

# GOD IS GREAT, GOD IS GOOD: JAMES ASHBROOK'S CONTRIBUTION TO NEUROETHICAL THEOLOGY

by *Kenneth Vaux*

*Abstract.* James Ashbrook's work has not only clarified issues in brain and belief, it has offered intriguing suggestions for ethics. The relevance of neurotheology to ethics is evident if we assume that ethics entails, in part, concerns about character, responsibility, and the art of living.

*Keywords:* brain; ethics; morality; responsibility; soul; theology.

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*SCROOGE: Why did you get married, nephew?*

*NEPHEW: Because I fell in love, uncle.*

*SCROOGE: ...as if that were the one thing in the world more ridiculous than Christmas. Bah Humbug!*

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

*. . . to have a God means to have something in which the heart trusts completely.*

—Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*

*To Luther's musical ear and intuitive perceptiveness . . . Gott and Gut are interchangeable [words] and signify both the worth, without which life would not be worth it (Gut), and the relation upon which we can utterly and unfailingly depend (Got).*

—Paul Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future*

The theory that God is great and good is both autonomic and rational, rising from the gut, heart, and mind. It erupts from the pathways of pain or the ecstasy of joy. It's kid stuff that purveys the philosopher's wisdom and the mystic's devotion. The prayer exposes the ontological affinity of

Kenneth Vaux is Professor of Theological Ethics, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL 60201.

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the spiritual and the ethical reality, manifested exquisitely in the biological and cultural levels of human existence.

James Ashbrook's pathfinding work offers such a synthesis of spirituality and biology. It paves the way for a new understanding of the brain and belief. Equally pioneering, though not fully elaborated, are the connections he draws among brain, belief, and behavior. In this essay of tribute I focus upon this matrix of human reality and find another salient contribution. It emerges as he explores the interactions between faith and certain modes of being and acting, in particular those features of moral character, responsibility, and living that we call ethics.

### CHARACTER

In his book *The Brain and Belief* (1988), Ashbrook begins a chapter with a description and analysis of the Rorschach profile of masters of three religions—a Hindu or Vedantist, an Apache shaman, and an enlightened Buddhist monk. For each, the Rorschach came back disclosing fluctuating reality perception, blurred experiential boundaries, and an incipient nihilism. In each case religious genius was associated with deep psychic disturbance. This should not be surprising. Even in biblical accounts, as well as more recent Christian religious experience, we see pathology depicted. In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, the rational and calculating Scrooge is subject to haunting night visions of Christmas past, present and future. No longer self-possessed, he becomes foolish and frenzied. But he is redeemed! On Christmas morning, his housekeeper greets the exuberant Scrooge with incredulity: "Are you quite yourself, sir?" His reply: "I hope not."

Scrooge has experienced a transformation of character. In Luther's language, he has confronted his own impending demise and in the process been found by divine grace and newness of life (cf. Luther [1518] 1962).

In Ashbrook's neurotheology, the human brain is rooted in the divine reality—but the human version is bivalent. It can be perverted into the demonic or support the dynamic of salvation. Scrooge, whose rationality and industriousness had taken a destructive turn, has come "to his senses" (to authentic sensate being), and he can now feel pity, mercy, and compassion. Self-awareness and other-awareness awaken together. He confronts the stark realities of ignorance and hunger in the emaciated children gathered under the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present. A world that had been abstract and distant to him ("Don't we have workhouses, orphanages?" he had asked) now becomes his family. In Dickens's universal tale, biological impulses intertwine with cultural awareness. Dickens depicts the affections of love in Scrooge's youthful fiancée, in Fan, and in the loyalty of siblings. He confronts mortality

and poverty in the lives of Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim. Yet kindness, generosity, and forgiveness are embodied in Scrooge's nephew, in Mr. Fezziwig, and even in Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim. The combination of these intense experiences performs in Scrooge a moral repentance and restitution.

Human ethical regeneration is at once personal and public. Sin is existential and political. It involves insensitivity and injustice. Dickens (like Jane Austen) is decrying the cultural ethos set in motion by the industrial age where the "business of the common welfare" recalled by Marley's ghost is displaced by the business of avarice.

In Scrooge's great ethical reversal, hard-heartedness yields to kindness. The narrative evokes a biblical view of sin and spiritual renewal. Coming to one's senses spiritually and morally is to contradict the world—to defy supposed, apparent reality and ordinary convention. In psychological language, redemption involves something like schizophrenia: one is enabled to traffic between time and eternity, nature and supernature. But redemption, unlike schizophrenia, is not delusional. As Luther pointed out, love for the neighbor (ethics) arises immediately from faith, for faith arises where Resurrection strives victoriously against the demonic.

Jim Ashbrook's ethical theology has moved more toward pantheism or some kind of divine-human synthesis than my Barthian brain allows. His study of the human brain has suggested "the Godlike brain" and the organic reciprocity of God and the human neural structure. My own study and experience has led me to affirm discontinuity alongside this continuity. Human sin, violence, apathy, and self-obsession interplay with the image of God within us. The diabolic is as real as the symbolic. But as to our relatedness to the created world, Jim and I agree. Neuronally and emotionally capable of God sensation, we are "diminished by any man's death because we are involved in mankind." For again with John Donne we can affirm; "I am a little world made cunningly of elements, and an angelic sprite" (Donne [1635] 1978).

#### RESPONSIBILITY

What then is the nature of our responsivity and responsibility? Here I turn to a theologian who bridges Ashbrook's natural theology with my own neo-orthodoxy—H. Richard Niebuhr. In his book *The Responsible Self* (1963) and in an important secondary work, *God the Center of Value: Value Theory in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Grant 1984), an anthropological psychology parallel to Ashbrook's is set forth.

Before we move to Niebuhr's analysis we should summarize Ashbrook's view. For Ashbrook the moral universe is not a transcendent or objective reality. It is primarily a construction of human "meaning making," which in turn has naturalistic roots:

Meaning making arises from the basic experience of separation from a loved object suffered by all mammals and in general terms, from the experienced gap between ourselves and our environment. We fill this gap with transitional objects and symbols that reassure us of a basic continuity in ourselves and in the world. (Ashbrook 1988, 38).

While I agree with Ashbrook that the fundamental activity of meaning making is the protoethical act, I would question his notions of both the ground and the nature of the derived imperatives. The ground of ethical consciousness rests on the answer to the great questions: Is there meaning? (Nietzsche); Is there a good God? (Luther). Answers rest on a structure in the constitution of reality which becomes known to persons in some apperception of that which we do not control. Paul Lehmann defines this apperception as "the uniquely human capacity to know something without knowing how one has come to know it, and to bring what one knows in this way to what one has come to know in other ways, and, in so doing, to discern what is humanly true or false" (Lehmann 1995, 23). Some, like Luther, refer to this apperception as *God* or *good*. That good evokes a moral imperative that is categorical and unconditional (Kant). As Calvin said, in the "whole work of the universe," the pressure and purpose of God are felt.

That God or good (to Luther, *Gott* or *gut*) is nothing less than that "worth" on which we can utterly and ultimately depend. The Freudian, Marxian, Feuerbachian, or Nietzschean construal of the moral imperative and moral universe as human projection, out of alienation and need, misconstrues the theogenic phenomenon as anthropogenic. As Wolfhart Pannenberg argues, humans do not project deity and moral purpose onto the world; reality projects consciousness into humanity because soul embraces body as God enfolds world.

This leads to H. Richard Niebuhr, who focused much of his work on the issue of how theology was concerned with both the structures of the human mind and the Word of God. Rejecting with Karl Barth the assumption of nineteenth-century liberalism (and pietism) that identified God and God's Word (including the moral imperative) with human religious consciousness, Niebuhr reasserts the promise and starting point of classic Christian orthodoxy: that God is both First Cause (the logos of natural process) and the *Summum Bonum* (both *Gott* and *Gut*). In images drawn from his mentor in faith, Jonathan Edwards, Niebuhr finds the "affections"—those impulses of ultimate devotion, feeling, commitment, and behavior—behind both the rational and the imaginative dimensions of faith and ethics. Affections, in Jonathan Edwards and in Puritan theology and psychology, are visitations of the Holy Spirit within human consciousness, gifts of divine energy (*exousia*) to enable Godly piety (being and decisiveness) against the demonic powers still rampant in the

world, threatening being and God's righteousness. In Grant's interpretation, "for Niebuhr even the objective realities of self and God are mediated in us through a knowing process that has its genesis in realities that stand over against our knowing and reasoning" (Grant 1984, 18).

This mediating quality of human being, juxtaposed between God and world, makes persons responsible selves. We are addressable, answerable, accountable—responsive and responsible beings.

Here one finds fascinating resonance with Jim Ashbrook's neurotheology. Here his lasting contribution becomes a pioneering corpus of writing, in which the persistent theme is that persons are responsible selves. The God-soul or God-voice of orthodox and neo-orthodox theology now becomes the Godlike brain-mind of Paul MacLean and Ashbrook. In concepts perfectly consonant with Nicholas of Cusa or Luther, Anselm of Canterbury or Calvin, the logos of divine vocation within us is evoked by the divine logos which gracefully appears to humankind in biblical history, bringing forth God's righteousness in holy living and Holy dying (Taylor [1651] 1952).

## LIVING

Ethics is ultimately the power of living, virtue. Faith and love (in Luther's writing, *Glaube* and *Liebe*) are the intertwined manifestation of the religious life. The conceptual brain is only the epiphenomenon of the living, feeling, willing, sensing brain. From Pavlov's elemental impulses to Pascal's sublime reaches, the life of the brain-mind is the life of responsivity. Not only seeing and hearing but touching, hurting, and speaking express the living brain.

Erik Erikson describes the importance to the young Luther of the whole person in relationship: "To Luther, the inspired voice, the voice that means it, the voice that really communicates in person, became a new kind of sacrament, the partner and even the rival of the mystical presence of the Eucharist" (Erikson 1958, 198).

Speech and confession, the witness, *in extremis*, martyrdom, are the fruits of the giving over of life to *Gott* and *Gut*—to the great and good God—just as death is deliverance, and expenditure is edifying, so speech is confirmatory. "Who believes in his heart and confesses with his mouth, will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). Just as the eye is the receptor of the brain, the voice is its expressor. Speech lays down circuits of memory and conviction, myelinating frontal and prefrontal cortex. "I will rise . . . I will return . . . I will say . . ." is the homeward resolution of the prodigal. Active living is the way the brain imprints reality and is, in turn, impressed by reality.

*L'hayim!* The essence of ethics is the affirmation of life and living. To restrict forces and actions that harm and to reinforce forces and actions

that enhance the freedoms, rights, and goods of persons—these form the substance of both religious and humanistic ethics. The brain is the organ of such vitality and virtue.

Jim Ashbrook's own life project is shaped by this ethic of life affirmation. After he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1984, he devoted his work to the question of how sociality and community in the human organism enhance the godlikeness of persons as a primary value. In a 1989 publication of the Garrett-Evangelical Seminary community, he shared two glimpses of this ethic. Using the metaphor of removal and renewal to explore physical (immunological) and psychic events, the article, entitled "Let Your Heart be Quiet," reports:

"Ashbrook realized that he'd been pushing all his growing edges—and one edge grew too much." I have never chosen ease in Zion. Striving, struggling, searching, yes; little time for resting, renewal, recovery! Onward, press onward! Grow, grow, grow—so I had lived, so I was dying. . . . Now, what to do about it! The imperative was straightforward: stop pushing, let up, stop driving—allow yourself to savor who and where you are, and those for whom you care. (Ashbrook 1989, 2, 3)

The heart of ethics in all systems is enlightenment, awareness. The beginning of a mature moral life is the rejuvenation or perhaps recomposition of the mind and soul. To compose and comfort personal being, to rest one's restlessness in God, is prelude to being efficacious for justice and peace for others.

God is great and God is good and we thank you for this food, Amen!

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