Part I
Preliminaries

1

God and Morality

God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son."
(Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited")

Introduction: Principles, Theory, and Morality

What is the relationship between God and morality? Are humans who believe in God (and which one?) more likely to be moral, righteous, flourishing people? Or are they more prone to be immoral – intolerant, inflexible, absolutist, arrogant, and parochial? Both of these views have been enunciated from time to time. Both in fact have strong constituencies today. Many intellectuals see religion, especially monotheism, as destructive. Most Americans, however, see it as pretty much the only way to be moral; poll after poll says that most people in the US distrust atheists, far more than other groups, and they distrust them because they find it hard to believe they are moral. Clearly, this is a live question in our world. It is especially pointed for a book like this one. How do its two most basic components – religion and ethics, God and goodness – fit together?

Ironically, representative thinkers of these traditions challenge the common assumption that morality and belief are two sides of the same coin. Indeed assertions of the opposite are quite frequent. "Principles are what people have instead of God": so contemporary Christian novelist Frederick Buechner has put it in his delightful *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.[1] And that is a claim that Jews and Muslims can make as much as can Christians. It is an overstatement, of course; all such claims are. But it gets at an interesting truth, the truth that these religious traditions stand in a quite uneasy and ambivalent relationship with the moral systems which are often described as deriving from them, and which are often said to be ungrounded or irrational absent faith in these traditions' God.

This chapter looks at the nature of the relationship between God and morality. What happens when moral reflection occurs, when theory breaks out? And how is

moral deliberation related to the religious convictions of the Abrahamic faiths? Are morality and Abrahamic religions wholly separate? Are they complementary? Are they conflictual? Here I will argue that they are some mix of both. At times these faiths reinforce morality, and at times morality reinforces these faiths; but at other times the two terms stand in deep and profound tension. That tension must be investigated, in order to understand the distinctive character of both Abrahamic religious faith and moral conviction, in their distinctness and in their similarities. That is what this chapter does, first by offering a very schematic picture of what moral theory is, then by discussing the ways that the Abrahamic faiths relate to moral conviction, and finally by suggesting one useful model for thinking about the fraught relationship between morality and these religious traditions, a model that will stand in the background for the rest of this book – H. Richard Niebuhr's model of "the responsible self."

In this chapter we will begin by talking about deliberation, but you'll see how quickly we end up talking about moral being and character.

A Very Sketchy Sketch of Ethical Theory

To begin with, it will help to have a sketch of the scope of what we mean by moral theory. What is it to *be moral*? What is it to *act morally*? Together, these two questions constitute the object of basic moral reflection. Consider, for a moment, how you think about morality, about doing good. Typically, if you are considering this in the moment of an ethical decision, your thinking has two components. First of all, you are asking what is the right thing to do in this situation. What path, among the paths available to me, is the one that I should travel? But beyond this immediate question, a deeper one looms, just over the horizon: what does this choice say about me? What does my decision here reveal about who I am and what I care about? What does it reveal about the what, or the whom, to which I understand myself to be accountable? In general, what picture of the world do I, in light of this situation, now see myself to assume? Many possible courses of action are ruled out by us from the beginning; when we are asked about why we never considered these, we typically give some variation of the answer "I cannot imagine living with myself if I had done that." That phrase is quite interesting, actually; it suggests that not every conceivable option is a *live* option for us – one that is viable for us to take, given who we are. Our understanding of ourselves, and our commitment to a certain set of people, will often mean that certain routes of acting are never really considered; if we were to take them, we would become – or have been revealed to be – fundamentally different people than who we thought we were.

This anatomization of a typical moral situation can go in many directions. Suffice it to say here that we see how, in thinking about moral situations, we are not simply engaging in a kind of "Monday-morning quarterbacking," or second-guessing a referee's call, or a coach's strategy, or an athlete's performances, in a particular

instance. No, in thinking about moral acting, even in the most basic way, we find we are led on to ask questions about moral thinking, or ethical deliberation, and moral being, or character and integrity. And that is as it should be. In asking "how does ethical deliberation work?" we're not asking *why* – not about asking the so-called "meta-ethical" question of "why be moral?" – but rather about *how* – the mechanics of morality.

In thinking about this *how*, we are actually asking two sets of questions. First, we are asking, what do you do when you think about morality? How should you think morally? Furthermore, how should we think morally if we are religious? In a way, these sorts of questions are about the formal logic of the process of moral deliberation. Second, we are asking, what resources can we find that might help us answer the first question? What sort of role should our religious commitments play in our moral reflection and deliberation? These sorts of questions are about the material data, or given, through which and with which we think morally. And both are important.

When we begin to try to articulate a theory about how to think about moral life, we can begin from one of several starting points. Roughly speaking, we might begin by thinking about morality in terms of goals, rules, or character. Typically, we divide ethical theories up, in the contemporary academy, as beginning with one of these three. The first group of approaches we consider *consequentialist* theories, theories which begin from reflection on the consequences of actions, either considered as individual actions with distinct sets of consequences, or as types of actions with typical sorts of consequences; utilitarianism is a classic example of this sort of moral theory. The second group we consider *deontological* theories, that is, theories concerned with the sort of absolute laws or rules that the agent must obey – in other words, what their obligations (in Greek, *deon*) are in some setting; Kantian theories, organizing moral life around a universalization principle (akin to the Golden Rule), are classic examples of this approach, but this group also includes divine command ethics, and those committed to some understanding of the natural law. The third group is often called *virtue* theories (and is sometimes, to my mind improperly, classified as a type of consequentialism); such theories focus on the kind of character that our actions, repeated serially over the course of a lifetime, are prone to habituate in us; like paths in a forest, worn down by generations of humans and animals following in one another's footsteps, repetition of actions over time grooves into us the habits that make those actions a kind of "second nature" for us. Famously, Aristotle's theory of the human as developing a range of virtues, "excellences" or capabilities over their lifespan (and especially in their first fifteen or twenty years), is an example of this.

Now, any of these theories can accommodate aspects of the others. Obviously, consequences matter to all sorts of people; and the idea of rules as rules "no matter what" is a powerful idea for any moral thinker; and all people recognize the power of habit in shaping people's moral fortitude, and can acknowledge the importance of education in making moral people. Yet for all that, the three approaches do differ in interesting ways, as we will see throughout this book.

So now we have a sense of the scope and depth of moral reflection, and a very rough sketch of the sorts of ways thinkers have tried to theorize moral being, character, action, and deliberation. Simple enough, yes? But now things get more complicated; for next we will begin to see how God enters into morality.

Divine Commands and Moral Obligations

Reflection on morality in the Abrahamic traditions begins with the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue sketches the basic framework for all three religious traditions this book explores – Judaism, Christianity, and even, in a different way, Islam (which has a semi-parallel to the Decalogue in the Qur'an (17:22–40)). The rest of the traditions are almost all just commentary on the Decalogue – that is, attempts to extend and apply the commandments enunciated there to the full range of human experience.

Some insights are apparent simply in the fact that the Decalogue is handed down from God. The bare act of *giving* the law itself already suggests that this view looks on what we might call "moral rationalism" – the idea that rational reflection might be sufficient to understanding and fully inhabiting the moral life – as inadequate; for God has decided humanity needs to be *informed* of its rights and duties. (For the Abrahamic traditions, this is true about the law given to Israel at Sinai, of course, but also of the so-called "Noahide Covenant," given to all humanity by God after the Flood.) Furthermore, this "giving" suggests that a relationship is at the basis of ethics – a relationship between two living agents.

So there is some tension between the "positive law" of Judaism's Torah and what thinkers in all three traditions have argued is a "natural law," a moral order inscribed in the fabric of the cosmos, or written on the human heart, and at least partially discernible to the sensitive observer. Such a "natural law" is more immediately available in some forms of Christianity (especially Roman Catholicism) and, at times, in Islam. But all three traditions negotiate between fidelity to the positive law, such as the Decalogue, and some construal of natural law.

The Decalogue has two parts, or "tablets." The first tablet offers a series of identity-conferring characteristics; who God is, who "we" are, what we owe to God and to our elders. But this identity is anything but morally neutral. In fact the moral charge is, if anything, more potent in the first tablet than the second. This is established in the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt." If we put ourselves in the position of those to whom this commandment is addressed, it is not merely information we are given here. Here, God's identity is tied to our own, and vice versa; were we to forget ourselves as those who have been redeemed, we would forget God as the redeemer. And the opposite is true as well: it is the first historical mark of this God's identity that this God is a saving God. Because of this, we owe our lives to this God. And this God is a jealous God, who will remember and punish if we do not worship.

Of course, there is a deep connection here between properly religious piety and the obligation properly to honor and attend to those human elders who preceded us, and initiated us into human community. (This is why the fifth commandment, the one which concludes the first tablet, is to "Honor your Father and Mother.") But in the end, even that piety towards our parents must be referred back to God, to whom we (and our elders) owe our lives, our freedom, our histories, "the land that the Lord your God is Giving you" – everything. My identity and my relationship with this God are inextricably intertwined. There is no me without this God, and the crucial fact about this God is that this God, and this God alone, has *redeemed us*: that is what the first tablet declares.

The second tablet provides community-constituting rules; how do we act regarding those around us (our "neighbors"), given the identity of God, self, and community that the first tablet has established. These rules are meant to organize society in successful ways, and as such are not of deep theological interest on first blush.

But take a closer look. There is a problem with the Decalogue as it stands, especially in the second tablet. These commandments are almost all negative; they are forms of proscriptions, of "thou shalt *nots*." Do not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet your neighbor's goods (including his wife – patriarchy is very much in place here). What about what we *should* do? Here, it says very little. This is a problem, as the tradition recognizes; for the next three chapters – 21, 22, and 23 – are concerned with explaining and fleshing out what the code entails for living, and for "tough cases," situations where rules seem ambiguous or conflict with one another.

The basic problem with understanding how to use such a list of "thou shalt nots" is precisely in learning how to apply them – how we are to employ the commands of God in governing the everyday details of our lives. This is not just a problem with the Ten Commandments – it's a problem no matter what the moral source or authority you use.

We have a hint in the Decalogue itself, in its prohibition of "graven images." This prohibition is clearly linked to an appreciation of some sort of a radical difference between God as Creator and God's creation, between the author of the cosmos and any of the artefacts that exist within it. Nothing can "represent" God in this cosmos, because anything that is thought to do so invariably distorts God by highlighting some features of creation as more revelatory of God than others. For our immediate purposes, however, the crucial fact is that whatever this analogy is, it is fairly distant because of the Divine's superiority.

Part of this is just the Divine's radical transcendence of creation. But another part of the difficulty comes from something positive about the Divine that these traditions, perhaps paradoxically, affirm. And that is, that this God is a living God – a God who is ever new, a God who can surprise you. This makes humanity's temporal existence crucial. It allows us a real history, not just as a matter of ever-repeating cycles of time, but in terms of genuine newness.

And yet the commandment offers a deeper lesson still. After all, the temptation to make images of God reveals that humans recognize not just a chasm, but some

sort of positive relationship between God and humanity as well – enough to feel the temptation – and to think that we can be related in some positive way to the ultimate source of our being. We will see in later chapters that all three accounts explore the roots of this temptation through suggesting some sort of positive analogy between the human creation and the Divine person. Indeed, while Islam resists too literal a construal of the idea of the image of God in humanity, it compensates for this by amplifying what the law says; the Qur'anic texts do not simply prohibit, but include the prescription to do the right. From its first formulation, then, Islam sees the fulfillment of morality not just in forbidding wrong, but also in commanding the right.

In general, though, the connection is clear, seemingly straightforward, and positive: morality is real because God stands behind it, and God stands behind it because in some way God's will, and perhaps God's own being, is manifest in the moral behavior that God commands. God endorses morality, and morality deepens its adherents' relationship with God. Pretty simple.

The Natural and the Supernatural

However, there is a problem here, a problem that becomes visible soon after anyone formulates this theory in this way. For God and morality seem often to be at best obscurely related, and there are times when they seem opposed to each other. Sometimes it seems that God's will about what to do is inscrutable, and sometimes God's will and the moral law seem frankly to conflict. Classically, these problems have been represented in two stories – one about a son's dealings with his father, the other about a father's dealings with his son. We will look at each of these worries in turn.

Euthyphro's dilemma

The best place to begin with the first worry is in fact right near the beginning of the tradition of Western philosophy itself, in a small gem of a philosophical dialogue written by Plato, entitled the *Euthyphro*. The story of the dialogue is simple. Just outside the law courts in Athens, waiting to go inside, Socrates meets the upper-class Euthyphro – a man renowned for his religious wisdom – and they converse. (Importantly, Socrates is there as a preliminary for his own trial for "impiety" and "corrupting the young," a trial that will lead to his death.) It turns out that Euthyphro is there to prosecute his own father, who let one of his workers die. Socrates is astonished that a son would be so confident of his moral standing to prosecute his own father, and seeks the sources of Euthyphro's confidence, by admiring his piety. As the conversation goes on, it becomes clear that much relies on Euthyphro's conviction, ultimately revealed, that piety is whatever the gods approve of. But that answer just provokes Socrates's almost naïve question, which has haunted philosophers ever

since: "But Euthyphro, is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"[2]

The question Socrates is asking here is one of the relationship between God and the moral order. Is one prior to the other, and if so, which? Socrates's views, let alone Plato's, are hard to pin down. (Plato set this dialogue at the beginning of Socrates's trial for impiety for a reason.) But their views don't matter to our purposes; what matters is that the dialogue grips us with a challenge we feel. This challenge grips us because it captures a crucial moment in our own thinking about these matters. After an initial unquestioning acceptance of the coherence between piety and righteousness, we eventually begin, in our lives, to ask questions regarding where they may come into conflict. And the Euthyphro dilemma is useful there, so long as it is only the first, not the last, word on things. (It wasn't even that for Plato.)[3]

A great deal of philosophy consequent to the *Euthyphro* was an attempt to respond to the challenges formulated in it. One very powerful response, articulated most influentially by Aristotle, was quite radical. On its account, being moral is understood as the *natural* thing to do, in some complicated sense of "natural."

There are two aspects of Aristotle's proposal that we must appreciate. First of all, it suggests that morality is deeper than our conscious willed decisions, more a matter of habits and attitudes than actions (this is why much of ancient moral thought was largely about virtues and character). Most reflection is not preactive, but reactive; most of our deliberation takes place after the fact, or in response to confronting a challenge that is put before us – not one that we have chosen of our own free will. One danger of imagining moral deliberation with a too-simple model of self-starting reflection is simply that that is not the way most of us live. Thinking is, in this way, a kind of a response to suffering, to actions upon us.

Second, because morality is deeper in us, in this way, and not so amenable to conscious control, it is part of our natural constitution as part of nature, not something that in itself distinguishes us from other parts of nature. This makes this approach, by and large, part of a larger outlook typically called *naturalism* – the idea that human behavior can be understood, ideally, entirely in terms of how humans participate in natural processes that other creatures participate in as well. This view is popular with a wide range of philosophers, from Aristotle in fourth-century BCE Athens to David Hume in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, and many in our own day.

Naturalism has as its goal the smooth fit of humans into the world. On naturalism's understanding, humans are just one more part of a larger organic cosmos, and ideally should not disrupt the flow of nature. The ideal here is thus a natural immediacy of response on the part of agents in any number of settings. Much of our life is sub-reflective in this way. Indeed, much of life is actually *non*-reflective, for often we simply act in a way pretty much indistinguishable from automata. Examples of this are not hard to find: you drive a car mostly automatically; you are polite in general without deliberation (thus the famous line, "a gentleman is

someone who is only rude on purpose"); and the ideal ethical actor is morally good in an almost reflexive way. So understood, naturalism is a powerful moral vision of the world and humanity's place genuinely *in* it.

Abraham's test

However, in the Abrahamic traditions, the human in part transcends their immediate "natural" surroundings, and is not fully determined by them. The human *stands before God* in some way distinct from the rest of nature. Hence, were humans to fit smoothly into the functioning of the world, they would be no better than beasts. Instead, they are called by God to account for themselves, and perhaps creation, in a unique way.

This commitment illuminates these traditions' common concern with idolatry. God is a living God, changing and confronting you with living demands, and thus the first sin is acting as if God is dead, frozen, an ossified statue. The God of Abraham cannot be reduced to a seamless set of axioms or rules, a moral algorithm that will smoothly produce the right answer for its devotees every time. A moral system like that has a hard time recognizing the mystery, the complexity, and perhaps the tragedy, of human existence – the obscure ways that good and evil collide in us to create a mystery that no human thought, it sometimes seems, can penetrate.

In all this, what this God suggests is not only that God transcends nature, but that humans do as well. *We are more than nature*, in some way. (Christianity more strongly affirms this than do Judaism or Islam, but they have it too, simply as part of the logic of having God be distinct from, and governor of, a partly corrupted creation.)

But there is a danger here – it means that there is always lurking a latent tension, and at times an explicit conflict, between God's commands and what seems "natural" to us to do. For after all, this God is a jealous God, a God of singularity, exclusivity, possibly violent intolerance. There may well be moments when God may demand something that is fundamentally unnatural. This God created the cosmos, after all; therefore, these traditions attest, this God needn't be held accountable to its maxims and its norms.

An example of this tension is not hard to find. We talk about these three traditions as "The Children of Abraham." But we forget that all the traditions say Abraham almost killed his child on orders from God. Since it is safe to say that no sane father would want naturally to kill his own child, it is clear that the tradition was alert to this tension between the natural and the supernatural from a very early stage. Indeed, the scriptural sources suggest what is actually a more profound analysis of the tension we have identified here than many philosophers or theologians do. So I want to look at those texts next.

Here is the story, commonly called the Akedah (the "Binding"), as recorded in Genesis, chapter 22, verses 1–19:

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" and he said, "Behold, here I am." And he said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his servants with him, and Isaac his son, and cut the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far off.

And Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the ass; and I and the boy will go up ahead and worship, and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and they both went together.

And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, "My father;" and he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide a lamb for a burnt offering;" so they both went together.

And they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not lay your hand upon the boy, nor do any thing to him: now I know that you fear God, for you have not withheld your son, your only son from me."

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold, behind him a ram was caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son.

And Abraham called the name of that place "The Lord Will Provide:" and to this day it is said, on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham out of heaven a second time, and said, "I swear by myself, says the Lord, that because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you, and make your seed as many as the stars of the sky, and the sand on the seashore; and your seed will possess the cities of their enemies; and through your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed: for you have obeyed my voice."

So Abraham returned to his servants, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed at Beer-sheba.

Consider some of the details of this story. God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, which meant effectively to leave behind his family, just as God had first asked him to leave behind his family in Chaldea – just as God asked Abram to leave behind his name, and his identity, and become Abraham. Indeed, because God had established the covenant with Abraham through Isaac, and not Ishmael, the call to sacrifice Isaac meant that Abraham was being asked to sacrifice his very name – "Abraham" was glossed as meaning "father of many nations." To sacrifice Isaac is to sacrifice himself.

There are many noteworthy things about this passage. Here I will note only a few. First of all, the language used is significant. Note in particular the use of the

word, *hinneni*. Roughly translatable as "here I am," the word communicates more than just one's location. It identifies the speaker as one who is attentive to the inquisitor, one who is available to them, who will be responsible to them. In short, it recognizes a relationship of obligation of moral concern and solicitude for another. In this passage, it is spoken three times, each time by Abraham, once directly to God, once to God's messenger, when they call to him; so Abraham is clearly putting himself at God's disposition, as an instrument of God's will. Yet this is not simply obeisance to a tyrannical deity; Abraham has already challenged God, on ethical terms, as regards God's plan to annihilate Sodom and Gommorrah (in Genesis 18). Indeed, there Abraham expressed his confidence in God's justice – "shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25) – in the same episode in which he learns that God will grant him a son, whom he will name Isaac. Here, in contrast, Abraham simply hears and follows: *hinneni*.

Interestingly, however, Abraham also offers this same reply to a human – his son, Isaac – thus suggesting that Abraham recognizes a similar kind of moral accountability to Isaac alongside the accountability that he offers to God. What is more, in his use of the word *hinneni* in both settings, there is no evidence that one is prior to the other. Each has a legitimate claim on him, Abraham seems to be saying; and in the equivalent answers he provides to them, even after he has heard the demand of one to sacrifice the other up unto him, he seems to refuse to recognize any moral differentiation between them.

The language of *hinneni* appears throughout the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament as a language of fidelity, attention, and availability. (It is shadowed in the New Testament with the Koine Greek term *idou*, typically translated "behold!") The prophet Samuel receives his call from God three times, but only responds to God the third time, upon being directed by Eli on how to do so: namely, to reply to the call with *hinneni* (1 Samuel 3:9–10). And on the other side, it is precisely Adam and Eve's refusal to reply to God's call in the Garden, after they had eaten of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that prompts God to ask them if they have disobeyed the divine command.

Now consider also the Qur'anic passage in this regard. Here is the story in the Qur'an:

> Among his followers was Abraham.
> He came to his Lord with his whole heart.
> He said to his father and his people, "What are you worshipping?
> "How can you choose false gods, instead of the true God?
> "What is your opinion of the Lord of the universe?"
> Then he looked up to the stars.
> He said, "I am sick,"
> So [his people] turned away from him and left.
> He turned to their gods, and said,
> "Do you not eat? Why do you not speak?"
> He then destroyed them.
> His people came at him in a great rage.

He said, "How can you worship what you carve
"When God has created you, and everything you make?"
They said, "Build a blazing fire and throw him into it."
They schemed against him, but We humiliated them.
He said, "I will go to my Lord; He will guide me."
"My Lord, grant me a righteous son,"
so We gave him good news, that he would have a patient son.
When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, "My son, I see sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?" He said, "Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me patient."
When they had both submitted to God, and he had laid his son down on the side of his face,
We called out to him: "Abraham."
"You have fulfilled the dream." This is how We reward the righteous.
That was an exacting test indeed.
We ransomed his son with a momentous sacrifice.
And We let him be praised by succeeding generations.
Peace be upon Abraham.
This is how We reward the righteous.
Truly he is one of our faithful servants. (Qur'an 37:83–109)

This also tells the story of the sacrifice, though the details are equally revealing in their own right. Here the story is traditionally understood as the story of Abraham and Ishmael, not Abraham and Isaac. And here the story is explicitly associated with Abraham's hostility to his family's business of idol-making, and his smashing of the idols. This association is presumably not accidental: children are, after all, almost inevitably their parents' idols. The text recognizes an ineliminable tension between fidelity to God and fidelity to the world in a slightly different way than in Genesis; here the requested sacrifice flows naturally from the smashing of the idols. Of course, in the Qur'an both Abraham *and* Ishamel were overtly willing to undertake the sacrifice, whereas in the Genesis telling, Isaac seems ignorant of it beforehand. Yet the essentials of both stories are the same: the father, the parent, is asked to sacrifice the thing he most loves in the world, and he shows himself willing to do so. What the world gives, and what God demands, can come tragically, disastrously apart.

Now, none of these faiths are willing to say that their God is Baal, actually demanding that we throw our children into the fire. They all directly refuse this blood-logic. But none of them blanch from the full reality of what they suggest may be required by a life fully faithful to the God they serve. Judaism makes it a recurrent theme, one that returns at different moments in the tradition as a perpetual temptation for humans to mistrust God. For Christianity, in contrast, the tension reaches its climax and its resolution in the death on the cross and resurrection from the grave of Jesus Christ. In Islam, it becomes more visibly a test, but also a warning. As we will see later, it is the purity of Iblis's monotheistic devotion to God that causes the angel to refuse God's commandment that all the angels bow down to

Adam, a refusal that constitutes the core of Iblis's rebellion against God and the angel's transformation into *ash-Shaytan*, Satan.

In each tradition, however, it is a powerful and vivid story. It challenges our attempts at moral deliberation, especially when we conceive of moral action in naturalistic terms, as tending towards automaticity. God's commands create an inner space in the human, a space that can be the stage for a tension between God and morality. Perhaps indeed there is an ineliminable tension between the absoluteness of morality, and our own capacity to comprehend and in some sense control that absoluteness. Perhaps, that is, the absolute exists in our lives only with a penumbra of judgment surrounding it, judgment of our own inevitable failure to obey it fully in our lives.

After this episode, Abraham and Isaac are never recorded as speaking to one another again – and neither are Abraham and Sarah. Indeed, Abraham's life moves rapidly towards its end. First he secures a wife for Isaac, in the story of his servant and Rachel at the well; then Sarah, his wife, dies, and he secures a burial place for her on Hittite land. Then Abraham himself dies. The division between Isaac and Ishmael is apparently resolved, at least provisionally, when they bury Abraham in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite (Genesis 25:9).

Each of the traditions gives the story a central liturgical place. The Akedah is the fixed reading for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and the ram's horn sounded in that service is associated with the ram caught in the thicket; furthermore, the Akedah is also part of the daily morning service. Christians read the story just before Easter, or at the Easter Vigil, and clearly it is meant to foreshadow the sacrifice of Jesus – God's only son – in the crucifixion. In Islam, Abraham is not simply a nomad, but a pilgrim, like Moses, but the pilgrimage is to a barren land, the location of the Kaabah, the House of the Great Covenant, which is built by Abraham and Ishmael after the event of the near-sacrifice. Even today, pilgrims on the hajj in Mecca chant "*labbayk*," "here I am" – echoing *hinneni*.

So the traditions do not solve the tension captured in these stories, but rather try in their own ways to make it palpable and unavoidable. In doing this, they suggest that any ethic that does not accommodate both the "horizontal" claims of natural morality and the "vertical" claims of God on us is inadequate. Any ethic that cannot understand Ahbraham's answer of *hinneni* to both God and Isaac will not capture the moral richness of this situation. Is there a viable moral alternative that offers us some advance on our earlier models? In short, we need a model of the self that can accommodate Abraham, and Abraham's *hinneni*. Where can we find it?

The Responsible Self

Perhaps the best such account is that offered by the twentieth-century Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962), who wrote a small book entitled *The*

Responsible Self. Niebuhr was dissatisfied with then-existing accounts of how to understand the human moral adventure, in no small part because they ill-suited those who were struggling to live out their lives in covenant fidelity to a living God. As an alternative, he offered the idea of the "responsible self," which he thought more fully suited humans' experience of moral life under God.

The image of "responsibility," for him, illuminates aspects of our life as agents in ways that other, older forms of thought about morality do not. So to understand why this is a valuable symbol, we must understand what it is supplementing.

Niebuhr thought that there were typically two models of the moral life. He called these the models of "man the maker" and "man the citizen," and on his understanding, they each ask different fundamental questions and imply different pictures of morality. The first – which Niebuhr named "man the maker" or "man the fashioner" – asks the question, what is my goal, ideal, or *telos*? What, that is, is *the good*? This model builds upon one particular insight about the human: "What is man like in all his actions?… he is like an artificer who constructs things according to an idea and for the sake of an end."[4] We use such practical ends-and-means reasoning all the time, in all aspects of our lives. For example, you might be disappointed with your short temper, and so you train yourself to be more patient with those with whom you disagree; over time this can work to change your character – if not dramatically, at least significantly. This is clearly an important dimension of the moral life.

But the validity of this model is significantly limited. After all, we do not always find ourselves in situations where means-end reasoning is helpful for our moral reflections. For example, sometimes you must choose among obligations or commitments, and rank them; most college students, I would wager, rank loyalty to friends over observance of the protocols of academic integrity, so that they would not betray a friend who they caught cheating on a test. (Though perhaps there are different senses of "loyalty to friends" that could operate here.) We wake up in the middle of things. We're swarmed by laws, rules, dictates of etiquette. We come to self-awareness in the midst of right and wrong, of commandments and rules, and we must take account of them, we must rank them. Of the many allegiances you have, which ones are most important?

So another image is often used in critical contrast to the man-the-maker image; and this is what Niebuhr calls "man the citizen." This figure asks, most fundamentally, what is the law by which I should live my life? The question here is not about the goal I seek, but rather what is the *right* framework within which I might pursue any goal? It is by asking this question that humans come to see themselves as embedded within communities, as members of communities. It is by asking this question that we come to see others as other "selves," worthy of our moral consideration.

These two models of the moral life each capture something important about the moral life. But both formulate their insights in ways that make it impossible to accommodate the insights of the other. They are, that is, incommensurable, unreconcilable with one another. They identify different aspects of our moral experience

and each stubbornly argues that their aspect is the central one. And neither can therefore recognize the genuine moral significance of the other aspect. As each insists on building a picture of the moral life around their own partial (in several senses) apprehension of morality, the inevitable conflict between the two symbols suggests neither is wholly adequate to our needs. We must have another, more encompassing picture that can accommodate the importance of both insights.

So, as a way to offer a superior account, Niebuhr proposes a third picture, which he calls "man the answerer," or the responsible self. This picture begins from "the image of man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him."[5] Here the moral life is understood as a conversation, a dialogue between various partners, and this model assumes the human asks a different fundamental question from either of the others: what is going on, and how should I best respond to it? What, that is, is the *fitting* thing to do here? In using this symbol, we will come to understand human actions, particularly but not exclusively those actions that are especially morally charged, as in a certain way *responses*, answers, to actions of others upon us.

This helps us see some things the other concepts left obscure. For example, it makes sense of human suffering in a certain way. "It is not simply what has happened to them that has defined them; their responses to what has happened to them have been of even greater importance, and these responses have been shaped by their interpretations of what they suffered."[6] We are never simply victims; if in no other way, our agency is manifest in how we receive and respond to the hurts and blessings inflicted upon us by the world.

This account is useful for many reasons, but for us most especially it is useful because it carefully identifies and anatomizes four distinct dimensions of the moral life, all of which are crucially in play for ethics in the three Abrahamic traditions. We can think about these dimensions as ways of mapping our moral experience in terms of the past, the present, and the future, and in terms of our lives in community.

First, as we said above, action is a response to action upon us, which is prior to our action; we are not allowed to set the terms of the game under which our moral life is played; we come into the game with it already underway, and we simply must act within it as it comes to us – we're not allowed to start it all over again.

Second, these "responsible" actions are responses to actions that themselves are interpreted by us. This is important because our interpretation of a situation always in part determines how we respond to it; sometimes, in fact, the interpretation is the decisive factor. For example, we would expect different responses to someone sneaking up and dumping a cooler full of ice water on one's back from a football coach whose team had just won the Super Bowl than from a professor delivering a lecture to a bunch of drowsy undergraduates. And all of us have felt the sting of someone else's casual remark to us, when that casual remark touches an old but still sensitive wound we have long harbored (how many times do we find ourselves responding frostily to someone's innocent remark, when we are in fact responding

to a history of personal injuries of which they themselves are completely ignorant?). How we understand the context into which we are acting matters for how we act in response. Furthermore, this interpretive background, which at least partially determines how we act in response, is itself not entirely within our conscious control. That is why practical jokes can go awry; in our example, the now-drenched professor can respond in good humor to the soaking, or feel outraged and enraged and turn on the jokers, or feel so humiliated that she must flee the lecture hall entirely. Any of these responses is possible, and none of them will be simply and sheerly self-consciously chosen by the professor; unconscious motives will always play a part.

Third, each action is a response that looks to the future and expects to be held accountable for itself. Indeed, responsible action anticipates such future accountability; that is, the actor takes under consideration the fact that they will be asked to account for what they did, how they did it and why they did it. If the professor is able to resist the urge to lash out or flee, it may be because she understands that their actions have a future-oriented aspect to which she should attend.

In all these ways, Niebuhr says,

> an agent's action is like a statement in a dialogue. Such a statement not only seeks to meet, as it were, or to fit into, the previous statement to which it is an answer, but is made in anticipation of reply. It looks forward as well as backward; it anticipates.… It is made as part of a total conversation that leads forward and is to have meaning as a whole.[7]

Actions are not only about the past and present, about what has been done and is being done to us; they are also significantly about the future, and express our beliefs about what sort of future we should like to inhabit. We respond in our actions in the full knowledge that we will later be held accountable for how we respond now. Responsibility lies in the agent who stays with her action, who accepts the consequences and is willing to weave the action into a larger life story. The twentieth-century literary critic Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) vividly describes this idea in the following story:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.[8]

Burke's image quite crisply puts in our mind the nature of our moral action as action that takes place, essentially in time, with some things earlier than it that it is responding to, and other things yet to come that will respond to it. Our actions are not merely superficially temporal; their particular historicity is part of what makes them the particular things they are.

But the historical and temporal dimensions of our moral agency – the way they extend across time – are not the only register in which we must think about our moral lives as responsible, according to Niebuhr. For those lives also take place in community, in some community or particular set of communities, among whom we number ourselves and from whom we in large part take our identity. Those social settings decisively shape the nature of our actions and our agency. Because of this, the responsible self is not only responding *in time*, but also responding to a particular understanding of its audience or audiences; and every audience has expectations that must be taken into account in order for your action to be intelligible to it. This is the fourth dimension of responsible action: an action is a response that is for a certain community and hence reveals some social solidarity, some fundamental attachment to a community of people – however imaginary, however far away in space and time from the person acting in the here and now; in this way there is always a whole "cloud of witnesses" surrounding your action and contributing to its distinct meaning.

In sum, for Niebuhr, "The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent's action as

1 response to an action upon him,
2 in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action, and
3 with his expectation of response to his response; and
4 all of this is in a continuing community of agents."[9]

In a way, all of these dimensions are visible in Abraham's single, simple word *hinneni*. In using that word, he recognizes (1) that another has made a claim on him, (2) a claim that he construes as a legitimate claim, and he anticipates (3) that his own response – "here I am" – will lead the claimant to ask something of him that he should be disposed to provide, in order (4) to keep the relationship between them alive and moving forward.

It is all packed not only into the *hinneni* Abraham speaks to Isaac, but also into the *hinneni* he speaks to God. For as I said earlier, Niebuhr does not simply think that this account is useful for understanding our moral lives simply as human moral agents in sheerly human moral communities. He thinks it also offers a picture of the life of the moral agent before God. As he says, it "offers us … a key – not *the* key – to the understanding of that biblical ethos which represents the historic norm of the Christian life."[10] The responsible self, that is, is not just a useful picture of the ethical self; it is a useful picture of the *theological-ethical* self.

Niebuhr suggests this is so for two reasons. First of all, the responsible self focuses moral attention on the agent as free and accountable in a lively way. Like the crafts-

man model, the freedom of human agency is acknowledged and respected on this account. But like the lawgiver model, that free agency is put in a complicated relationship with powers and dynamics that both bear down on the person and sustain and empower her as well. Given that human actors who are religious understand themselves (or should understand themselves) to exist in the worshipful service of a creative and sovereign God, a model of responsibility accommodates their experience more fully. The image of responsibility, that is, captures something of the tense dialectic between freedom and constraint that religious agents experience at the core of their moral lives, and that is captured in Abraham's free response of *hinneni* to God and to Isaac.

Secondly, this account implies a vision of the source and structure of the moral order that is more in tune with what he thinks "the biblical ethos" entails. That is to say, the picture of the human as a responsible self creates far more space for a genuinely *living God* to be a functional part of this account of morality than either of the other accounts. For after all, the crucial character of God in the biblical ethos is dramatic. God is not fundamentally identified as a lawgiver or as the supreme good, but rather the crucial agent in the historical drama – the primary actor, the first cause, the dramatist. This picture of the self in relation to God better captures the quality of vitality and surprising freedom that marks all of God's action.

Niebuhr's account is not meant to be exclusively Christian, and at a minimum it succeeds, I think, in being amenable to the other Abrahamic traditions, at least in how it sketches the crucial dimensions of how adherents to any of these three traditions must think of themselves as standing before God. It is a general account, needing much specification, but in emphasizing the way that these traditions see human agency as a response more than an initiatory action, it captures something very important that we must keep in mind in coming chapters.

Conclusion

So things are far more complicated than we might at first assume. Far from simply and straightforwardly reinforcing one another, these traditions' depiction of the relation between God and human morality is alert to the tensions and possible contradictions between them. This is, perhaps, a far darker and more troubled picture than one hopes for, or at least expects. But while it is less comforting, it has the advantage of being true: more accurately representative of the experience of humans over several millennia of attempts to live in faithful relation to this God. Now it is time to turn to the various ways in which the traditions have tried to depict what that "faithful relation" looks like.