way into the mosque, I noticed that next to the pigeonholes in which we dutifully popped our pairs of shoes prior to engaging in the ritual ablutions, there was a separate stand in which were a dozen AK-47s. Our ablutions completed, we went into the main room, and I outwardly did as my guide and the other worshippers did; I got a few curious looks, but not as many as one might have expected. And I wasn't just going through the motions, as it were; as the Imam led the prayers, I offered my own prayers in quietness – and not simply prayers that I would not turn out to have offended any owners of the machine guns which I had passed on the way in, though there were certainly prayers to that effect. After the prayers were completed, on the way out, the Imam came up to the two of us and started a lively and good-natured discussion with my guide in the local language, a discussion which I could not join in. Nevertheless, I got the impression that I was being presented as someone who had recently converted to Islam; who did not speak the local language; but who would no doubt have wished to stay longer had it not been that we now, both of us, needed to rush off (my guide was shooing me somewhat in the direction of the door as this all unfolded). The Imam turned out to speak some English and directed to me some comments which rather confirmed his having formed these opinions of me. After what may have been something of a dramatic pause, I responded with, "It is good that you and I worship the same God." There was much smiling and nodding all around; and my guide

propelled me through the door. Whilst I did feel I had misled the Imam, I also believed that what I had said had been literally true.

The question of whether or not Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God is one on which various views are held by the adherents of these religions. Some Jews think that Christians worship the same God as them, but some don't. Some Christians think that Jews worship the same God as them, indeed most do so; but some don't.² Many evangelical Christians believe they do not worship the same God as Muslims but, at least since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church's teaching has been that the adherents of all of these religions worship the same God.³ Even amongst Muslims, who may draw on a passage in the *Qur'an* that might at first sight seem to be definitive on such matters, there is room for dispute. In translation, the relevant surah reads, "Do not dispute other than in a good way with the people of Scripture [i.e. Jews and Christians], except for those of them who commit injustice; and say: 'We have faith in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God are One, and to Him we submit'" (*Qur'an* 29:46). But, of course, some Jews and Christians will be judged (and no doubt correctly judged) to have committed injustice and thus perhaps may be judged to fall outside the scope of this injunction, though the most natural reading would perhaps suggest that it is simply that they may be disputed with in a non-good way, whatever that might entail.

There is then a diversity of opinion amongst believers in these religions on whether or not they worship the same God, but there should not be, for the argument for thinking that if one of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is right in even broad outline, then the adherents of each do all worship the same God can be sketched quickly and it is conclusive. Of course, even given its conclusion, some acts of worship might be more or less acceptable to God than others⁴; some conceptualisations of God may be more or less adequate to His nature than others⁵; and perhaps none of this has anything at all to do with salvation.⁶ Nevertheless, this much, I suggest, should be uncontroversial: if one of these religions is true, then the adherents of each are referring to the one God and, if they direct worship towards that one being to whom they are all referring, they therefore must all be worshipping the one God. I shall give the argument for thinking this now.

² An interesting spread of views may be found in Volf (2012).

³ See Pope Paul VI (1965). For discussion, see D'Costa (2014).

⁴ Some even perhaps are unacceptable to Him, as pointed out to me by Nick Waghorn. For example, one could consider offering human sacrifices in one's worship of God, but the evidence we have from these religions suggests that God does not find that an acceptable way of worshipping Him.

⁵ Some *must* be – e.g. if God is a Trinity, then Trinitarian conceptualisations are in that respect more adequate to His nature than non-Trinitarian ones; if God is not a Trinity, then the opposite.

⁶ One could hold that worshipping God has nothing to do with one's chances of salvation even if worshipping involves having and displaying some degree of faith in the being worshipped.

Why the Issue is Fundamentally One of Reference

The question is fundamentally one of reference: in particular, do the tetragrammaton and what we might call the “cognate names” of “God” – names such as “Elohim,” “Adonai,” “G_d,” “The Lord,” “God,” “Allah,” “The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,” “Gott,” “Dieu,” and so on – as they are taken by the adherents of these theistic religions to refer to the object of their worship refer to the being that Theism describes? For ease of presentation, let us then allow ourselves a few things. Let us suppose that there is a supernatural being of the sort that Theism describes (a supreme and ultimate omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good supernatural personal being who created the universe) and that this being did reveal Himself in the manner that one of these religions says of Him that He did, even if not in every detail as it says of Him that He did. In short: one of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is – at least in “broad outline,” as we have put it – true. It would be possible (if irrational) to believe that one of these religions is right as a matter of metaphysical theory and yet never seek to worship the supreme being whom it identifies; Satan, if he exists, may be in this position. So let us confine ourselves to considering from now on only those adherents of these religions who do seek to direct acts of worship towards the being to whom they take themselves to refer with “God” and these cognate names of “God.” Finally, let us allow ourselves to use the phrase “The One” in our presentation of the issues to refer to this being. With all of that on the table, the central question may be posed as follows: do “God” and its cognate names in fact co-refer to The One?

The crucial barrier to remove on the way to giving a positive answer to this question is the thought that one cannot refer to something or someone if one has false beliefs about that thing or person. And this barrier is in fact easily removed⁷ as, whilst the theory of reference for proper names is disputed (as is the logical status of “God” and cognate names, of which more in a moment), all plausible accounts must allow that one can refer to a being whilst having false beliefs about that being. (Otherwise, how could one ever end up believing anything false about anything?)⁸

Even with this barrier removed, given that the theory of reference appropriate for “God” and cognate names is disputed, it is as well that the positive answer to the

⁷ I say that this barrier is easily removed and, as a matter of the Philosophy of Language, it is; but a very great number of people seem not to see the irrelevance of the differences between Jewish, Christian and Muslim conceptualisations of God to the issue of reference and thus, in writing on this topic, they spend their time pointing out these differences on the unexamined (*a fortiori*, unargued for) supposition that difference in conceptualisation must lead to difference in reference. See, for example, Vroom (1990).

⁸ The strains interior to the view that the adherents of a different monotheistic religion from one’s own are managing to refer to God with the beliefs that they have about Him (so that they may be said to be having mistaken beliefs about God, rather than beliefs about something else or about nothing at all), yet also failing to refer to God when they direct their prayers and worship are sufficient to make most queasy of endorsing it. William Lane Craig’s short piece on this topic is indicative in that, having set itself up to answer the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God, it then spectacularly does not answer it, but rather switches topic, suggesting that a ‘better question’ is whether or not their differing conceptualisations of God are of equal plausibility. See Craig (2016).

question of whether or not it is the case that if one of these religions is true, then the adherents of all of them refer to the same God may be secured on either of the two main accounts of how names secure reference – the view we might call the “Kripkean” one and the view we might call the “descriptivist” one.⁹ Given we are confining ourselves to considering the adherents of these religions who offer acts of worship to the being to whom they take themselves to refer with “God” and cognate names (we are, for example, ignoring Satan), the question of whether or not they worship the same God resolves to this referential question for these adherents even though co-reference is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for co-worship (as the example of Satan shows). We shall therefore look at both Kripkeanism and Descriptivism in order to establish co-worship, Kripkeanism first.

A Kripkean View of “God”

Jerome Gellman expresses a Kripkean view of “God” when he writes as follows:

[The] typical believer, when speaking or thinking of God, does not intend just to be speaking or thinking of [the satisfier of] [...] a certain description [...] Rather, the intention of the typical believer is to tie in to a referential chain that culminates (originates) in the past experience of a particular being, whose name is ‘God.’ This being was named then and continues to be called by that name now, or [...] by means of the referential chain reaching back to the initial act or acts of naming. (Gellman, 1995, p. 536)

The last clause in the passage quoted from Gellman hints at the difficulties for the account generated by the fact that the word “God” is of relatively recent origin, whereas we shall want to say that those Jews, Christians, and Muslims who pre-dated its introduction may yet have been speaking of God – we have hitherto called Him “The One” to avoid begging any questions – and simply been using different names to do so, cognate names, as we have called them. (The same issue arises even now: most present-day Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship in languages other than

⁹ Whilst there are a variety of views to be found sheltering under these two broad banners and there are some views which don’t naturally find themselves fully at home under either (e.g. Evans’s view), these differences of detail do not make a difference for the central issue this paper discusses, so I shall not offer any more discriminating taxonomy; and, for reasons of space, I must assume that the natures of these two families of views are known by my reader. A good overview of Kripkeanism may be found in Hughes (2004). A classic statement of the descriptivist view is Russell (1905). Evans’s view is given in Evans (1982) and Evans (1973). My own view is that names can be purely Kripkean or purely descriptivist (or even in principle an Evansian mixture) and that they can change in which of these ways they refer over time. Whilst in principle such changes could lead to differences in referent, this has not happened in the case of “God” and cognate names if one of the main monotheistic religions is true.

English.) However, these difficulties can be overcome by maintaining things such as the following. When the word “God” was introduced, the intention of the introducer was to refer by it to whoever it was who was referred to by the name or names that “God” replaced (or started to serve alongside); and so on, back in time to the baptismal moment of the original “ancestor-name”, as we may refer to it, for The One. The same sort of account, *mutatis mutandis*, can be given for the emergence of any other cognate name (e.g. “Dio” [Esperanto for God]), without any presumption in any case that it was this particular name which was in the mouth of Abraham, or whoever one wishes to credit with starting-off the chain of reference. (E.g. the view is not committed to Esperanto being Abraham’s language.)

In the cases of the three Abrahamic faiths, the avowed intention of the adherents of each is to worship the same being as Abraham worshipped and, on the truth of any one of these religions, the tradition in question can trace itself back to Abraham. So, the job is done. We could rest the case there. But in fact, on two of these religions, it is even better than that would suggest. Another figure who is highly revered in each tradition is Moses. In a book held to be holy by Judaism and Christianity (*Exodus*), Moses is depicted as receiving the ancestor-name for “God” in what could have been written as a close-to “textbook” case of a Kripkean baptismal moment. The status of *Exodus* in Islam is not uncomplicated; as with all books in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, the view is that the texts as we now have them are a mixture of divine revelation and human invention. However, as far as I am aware, the passage in question (*Exodus*, chapter 3, esp. verses 1–15), is not explicitly identified by Islam either as the one or as the other, so, as far as I am aware, it is open to a Muslim to believe of this passage that it falls into the divine revelation category or, even if not quite that, that it is at least a more or less accurate account of a historical happening.

As readers may recall the passage, Moses hears a voice identifying itself from a burning bush as being the voice of the God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses subsequently asks God what name he should use of Him when he goes back to tell the Israelites that God has spoken to him. It is at this stage that God gives His name in a form which is usually translated into English as “I AM WHAT I AM,” although almost immediately God indicates that a contraction, “I AM,” will suffice. This, God says, is the name that Moses should use of Him.

If one is a Kripkean about “God” and cognate names, this is all about as good as it could get for the thesis that the adherents of each of these religions refer by them to The One, as we called Him, presuming – as each of these religions do of course presume – that The One was being referred to by Abraham. If Abraham was speaking to and of The One, then all the religions which have sprung from him are doing so; if Abraham was worshipping The One, then all the Jews, Christians and Muslims who have followed him have been worshipping The One. And, as already indicated, on two of these religions, we actually have a record of a close-to paradigmatic Kripkean “baptismal” moment. If a Kripkean account of the nature of the relevant names is right, then the positive answer to the question of whether Jews, Christians and Muslims are,

if they are worshipping anything referring to it with “God” and cognate names, worshipping the same God as one another drops out with a degree of certainty which one seldom achieves in the Philosophy of Religion.

I shall now briefly consider, but reject, some objections to the view that if Kripkeanism is right about “God,” then a positive answer to the question of whether if one of Judaism, Christianity or Islam is right, then the followers of all worship the same God is assured. Doing so will however give us some reason to think that Kripkeanism about “God” is not right and thus move us to a consideration of how matters look if one adopts a descriptivist understanding.

Some Objections to the Kripkean View

Firstly, it could be argued that even if we assume that one of these religions is in broad outline true, we cannot know that there was just one single point of origin of belief in God (or single act of baptism). However, this, even if accepted, is hardly fatal to the view. All concede that multiple acts of baptism might end up starting multiple co-referring chains (consider the classic “Hesperus”/“Phosphorus” example). Secondly, perhaps a deeper worry is that we cannot know that there have been the necessary links in the chain since the initial baptismal point or points. The Kripkean account of “God” makes the intentions of successive generations of believers in their use of the name (or its ancestor-names) crucial, for, according to the account, it is these intentions which forge the links in the chain that sustain the reference-securing capacity of the name in the present. It could be maintained that we can have no certainty that all or even most of these intentional actions ever occurred. If we consider simply the last “handover” when the term “God” was introduced, if the word “God” was in fact first introduced in something like fashion (a), rather than in something like fashion (b) as I am about to give them, then that will have broken the chain that we may naïvely have supposed linked us in a Kripkean manner to those Jews, Christians, and Muslims who pre-dated the word’s introduction. (a) “By ‘God,’ I mean to refer to that thing, whatever it is, which I am currently invoking.” (b) “By ‘God,’ I mean to refer to that thing, whatever it is, to which those Christians around me who are trying to convert me from my Paganism are referring with ‘Deus,’ ‘Theos,’ and so forth.” (As a point of interest, I mention that there is some etymological support for the suggestion that “God” comes from a proto-Germanic word meaning “that which is invoked” and that it pre-dated the introduction of Christianity in the cultures which then used it [they supposed] to refer to the object of worship which this new religion told them was more worthy of worship than anything they might previously have invoked.) But the proponent of the Kripkean account of “God” may say that even if it was in something like the (a) fashion that the word “God” was first introduced, there is a possibility – indeed a probability – that someone later forged the necessary link, by referring back in their intention at that moment to the right people’s intentions in the manner of (b).

Surely, it is very likely that as these “God”-using people converted to Christianity, they re-baptised The One, intending, now they had (so they took it) learnt of Him and the history of the religion to which they had converted, to refer by “God” to The One, He to whom this religion told them they should have been directing their worship all along. This too then is no fatal objection to the view.

Nevertheless, one might reason as follows. It would only have taken one person to have had the following attitude and the chain securing reference in the Kripkean manner would have been broken. “I don’t care what the person from whom I learned the word “God” intended to refer to with it. I intend to use the word “God” to refer to the being who actually satisfies the dictionary-definition of “God” should there be such a being.” Then anyone who learns the word “God” from this person or later on in the chain that they have initiated will no longer in fact be on one of the branches of word-usage which constitutes the Kripkean chain. (Dictionary definitions of “God” and its cognates are remarkably (a) prevalent [it is not that some dictionaries fail to have an entry for the term] and (b) uniform [they give the standard theistic concept].) But whatever this possibility is a problem for, it is not a problem for reference. If one introduces a new use of the word “God” as shorthand for the theistic description (and it will be a new use if Kripkeanism is right as an account of its previous use), then as long as the being who did in fact get baptised with the ancestor-word for “God” also meets this description and nothing else does, one will have co-referred. One will in effect have simply turned a Kripkean name into a descriptivist one, all whilst maintaining its original referent. As the dictionary definition of “God” (the theistic concept) *is* only capable of being instantiated by at most one being, so any such change from a Kripkean name to a descriptivist one in its case will have preserved reference, presuming always that it was the being satisfying this concept who started off the hitherto-Kripkean chain of referring, which presumption is of course safe if one of the monotheistic religions we are considering is true; and it will be recalled that the presumption that one of the monotheistic religions is true is one on which we are working. This sort of change God may well have allowed to happen as, presumably, it is the reference-keeping that He cares about, not whether or not that reference is kept in a particular manner.

Whilst none of these objections is then a reason to think that it is mistaken to maintain that if Kripkeanism about “God” is right, then if any one of the monotheistic religions is in broad outline true, all Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God, this last consideration does provide one with some reasons to think that Kripkeanism about “God” may not be right, as it raises in this way the worry that in the case of “God” a chain which may well have started in a Kripkean way may since been transformed into a descriptivist mode of securing reference. Indeed, I think we can show that even if the original ancestor-name for “God” was Kripkean, then such a transformation has in fact taken place at some time since the initial baptismal moment or moments.

In order to show this, let us imagine the history of our world went like this. About 1300 BC, a figure called Moses introduced the original ancestor-name for "God." As in Judaism, it has come to be believed that this name itself is so holy that it is best not to write it, at least in texts that are likely to be destroyed, I shall present it as " _ " in my description of the relevant events. This then is how Moses introduced " _ ." In his own language, Moses said, "By ' _ ' I mean to refer to that thing, whoever or whatever it is, which is currently speaking to me from that burning bush." Moses did not introduce " _ " as a descriptivist name; his intention was not, for example, to use " _ " to refer to something which he supposed *essentially* had the property <talker to me from that burning bush>. Indeed not, for whilst Moses of course believed of the referent of " _ " that it was talking to him from a burning bush, he did not suppose it was essential to the referent of " _ " that it talk to him from a bush. Nor even did Moses use some properties that he did in fact suppose the referent of " _ " had essentially - <Omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good>, say - to form an associated nominal essence for " _ " as he introduced the term; " _ " did not have theistic meaning packed into it; it didn't mean anything. So, whilst Moses had various beliefs about the referent of the term " _ ," the word " _ " had no concept associated with it as its meaning; at the start then we had a paradigmatic Kripkean name.

Now if this is what happened and the Kripkean account of the word "God" as it has emerged at our end of the chain that Moses started with " _ " is right, then there is still no significant conceptual constraint on the sort of thing to which "God" may refer and so we may add the following details to the story.

There is in our world a supreme and ultimate supernatural person with properties such as the adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam suppose the object of their worship to have: He is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good; in addition, He is the creator of the universe and indeed anything else that there might be. This being, in other words, meets the dictionary-definition of "God." What happened all those years ago though was not that this being spoke to Moses from a burning bush. The being who actually spoke to Moses from this burning bush was a visiting Martian. This Martian has the habit of visiting planets at certain hinge moments in the development of their cultures and enjoys appearing to the beings on these planets in the guise of a supernatural entity of great power, using advanced Martian technology to produce apparently miraculous effects - e.g. bushes that burn and yet are not consumed. On this occasion, he got his pyrotechnics/holographics in order; he set his version of "google translator" to the relevant language; and spoke to Moses as he did, thus starting the chain described above. The supreme supernatural being, in looking down on these happenings, found that they were in accordance with His permissive will; whilst the Martian trickster was not in any way acting on orders from this being, the message that the trickster conveyed was in fact such as the supreme being might have wished to convey Himself, so He let matters unfold as they did.

If we allow ourselves to suppose for a moment then that ours is a world with this history, let us ask, who - if anyone - gets to be referred to by "God" in it. In particular,

is the referent of “God” the supreme and ultimate supernatural personal being or is the referent of “God” the Martian trickster? Is the referent of “God” all-powerful, all-wise, and wholly good, the one who created everything other than Himself; the being who has all the properties that the adherents of the main monotheistic religions are trying to worship a personal being for having; and the one who takes these believers into an everlasting afterlife with Him after their deaths? Or is the referent of “God” a finite created being, of dubious morality, who nobody intends to worship; someone who may well have ceased to exist himself in the several millennia since this particular trick; and someone who, in any case, offers believers no hope for anything beyond death? I take it that the answer which will strike competent language-users as obvious is that it is the ultimate supernatural person who is the referent of “God.” Even if the chain that was initiated by Moses’s interaction with the Martian trickster is what has ultimately given rise to our using the word “God” nowadays in the way that we do, over the years the word “God” has come to have a meaning, a concept standing behind it; it is the supreme being who satisfies this concept, not the Martian trickster; and thus it is this supernatural being who is the referent of the term now. But if *that* is right, then Kripkeanism is *not right* as an account of how the name “God” now functions. Even if some proper names may function in a Kripkean way and even if the ancestor-name (or ancestor-names, if there was more than one moment of baptism) for “God” were Kripkean, “God” is not now a Kripkean name. It is a name of which a descriptivist account is to be preferred (or possibly an Evansian one).¹⁰ Let us now move on to consider how the thesis that if one of these religions is true, even if only in broad outline, then the adherents of all of them worship the same God fares on this account of how the name God works.

A Descriptivist View of “God”

The good news is that on a descriptivist account, the conclusion that if any one of these religions is broadly right, then the adherents of each are worshipping the same God is equally well secured due to the fact that, through their intertwining with Greek culture and their interacting with one another, each of the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, has come to share what is usually called the theistic concept of God. God is understood by the mainstream of each of these traditions as a supreme and ultimate being, one who is perfect in power, wisdom and goodness, and who created this universe, us, and indeed anything else contingent there might be and who is the intended object of worship for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This understanding is such a commonplace that it has become codified in dictionary entries for “God” and its cognates. Indeed, the very fact that “God” and its cognates have entries in dictionaries is weighty evidence against a Kripkean account, afforded when

¹⁰ For an account of how one might consider things then, see Bogardus and Urban (2017).

one considers how little variation there is in the content of these dictionary definitions. Again then, given a descriptivist theory of “God” and its cognates, this is about as good as it could get for the thesis that if the adherents of any of these religions manage to worship God, i.e. a being that satisfies this description, then the adherents of the others manage to worship the same God, for only one being could satisfy this definition. Differences in these religions’ conceptualisations (as we may put it) of this concept do not make a difference to that.¹¹

This is true for the orthodox, those whose understanding of the object of their worship conforms to the theistic one, but what about the heterodox? What if someone self-identifies as Jewish, say, but holds a concept of God which is not theistic and reports themselves as worshipping this being. If the theistic God exists, are *they* worshipping Him?

At a debate in 1993, I heard Rabbi Sidney Brichto make the following move in response to a presentation of the classical Problem of Evil, which had just been given by Karen Armstrong. “The Dean of my rabbinical college said to us, ‘Boys, you’re selling a stock of trade which died three-hundred years ago.’ By which he meant the classical God who is both all-powerful and all-good. Where I disagree with Karen Armstrong is where she says that to say he is not all-powerful makes him impotent and useless. My parents were not all-powerful, but they were not impotent or useless [...] I do not see why, when there has been so much change [...] in every area of knowledge [...] why are we not allowed to change the God concept?”¹² Let’s call views

¹¹ Nick Waghorn and one of the referees of this paper have raised with me some interesting complications to this picture posed by Trinitarianism. Sadly, space does not permit me to give them the attention they deserve. But let me at least give a flavour of the issues and a suggestion or two as to how they might be dealt with. So, firstly, it could be argued that, supposing Trinitarianism to be true, at least some, perhaps most or even all, Jews and Muslims fail to worship God, for it might be said that worshipping God requires worshipping all three divine persons (more or less equally?) and, on a plausible descriptivist account to the relevant matters, Jews and Muslims refer with their so-called cognate names merely to God the Father. Perhaps the thing to say here is that, even if Trinitarianism is true, worshipping God does *not* require worshipping all three divine persons (more or less equally) under names which discriminate between them. After all, not all acts of Trinitarian-Christian worship are considered to have mis-fired if they fail to “name check” all three members of the Trinity as they are performed; one and the same God – a single unitary substance, after all – is worshipped as Father, and/or as Son, and and/or as Holy Spirit. Secondly, it could be argued that, supposing Trinitarianism to be false (yet, as always, Theism to be true), orthodox Christians are directing to God only those bits of their worship which avoid (or at least supplement) what they (mistakenly, the worry would be) suppose to be referring expressions such as “Jesus, the only begotten Son of God” or “The Holy Spirit.” Some of the issues raised in a moment in the main text will be germane to what to say here, but perhaps one thing to say early on is that it need *not* be a mistake, in such a scenario, for them to regard things such as “Jesus, the only begotten Son of God” as referring expressions which refer to God even if they are referring to a God about whom they are in significant error, error that has become encoded in these referring expression. If, as I shall maintain in the main text in a moment, someone (Brichto) who explicitly denies God one of His conceptually essential properties may yet still be referring to Him and directing to Him acts of worship, those who are mistaken about the Trinity seem to be in no worse a position.

¹² The debate was televised and is currently viewable online: “God – For and Against – C4 – 1993” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aivRDaTnx8M>

of God's nature which keep a goodly proportion of His nominal essence as Theism has it, but which alter a small amount (as Brichto was willing to do), "quasi-theistic" views of God; of course, introducing the term "quasi-theistic" in this way leaves matters somewhat vague - "goodly proportion...small amount" - but this vagueness will not harm our discussion.

I wish to maintain now that even if it is true that it is in fact, contrary to Brichto's opinion, the theistic concept of God that is instantiated and not Brichto's quasi-theistic concept, this mistake on Brichto's part is not sufficient for Brichto to fail to believe of the theistic God that He exists.

Straight out of the gate, this will strike some people as incoherent - if the God who exists is in fact a God matching the theistic concept of Him, not a God (god?) matching Brichto's quasi-theistic concept of Him (him?), then how can it be that Brichto is believing of the God who exists that *He* exists, rather than believing of a God (god?) who doesn't after all exist that *He* (he?) exists? It's precisely the theistic God whose existence Brichto explicitly denies, after all: when asked "Do you believe of a being such that He satisfies the theistic concept of God that He exists?," Brichto would answer "No." How then, despite Brichto's probable protestations to the contrary, can I maintain that it is the God of Theism of whom Brichto believes that He exists if it is the God of Theism who does in fact exist? How can anyone ever turn out to be believing of anyone or anything something they do not take themselves to be believing of them or it?

The answer to this general question utilises a fact of which we have already made use, *viz.* that one can believe something false about someone without that falsehood occasioning what is sometimes called a "radical reference failure," i.e. without that false belief's being sufficient to prevent one from having beliefs about that person at all. This fact means both that one can have false beliefs about someone without those false beliefs meaning it ceases to be that someone about whom one is having them, but *also* - and this is the point that is crucial in the current context - that one can mis-identify who it is about whom one is having beliefs; one of the false beliefs one may have is a false belief about who it is of whom one is believing something. This, I am now suggesting, is what has happened in the case of Brichto if the theistic God exists.

It is impossible to address these issues without assuming things which are themselves controversial. But if we understand (a) "beliefs that" to be attitudes towards propositions and if we understand (b) "beliefs of" to be attitudes towards objects, then we may make some progress. An example of a belief-that would then be as follows. I believe that Hugh Scully (a UK TV presenter) is desperately filling air-time with trivia whilst commentating on the Queen's funeral just if I assign the truth-value "true" (or a sufficiently high credence [probability]) to the proposition expressed in English by the sentence "Hugh Scully is desperately filling air-time with trivia whilst commentating on the Queen's funeral." An example of a belief-of would then be the following. I believe of Huw Edwards (another UK television presenter) that he is desperately filling air-time with trivia whilst commentating on the Queen's funeral

just if the person on the television who I am watching and about whom I am believing that he is doing this is in fact Huw Edwards. Importantly, I may believe this of Huw Edwards even though I have in fact misidentified the presenter on the television as Hugh Scully.¹³ With this apparatus in place, we may now say the following.

Firstly, Brichto believes that God is not omnipotent; but, secondly, Brichto believes this of God if there is a God. That is, if Theism is true, Brichto believes at least one false thing about God (that He doesn't have a given property that is in fact nominally essential to Him) and Brichto believes *of God* that He exists.

But one may wonder how anything like this can be going on if a descriptivist account of "God" is right – this is the sort of thing, one might think, that can only happen if a *Kripkean* account of "God" is right. The key point to appreciate in order to defuse this worry is that the user of a name of which a descriptivist account is right may use that name without utilising (possibly even without knowing) the relevant description.

In the passage quoted from Gellman earlier articulating a Kripkean approach, the opposing descriptivist view of "God" is described as committing one to the claim that the "typical believer" has an "intention" to use the name to refer to the satisfier of a description. This may be read as suggesting that the descriptivist theory requires one to think that the user of a name of which a descriptivist theory is right has to themselves know the relevant description (so that they may then form the allegedly-required intention to use it of that which satisfies that description); but *that* is certainly something the descriptivist theory does *not* commit one to holding.¹⁴ (If it did, then the theory would commit one to holding that no Kripkean – whilst remaining true to their Kripkeanism – can use any names, for to use a name would be to form an intention the forming of which showed one that one's Kripkeanism was false!) One can use a name of which a descriptivist account is true without oneself knowing the meaning of the name, *a fortiori* without intending to use it.

If I report, "Given what I've just heard that person in a black suit and sunglasses over there apparently tell his shirt cuff, I think that Potus – whatever or whoever they are – has just left the building," I certainly use the name "Potus," but I may not know that "Potus" is in fact an acronym for "President of the United States" and even someone who did know that might know next to nothing about how the role of President is constitutionally defined, i.e. about the correct concept of President of the United States of America. Yet "Potus" is, I presume all parties should concede, a name of which, at its most fundamental level, a descriptivist account is correct. The name

¹³ A distinction is sometimes drawn between what is called knowledge or belief "*de dicto*" and knowledge or belief "*de re*," but this distinction is itself taken in a number of different senses. As with so many things in Philosophy, the issues are more controversial and complicated than they at first appear; I trust that my choice of terminology will allow me to sidestep these debates and prove sufficient for our purposes.

¹⁴ To be fair, Kripke himself saddles the descriptivist with a commitment to the view that every user of a name of which a descriptivist theory is true must themselves know that description – he does not allow the abdicating of this role to others within one's linguistic community.

“Potus” has a meaning – a concept associated with it – such that if it refers to anyone at all, it refers to the person who satisfies that concept in virtue of them satisfying that concept. One might say, “But ‘Potus’ isn’t a name; it’s an acronym for a definite description.” But someone willing to be a descriptivist about any names will not be persuaded by this, for those names of which a descriptivist account is right are simply labels (admittedly most non-acronymic ones) for definite descriptions. It might be said that in the scenario imagined where I use the name without knowing this description, then for me at that time “Potus” functions as a Kripkean name – I am intending to use it to refer to whoever it is the person I overheard using “Potus” referred to by it presuming they referred to anyone; and this can be conceded. As well as names shifting from being Kripkean to being descriptivist, the shift can happen in the other direction. But “Potus” is fundamentally a descriptivist name in that in the end – notwithstanding some Kripkean links before the end – if it refers at all, then it does so in virtue of the fact that there is someone who satisfies the description associated with it.¹⁵ “God” is similarly fundamentally a name of which a descriptivist theory is true (that is what the thought experiment involving the Martian trickster has shown) even if individual language-users may utilise it in a Kripkean way – young children, for example, who have not yet grasped the concept presumably do use “God” in this way (of which more in a moment). In that respect, the proper name “God” is rather like the common name “quark”: most people who talk of quarks intend to refer by “quarks” to whatever it is that meets the descriptions (of which they are ignorant) which Physicists would give if asked to define quarks. Brichto’s case is slightly different of course in that he knows the theistic concept and is eschewing an element of it (the all-powerfulness element). He conforms to the general characterisation then of someone who is wondering whether even if there is no such thing as that which is definitionally supposed to have all of a set of properties, there might yet be a thing that has such a goodly number of them that, given the non-existence of anything with them all, the name traditionally used to refer – by definition – to the thing with them all (on the assumption it refers) may not sensibly be reused to refer to this close and closest contender. Fair enough. But if Brichto is wrong and there is a being who satisfies the full theistic concept, then it is this being about whom Brichto is mistaken, for the close and closest contender is in fact scoring perfectly (on all theistic attributes) not just closely (on all in Brichto’s quasi-theistic concept). It will then be Him of whom Brichto

¹⁵ It is as well to point out that the relevant description is the one which one would find in dictionary definitions – not of necessity then in this case the description in the mind of the person I overheard. So, applying the lesson over to the “God” case, it is not that on the “descriptivist theory, whether adherents of the different religions refer to the same God turns out to vary on a case-by-case basis [due to the descriptions they might give varying on a case-by-case basis].” (de Ridder & van Woudenberg, 2014, p. 60)

mistakenly thought He was not all-powerful and it will then be Him to whom Brichto was directing his worship, presuming He engaged in acts of worship.¹⁶

With the believe-that/belief-of distinction in mind, we cannot then assume that even major differences in beliefs-that about the supernatural as they exist across the range of the world's religions and indeed interior to each of them are sufficient to mean that if the theistic God exists, then those who are in significant error in their views about the supernatural realm do not end up believing of God that He exists and worshipping Him under different concepts as well as different conceptualisations.¹⁷ Indeed, we might wonder if, again supposing that God exists, simply believing that there is something supernatural and placing a degree of faith in it or showing it a certain gratitude-cum-reverence may be sufficient for it to be God of whom one is believing He exists and to whom one is directing an attitude of worship at least if there is nothing else supernatural. I wish to close by indicating how one might seek to push the boat out a bit farther in this direction and some obstacles one might face in doing so.

Conclusion

When one of my own children was younger, she was curious about how God had got her great-grandfather, who had recently died, up to be with Him in Heaven and asked, "Did God use a ladder?" I replied that I thought that if a ladder had been necessary, then that would indeed be what He'd have done - not perhaps my finest moment as a theological educator. But she seemed impressed (not with me, but with God). "That's great." Let's suppose that, had I asked her at that age what her concept of this God was, she would have said something along the lines of, "God is a big man, with a beard; he sits on a cloud above us; and, when we die, he takes us to be on that cloud with him (probably using a ladder)." Although space does not permit me to develop a detailed argument for it, I wish to close by suggesting that, if so, then, despite falling short of even the quasi-theistic understanding of Brichto, my daughter believed of God that He existed; held an attitude of faith towards Him - she had faith that He takes people after their deaths to be with Him - and also an attitude of worship towards Him, an attitude which resulted in at least one act of worship, *viz.* her uttering, "That's great." Of course, I am not denying that this was all somewhat minimal. But I take it that attitudes of faith and worship fall on a continuum or continua and so I may concede that she may well have been down one end of this continuum/these continua

¹⁶ Sophie Allen points out to me that someone attracted to a cluster theory, along the lines of John Searle, could also accept the conclusion about Brichto's securing reference. Personally, I think that a cluster theory is not right for "God," but I report that Swinburne disagrees (Swinburne, 2016, esp. chapter 1).

¹⁷ I am then disagreeing with de Ridder and van Woudenberg, *op. cit.*, who argue that a certain number of true beliefs about the fundamental nature of God is necessary for worship of Him. This has relevance to the issue of whether, supposing Trinitarianism to be false, Christians who seek to refer to the object of their worship under names such as "Jesus" may nevertheless worship God; see a previous note.

whilst – say – those adults in contemplative holy orders are characteristically at the other end. Nor do I wish to be taken as saying that someone at the most minimal end of the faith spectrum and engaging in only the most minimal acts of worship (e.g. uttering on one occasion, as she did, “That’s great.”), will, in virtue of that, be saved; indeed, I would not wish to be taken as saying that where one falls on this spectrum or these spectra has *anything at all* to do with one’s being saved. What I am saying is simply that whatever the right thing to say about these issues may be, it has nothing to do with the object of these attitudes or acts, which could be – along this continuum or these continua – the same, God (if there is a God). So, how in principle could this suggestion be supported?

Supposing my daughter’s use of “God” to have been one of which a descriptivist account is entirely sufficient, then to defend the claim that she is referring to God in her use of the term, we would need to presume that there is nothing which satisfies most of the concept which I am speculating my daughter had, but that there is something that matches the theistic concept and thereby the most functionally significant part of her concept – taking people at their deaths to be with Him. If so, then this thing, in being the closest and (arguably, of which more in a moment) close-enough contender to instantiate her concept of (as she supposed) God, may be said to be the thing to which she was referring by “God.” Naturally then, on such an understanding, she would not have managed to refer to God in a world where, even though there is a God, there also exists some natural agent who is in fact an old man with a beard and somehow – teletransportation and body-swapping (not a ladder, one presumes)? – takes us at the moments we think of as our deaths to be with him on some floating structure hidden from *ante-mortem* view in a cloud. In that eventuality, the close and closest contender for her concept is not God, but this man; it would thus be this man she was worshipping. And, in any case, we could question whether even if the theistic God is in fact the closest contender for something matching her concept (in matching the most functionally significant aspect of it), He is close enough to be the referent. It could certainly be argued with some plausibility that if descriptivism is entirely sufficient as an account of her use of “God,” then she simply fails to secure reference at all. However, in fact, as indicated earlier, it seems we can bypass such issues as it seems likely that a Kripkean account of “God” is more suitable for her use of the name than a descriptivist one; she is using what is fundamentally a descriptivist name in a Kripkean fashion. If so, her case parallels a case where I manage to refer to the President of the United States with “Potus” even whilst – say – my best guess as to what properties the referent of “Potus” essentially has are properties hardly any of which are actually had by the President of the United States even accidentally. Each of us are abdicating responsibility for the fixing of the reference-determining description to others.

If then someone with such a confused concept of God as we have attributed to my young daughter may yet manage to worship God if one of the monotheistic religions is true, we may ask who, if anyone, falls *outside* the scope of those who, presuming one

of these religions is true, are in fact worshipping Him? On any plausible account, there are some such people.

Most obviously, there are those who simply do not have even a glimmer of faith or an attitude of worship; they thus never perform any acts of worship, even as minimal as one as saying, "That's great" of some activity they attribute to God. They thus fall outside the scope of these considerations.

More interestingly, amongst atheist naturalists, some wax exceedingly lyrical about an attitude of awe or gratitude which they have, as they sometimes put it, towards the cosmos. This is an attitude which in some cases comes close in conceptual space to the attitude of worship which theists direct (as they suppose) to a being who lies outside the cosmos and is responsible for it. Some argue that of conceptual necessity worship requires the worshipper to conceive of its intentional object as a person; and they may be right to do so. If they are right, then it looks as if these atheists cannot be worshipping God after all. But if they are not right, it could yet be argued that it is an open question whether or not the worship of these atheists may be – unbeknownst to them, of course – directed to the theistic God if the theistic God does in fact exist. However, it seems to me that significant obstacles to such atheists worshipping God are the facts that there is something which satisfies the concept of the cosmos, *viz.* the universe, and that this thing is ontologically distinct from God if one of theistic religions is broadly right, as we are assuming it is. Given this, it seems to me that these atheists would be better described as, if worshipping anything, then worshipping the universe.¹⁸ So, they too fall outside the scope of these considerations. Before moving on, it is worth noting however that their falling outside the scope of these considerations does not preclude God crediting them for this attitude in the end.

At a meeting, it sometimes happens that someone directs a point to the wrong office-holder. If the relevant office-holder is present and attentive, he or she can step in with something like, "Good point, but, actually, let me take it." And the person making the point usually accepts this redirection and is grateful for it as – even if sometimes only after a bit of help – they can see that their original point would have been better directed to this person in the first place. E.g., "If I'd known the College had a Fellow Librarian, then of course I'd have wanted to direct this to them initially, not the Bursar." Perhaps in some eschatological moment God will say to these atheists,

¹⁸ One of the theistic religions being broadly right, I take it, means that Pantheism is wrong; if Pantheism is right, then of course these atheists are worshipping God after all. The issue is more complicated if one thinks of Panentheism as compatible with Theism, construing Panentheism as holding that the universe is a proper part of God. On such an understanding, if Panentheism is right, these atheists may be worshipping a proper part of God. Their situation in such an eventuality is still rather more problematic than that of a non-Trinitarian theist worshipping God in a Trinitarian world, in that such a non-Trinitarian theist in such a world uses only one mode of referring to God (they worship Him, as the Trinitarian might put it, solely as God the Father, and never as God the Son or God the Holy Spirit), but the thing to which they refer is still the one substance, the Triune God. The atheistic naturalist in such a Panentheistic scenario would, by contrast, be at best worshipping only a proper part of God, God being Himself a composite in such a scenario.

“Good point, but, actually, let me take it.” and – even if only after a little bit of help – such atheists will similarly be brought gratefully to accept this redirection.

Finally, if we turn to consider those who direct the right sort of attitude and acts to what they suppose to be a supernatural person, the fact that Theism is compatible with there being supernatural agents other than God similarly generates potential for the object of their worship to be too far down the chain of being to be God even if there is a God. Suppose, for example, that there is a Satan as traditionally characterised. It is hard to see how those who wilfully wish to direct their worship to him and *not* to God will not succeed in getting what they wish for (in this respect, if not – one presumes – in many others). If, on the other hand, it is assumed that the only supernatural being is God, a stronger case may be made for thinking that those who try to worship anything supernatural (via a Kripkean route, via a descriptivist one, or via a mixture) will thereby be worshipping God, for once a worshiper has directed his or her worship into the supernatural realm, there is then *ex hypothesi* no one else to whom they can be referring with their names for the object of their worship; then they either worship God or nothing at all. And perhaps in some *post-mortem* eschatological moment, God will say to any people who have in their *ante-mortem* lives directed their worship to nothing at all, “Good point, but, actually, let me take it.” And they too, like any hitherto universe-worshipping atheists, will gratefully accept this redirection.

So, in short: if one of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is true, a lot more people already worship God than the present-day facts of religious diversity might seem to suggest; and, if one of them is true, eventually, as this diversity diminishes *post-mortem*, perhaps to vanishing point, even more people – possibly everyone – will do so.

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