Sam Fleischacker*
Making Secular Sense of the Sacred

Abstract: From the earliest days of social science, in the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith, it has been difficult to make secular sense of the notion of sacredness in terms that believers in that notion can recognize as what they mean by it—social scientists instead tend almost universally to treat it as the consequence of an illusion of some kind. This paper explores the sources of that difficulty, arguing that it is built into the assumptions that make social science a science at all. It also argues that treating a category so central to the moral thinking of millions of people as resulting from an illusion breeds attitudes of condescension that are morally problematic. Using themes to be found especially in Kant, the paper proposes a way for social scientists to treat the category of sacredness with respect for moral purposes even while maintaining the presuppositions, for the purposes of their scientific work, that lead them to try to explain it away.

Keywords: Sacred, utility, social science, Kant, Rudolf Otto

1 Introduction: Sacredness in Hume and Smith

David Hume used the word 'sacred' for the rules that establish property, and make for orderly transitions of government, but he seems to have meant by this no more than 'inviolable.'[1] He indeed drew an invidious contrast between the rules of justice and religious rules, describing the latter as "monstrous [...] priestly inventions", and as the "frivolous, useless and burdensome" products of "superstition" (Hume, *Treatise*, 524, and *Enquiry*, 199 (159)). The inviolability of rules of justice has a *reason*, he thinks, while the inviolability of religious rules does not. So the similarity between the rules of justice and religious rules is misleading: we need to disentangle them in order to see the real grounds for inviolability as regards

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1 Hume is not an absolutist about moral rules, the way Kant is, but he does argue that the rules of justice generally lose their grip on us only where the circumstances that make for justice have wholly broken down: see Hume, *Enquiry*, 186 (147). I am grateful to Anton Leist for pressing me to comment on this point.

*****Corresponding Author: Sam Fleischacker,** Philosophy Department, University of Illinois, Chicago, USA, e-mail: fleischert@sbcglobal.net

justice. When it comes to justice, there is a danger that we will proceed from case to case and suppose that we have reasons of utility for taking things that don't belong to us in many circumstances, or for launching bloody revolutions against inept or moderately corrupt rulers. Most of the time we will be deluding ourselves, and whatever short-term or minor gains we may rightly attribute to the violation of property or the political revolution we are contemplating, the costs of these acts, and of the precedent we set by committing them, will in the end be gravely harmful to our society. We need therefore to avoid thinking in terms of the utility of particular cases, and instead "fix an inviolable law to [ourselves], never [...] to be induc'd to violate" the rules of justice (Hume, *Treatise*, 501). But it is important that we understand this inviolability itself as having utility: otherwise we will be tempted to compare the rules of justice to those of 'superstition', which are eminently deserving of violation. What's sacred about justice is *only* that its rules are for good reason inviolable; nothing further should be drawn from the religious connotations of that term.

Hume's friend Adam Smith also called the rules of justice 'sacred',[2] but he used that term in a more robust sense. Smith certainly associates the sacredness of these rules with their inviolability (see for instance TMS 161 and 175), but he adds that if we do violate them, we will bring on ourselves "inward disgrace", "terror and amazement", "horror and shame" (TMS 138, 65, 161). We will come to see ourselves, and be seen by others, as "odious, contemptible, or punishable", as the proper "objects of all those sentiments for which we have the greatest dread and aversion" (159); we may indeed bring ourselves to complete psychological and social collapse, analogous to the haunting by the Furies that almost ended the life of Orestes (65, 84, 118). For Smith, the rules of justice are hedged about by some of our strongest aversive sentiments, which makes violating them feel like entering a forbidden and horrifying place. Smith's sacred rules thus have all the emotional texture of a religious taboo, and unlike Hume, he is happy to draw that connection out explicitly (163–166). The rules of justice should "be regarded as the commands and laws of the Deity", he says, "promulgated by [the] vicegerents which he has [...] set up within us": our moral sentiments (165).

It's worth noting that Smith says only that the rules of justice *should be regarded as* divinely promulgated, not that they *are* divinely promulgated. Here, as elsewhere, Smith invokes God only as additional support for moral views he is espousing anyway, not as a presupposition of those views. He thus allows an atheist or agnostic to accept his conclusions while rejecting his religious language. Smith's moral philosophy never has the *anti*-religious implications that Hume's

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2 Much more often than Hume does: see Smith, *TMS*, 84, 89, 138, 153, 159, 161, 241, 330.

sometimes has, but it remains fundamentally secular, even when invoking religious notions.[3]

That said, Smith makes better secular sense of sacredness than Hume does. Smith is right that the attribution of sacredness to a moral concept entails the repertoire of emotional response that he associates with that attribution: the cold designation of a rule as 'inviolable' is inadequate for this purpose. 'Sacred' is a throwaway term in Hume's moral philosophy, something we could erase without losing anything. 'Sacred' does real work for Smith: about as much work as it ever does, in a secular view.

The burden of this paper is to indicate what is still unsatisfactory in Smith's account of sacredness, even from a secular standpoint, and the degree to which that lack can be remedied without actually accepting religious premises. I shall then sketch the advantages I think secular moral philosophers can gain from this more robust notion of sacredness.

2 The Problem with Explaining Sacredness

To bring out what's missing in Smith's account of sacredness, consider the contemporary moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt's similar account of this quality. Haidt, like Smith, associates sacredness with a suite of emotional responses at its violation: disgust, degradation, horror, repugnance (Haidt 2012, 118–122, 170–179). He also endorses Durkheim's proposal that religions should be defined by way of a distinction between the sacred and the profane (193, 261–262, 301; Durkheim 1995, 33–39). In this way, he hopes to capture the importance of an aspect of morality that moral philosophers and psychologists in the modern, liberal West generally ignore, he thinks, but that people in the rest of the world take very seriously. Rather than writing a concern for the sacred off as simply a remnant of superstition, and a distraction from the utilitarian and rights-based views of morality favored in the modern West, Haidt maintains that it is one of the primal sources of moral norms.

But Haidt also thinks that sensitivity to the sacred is an evolutionary development that can be fully explained as an outgrowth of a feeling of disgust: "If we had no sense of disgust", he says, "I believe we would also have no sense of the sacred" (Haidt 2012, 173–174). And he thinks that our sense of disgust can be fully explained as something that, at its origin, protected us against dangerous pathogens (171–173). This, however, reduces the sacred to its utilitarian functions.

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3 For further discussion, see Fleischacker 2004, 44–45.

That is not how it is conceived by the religious believers who actually believe in a distinction between the sacred and the profane, and it provokes the question, 'Why should we still hold on to this distinction, if we can now get around the concerns that made it useful'? But this is precisely the sort of question that a respect for the sacred/profane distinction is supposed to rule *out*: people are supposed to be horrified, faced with the possibility of psychological and social collapse, at the very idea of breaching the inviolable territory that sacredness protects.

So Haidt does not achieve the respect for the way religious people around the world think that he sets out to achieve. It is, however, hard to see how any secular scholar could get him or herself into a frame of mind in which the very idea of breaching a rule is unthinkable, or in which such an attitude towards breaking rules is impervious to utilitarian explanation. Failing even to consider what will happen if I violate a rule, and being unwilling even to try to explain the inviolability I attribute to a rule, would seem to betray the very project of studying human beings from a secular perspective: of social *science*, of trying to see human behavior in a naturalistic context. The danger even of Haidt's and Smith's relatively sensitive approaches to the sacred, then, is that in the very attempt to explain that notion, they must miss what gives it its significance to those who employ it. They cannot but reduce it to something more naturalistically manageable, but in so reducing it, what it means to those who believe in it will disappear.

The problem, simply put, is that believers in the sacred take its violation to lead to feelings of horror, shame, disgust, etc. *in virtue of a real supernatural order* that makes certain things supremely good, and others evil, independently of their naturalistic properties, while secular scholars see people as *believing in such an order* in virtue of certain feelings they experience of horror, shame, disgust, etc. The order of explanation is reversed, for believers in and scholars of the sacred, and it cannot but be reversed, given their other commitments. The believer and the scholar do not share the central idea by which they make sense of the sacred; they cannot, therefore, share the notion of sacredness itself.

This is a conundrum that cannot, I think, be fully removed. It is central to the modern scientific point of view—to anything we would today call a 'naturalistic' point of view—that super-natural entities and forces must at best be set aside for the purposes of knowledge, and explicated in terms of things that can be observed, or inferred from what is observed.[4] This presupposition is non-negotiable, and there is indeed no reason to suppose that it is incorrect. There is, then, a sim-

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[4] The terms 'modern' and 'today' in this sentence are meant to signal an acknowledgment of the fact that pre-modern modes of natural inquiry—premodern science, or the premodern forerunners of what today we call 'science'—often *did* have room for the supernatural: the natural order itself could not be explained without a supernatural God, on many such views. The rea-

ple response that the secular scholar can make to the believer, as regards sacredness: that the believer is *incorrect* to suppose that sacredness is irreducible to naturalistic terms, and under an illusion if she thinks that her sense of the sacred reflects an objectively sacred order, independent of the natural world.

Nevertheless, this response may make secular scholars uncomfortable. For viewing a large swathe of human beings as under a deep illusion about the nature of their own values makes it difficult fully to *respect* those people. From what Immanuel Kant calls 'the speculative standpoint'—the perspective of explanation—it may be fine for a secular scholar to insist on reducing sacred values to terms that believers in those values do not accept. From what Kant calls 'the practical standpoint'—the perspective of *deliberation*, in which we consider how we should act in relation to other people, or together with them—it is not so fine. Secular scholars tend after all to be committed to modern, liberal moral outlooks, on which it is a virtue to respect others as much as possible. That need not entail that one *agree* with those others, but writing off a central category of their way of thinking about values as based on an illusion is hard to reconcile with a view of them as truly capable of moral reasoning—truly one's moral equals.

Of course we can respect the *rights* of others without accepting anything they believe as true or good. We show respect for horrific criminals, without condoning what they have done, by putting them on trial rather than imprisoning or executing them summarily, and by allowing them freedom of speech and conscience. We show respect for people with serious mental illnesses, without accepting their delusions, by helping them to lead a life that, as much as possible, brings them happiness. This sort of respect has nothing to do with accepting their ways of looking at the world.

But this sort of respect is insufficient for the sorts of free and equal relationships that liberals strive ordinarily to have with other people. Criminals and the mentally ill stand outside these relationships; our ways of living with them are models of what free and equal interaction does *not* look like. When liberals call for free and equal relationships among people, and construe respect as the attitude expressed in these relationships, they are looking precisely to avoid the control and condescension of the way we handle criminals and the mentally ill.

The question is, can we avoid that control and condescension while still regarding others as thoroughly confused or deluded? That seems unlikely. We

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sons why the arguments for God to which these premodern ways of thinking lent themselves no longer make sense today are, I believe, deeply built into the presuppositions of modern science: its abandonment of 'final causes', especially. See also Fleischacker 2011, 28, 66.

should distinguish here between tolerance and respect.[5] We tolerate people we consider wrong-headed and shallow, but we don't respect them. Respect involves more than toleration. We have respect for something only if we think it has *good* features, features we can admire. Consequently, while tolerating religions one finds contemptible is a not insignificant political achievement—many parts of the world would be freer and more peaceful if that attitude were more widespread— to urge respect for religious believers entails something more: it entails seeing them as able to contribute to one's own ethical projects. Only those we respect are reasonable partners in ethical projects, after all—in building civic institutions or running schools or fostering art and modes of discussion. For only if we respect another can we expect to share normative premises with him or her, from which joint action can begin. But it is very difficult to respect others in this sense if one sees them as seriously confused.[6] Ordinary friendship can be difficult; shared intellectual projects may be impossible. And the more such shared projects are ruled out, the more difficult it will be to sustain a view of the purportedly confused other as an equal source of moral reasons: as a 'free and equal' person.

So the project of explaining sacredness, from a secular, scientific point of view, runs up against the project of respecting others—of regarding them as moral equals. And the tension here is not infrequently a source of considerable discomfort.

Is there anything that can be done to enhance secular accounts of the sacred, such that religious and secular people can come closer to sharing that category, from a practical standpoint if not a speculative one?

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5 See further discussion of this distinction in my *The Good and the Good Book* (Fleischacker 2015, ch. 7).

6 Some forms of co-operation may be possible even with people we regard as thoroughly deluded. John Rawls has shown how people who reject one another's religious beliefs can yet build a political order together, so long as they share certain beliefs about the public realm (including the idea *that* the public realm should enable people with different views of religion to live together): see Rawls 2005. But Rawls presumes that 'reasonable' religious and secular people will find an array of premises, adequate for setting up a liberal political realm, that they can share.

3 Sacredness and the Unknown

The Kantian language I have used in setting up this problem points the way to a Kantian solution to it.[7] There is indeed such a Kantian solution, but before we get to it, let's consider an additional element of the sacred.

This is the element of *mystery*. In virtually all religions there is something deeply unknown, even unknowable, about the sacred: about what it is and why some things are sacred and others not. The sacred can't be fully unknown, of course, else one wouldn't know how to participate in it or stay away from things that violate it. Religious traditions compose lists of the sorts of things or activities that count as allowing a person to experience sanctity, or on the contrary as 'desecration' or 'sacrilege'; they also come up with broad characterizations of what holds these lists together. But at the core of the experience of the sacred, for most religious traditions, is an awe, a humility, that comes in large part of *not knowing exactly what one is experiencing*, not being able to put it into concepts, to analyze it or explain it to others. There is also usually an idea that one should have a

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7 I should stress that I do not assume the correctness of a Kantian view of morality in this paper. Broadly speaking, the argument I will offer here is what Kant would call a 'practical' one, but I do not here presume the correctness of any particular theory of how practical reasoning should be done. Rather, I am trying to work within the phenomenology of morals: an account of what the moral life looks life from within, of how moral decision-making and moral judgment and the experience of moral sentiments appear to those engaged in them. This is a *preliminary* to moral theory rather than moral theory proper. Moral theory proper generally starts from an account of what the good human life looks life, or from a view of agency: an argument to the effect that, to a rational agent, consequences can be all that matters about action, for instance, or an argument to the effect that, to a rational agent, the freedom to act must be what matters most about action. Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and the utilitarians have all grounded their moral theories on premises of this sort. When they attend insufficiently to the phenomenology of morals, however, their theories suffer. Many moral theories require us to override aspects of the phenomenology of morals—to reject the idea, if we are utilitarians, that we should worry about dignity or rights, say, where that requires a great sacrifice of happiness, or on the contrary, if we are Kantians, to forbid lying even where that entails great suffering. But making these demands always comes at a high price to the plausibility of a moral theory: ideally, we want our moral theories to preserve as much of the phenomenology of morals as possible. It is with this concern about plausibility in mind that both Smith and Haidt, to their credit, try to 'save the phenomena' of sacredness, and it is with this concern in mind that I want to challenge their accounts. If a theory of morality fails to account adequately for how we, in ordinary life, treat a category that we regard as of great importance to morality—like the category of the sacred—that is a strike against its plausibility. Not a decisive strike, perhaps, but something that should and generally will make us look a bit askance at this account, and more favorably at accounts that do better with that category.

certain awe towards the violation of the sacred: one is supposed precisely *not* to assume that one knows exactly what is terrible about these violations. Only that assumption, it is thought, will keep one from thinking that there is a way, safely, to get around the horrors that accompany such violations—will hold one back from them even when, rationally, they seem excusable.

Different religions offer different reasons for *why* the sacred is mysterious. Our minds may be sunk in *maya*, a world of illusion that prevents us from apprehending the supernatural principle grounding reality. Or our minds may be too limited to perceive a God who transcends all limits, or too sinful to grasp God's love for us. Or we may be too attached to our notions of selfhood to grasp reality. These differences are of course tied to the different metaphysical systems associated with each religion, and cannot be resolved without resolving the disputes between these systems. It is not just the sacred that is unknown, then—the reason why it is unknown is also unknown: at least, it cannot be known, according to each religious tradition, by those who do not yet share that tradition.

I am not suggesting that mystery is the sole or even the main component of sacredness. It is simply a necessary condition for grasping whatever else goes into the sacred, for most people who employ that category. If secular scholars want their accounts of the sacred to mesh to any considerable degree with the way the category is seen from the inside, therefore, it would behoove them to make better sense than they generally do of the mysteriousness of the sacred.

4 Sacredness in Secular Ethics

Of course, this suggestion conflicts, once again, with the demand for explanation that is definitive of modern science. But suppose we move away, for a moment, from the standpoint from which we demand explanation at all—the speculative standpoint—and consider instead the standpoint from which secular scholars themselves (not *as* scholars, now, but as agents) make moral decisions. Might it turn out that they too employ categories that are somewhat opaque to them, somewhat mysterious—that they have access, from what Kant would call the practical standpoint, to a notion quite like that of the sacred?

I would like to suggest that they do—that *some* secular ethical outlooks, at least, themselves have a conception of mysterious values, which they can deploy if they want to see themselves as sharing the general structure of what believers call 'the sacred'. Such a notion may be found in views, like G. E. Moore's, on which the good is not naturalistically definable, and in some varieties of particularism—when reading Iris Murdoch and John McDowell, it at least seems as if the grounds

for our moral views include intuitions into something over which we do not have full rational command. But I am thinking in particular of Kantian views. Kant devotes the end of his *Groundwork* (G, Ak 458–463) to showing precisely that and why we cannot explain our freedom, even though we must assume it throughout it our deliberations. He indeed takes the 'extreme boundary' of practical philosophy to be explaining why freedom is inexplicable. Our inability to explain freedom, for Kant, is not a reflection of merely contingent limitations on our understanding, or on the empirical facts available to us. It follows, rather, from the very nature of explanation. To 'explain' is to give a cause for something but anything for which we can give a cause would not be freedom. So freedom is *essentially* inexplicable—essentially unknowable.

Recognizing this point induces a cognitive humility in us. In the second *Critique*, Kant also urges on us a moral humility. The proper state of mind in which to make moral decisions, he argues, is one in which the moral law strikes down our desires and arrogance, and we feel, consequently, an awe towards it. We should see full virtue as beyond our reach, something we need to strive for rather than something we have already attained; the alternative is "self-conceit" (Kant, CPrR 76, 82). This stance of humility has, moreover, a cognitive component. Thinking that one's will is united with the ideal will—that one *knows* that one's intentions are virtuous—conduces to arrogance (CPrR 84–86). Kant uses the language of 'holiness' for a will that is perfectly aligned with morality and says that we finite beings need to keep ourselves from supposing that we have a holy will. Holiness for Kant, as for religious people, describes a boundary we may not cross, a territory we may not enter.

All of this underwrites the Kantian idea that *persons*, the bearers of freedom, are sacred. That certainly means that we should regard the rules against fraud and theft and murder as inviolable, and feel horror at the very thought of violating them. But it also means that what *makes* the rules protecting personhood sacred is something that is in the end deeply mysterious: unknown and unknowable. And even though modern-day Kantians do not necessarily accept his theory of how and why freedom is inexplicable, they do tend to endorse the idea that the sacredness of human rights is more a starting point for moral argument than something we should expect, itself, to be given a rational defense.

It's worth noting that Kant deployed his moral views to help underwrite some of his aesthetic views, which fit nicely into an account of the sacred, and helped shape the famous account of holiness developed by Rudolf Otto. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant tells us that both the beautiful and the sublime elude concepts. What makes us take pleasure in beautiful objects, and objects that inspire an experience of the sublime in us (strictly speaking, for Kant, no object can *be* sublime), are precisely qualities that escape conceptual determination. That is

why aesthetic pleasure feels free to us: it is free *of* the cognitive determinations that normally tell us what to think. In experiencing it, our minds engage in 'free play', rather than coming to a determinate conclusion. But that is to say that the qualities that make for aesthetic experience cannot possibly be known.

As regards sublimity in particular, Kant adds that the objects that occasion it seem to transcend our cognitive limits or our power to an extent that awes us, but in that very awe reminds us of our freedom. In recognizing that what is terrifying about a natural object (a volcano or waterfall, say) can make it enjoyable to watch, we recognize that we contain within ourselves a power—freedom—that transcends all natural powers. But this freedom is the source of morality. The connection between the sublime and morality is indeed a point of great importance to Kant (CPJ, 274–275). And he expressly recognizes that religious precepts sometimes achieve this sublimity, attributing it to both the Jewish and the Muslim prohibitions of idolatry (CPJ 274). The sublime and the sacred are thus close, for Kant, and both are associated with the unknowable source of our inviolable values: our freedom.

Otto follows Kant closely in his *Idea of the Holy* (Otto 1923). The book begins by acknowledging the importance of 'rational religion'—Kant's term for what religion should be, on which Otto had already written two books—and making clear that the non-rational (not *ir*rational) aspects of religion he proposes to examine here *complement* that rational religion rather than replacing it (Otto 1923, 1–2). In the course of these opening pages, he also identifies rationality with what can be put into "clear and definite concepts", and holiness with what "eludes apprehension in terms of concepts", comparing this latter with "the category of the beautiful" (1, 5). References to Kant, to experiences that transcend 'conceptual explanation', to the analytic-synthetic distinction, and to the *a priori* appear periodically throughout the discussions that follow (e.g., 10, 25, 30, 41, 44, 112–113), until eventually we come to an important section that tells us how to 'schematize' the category of the holy (45–49). 'Schema' is Kant's term for a concrete instance—something that can be presented in an image—that guides us in the application of an abstract category, and Otto tells us explicitly that he is borrowing the notion from Kant (45). He goes on to say that the sublime is a schema for the holy, and that "Kant's *Critique of Judgment* bears distant witness" to this point (63; see also 41).

So there is a direct connection between the Kantian sublime and the most famous modern theory of holiness. It is not unreasonable to move in the other direction, then, and use holiness, as Otto describes it, to illuminate the place of freedom for Kantians. It is *freedom* before which we should show awe and humility, for a Kantian; it is freedom that is the source of our other values; it is freedom that cannot be captured in concepts and around which there lies a mystery not unlike the mystery traditionally surrounding God; and it is freedom that organizes

a space, around each individual, which can be crossed violated only at the cost of shame, degradation, and self-disgust. The idea that human beings, or human rights, are sacred is not just a manner of speaking, on this view—it is quite literally correct.

5 A Bridge between Believers and Secularists

Mystery thus opens up a route to mutual respect between religious believers and at least some modern secularists. If the ground even of secular values is mysterious, then the reasons why the rules to which it gives rise are inviolable, and protected by strongly aversive sentiments like horror and disgust, are not so different from the reasons why certain precepts are sacred for religious people. Sacredness will on this view not just be a useful *illusion*, as it is for scholars like Haidt. An unknowable freedom plays the role, in Kantian moral thought, that an unknowable God or *tao* or *brahman* does in religious thought: and the proper order of explanation of why, for Kantians, personhood and the rights to which it gives rise are sacred goes *from* something truly important but unknowable about the ground of personhood *to* the sense that these things are inviolable rather than the other way around. So Kantian moral theorists can share a notion of the sacred with religious believers, without acquiescing in the existence of supernatural entities.

The same goes, mutatis mutandis, for intuitionists and particularists of the sort who are attracted to the work of Moore, or Murdoch and McDowell; there is a place for the unknowable in their thought which can allow for a bridge to what religious people call the 'sacred'. It should in any case be understandable, to people with these sorts of moral views, why one might treat certain rules or duties with a reverence, and a horror at their violation, that can be given no utilitarian explanation.

6 The Deliberative Point of View

But it is important that both the Kantian and the non-Kantian moral theorists I have described have reason to accept a notion of the sacred only from a deliberative point of view. 'This is how certain values look from the inside', they may say, 'from the perspective of one employing them in the course of making a decision'. From the speculative point of view—the point of view in which we give causal descriptions and explanations of things—they may grant that nothing can be unknowable.

So what happens if one rejects the distinction between speculative and practical reason, holding instead that the space of deliberation can be reduced to the space of explanation? Some moral theorists do just that. Many utilitarians, for instance, take it that science can tell us all we need to know about value—that what we *should* value is and can only be what we *do* value. Marx, and many of his followers, held much the same view, albeit with a very different conception of what constitutes science. On any view of this sort, the idea of an inexplicable value is incoherent. There will then be no place for the sacred, understood as it appears 'from the inside'.

I will not argue this in detail here, but I take the denial of a distincion between explanation and deliberation to be incoherent. It amounts to saying, of our decision-making process, that *predicting* what the conclusion of that process will be is the same thing as *coming* to that conclusion. This rules out thoughts of the form, 'I know that all my desires and environmental influences *incline* me to go for x, but am I *right* to be so inclined'?—thoughts without which decision making is impossible.[8] This is not quite enough for a defense of free will, but it certainly suggests that we need to view ourselves, when making a decision, quite differently from the way we view ourselves when *studying* how we make decisions. The perspective of a decision-maker, and the perspective of an observer to that process, will necessarily proceed from different assumptions.[9]

But even if I am wrong about this, and the space of deliberation can be fully reduced to the space of explanation—fully explained away in psychological or other social scientific terms—a theory that succeeds in doing this will deviate significantly from the way the moral life appears to its participants while they are engaged in it. That is a strike against such theories (see footnote 7 above). Better, for the plausibility of a moral theory—a theory that is meant to guide how our decisions—if our account of deliberation meshes with the way that deliberation looks when we are engaged in it.

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8 These points are elaborated beautifully in Korsgaard 1996, 194–197.

9 Those who collapse these spaces may be said to view our decision-making capacities as if it would be just as good if someone else made our decisions for us. This is disturbingly close to what utilitarians *do* say—but it vacates the notion of agency.

7 Deliberative Reasons to Make Room for Sacredness

I have argued thus far that if one distinguishes between the explanatory and the deliberative standpoint, one *can* make room for a notion of the sacred. I'd like now to take a further step and argue that, from the deliberative standpoint, one *should* make such room. This is itself a moral claim, of course, and I make it from within the broadly liberal moral systems characteristic of secular modernity. On those systems, as indicated earlier, we have reason to try to respect people with other moral views as fully as we can—to see them as our equals as much as possible and to avoid, if at all possible, having to look down on them as living under an illusion. Perhaps, if we are utilitarians or Marxists, we can't avoid regarding religious people that way. But Kantians, and Moorean and Murdochian intuitionists, are able to build more of a bridge with religious people. By seeing their own core values as sacred, they can acknowledge the degree to which they share with religious people a belief that a mystery of some sort underlies morality. Their account of that mystery will of course be different from that of a Christian or Hindu or Taoist—but these latter also differ among themselves. So using the language of the sacred allows secular Kantians and Moorean and Murdochian intuitionists to treat their religious counterparts as their full moral equals. That is a good way of bolstering the value of mutual respect among human beings, which all three of these secular outlooks espouse.

At the same time, a Kantian who insists on the sacredness of human freedom has reason to regard that value as a *constraint* on what he or she is willing to respect, in the moral systems of religious people.[10] No Kantian need accept claims to the effect that killing innocents, or preventing women from making their own choices, are expressions of a sacred value: these actions violate what the Kantian herself regards as sacred. What the Kantian can respect are more modest claims to sacredness—that one should never 'desecrate the Host', say, or go into a mosque with shoes on, or ask a traditional Jew to do work on the sabbath. These claims arise from the same reverence for something unknown that the Kantian has for freedom, and are plausibly regarded as themselves expressing the freedom of religious agents, without violating the freedom of others.

This is the same attitude that religious believers, when not fired up by a passion to impose their religion on everyone else, tend to take towards one another; it is the sort of interreligious respect that allowed, say, Hindus and Muslims in India,

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10 Similar points go again, mutatis mutandis, for Mooreans and Murdochians.

or Confucians and Buddhists in China, to coexist peacefully for most of the many centuries in which they lived together. Believers in different religions who manage to live together do not share a sense of exactly *what* makes certain values sacred, in one another's traditions, but they do share a sense *that* some things are sacred, and that violating what others regard as such is, legitimately, a source of suffering and outrage. Recognizing the sacred in one's own tradition goes a great distance, here, towards helping one respect it in other traditions. Accordingly, even people with a secular morality have reason to make room for a notion of the sacred in their outlook.

So there are moral reasons for making room for a notion of the sacred in even secular moral views. Those reasons don't show that there *is* something sacred in the world, a real entity or principle on the basis of which a sense of the sacred arises—for that we would need to demonstrate sacredness from the speculative point of view. The moral point of view doesn't yield demonstrations; it gives us reason just to posit sacredness. But the moral point of view works from posits in general, on the account of it I am borrowing from Kant: freedom is itself a moral posit, not something that can be shown to exist scientifically. A moral argument for positing sacred moral values is thus of a piece with the arguments we give for moral claims generally.

8 Conclusion

I conclude that there is no scientific reason to regard anything as sacred, and good scientific reason for scholars to try instead, as they generally do, to reduce the sacred to something that can be explained naturalistically. But even secular scholars have *moral* reason—reason in their capacity as agents—to regard some values as sacred, and they can do that so long as they allow that there is something mysterious, something that may not lend itself to naturalistic explanation, at the core of the moral point of view. It is no accident that moral systems that do allow for such a possibility—including the outlooks of Moore and Murdoch and McDowell, as well as Kant—are able to avoid the shallowness that clings to thoroughly naturalistic moralities like utilitarianism. This alone would be a reason to make room for sacredness. But the central reason to do that is to allow for robust mutual respect between secular and religious people. That would be a good thing in itself, and the cognitive humility it entails is also an excellent starting point for all of us, secular and religious alike, to explore the nature and implications of morality with open and flexible minds. Arrogance is never healthy, even in the pursuit of theory. The humility that a respect for the sacred involves, especially where that

humility helps keep us from violating human rights, is something that in the long run can only help us: even in our attempts to understand morality and certainly in our attempts to abide by it.

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