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MORALITY AND RELIGION

This paper, recently given at a philosophy seminar at London University, discusses the possible relationships between religion and morals. It is concluded that the only possible relationship is one of overlap.

From time to time one hears appeals for more effective religious teaching to stem the tide of immorality. Such appeals assume not only a close connection between morality and religion but argue that they are inextricably joined. Such a view, I believe, rests on a confusion. Attempts have been made to define religion in terms of a list of necessary features that go to make up a 'family resemblance' which will encompass all religions. However, for the purpose of this essay I shall be content with describing religion as a belief in a transcendent being who evokes awe in his worshippers who in turn respond by performing certain acts which together constitute worship. Indeed, even this description could be objected to on the grounds that certain religions, like philosophical Buddhism, seem to dispense with the transcendent altogether. We must further note that religious utterances have a performative function. Thus in saying 'God is our Father' the believer is doing more than stating a fact (if such it is); he is expressing his trust in God. This can be brought out by asking what would it mean for a believer to say, 'God is our Father, but I don't trust Him'. By moral reasoning I mean seeing events and states of affairs in terms of obligation. What ought to be done in specific instances being justified in terms of fundamental moral principles like justice, freedom and respect for persons. How one decides what principle to follow when fundamental principles clash or whether there is any sense in talking about the objective existence of the transcendent outside a religious 'language game' lies outside the scope of this essay.

There are at least three possible ways in which religion and morality could be connected. (1) Religion is a form of morality, (2) Morality is a form of religion, (3) Morality and religion are autonomous disciplines which nevertheless overlap. I shall argue that only the third possibility is defensible.

An example of the first position is found in Professor Braithwaite's Eddington Memorial Lecture where he claims, "the primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles". Thus he argues that the man giving allegiance to Christianity is showing his intention to follow an agapeistic way of life. The doctrinal contents of religions are regarded as 'stories' which may or may not be believed, but which function as a psychological support for following the religion, He writes, "It is an empirical psychological fact that many people find it easier to resolve upon and carry through a course of action which is contrary to their natural inclinations if this policy is associated in their minds with certain stories". For him the different religions differ only in the 'stories' that they entertain.¹

Besides the criticism that Braithwaite fails to take account of aspects in the various religions which go beyond morality, he also fails to note the different roles played by religious and moral language. This is clearly brought out by a consideration of the concept of duty as seen in terms of religion and morality.

Moral duties can be various and differ one from another. Furthermore one duty may be more obligatory than another. With religion, duty to God is all of one piece. The believer does not ask whether one religious duty is more important than another, but whether or not it is God's will. With one's duty to one's fellow it is always possible to define the duty and there is often a cut-off point where one can say 'I have done my duty'. However with one's duty to God this is never possible. Because the believer makes certain claims about the nature of God his religious duty must be qualitatively different from his moral duty. We feel a moral duty because we see someone in need and feel we ought to respond to that need, but God does not need anything from us. This must be so, otherwise, as Kierkegaard observed, "It would be a highly embarrassing thing to be a creator, if the result was that the creator came to depend on the creature". Similarly failure in our moral duties often leads to injury to other people. Even failure to keep one's promise can cause distress. However it is difficult to understand how failure to do God's will can

injure God. The person who suffers is the one who fails to do God's will and many religions teach a way of reconciliation. For the believer this can mean starting again as if nothing had happened. Such an eventuality is often not available to the person who injures another by failing in his moral duty. The offender can be forgiven, but the clock cannot be put back. Of course this does not imply that the same duty cannot be both a moral and a religious duty. The fundamental difference is that duties seen as moral duties are context-dependent (some duties taking precedence over others) but religious duties are absolute; God's commands cannot become of secondary importance without being abandoned altogether.

If religion cannot be subsumed under morality, could it not be that morality is a species of religion? Many have certainly thought so. It has been argued that morality has its objectivity in the revealed will of God who, at least in some religions, is regarded as all-powerful and all-knowing.

This possibility must be rejected for two reasons. First, if such knowledge is revealed we have to be certain that the revelation comes from God and from no other source. This is made more difficult when it is realized that we cannot even prove the existence of God let alone the validity of His purported revelation. More crucial, however, is the problem of why we should assume that what God commands should necessarily be good. Even if it is possible to know that God exists and is both omnipotent and omniscient it does not logically follow that He must be good. In fact the phenomena of religion seem to militate against such a view. We find many instances in religion where immoral practices have been performed ostensibly as the result of divine revelation. Human sacrifices and sexual perversions were practised in ancient pagan religions, widows were burned to death on their husbands' funeral pyres and outcasts despicably treated in Hinduism and even in Christianity the Inquisition, the Crusades and slavery have all been justified in terms of the divine will. If one seeks to counter this by arguing in terms of lack of moral insight, then one is acknowledging that morality is prior to religion. The problem is clearly put by Dr. A.C. Ewing^{3a} "... the simplest and most radical way of making all ethical principles dependent on God would be to say that their validity just depended on their being decrees fixed by the will of God... the question arises why God should command any one thing rather than any other. We cannot say that he commands it because it ought to be done, for that would have to be translated into 'God commands it because

it is commanded by God'. (If however) ... the commands were only issued because it was good that they should be or because obedience to them did good, this would still make judgments about the good, at least, independent of the will of God... If what was good or bad as well as what ought to be done were fixed by God's will, then there could be no reason whatever for God willing in any particular way. His commands would become purely arbitrary, and while the idea of God as issuing arbitrary commands has sometimes been welcomed as a tribute to his omnipotence, omnipotence without goodness is surely an idea of no religious value whatever, and the idea of God would be deprived of all ethical content. For to say that God was good would be just to say he was God: he would be good by definition whatever he should do. Since there was no ethical reason for his commands, God might in that case just as well command us to cheat, torture and murder and then it would really be our duty to act like this". In other words to make ethical principles dependent on God either issues in a tautology (what ought to be done is what God commands, therefore what God commands is what ought to be done) or reduces morality to a form of obedience. The confusion is created by mistaking a metaphysical for an epistemological question. It may be that morality is rooted in God's existence and nature. "But even if it is so rooted, it does not follow that a knowledge of God's existence and nature is necessary to our knowledge of moral (or any other) rules and principles. The epistemological question of the basis of our knowledge of such principles is another matter, and in each case that basis must always be appropriate to the kind of knowledge that is being pursued".⁴

Another consequence would follow from identifying religion with morality. This is that it would be impossible for a non-religious person to be moral. This is surely not the case. Atheists and agnostics know the difference between right and wrong and few would want to maintain that the person who rejects religion is thereby justified in doing as he pleases. Such a position is untenable, at least to biblical Christianity which argues that no one can be excused from obeying the moral law by arguing that they do not know God because God's laws "are written on their hearts, accusing or excusing them" (Rom. 2:14-15).

Of course it could always be argued that religious belief is universal and that atheists really believe in God 'at the bottom of their hearts'. The problem here is to determine what can then be meant by belief in God. If one acts morally by the unbeknown help of God then the significance of religious concern becomes

irrelevant and there will be no way of identifying the divine help outside of the moral life itself.

There is a final line of approach which can be pursued by those who maintain that morality is inextricably linked with religion. It is that a believer must hold that all things, including the laws of ethics, must ultimately depend on God, otherwise God would be limited. This rests on a confusion of the laws of ethics with existing entities. Thus Ewing rightly observes "... we must not confuse laws with existent entities, and when we realize this we can see that we might hold that God created the whole universe without holding that He created the laws of ethics (or of logic for that matter). These laws are just the sort of thing that could not from the nature of the case be created at all... Could they be valid if God did not exist? Well, if God created the whole cosmos, or it is eternally dependent on him, nothing could exist at all without God and therefore without God there would be no being in existence to whom the laws of ethics could apply... But that is not to say that they are made by God as laws and do not follow from their inherent content. Thus it is surely wicked deliberately to inflict pain unnecessarily because of the nature of pain, and not primarily because God decreed that it should be so. On the contrary, if God forbids it, it is because of the inherent nature of the act, from which its wrongness already necessarily follows".^{3b}

It is one thing to deny the identity of religion and morality, but another to maintain they are completely separate. Of course it may be that particular religions have taught moral principles that prove unpopular or incline believers towards a life separate from society. Thus Rousseau claimed that Christianity made people into bad soldiers who showed little concern for their rights and political privileges. Some aspects of religion, such as the doctrine of original sin in its extreme form, lead to a position where moral action is denied to all but recipients of the grace of God. Nevertheless, this doctrine, rightly understood, only emphasizes the dilemma faced by the weakness of the will recognized by theologians and moralists alike that is summarised by St. Paul as "the good that I would I cannot, but the evil that I would not that I do". In fact most, if not all, religions have a moral dimension, but of course not all adherents to the religion faithfully follow its moral precepts. Where we find a developed religion we find that morality takes on a deeper meaning in the light of the religious beliefs. Thus in Christianity a belief in a God who is morally perfect transforms the believer's whole

view of life. In Professor Peter's words, "This is tantamount to saying that a religious person is one who has developed a deeper dimension in his consciousness, which transforms his more mundane experiences".^{5a} In the teaching of Jesus the concept of fraternity is extended beyond race and nation to include the alien and the enemy and thus because the Christian believes in the Fatherhood of God it follows that in Christ there can 'be neither black nor white, rich nor poor, bond nor free because we are all one in Jesus Christ'.

If it is maintained that there is little in the Bible about society and that the emphasis is on the individual, when the answer would be that by the individual application or moral principles social reforms come about. Thus there is no outright condemnation or slavery in the New Testament, but it was the principle explicit in Paul's letter to Philemon that he should receive his runaway slave back "no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother" that led ultimately to the abolition of slavery. The way religion transforms ethical concern is seen in the Christian concept of love which is not only selfless and a shared experience uniting the worshipping community but has its source in the love of God who sent his Son to die for the unlovely and undeserving. In this way also Christianity is able to respond to the problem of pain by seeing God himself involved. As Peters expresses it "... religion, by placing the fact of suffering in a cosmic context, objectifies the particular response to it that is thought appropriate ... By its personification of love it suggests a way which is open to all to face the human predicament with some kind of hope".^{5b}

I claimed at the outset that the identification of religion and morality rests on a confusion. They are not identical but complementary. I would further maintain that, although I do not see how in teaching morality one could be also teaching religion, it seems to make good sense to say that by teaching a person to see the world in terms of God one could also point that person to moral principles that arise from such a world view.

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