DOES MORALITY DEPEND UPON RELIGION?

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I

The expression "philosophy of religion" did not come into general use until the nineteenth century, when it was employed to refer to the articulation and criticism of humanity's religious consciousness and its cultural expressions in thought, language, feeling, and practice. Historically, philosophical reflection on religious themes had two objectives: first, God or *Brahman* or *Nirvāṇa* or whatever else the *object* of religious thought, attitudes, feelings, and practice was believed to be, and, second, the human religious *subject*, that is, the thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and practices themselves. Philosophical analysis of religion is often not welcomed with open arms by systematic theologians in theology. This suggests that the God of philosophers has little or nothing to do with the God of Abraham, Isaac or Shankara and Ramanuja. Theologians say that philosophers are applying their analytic tools to an idol, an exaltation of their construction. Conversely, they hold living God simply not to be susceptible to analytic scrutiny. The mystery of God, as worshipped and adored in the community of faith, is beyond the capacity of human and philosophical mind to analyse which is considered as a tension noted between the philosophers and the theologians.

Philosophy of religion is the philosophical examination of the central themes and concepts involved in religious traditions. It involves all the main areas of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, and philosophy of language, philosophy of science, law, sociology, politics, history, and so on. The importance of philosophy of religion is chiefly due to its subject matter: alternative beliefs about God, *Brahman*, and the sacred, the varieties of religious experience, the interplay between science and religion, the challenge of non-religious philosophies, the nature and scope of good and evil, rebirth, *Karma-phala*, death. At the beginning of the 21st century, philosophy of religion can enhance cross-cultural dialogue. Philosophers of religion now often seek out common as well as distinguishing features of religious belief

and practice. This study can enhance communication between traditions, and between religions and secular institutions.

Ethics is a normative discipline of human conduct, whose main goals are prescriptive and evaluative rather than descriptive and explanatory. Social scientists offer descriptive and explanatory accounts of standards of conduct; ethicists criticize and evaluate those standards. In thinking about standards of conduct, it will be useful to distinguish between *ethics* and *morality*. Morality consists of a society's most general standards. These standards apply to all people in society regardless of their professional or institutional roles. Moral standards distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice, justice and injustice. Many writers maintain that moral duties and obligations override other ones: if I have a moral duty not to lie, then I should not lie even if my employment requires me to lie. Moral standards include those rules that most people learn in childhood, e.g. "don't lie, cheat, steal, harm other people, etc." Ethics is not general standards of conduct but the standards of a particular profession, occupation, institution, or group within society. Question may be raised that why do we have two words in English, what appears to be the same thing. We have two words because; one word is derived from Greek and the other is from Latin. 'Morality' is used to denote the standards or values of a society as they exist 'on the ground', and 'ethics' refers to the critical analysis of those values by people such as philosophers. One may say that morality provides the raw data for the ethicist's deliberations.

Religion and *Dharma*

The term "religion", is originated in Western culture, has a set of various meanings, and is often referred to as an equivalent of the Sanskrit word *dharma*. The word "religion" has equivalents in the Sanskrit terms, like: *dharma*, *īśvarabhaktiḥ, devabhaktiḥ, bhaktiḥ* and *īśvarasenā.* The term *dharma* is defined as, that which is established or firm, ordinance, law; usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty; right, justice virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good works; nature, character,

peculiar condition or essential quality, property, mark, peculiarity; sacrifice; religious abstraction, devotion. The word *dharma* is derived from the root *dhṛ*. Major meanings cover the following:

- to hold, bear, carry, maintain, preserve, keep, possess, have, use, employ, practice, undergo
- to preserve soul or body, continue living, survive (*ātmānam*, *jīvitam*, *prāṇān*, *deham*, *śarīram*, *etc*.)
- to place, bestow or confer on
- to conceive, be pregnant (*garbham*)
- to inflict punishment (*daṇḍam*)
- to draw the reins tight (*praharān*)
- to fulfil a duty (*dharmam*)
- to be firm, keep steady and
- to continue living, exist.

Thus, it is clear that the range of dictionary meanings for the word *dharma* is much broader than that of the term 'religion'. According to Tagore, 'in Sanskrit language, religion goes by the name *dharma*, which in derivative meaning implies the principle of relationship that holds us firm, and in its technical sense means the virtue of a thing, the essential quality of it; for instance, heat is the essential quality of fire, though in certain of its stages it may be absent. […] *Dharma* represents the truth of the Supreme Man'.[1]

II

If we examine the relationship of religion to ethics we actually find two basic problems. a. Does morality depend upon religion? and b. Are religious ethics essentially different from secular ethics? These questions are related but they are not the same. Many religions in the world like Judaism, Christianity are ethical monotheism. They not only promise salvation to the faithful but tie ethical responsibility into the matrix of salvation in a very close way by making the moral life either a necessary condition for God's favour or a consequence of it.

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[1] Tagore, R. (1931). *The Religion of Man* New York: Macmillan Company, PP.141

The question remains: whether moral standards themselves depend upon God for their validity or whether there is autonomy of ethics/morality so that even God is subject to the moral order? In Plato's *Euthyphro* Socrates raises the question, "Is what is holy, holy because God approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?"[1] This question is the beginning of a debate among philosophers and theologians about the foundation of morality. Is an action right (or wrong) because God commands or prohibits it, or does God command (or prohibit) the action because it is already right (or wrong)? According to the Divine command theory, "an action or kind of action is right or wrong if and only if and because it is commanded or forbidden by God."[2] This ethical theory maintains that "what ultimately makes an action right or wrong is its being commanded or forbidden by God and nothing else."[3] An ethics of Divine commands is frequently expressed in terms of right and wrong being determined by the will of God. Thus, without God, there will be no universally valid morality.

While Divine command theory bases morality on *God*, an alternative approach to ethics bases right and wrong on human nature which is called natural law theory. According to natural law theory, the basic principles of morals are objective, accessible to reason, and based on human nature.[4] An action is right if it serves to fulfil human nature, and wrong if it goes against human nature. Our human nature includes various inclinations and tendencies. The task of reason is "to discover, sort out, and order these inclinations in accord with appropriate human fulfilment." Thus ethical views are autonomous and even God must keep the moral law which exists independently like the laws of Logic. Of course God knows what is right but in principle we act morally for the same reason that God does. We both follow

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[1] Janine Marie Idziak (ed.), *Divine Command Morality: Historical and Contemporary Readings* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1980), p. 41.
[2] W. K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 28.
[3] Ibid.
[4] D. J. O'Connor, *Aquinas and Natural Law* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 57.

moral reasons that are independent of God. If there is no God, nothing is changed. Morality is left intact, and if we choose to be moral, we have the very same duties, we would have as theists.

Virtually all religions include a code of moral conduct. In fact, the only feature of religion that comes close to being universal is a practical one: to offer human beings a way to cope with the human condition, particularly suffering and death. Most religions give a diagnosis of the human condition and an explanation for the existence of suffering and death, as well as a remedy for the problem. Moral behaviour as defined by the particular religion is part of the remedy, but each religion teaches that the ultimate goal of moral living is unattainable without the practice of that religion. So not only is morality an intrinsic feature of almost all religions, but most also taught that morality is incapable of standing alone. Morality needs religion. And one respect in which it is said that morality needs religion is that the goal of the moral life is unreachable without religious practice. Some religious philosophers maintain that morality needs religion in at least two other respects: (1) to provide moral motivation, and (2) to provide moral ends with its foundation and justification. These three ways in which morality may depend on religion are logically independent, although we will see that there are conceptual connections among the standard arguments for these positions.

III

What is important here is the way natural law theory makes morality ultimately dependent on God, while giving it sub-ultimate metaphysical grounding and justification in something all humans have in common. It is not necessary, although it is often advantageous, to refer to God's revealed word in order to know what morality teaches and why. The moral law therefore, depends on God only at the deepest level of the metaphysics of morals. The way morality needs God in natural law theory does not threaten the functioning of societies internally nor in their relations with each other. In natural law theory and also in the *Dharmasāśtras*, wrongdoing is a violation of

a law. If the ultimate lawgiver is God, and God is a being with whom the agent has a relationship through the practice of religion, wrongdoing is something more than merely doing what is morally wrong. It is a sin, an offence against God.

All can understand the idea of doing what is wrong even though many believe that every act of wrongdoing is more than mere wrongdoing. We need to be cautious of the idea that when the Christian or a Hindu speaks of "sin" and the nonreligious person speaks of "moral wrong," they are talking about the same thing. It is not just a matter of the Hindu/Christian having distinctive beliefs about the implications and consequences of wrongful acts. One may suggest that the concept of sin and the concept of moral wrong are different concepts, although they are not separate, and Christians or Hindus are able to understand what is meant by morally wrong because of their ability to understand discourse outside their religious community and the extent to which it overlaps with their own. There are concepts analogous to sin such as *avidyā* (ignorance) in *Advaita Vedānta*. And *avidyā* is a kind of ignorance that involves desiring, feeling, and choosing wrongly as well as thinking wrongly.

The question 'why should I be moral' is not obviously a unimportant question, whereas 'why should I care about offending God' is foolish to anyone who understands the context in which such a question would be asked. It seems that the relation between morality and religious motivation is a serious one in modern secular ethics because the thinning process thins out the aspects of moral concepts most directly relevant to motivation. This problem is perhaps most evident in the case of the concept of happiness. It is very difficult to be motivated by the mere concept of that at which all humans aim, whereas it is much easier to be motivated by the shallow concepts of salvation, enlightenment, or Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. The deep the concept, the wider its conceptual applicability, but the price is a reduction of motivational strength.

One of the aims of philosophy of religion is to understand the relation between morality and religion from a perspective outside that of any religion.

This is not to deny that there can be a distinctively Christian philosophy, Hindu philosophy, and so on. But one needs to address the issue of whether morality can be independent of religion and, if so, what it would look like, and that is the distinctive task of the philosopher. There are important arguments that morality needs religion to reach its goal, to provide moral motivation, and to provide morality with its foundation and justification. Let us address the implications for the task of developing a common morality.

IV

One such important arguments that morality needs religion or that moral theory needs theology holds that there is a goal/objective of morality, and that point is inexplicable within a naturalistic, autonomous moral theory. In this class of arguments there are some of the best-known moral arguments for the existence of God. These arguments require the identification of a particular goal of morality, for example, a system of cosmic justice in which the good are ultimately rewarded and the bad are punished, or the idea that there is an end of history, a goal at which all human life aims, that human life is pointless without such a goal, and the goal is unattainable without a supernatural power. Many of these arguments are in the class of transcendental arguments, or arguments that purport to identify the preconditions for the truth of some premise. These arguments begin with a premise giving the content or point of morality, and the argument attempts to show that the truth of such a premise requires the truth of important religious propositions such as the existence of God or *karma* afterlife.

One may find a classic argument of this type in Kantian morality. It is true that Kant accepted the ancient Greek and medieval Christian teaching that all human beings necessarily seek happiness. Where he differed from his predecessors was on the relation between virtue and happiness. The Greeks and medieval philosophers agreed that there is a strong connection between a virtuous life and a happy life, although the Greeks worried about the place of good fortune in happiness and the Christians maintained that the happiness we

seek is not fully attainable in this life. Nonetheless, with some variations, they believed that the ultimate goal or end of moral life is a unitary good in which happiness and virtue are integrated and virtually inseparable. In fact Kant denied that. Virtue and happiness are neither conceptually nor probabilistically connected, according to Kant. They are two different ends. Kant argued that because both virtue and happiness are goods, the highest good, or summumbonum, would be a world in which human beings combine moral virtues with happiness. Thus, it would be a world in which their happiness is proportional to their virtues.

Keeping in mind the idea of highest good, Kant offers the following simple argument for theism. Morality obligates each of us to seek the good, and so it obligates us to seek the highest good. But morality cannot obligate us to seek the impossible. Hence, the highest good must be attainable. It is not attainable without a cause adequate to the effect, which is to say, unless there is a God with the power to proportion happiness to virtue. God's existence is therefore, a necessary condition for the possibility of the highest good, and so it is a necessary condition for our obligation to be moral. The rationale behind Kant's argument is profound even though his description of the highest good is distinctive. What may seem particularly problematic about the argument is that Kant himself creates a problem for value theory and then argues that there must be a God to solve the problem.

Thus, for Kant morality puts an impossible demand on us if there is no God; the Thomistic argument understands nature as structured in such a way that it aims at the impossible if there is no God. The former argues that in the absence of God there is something wrong with morality, whereas the latter argues that in the absence of God there is something wrong with nature. Aquinas, like the Greeks, assumed that nature is orderly and teleological in structure. There would be no point to the existence of natural desires unless they are capable of fulfilment and therefore, the conditions for their fulfilment

reveal important metaphysical truths. In contrast, modern thinkers are generally wary of drawing any conclusions from human needs and desires.

If we believe that our natural human desires cannot be satisfied in this life, the typical response is to conclude that we should change the desires. This modern option displays a remarkable degree of confidence in the power of therapy. Perhaps a less naive alternative is to conclude that life really is absurd. This is the position of an important strand of atheistic existentialist literature which accepts the Thomistic idea that human desires and aims are irremediably thwarted without God, but rejects the premise that human desires cannot be irremediably thwarted.

Camus' essay "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" is a touching depiction of this view of human destiny. It contains the following axiom: "Oh my soul do not aspire to immortal heights but exhaust the field of the possible." Camus' kind of atheism makes an interesting contrast with the atheism of the Enlightenment, which simply rejects the soundness of arguments for theism while attempting to keep the most of the views in traditional ethics. The denial of God's existence is an intrinsic feature of Camus' view of the human condition. The absurdity of life is his price for accepting the major premise of the moral argument for the existence of God. The transcendental arguments focus on the conditions for the meaningfulness of human life.

Let us explain some anti-skeptical arguments arguing that morality obligates only if there is a God that supports Kant's moral transcendental arguments for the existence of God.

1. Morality obligates us, no matter what we think or believe and no matter what we feel or choose. We have no option but to engage in the moral life. Morality obligates us unconditionally.
2. Morality requires us to be motivated to act in moral ways and to act on those motives in the appropriate circumstances. Many moral acts also aim at producing particular outcomes.

3. No one is required to engage in an activity if he/she reasonably judges that he/she is taking a risk that it is pointless or self-defeating and is unable to judge the degree of the risk.
4. Moral life requires some degree of confidence that the effort to be moral is not pointless or self-defeating.
5. Our trust in our moral beliefs, the accuracy of our motivational states and our probable success in reaching moral outcomes is a condition for confidence that the effort to be moral is not pointless or self-defeating.
6. If we are radically skeptic, we cannot have any confidence in the truth of our moral beliefs, the trustworthiness of our motivational states and our probable success in reaching moral outcomes thus, the effort to be moral may be pointless or self-defeating.
7. Therefore, morality does not obligate us unless we have reasons to believe that the skeptical assumptions are false.

Moral obligation requires that there be a guarantor/ sponsor of our trust in our moral beliefs, motives, and success in action. As Kant claims it, we must suppose the existence of a cause adequate to the effect: a Providential God. According to this argument, our motive for being moral is not threatened as long as we believe that there is a God, but morality does not actually obligate us unless the belief is true.

V

Western perspectives of religion maintain that morality arises from God. Natural law theory makes morality rest on God's nature. Divine Command theory makes morality rest on God's will. There is also a theory which is called Divine motivation theory that makes morality rest on the motives that are the primary constituents of God's properties. In each case, the theory may not be committed to the idea that morality needs religion, as it is possible that even though morality in fact derives from God, morality would exist even if there were no God. But if morality derives from God, it depends on God in actuality whether or not morality would have existed in some other

possible godless world. This is the view to be investigated briefly. Other than natural law theory, the principal theory of a theistic foundation for morality is Divine command theory. Divine command theory has a long and important history in religious ethics, although it is often misunderstood.

Morality is dependent on divine commands, but they are dependent on the commands of a deity with a certain nature. If God's nature is not love, morality would fall apart. There is no intrinsic connection between a command and the property of being loving, so to tie morality to the commands of loving God is to tie it to two distinct properties of God. There is no need to solve the problem of whether God could make it right that we maltreat the innocent by making any such modification to the theory, since being loving is one of God's essential motives. The right thing for humans to do is to act on motives that imitate the divine motives. Maltreating an innocent is not an act that expresses a motive that imitates the divine motives. Hence, it is impossible for maltreating the innocent to be right as long as (1) it is impossible for such an act to be an expression of a motive that is like the motives of God, and (2) it is impossible for God to have different motives.

Moral pluralism is a challenge to every kind of moral theory, whether or not it is religiously based. Apart from the issue of the justification of one moral system over others, there is the problem of developing a common morality. It is not important for this purpose that everyone agrees on the foundation of ethics or the substantive goal at which the moral life aims; nor is it important that everyone have the same motive to be moral. It is not even important that everyone think of wrongdoing the same way - as a sin, *pāpa*, *avidyā*, a violation of someone's rights, or something else - as long as they agree on what is wrong, and they only have to agree on that within a certain core area of human behaviour. What are the prospects for a common morality? One based on natural law? Divine commands? Universal reason? It is widely believed that there is virtually no hope for a common morality based on divine

commands. Natural law and Kantian universal reason may both provide some help, but so far with only limited results.

Let us suppose that a wide range of virtues is represented by all or almost all of the moral paradigms in the major cultures, both religious and nonreligious, in different parts of the world, even though there are some differences in the particular acts that are thought to express the virtues. This will help us to find common morality. A common morality would in principle be that morality that derives from the overlapping character traits of moral examples in a wide range of culture. Particular moralities distinctive of individual cultures would include the non-overlapping traits of their examples. Religiously based moralities have an important function to serve in the development of a common morality. In contrast, secular ethics in the Western world differs from religious ethics, not so much in having different examples, but in not having examples at all. This is particularly true of consequentialist and deontological ethics, both of which aim for universality by constructing entire moral systems out of the thinnest of moral concepts. A complete universal agreement is no doubt impossible in any case, but an effective common morality is more likely to arise from dialogue between richly developed religious moralities the most abstract systems. If this is right, religious ethics has an important function in society quite apart from its importance in religious communities themselves.

Religion thus, has an important role in our practical life and this leads to the question of morality, which is intimately connected with religion. Morality implies a system of practical rules of conduct of a human in the light of his/her religion. When a human is filled with religious emotion, he/she may either plunge into an ecstatic state or may feel an inner urge to give expression to it, and it is his moral sense that roused and directs the way through his/her feelings and can glide on. Due to the sweetening of emotions and its purifying influence moral principles of truthfulness, charity, sympathy and love blossom forth in the mind like so many flowers and the religious artist has his/her

greatest satisfaction. Morality is the technique of his self-expression. It gives concrete forms to his/her dreams, helps him/his to actualize his/her vision by practicable details. Morality loses its true significance if separated from religion in a higher sense i.e. spiritual attainment. Theories in social ethics may fail to serve their purpose if not founded on some higher principles i.e. spirituality and religion. Religion merely in the sense of certain beliefs and the observance of some form of rituals is however, different from this.

In a way of conclusion, it can be said that right and wrong do not have to be understood in terms of God's will. Morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not faith. Religious considerations do not provide definitive solutions to many of the controversial ethical issues that we face today. The arguments which are discussed in this endeavour do not assume that Hinduism or Christianity or other theological system is false. They merely show that even if such a system is true, morality remains an independent issue. The religious believer has no special access to moral truth. Believer and nonbeliever alike receive equal powers of reasoning from nature.

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