

## *Theological Modesty and the Idea of Divine Perfection*

HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS

WHETHER GOD EXISTS OR NOT IS THE LAST question to be asked, though it is the fashion of many theologians to make it the first one. Before men can speak meaningfully of God or seek to demonstrate His existence, they must know what it is they are looking for. They must know beforehand where they are to look for corroborative evidence, what would count as confirming proofs of His existence and attributes. They must know beforehand which events and traits point to His reality, which features in the real or ideal world may be legitimately used to draw analogies to God's nature, which claims to revelation may be said to be His self-disclosures, which actions may be asserted to belong to His will.

Martin Buber, for example, insists that "nothing can make me believe in a God who punishes Saul because he did not murder his enemy."<sup>1</sup> "Nothing" presumably means that no Biblical text, second revelation or rational argument can alter his invincible conviction concerning God's conduct. Clearly, however, Saul's punishment by God contradicts no logical or metaphysical law. What is this apodictic certainty on Buber's part but an indication of his fidelity to an antecedent commitment, to an idea of divine perfection whose logic precludes God's acting in certain ways? Indeed, Buber goes on to explain, there is nothing astonishing in the fact that an observant Jew "when he has to choose between God and the Bible, chooses God: the God in whom he believes, Him in whom he can believe."<sup>2</sup> What is the logic of "can" here except its oblique reference to an unexamined but imperious idea of divine perfection? However unformulated, the image of perfection contains implicit criteria as to what may or may not be properly attributed to God.

The Abraham of the Scriptures similarly insists that a contemplated destruction of innocents along with the guilty is "far from" the character of the covenant God. And, in a passage in his *Streit der Fakultäten*, Kant would have Abraham answer the voice commanding his sacrifice of Isaac in a similar fashion: "That I ought not to kill my son is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt; that you, as you appear to be, are God, I am not convinced and will never be even if your voice resounded from heaven." The positive and negative convictions that Kant expresses are rooted in a

1. Martin Buber, "Samuel and Agag" in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (LaSalle, Illinois: Opencourt, 1967).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

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faith commitment to a particular idea of divine perfection. Commitment to a similar typology of divine perfection finds expression in John Stuart Mill's declaration:

Whatever power such a being (God) may have over men, there is one thing he shall not do. He shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creature, and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.<sup>3</sup>

More than semantic lucidity is involved in Mill's declaration of moral independence. He "cannot" worship amoral omnipotence because it runs counter to an ultimate faith commitment lodged in his ideal of perfection. That neither Kierkegaard nor Karl Barth would respond in this fashion points to their significantly different presuppositions of divine perfection.

Theologians who know that God cannot square a circle or cannot create a moral being devoid of free will or create a world without some evil often argue as if the issue were a matter of logic alone. Beneath the manifest logical argumentation, however, resides an unproven and unprovable perfection ideal with its own legislative logic as to the powers and conduct of a supremely perfect being. Theological limitations upon the attributes of "omniscience," "omnipotence," or "benevolence" may be traced to the prescriptions of the particular perfection model to which the theologian is antecedently committed. Thus, Aristotle knows how the Gods will behave and what they must do. "Will not Gods seem absurd if they make contracts and return deposits, and so on."<sup>4</sup> Aristotle's tacit appeal to his idea of perfection allows him to assert confidently that Gods will not be assigned acts of justice or bravery or liberality or moderation since they are "unworthy of Gods." The logic of his idea of perfection centers around the ideal of self-sufficiency and leads him to conclude: "Therefore, the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative."<sup>5</sup> On the basis of another ideal of perfection, the Bible finds God's keeping of contracts, pledges, oaths and covenants far from seeming absurd.

While every theology is informed by an idea of divine perfection, not all ideas of divine perfection are alike. Maimonides, for example, was convinced that the perfection of God was "an innate idea."<sup>6</sup> But he was equally convinced that everyone shared his idea of perfection. Such an assumption of the universality of what proves to be a particular notion of

3. John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (London: Library of Little Arts, 1867), pp. 119-129.

4. *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 1178 (10), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

5. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178 (20).

6. Moses Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* Book III, Chapter XIX.

perfection is widespread. As a pre-reflective presupposition, the idea of perfection frequently functions in theological argumentation as if its image were self-evident. In this presumption lies the concealed root of some major theological entanglements. Theologians do not feel compelled to justify the unique character of their perfection paradigm. They proceed to mount arguments against adversaries without awareness that their position assumes acceptance of an unexpressed perfection presupposition. Nor, for that matter, are they aware of the perfection ideals which support the adversaries' posture.

The perfection model of classical metaphysical theology is significantly different from those which support process, existentialist or personalistic theological orientations. Each perfection typology marks the scope of its theological domain and weights differently the qualities that it assigns to God, and all without explicit, cognitive awareness. The presuppositional character of the perfection ideal which colors our theological conceptualization tends to blind us from seeing the pluralism of these ideals in theology.

The physicist, Eddington, offers an illuminating parable of a man studying deep sea life by means of casting ropes of a two-inch thick mesh into the waters. The fisherman thereby concluded that there were no fish smaller than two inches in the sea. Each theology throws out its own size-category of perfection. It may, indeed, be a necessary instrument for the theological enterprise. But it would be an error to presume, on that account, that there is but one such size. It is a liberating knowledge to understand that every doctrine of God's perfection depends upon a certain choice and grouping of concepts.

#### *Theological Analysis and the Limits of the Idea of Perfection*

Uncovering the dwelt-in ideas of divine perfection remains an indispensable task for theological analyses. The perfection paradigms of theology are not readily in evidence because they are rarely explicitly expressed. Ultimate vindications are grounded in the implicit character of the presuppositions. As ultimates, they are taken for granted as innate ideas. Theological arguments often proceed on the assumption that the perfection ideal is universally held.

The character of the perfection ideal within a given theology must be deduced from the explicit arguments of which the theologian is "focally aware." To adopt further Michael Polanyi's language, the theologian may be spoken of as being "subsidiarily aware" of the particularity of his perfection-idea.<sup>7</sup> The specific character of his perfection image is as unnoticed by him as are the lenses of the spectacles through which we see. The perfection model provides the theologian with an indispensable

7. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 88, 92, 115.

instrument of religious perception. In this manner, the perfection presuppositions remain largely hidden from the theologian. Its very obviousness enables its concealment. It is the premise, not the conclusion, of theological demonstrations.

The perfection idea, then, functions within a theological system much as a paradigm functions with a language game. To use one of Wittgenstein's illustrations, one cannot rightly ask what the length of the standard meter in Paris is in the manner that we may ask about the length of some piece of metal. For, by convention, "length" means being measured against the standard meter in Paris.<sup>8</sup> Analogously, the perfection idea serves theology as a paradigm measuring the qualities and attributes ascribed to the Perfect Being according to its own standards.

The perfection-idea in theology may be understood as an ultimate conviction precisely in the sense that Polanyi characterizes it.

We can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions, from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

The governing image of perfection generates a network of commitment which sustains and protects it. The insular and internal character of the perfection ideal within a theological system renders it virtually invulnerable to external criticism. The perfection-ideal is self-validating. We are, thus, enveloped in what Charles McCoy calls "the theological predicament." In dealing with ultimate commitments of faith "one is concerned with the source of all criteria of truth and error, good and evil. One cannot validate a realm of actuality by criteria beyond it."<sup>10</sup>

What rational justification can be demanded of an ultimate conviction in a perfection ideal? We suggest that it is no more subject to "justificanda cognitiones" than are the laws of logic or the principle of the uniformity of nature. We can, at best, turn to Herbert Feigl's proposal that the latter "laws" can be defended as "justificanda actionis."<sup>11</sup> Applied to the faith presuppositions of ideas of perfection, the proposal may offer pragmatic vindication of our ideals. Perfection-ideas may be vindicated as indispensable instruments of theological conceptualization, much as the laws of logic are justified as pragmatically necessary for rational communication. Beyond that, perfection-ideas may be vindicated in terms of

8. M.J. Charlesworth, *Philosophy and Linguistic Analysis* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), p. 116.

9. Polanyi, *Op. cit.*

10. Charles McCoy, *Theological Analysis*, unpublished manuscript. (Berkeley, California: Pacific School of Religion).

11. Herbert Feigl, in an article "De Principis non Disputandum," privately circulated, draws such a distinction between justification and vindication. A later formulation of his argument may be found in his contribution to *Philosophical Analysis* edited by Max Black, (Ithaca, N.Y.; Cornell U. Press, 1950).

their ability to satisfy the basic needs and interests of the believer, e.g., his drive to know and his drive to be known. On such grounds, ideals of perfection may be appraised as better or worse, not true or false. The theologian's idea of divine perfection is, in R.G. Collingwood's sense of the term, an "absolute presupposition."<sup>12</sup> And absolute presuppositions are not propositions propounding statements which can be proved or disproved. The idea of divine perfection, understood as an absolute presupposition, is not an answer, true or false. It simply stands as a presupposition.

### *Theological Modesty*

Attention to the preconceptual idea of perfection offers more than a suggestive area for theological analysis. Awareness of the subterranean images of perfection in selecting and ordering the attributes of divinity may temper the absolutistic claims of theology. Theological arguments frequently turn on the half-conscious assumptions that a particular idea of perfection is universally held. The idea of perfection may be so much a part of the climate of opinion in which the theologian functions that it is taken for granted, as Aquinas puts it, that "this *all* men speak of God," or "to which *everyone* gives the name of God," or "and this *everyone* understands to be God."<sup>13</sup> But listeners committed to other ideas of divine perfection, e.g., personalistic or process theologians would not so readily acquiesce to Thomas' assumption of a consensus gentium.

Awareness of the pluralistic character of perfection models and their governing power in shaping God concepts and legitimating arguments may, at the very least, contribute to greater theological modesty: One need not surrender one's own idea of divine perfection to appreciate that it is not innate, necessary or universal, or to appreciate the value of other ideals which satisfy other needs and other priorities.

12. R.G. Collingswood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), Chapters V, VI.

13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I Q 2 article 3. Italics mine.

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