God and the Grounding of Morality

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1. The Best-Interest Theory of Morality

The question of the grounding of morality has been on the agenda of philosophy ever since the Ring of Gyges episode of Plato's *Republic*, which pivots on the challenging question: Why be good in situations where you can be sure of getting away with an advantage by being bad?

Now there are two substantially different ways of posing the issue because the question "Why be moral?" can take two very different forms:

1. Why *should* I be moral? Why is it that I am well advised to act as morality requires? How is morality-conformable behavior really in my best interests?

2. Why *must* I be moral? Why is it that acting morally is required of me through its being actually obligatory rather than merely somehow advantageous—mandated rather than merely advisable.

As regards the first question, a much-favored line of response is familiar. It runs essentially as follows: morality is a matter of rational self-interest. In acting morally one supports and promotes a system of action and interaction from which all of us benefit. Avoiding a *bellum omnium contra omnes* is the essence here. (Think of orderly queuing to avoid a free-for-all.) By honoring the strictures of morality we engender a user-friendly system of procedure by which all of us benefit. (Kurt Baier's classic *Moral Point of View* sets out the details of such an approach.)[1] What we have here is what might be called the Best-Interest Theory of morality.

However, the Achilles heel of this theory is that its line of reasoning shows only that one is well-advised to be moral—that meeting the demands of morality is conducive to one's best interests. What it does *not* do is to show why one is *obligated* to be moral: why it is a matter of *duty and obligation* to do so—and not just one of prudence, advantage, and self-interest. We are still left to wonder why transgressions are not just *ill-advised and counterproductive*, but actually *wrong* or *wicked*.

[1] Kurt E. Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (New York: Random House, 1965).

This later issue calls for an altogether different approach—one that is not geared to deliberations regarding Question 1; rather, this requires a shift of orientation to Question 2 with its concern for the mandating dimension of duty and obligation. It is on this specific and narrowly defined issue that the subsequent discussion will focus.

2. The Divine-Command Theory of Morality

In this regard there enters a by-now familiar doctrine connecting God and morality—the so-called "Divine Command Theory" which has it that actions become wrong through the prohibitions of God—that various human doings are rendered morally unacceptable by the fact that God forbids them. Moral duty on such an approach issues from the mandates of the divine will and moral transgression constitutes disobedience.

Notwithstanding its surface plausibility, this position is ultimately untenable. For one cannot but acknowledge that God, as a preeminently rational being, would always want to have good reasons for whatever he wishes and commands. And these good reasons of his must, by virtue of their very nature as good reasons, thereby also serve as such not just for God but for us as well. On this basis morality's rationality is going to be something that is merely *ratified* rather than *created* by the circumstance of being commanded by God. God's commandments prohibit misdeeds because they are wrong in their nature: they do not somehow "wrongify" otherwise morally indifferent acts—some medieval theologians to the contrary notwithstanding. And so a divine mandate is not the ultimate basis here. Divine commands can certainly *identify* the demands of morality and *confirm* the moral norms. But those norms have a *raison d'être* of their own.

Now, anyone who has someone's best interest at heart would want that individual to be a conscientiously moral agent, seeing that immorality—potential material benefit notwithstanding—is psychically corrosive.[2] And so while God undoubtedly wants—and indeed commands—us to be moral, it is ultimately not because of this that we should be so, but because of the injury that immorality does to ourselves and our best interests. It is clear that a benign God would want us to be moral. But of course he would have this wish for *our* sake, and not for ulterior reasons of his own.

And so, the ultimate source of actual obligation can neither lie in self-interest and self-oriented benefit, nor yet in the existence of a divine command. Where then does obligation come from?

[2] This salient point was already made in the Ring of Gyges episode of Plato's *Republic*.

3. A Different Turning: The Duty-of-Gratitude Theory of Morality

Now what I propose to argue here is that moral obligation is not a duty of *obedience*, but rather a duty of *gratitude*. On such an account it is not God's role as *ruler* but God's role as *creator* that is crucially at issue in an adequate account of morality.

Morality's mandate is not grounded in a social contract of sorts, but in due acknowledgment of benefits received—in appropriate gratitude to the author of all. Accordingly, the crux of moral obligation lies not in the *will* of God—in divine decrees and mandates. Rather, it lies ultimately in the *beneficence* of God—in debt incurred through benefit bestowed: a benefit that is not a contractual product but a freely bestowed boon. Precisely because the benefit of existence is freely bestowed and not the product of a bargain, it is the source of obligations of inherent propriety rather than of obligations of arrangement or contract.

What is wrong with failing to acknowledge a debt of gratitude? The short answer is: *everything*. From *every* relevant moral perspective something is severely amiss here. For consider:

1. *Prudentialitism*: A failure to be appropriately grateful creates a counterincentive to people's doing other good things for us or—even worse—renders us open to bad treatment.

2. *Enlightened Self-Interest*: Any failures to be appropriately grateful are a disqualification from seeing ourselves as someone deserving of respect.

3. *Divine Command*: A just God would unquestionably want us to be appreciative for receiving otherwise unmerited goods and instruct us accordingly.

4. *Deontology:* Appropriate gratitude is demanded by the principle of generalization, of acting towards others as we would have them act towards us.

5. *Utilitarianism:* Gratitude for favors received is socially productive in encouraging communal solidarity and mutual aid.

6. *Virtue Ethics:* Gratitude itself qualifies as a cardinal moral virtue.

All in all, then, on every morally relevant line of approach debts of gratitude form a significant sector of mandated appropriateness.

On such a perspective the ultimate grounding of morality is neither self nor society nor obedience to the will of man or God, but rather the consideration that it represents something that we owe to the power, force, or potency that has brought us into being as a debt of gratitude for affording us this opportunity. And it is exactly this debt of gratitude—a gratitude to God, if you will—which in the final analysis is the basis of moral obligation. We are *well advised* to be moral because it is to our (individual and collective) advantage; we may well be *required* to be moral because of a divine mandate; but we are *obligated* to be moral so as to make a due *acknowledgement of gratitude* for benefits bestowed by putting our shoulders to the promotion of the good.

A closer look at the matter indicates that three levels of differences are at issue here:

1. *Duty to ourselves*: reflexive [1st person]
2. *Duty to others*: donative [2nd person]
3. *Duty to God* (as creator of the cosmos): recognitive [3rd person]

Morality—duly honoring the claims of others—looks at first glance to function at the middle level above. But matters clearly do not end here. For in the first place morality forms part of what we owe to ourselves—namely, making the most of our opportunities for the good. And this obligation in turn emanates from the third—from our debt to God, the creator and course of all existence, our own included—in recognition for the opportunities that have been afforded to us for realizing good things.

We are part of a world not of our making that puts at our disposal a multitude of unearned benefits by way of resources and opportunities for the realization of good things. And in due acknowledgement we owe it to the creative forces that have brought us into being to make the most of our opportunities for the good. This obligation calls upon us to make the most and best of ourselves: to proceed in our action to produce the very best version of ourselves that we can possibly realize. And it is this obligation that is the ultimate basis for our commitment to morality.

And so on the line of approach contemplated here the generic "must" of moral obligation comes down to—and is pervasively rooted in—one single, paramount sort of obligation; namely, the acknowledgement of benefits received. And this duty itself is validated by three considerations among others: (1) the circumstance of its acknowledgment by virtually every theory of morality; (2) the natural reaction of negativity towards any situation in which this obligation is validated; (3) the fact that any public order that acknowledges this practice is thereby clearly rendered superior to what it otherwise would be.

4. But are Those Opportunities for the Good Real?

But why should our being here (*Dasein*; our existence in the world) be seen as a boon that mandates acknowledgement and gratitude? Why not join Schopenhauer and some Eastern thinkers in seeing our existence as a test—and perhaps even as a punishment or penalty?

The answer to this question lies in the fact that our presence here affords us an opportunity to contribute to the good of the world. Our very existence provides an opportunity beyond price—the chance to act and function as a free rational agent able to make contributions to the goodness of the world.

But do we really have this opportunity? What if the realization of good results is just beyond our power by adverse circumstance? What if—to put it in Kant's terms—"a stepmotherly nature" does not accord us the resources and opportunities to achieve good things? After all, the world is not designed for our *personal* convenience.

Never mind! The answer here lies in the consideration that contributing to the world's good is not a matter of actual achievement and success in this endeavor.

To be sure, an uncooperative nature may render the realization of opportunities for the good beyond our reach, *but we can certainly try.* And we owe it to the forces and potencies that have afforded us these opportunities—to God if you will permit—to make such an effort. And in this regard, the crucial and benevolent fact is that even merely to try to be a better person is to succeed in making us one. And the critical consideration here is this: *even in merely trying—in setting ourselves to make the effort—we automatically succeed in making the world a better place that it otherwise would be.* Contributing to the good of the world is, in the final analysis, a matter of effort—an actual trying that goes beyond mere good intentions but stops well short of success. In this regard we show our gratitude simply by making an effort, irrespective of the issue of ultimate realization. No misfortune can altogether deprive us of our opportunities for contributing to the world's good.

And so the line of thought at issue here runs as follows: (1) We owe a debt of gratitude to the larger forces at work that have afforded us this opportunity to "strut upon the stage" and play our (small) part in the vast scheme of things. (2) The only effective way to express this gratitude to these powers is by doing what (little) we can to make this world of theirs a better place. And (3) Irrespective of success in achieving this end, even in merely making the effort we automatically make the world better than it otherwise would be.

5. Summary

To summarize. What has been canvassed here is a line of argument that proceeds as follows:

1. No invocation of self-advantage can reach beyond *prudence* to establish actual *obligation*.

2. Nor can moral obligation be rooted in a contract entered into with a view to self-oriented benefits.

3. The only viable source of *moral obligation* is a debt of gratitude in acknowledgement of unmerited benefits—and in specific the benefit of existence.

4. At the level of morality at large this indebtedness cannot be oriented to particular finite agents (e.g., one's parents or fellow citizens), where a finite and limited indebtedness is always involved.

5. It can only directed to the larger creative powers and potencies that have put the boon of actual being—of *Dasein* and actual existence in this world—at one's disposal.

6. In the setting of the deliberations, these larger creative powers and potencies comprise what for other, more traditionally theological points of consideration is called God.

And so, the upshot of these deliberations is the conclusion that in the final analysis, morality must be grounded in God because he is the ultimate source and focus of the *obligatoriness* that is characteristic of morality as such.

6. A Postscript on the Insufficiency of Divine Command Theory

In closing it is instructive to look again to the widely endorsed Divine Command Theory of morality which effectively has it that we should be moral because God commands it.

The fatal flaw of Divine Command theory lies in the circumstance that it "picks up the wrong end of the stick." For the fact of it is not that the acts become wrong through God's forbidding them, but rather that God forbids them because they are wrong. Divine Command theory rightly coordinates wrongdoing and sin with divine prohibition, but goes amiss in having the ground/consequent relationship go awry in putting the cart before

the horse. God's commandments prohibit various misdoings *because* they are wrong in their nature: they do not somehow "wrongify" various otherwise morally indifferent actions. To reemphasize the moral status of acts is not *created* by divine mandate but *ratified* by it.

With any commander, the question invariably arises: Why is it that this commander should be obeyed. In very general terms, the answer here will have to take the form: Because if the commander is not obeyed, something negative results as a consequence. And there are three prime possibilities here:

> (1) *Punishment*. The commander must be obeyed because his injunctions are enforced by force *majeure*. He has the power to exact some sort of penalty for disobedience.
>
> (2) *Misfortune*. The commander has our best interests at heart. In disobeying we cause, or at least risk, incurring a negativity of some sort for ourselves.
>
> (3) *Contractual agreement*. The crux that matters is subordination by compact. The commander must be obeyed because rather in the manner of the volunteer soldier—one has, as it were, signed up for a "tour of duty" under his authority.

It is clear that none of these is applicable in the present case. Let us look at them one by one.

The first of these—the punishment route—is now not available. For surely God is not an arbitrary potentate who exacts obedience by the threat of wrathful punishment.

As to the second route *via* misfortune, there can certainly be no question that divine commands are given in our best interests—individually and collectively. But as already noted this circumstance merely means that we are *well advised* to obey, not that we *ought* to do so in the sense of a moral obligation.

Finally, one cannot root the obligation to obedience in a contract of some sort. For such a compact—a Divine Contract on analogy with a Social Contract—is an unrealistic fiction. The question "When, how, and with whom was this contract made" alone suffices to show that resolution is impracticable.

The best and ultimately only cogent way to ground the obligatoriness of a moral mandate is the route of gratitude. For while we could doubtless be *required* to be moral because of a divine command, we are *morally obligated* to do so not by obedience and subordination, but by a due acknowledgement of gratitude for benefits bestowed and opportunities afforded. And so the crux to the present argumentation is that there are certain facts about morality that

we cannot adequately explain without bringing God with it: specifically that which Kant called "the ignominy of vice"—the fact that immorality is not just ill-advised or regrettable but actually bad, wicked, evil, reprehensible, a matter of monumental ingratitude.

For, to bring a useful analogy to bear, God is the good parent, the father who has "knocked himself out" for us—not only as creator but also (as Christians see it) by sending his only begotten son as redeemer to die on the cross for our salvation. He wants "nothing but the best" for us and moral comportment is an integral part and parcel of this. Like any parent God wants his children to be both happy and good, and knows—as most parents instinctively realize—that the former is not to be had in its fullest realization without the latter. But willful immorality is a deliberate perverse injury to an order of being that has been instituted for our benefit. It is in effect sheer vandalism—the manifestation of monumental ingratitude towards the powers and potencies to which we owe our very being. And, seen in this perspective, God stands at the focus of moral obligation: the key to explaining immorality's reprehensibility and accounting for the fact that evil-doing is not just ill-advised and regrettable, but actually wicked.

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