

## **“The Little People”: Power and the Worshipable**

### **Introduction**

The array of idols that humans have at one time or another worshiped is bewildering. It is fairly obvious that there is no end to what people are willing to worship. But can they be wrong? That is, can people mistakenly worship something that is unworthy of veneration? Although members of tolerant, liberal democracies may be uncomfortable in suggesting that others are mistakenly worshipping some gods, it is fairly clear that not everything should be worshiped. This opens the possibility for mistakes. What may be less clear is what exactly makes something worthy of worship.

Unfortunately, the history of philosophy provides fairly little help.<sup>1</sup> Although philosophers and social scientists have explored religious rituals and the phenomenology of worship, there has been very little discussion of what makes something worthy of worship.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, we find a sophisticated examination of the issue by Rod Serling in the *Twilight Zone* episode “The Little People” (3<sup>rd</sup> Season, March 30, 1962). In this episode, Serling presents a powerful argument to the effect that people can indeed be wrong about their choice in objects of worship—that is, people can worship things that do not warrant the response. More particularly, the episode supports the claim that power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship, or what we can call “worshipable.”

“The Little People” opens on a planet where two spacemen, Peter Craig (Joe Maross) and William Fletcher (Claude Akins), have made an emergency landing in hopes of repairing their ship. The required repairs are extensive and the spacemen have been toiling away on the planet for days, if not weeks. During the interval, Craig discovers a race of tiny people, perhaps 1/100<sup>th</sup> his size. By waging a campaign of terror, the immoral psychopath, Craig, demands that the natives worship him and him alone. Through what we can only imagine would be a tremendous effort, the natives erect a life-size effigy of their jealous god. Drunk on power, the self-declared deity refuses to leave when the ship is finally repaired. While forcing his partner off at gunpoint, Craig declares that there is only enough room for one god on the planet. Luckily for the natives, Craig’s reign is short. A second group of spacemen, 100 times the size of the previous, arrives on the planet. While looking around, one of the giants accidentally crushes Craig between his fingers. The little people celebrate by tearing down the idol of their fallen god.

To determine what would make something worthy of worship would be to say what makes the complex set of emotions, attitudes, and desires fitting, or appropriate, to an object. Rather than attempt to provide a complete answer to the question of what makes something worthy of worship, I will confine my examination to the relationship between power and the worshipable—the topic of Serling’s screenplay. By considering the example of “The Little People” and a few variations, we can clarify the role power plays in making something worthy of worship. The episode presents a scenario where a relative, although great,

advantage in strength is not sufficient to make something worshipable. But what of far greater powers, such as that of creating the universe—is such power sufficient? Alternatively, is great power necessary for something to be worthy of worship? Furthermore, we must ask if something could have the power to make others properly worship it.

In order to answer these questions we must first achieve greater clarity about what it means to worship something. When one thinks about worship, images of chanting monks, prostrating practitioners, and incense waving devotees immediately come to mind—that is, one thinks of people engaged in ritual practices. But by “worship” I do not have in mind the act of engaging in a ritualistic practice of paying tribute. One can pay tribute to fallen soldiers, elders, or benefactors without thereby worshipping them. By “worship” I mean a complex of attitudes, desires, and emotions directed toward something, not a devotional act. The act of acknowledging this complex is an act of worship. An act of worship is different from a mere ritual; an act of worship must be sincere. One may behave as if they worship something by engaging in ritual acts that are typically expressive of feelings of worship. But it is not an act of worship unless one genuinely worships the object.

To genuinely worship is not simply to fear, respect, admire, or feel gratitude and love. It is beyond these, but most plausibly includes them all. On most accounts, to worship is to venerate, to honor, and to love, perhaps unquestioningly—to feel unworthy in the presence of awe-inspiring greatness.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this notion of worship is characteristic of the Christian ideal of the

proper attitude one should hold towards God. It is a perfectly acceptable consequence, that if this is not the attitude that Hindus adopt towards gods such as Ganesh, then it would follow that they do not worship Ganesh—despite the fact that they may honor, revere, and pay tribute to him. However, there are clearly other Hindu gods, such as Krishna, that inspire the emotion complex and attitudes that are worship—this is certainly Arjuna’s response to Krishna after the theophany in the eleventh teaching of The Bhagavad-Gita. Although a Christian paradigm, the notion of worship under consideration is widespread enough for this discussion to have general significance.

Given this rough characterization of worship, we can proceed to explore the three questions I introduced above concerning the relationship between power and the worshipable. (1) Is power sufficient to make something worthy of worship? (2) How much power is necessary for something to be worthy of worship? (3) Does omnipotence impart the holder with the power to make others worship it properly?

### **Is Power Sufficient?**

The first question about the relationship between power and worship that “The Little People” encourages us to explore is whether power is sufficient to make something worthy of worship. To restate the question: Could power, irrespective of other facts, ever be enough to make something worshipable? This does not to ask if power is necessary—that is, whether to be worshipable something would have to have great power—but whether power, on its own, is

ever enough. This question is of crucial importance, because in a prereflective state, many if not most people might be inclined to answer incorrectly—in the affirmative. Indeed, much like spaceman Craig, there is good reason to believe that we are erroneously encouraged to worship the God of the Old Testament principally for his tremendous power.

In the book of Exodus, God instructs Moses to ask Pharaoh to free the Israeli slaves held captive in Egypt. Seemingly working at cross-purposes, God tells Moses that “I will harden [Pharaoh’s] heart, so that he will not let the people go” (4.21). Fulfilling his promise, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart repeatedly through the next several chapters. In response to each hardening, God punishes Pharaoh’s defiant stubbornness by afflicting a plague on the Egyptian people. Finally, after God slaughters the firstborn child in every Egyptian household, Pharaoh is beaten into submission. But not yet finished with Pharaoh, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart one last time so that he will pursue the Children of Israel into the desert, thereby setting up the Egyptian army for total destruction in the Red Sea.

The principal interpretive puzzle raised by this passage is this: Why does God seemingly work at cross-purposes? If he wants to free the Israeli people, it certainly does not help to make the Pharaoh stubborn and defiant. Rather than harden, why not simply soften his heart and avoid all the bloodshed? God explains that “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord” (14.4). As this passage indicates, the ultimate purpose is a

display of power, to both the Egyptians and the Israelites. The plagues send a message: Let there be no doubt, the God of the Israelites is capable of conquering the armies of the strongest earthly empire.

But so what? What is the appropriate reaction to such a powerful deity? It is not at all obvious that such power warrants worship. The question we must ask—the question raised by “The Little People”—is whether such powers are enough to make something worthy of worship. Putting aside the contentious question of whether the God of the Old Testament is worthy of worship, the question we need to answer is whether power, however vast, could ever be sufficient to make something worshipable. “The Little People” shows fairly clearly that having powers like ours—even if they exceed our most fanciful exaggerations—is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship.

This is not to say that it would be inadvisable to capitulate to great power. If the options are to either suffer a fate far worse than the Milians at the hands of the Athenian hoplites or to feign worship of a powerful giant such as spaceman Craig, we would all be well advised to fall to our knees and sing his praises. Clearly, if something is far stronger than you, it might be prudent to obey its commands. Periodically, you might even want to publicly acknowledge that you know it is stronger—that is, if it likes this kind of thing. But an advantage in strength would not make a bully worthy of worship, no matter its province—earthly, extraterrestrial, or heavenly.

Spaceman Craig towers over the little people, much like the giant in Goya's painting “The Colossus” (1808). Similarly, most of the Greek gods are

formidable forces, much stronger and often smarter than their subjects. From the point of view of mere mortals, the powers of the gods of Olympus are nothing less than awe-inspiring. Certainly it would be prudent to court their favor and to take measures to avoid their wrath, but no Greek god is worshipable. To the last one, they are extremely flawed, if not petty, deities, just like spaceman Craig. Neither are worthy of the special kind of love, admiration, reverence, and respect that is worship. But what if spaceman Craig had powers dwarfing that of a thousand Zeuses—the power to create and destroy universes, the power to create life?

Again, “The Little People” provides an answer. It clearly shows that something with unlimited powers, including power to create and destroy universes, would not necessarily be worthy of worship. No amount of power could make something worthy of worship if it had the moral character of a megalomaniac spaceman. Imagine a demon that created us for the purpose of torture—not to torture us, but to torture others. He might treat us well, but at the same time use us as a means of inflicting even greater torment on others whom he tortures. Perhaps he has secretly placed us on the far side of a one-way mirror of sorts, dividing our opulent suite from the chamber of horrors where our counterparts suffer unspeakable agonies. Despite its vast powers, such a being would not be worthy of worship. If power alone were sufficient to make something worthy of worship, this hypothetical demon would deserve our most sincere love, admiration, and respect. But it should be clear that it would be inappropriate to feel anything but disgust at such arrant evil, no matter how

powerful it might be. Hence, not even the powers of a creator god are sufficient to make something worshipable. So, in answer to our first question, we can safely reply: Power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship.

### **Is Power Necessary?**

Although power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship, we need to ask if power is necessary. It is fairly easy to see that to be worshipable something does indeed need power, and lots of it. The real question is how much.

A simple thought experiment shows that great power is necessary for something to be worthy of worship. Imagine that a child gives you a cricket in a jar as a present. You admire the cricket's coloration and do not want to offend the kid, so you decide to take it home and keep it on your desk until it dies a natural cricket death. When you get it home, you discover that the cricket can talk, and not only can it talk, you find that the cricket is by far the wisest and kindest creature that you have ever encountered. You quickly come to realize that the cricket is perfect in many respects. It is perfectly benevolent and, as it turns out, it is also omniscient. It knows your thoughts, all of history, and can foretell the future. Puzzled by its captivity, you become uneasy having such a creature trapped in a jar on your desk. So, you take the jar outside and offer to let it go, assuming that it could probably free itself, but that the gesture is nonetheless proper. Horrified, the cricket begs to be taken back inside for fear of being eaten by a bird. In conversation you discover that the cricket has been

reduced to its ignoble state by another god, who was jealous of the cricket's omniscience.

As to whether the cricket is worthy of worship, our intuitions are clear. It is hard to imagine worshipping something as vulnerable as a cricket, even a talking cricket that is perfectly benevolent and omniscient. No matter if we change the scenario and make the cricket humanoid, it is still hard to imagine worshipping a creature that is so weak. If we further alter the scenario and make the creature ten times as strong as a normal person, it does not make a difference. A creature with such limited powers is not worthy of worship. Worship requires something close to awe, and, simply put, the small and weak are not awe-inspiring. Hence, it should be clear that to be a proper object of worship something must have powers far exceeding our own. But how much and what kind of power is necessary?

A testament to Serling's brilliance, "The Little People" suggests an answer to this question as well. The arrival of a second group of even more powerful spacemen at the end of the episode forces us to ask whether the powers and other attributes that might make something worshipable are relational or intrinsic properties. In other words, is the amount of power necessary for something to be worthy of worship simply a matter of how powerful the subject is in comparison to us, or is there a certain amount of power necessary, regardless of our own abilities?

For the sake of argument, assume that a morally perfected version of spaceman Craig is worthy of the worship of the little people. But this would not

mean that he is worthy of the worship of his partner, nor would he be worthy of the worship of the second group of giants that land on the planet. Likewise, although many of the lesser gods of Olympus might fear Zeus, their attitude towards him is not one of worship. Hence, it is fairly clear that a relative advantage in power is required for something to be worthy of worship. Although it may seem that to be worthy of worship something would only have to have powers far in excess of our own, or perhaps have powers of a kind that we do not possess, the relational view runs into a serious problem. To introduce the problem, we will need to consider an important issue in the philosophy of love.

Although no one should ever ask this question, imagine that your lover—never one to avoid a horribly awkward situation—turns to you and says, “Why do you love me?” If you are willing to humor such unreasonable requests, you might begin by listing a variety of attractive qualities, such as: great sense of humor, sparkly eyes, sharp wit, kind and forgiving nature, cute ears, insightful, well read, lovely toes, and so on. The problem is that if these properties are what rationally justify your love, it seems that you should “trade up” if given the chance. That is, if someone else comes along with an even better sense of humor, with an even brighter sparkle in their eyes, with an even sharper wit, etc., then you should trade in your lover for the new, improved model. But we do not think that the objects of our love are fungible; they simply cannot be exchanged like old coats. Recognizing this, if one answers the question “why do you love me?” by saying something along the lines of, “there is just something special about you,” then one has given up trying to rationally justify their love. This problem has led many

philosophers to conclude that although we might be able to explain how we came to love some particular person, we cannot rationally justify our love. Such a conclusion may make us uncomfortable at first, but it is not altogether intolerable.<sup>4</sup> This contrasts sharply with worship.

Although we may think it is plausible that we might not be able to rationally justify our love for another person—we do say that we “fall” in love, as if it is somehow out of our control—this is not at all the case with worship. We do not fall in love with God. No, we think that worship can be justified by appeal to the properties of the object of worship, such as its goodness, knowledge, and power. So, to repeat the question: Is the amount of power necessary for something to be worthy of worship relationally or intrinsically determined? As should now be apparent, the problem for any relational standard of power is that it would allow you to trade up. A more powerful god might come along, as do the giant spacemen who accidentally crush Craig at the end of “The Little People.”

The significance of the possibility of trading up is partly a matter of whether or not the objects of our worship are fungible. Unfortunately, intuitions are unclear. It certainly seems that most monotheists do not think that the object of their worship can be exchanged, but this is likely because they believe that their god is omnipotent, so the prospect of a more powerful god coming along is not possible. But then again, the thought of abandoning a god for a more powerful deity smacks of disloyalty worthy only of a mercenary. Hence, one cannot help but think that the objects of worship are very much like the objects of love. If monotheism is not just polytheism with a more powerful god that

demands exclusive worship, the objects of worship are not fungible. In any case, if the objects of worship are, as I suggest, not exchangeable without loss of value, then a relational standard will not suffice, at least for monotheists.

Polytheists need not rationally trade in one god for another, since they can likely just add new deities to their existing panoply. But for monotheists, something more is necessary to prevent the problem trading up.

If the objects of worship are not fungible, the monotheist has two options: stick to a relational standard and deny that we can rationally justify our worship, or appeal to intrinsic properties of the object of worship. As noted above, it would be highly counterintuitive to suggest that we cannot justify our worship. We do not just find that we are forming the desire to worship some god or another. Worship must be rationally justifiable. Hence, the first option is a nonstarter. As for the second option, if one appeals to intrinsic properties, they would have to be absolute, else the problem of trading up again arises, since a greater god could be just around the corner.

Earlier, I concluded that great power is one of the necessary conditions for what makes something worthy of worship. The cricket example shows that in order for something to be worshipable it must possess power far greater than our own. The arrival of the second group of spacemen at the end of “The Little People” presents the problem of trading up, which shows that an even greater advantage in power is not enough. An even greater group of spacemen might crash-land tomorrow. Hence, to be worshipable something must possess absolute power—that is, if our worship is not promiscuous. So, in answer to the

second question, we can conclude that to be worthy of exclusive worship, something must be omnipotent. However, to merely be worthy of non-exclusive worship—assuming that it is psychologically possible to worship more than one thing at the same time—some lesser degree of power may suffice.

### **The Power to Make Others Worship**

So far we have explored two questions about the relationship between power and the worshipable. We have concluded that power is not sufficient and that unlimited power would be necessary to make something worthy of exclusive worship. Spaceman Craig's reign of terror over the tiny natives raises an additional question: Can we be made to worship? More specifically, the question I now want to consider is whether something could have the power to make others *properly* worship it? Admittedly, this question is a bit cumbersome, but the “properly” is important. To understand why I have qualified the question in this manner, we will first need to explore an unqualified version of the same question: Can something have the power to make others worship it?

Among philosophers of religion, there has been some discussion of whether God can command our worship. Many if not most theists believe that we are obligated to worship God, precisely because he demands it. Depending on the demarcation scheme, the first, or the first two, of the Ten Commandments explicitly command worship:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven, or that is on the

earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me. (Exodus 20:3-5)

Similarly, from the second page until the page before the last, the Koran repeatedly warns of the dismal fate—“grievous punishment” (2:5) of “the Destroying Fire” (104:4)—in store for unbelievers who fail to worship Allah. The Koran could not be more emphatic: “They have incurred God’s most inexorable wrath. Ignominious punishment awaits the unbelievers” (2:90).<sup>5</sup>

In every major monotheistic religion, God demands faith—that is, he commands our worship.<sup>6</sup> Of course, one could take issue with the claim that faith and worship are identical. Perhaps, one might argue, the kind of faith that God demands is mere belief, not the emotion complex that I have described as worship.<sup>7</sup> This minimal interpretation might save the traditions from absurdities, but I do not think that it is even slightly plausible. It simply does not make sense to think that God would be jealous if we merely believed in other gods. Although I might not be able to devote myself to multiple gods, I could certainly believe in hundreds without diminishing my affections for my favorite. Jealousy is only appropriate if the text is referring to something akin to the attitude of worship, roughly, as I describe it. Mere belief does not fit God’s jealous response. Regardless, I have no intention of engaging in a three-front exegetical battle, since the actual doctrines of any given religion are largely irrelevant to our more abstract question: Can one be made to worship (in the sense described earlier)?

Whether or not the God of the Jews, Christians, or Muslims commands this kind of attitude has no bearing on our issue. However, since it is highly plausible to think that the major monotheistic traditions hold that God demands worship, our third question has significant implications.

Spaceman Craig's familiar demand that he be worshipped by the little people forces us to ask the question, can one coherently command worship? Clearly, one can be intimidated into supplication by a bully, but it is not so clear that one can force the sincere attitudes and desires that are worship. It seems that the attitudes and emotions that compose worship can only arise voluntarily. At least, philosophers Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa think so. They argue that,

Worship is, just like love or admiration, always voluntary. It is logically impossible for one reluctantly or unwillingly to worship anything. One might *pretend* to worship God by following certain religious rituals, but that does not mean that one actually worships God.<sup>8</sup>

Brown and Nagasawa are primarily concerned with whether one could sincerely worship something because it commands our worship. And they seem right to conclude that we cannot love or worship something out of mere compliance to a demand.<sup>9</sup> However, the statement of their conclusion may be a bit too strong.

To better see the possible problem with the formulation of Brown and Nagasawa's conclusion, consider the last stanza of Sappho's poem "Hymn to Aphrodite." In this poem Sappho invokes the goddess Aphrodite to help her win the affections of a young woman. In a fantasy of optimism, Sappho imagines the

arrival of the goddess, willing to grant her every wish. Aphrodite speaks: “Who, O / Sappho, is wronging you? / For if she flees, soon she will pursue. / If she refuses gifts, rather she will give them. / If she does not love, soon she will love / even unwilling.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps not in the sense that Brown and Nagasawa have in mind, but it is perfectly coherent to think that one can be made to love unwillingly—that is, one could be made willing. It is not at all logically contradictory to think that one could be made to love, and perhaps worship, as well.

Although one might not have the power to make oneself worship another out of mere compliance with a command, it is perfectly conceivable that like fabled love potions or the will of Aphrodite, something could have the power to impart the attitudes, emotions, and desires that constitute worship on another. By having the ability to affect another’s psychological states, one could have the power to make oneself the object of another’s worship. Certainly a god with the power to create the universe could have the power to make mere mortals feel awe, admiration, respect, love, and most anything else.

We should conclude that it is logically possible that something could have the powers to make others love or even worship it. But one might object that there is something perverse in this kind of love. Perverse or not, the way one comes to love another does not change the ultimate response. Imagine meeting Sappho’s lover, who exhibits all the symptoms of being in love and frequently announces her feelings. We would conclude that Sappho and her lover are very much in love. It is not clear why we would need to revise our claim if we later

came to find out that Aphrodite's interventions are what caused the girl to fall for the tenth muse. No, the way one falls in love does not change the fact that one is in love. Hence, it is safe to say that one could have the power to make others love.

Nevertheless, the above discussion reveals that something is not quite right about love gained through incantations or heavenly machinations. The difficulty is in saying just where the problem lies. Perhaps what seems suspect about love garnered from potions is that it is not freely chosen by the lover. Although this is likely close to the correct answer, it is not a completely satisfactory solution. Assuming that people have free will, we do not think that unwilled actions could be freely chosen. The problem is that love does not appear to be the product of will. One symptom of this, as we noted above, is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to offer a clear account of how our love for another is rationally justified. We typically say that we "fall" in love, and we do not always choose to fall; typically, it just happens to us. Although we might not be able to say that love should always be freely chosen, we still might want to say that love should be authentic—a genuine outgrowth of one's self, major commitments, and goals. For one's values and commitments to be authentic, they must be, in some important sense, one's own. They would have to be autonomous. Regardless of our precise notion of authenticity, it is clear that love earned through potions and spells would be inauthentic.<sup>11</sup>

One does not have to be a Kantian moral theorist to recognize the value of authenticity; one merely needs to be a value pluralist. Consider two worlds. The

first world is much like our own. People fall in love and decide to pursue the objects of their love without divine intervention. The second world differs in one crucial way: Rather than allowing people to fall in love with whomever they please, a panel of cupids makes the decision for them. Immediately following the verdict of the cupids, a love-laced arrow is fired, making the target fall in love with whoever the cupids decide. Overall, the amount of happiness in the two worlds is the same. Perhaps the second world is even more joyful, since the wise cupids might make better match makers than the normal mechanism of our fallible human hearts. Nevertheless, my intuitions are clear: The first world is a far better place to live. It is a better world. Even if the cupids always make the same decision, deciding on the same object of love that their first-world counterparts would have selected, the second world is less desirable. The fact that we judge the first-world, the world absent of paternalistic cupidian interference, as better than the second, shows that we value authenticity in love. And the value of authenticity arises for worship just as it does for love.<sup>12</sup>

Although something could have the power to make others worship it, it is clear that forced worship is not as desirable as authentic worship. This brings us back to the question I asked at the beginning of this section: Can one have the power to make others properly worship it? The notion of “proper” worship is ambiguous. There are two senses in which one might say that worship could be improper. First, by improper one might mean that the worship could have been caused by suspect means. Second, one might mean that worship would be improper if the object worshiped were not worthy of worship. I have in mind this

second sense, that the worship would be unfitting of its object. Certainly, worship caused by the mind-altering abilities of a powerful agent might be less desirable than voluntary, authentic worship, but this does not show that such worship would be improper in the sense of unfitting.

In order to determine if something could ever make someone worship it properly, in the fitting sense, we need to try and consider all of the possibilities. Something, with the power to do so, might make others worship it for two different types of reasons. First, it might make others worship it primarily out of a desire to be worshiped. Alternatively, something might make someone worship it because worshipping benefits the person or others affected by that person. The options are roughly that one could coerce worship either for one's own benefit or for the benefit of person who is doing the worshipping.<sup>13</sup>

It is fairly clear that the first case—where one is made to worship for the benefit of the object of worship—could never be fitting. It is never worth denying a person's autonomy for the sake of a god's self image. To see why, we merely need to ask, what kind of being would want to be worshiped by coercion? It is clear. If something has and acts on the desire to make others worship it, then it has a moral character equivalent of that of the megalomaniac spaceman Craig. But power-hungry tyrants are not worthy of worship, no matter how strong they might be. Necessarily, the act of making someone worship you for *your* benefit would make you unworthy of worship. Hence, nothing can have the power to make others worship it property for its own sake.

The second case is more complicated. For the sake of argument, we should assume that it might sometimes be permissible to deny people their autonomy in such an otherwise egregious way, if the benefits are clear and compelling.<sup>14</sup> In order to see if one could be made to worship something for the benefit of the one doing the worshipping, we need to figure out exactly how one could benefit from worship. Perhaps one might be happier, less troubled by existential concerns, and have a greater sense of purpose if one felt genuine worship. But I cannot see why the benefits of worship could not be achieved by other means. If the same goods could be had without worship, then we have no reason to think that the worship is not motivated by a desire to be worshiped. Hence, unless the goods can only be achieved by worship, we have no reason to think that the situation is any different from where one is made to worship for the sake of the object of worship.

The problem is that there is not a single plausible reason why one would have to be made to worship to reap the benefits. Certainly it could not be to prevent eternal damnation, since any god that would torture those whom it did not make worship and reward those that it did make worship would be a twisted sadist, no more worthy of worship than the most wicked devil imaginable. On the other hand, if mere happiness is the intended result, a god could simply administer a divine form of Prozac. If a god could make people worship it, then it could just as easily make them happy. Worship is not necessary for blind happiness, contentment, general life satisfaction, or even a pleasant disposition.

Hence, I am simply at a loss for any plausible account of the benefits that could not be had by any means but worship.

Without a clear benefit that would justify coerced worship, I am forced to conclude that any act of imposing worship on another would make the object unworthy of worship. If this is right, then it is logically impossible to make someone appropriately worship you. This is simply not a power the worshipable can possess. Something could have the power to make others worship it, but by exercising that power it would prove itself unworthy of worship. Hence, any such worship would be mistaken or improper. Since it is not clear that one can have a power that logically cannot be exercised, it is safe to say that one cannot have the power to make others properly worship it. Of course, if someone could produce a compelling reason why someone would need to be made to worship for benefits that could not be achieved via other direct means, then my conclusion would need to be revised.

## **Conclusion**

I hope to have shown that in Rod Serling's "The Little People" we find a characteristically sophisticated examination of a philosophical issue—in this case, the nature of worship. Much of the philosophical content of this current study must be attributed to the episode itself, since it would be impossible to develop an adequate interpretation of "The Little People" without explaining the position it takes on the role of power in worship. Not only does the episode make philosophical claims, it provides reasons for us to believe these claims. For

instance, although spaceman Craig's powers are awe inspiring to the little people, his moral depravity invalidates any suggestion that he is a worthy object of worship. This gives us a compelling reason to believe that power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship. The episode does not simply come out and tell us that power is insufficient; it actually leads us to this conclusion via the example of a megalomaniac spaceman. Since Serling provides support for his evident conclusion, I would not hesitate to say that "The Little People" does philosophy, in the most flat-footed sense of what it means to "do philosophy."<sup>15</sup>

With additional reflection on a few related examples we are able to see that no amount of power would be sufficient. Similarly, by considering the role of the second group of spacemen we were able to see that for monotheists, something close to absolute power will be necessary to prevent the problem of trading up. In addition, spaceman Craig's demand to be worshiped allows us to consider the complicated question of whether or not someone could be made to worship properly. No doubt Serling's rich example will reward further scrutiny for those interested in the larger question of what makes something worthy of worship.<sup>16</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Swinburne presents a fairly standard Christian view of what would make something worthy of worship. In “Holy and Worthy of Worship,” the last chapter of *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, 1993), Swinburne argues that an omniscient, omnipotent, morally perfect, holy, supreme benefactor would be worthy of worship.

The question of what makes something worthy of worship is touched upon in some discussions of the problem of evil. Although the amount of evil in the world might not show that God does not exist, it might provide reason to think that God is not worthy of worship. Chapter 4 of *The Brother’s Karamozov* is frequently read as an argument to this effect.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine* (1917), describes what it is like to experience the presence of what one takes to be awe inspiring greatness.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa provide a more elaborate description of the kind of worship that I have briefly characterized. See Bayne and Nagasawa, “The Grounds of Worship”, *Religious Studies* (vol. 42, 2006, pp. 299-313). Rudolph Otto’s description of the experience of the “numinous” is similar, but not identical to what I am calling worship. Otto describes an experience of which he calls a *mysterium tremendum* (a tremendous mystery). The experience is one of fascination and awe directed at an overpowering, otherness with tremendous energy. It involves feelings of unease, humility, and fascination. The experience Otto describes is what it might be like to think that you are in the presence of a being worthy of worship. But one can worship something without having such an experience.

<sup>4</sup> For a good discussion of the problem, see Laurence Thomas, “Reasons for Loving,” in *The Philosophy of Erotic Love*, eds. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (UP Kansas, 1991). Bennett Helm also provides an excellent summary of the problem in his entry “Love” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>5</sup> *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (Penguin, 2003)

<sup>6</sup> We also find the command to worship in the New Testament: *Matthew* 4:10 and *Revelation* 19:10, 22:9.

<sup>7</sup> Here I am making reference to Annette Baier’s theory of love as an emotion complex. I do not want to endorse this view of love, since I think that love is likely more than a complex of emotions. It also involves a suite of desires and beliefs that cannot be reduced to the causes or consequences of emotions.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell Brown and Yujin Nagasawa, “I Can’t Make You Worship Me”, *Ratio* (XVIII, 2005, pp. 138-144), p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Blaauw takes issue with Brown and Nagasawa’s claim that one could not come to worship something out of compliance with a demand. His counter-argument sometimes seems to confuse the act of worship with the attitude. See, Martin Blaauw, “Worship Me! A Reply to Brown and Nagasawa”, *Ratio* (XX, 2005, pp. 236-240).

<sup>10</sup> Sappho, “Deathless Aphrodite of the Spangled Mind”, trans. Anne Carson, *Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, vol. 1, (Norton; 2006), p. 497.

<sup>11</sup> For a clear discussion of the major ways to elucidate the notion of autonomy, see L.W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 167-171.

<sup>12</sup> James Rachels makes a far different argument against worship based on autonomy. He argues that to worship something would be to acknowledge its absolute authority. This would require giving up one’s moral autonomy, which is something we should never do. Hence, we should never worship anything. See

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James Rachels, “God and Moral Autonomy” in *Can Ethics Provide Answers* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> I am ignoring the possibility that some powerful creature might make some people worship some other god, since allowing this to happen—not reversing the results—seems identical in all relevant ways.

<sup>14</sup> On Kantian grounds it would likely never be justified, since it is not clear that anyone could consent to being made to worship. At least, post hoc consent is not possible: Even if the person made to worship came to think that it was a good thing, we have no more reason to treat this as autonomously chosen than the typical products of brainwashing.

<sup>15</sup> The question of whether film can do philosophy has recently received a good amount of deserved attention. For an introduction to the issue, readers are advised to look at the special issue on film of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. The essays in this volume have been published as a book: Murray Smith and Thomas E. Wartenberg, eds., *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy* (Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank Heidi Bollich for reading multiple drafts of this paper and for discussing power, worship, and the Twilight Zone during our walks in lovely Prospect Park. Lester Hunt provided helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. My patient office mate, Susan Feagin helped me work through some initial thoughts on the subject. And Noël Carroll forced me to clarify some of the key points of this paper during a symposium on worship.