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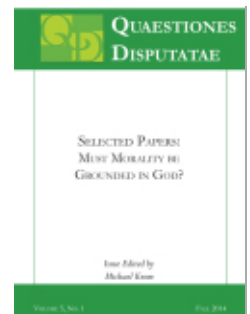
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## Response to John Rist's "Must Morality be Grounded on God?"

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Quaestiones Disputatae, Volume 5, Number 1, Fall 2014, pp. 26-29 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press



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# Response to John Rist's “Must Morality Be Grounded on God?”

Paul Symington

Prof. Rist offers a rich, sophisticated, and persuasive analysis for the view that morality must necessarily be grounded in belief in God, a view with which I have much sympathy. Contrary to claims that one can obtain a perfectly well-grounded morality without appealing to God by atheist and Christian moralists alike, Rist bravely claims not only that morality must be grounded in God (ensconced with a non-voluntarist variety), but also that it is best grounded specifically in belief in the Christian God.

Rist argues that attempts at obtaining grounding for morality independently of God have failed and must fail. Beyond the historical failures by moralists such as Kant, Rist argues that any morality that excludes God is destined to collapse into an conventionalist or constructivist ethic that by definition lacks an external standard; standing without a measure that goes beyond that of man's mind and interests. Without an external standard for morality that transcends humanity, one must exchange the ought of morality with the is of preference or some actual goal that folks in fact have but need not have since there lacks grounding support for it. Certainly Bentham or Mill come to mind as holding ethics that lack the kind of ground that one has come to expect in a moral theory, the former indeed even admitting to this. But there are conventionalist and constructivist viewpoints (which also include Kant upon examination) that although may claim to possess a proper grounding nevertheless also lack it. A necessary condition that Rist points to for a well-grounded moral system is that one has good reason to believe that one *ought* to do something. On that score, non-theistic moralities hit a brick wall: one would be hard pressed to come up with a good reason why one ought to do what one prefers, or that which is the greatest good for the greatest number, or what is conventional, or to do those actions that have been evolutionarily beneficial to us in the past. Each of these are compatible with both a complete lack of value and with what is merely arbitrary; both of which are antithetical to a thorough-going morality. Beyond this, Rist is also wary of theists who think that one can ground morality independently of God by thinking that they can successfully argue for some standards of morality merely consistent with a theistic morality but, for the sake of epistemological integrity, disconnect their lines of argumentation or support

from their theistic beliefs. Rist takes note of an insufficiency in the attempt of grounding morality by way of claiming that through practical reasoning alone one is able to compile a list of obviously basic goods. Even with this approach one must identify God, the object of religion, as essentially related to the basic good of religion.

I would, however, like to offer some possible questions or observations that may make us wonder a little bit that a plausible alternative viewpoint on this issue is not possible.

First, which involves a minor point of clarity, it is not entirely clear whether Rist wants to include with atheists—those that positively exclude any theistic foundation for morality and arguably have no ground for morality—those theists who try to build a case for grounding morality independently of an explicit reference to God. It seems that he wants to include both. If this is so, then it seems relevant to bring in his closing comments in which he seems to infer from the fact that one's philosophical interlocutor does not accept a theistic foundation for morality that one ought not to try to score moral points without appeal to God. That is, do all arguments that do not positively include God as a ground for morality collapse? If so, this appears problematic. Although I think that it is plausible that eventually a theistic ethicist will need to appeal to God for a fully robust ethical theory, it seems perfectly reasonable given the context and the particular presuppositions of some set of interlocutors that one can make a persuasive ethical argument for a particular point of morality that can be made independently of appeal to God. This point may be irrelevant since Dr. Rist is appealing to foundations for morality, but I think that it nevertheless is a fair point to be made along the way.

Second, Rist's position is a strong one and as a result runs the risk of lapsing into a kind of triumphalism. A Christian moral triumphalism in this context can be identified as a certain cognitive attitude in which Christian teaching on morality is thought of as being complete and independent in the sense of not requiring revision, clarification, integration, or cognitive relation to so-called naturally rational approaches or experientially related moral beliefs. A triumphalistic position on ethics is harmful in the following way: it does not emphasize the importance of integrating the central Christian moral principles with naturally recognized good practices and values given according to a broad notion of human experience. To illustrate this, one can think of the teaching of Christ to turn the other cheek to one's enemy. However, it seems that this instruction requires a prior notion of courage with which Christian and non-Christian alike can each identify. Such a recognition helps us to integrate this teaching of Christ most effectively and perfectly into our lives. Alternatively, one can conceive of a misguided application of this instruction without courage by using it merely as a justification for mere-

ly being a coward. So, how does Rist's position run the danger triumphalism? By identifying acts that are not grounded in belief in God as without moral foundation is to simply undermine their ethical status altogether. If they are devoid of ethical status then it seems to me that a Christian need not have to heed them when seeking to follow a particularly Christian moral ethic.

Finally, Rist seems to assume that a necessary condition for a moral belief being grounded is whether or not one can rationally identify a duty, imperative or ought, with respect to a specific action that is performed in conformity with that belief. However, it seems possible to me that this is not a necessary condition for an action being moral; and so, *a fortiori*, it need not be a condition for an action being morally grounded. That is, one may hold that every belief that one understands that they ought to do is moral while also maintaining that not every belief (or action) that is moral one has an obligation to perform. For example, there seems to be occasions when we make a moral choice absent of moral obligation. Such is the case with supererogatory or heroic acts of self-sacrifice. Or, it seems like one has made a moral choice when one has chosen a particular career path for the right reason, even though they were not morally obliged to do so. Or, if one is in a tight fix where one must choose to do one thing or another each of which are moral, but one cannot do both. Thus, it is not clear to me that when one makes some (moral) choice without a moral imperative attached to it that that choice must be morally ungrounded. That is, it seems that in some cases in which I recognize something as good insofar as I desire it and do the action I have done a moral action, even if one has not done it for the sake it being a basic good, etc. One thinks of someone being inclined to help the proverbial old lady cross the street merely because they see it as a good thing to do or desire it. So, even if it is granted that one cannot have moral imperatives without God, there still leaves open the possibility that one can make moral choices without God.

However, even if this scenario is inaccurate and every moral action, even so called optional ones, require some grounding in an ought (e.g., I ought either to do this or that), is not clear to me that in granting these non-imperative oughts one needs always to appeal to God in order to gain knowledge of it as an ought or as rational. That is, it seems reasonable, for example, to say that one wants to be happy, one cannot not desire their own happiness, so in order to be happy one ought to act in certain ways so as to uniformly achieve this fixed goal. Another possibility: one can say that one has a basic or fundamental rational intuition into basic goods and this intuition occurs independently of belief in God. Rist seems to imply that this leaves one open to not being able to argue against those who would try to bury this intuition or distort it. But, this argument is problematic: it is like saying that one cannot believe in the principle of non-contradiction unless

it can be grounded in something else. Why not simply say that one has had a rational intuition into something as a basic good and so is justified on that basis, not unlike saying that one is justified in the principle of non-contradiction in the same way?

One may be able to look for an alternative source for moral grounding. Perhaps a choice has moral grounding when it is enacted with a combination of a natural inclination (which provides motivation) and some recognition that it is ordered in some way to contributing to their happiness. I want to be happy, and I cannot act otherwise with respect to this, and so I ought to do this in order to be happy. Of course at this point, one need not wonder where one is going with this: to a *eudaimonistic* ethics. Such an ethic has happiness or one's perfection as the ultimate end that motivates one to action, is obtained in conformity with a rational process of choice, and allows for actions to be optional and moral; that there are a range of goods (either truly or according to an appearance) that one ought to obtain in a rational way so as to obtain genuine or true goods (determined, perhaps, as being mutually consistent and obtainable or intuited as ordered to a basic good). In addition, a Christian will hold that one's inclination or will is not satisfied by created goods and so the object of God is left as an open question, without being required to be positively appealed to in order to ground all obtainable goods.

Yet, Rist aptly supports his claim that Christianity most effectively serves as the ground for morality by pointing to the fact that God relates to us personally. This recognition is a game changer for the proclivity in *eudaimonistic* ethics to be merely about obtaining those goods that are primarily good for oneself; a view that has earned for it the charge of "egoism." However, Rist makes us see that in Christianity a kind of reversal occurs: one sees that any goodness or perfection in oneself is merely a pale reflection of the perfection that is personally grounded in God; I must become less so that He may become more. In this way, a Christian ethic becomes fundamentally re-oriented and grounded in communion, humility, and grace.

All in all, I congratulate Prof. Rist on an excellent paper and I thank him for his contribution to our progress in thinking about this fundamental issue.

—Franciscan University of Steubenville