

ETHICS AND RELIGION

In his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky writes, “If God is dead, then all things are permissible.” He meant by this that the existence of right and wrong depends on the existence of God; if God did not exist, he is saying, there would simply be no basis for morality and for moral claims. Let us refer to this view as the thesis of religious moralism. Religious moralism has been a popular view among theist¹ and atheist² alike. Many theists, reasoning as follows, have thought it to provide an argument for belief in God:

Obviously, some actions (for example, murder and stealing) are morally wrong and others (for example, helping others and paying one’s debts) are morally right.

Actions can be morally right or wrong only if God exists. (The thesis of religious moralism)

It must be, therefore, that God Exists.

Clearly, though, religious moralism might also be adopted by an atheist who wishes to discount the claims of morality. Such a person would argue as follows:

There is no God.

Actions can be morally right or wrong only if God exists. (The thesis of religious moralism)

Therefore, there are no actions that are morally right or wrong.

¹ *Theist*: One who believes in the existence of a god or gods; especially, one who believes in a personal God as creator and ruler of the universe.

² *Atheist*: One who denies the existence of God.

It is important to notice, in light of the above, that the thesis of religious moralism is not, in itself, a claim about the existence or non-existence of God; nor is it, in itself, a claim about the existence or non-existence or moral standards. It is a theory about the relationship between the existence or moral standards and the existence of God. It simply says that if there are to be moral standards, there must be a God.

We have already seen that religious moralism is held by some atheists as well as by most theists. It is also rejected by some theists, as well as by most atheists. Regardless of one's views about the existence of God, one might believe that moral standards can exist independently of God. Let us call this latter view—the view that moral standards can exist independently of God—'secular moralism'.³ The secular moralist may concede that our moral duties might be different if God were to exist than they would be if God were not to exist. That is, the secular moralist may admit that if God were to exist we would have some special moral duties (perhaps worshiping in a certain way) which we would not have if God did not exist. But the secular moralist insists that not *all* of our moral duties would disappear if God were not to exist. Some moral duties, s/he maintains, exist regardless of whether or not God exists.

Now given what has been said thus far, it should be clear that the dispute between the religious moralist and the secular moralist is a dispute that ought to be of interest both to the atheist and agnostic,⁴ on the one hand, and to theists, on the other. It will be of interest to atheists and agnostics for an obvious reason: if religious moralism is true, the atheist cannot make judgments of a sort that most of us are inclined to make—judgments like “what Hitler did in Nazi Germany was terribly wrong,” for example, or “what Martin Luther King did to desegregate this country was morally praiseworthy.” This is because, if

³ *Secular*: nonreligious

⁴ *Agnostic*: someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of God.

religious moralism is true and all moral standards depend on God's existence, the atheist—who denies that God exists—cannot judge actions as morally right or wrong or morally praiseworthy or blameworthy. If religious moralism is false, on the other hand, then the atheist is not prohibited from making judgments of the sort just mentioned, at least not on the grounds that moral claims cannot consistently be made by those who do not believe in God. Hence, it is obvious that the truth or falsity of religious moralism will be of considerable interest to the atheist (and also, of course, for similar reasons, to the agnostic).

But, one might ask, why should this dispute be of serious interest to the theist? After all, the theist believes in God. If religious moralism is true, the theist can continue to make the same moral judgments s/he has always made. And if religious moralism is false—that is, if some moral standards exist independently of God—then, again, the theist can continue to make moral judgments. For if religious moralism must be rejected in favor of secular moralism, this just means that there is some basis for morality other than God's existence. And the theist is still free to appeal to moral standards.

It would be a serious mistake, though, to believe that the theist has no stake in the issue of religious moralism. This is because there are certain things that some theists have wanted to say *about* God that will be true only if religious moralism is true. And, more surprisingly, there are some things that certain theists have wanted to say about God which are true only if *secular* moralism is true. What you can truthfully say about God will vary, in other words, depending upon the truth or falsity of religious moralism.

For example, many people have wanted to say that God's will is the ultimate source of all moral duties and that there are no standards by which God can be judged. Indeed, according to some of these people, it would be irreverent to suppose that there are moral standards that exist independently of God's will. To admit this would be to allow for the possibility of our morally criticizing God. Clearly, though, if one believes that being the ultimate moral legislator is one of God's properties, one is committed to

religious moralism. Hence, the resolution of the dispute described above will be of interest to anyone who believes that God alone is the source of all moral principles.

Even more interesting is the fact that some theists have felt compelled by their religious views to *reject* religious moralism and to endorse, instead, secular moralism. Why would some theists believe that their religious views were incompatible with religious moralism? The answer is that most theists believe that God is morally perfect—that God is all-good. When people say this, they generally take themselves to be *praising* God. That is, they mean to be saying that God approves of all (and only) those things that are morally good (for example, helping others) and disapproves of all (and only) those things that are morally bad (for example, deceit), *and* that this shows that God is morally virtuous. However, at least if one holds a certain form of religious moralism, it seems impossible to praise God in this way. Suppose, for example, that someone holds the following view of the relationship between ethics and religion:

P₁: All that it means to say that something is morally good is that it is approved of by God.
(And, conversely, all that it means to say that something is morally bad is that it is disapproved of by God.)

Clearly, someone who holds P₁ is a religious moralist, as we have defined that term. But notice that if one holds this view of the relation between religion and ethics, it is not possible to *praise* God by saying that he is morally perfect. This is because if P₁ is true, then all it means to say that God approves of things which are good and disapproves of things which are bad is that God approves of things which are approved of by God and disapproves of things which are disapproved of by God. But this latter claim is an empty tautology;⁵ its truth cannot establish the *praiseworthiness* of God. To make this point clearer,

⁵ *Tautology*: An empty or vacuous statement composed of simpler statements in a fashion that makes it logically true whether the simpler statements are factually true or false; for example, the

consider the following. Suppose that a friend tells you that his father is morally perfect. With some doubt about his claim, you ask him to explain. He replies that his father approves of things that are good, and only things which are good, and disapproves of all things which are bad. Curious now, you say that his father certainly does sound like a good and praiseworthy man, but you would like to know what your friend means by 'good' and 'bad'. He tells you that what he means by 'good' is something approved of by his father and what he means by 'bad' is something disapproved of by his father. Now consider what you know about your friend's father. You have been told that he approves of things that are good and disapproves of things that are bad. Given what your friend means by these words, however, all you know is that his father approves of what he approves of and disapproves of. This claim is utterly trivial and fails to tell you anything about your friend's father that could be the basis of moral praiseworthiness.

In the case of religious moralism, the situation is the same. The defender of P_1 cannot be saying anything interesting about God when s/he says that God is morally good, for according to P_1 all this means is that God approves of what God approves of and disapproves of what God disapproves of. But, of course, we all like the things we like and dislike the things we dislike. God, if S/He exists, is no different from the rest of us in *this* respect. This cannot be a reason for praising God. If saying of God that S/He is all-good is to constitute *praise* of God, the 'good' must mean something other than "approved of by God." That is, P_1 must be false. For reasons like this, many theists have rejected religious moralism and have adopted instead a secular morality. To do so is certainly not to be irreligious.

The thesis of religious moralism, then, is of interest and importance to theists and atheists alike. How, though, do we go about deciding whether this controversial thesis is true? The religious moralist is

statement *Either it will rain tomorrow or it will not rain tomorrow*. (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: Fourth Edition. 2000.)

claiming that no moral theory which is not founded on a religious base is (or, perhaps, could possibly be) an adequate moral theory. We could simply view this as a challenge to the secular moralist. We could proceed to examine secular moral theories. If we were to find one (or more) which is adequate, then religious moralists would have been refuted. But the claims and theories of religious moralists are interesting in their own right, and so deserve more direct attention.

Divine Command Theories of Ethics

Let us begin by looking at one of the most popular versions of religious moralism. It is called *the divine command theory* of ethics. Such a theory, as the name suggests, holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends ultimately upon God's commands (or, generally, upon what God wills). We must characterize divine command theories of ethics more carefully than this, however, or we will run the risk of confusing them with several other views which would be held by most theists whether or not they are religious moralists.

Virtually all theists would agree that one ought to obey God—that is, that one ought to do those things that God commands and refrain from doing those things that God forbids. But believing *this* does not make one an adherent of the divine command theory of ethics. One may, for instance, believe that there is a moral standard independent of God's will that requires us to obey God. This view is similar to the view most people have about obedience to one's parents or to the law. Assuming that one's parents (or the laws of one's country) are reasonable fair and benevolent, many people believe that one has an obligation to obey them. But this is not because it is thought that parents (or the laws of one's society) are the ultimate standard of right and wrong. Rather, it is believed that there are moral duties independent of one's parents (or the laws) and that one of these duties is to obey one's parents (or the laws of one's country). The obligation for a child to obey her parents or for a citizen to obey his country's laws cannot be grounded on the commands of the parent or the law. That would involve circular reasoning. It would

be to say that one has an obligation to obey the law because the law commands you to obey the law. Similarly, if there is to be an obligation to obey God's commands, that can't be derived from God's commands. To do so would be to assume the very thing one is trying to establish—*i.e.*, that there is an obligation to obey God's commands. So, while virtually all theists would accept the view that one has an obligation to obey God's commands, this is not only *not* an instance of adopting divine command theory, it is inconsistent with divine command theory.

Furthermore, one may believe that an action is morally obligatory if and only if God wills it, and still not be a religious moralist for another reason. It is a doctrine of most traditional religions that God is all-good. But if so, then presumably God wants each of us to do those actions which God believes are morally right. If God is omniscient,⁶ then God always knows which actions are morally right and which are morally wrong. In this case, it will be true that an action is morally required if and only if God will that it be done and morally forbidden if and only if God wills that it not be done. But this is not because God's willing that an action be done *makes* it right, but, quite the contrary, because its being right leads God to will that it be done. Clearly, if someone holds this view, he is not a religious moralist and, so, is not holding a divine command theory of ethics.

With these cautions in mind, let us attempt a more precise characterization of the divine command theory. For our purposes, we will understand a divine command theory of ethics as holding the following two claims:

- (i) *The Extensional Equivalence Thesis:* An action is morally right if and only if God wills it and morally wrong if and only if God forbids it; and,

⁶ *Omniscient:* all-knowing.

- (ii) *The Dependency Thesis:* God's willing an act is *the reason* that a morally right act is morally right and God's forbidding an act is *the reason* that a morally wrong act is morally wrong.

The dependency thesis is absolutely necessary if we are to distinguish advocates of divine command theory from other theists who adopt the extensional equivalence thesis on the grounds that God is all-perfect and, so, always wills the best.

Divine command theories are not a recent invention. They have been around in one form or another since people first began to wonder about the basis of moral judgments—since long before Christianity. As one would expect, these divine command theories have drawn criticism from the beginning, from theists and atheists alike. Theists were often worried that such views made the claim that God is all-good into an empty tautology rather than a significant and important statement about God's nature. Atheists have opposed divine command theories because they force atheists to either admit that moral judgments are groundless and unjustified or to give up their atheism and accept a theistic world-view.

In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates considered and criticized a version of the divine command theory in the course of a conversation with a young man named Euthyphro. In this discussion, Euthyphro and Socrates are concerned to discover the nature or essence of piety; but, as we shall see, the issues raised in that discussion apply to the question of the nature or essence of moral rightness in general.

At one point in the discussion, Euthyphro defines piety as "doing whatever is pleasing to the gods." In response, Socrates concedes that pious actions are pleasing to the gods but poses the following question to Euthyphro: Are pious actions pleasing to the gods because they are pious or are they pious because they are pleasing to the gods? If Euthyphro answers that they are

pleasing to the gods *because* they are pious, then there must be something about the actions, apart from the gods' loving them, that makes them pious. In this case, Euthyphro is appealing to some standard of piety independent of what the gods love, and hence he is not really defending the view that piety to be understood in terms of what is pleasing to the gods. Euthyphro rejects this option and insists that pious actions are pious *because* they are loved by the gods. However, this raises another question that Socrates presses Euthyphro to answer: why do the gods love pious actions and not others? On this question, Euthyphro falters and Socrates concludes that Euthyphro has not given us an adequate understanding of piety in terms of what is loved by the gods.

Let's see why, but let's do so by updating the conversation and putting it in terms of moral rightness, instead of piety, and what is commanded by God, instead of what the gods love. Consider Socrates' question would arise in a contemporary discussion of a divine command theory. Suppose that a defender of the divine command theory is asked whether morally right actions are willed by God because they are morally right or whether they are morally right because they are willed by God. Of course, s/he is committed to answering that they are morally right because they are willed by God (the Dependency Thesis, above). But then we must ask, following Socrates' lead, "Why does God will that these actions be done?" Surely God's willing is not capricious or whimsical. If the divine command theorist admits that God's will is not capricious, then there must be some reason for God willing that we perform some actions and abstain from others. For example, God may approve of the actions God does because those actions lead to the greatest happiness of everyone in the long run, or because they show respect for the equal humanity of others, or for any of a number of reasons. But, many have thought that as soon as the divine command theorist *admits* the existence of a reason for God's preferences, she is admitting that there is an independent standard of morality. For the things that God

approves of are valuable and worthy of approval precisely because they have whatever qualities lead God to approve of them. Therefore, we do not need to refer to God's will to explain why certain actions are morally right. They are morally right because they have those qualities which lead God to approve of them. For example, if God approves of helping to alleviate the suffering of innocent children because of the nature of that suffering, then it is the nature of the suffering itself that makes it something we ought to alleviate. On this line of reasoning, moral rightness and wrongness do *not* depend upon God's approval but upon the qualities of an action that cause God to approve or disapprove of it.

Furthermore, if the divine command theorist were correct in saying that moral rightness and wrongness *depend* on God's preferences, he would be committed to saying that *anything* God willed would be morally right. This problem is often exemplified by reference to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. In the Old Testament of the *Bible* it is claimed that Abraham was commanded by God to kill his son, Isaac. Though this order was rescinded at the last moment, the divine command theorist is committed to saying that had God not altered his instructions to Abraham, it would have been Abraham's moral duty to kill Isaac. Now, perhaps given the possibility of heaven and reward in an afterlife, the killing of Isaac would have produced the greatest happiness for all, including Isaac. This might be taken as showing that were God to command Abraham to kill Isaac then it would really be his moral duty to do so. Thus, this is now objection to divine command theory. But suppose that God were to will that all creatures suffer *eternal* torture and that those who have alleviated the suffering of others in this world shall be tortured all the more in the afterlife. Would the act of bringing about the eternal suffering of all creatures then be morally right? The divine command theory forces us to say that it would. It does no good for the divine command theorist to reply that God would never will such a thing. This may be true (though the divine command theorist cannot say that the reason God would not

will universal and eternal suffering is that universal and eternal suffering is morally bad). The question is not, “Would God will such a thing?” but, “*If* God were to will such a thing, would it be morally right?”

Donald C. Hubin
Department of Philosophy
The Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210
614-292-2505
e-mail: hubin.1@osu.edu