

RELIGION AND NORMATIVE ETHICS

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Introduction

It is an incontestable truth that, for the vast majority of human beings, throughout all of recorded human history, morality and religion have gone hand in hand. It is also the case that, as far back as the dawn of philosophy around the sixth century BCE, there have been movements we would now describe as atheist, secularist, or humanist, that have affirmed both the possibility of an ethical system and particular ethical principles as the content of that system.

These latter schools of thought are now very much at the forefront of both public discourse and academic debate, due in significant measure to the influence of what are sometimes called the ‘New Atheists’. (See, for example: Dennett 2006; Dawkins 2006a; Hitchens 2007.) The idea of a religion-free, purely secular morality might still be a minority view if we take the opinion of everyone on the planet into consideration, but it is by no means to be regarded as outlandish or confined to a niche of professional philosophers or fashionable thinkers. Here we have a portentous fault line for religion in its conflict with secularism: for if morality does not require a religious foundation, what is probably religion’s strongest claim to adherence on the human mind is fatally undercut. A religious believer might offer a slew of metaphysical arguments for the existence of God, and at least one of them might be unassailable, even persuading an intellectually-minded person to be or become a theist. The task of developing such arguments – and, for the atheist, refuting them if they can – might be of immense importance for the cause of truth and understanding. The fact is, however, that for most religious believers – even, I hazard, for religious believers who are professional academics – the dominant thought when pondering the possible non-existence of God and falsity of all religions is: ‘And what about right and wrong?’

It is as well to set out immediately what I propose to do in the remainder of this chapter, and what I will studiously avoid, whether for the sake of simplicity or for lack of space. First, I will not discuss the Problem of Evil, which requires a full treatment of its own. Second, I will not make a distinction between belief in God and adherence to a religion. Buddhism, of course, is a classic example of a religion without belief in a deity, and one could fruitfully analyse the connection between religion and morality in terms of such systems. Instead, I will confine myself to classical monotheism, taking Christianity – itself understood traditionally – as the paradigm. In other words, I will take religion to have belief in God, traditionally understood, at

its core, and the believer in God to be a person who adheres to some form of classical monotheism. Third, I will confine myself to a set of what I consider to be key questions in the contemporary debate – both inside and outside the academy – concerning the relation between religion and morality.

Fourth, I will not discuss what are generally held to be meta-ethical issues, such as whether the so-called divine command theory of morality is true. One could argue that divine command theory is not only about meta-ethics: just as there is the second-order thought that what it is for an act, say, to be morally obligatory is for it to be commanded by God, so there is the first-order idea that to find out just *what* is morally obligatory one needs to consult the divine injunctions. This latter is not of much interest, at least for my purposes. For even if the content of morality were to be found in the book of divine commands, as it were, this would not advance understanding of what it is about the *content* of those commands that made them the fit subject of divine injunction. To say this is not to take a stand on the Euthyphro problem: a command may be fit for God to make not because its content adheres to a standard external to God in some appropriate sense, but because its fitness is logically necessitated by God's own internal nature. Still, it does presuppose that any sensible divine command theory would have to rule out the sort of extreme voluntarism according to which a command is fit for God to make just because He makes it – if this is even a coherent notion. Moreover, divine command theory obviously presupposes the existence of God, whereas my purpose is to investigate whether a proper understanding of morality should lead us in a theistic direction. Finally, and even apart from questions of inconsistency between commands held to be divine and yet belonging to different creeds, we need to be reminded that God is held to have commanded many things – specific deeds, ceremonial and ritualistic actions, social and political arrangements – many of which, even if moral in content, apply to particular times and places rather than embodying universal principles of the type we take to be foundational to morality. If we want an informative account of the latter, we cannot merely appeal to the fact of their having been commanded.

That said, and without any pretence to exhaustiveness, I want to look at a few of the central issues that either do, or ought to, animate current debate about religion and morality.

The moral grip

It is common for texts setting out arguments for the existence of God to include what is sometimes called the 'moral argument'. (See, for example, Copan 2003.) The argument usually focuses on the claim that objective moral values require a divine guarantor of their objectivity, there being no alternative (or at least superior) explanation in terms of, say, reason or nature. Whilst the argument deserves serious consideration, it can be fleshed out in different ways and also met with various rebuttals. For instance, if mere objectivity is the explanandum, one might as well argue for the same conclusion from the objectivity of anything – the physical world, mathematics, logic. Either the argument form is too promiscuous, or the moral argument is no more than a species of some broader genus of argument that has to be assessed in general terms. The same applies to the necessity of moral truths, if – as I assume – some are indeed necessary when formulated appropriately: witness again mathematics and logic. One could say the same about the universality and absoluteness of moral truths (non-relativity), their entrenchment in belief systems across time, space, culture, circumstance; and so on.

A more interesting, and perhaps promising, line of thought concerns the hold of morality upon our lives. There does seem to be something peculiar – in the non-pejorative sense of the term – about morality. It has a *grip* on us that no other system of truths or principles even approaches. When we think about what we must or must not do in moral terms, it is

impossible not to think of demands made on us – demands to do or refrain from something (to be kind to someone in need in the former case, for example, or to refrain from cheating on an exam in the latter). We need not think of the demand as a command: friends, children, and others make demands on us without commanding anything. But the demand nevertheless is strongly felt. It is more than the recognition of someone's desire that you do (not do) something, and it goes beyond any felt urge. Even those who pronounce themselves sceptics or anti-realists of some stripe cannot deny that they too feel the pull of the moral rope upon them personally, and it may even be something that they try – with superficial plausibility – to incorporate into their meta-ethic. In this sense, the grip of the normative undermines the embrace of any second-order perspective that does not or will not accommodate it.

The moral grip is one aspect of the demand morality makes on us. The other is what we might call its pervasiveness. Although it might at first sound strange to contemporary ears – though it would have been a commonplace even a century ago – every action we perform is a moral matter. Morality is like the air we breathe inasmuch as we do not notice its presence until circumstance makes us pay attention. How could this be? How could humming a tune on my way to work or deciding to blow my nose with a white tissue rather than a blue one be a moral matter? What we fail to realize is that the vast bulk of what we do is *morally permissible*. Choosing ice cream rather than mousse for dessert is (the ever-necessary 'all things being equal' assumed) what we might call 'morally indifferent' – not because it is outside morality, but because morality itself neither forbids nor enjoins it. Once we remember that moral permissibility is as much a normative category as being obligatory or forbidden (as well as advisable, admirable, and so on for all the other shades of moral predication), we can see immediately the pervasiveness of morality in the life of every person. That we are not prompted by the stirrings of conscience to consider the permissible things we do as permissible, that we do not reason about them, says everything about (hopefully correct) instinct and education and nothing about these things' being beyond the moral reach.

It might be thought that the world itself and all the truth in it is similarly demanding and pervasive: we have to believe what is true and disbelieve what is false (for the most part at least) not merely because of the consequences of doing otherwise, but because we feel the instinctive tug of truth and repulsion of falsehood, both of which also pervade our lives. But the pull of truth just is, I submit, a moral one: we morally ought to believe the true (and disbelieve the false). Knowledge, as natural law theorists among others affirm, is a basic human good, and so *ipso facto* something we are morally bound to pursue in all its forms (though not at all costs, unless – implausibly – it is the *only* good). Many would object that there is a *rational* imperative here, not a moral one: but again, there is an overriding *moral* duty to be rational, that is, to use our epistemic faculties in the right way. Not only would the cultivation of irrationality be as morally blameworthy as eating purely for the sake of regurgitating, but it would undermine the very foundation upon which any other moral behaviour, including relations with others, can be founded.

As well as being uniquely demanding and pervasive, morality is what some writers have called 'inescapable'. In other words, it is not something an agent can opt out of. To be sure, someone could decide to opt out of being moral in the sense of devoting themselves to a life of wicked deeds, but that no more removes them from the moral reach than deciding to live an unhealthy life removes them from the reach of health. A person could also choose to be a 'moral nihilist', thinking that morality did not matter to them, or should not matter to anyone, because it is an illusion; but that would hardly prevent it from mattering. Likewise if a person considered themselves 'above' morality. Thinking you are a superman does not make you one, nor does covering your ears and speaking loudly make difficult truths go away.

Philippa Foot (1978/2002: 163) has objected that the idea of the ‘inescapability’ of morality – the context being a discussion of Kant and the demands of the categorical imperative – might be an illusion: we may *feel* compelled to be moral because of good upbringing and education, without believing we are under – let alone being under – any sort of compulsion. Bernard Williams (1985/2006: 177), using the same terminology, takes inescapability to be an essential feature of what he calls the ‘morality system’, which he finds ‘peculiar’ (in the pejorative sense) because of its unhealthy focus on reducing all moral considerations to obligations (to do or refrain from something). Yet we can disentangle inescapability from reductivism about morality and obligation and also from considerations about education and upbringing. As I noted, when it comes to all the permissible things in life, of course we do not generally feel a pull in any direction: that’s part of what it *is* for something to be permissible. But if pressed – ‘Who do you think you are, using a blue handkerchief?’ – we will stand on our rights, and even if *we* do not feel a pull or push in terms of our own behaviour, we certainly do feel our *challenger* being pushed away, and insist they should feel the same. So although a person acting permissibly may not feel a force on themselves, they do, as it were, feel a force on *others*; and this is what we should expect from pervasiveness. The project to reduce morality to a system of obligations, then, is distinct from the insistence on its inescapability. And while it is true that training does account psychologically for *some* of the tug we feel, it cannot account for it all, unless Foot wants to reduce the moulding of conscience into pure brainwashing, which I doubt. Education always works on pre-existing materials, and the reflexive, instinctive knowledge we have – even if only at a fairly gross and basic level – of the rightness and wrongness of certain behaviour provides the unique bedrock on which education can work in the first place.

Suppose morality to have a pervasive grip on our lives. What then? A theist will find purely naturalistic explanations of no avail. We have many needs and urges – to survive, to eat and sleep, protect ourselves from harm, to reproduce, and so on. We can, for the sake of argument, grant a wholly naturalistic account of where these needs and urges come from: we are ‘hard-wired’ this way due to the pressures of nature, the blind yet guiding hand (if this make sense) of evolutionary forces. Yet although we feel urges and needs to behave according to the dictates of morality as well, and although the urges and needs may themselves have a naturalistic explanation (which I for one doubt), we cannot account for the *demands* of morality in this way. This is something proponents of an evolutionary account of the moral life have a difficult time explaining. (See Ruse 1986/1995, for example, who speaks of the ‘dictates of our conscience’ (99), and seeks to explain our moral sense in evolutionary terms, without similarly accounting for the demands morality *itself* makes on us.) Needless to say, a full defence of my position is impossible here, requiring as it would a detailed elimination of naturalistic alternatives and fleshing out of my characterization of morality. What I propose here, however, is more akin to moral phenomenology: if we do take the characteristics of the moral grip as seriously as I suggest we should, then we ought, without further ado, to reconsider the kind of metaphysic that would appropriately underlie it.

What is distinctive of the moral grip is that it feels as if it comes from outside us, even if only remotely via the stirrings of inner conscience. The thought that where a demand is made of us, there must be an agency (let us call it) *making* the demand transcends the truism that we respond morally to external facts or circumstances. The drowning man flailing helplessly need not demand anything of us, for he may not even know we are watching him from the shore. The situation, we say, demands a response, but I take ‘demands’ here to be synonymous with ‘requires/needs’. If I am on the shore, I feel a demand to help, but it would seem strange were I to think that the situation *itself* demands anything, let alone anything of me in particular. There is nothing Humean in this way of looking at it – no endorsement here of the thought that ‘[it]

is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger' (Hume 1739–40/1978: 416). Rather, the genuine fact that the situation, by its very nature, is one involving a person's requiring help – in the sense of needing it – is distinct from the putative fact that the situation *requires me* – in the sense of *making a demand on me* – to give it. The situation contains intrinsic normative features, and these appeal directly to my reason as motivators of action; but this can all be true without my feeling any pull, from outside me, to act in accordance with a correct order of things. The Stoic Chrysippus (279–206 BC) famously spoke of acting in accord with a 'right reason' that is identical with the 'common law' (by which he meant moral law) of mankind, which 'pervades everything', and which he further identified with Zeus, 'lord and ruler of all that is' (Laetius c. 300 BCE/1925, sec. 88, 195–97). He may have been wrong to identify Zeus, but that he did not stop short at mere reason, linking it instead to a personal agency that could by its nature make demands of us, is a thought many theists continue to take seriously.

Self-interest and moral motivation

It is common, especially since Kant, to divorce morality from self-interest. More precisely, self-interest cannot be, insofar as praise and blame are concerned, the sole motive of moral behaviour, nor can it be a necessary one. It might be widely present, contingently, as a mover of moral behaviour, and so much the better if it causes more people to be good than otherwise. Most ethicists, even Kantians, would not go as far as Kant in holding that no other motive than acting from pure duty contributes to what is sometimes called the 'moral worth' of an action (Kant 1785/1993, first section). Moral worth might come from motives of sympathy, love, and the inner joy of being virtuous – but that self-interest can be a motive contributing to moral worth seems as repellent as it did to Kant.

Most religions, on the other hand, hold there to be an ultimate reckoning in the afterlife, according to which the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. (For an overview of some major traditions, see Eliade 1987: 237–43.) This is not supposed to be a mere accident of living a virtuous/vicious life, but essentially connected to doing so. Moreover, the thought of such a reckoning is supposed to *move* people to the right kind of behaviour. To take a typical example from the Old Testament, in the Book of Daniel (12:2) we have: 'many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some unto life everlasting, and others unto reproach, to see it always.' And from the New Testament, we have Jesus saying: 'And these [the unjust] shall go into everlasting punishment: but the just, into life everlasting' (Matt. 25:46). It is commonly thought that Plato (and probably Socrates) held that 'virtue is its own reward': if this means that the only benefit to come out of being good is simply being good, then the thought is mistaken. In the *Gorgias* (523a–527e), Plato sets out a vision of a kind of Last Judgment, in which the just souls go to the Isles of the Blessed and the unjust to Tartarus, and the Myth of Er in his *Republic* tells a similar story (Book 10: 614–21). But even if we discount these narratives, virtue as the health of the soul is central to Platonic thought – something which involves more than the idea that being good is a reward in itself.

George Mavrodes (1986/2008) has argued that morality – taken to include obligations that are objective, demanding, and pervade our lives – could not exist in a world he calls 'Russellian', after the famous description by Bertrand Russell in 'The Free Man's Worship' (1903/1999). There, Russell describes our world as governed by impersonal forces, made of 'accidental collocations of atoms', and providing only a 'firm foundation of unyielding despair' on which to build our lives. Such a world, for Mavrodes, would be 'absurd ... crazy' (2008: 581) given that these demanding, all-pervasive obligations often yield no 'Russellian benefit' and even a 'net

Russellian loss' – whatever material benefits and losses could accrue to us in a materialistic and ultimately meaningless universe. The details of Mavrodes's argument aside, the thought is compelling to most theists, and moves Mavrodes himself to advocate religion (in particular, Christianity) as overlaying our material world with an economy of judgment and salvation. If morality is as I have described it earlier, would not a world without ultimate reward for being good (and punishment for being bad) be absurd? To be sure, this is just what an atheistic existentialist holds if they take morality to be as I have characterized it. Yet might this not reflect a prejudice rather than reasoned argument? After all, the physical universe displays order and coherence according to immutable laws of nature: we do not expect, nor do we think it the case, that the laws (even probabilistic ones) operate in a systematic fashion only to dissolve into utter chaos every so often. It is not what we experience, nor is it a methodological assumption of natural science.

Yet a parallel point could be made about the moral life. First, consider all the demands morality makes of us, constraining and directing our behaviour in uncountable ways. We should develop our characters in certain directions rather than others. We must respect the rights of our fellows, thus limiting quite severely our freedom to act. We should behave in accordance with a host of virtues, not merely in our external acts, but speaking and even thinking in certain ways as opposed to others. Consider what we *could* do if moral nihilism were true, for instance, compared to what we *can* do given an objective, demanding, pervasive, and inescapable morality. Second, set all of this against the realization that there is frequently no correlation whatsoever between acting morally and how our lives go in terms of earthly benefits. Often there is a *reverse* correlation. ('No good deed goes unpunished', as the old saying has it.) To religious believers this looks like a crazy mismatch, akin to the laws of nature going haywire every so often; or better, to the laws of nature being perfectly coherent until the very threshold of a final explanation (the longed-for 'theory of everything', if there is one), at which point all descends into chaos. In other words, not only should we expect there to be an ultimate point to natural science, but in the 'science of living well', as it were, theists expect there to be a point – one that goes beyond simply being good for its own sake.

Suppose there were an evil demon ruling the universe, who implanted the moral conscience in us but only as a game for his own sadistic motive: if we live a good life, the demon tortures us for eternity, and if we live a vicious and evil life, he rewards us with eternal bliss. We might well think, if we knew this to be the case, and we took morality seriously all the same, that being moral – for all its fist-shaking defiance in the face of adversity – was in a higher sense a pointless and futile game. And if we did not know anything about such an evil demon, we certainly would not – and do not – *expect* this ultimate perversity to await us at the end of our lives. Now this does not prove that we should (let alone do) expect a more positive point and outcome to follow upon a virtuous life, but perhaps it reveals what many of us do hope for – that as the most serious thing in our lives, morality should also involve serious stakes. If a Russellian world, in which our virtuous behaviour vanishes like a point in the infinite expanse of the universe, of no more significance than the most reprehensibly lived life of vice, is not as frightening a prospect as that of the sadistic and perverse demon, it is – so religious adherents generally think – equally appalling. The only apparent way of lifting the pall is to take it that some sort of ultimate happiness awaits those who dedicate their lives to the good. Clearly, though, if those who fasten themselves to a life of evil share as well in this happiness, we are not far away from the demon. Presumably, then, the latter are destined for a life of unhappiness. They do not always – not often enough, in fact – experience such a life on earth. So they must meet it somewhere else. If this sort of economy is the case, then it just is one in which there is an ultimate reckoning – reward and punishment meted out appropriately – awaiting all of us.

To what extent is this line of thinking the same as Kant's, who regarded the existence of God as a 'postulate' of practical reason? (See Kant 1788/1898: 220–29.) For Kant, the '*summum bonum*' (highest good) has two elements – morality and happiness. Morality is the 'perfect accordance of the will with the moral law', which he also calls 'holiness' (ibid. 218). Happiness is 'the condition of a rational being in the world with whom everything goes according to his wish and will' (ibid. 221). The latter looks rather like happiness defined as getting whatever you want – as long as you respect the moral law, of course. That idiosyncratic definition aside, Kant's view is that the *summum bonum* does not merely consist of these two elements, but they have to be in harmony – happiness proportioned to virtue. But for a being living in the world, there is no necessary connection between virtue and happiness – something with which we are all too familiar. Nevertheless, as far as 'pure' practical reason is concerned, such a connection must exist, if not in this world then in an afterlife (hence Kant's additional postulate of the immortality of the soul). Why? This is where it gets a little tricky, because Kant says that 'we ought to endeavour to promote the *summum bonum*, which, therefore, must be possible' (ibid. 221). He goes on: 'Accordingly, the existence of a cause of all nature, distinct from nature itself, and containing the principle of this connexion, namely, of the exact harmony of happiness with morality, is also *postulated*' (op. cit.; emphasis in original). Pure practical reason, then, must postulate the existence of a supreme being, outside nature, who sees to it that the rational agent's morality is proportioned to his happiness.

The penultimate quotation, however, is ambiguous: What must be possible – the highest good or its promotion/pursuit? (The original German seems ambiguous as well, though there is room for debate: the translations in Kant (1788/1898) and Kant (1788/1997: 240) are almost identical.) The agent can surely promote or pursue it without its existing, so long as he *believes* it to exist; just as I can try to escape from an escape-proof prison as long as I believe escape to be possible. As long, then, as an agent believes that a perfect harmony between virtue and happiness is attainable through the causal power of a supreme being outside nature, then he can – and presumably will – strive for that harmony or, perhaps better, aim at that harmony, even if no such harmony *is* attainable. (Here we have an analogue of the well-known objection to Kant's refutation of idealism, namely that all it can establish is that we must believe in the existence of an outer world if we are to have true beliefs about our inner experiences.)

Linda Zagzebski (2005) has similar worries about Kant's transcendental argument for postulating God, replacing it with an argument inspired by Kant but importantly different. She argues in the following way (which I heavily paraphrase in places): (1) Morality is demanding, inescapable, and pervasive; (2) Morality requires acting on certain motives rather than others, and also aiming much of the time at producing certain outcomes; (3) 'No one can be required to engage in an activity if he reasonably judges that he is taking a risk that it is pointless or self-defeating and is unable to judge the degree of the risk' (ibid. 354); (4) 'The moral life requires some degree of confidence that the effort to be moral is not pointless or self-defeating' (op. cit.); (5) To have such confidence, we need to be able for the most part to trust our moral beliefs, the accuracy of our motives, and the likely success of producing the morally right outcomes; (6) A radical sceptical hypothesis has it that we can trust none of these things; (7) Since morality makes no demand on us unless we have reason to believe such scepticism false, '[m]oral obligation requires that there be a guarantor of our trust in our moral beliefs, motives, and success in action. As Kant puts it, we must suppose the existence of a cause adequate to the effect: a Providential God' (ibid.: 355).

Zagzebski claims that her version of the transcendental argument escapes the objection raised earlier to Kant because, on her version, morality *requires* our moral beliefs, motives, and action outcomes to accord with reality. It is not enough that we suppose them to be so; they must *be*

so. That aside, Zagzebski faces the difficulty that premise (3) is dubious, both in itself and in the context of her argument. First, take an example: a soldier might be morally required to try to achieve a significant military objective despite knowing that there is a risk his mission will end in utter failure. Nor might he be able to judge just how risky the operation is. But if, say, no one else is available to take on the mission, it may well be his duty to do so. Moreover, if he is *commanded* to do so by his superior officer, then at least in most cases he is morally obliged to obey, hence *ipso facto* morally obliged to carry out the operation. Second, in the context of the argument the requirement seems too strong. The sceptical hypothesis, like most such hypotheses, has it that something we believe or do *might* be false or pointless. Yes, our motives, beliefs and the likely outcomes of our actions might be quite different from what we take them to be. But must we conclude that a supreme guarantor exists who rules out this hypothesis? Just as Descartes's invocation of God as an anti-sceptical move is highly questionable, so is Zagzebski's, with her use of the term 'risk' here being tendentious. As a logical possibility, let us suppose, there is massive failure of alignment between what I take to be my moral motives (and the like) and the way things really are. But does this constitute a *risk*, any more than the logical possibility (if it be so) of my being a brain in a vat or at the mercy of an evil deceiver?

On the kind of argument I propose, it is not a question of motivational or other scepticism at all. Rather, there are two possibilities: (i) Morality is demanding, inescapable, and pervasive, yet there is no ultimate reward, no final happiness in submitting to its demands; (ii) Morality has these features, and such a prospect does indeed exist. On the former, morality seems absurd and pointless, a cruel trick minus the trickster. On the latter, there is – contra Kant – a necessary connection between happiness and virtue. If morality is not pointless, then all your effort must pay off – not just for others, but for yourself. Kant is right that no agent can be guaranteed such an accord in this world, so there must be another in which the accord is certain. Yet whereas on Kant's argument the obligation to *pursue* moral rectitude can only be met on the condition of *postulating* a being who can align happiness with virtue, on my position the obligation to *be* good requires the real *existence* of a being who guarantees that the obligation is not an absurdity; which this being can only do by rewarding those who take the obligation as seriously as it really is.

For both philosophers and ordinary folk the immediate response is likely to be that the view I am proposing bases morality on selfish motives, which Kant taught us not to do. Indeed, religious believers are regularly subjected to that charge: 'You only do what you think is right so you can get to Heaven/avoid Hell', and so on. The so-called 'New Atheists' delight in levelling such accusations (see, e.g., Dennett 2006: ch.10). There are many misconceptions in this view, but I want to begin by accepting that the prospect of ultimate happiness for being good and ultimate unhappiness for being bad should, and does, form part of the moral motivation of religious believers. It might be tempting to deny this outright: the believer acts out of genuine sympathy, love (of God and neighbour), a belief in what is right, and so on. This is all true, but not only does it not exclude acting out of a desire for personal salvation – it *requires* it. At least on the classical conception, the theist is morally bound to love her creator, and if she understands what kind of being He is (at least in outline), then she would be irrational and foolish not to love Him. The first thing to understand is that she does not love Him as a means to the *further* end of ultimate happiness; rather, loving Him just *is* wanting to be with Him, and she knows that being with Him just *is* ultimate happiness. Second, she is bound to love God because He is the author of her very being, of the entire universe, as well as its providential governor. As she must love her parents because they are the authors, in the *proximate* sense, of her existence, and the providential governors of the household and restricted environment in which she lives, so she must love her *ultimate* author and governor.

Third, since the author of the entire universe is *ipso facto* the author of the moral system by which human beings must live, the theist must love God for the authorship of that system, which includes everything that it requires of a person without exception. As a matter of conceptual truth, the believer cannot possibly love God as the author of morality while at the same time disrespecting morality: so he must respect it wholeheartedly and completely, which means abiding by it as far as his powers and circumstances allow. The converse of this line of thought is that if the believer lives a moral life, it must be because he loves God as its author, and since loving Him means wanting to be with Him, he must want to be with Him as the believer's ultimate happiness. Since there is a metaphysical connection of the sort just described between God and morality, and since the believer knows it, it would be supremely irrational for the believer to live a moral life without being motivated by the desire to find happiness with the very being who created the moral system, and the possibility of a moral life, in the first place.

The charge of selfishness, or at least self-interestedness, seems immediately to bite. For if *this* is all that spurs the believer to be good, then he surely is motivated not by what is right and good *simpliciter*, but by what is right and good *for him*. Yet the charge is equally quickly defused. For a start, there is no Kantian worry about the contingency of self-interest. In the mundane world of contingent material circumstance, what it is morally good to do may well not coincide with what promotes my contingent desires and interests, nor even with what my nature requires on this earth – health, stable and pleasant relations with others, property, and so on. But on the theistic conception, there is nothing contingent about what will cause my ultimate happiness. If I have the right attitude to the things that God has authored, then I *must* find happiness with Him in the end; in other words, the self-interest in ultimate happiness is a necessary correlate of living a good life.

Secondly, nothing that has been said in outlining the religious position entails that personal happiness is or should be the *only* motive of living a good life. All that is required is that it be *a* motive. What other motive might there be, on this view? One cannot generalize too easily across religious traditions, of course, but at least on the traditional Christian conception of goodness as developed by the medieval philosophers, in particular Aquinas, morality is not inscrutable – as it would be if it were an unfathomable system proposed by the impenetrable divine will. God does not author a mere system of principles with which we are bound to live in accord, even if they cannot be understood in their essence. Instead, acting as remote cause, God produces a world of which, given its nature, the principles are *true*. Such is the classical natural law theory of morality. What is morally good is that which, when done, fulfils some aspect of human nature – life (of course), health, family, property, liberty, knowledge, aesthetic experience, and the like (all suitably qualified and balanced against each other). What is morally bad frustrates or damages some aspect of human nature. The principles of morality are true precisely because they codify the fundamental metaphysical truths about human nature, including our lives together in society. Hence, when acting morally, we are acting in accord with these truths – respecting, promoting, and protecting the various human goods underlying them.

The point of this all-too-brief summary is that there is an abundant supply of *normative features* in the world (to use contemporary parlance) to which an agent can respond when he acts morally. He is fully able to be *motivated* by those features since he is able to understand them. None of us fully fathoms human nature, so the understanding is always incomplete. But we know enough to be able to take the relevant normative features as a genuine spur to action. Further, as the theist insists, these normative features too are authored by a divine being outside nature. Indeed, it is not as though the moral system and its underlying metaphysic are the products of two separate acts of creation: in creating the latter, God *ipso facto* creates the former. Since, again, the believer understands this (as I am supposing) he will, in acting well, respond to

the proximate normative features *in addition* to the prospect of ultimate happiness with the being who created them. If he loves God, as he must, he is bound to respond to *both*.

I have suggested that it would be irrational for the theist not to be moved by the prospect of ultimate happiness. It would also, I suggest, be irrational – in general – not to respond to the normative features of the world that underlie moral truth. But it is not always a matter of irrationality. Although, as Aquinas (1265–74/1915: I.II q.94 a.6; Volume 8, 51–52) famously holds, the general principles of the natural law cannot be erased from a person’s conscience, it is still possible not to know, or to misapply, more particular principles of morality for all sorts of reasons: the general principle may be hard to apply in complex circumstances; bad customs or culture may suppress moral knowledge in an individual; the person may be blinded by emotion or contrary inclination; and so on. In such cases, failure to be motivated by the right – or any – normative features will be less a case of irrationality than of, say, ignorance, confusion, or psychological disorder. Do such circumstances prevent an agent from acting morally – not just in terms of outcomes but in terms of motive?

It is worth briefly considering obedience in general to help answer this question. For a strict Kantian, internal obedience to anything but the moral law itself can contribute no ‘moral worth’ to an act. As we noted earlier, for less rigorous Kantians, as for most moralists, doing something not merely because it is the right/good thing to do, but because a person loves someone or something or sympathizes with another, does contribute worth. But what about pure obedience to authority, or at least obedience motivated by love or fear of authority? As far as love goes, I might act well through refraining from doing something potentially harmful to someone I love – but must it be the potential victim? What if I love the person who told me to refrain? Children are certainly in a state of moral immaturity, but once they have reason they are capable of acting morally. Yet a child with reason might still act well in some cases only because their parents told them what to do, and they love, respect, and/or fear their parents. Is there no moral worth in their act? We can accept that it would be *better* were they to respond also (or only, for non-theists) to the normative features of the situation – for example, that an act would deprive someone of property that is rightfully theirs, that it would cause them immense pain, that it would make them very sad, and the like – but why should we think that motivation by love, fear, and/or respect for authority counts for nothing at all? A child just may not know, or be able to grasp through their own reasoning, why a bad act is bad in terms of the normative features of the situation. Many circumstances are complex and require much reasoning and a depth of maturity that few of us, let alone children, possess. We may not be to blame for our ignorance; yet we can, many theists would say, still act well both subjectively, as regards our motives, and objectively, in terms of the outcome of our action.

Again, what should we say about obedience to/fear of the law, by which I mean man-made (positive) law rather than divine law? It is surely ‘morally worthy’ to stop at a red light on crowded roads out of respect for the safety of others. But what if I am not thinking of others’ safety? What if I am in a hurry, distracted by thoughts of being late for work, annoyed at the other drivers, and yet I still stop? We can grant that if I positively do not care about others’ safety, the worth of my act is vitiated no matter what other motives I have, including fear for my own safety. But if I am simply not thinking about them, and what brings me to a stop at the red light is fear of being arrested, has my act been denuded of ‘moral worth’? We do not have to think that ‘I was just obeying orders’ excuses arbitrary behaviour for us still to believe that, at least in some cases, pure obedience to the law out of fear of the consequences can make an act worthy, if not the best, as far as motive is concerned. Law is designed to keep society in order, and applies to everyone who possesses enough reason to know the difference between right and wrong. It would be strange to say that because it applies to such people they don’t need it since they

already *know* the difference between right and wrong! Rather, the legislator appreciates that people can fail to apply their reason in all sorts of normal and understandable circumstances. The law exists primarily to keep society stable and individuals on the ‘straight and narrow’. If a person obeys in some case or other purely because the law requires them to and exacts punishment if they do not, then the person displays no other virtue than that of obedience: but obedience itself *is* a virtue, suitably qualified and interpreted. Similarly, if a person obeys the natural law only because they believe (the theist would say *know*) that by disobeying they risk divine disfavour, and/or that by obeying they remain on good terms with their creator, why is this to be characterized as a case of unworthy self-interest? Needless to say, such a motive should not be the sole informant of everything a person does, for then their God-given reason would remain idle, which itself would be an offence against their creator. But it only takes one legitimate case of such motivation to make the theist’s point.

In general, however, the dual motive of response to normative features and ultimate love/fear of God ensures that pure self-interest never informs a theist’s moral life. There may appear to be tension between the two, but if what I have said is plausible, the tension is only apparent.

Cosmic justice

Although I have spoken much about reward and punishment, and the ultimate pointlessness of the moral life in the absence of these, I have not said anything about justice. At most, I could have put the above discussion in the following terms: without personal reward and punishment as the ultimate consequences of a morally good or bad life respectively, life would be unfair or unjust. Leaving aside whether this would be a good way of putting it, I have omitted to speak in terms of justice because, if I had, it would still have been only a point about justice in the case of an individual agent. In other words, each individual could think to themselves that it would be unjust *to them* were adherence to the demanding, inescapable, pervasive moral system not sweetened by the prospect of ultimate happiness.

There is, however, a further consideration. Although I have no personal stake in the matter, I would regard it as outrageous were – to use hackneyed examples – Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot not to have met their ultimate punishment and, say, St Francis of Assisi not to have entered into his ultimate reward. Whatever I may think about my own situation, it *also* matters to me that *others* should be ultimately accountable for their actions. In other words, morality seems not only pointless but fundamentally an unjust system if there is no additional system of ‘cosmic justice’, as I have called it (Oderberg 2011), whereby ultimate rewards and punishments are dispensed appropriately to those who have lived fundamentally good and bad lives, respectively.

We know for a fact that neither Hitler, Stalin, nor Pol Pot suffered in their earthly lives a fraction of what we all – believers and non-believers – think they should have, given the evil deeds they carried out. We also know that St Francis of Assisi, for all the joys he experienced on earth, suffered much. Fewer people in general seem to be concerned with ultimate reward for the saintly than with final punishment for the wicked, but that is probably a complex psychological bias. In any case, sticking with those who have reached the depths of depravity, are we to suppose that this strong belief we all hold – that evil people should meet appropriately severe deserts – is a relic of immature religious thinking that infects even the otherwise healthy secularist? It is hard not to hear the intended message of the story of the Ring of Gyges (Plato 350 BCE/2004 *Republic* Book 2 359d–360b; 38). Yet the Platonic/Socratic answer, in terms of the health of the soul, sounds hollow to the theist (as perhaps to Plato himself, given the Myth of Er and the account in *Gorgias*). For all that Hitler may have been consumed in the bunker by despair that his beloved ‘thousand-year Reich’ was going down in flames after just twelve years,

we would hardly consider that just deserts. In any case, as far as we know neither Stalin nor Pol Pot had demises that smelled sweetly of 'poetic justice'. The gnawing truth is that they all got away with their crimes, at least on earth.

It is wholly understandable both to try not to think about these unpalatable facts, and when confronted with them to wonder, 'Well, just why should anyone bother to be good?' Of course, if a person wishes to gamble at this point, we can tell them that they would have to be extremely lucky to lead a life in which wickedness was never repaid with severe enough consequences to make them regret their risk-taking. But the cosmic justice point is *not* about regret; it is about what is *just* or fitting. Even if a person lived a depraved life that was met with all sorts of obstacles and human punishments, but they persevered – as many do – in a life of vice, the question would be whether the accumulated earthly suffering was necessarily an appropriate and complete punishment for the evil done. We know that it very often is not. The religious believer thinks it *never* is, at least if they understand mortal sin in the traditional way – as an infinite offence against the infinite majesty of God. But we can all agree that, all too often, people simply do not 'get what is coming to them', which should bother a philosopher as much as it should the man on the Clapham omnibus.

Which is worse: for morality to be an absurdity, or for it to be fundamentally unjust? To call it unjust sounds paradoxical, since injustice *is* a moral issue, and so how could morality condemn itself? We need to remember that it is not only individual agents who can be unjust: so can situations. Indeed, a situation can be unjust even though no person has acted unjustly (contra Hayek 1976: 67–70). Suppose, for example, that a natural disaster destroys vast swathes of property belonging to half the population, while the other half is spared yet physically cut off from being able to help their poor fellow citizens. Although no one has acted unjustly in such a circumstance, the situation is unjust – an extreme, unfair inequality imposed on a society by natural forces. Some (such as Hayek) might object that the situation is not unjust, only unfortunate, but the distinction is merely terminological unless the objector thinks that no unfortunate situation *ought* to be rectified. Even if we restrict consideration to situations affecting groups of people rather than individuals, there are clearly circumstances that look like objective disorders in the arrangement of things: things ought to be thus-and-so, but they are not. For my argument to work, I need not appeal to the implausible general principle that if a situation ought to be rectified then *someone* ought to rectify it. I appeal only to the specific thought that if a situation ought to be rectified, and its not being rectified entails the fundamental and ultimate pointlessness of the moral life, then it will be rectified, given that the pointlessness of the moral life is an unacceptable alternative. But if it will be rectified, and this cannot happen without the intervention of an agent, then some agent will rectify it. And if no human beings can rectify it, individually or collectively, then some other agent will rectify it.

Now consider the cruel dictator. He acts unjustly, to be sure, but the fundamental injustice of his escaping his just deserts need not be caused by anything that *he* has done wrong. He has no control over what happens to him – if anything – after he dies, and while alive we can suppose he is plain lucky. His enemies try repeatedly but fail to assassinate him. International tribunals do not have the reach to impose any sanctions on him. Many people oppose him, but they are collectively powerless to stop him. Yet we think it is profoundly unfair that he should get away with his crimes. Clearly, the notion of unfairness we are operating with is at a higher level than that of human justice: no person on earth has failed to do what they could, but there is still a higher-order moral remainder. Something *else* needs to be the case for the world to be made right, and that has to be an ultimate sanction, fully appropriate to the dictator's crimes. The non-believer in divinity must come to terms with the fact that he also does not believe in any such sanction. Either he must say that the world is fundamentally unjust, or that our sense

of collective outrage is mistaken, a delusional harking back to the fire and brimstone of our benighted ancestors.

This is not something secularists like to contemplate. It is, however, a prospect that ought to be confronted by any person who takes morality as seriously as I have suggested it should be taken. A world that is, at bottom, deeply unjust looks to have all the pointlessness of a purely absurd world, with all the additional offences against our collective moral sense that give it an extra savour of bitterness. The present sketch of the situation is far less a deductive argument than an invitation to renewed discussion of what, in secular moral theory, is a much-neglected topic.