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Must Morality be Grounded on God?

John Rist

My title ends with a question-mark, which might lead you to think that it is susceptible of an answer one way or the other: Yes, or No. But in philosophy things are never that simple; some awkward clown is immediately likely to ask what I mean by the key terms in the question: What do I mean by 'morality'? What do I mean by 'God'? I shall try to clarify these terms insofar as is necessary for our immediate discussion both before and after moving on to more substantial questions. Let me begin, then, with a utilitarian atheist who is nevertheless regarded as a moralist: Jeremy Bentham. The story goes that Bentham, an effective philanthropist and tireless worker to improve the lot of the disadvantaged in his very unequal society, was asked why he tried to help people. His reply, characteristically honest, was "Because I like doing that kind of thing." He was telling us, that is, that his moral code depends on "what I like" (in some sense of the word "like") or on "what I prefer." He does not say that he *ought* to do what he does, unless he can be construed to mean that what I like to do (or what I choose to do) is what I ought to do. But that would be difficult, not least because we are accustomed to say: "I would *like* to do this but I believe or think or know that I *ought not* to do it." Nor, of course, would Bentham want to say that he helps people because they have some sort of extra-legal *right* to be helped if they are suffering or in trouble. On the contrary, he famously commented that such supposed rights are nonsense on stilts; that is, that the notion of a natural right is unintelligible. Overall, our problem in talking to people who hold God to be irrelevant to morality seems to be centred on the sense of the *moral* "ought," and indeed whether such a possible concept—however much we think we "feel" the force of it—is intelligible, let alone useful.

Once upon a time there was a version of natural law (though not the earliest version) which somehow depended on the existence of God, or at least on some kind of metaphysical first principle: so now I have reached the awkward clown's second question: namely, what I do mean by 'God' in the context of the present debate? Or perhaps, what is the most helpful sense of the word 'God' for the present debate? For I want to argue, however skimpily in this space of this paper, not only that morality must be grounded on God but that it is best grounded if the God is rather like the Christian God. Leaving that sort of presumption aside for a moment, however, I return to the question: "In what sense, once upon a time, did the concept of natural law

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depend on the existence of God?" There are two answers to that question: either natural law was the willed expression of God's nature in his creation, or it was merely the expression of his inscrutable (even wholly unintelligible) will. Some version of this second position, often dubbed 'voluntarism' and highly popular in early modern times, had already been challenged by Plato in the *Euthyphro*.

At least since the time of Duns Scotus in the early fourteenth century, philosophers have raised the question of whether "if God does not exist" (then supposed to be a purely hypothetical question), we could still have a natural law: part of their intent being to argue that we can indeed defend such a law without introducing God: and not necessarily only as a source of moral commands but even perhaps as a metaphysical or religious principle of value in an otherwise apparently random and morally neutral universe. But for reasons which cannot be expounded upon here, the hypothetical quest became (with Hugo Grotius in the seventeenth century) an apparently urgent requirement in a world in which Christianity was fractured (and agreement about God's nature dissolved), not to speak of where it was necessary to sort out disputes about justice with powerful non-Christian societies. If God could be left out of the calculation, perhaps common ground could be found, possibly through our common rational capacities, to resolve otherwise irreconcilable conflicts.

In succeeding centuries the problem seemed ever more urgent as the Christian God himself was more or more widely dismissed as morally disreputable, hence unworthy of worship. If he was to be viewed in a strictly voluntarist way as Luther and Calvin, among others, seemed to imply (not least in their accounts of divine rewarding and punishing), then to obey him might seem merely slavish, a worship of power induced by terror: a superstitious act of self-preservation not only irrational but gravely immoral. In particular, the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century France invited their readers to consider God's nature, as promoted by Christians, in terms of the genocidal brutalities and atrocities depicted with satisfaction in parts of the Old Testament, and of the unedifying delight shown, it was thought, by the Christian God and his followers in watching or looking forward to watching the tortures of the damned: such a God—and that was what was on offer—was clearly unworthy of the moral dignity of enlightened human beings. We, it was increasingly supposed, can do better than the Christians in constructing models of the good life. But, of course, hidden behind this excited self-congratulation and often unavoidable ignorance of history lurked several unanswered philosophical problems—and I leave aside the strictly historical one of whether eighteenth-century interpretations of the Old Testament could have been improved, since in the light of more recent historical reflection we can show they were often inadequate. And I also leave aside the attack on what seemed

God's unintelligible partiality for a trivial and barbarous little people like the ancient Israelites.

What then were the unanswered philosophical problems? That is no mere historical question since it also lurks behind contemporary debates. First of all for the old voluntarist theoreticians (not only Protestants like Locke but Catholics like Suarez) the concept of law entailed the presence of a superior, that is, a lawgiver, so their successors needed either to find a new kind of superior or perhaps recognize law-like phenomena without such a supposed superior. Yet in that very formulation of the dilemma lies the problem: without a lawgiver law-like phenomena are not really like laws and cannot be considered as moral laws, so—God abandoned—we must indeed find some new lawgiver, and the only possibility was the human mind. So eventually we reach Kant's reply to critics of the traditional picture: a reply whereby we discern the dictates of right reason and will that they apply to the whole of humanity, not least to ourselves. That was supposed to retain the strengths of the old absolutist morality without its voluntarist, or indeed, more generally religious and metaphysical weaknesses. We ourselves thus occupy the place once held by (a voluntarist) God, with the apparently additional advantage that claims about obligation are accessible and intelligible to all rational agents and can thus be proclaimed as genuinely moral, even democratic.

The philosophical history I have sketched thus far relates to the rise and intended fall of various claims about the relationship between a specifically *Christian* God (however understood) and the demands of morality, especially the idea of moral obligation. But now it is important to recognize that whether or not the Christian God is the best option for a higher being on which morality must be grounded, the debate about God and morality had begun long before Christianity: as one might expect, that is, with Socrates as recorded by Plato and with Plato himself.

In the *Phaedo* Plato makes some particularly challenging remarks about "decent" people, conventionally good citizens, and I suspect he would, perhaps unkindly (though one can see his point), be willing to apply them to many of their equivalents in our contemporary world. He tells us that they are like social insects, bees or ants, and that they will be reincarnated as such the next time round. What then does he think is wrong with such people? The answer is that their morality is supported merely by convention; they have learned what is supposed to be "right"—indeed what may sometimes actually be right—and have accepted unquestioningly what they have learned. In this respect they remind us of many in our own society: people who are often used by atheists and fellow-travellers in attempts to challenge the idea that morality depends on God. For, the atheist says, "See how many decent people behave well and how many religious people behave

badly"? But Plato's approach unmasks this confusion. Underlying the codes of decent people may lie some sort of hidden but necessary axioms to which the atheist certainly—and many decent but unthinking people probably—are not entitled. And the same applies to a number of philosophers to whom such people may appeal. Thus Kant is not entitled to assert the value of the human person; that he does so depends not on his supposed defence of such an idea but on the hidden assumptions he has inherited from the pietism—the version of Lutheran Christianity—he has inherited from his home-background. And similarly we can ask why Aristotle is entitled to claim that he knows how decent people will behave, how they will always want to act "for the sake of the fine (*to kalon*)," when he has rejected the Platonic metaphysics—which through the form of the Good would have offered him a possible justification for ethical propositions themselves, dependent on his being able to give an account of that very concept of "the fine" itself.

So our problem is not that unthinking people are often morally superior to the overtly religious, but that when hard times (or perhaps too easy times) come—Plato's morality is certainly a morality for torture-chamber and bed-time heroes—decent people will cave in because their apparent morality, when, for example, challenged—as Plato would put it—by the twin threats of tyrannical violence and the loss of a good reputation, will fail to provide adequate support: that is, when "decent people" have to decide whether they are prepared to pay a fearful price for maintaining their old moral ways. Perhaps Plato exaggerates when he suggests that moral collapse normally ensues, but he is certainly right in all too many cases: think of the appalling record of German academics during the Nazi period—and ask yourselves how many of us would not have done the same thing: not necessarily, as with Heidegger, by becoming unabashed members of the Nazi party, but rather by somehow not knowing about the tortures and murders being carried out in the concentration camp down the road.

So we should follow Plato a little further for, as I have regularly pointed out elsewhere,[1] he had already identified the core of the problem which confronts us today in thinking about the relationship of morality and religion. Obviously he had no direct notion of the Christian God; indeed, and we shall return to this, his idea of God must be importantly different from ours. Nevertheless, it is worth seeing just how far he can go with what he has.

One of Plato's basic aims was to refute the axiom of Protagoras that man is the measure of all things. That proposition, of course, is ambiguous: it may mean that men in general are the measure or that each one of us is the

[1] For example, John M. Rist, *Plato's Moral Realism: The Discovery of the Presuppositions of Ethics* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

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measure. Plato normally takes it in the latter sense, probably supposing, rightly, that in practice at least the former alternative will collapse into the more individualist latter. That is, he holds, a morality dependent on human conventions and decisions cannot defend itself (except of course by force or fraud) from collapsing into a claim that we each of us construct our own code of behaviour, modifying what we desire only in accordance with a Hobbesian recognition that if we want to enjoy ourselves in relative peace we shall have to agree on contracts and conventions as the unavoidable price to be paid for such security.

In opposition to all this Plato claimed that not man but god is the measure of all things: that is, that there is a standard in morality which does not depend on the dictates of human reasoning or human passions, and that it must be recognized as what God, determined by the external standard of the form of the Good, would decree. In the *Timaeus* he tells us that God organizes the world because he wants to and because he is good. For present purposes I must leave aside the historical question of how he conceives of (or comes to conceive of) the relationship between god and goodness in order to concentrate on the fact that without such an external standard, he offers arguments to show not merely that many unthinking people may only appear to be moral—the "decent" folk I mentioned earlier—but that in the last resort morality itself cannot be defended against the implications of Protagoras's claim that, somehow, man the measure of all things.

In what sense, then, could I, or could we, be the measure of all things? Plato invoked an external standard: that is, he invoked a metaphysical first principle to account for the very possibility of a morality rather than a set of conventions or something like a professional code. In our modern philosophical world, of course, most of us cannot remain satisfied with his unavoidable dichotomy between God and goodness, though Iris Murdoch was an exception to that rule. Rather, we find that, from entirely different standpoints and aspirations, both Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky urge in their different ways—though each in rough agreement with Plato—that without religious or platonizing metaphysical underpinnings no moral claims, least of all about moral obligation, are defensible. That reading of the situation, however, is now challenged: not only by atheists or non-believers who think that something they call morality can be constructed without such defences, but—more surprisingly—by religious people who argue that the possible existence of a benevolent God has nothing to do with what they can demonstrate about the basic principles of morality; I shall look therefore at both these anti-Platonic, anti-Nietzschean and anti-Dostoyevskian proposals.

Morality is concerned with what is good or with what is good to do or with what we ought to do because it is "right" to do it, or with all of these. There again, any interpretation of the implications of such comments will

depend on how "good" and "right" are understood. Specifically, for example, it will depend on whether we want to found justice-claims on positive law or on some version of natural law: that is, whether we discern the first principles of obligation in the nature of what *is*—but perhaps only with reference to a transcendent or non-natural factor—or in the constructions of men: invented for whatever reasons, whether good or bad.

Invented "moralities"—based on the principle that man is the measure of all things—will be either self-serving or group-serving: that is, they will claim to serve the interests either of an individual, or of a group of individuals, or of the whole human race, including future generations. They may envisage the preservation, more or less, of the social *status quo* (as "social glue"), or of one's own life, or of the greatest good of the greatest number, or of human "rights" (whatever they are asserted to be from time to time). When we identify such goals as good and desirable, we imply—perhaps problematically, as we shall see—that we *ought* to pursue them (and perhaps ought to enforce them) wherever possible. So the philosopher will ask for the grounds on which we have made our decisions and assertions, and enquire how we justify the order of priorities we have set among the various goods we have adopted. If we think, for example, that all have a right to good health and that the establishment of a healthcare system is good for some particular group, we have "previously" determined that the preservation of human life itself (or at least of some manifestations of human life) is a good, indeed a logically prior good.

So next we need to ask whether, in our "moral" determinations, we have been determining priorities among desirable goals—as well as the means to secure those goals—or whether we can more generally justify the goals themselves. And if our minds are not—as instruments—merely the slaves of our passions, we can ask how they can be deployed to determine or identify what our purposes are or ought to be. Thus, if we want to determine how a man (or men) may exercise his capacity to measure, we may either (implausibly) assume that we must follow our passions blindly, or we may try to prioritise them, or, more generally, to find "the" rational course. If we choose either of the latter options, we are prone to assume that given the right circumstances there really is a rational (or more rational) course while significantly neglecting to ask whether it is *logically* incumbent on us (hence that we "ought") to follow what *appears* to be the rational course even when we really can discover what it is.

Hence arise various thought-experiments (wholly detached from actual life) about what we would do behind a "veil of ignorance" or in a "state of nature." However, in engaging in such experiments, we make a monstrous and unjustified assumption: namely that we are ahistorical beings, and that thus we ever *could* enjoy such an option and so logically derive our behaviour

from it. More fundamentally, the error of that sort of thinking reveals the deeper error of thinking that by an act of reason we can "correct" the morally relevant historical circumstances in which we find ourselves—and thus reduce ourselves experientially to homogeneous, ahistorical entities. For, although as humans we are similarly moral beings, we are born into very different moral circumstances. It is an unavoidable inference from the unique character both of our genetic history and of our moral nurture that we face very different moral tasks, and who is to know how well or ill we variously succeed or can succeed in performing them in the real world?

Undoubtedly Kant was the philosopher who made the most determined effort to pursue a version of Protagoras's approach without doing what I, following Plato, have claimed that Protagoreans of every stripe must do: namely reduce morality if not to the law of the Hobbesian jungle then certainly to convention. And some of his recent "constructivist" descendants, lacking even his residual theism, have made things worse: they tacitly accept some of his unjustified (though not necessarily untrue) premises about the worth of human beings, while adding others drawn from similarly unjustified assumptions in contemporary culture. Their position is the more exposed in that they abandon Kant's resort to the Cartesian-sounding claim that our real nature is part of a specifically designated "noumenal" realm, as well as his assertion that God can eventually be invoked to resolve the tension between duty and happiness.

As I have already noted, among Kant's less well defended premises are first that persons have equal "value" (which would entail that they have some sort of right all to be treated equally) and secondly that what we think of as a "rational" decision (if that be regularly, indeed universally, possible) is at the same time an indication of what we "ought" to do. For although Kant argues that we can legislate how it is right for human beings to act, and though he believes (for insufficiently identifiable reasons and—to the satisfaction of anti-Christians open or hidden) that "ought" implies "can"—he fails to show how that "ought" is morally absolute even were it true (*inter alia*) that all persons are equally worthy and exist in similar moral space. That would be reasonable (in his view) if we were all capable of an equal "rationality," but there is no reason to believe that that is the case. Of course, to deny Kant's claim that we are all equally "rational" and *therefore* equally valuable, is not to deny that we are all equally valuable; only that, if that is to be so, there must be another explanation for it. And there remains on the horizon the disturbingly nihilist option that we are all equal in value in being of no value at all. At this point—I touch on it only briefly—we really are close to the developing spirit of post-modernity, whereby a well-known philosopher has recently argued in over a thousand pages that nothing really matters very much. Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky—not to forget Plato—would ask whether

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we can refute him, and if so on what kind of metaphysical or religious basis. Yet despite all that, a number of religiously-minded philosophers still think that we must follow Kant in the direction of practical reasoning if we are to escape the scepticism of Hume; on an occasion like this I shall obviously have to return to them.

A better version of Protagoras's claim—and probably what he himself intended—is that morality (after all) is not just rationality, but that it is conventional. That implies that (Kantians aside) many contemporary ethical schemes are Protagorean. Such would be all forms of contractarianism, whether Hobbesian or Rawlsian. All would depend on what we ourselves accept to be "right," such rightness depending (for example) on whether they are deemed (without benefit of Kantian claims about the strictly rational and therefore moral course) to promote the greatest good or safety of the greatest number, with ourselves to determine what that greatest good happens to be. Yet all such schemes find it impossible to account for why we *ought* to act conventionally (rather than why conventional actions might make a certain sense, or *feel* right, or consoling or self-flattering, or whatever), or why we *ought* to promote the greatest good of the greatest number—or indeed why we *ought* to do anything at all: as distinct, that is, from claims that such and such a "moral" scheme will benefit us most, that the scheme is more likely to preserve our lives in a relatively happy condition, and thus that such and such a practice ought to be performed.

Of course, there are quite other varieties of "ethical" proposals too, most of which may be dubbed 'ideological,' as depending on claims that we should (or ought to) do what the march of history, or progress, or evolution "teaches" that we ought to do. (Perhaps we shall have to do so anyway in some sort of determinist fashion, like dogs dragged along behind the Stoic cart, all good compatibilists and "free" to follow our destiny.) I leave such schemes aside, merely noting that they are all in effect non-providential variations on Stoic or near-Stoic naturalism. They have the advantage of identifying us as animals rooted in history, but they invariably depend on some piece of alleged knowledge as to how the future will pan out and therefore how we *ought* to "come to terms" with it or indeed also actively promote it.

Leaving such schemes aside, we note that all man-made "Protagorean" constructions have similar disadvantages: firstly they offer no defence against nihilism in some form or another, whether the nihilist claims that all morality is "hidden" power-seeking which can be exposed by the Nietzschean genealogist, or whether he merely objects that he has no compelling reason to accept it, perhaps citing '*carpe diem*': short term advantages and pleasures are as attractive as something more distant; we may just prefer them. That nihilist move might be supported by pointing out to the conventionalist (as indeed also to the Kantian) that we are not just "reasonable" creatures;

we are more complex than that. And there is a second major objection to conventionalism: whatever law may be made by one man (or one group) and claimed as moral can be unmade by the next man (or group) under some similar pretext.

If all man-made morality is conventional, there is no binding "moral" reason to accept any of it—even if there may be reasons of self-interest and comfort which make it preferable to do so. But moralists (and their followers among the public) regularly—however unreasonably—ask for more. For example, they may want to say that the Holocaust was simply "wrong," not that we have decided, or think it helpful, or comforting, or necessary, to call it wrong. Yet if for such people all law is positive law, they have no good reason to say anything is simply wrong, even if it is. And it would follow that, unless an international positive law exists and is accepted as binding (which in any case could be for "non-moral" reasons of convenience, etc.), then no-one is to be condemned on "moral" grounds outside his own country or society. So Goering and his fellow defendants at Nuremburg should have been acquitted. They were condemned not because they offended against any duly established "positive" law, but because it was thought to be fitting to convict them for what they had done. But if I say *that*, I need to show that I am doing more than appealing to my (or someone's) preference, or prejudice, or to undefended theses about a "morally significant" common humanity.

We seem to have hit a brick-wall. We can of course execute people like Goering, but we cannot claim any absolute right to do so—unless as followers of Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* we hold that might makes right. Yet those who condemned the Nazi leaders claimed to be doing much more than exercising the strong man's "right" to kill—it may be for some "reason" they lit upon, or because they did not like jack-boots.

I now turn to a further assumption sometimes made by those proposing some kind of Kantian solution to our present difficulties: namely, that we have an innate instinct for what is good for us. Clearly this sort of assumption is necessary for Christians claiming that what is natural is rational, lovable and the will of God, and that therefore such an instinct is directed ultimately to goodness and God himself, but even granted such an instinct towards what *we* might label 'goodness,' in a godless or at least a non-providential universe, this instinct has not only arisen by chance (or natural selection) but is directed not to what is morally good (for that may not exist) but to what we want consciously or otherwise for ourselves. And in that world Hobbes again seems to be on the right lines: instead of a desire for God and goodness we have a desire for self-preservation, and that represents all the good there is available. So the mere desire or instinct for what we choose (perhaps inevitably) to call our good gets the atheist nowhere.

At this point I want to turn to Augustine for a little help, and of course to an Augustine who has appropriated important Platonic premises into his account of our moral and spiritual nature. Arguing against a Stoicizing account of virtue, Augustine urges that the virtues are not merely modes of right reason—though they are that—but more basically modes of love (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 1.13.23). That claim will give him an account of motivation and of a moral "ought" which, as I have argued, a mere Kantian rationality will lack. And Augustine believes his account to be not only scripturally based but supported by an empirical analysis of human nature: we are not, as ancient Stoics and modern Kantians (among others) would have it, primarily—even "really"—minds, but both reasoning and affective beings. Hence to fulfil our moral obligations it is not enough to know what is right; we must also be capable of loving appropriately. For Plato himself, especially in the ninth book of the *Republic*, had already grasped that knowing the truth in its entirety is inseparable from loving it, that the mind is a loving mind and that thus weakness of will is impossible in a good man (or "guardian").

In confronting modern claims about motivation this is of the utmost importance: Plato's account of the mind—and in this Augustine is very close to him—is substantially different from that of Descartes who lived in a philosophical world which had lost the Platonic insight that in the good man perfection of mind and perfection of love of the good are inseparable: a new world which has fallen back on the notion that our actions must ultimately be explained *either* as driven by a "free" will (however explained) *or* by an intellect determined by its objects. As we already noticed, Kant tried to resolve that disjunction by arguing that practical reason writes out its dictates as moral obligations. But where then is the Platonic and Augustinian love of the good?

In the seventh book of the *Republic*, Socrates is challenged by Glaucon who demands to know why the good man has to return to the Cave and instruct and lead his fellows, but finds his query dismissed almost out of hand. That he return, Socrates remarks drily, is a just demand, and as a just man he will obey; that is because he both knows what the Good is and loves it sufficiently to act without hesitation in accordance with its dictates in every circumstance. And indeed that Plato is basically right about this is far from unreasonable: if I say I love someone and then add that I would not do what I could for them, the reaction of my hearer will be that I do not really love them (or love them enough). But Plato's Guardians both know the Form of the Good and love it; their knowledge is a facet of their love, their love a facet of their knowledge. It is worth observing that even when this Platonic insight had been generally lost and "love" largely replaced by "will," "Platonizers" sometimes found ways to reassert revised versions of Plato's message. Thus among the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century, both More and Cudworth hold that any division of the mind into faculties of knowing and

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willing is mistaken; rather we must refer our motivation for moral behaviour to what More, in his *Encheiridion Ethicum*, called, rather oddly, our "boniform faculty."

In line with his adaptation of Platonism Augustine holds that if we try to live without the true God, we are in effect trying to live in a universe in which we can recognize a number of significant metaphysical truths (if we like doing that sort of thing and are good at it), while still being unable to follow their moral implications, or indeed any strictly moral implications. In his view, as I have noted, *ought* does not imply *can*. Hence his challenge is dual: if there are no transcendent norms, then morality is impossible and must be replaced—at best and for comfort's sake—by some form of conventionalism, perhaps disguised as morality (as Plato had earlier noted in the *Laws* [2.663d]). But even if these norms exist, we cannot adequately access them and live accordingly without some knowledge of the true God and experience of the effects of his grace. Augustine's own "restatement" of our moral situation is, of course, that God, some of whose attributes are the Platonic moral Forms, exists—hence we live in moral space—and that we can indeed improve our lives with his assistance. All attempts to deny this and substitute some "moral" alternative are futile, being merely self-protective devices based on ignorance of the human condition or designed (He cites ancient Romans) vainly to protect ourselves against the fear of death.

If Plato's transcendental metaphysics, given a more religious (i.e., Christian) form by Augustine, is reinstated, then a genuine (i.e., non-conventional) morality, not a mere code of practice, is possible. But let us ask more precisely what—apart from a darker account of man's present "fallen" nature and a denial that Platonic *eros* has the power to reach its target—Augustine's position has to offer which Plato's has not? Certainly both see man as seeking the Good, but in Augustine's view Platonic man cannot find his way back to it. But there is more: he also believes that Plato's account of how we can justify notions of what we *ought* to do needs to be strengthened considerably. His critique involves three propositions: the first is that God, to be the effective first principle of morality, must be personal; the second is that a personal God delivers the possibility of recognizing the nature of sin, as distinct from that of crime—and hence a more robust distinction between what is moral and what is merely legal; the third is that we exist not only in metaphysical but also in historical space and time. I shall briefly consider these in turn.

A well-known, if curious, feature of Plato's metaphysics, at least in its normal version, is that neither gods nor men top the hierarchy of beings, that place being held by the Forms. And although love (as desire for the good and the beautiful) drives the potentially perfect man towards his goal, the relation between the soul and the Form of the Good is curiously non-reciprocal: we are to love—indeed we exist or are made so as to love—what

is incapable of loving. That is the explanation of a puzzling feature of the *Symposium*; namely, that as the soul progresses up the ladder of perfection, it moves from a love of beautiful souls to a love of increasingly non-personal objects, culminating in the Beautiful itself. The question that regularly occurs to modern readers, however, is how love of the impersonal can replace love of the personal. Clearly love of the impersonal is unproblematic in itself; we may love a beautiful landscape and long to see it again. In that case the love of the impersonal does not *replace* a love of the personal, but sits alongside it. Indeed, the "pathetic fallacy," not to speak of the habit of naming beloved boats by usually female names, indicates that we try in often facile or futile ways to personalize our love of the impersonal. But in the *Symposium* Plato's love of the impersonal *replaces* that of the personal—and he himself seems to have noticed, in a curiously oblique way, that something is missing: not only in the *Phaedrus* (which in many other respects corrects the *Symposium*) does he introduce a "counter-eros," a love in reply to eros, but in the *Sophist* he emphasizes that "real being" cannot be simply lifeless.

But for Christian (and other) theists that is not enough. For such, the morally-relevant point about a divine *person* is that he (and therefore we) can guarantee the unique importance of individual human beings. The Christian notion of a human person is logically generated from, and serves as a corollary to, the notion of a divine person, in whose image and likeness we are. Thus, only if God matters do we as individuals matter. Of course, as I have noted, among contemporary non-believers too, the importance of the human individual is regularly taken to be the corner-stone of "morality," especially, but by no means only of, a Kantian sort. But in the case of Kant and indeed more widely, I have already intimated that we should pay heed to Anscombe's contention that almost all modern and contemporary morality depends on (Christian) metaphysical and psychological theses to which its proponents are not logically entitled and which many of them explicitly reject. As we shall discover, however, a more cynical defence of such proceeding—apparently unforeseen even by Anscombe—is now widely current among professionals.

Being a person is important not only in that we usually assume (unless we are honest utilitarians or other advocates of the greatest goods of large numbers of people, which necessarily is often at the expense of those of individuals) that individual persons matter uniquely, and that this mattering sums up what morality is about; it is also important in a broader sense which may serve to introduce our second "Augustinian" thesis: that relating to the difference between sin and crime.

The difference between a crime and a sin (which may or not legally be a crime—of this a recurring example would be abortion) is that a sin is an offence against a personal deity, not merely against an impersonal Form, which—as only a formal and final cause—is non-sensitive and ineffective,

since "abstract." That is why a special kind of *obedience* is integral to a theistic morality, and why some different model of obedience is demanded by any serious alternative. The secularist—in light of his inferior theory—may recognize his behaviour (in some quasi-legal way) as "wrong"; what he will obviously be prevented from recognizing is that it *also* offends again a Person who has, and claims, the right to be obeyed because of what He is and what we are in relation to Him. Here again we recognize that religious morality and non-religious "ethics" are very different animals. The idea of sin not only points the way towards a Creator (or at least fashioner) God, but emphasizes the serious nature of moral lapse and the immoral—and unrealistic—character of the individual who lapses. It has been said (by Peter Brown) that Augustine drove the problem of evil (and of original sin)—that is, of its seriousness—into the heart of Christianity. That needs correcting: Augustine did not invent the problem; his success was in further developing a coherent and powerful intellectual thesis to resolve it. The attempt to deny that thesis, or pay it lip-service, has been a mark of most modern and contemporary philosophy (and yet more mindlessly of much theology), but such denials are flawed by a habitual blindness to the surely salient fact that in it we have a theological proposition claiming strong empirical support and explaining a variety of otherwise baffling human phenomena. Do not our papers regularly inform us of some "sheer evil" that is "simply inexplicable"?

The distinction between ordinary crimes and sins that offend God invites us to comment further on God's nature as the source of morality. Many Greek philosophers, from Xenophanes and Heraclitus on, were insistent that traditional accounts of the gods were false because the gods were presented as beyond morality or as morally offensive. With the Enlightenment, similar charges were brought against the God of the Old Testament and his traditionally admired servants such as Abraham and King David—and that not only by such as Voltaire but by concerned Christians like Pierre Bayle. Both the older and the more recent critics argue that if there is a God he must be a moral being: which does not imply, as Plato often supposed, that he must be subordinate to other moral realities such as Goodness; he can, as Christians should hold, be identical with them, revealing justice and beauty as divine attributes. God's goodness is not ours (that much is granted to the voluntarist), but our goodness partakes—to use Platonic language—in His. Even in their caricatures, however, Voltaire and the rest draw attention to a genuine problem, for morality as *mere* obedience to God's will is open to abuse and indeed is regularly abused in religious traditions where the God to be obeyed is not presented as necessarily or primarily good—as when his power is elevated above his goodness. Strictly "voluntarist" accounts of God are of no use in the account of morality I want to defend, harking back as they do to the crude amoralism of the Greek Olympians or to early

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Hebrew accounts of *Jahwe* which can be interpreted similarly—that is, as denoting a figure to whom good and evil are ultimately irrelevant. One should obey God not simply because he commands us to do so but *also* because we know—even if we do not always understand—that his commands are good as reflecting the goodness of his nature—and at the same time that they are good for us: that is, they enable us to live as we have been designed to live, and therefore happily. No account of morality will be plausible if it fails to mention not simply God but God's good purposes.

Whereas a theistic morality says we must begin by recognizing that we are not gods, a secular morality wants us (in varying degrees) to act as if we were. Traditionally, this antithesis has been posed in the form that sin depends on pride (above all on our trying to be self-creators) and that virtue begins with the humble (but not humiliating) recognition that we are not gods and that we should idolize neither ourselves nor anything else (such as History or Progress or Autonomy or Sex or Choice). And of course idolatry and self-idolatry are not limited to dictators; the contemporary Western social scene provides countless examples of pop-stars or soccer-players dealing out pearls of wisdom to their unthinking admirers; some indeed boast of being more influential than Jesus. To reject such idolatry, to accept that we are mortal and, if more, only by the grace of God, is not moralistic snivelling or holier-than-thou hypocrisy, as it has often been portrayed by those who confuse humility and truth-telling with servility; it is an attempt to reject obvious but attractive lies and propose possible and plausible truth.

So let us turn to Augustine's third point: an insistence—found especially in the *City of God* where he comments on the role of philosophy in the good life—that we exist in historical as well as metaphysical space. How this is important for morality is one of the implications of the remark of Aristotle in *Metaphysics* (7.1036a) that there is no definition of the individual, who can only be recognized by the senses or by the mind. That means that the findings of metaphysics, being impersonal (we might see them as analogous to those of departments of public health), can only identify our existential situation in general terms. (hard-core Thomists beware!) We can learn from metaphysics (as from the other sciences) what we are as members of the human race, not what we are as individual members (which may rather be the subject matter of religion), as also what in general may be expected of us morally but not what specific actions we ought to perform or are capable of performing as individuals. Aristotle recognized in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (5.1137b) that a lawgiver can prescribe what is just in general, not what is equitable in individual situations—hence discretionary powers should be left in the hands of the magistrate—and such observations give further substance to the (religious and realistic) view that whatever our theoretical or "ideal"

situation (as behind a veil of ignorance, or whatever), in the real world we are each located in radically different circumstances.

One practical effect of this is that though humanly and legally there may be something we can do to remedy the effects of a particular criminal offence (by, say, taking account of extenuating circumstances when a "just" law is broken), we cannot be sure of the accuracy of the moral understanding that underlies (or should underlie) the judgments that we (or our representatives) have to make in individual instances. In extreme cases that may mean that we do not know whether in God's eyes a "criminal" should be punished as *responsible* for what he has done, even though—to protect society or to deter himself and others from crimes in the future—he will still have to be punished. There is a sense in which the unerring justice of God is a warrant and a safeguard not only for the apparently obvious villain but for all of us. That much at least is implied in "Judge not that ye be not judged."

I have now identified three clear advantages for a coherent account of moral obligation if the first principle, the religious "source" of morality, is no impersonal entity (such as a Platonic Form) but a personal divinity. The personal divinity not only guarantees moral obligations but helps explicate the peculiarly serious nature of moral offences—that is, of sins rather than merely inconvenient crimes—as well as enabling us to ponder their seriousness with due reference to the varying circumstances in which people find themselves in their individual lives. For, as I have argued, the old Enlightenment axiom that we are all, as presently situated, faced with identical moral dangers must be denied, and Christianity has a theological explanation of that apparently random and irrational situation—and why it is so important that it be recognized—in its doctrine of original sin. That teaching, widely ignored as much by Christians as by *de facto* pagans like Hobbes, accounts both for why we have "moral" problems in the first place and why they are so variegated. As already noted, it has both biblical and empirical roots: biblical in the story of the fall (or failure) of Adam and its consequences—and we are now being assured that we must at least have an "Eve" as our common ancestor; empirical in that it offers an explanation of obvious if too conveniently and easily forgotten facts about human life. Please consider the following citation on the impact of the atrocities of the Second World War and specifically on what was revealed to those entering the concentration camp at Dachau:

> It [World War Two] was a savage insensate affair, barely conceivable to the well-conducted imagination…and hardly approach-

> able without some currently unfashionable theory of human mass insanity and inbuilt, inherited corruption.[2]

These are the words of an atheist, bearing witness to the empirical precision of the Christian dogma: less perhaps in that it offers to make stupendous evil intelligible than in revealing it as strangely unsurprising. Yet to infer a fall is to usher in a human race *intended* for perfection; otherwise it would be an account not of fall and corruption but merely of *change*. And an intended perfection implies an intender.

So as logical alternatives to religious morality we are left with the nihilism whether of a Sartre or of a Nietzsche, or some "Protagorean" construction which lacks any morally (as distinct from legally or otherwise conventionally) binding force. Either moral values and moral obligations are a reality or they are a human construct: convenient certainly, but, as Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky reminded us again, not ultimately compelling. And now there is an increasingly fashionable variant: that they are a fantasy whereby we may *pretend* or be *deluded* into believing that they are "naturally" binding! Here I want to go beyond Anscombe's account of the present situation. Anscombe's argument was that modern moral philosophers are trying to base their moral language, and hence their moral claims, on metaphysical or religious underpinnings which they in fact reject and to which they are not therefore entitled. But she also seemed to hope that after a period of reflection, especially on philosophical psychology, we should be able to restart ethical enquiry in a less disingenuous spirit. Indeed, one or two philosophers have in effect taken up her challenge in trying to construct an avowedly secularist ethic based—so they claim—on no hidden metaphysical or religious foundations. Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1986) is an outstanding example of this sort of project: a genuine attempt in the Benthamite tradition to avoid any talk, for example, of metaphysical entities such as inalienable rights. More typical of the contemporary scene, however, is the world so lucidly described by MacIntyre in the opening pages of *After Virtue* in which we are invited to reflect on "ethicists" shouting past one another on every conceivable "moral" topic.

But now, as I have implied, a new way out of our difficulties is widely canvassed: "virtual" morality. And analogous ghosts can be seen among our literary lions; their ancestors can be identified at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth-century nostalgia of Matthew Arnold's *On Dover Beach*. For as the "tide of faith" has receded, the difficulties of sustaining a strong and viable, non-religious morality have washed up a "nostalgic"—or is it now a cynical?—alternative. Just as poetry can now "redeem" without a Redeemer,

[2] Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 132.

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thus purporting to fill the gap left by salvationist religions—in our case Christianity—so we can pretend that we live in a morally value-laden universe, though our opinion-formers and élites know we do not! Some, like Richard Rorty or the Rawls of *Political Liberalism*, are more straightforward about the situation, almost avowing themselves not moralists but social-engineers (Rorty even took the step of exchanging a Chair of Philosophy for one in Comparative Literature). Others, however, are more canny, sometimes preferring to compare moral qualities to Lockean secondary qualities and always eager to retain that apparently "objective" sense of duty or moral obligation which no mere convention nor latter-day neo-Stoicism (much beloved especially, but not only, by French ex-Christians) can justify.

There is a curiously unphilosophical tone about all such proceedings; they remind me of undergraduates who deny traditional sexual mores on the grounds that everything is subjective, or a matter of choice, but invited to go Paki-bashing or Jew-baiting insist that this is "simply wrong," the only explanation of that assertion being that it "feels" or "just is" so. Gilbert Ryle once commented that someone in court for theft would get short shrift if he said that he knew the difference between right and wrong but that he had forgotten what it was. But although it is indeed difficult to forget that there is a difference between right and wrong, both for believers and for non-believers (even if at times they want to), the difficulty is to justify it philosophically without recourse to religion.

At least since the seventeenth century—though with precursors as far back as the fourteenth—some have reflected on "natural" behaviour in an apparently, and sometimes explicitly, Stoic fashion: that is, without appealing to any transcendental justification of such behaviour. For the Stoics themselves, such justification was to be found in a pantheistic deity, of which our minds are fragments, within the cosmos. Implausible as such an account of natural law always was—the more so after Hume pointed to the difficulties of deriving a moral "ought" from an "is"—it is even more implausible in light of our present scientifically-governed view of a universe quite unlike that of the Stoics and long since de-mythologized. Any contemporary attempt to find more-than-conventional values *within* the cosmos looks even more implausible than its Stoic original. Yet such high-flown "naturalism"—whether or not spiced up by the "virtual" and desperate morality of nostalgia, or now at times by the notion that a binding morality has "evolved" (which is merely another example of the myth of Historical Progress)—is regularly proposed as a serious defence of such metaphysical entities as natural rights. The Age of Enlightenment and the Age of Ideology have been succeeded by the Age of Self-Deception, wilful or otherwise: that is, of ideologies arising no longer from a bad metaphysics which has been shown up for what it is, but from mere whim and wishful thinking. Such empty platitudes are grist to the he-

donists of the advertising industry, and it is at this squalid level, rather than with the birth of the superman dreamed of by Nietzsche, that the discovery of the "death of God" spawns its moral effects—as, of course, is only what those who postulate original sin assume; man, they say, without divine grace, is seriously injured and that injury takes effect not only on the level of the "great and the good"—nor only on that of the brutal—but equally of the mean, the banal, the ugly, the trivial, the hypocritical.

Summing up his confessed failure to reconcile the claims of duty and happiness near the end of his *Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick lamented the appalling social consequences if such a failure became known to the public at large. Rather than accept such a loss of "social glue," he believed it would be better to *pretend* that there had been no failure. By now that pretence has been going on for so long that those who pretend—even some of the smarter among them—have long lost any sense that they are pretending. Plato, with a transcendental metaphysic as yet only inadequately "personalized," had foreseen the contemporary panorama. Revisiting in the *Republic* (560c ff.) the theme of the historian Thucydides that sophists and demagogues manipulate moral terms to trick the public, he implies here and elsewhere that the manipulators will come in the end to believe their own lies; that is, if indeed anything in their world can properly to be called a lie.

Before moving to my last point, I think I should reiterate what I am trying to do in this article: I have not attempted to prove the existence of a personal God, only to argue that without such a God morality (as distinct from conventionalism and nihilism) cannot be justified. No theist should argue that God "invents" goodness; either God is good or he is not. And if God could not invent it, what possible reason could there be for supposing that anything more than substitution lies within human capacity?

I am not quite at an end. If non-transcendental morality must be reduced to something like a professional code, always intellectually defenceless against nihilist challenges, why do a number of committed Christian philosophers think not only that they can but that they must defend it not only without metaphysics but without allowing the necessity of God? Several factors must be considered if we want to frame a reply. Some are moral, the rest more generally philosophical. At the moral level, many Christian philosophers (as indeed many Western Christians) seem, as it were, to be punch-drunk; they dare not openly claim that only the existence of God enables them to progress towards solving basic problems in moral philosophy. That leads them to debate such matters entirely on terms set by their opponents, fearful as they are of being called fideists if they decline to do so, being thus victims of the culture in which we live. Instead of being ready to assume, for example, that Hume and Kant have eliminated the possibility of traditional meta-ethics, they should proceed as far as they can within the limits of secu-

lar philosophy, but be prepared to admit it when by doing so they hit a brick wall. For perhaps that brick wall might be demolished if God were allowed in at least as a thought-experiment.

Christian thinkers should be prepared, as in the past they have been, to say to their atheist rivals: you are in a difficulty from which you cannot escape. Hence—to revert to an example I have already spoken of—you want something called "human rights," but you cannot begin to agree on how they can be defended, although theists have no difficulty defending them. Or, you do not want to be shown up as nihilists or as defenceless against nihilism; we alone can show you how not to be trapped as you are.

Finally, I will mention a startling case where the attempt to talk to secularists on their own terms not merely collapses but demonstrates its own impossible absurdity. Some Catholic philosophers, despising the pre-Humean world, have claimed through practical reasoning alone to be able to compile a list of obviously basic goods: almost all such lists, however, include the good of religion, but of course no atheist can regard religion as a good, and many think that at least most of its varieties are positively evil. So the Christian, purporting to begin with universally recognizable goods either has to construct a list in which religion (including his own religion) is not a good or he has to advance an opinion which no secularist can accept. It is not surprising that such moves have been greeted with contempt in much of the secular world; better to be frank enough to admit the possibility of God in the first place: but if God, then religion and no merely descriptive metaphysics (as that latter phrase is commonly understood). And we have no need—here we are back to moral courage—to be quite so desperate to leave religion aside, for as Plato and Aristotle agreed, truth is more important, especially for a philosopher.

Although at a cursory glance it may not look as though morality depends for its justification on some sorts of religious belief, and although contemporary theophobes wish it otherwise and try to pretend it is otherwise (if they think about it seriously at all), morality and religion—philosophically at least—stand or fall together. That is, unless we conspire to use words like "morality" and "moral obligation" to indicate any code of behaviour we happen, for whatever reason, to prefer. A contemporary, desirous of justifying his moral obligations, must update Thomas More's last words, saying (as also in the spirit of Socrates before the court of Athenian society): "I die the public's good servant, because I am God's first."

—*The Catholic University of America*