

Can I Know It Is God Speaking to Me?

Commentary on Dan Bradley's Presentation

Gonzaga Socratic Club, 1/30/09

Wayne P. Pomerleau, Philosophy, Gonzaga University

1) SOCRATES (Plato's "Euthyphro") challenges the Divine Command Theory in ethics by arguing that divinity approves of what is good because it is good rather than the good being made good by divine approval. I think that Socrates is importantly correct here.

2) SOREN KIERKEGAARD (in "Fear and Trembling") memorably analyzes the Old Testament (Genesis 22) story of Abraham supposedly being told by God to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, to demonstrate his love for and obedience to God, holding that this represents a dramatic illustration of what he calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." I believe that Kierkegaard is dangerously wrong here.

3) JOHN LOCKE (in his "Essay concerning Human Understanding") argues that reason must be our "judge and guide" in such matters and that the perilous alternative can be the religious fanaticism he calls "enthusiasm." I regard this as a valuable and accurate warning.

4) IMMANUEL KANT (in "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone") maintains that reason always provides us with at least a "negative criterion," in that if an alleged divine revelation violates the rational principles of moral duty, it cannot possibly be genuine and can be regarded as "a mistake" of some sort. Kant is right here.

5) LESSONS LEARNED (my own synthesis) are four. First (from Socrates), we should repudiate the Divine Command Theory and believe that some moral matters are intrinsically good/right and others intrinsically bad/wrong and that this can never be altered by arbitrary divine will. Second (against Kierkegaard), we must therefore reject the idea of any "teleological suspension of the ethical," which is universally binding on us as moral agents and is not to be put aside in favor of an alleged divine voice that would undermine it. Third (from Locke), though human reason, unlike divine reason, is always limited and fallible, it is the best tool we have for determining truth and morality, and we abandon it at our own peril. And fourth (from Kant), although we might never be certain that God IS speaking to us, we can be sure that God is NOT speaking to us if what is allegedly said violates the rational principles of universal morality, so that it must be some sort of "mistake" to suppose it to be of divine origin. Is it better to believe in a "God" who orders us to intend the murdering of an innocent and beloved son or to suspect that such a notion is some sort of delusion? You decide for yourself. I have done so!