God and the Moral Law

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IN the final paragraph of *Existentialism and Humanism* J.-P. Sartre makes the following statement:

Existentialism declares that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe that God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God.

This is characteristically cryptic and it is accompanied by neither explanation nor defence; furthermore it appears to be entirely out of key with what goes before it, where Sartre clearly suggests that his belief that there are no moral absolutes and that each man must take final responsibility for his own moral convictions rests upon his belief that there is no God. It is somewhat disconcerting to find on the final page of the book that God's non-existence, which has repeatedly been asserted to make all the difference, in fact makes none at all.

Nevertheless, Sartre's remark does involve an important point, and one, moreover, which is independent of the peculiar metaphysics of Existentialism. This point concerns the precise relationship between God—if He exists—and moral standards—if there are any.

I

It is sometimes maintained that the distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, consist in the fact that God has commanded us to do certain things and to refrain from doing others. Upon this view to say that an act is our duty is to say that God has commanded us to perform it, and to say that an act is wrong is to say that God has forbidden it.

The Good has its basis and its existence solely in the will of God. . . There is no Good save obedient behaviour, save the obedient will. But this obedience is rendered not to a law or a principle which can be known beforehand, but only to the free, sovereign will of God. The Good consists always in doing what God wills at any particular moment.[1]

It is a corollary to this doctrine that had God commanded actions the very opposite of those He has in fact commanded then they, and not the latter, would have been morally obligatory; it is not what God commands but the fact that He commands it which creates our duty. This is a doctrine which

1. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, pp. 53, 83.

appears to be implicit throughout most of the Old Testament[2] and has been made explicit by many subsequent writers.

It would seem that we ordinarily think of moral principles or moral standards as rules of conduct which are binding upon all beings with sufficient mental development to understand them and with sufficient freedom of choice to determine their own actions. However, if a moral rule is simply a divine command what is it which makes it binding upon us? Surely not just the fact that it is enjoined upon us by an omniscient and all-powerful being who rewards obedience and punishes disobedience; this would certainly make it *prudent* to obey, but it is difficult to believe that the moral exhortations of those who have identified moral principles with the commands of God have been nothing but counsels of prudence.

But if there is some better reason than prudence for doing whatever God may command, what is it? It has been suggested that God's commands are binding upon us because He is our creator:

> God made us and all the world. *Because of that* He has an absolute claim on our obedience. We do not exist in our own right, but only as His creatures, who *ought* therefore to do and be what he desires.[3]

God, the argument runs, has created the world with ourselves in it for some ultimate purpose; we, who have some degree of choice in our actions, can aid or obstruct the realization of this purpose by either obeying or disobeying God's instructions to us. And since we were created solely as instruments for the fulfilment of God's purpose we are therefore under an obligation to obey all of God's commands. However, such an argument, although plausible, is not free from difficulties. As Mr. Nowell-Smith points out with reference to the foregoing quotation, the argument requires for its validity the additional premiss that a creature owes obedience to its creator; this premiss is itself a moral principle and one which could not be established by showing that God has enjoined obedience upon His creatures. Nor would it be sufficient to argue that we owe God gratitude for creating and sustaining us since it is not self-evident that we owe obedience to those to whom we owe gratitude.

But surely, it may be said, our obligation to obey God and to assist in bringing about His purposes follows from His moral perfection; God's commands are absolute moral principles because they are the commands of an omniscient and morally perfect being. However, this answer will not do for the following reason. A morally excellent person is, presumably, one who always acts or strives to act in accordance with moral principles and a morally perfect being is, presumably, one who possesses moral excellence in the highest degree. But upon the present account of moral principles to say that God is morally perfect is simply to say that God always acts in accord-

2. Cf. R. J. Z. Werblowsky, "Revelation and the Law of Conduct," *Hibbert J.*, LIV, p. 66: "In this context [Rabbinic Judaism] ethics is reduced to the will of God. It is surely significant that the Bible never speaks of good and evil as such, but it says (or at least means) that which is good or pleasing, bad or displeasing, in the eyes of the Lord."

3. Bishop Mortimer, quoted in Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, pp. 37–38.

ance with His own commands. That is, as soon as we say that God's commands are the *standard* of morality we reduce to triviality the statement that God is morally perfect.

> In saying . . . that things are not good according to any standard of goodness, but simply by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing it, all the love of God and all His glory; for why praise Him for what He has done, if He would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary.[4]

Now we could, of course, decide to use the expression "right action" as synonymous with the expression "action in accordance with God's will"—just as we could and perhaps sometimes do use it as synonymous with "action in accordance with the law of the land." But it seems clear that neither of these uses coincides with the strictly moral use of the expression; we say, for example: "Certainly what you did was right so far as the law is concerned, but was it morally right?" And although most people would agree that whatever God commands is morally obligatory and would perhaps be prepared to say that it is morally obligatory because God commands it, it seems very likely that upon having the distinction explained to them they would say that they meant only that God's having commanded something is an infallible *guarantee* of its moral obligatoriness, and not that "morally obligatory" literally *means* "God-commanded." That is, they would probably say that the statement "God has commanded something wrong" is unquestionably false but that it is not self-contradictory—that there are commands which it would be wrong of God to issue and that in view of His goodness it is quite certain that He never has issued and never will issue them.

There are certain important differences between this "ordinary" view, as I have just outlined it, and the doctrine that whatever God commands is morally obligatory simply because God commands it. If, as we ordinarily appear to suppose, there is a standard of morality by which even God's actions could be evaluated then, since we know that God is morally perfect, we know what to expect of Him. However, on the view that God's commands are themselves the standard of right and wrong we have no such basis for expectation.

> God cannot be obligated to any act. With Him a thing becomes right solely for the reason that He wants it to be so. If God as a total cause were to instigate hatred toward Himself in the will of somebody . . . such a person would not be guilty of sin and neither would God, because He is not obligated to anything.[5]

We may feel certain that God will never instigate such hatred in us, but if we accept the doctrine that whatever God wills is right then our certainty cannot be based on the conviction that it would be wrong for God to do so. And, in general, upon the view under consideration, however immoral

4. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Sect. II. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 25: "There is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris."

5. William of Ockham, *Selections*, Open Court, p. 180.

something may seem to us, however at odds it may be with our deepest moral convictions, this can be no guarantee that God will not command it—and if He were to command it we should have to say that it was right.

It might be objected here that, since God is an eternal being, it is senseless to speak as if there were any danger of our receiving moral shocks from Him in the future. There is something in this objection, but not a great deal. In so far as we can speak intelligently at all of an eternal being issuing commands it would appear that we must not speak of *a time* at which any such command is issued and *a fortiori* must not speak of the possibility of any command being issued at some future time. On the other hand, however, we, as temporal beings, come to know God's commands at definite times, and it may very well be supposed that all of us still have much to learn about God's instructions and purposes. Not only may we say, therefore, that on the view we have been discussing it is quite accidental and not at all the result of moral considerations that God did not enjoin cannibalism and sacrilege on us, but also that there is no guarantee that as we come to know more completely the principles of God's grand design we shall not find them drastically at odds with our own deepest moral certainties.[6]

That there actually is such divergence between human and divine morality has sometimes been advanced as the only cogent solution of the problem of evil. John Stuart Mill's comment upon one such statement deserves to be quoted in full. It had been argued by H. L. Mansel that what is right in the eyes of God may well differ entirely from what seems right to the highest human morality. To this Mill replied:

> If . . . I am informed that the world is ruled by a being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, nor what are the principles of his government, except that "the highest human morality of which we are capable of conceiving" does not sanction them; convince me of it and I will bear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by all the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say in plain terms that I will not. Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing which he shall not do; he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.[7]

II

It must not be supposed that all philosophers and theologians have accepted the doctrine that the ultimate standards of right and wrong or of good and bad are established by "the free, sovereign will of God." As we have already seen, this view is explicitly rejected by Leibniz, who argues that there is some reason for whatever decision God makes; he continues:

6. It may be argued that we are in no danger of such moral shocks, since in practice we would accept nothing as a genuine revelation of God's will which did not conform with our deepest moral convictions. But there would be no justification for this criterion of true revelation if we regarded God's will as the ultimate standard of right and wrong.

7. *Examination of Hamilton*, 4th ed., p. 129.

This is why, accordingly, I find so strange those expressions of certain philosophers who say that the eternal truths of metaphysics and Geometry, and consequently the principles of goodness, of justice, and of perfection, are effects only of the will of God. To me it seems that all these follow from His understanding, which does not depend upon His will any more that does His essence.[8]

But what is meant by saying that the principles of morals follow from God's understanding or that the divine will acts according to the order of wisdom? In seeking a plausible interpretation of these expressions I shall first deal briefly with the position maintained by Richard Hooker.

Hooker's discussion of this question is to be found in the second section of Book I of the *Ecclesiastical Polity*. Here, like Leibniz and St. Thomas, Hooker denies "that of the will of God to do this or that there is no reason besides his will"—as the very heathen have acknowledged, God acts according to law and reason. The law, however, is God's own: it is an eternal law, hence one by which God is Himself lastingly bound, but it is nevertheless a law which God has imposed upon Himself "by his own free and voluntary act." If God were not the author of this law there would have to be some other being "worthier and higher" than God who had imposed the law upon Him. Thus, in spite of his initial denial, Hooker appears to hold a view which differs only to a minor degree from that discussed in Section I of this paper. The minor difference consists in Hooker's assertion that God is subsequently bound by His own law. As to this, however, two remarks may be made: first, if God has originally made the law God may subsequently unmake it unless there is a moral principle more fundamental than God's law, to the effect that such a law once made is endlessly binding; second, if God, as well as His law, is eternal then it apparently makes no sense to speak of His activity at a time subsequent to that at which He imposed the law upon Himself.

There are passages, however, in which it appears that Hooker means by God's law not a set of rules of conduct but the plan or purpose originally adopted by God in creating the world and toward the realization of which the world is directed—"that law, which hath been the pattern to make, and is the card to guide the world by." God's purpose remaining unchanged, all His acts of will are determined by it: "All those things which are done by him have some end for which they are done; and the end for which they are done is a reason of his will to do them." However, although this interpretation makes Hooker's position more consistent, it does not remove the difficulty with which we are concerned. It would be plausible to argue that God's commands to us were morally binding upon us if they were the means for realizing a purpose which was itself objectively good. But Hooker does not appear to employ this argument: he appears to maintain that God

8. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Sect. II. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, Disputations, XXIII de Veritate, 6: "The dictate of will should not be accounted the first rule of conduct, for will is directed by reason and mind, in God as well as in us. To say that justice depends on mere will is to say that the divine will does not act according to the order of wisdom, and is blasphemous."

chooses His ultimate purpose by a "free and voluntary act" and he gives no hint that he conceives a moral standard in terms of which such a purpose could itself be evaluated.

If it is to be maintained that the distinction of right and wrong is independent of God and that His actions and purposes may themselves be evaluated it appears necessary to assert that there is a moral standard which God did not create. Hooker, as we have seen, expressly denies that God can be bound by any law of which He is not the author, but many moralists have disagreed with him. Sir David Ross may be taken as a distinguished representative of the latter group; he says:

> . . . if we suppose that God commands us to tell the truth, we must surely say that He commands it because it is right, not that it is right because He commands it. A theist must recognize that God is in a sense subject to moral, as He is to mathematical law. . . .[9]

What is the nature of such moral law? Ross, like Leibniz, compares it with mathematical law, but the comparison appears, at first glance at least, to be a misleading one. A mathematical law (if it is not, as many philosophers now maintain, simply a tautology) presumably asserts that certain relations hold among entities of certain kinds,—*necessarily* hold, Ross maintains, in the sense that if God creates a world with such entities in it He cannot avoid their standing to each other in such relations. A moral law, on the other hand, appears to be a "commandment," a rule of conduct directing us (and God) to behave in certain ways and to avoid behaving in others.[10] If there is any sort of law with which moral laws may usefully be compared it is juridical rather than mathematical or scientific law; in fact, juridical laws have frequently been maintained to be imperfect and local reflections of moral laws. However, if we do regard moral laws as commandments independent of the will of God we must not think of them as deriving their authority from any author at all, since to do so would, as Hooker points out, involve the notion of a super-God. We must suppose that such laws exist without an author and possess intrinsic authority.

According to Ross the moral law "presents itself to me as part of the nature of things" and I obey it "because I recognize its bindingness in itself."[11] Not only do I do so, but so, presumably, does God. But in what does recognition of the "bindingness in itself" of a moral law consist? Unless this question can be answered the whole account remains obscure. Ross's answer, in so far as he can be said to give one at all, depends on the alleged analogy between moral laws and mathematical laws: moral laws are "self-

9. *Kant's Ethical Theory*, p. 25. It is interesting to find a very similar account by a Thomist: "God's holiness consists in the fact that essentially His will can will only the Good and the Right. Thus it presupposes an eternal standard of all willing which is not subject to the free choice of God. . . ." Cathrein, *Moral philosophie*, I, p. 186. Quoted by Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 586.

10. "The moral law is thought to be a set of commands which all reasonable men who possess the relevant information must concur in giving to themselves and to their fellow men" (W. C. Kneale, "Objectivity in Morals," *Philosophy*, XXV, p. 159).

11. *Kant's Ethical Theory*, p. 60.

evident just as a mathematical axiom . . . is self-evident."[12] Mathematical laws are self-evident in that contemplation of them enables us to see that they could not be false; moral laws are self-evident in that contemplation of them enables us to see that they are binding upon us. But, unless the term "self-evident" means in both cases "self-evidently true," it is simply misleading to say that moral laws are, like mathematical laws, self-evident; it explains nothing and at best merely repeats the assertion that we find them binding. On the other hand, however, if "self-evident," as applied to moral laws, does mean "self-evidently true" then, since we cannot correctly say of a command that it is either true or false, we cannot say that moral laws are both self-evident *and* commandments. (We can, of course, say that it is true or false that such and such a command has been issued, but that is another matter entirely.)

But, it may be said, moral principles do not properly take the form "Do x," "Refrain from y" but rather "X is obligatory," "Y is wrong"—where obligatoriness and wrongness are properties possessed by certain types of actions—and principles of this kind may be true and even self-evidently true. Nevertheless if moral principles are directive of conduct, and this is surely of their essence, then it must either be the case that "X is obligatory," "Y is wrong" *mean* (*inter alia*) "Do x," "Refrain from y," or it must at best be the case that "Do x" and "Refrain from y" *follow from* "X is obligatory" and "Y is wrong." Now if "X is obligatory" *means* "Do x" then "X is obligatory" can no more be said to be true or false than can "Do x"; on the other hand, if "Do x" *follows from* "X is obligatory" without being either part or whole of the meaning of the latter expression, then it must follow in virtue of some such principle as "Do always what is obligatory." But any such principle would itself be a rule of conduct. Rules of conduct thus appear to be an irreducible part of the sort of objective moral order that Sir David Ross envisages, and making the notion of such an order intelligible will involve justifying the claim that there are rules of conduct which are binding in themselves. To this latter task, however, the concept of self-evident truth contributes nothing. But unless it can be shown—and it is difficult to imagine even where such an enterprise ought to begin—that the notion of a rule of conduct which is binding in itself is a valid notion, the relationship between God and the standards of morality must remain essentially obscure.

12. *The Right and the Good*, p. 29.