

Philosophy and Faith

A Philosophy of Religion Reader

Edited by

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rate petitionary prayer can be plausibly argued to fulfill such a role. In the same way, then, God can justifiably make the procurement of various (important) goods hang on believers petitioning God in this way.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What problem about prayer do Murray and Meyers consider? What analogy do they use to present this problem?
2. What do Murray and Meyers mean by “idolatry”? In their opinion, why are prayers of thanksgiving not enough to rid a believer of idolatry?
3. According to Murray and Meyers, how frequently does God make the provision of a good dependent on God’s being asked to provide it? Explain.
4. Suppose that Jones, an atheist, enjoys health, wealth, and good relationships with his wife and children. Smith, a devout believer, lives in poverty and ill health and is pained by her children’s wayward behavior, even though she regularly prays for changes in these conditions. How would Murray and Meyers explain this? Do you find their explanation plausible? Why or why not?
5. Murray and Meyers claim that, if God makes certain goods contingent on persons’ asking for them, those persons are better able to appreciate what God’s will is. How does this process work? How do Murray and Meyers handle the objection that a believer cannot be sure that his or her prayer has led to the event prayed for?
6. According to Eleonore Stump, cited in the essay, petitionary prayer enhances the relationship between God and humans. How?
7. What do the authors mean by “corporate prayer”? Why doesn’t Stump’s account work to explain “corporate prayer”? How do Murray and Meyers explain why God might bring about a person’s being cured of an illness only if another person prays for the other’s health? *Do you think that—given God’s way of operating, according to the authors—God is truly just? Why or why not?
8. *Some philosophers maintain that, in order for a prayer to be regarded as an “answered” prayer, the event prayed for must occur by means of a miracle. If an event can be explained by natural law, the fact that it occurs cannot be regarded as an answer to a prayer, for, in that case, it would have occurred regardless of the prayer. Do you think this argument is cogent? Why or why not? In other words, would petitionary prayer make sense in a universe without miracles?

MORALITY and RELIGION

READING 3.4

Defining Piety

Plato

This selection is from the first half of the dialogue Euthyphro (9e–11b). Euthyphro has defined piety as that which is loved by the gods. Plato has elicited from him a refinement: since the gods disagree, the same act could be both pious and impious, on Euthyphro’s definition. To repair the definition, Euthyphro redefines the pious as that which is loved by all the gods, and that is where the selection picks up the conversation.

In his refutation, Socrates (who speaks for Plato) asks Euthyphro, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” In other words, do the gods love the pious because it has a quality that is separate and independent from their loving it? Or does the gods’ loving certain acts make those acts pious? Euthyphro concurs that the former alternative is correct. Unfortunately for him, in doing so Euthyphro is admitting that there is a standard of piety

independent of the gods' love, and Plato shows that this refutes Euthyphro's definition of the pious as that which is loved by the gods. For if pious means "loved by the gods," then the gods love that which is loved by the gods because it is loved by the gods. This consequence is unacceptable, Plato suggests. Interpreters believe that the problem he sees is that the gods seem to love what they love arbitrarily, without reason.

For contemporary philosophers, the significance of this exchange is that, according to Euthyphro, moral terms must be defined in purely religious ones and cannot be given a secular definition. God's attitudes are all that determines piety. This approach is associated by today's philosophers with the view that right and wrong must be defined by God's commands — **divine command theory**. Plato's refutation offers the important objection that the gods, given this theory, appear arbitrary. (See, however, study question 6.)

- E: I would certainly say that the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious.
- S: Then let us again examine whether that is a sound statement, or do we let it pass, and if one of us, or someone else, merely says that something is so, do we accept that it is so? Or should we examine what the speaker means?
- E: We must examine it, but I certainly think that this is now a fine statement.
- S: We shall soon know better whether it is. Consider this: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?
- E: I don't know what you mean, Socrates.
- S: I shall try to explain more clearly: we speak of something being carried¹ and something carrying, of something being led and something leading, of something being seen and something seeing, and you understand that these things are all different from one another and how they differ?
- E: I think I do.
- S: So there is something being loved and something loving, and the loving is a different thing.
- E: Of course.
- S: Tell me then whether that which is being carried is being carried because someone carries it or for some other reason.
- E: No, that is the reason.
- S: And that which is being led is so because someone leads it, and that which is being seen because someone sees it?
- E: Certainly.
- S: It is not seen by someone because it is being seen but on the contrary it is being seen because someone sees it, nor is it because it is being led that someone leads it but because someone leads it that it is being led; nor does someone carry an object because it is being carried, but it is being carried because someone carries it. Is what I want to say clear, Euthyphro? I want to say this, namely, that if anything comes to be, or is affected, it does not come to be because it is coming to be, but it is coming to be because it comes to be; nor is it affected because it is being affected but because something affects it. Or do you not agree?
- E: I do.
- S: What is being loved is either something that comes to be or something that is affected by something?

¹This is the present participle form of the verb *pheromenon*, literally *being-carried*. The following passage is somewhat obscure, especially in translation, but the general meaning is clear. Plato points out that this participle simply indicates the object of an action of carrying, seeing, loving, etc. It follows from the action and adds nothing new, the action being prior to it, not following from it, and a thing is said to be loved because someone loves it, not vice versa. To say therefore that the pious is being loved by the gods says no more than that the gods love it. Euthyphro, however, also agrees that the pious is loved by the gods because of its nature (because it is pious), but the fact of its being loved by the gods does not define that nature, and as a definition is therefore unsatisfactory. It only indicates a quality or affect of the pious, and the pious is therefore still to be defined (11a7). [Translator's note]

- E: Certainly.
- S: So it is in the same case as the things just mentioned; it is not loved by those who love it because it is being loved, but it is being loved because they love it?
- E: Necessarily.
- S: What then do we say about the pious, Euthyphro? Surely that it is loved by all the gods, according to what you say?
- E: Yes.
- S: Is it loved because it is pious, or for some other reason?
- E: For no other reason.
- S: It is loved then because it is pious, but it is not pious because it is loved?²
- E: Apparently.
- S: And because it is loved by the gods it is being loved and is dear to the gods?
- E: Of course.
- S: The god-beloved is then not the same as the pious, Euthyphro, nor the pious the same as the god-beloved, as you say it is, but one differs from the other.
- E: How so, Socrates?
- S: Because we agree that the pious is beloved for the reason that it is pious, but it is not pious because it is loved. Is that not so?
- E: Yes.
- S: And that the god-beloved, on the other hand, is so because it is loved by the gods, by the very fact of being loved, but it is not loved because it is god-beloved.
- E: True.
- S: But if the god-beloved and the pious were the same, my dear Euthyphro, and the pious were loved because it was pious, then the god-beloved would be loved because it was god-beloved, and if the god-beloved was god-beloved because it was loved by the gods, then the pious would also be pious because it was loved by the gods; but

now you see that they are in opposite cases as being altogether different from each other: the one is of a nature to be loved because it is loved, the other is loved because it is of a nature to be loved. I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet told me what the pious is. Now, if you will, do not hide things from me but tell me again from the beginning what piety is, whether loved by the gods or having some other quality—we shall not quarrel about that—but be keen to tell me what the pious and the impious are. . . .

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the two alternatives Plato presents to Euthyphro: do the gods love the pious because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?
2. Which of the alternatives in question 1 does Euthyphro agree to? Why?
3. Explain the analogies Socrates brings up: being carried, being led, being seen.
4. How does Socrates refute Euthyphro's definition based on Euthyphro's answer to the question in question 1?
5. *In what way does Socrates's rejection of Euthyphro depend on a particular conception of the gods as wise and rational? How would a conception of the gods as powerful possibly breed a different conclusion? (On this, see also Reading 3.5.)
6. *Philosophers usually say that Euthyphro maintains that *right* and *wrong* must be defined in terms of God's will. However, the term *pious* has a religious connotation. How might this point undermine the philosophers' understanding of Euthyphro's position?

²I quote an earlier comment of mine on this passage: ". . . it gives in a nutshell a point of view from which Plato never departed. Whatever the gods may be, they must by their very nature love the right because it is right." They have no choice in the matter. "This separation of the dynamic power of the gods from the ultimate reality, this setting up of absolute values above the gods themselves was not as unnatural to a Greek as it would be to us. . . . The gods who ruled on Olympus . . . were not creators but created beings. As in Homer, Zeus must obey the balance of Necessity, so the Platonic gods must conform to an eternal scale of values. They did not create them, cannot alter them, cannot indeed wish to do so." (*Plato's Thought*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 152–3.) [Translator's note]

Divine Command Morality

Janine Marie Idziak

*In this selection, Janine Marie Idziak (Loras College) gives a brief survey of the considerations that, through the centuries, have led philosophers either to hold that morality is dependent directly and solely on God's commands or to deny this dependence. Those who espouse a **divine command theory** of ethics stress certain characteristics of God — **omnipotence** and **liberty**, for example — along with the dependency of everything on God. Those who reject divine command theory argue that God's commands and prohibitions seem, according to those theories, arbitrary; if God were to command killing and cruelty, these actions would have to be regarded as right. The critics maintain as well that the acceptance of divine commands requires a prior moral standard. These are but a few of the many arguments Idziak considers.*

... Generally speaking, a "divine command moralist" is one who maintains that the content of morality (i.e., what is right and wrong, good and evil, just and unjust, and the like) is directly and solely dependent upon the commands and prohibitions of God. ...

THE RATIONALE OF DIVINE COMMAND MORALITY

Divine command ethics has been the subject of much criticism both historically and in the recent literature. The intensity of this criticism emphasizes the question why such an ethical theory should be proposed and maintained. The literature on divine command morality suggests considerations having to do with the nature, status, and activity of God as the rationale for this ethical position.

(1) *Divine Command Morality Is a Correlate of the Divine Omnipotence.* This line of thought has been attributed to divine command moralists by critics of the position. After mentioning the **scholastic** divine command moralists, Ralph Cudworth asserts that "this doctrine hath been since chiefly promoted and advanced by such as think nothing so essential to the Deity, as uncontrollable power and arbitrary will, and therefore that God could not be God if there should be any thing evil in its own nature which he could not do." ... More recently, D. Goldstick has

claimed that a theist is in the position of affirming, with respect to any divinely-willed code of behavior, that "its moral rightness follows necessarily from its being willed by somebody omnipotent." ...

(2) *Divine Command Ethics Is Involved in the Divine Liberty.* This point comes out quite clearly in Jean Gerson's *On the Consolation of Theology*, in a passage which we will subsequently discuss.

(3) *Divine Command Ethics Recognizes the Importance of the Divine Will.* We list this consideration with reservation. It may be the intended meaning of the second part of Cudworth's assertion, quoted in (1), that divine command morality was espoused "by such as think nothing so essential to the Deity, as uncontrollable power and arbitrary will." On the other hand, the phrase "arbitrary will" may simply be a reference to the divine liberty.

(4) *Divine Command Morality Must Be Espoused in the Realm of Ethics Because There Cannot Be Anything Independent of God.* Again, this view has been ascribed to divine command moralists by critics of the position. Thus A. C. Ewing states that "most theists by no means like the idea of something independent of God limiting him," and suggests that "it is for this reason chiefly that the laws of ethics have been said to be dependent on God." Within the historical literature, one finds Ralph Cudworth claiming that Descartes espoused divine command ethics for the reason that "if the natures and essences of things should not depend upon the will

of God, it would follow from hence, that something that was not God was independent upon God." ...

(5) *Divine Command Ethics Is Related to Man's Dependency on God as Creator.* This is suggested by John Locke in his *Essays on the Law of Nature*. According to Locke, "it is proper that we should live according to the precept of His [God's] will" because "we owe our body, soul, and life—whatever we are, whatever we have, and even whatever we can be—to Him and to Him alone." In other words, since "God has created us out of nothing and, if He pleases, will reduce us again to nothing," we are, Locke suggests, "subject to Him in perfect justice and by utmost necessity."

(6) *Divine Command Ethics Satisfies the Religious Requirement That God Be the Supreme Focus of One's Loyalties.* This reason for being a divine command moralist has recently been suggested by Robert Merrihew Adams, who proposes that "If our supreme commitment in life is to doing what is right just because it is right, and if what is right is right just because God wills or commands it, then surely our highest allegiance is to God."

(7) *Divine Command Ethics Is Grounded in God's Graciousness to Man in Jesus Christ.* According to the divine command moralist Karl Barth, the basis of God's ethical claim on man lies in the fact that: "God has given us Himself." In other words, it lies in the fact that "Although He could be without us—He did not and does not will to be without us"; in the fact that "He has taken our place and taken up our cause." ...

CRITICISM OF DIVINE COMMAND MORALITY

... [C]ontemporary philosophers trace the criticism of this ethical position back to Plato's *Euthyphro*.¹ The objections which have been raised against divine command morality are diverse in character.

(1) *The acceptance of divine commands as the criterion of what we ought to do requires a prior moral standard.* This line of attack carries ... the

¹[See Reading 3.4—Ed.]

implication that morality cannot be fundamentally dependent on God and his commands, as divine command morality claims. Patterson Brown has replied to this criticism by pointing out ways, other than moral reasoning, in which ethical standards (including divine command morality) can be acquired.

(2) *In using divine command morality to determine what we ought to do, it is necessary to resort to some other ethical principle to know what it is that God commands; thus divine command morality is in effect useless as an ethical standard.* This criticism of divine command ethics was made by Jeremy Bentham. ... Bentham claims that the revelations of the divine will contained in Scripture stand in need of interpretation, which process of interpretation, carried on by the Church, he believes to involve ethical standards other than divine command morality. Finally, Bentham seems to discount the viability of personal revelation as a source of knowledge of divine commands in claiming that "God ... confessedly does not now either speak or write to us."

[A] line of reply to Bentham has recently been developed by Philip L. Quinn. Quinn contends that, even if Bentham is correct in his claim that the only way we can come to know God's will is by first determining what is right, divine command morality need not be considered useless. For, according to Quinn, "ethical theories can perform other functions besides teaching us exactly where our duties lie." Specifically, Quinn suggests that "it would be theoretically interesting to find out that divine commands are **necessary and sufficient** causal conditions for moral obligations and prohibitions, regardless of the **epistemic** difficulties involved in scrutinizing the divine will."

(3) *Divine command ethics makes morality dependent on a divine choice that is arbitrary.* A. C. Ewing has recently argued this point for the **metaethical** variety of divine command morality; this criticism has also been mentioned by the twentieth century theologian Carl F. Henry. Historically, one finds Ralph Cudworth describing divine command ethics as the view that "the arbitrary will and pleasure of God" constitutes the rule of good and evil. ... [T]his criticism does seem to have a foundation in certain statements of Luther and

Calvin which are indicative of an ethics of divine commands.

Two types of reply have been made to this objection to divine command morality. Patterson Brown has developed a response based on the fact that "God is . . . defined as perfect in knowledge, justice and love." Thus Brown claims that God would "by definition will in accord with these several attributes" so that "the result would be anything but arbitrary." Heiko Oberman, on the other hand, has suggested a response which could be made on behalf of at least some scholastic divine command moralists that involves the concept of the divine simplicity:

. . . At this point, however, we must remember Boehner's defense of [William of—Ed.] Occam mentioned earlier: the set order is for the *Venerabilis Inceptor* ["the venerable beginner," referring to Ockham—Ed.] by no means a product solely of God's will; will and intellect are two different names for God's essence. . . . Against the **Thomistic** emphasis on the priority of God's intellect, the priority of God's will is not stressed as much as the simplicity of God's being and the resulting unity of his intellect and **essence**. As the simplicity of God's being also implies a unity of essence and will, God's very essence guarantees the unbreakable relation and cooperation of intellect and will in God's *opera ad extra* [acts vis-à-vis the external world—Ed.] . . . [Gabriel—Ed.] Biel constantly tries to make clear that, whereas the will of God is the immediate cause of every act, these acts are certainly no arbitrary products of God's will alone. On the contrary, God's will operates according to God's essential wisdom, though this may be hidden from man.

. . . Finally, it should be pointed out that the particular variety of divine command morality espoused by [Nathaniel] Culverwell and by John Locke in his *Essays on the Law of Nature* can be seen as an attempt to avoid the objection of arbitrariness. For, while regarding "obligation" as dependent upon the divine will, they believe God to will in accord with the "nature of things."

(4) *God could command actions to be performed which are abhorrent and obviously immoral in character; such as murder and pointless acts of cruelty;*

if divine command morality were correct, such actions would have to be regarded as right. This line of argument against divine command ethics . . . has a foundation in the divine command moralist William of Ockham, . . .

It has been suggested, however, that this criticism fails in not taking into account the fact the God who does the commanding also possesses such qualities as being "loving" and "benevolent." This line of reply has been . . . most forcefully developed by Robert Merrihew Adams.

(5) *Divine command morality reduces ethics to a matter of power.* This objection . . . could be regarded as a response to one of the reasons offered for divine command morality, namely, that this ethical position is required by the divine omnipotence.

(6) *Divine command ethics represents an infantile form of morality, in that it is deontological and heteronomous in character.* This criticism of divine command morality has been proffered by P. H. Nowell-Smith. . . .

(7) *Divine command morality is theologically unacceptable because it does not permit a coherent account of the moral attributes of God to be formulated.* . . . [Robert Merrihew] Adams formulates the problem in this way:

. . . It is doubted that God, as an agent, can properly be called "good" in the moral sense if He is not subject to a moral law that is not of His own making. For if He is morally good, mustn't He do what is right *because* it is right? And how can He do that, if what's right is right because He wills it? Or it may be charged that divine command theories trivialize the claim that God is good. If "X is (morally) good" means roughly "X does what God wills," then "God is (morally) good" means only that God does what He wills—which is surely much less than people normally are taken to mean when they say that God is (morally) good.

Adams responds to this criticism by suggesting a meaning for the statement "God is good" which he believes to be compatible with divine command morality. Specifically, Adams suggests that when a divine command moralist claims that God is good, he is (a) expressing a favorable emotional attitude toward

God, and (b) ascribing to God certain qualities of character regarded as virtuous, such as kindness, benevolence, faithfulness, a forgiving disposition, or love. Moreover, Adams defends his proposal by arguing that the attitudinal and descriptive elements involved in his analysis of "God is good" are also part of the meaning of ascriptions of goodness to human beings.

[Philip L.] Quinn broadens the criticism discussed by Adams by calling into question the possibility of a divine command moralist attributing any moral virtue to God:

. . . If we adopt one of the stronger divine command theories and suppose that only divine commands impose moral requirements on us, then obedience to God is a fundamental human virtue. . . . Other moral virtues will then be such that exercising them will entail being obedient to God. Thus, for example, temperance will be the disposition to obey those divine commands which require us to refrain from excesses of certain sorts. And courage will be the disposition to obey those divine commands which require us to act bravely in certain hazardous situations.

But, within this framework, the divine command theorist does not seem to be able to speak coherently of God having moral virtues. For it is very odd, and perhaps unintelligible, to suppose that God, or anyone else for that matter, commands himself to do certain things and then obeys the commands he has addressed to himself. If a certain man is captain of a ship, then the crew is under his command, and he may command them and they must obey him. But he does not command himself. The admiral of the fleet addresses commands to him, and he must obey the admiral's commands. No one, then, is in a position to issue commands to God or to exact obedience from him. . . . Since no one, not even God, could be correctly said to obey or to disobey an imperative which did not originate from a source apart from himself, it is not possible for God, or for anyone else, to address commands to himself. But then, given our assumptions, since God cannot have the virtue of being obedient to God, he cannot possess any of the other human moral virtues.

And, as Quinn points out, "if God cannot have moral virtues, then it would seem that he cannot have those

moral excellences which are logically necessary conditions for being worthy of worship."

Quinn's strategy of reply consists in describing divine *analogues* for human moral virtues. To take a very simple case, Quinn suggests that divine love might consist in unselfish concern for the welfare of the recipient, in which it resembles the virtue of human love; at the same time, God's love would lack two properties appropriate to human love, namely, the properties of "being commanded by God" and concomitantly of "being a moral virtue." Somewhat more complex accounts of divine analogues for the human virtues of forgiveness, mercy, and justice are also developed by Quinn.

(8) *Divine command morality is destructive of Christian beliefs about God's relationship with men.* Historically, this criticism of divine command morality was proposed by Joseph Glanvill, who found it suggested by George Rust's *A Discourse of Truth*. Glanvill believes that if morality is independent of God and reflective of the *nature of things*, there are restrictions on what God can do, viz., God "cannot lye, cannot deny himself. . . . cannot act any thing that is Evil or imperfect." On the other hand, he claims that "if there be no immutable respects in things, but Just and Unjust, Honourable and Dishonourable, Good and Cruel, Faithful and Deceitful, are respects made by mere arbitrary Will," then God could fail to abide by his promise to save those who commit themselves to Jesus Christ. Indeed, Glanvill claims that the dependency of morality on God allows for the possibility that God himself [causes] men to sin in order to assure their damnation.

(9) *Morality cannot depend solely on divine commands since nothing can be good, just, or the like, without possessing the nature (i.e., defining properties) of goodness, justice, etc.* This criticism is proffered by Ralph Cudworth. . . . Philip L. Quinn has perceived in Cudworth's point the claim that there are *necessary truths* about obligations and prohibitions, a claim which cannot be accepted by anyone who makes morality directly and solely dependent upon divine commands.

(10) *Linguistic considerations show the metaethical variety of divine command morality to be incorrect.* Specifically, the *open question argument* can

be used against definitions of moral concepts in terms of divine commands: If, e.g., the term "good" means "commanded by God," then the question "Is what God commands good?" ought to be redundant and senseless; since it is a meaningful question, the proposed definition must be wrong. A related form of argument consists in pointing out that, if divine command morality as a metaethical thesis were correct, then certain propositions (such as "God's actions are right") would be **tautologous**, insignificant, or meaningless, which they are not. . . .

Two replies to this line of argument are mentioned in the literature on divine command morality. First of all, it has been suggested that a theist might claim that definitions of moral concepts in terms of divine commands are not intended to reflect ordinary usage but constitute more adequate, **stipulative definitions** embodying the insights of the man of faith. In this way divine command **metaethics** would stand untouched by the linguistic arguments proffered against it, since these arguments are grounded in common usage. This possible move on the part of the divine command moralist has been mentioned by Kai Nielsen, who argues against it on the grounds that it both begs the question and trivializes the position of the divine command moralist.

Historically, another approach to the problem was taken by William Paley. It is claimed by Paley that divine command ethics allows for the derivation of secondary rules for judging moral situations. In

fact, Paley believes that we come to use these secondary rules without thought of their origin, so that we may even judge God himself according to them. And it is this situation which accounts for the linguistic cases which seem to refute divine command metaethics.

(11) *Divine command metaethics fails in either reducing ethical statements to merely factual ones or in producing a circular definition.* This criticism has been made by A. C. Ewing, who believes the same point to be applicable to **naturalistic** definitions of ethical terms.²

In considering criticisms of divine command morality, mention should also be made of an alternative interpretation of evidence which seems to support divine command ethics. Specifically, it might be pointed out in favor of divine command morality that there are cases in which divine commands are acknowledged to create obligations which did not previously exist (e.g., if God should command person (or group) X not to eat a certain kind of food, or to move to a certain locality, or to take up a particular vocation). Both Ralph Cudworth and Richard Price, however, have argued that this sort of situation should be interpreted in the following way: Just as the laws of a civil government or the act of promising make actions obligatory which were not such before, but only because of an antecedent obligation to obey legitimate authority and to keep promises; so God's commands can create new obligations

²[Ewing writes:

. . . why obey God's commands? Because I ought to do so. Since 'I ought to do A' is held to mean 'God commands me to do A,' this can only mean that I am commanded by God to obey God's commands, which supplies no further reason whatever. Because God is good? This could only mean on the definition given that God carries out his own commands. Because I love God? This presupposes two propositions as to what I ought to do which could not without a vicious circle be validated by referring again to God's commands, i.e. that I ought to obey the commands of God if I love him and that I ought to love God. . . . Without a prior conception of God as good or his commands as right God would have no more claim on our obedience than Hitler or Stalin except that he would have more power than even they had to make things uncomfortable for those who disobey him. It is only because the notion of God (for Christians at least) already includes the notion of perfect goodness that we are inclined to think it self-evident that we ought to obey God.

He continues:

If God is not conceived as good in a specifically ethical sense but 'good' functions just as an adjective to mean 'what God wants', ethics is reduced to a mere prudent subservience to superior power; if on the other hand in the definition of good or right as willed by God goodness in a properly ethical sense is already presupposed, the definition is a circular one and leaves undefined some fundamental ethical term. As we can find no necessary relation between goodness and obligation on the one hand and the alleged **naturalist** definitions on the other, so we can find no necessary relation between being commanded or willed by God and being obligatory or good, unless we already assume the goodness of God, thus exposing ourselves to the charge of being guilty of a vicious circle, since we should have defined both God in terms of goodness and goodness in terms of God. . . .

—Ed.]

because of another obligation we have to obey the divine authority, which obligation is not itself dependent on God. In this way an important facet of religious tradition can be preserved without resorting to divine command morality.

Finally, we wish to mention a consideration which, while not directly a criticism of divine command morality, is a caution regarding it. This consideration concerns the recent proposal of some moral philosophers that not just anything can count as a moral standard. In other words, it has been claimed that there are certain characteristics which serve to define the realm of the moral and to distinguish it from the non-moral, and concomitantly, that any norm or set of norms must possess the properties in question in order to qualify as a *moral* system. This position carries the implication that, if God's commands are to constitute a morality properly speaking, these commands must be of such a nature as to satisfy the restrictions we place on possible moral standards. . . .

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain the considerations Idziak mentions in favor of a divine command theory of ethics. *Which ones, if any, do you not find convincing? Why?
2. Explain the considerations Idziak mentions against a divine command theory of ethics. *Which ones, if any, do you not find convincing? Why?
3. Divine command theorists stress God's power and liberty. But God has other attributes, such as wisdom. What implication does this point have vis-à-vis divine command morality? (Think here of Plato's argument in Reading 3.4.)
4. *Divine command theorists argue that nothing can be independent of God; therefore, in particular, no ethical standard can exist independently of God. What does this argument seem to suggest with regard to whether truths of logic and mathematics are dependent on God? Does this implication strike you as correct?
5. *John Locke argues that, because "we owe our body, soul and life" to God, we are completely subject to God's commands. Some critics would charge that Locke's argument is inconsistent, because it itself rests on a moral principle that is independent of God's will. What principle do you think these critics would be referring to?

6. *According to divine command theory, if God were to command people to torture innocent children for fun, people would be morally obligated to do so. Critics think this result is damaging to the theory. How does the fact that God has qualities such as being loving provide a possible reply to this objection?

7. Idziak notes that, on a divine command theory, we cannot give a coherent account of God's moral attributes. God could not possess moral virtues. Why?

READING 3.6

The Binding of Isaac

Genesis 22

*In Genesis 22, God commands Abraham to go up Mount Moriah and offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering. The episode is particularly poignant because Abraham's wife, Sarah, did not give birth to Isaac until the couple were elderly, and Abraham had invested all hopes of an heir in Isaac. (Shortly before the command, his other son, Ishmael, born to Hagar, had left his household.) Abraham binds Isaac and prepares him for the sacrifice; however, just as he is about to slaughter Isaac with a knife, an angel of God tells him to stay his hand because he has by now proved that he is a God-fearing person. Søren Kierkegaard viewed Abraham's willingness to comply with the command as an example of morality overriding God's command. The episode is often referred to by the Hebrew term **akedah** (binding).*

Superscripts in this selection are verse numbers, not footnote numbers.

¹And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: 'Abraham'; and he said: 'Here am I.' ²And He said: 'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.' ³And Abraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. ⁴On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. ⁵And Abraham said unto his young men: 'Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come back to you.' ⁶And Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they went both of them together. ⁷And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said: 'My father.' And he

said: 'Here am I, my son.' And he said: 'Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' ⁸And Abraham said: 'God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So they went both of them together. ⁹And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. ¹⁰And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' ¹²And he said: 'Here am I.' And he said: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me.' ¹³And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son. ¹⁴And Abra-

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Relate the episode of the binding of Isaac.
2. What is your reaction to Abraham's willingness to obey God?
3. *In Genesis 18:20–33, when God threatens to destroy the city of Sodom because of its inhabitants' wickedness, Abraham pleads with God not to destroy the innocent together with the guilty, and God eventually agrees to spare the city if ten righteous people can be found there. Why would Abraham question God in that episode but agree to kill his son without protest or pleading?

READING 3.7

Suspending the Ethical

Søren Kierkegaard

*Danish existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), one of the major figures in philosophy of the past two centuries, construes the conflict that Abraham faces in the binding of Isaac as a clash between morality and religion. Ethically, Abraham's action (were he to kill Isaac) would be termed murder, but the religious term would be sacrifice. By choosing to obey God's command, Abraham engages in a **teleological suspension of the ethical** and thereby becomes a knight of faith. The ethical is the universal that applies to everyone (as in Immanuel Kant's philosophy). Abraham's faith is paradoxical, for he surrenders himself to the universal yet suspends it to become a singular individual. Abraham's faith cannot be communicated and is "faith by virtue of the absurd." Abraham had faith that God would not command that he kill Isaac and that he would be blessed with children, but he was willing to obey God's command to kill his son.*

Kierkegaard's view should not be confused with Euthyphro's position that morality has no validity independently of God's will. On the contrary, it is the validity and bindingness of morality that creates the conflict with God's command. In general, Kierkegaard did not deny the value of endeavors such as science, history, art, and morality, but he insisted on keeping religious commitment distinct from and, at times, opposed to these endeavors.

... The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is. Or if Abraham perhaps did not do at all what the story tells, if perhaps because of the local conditions of that day it was something

entirely different, then let us forget him, for what is the value of going to the trouble of remembering that past which cannot become a present. Or perhaps the speaker forgot something equivalent to the ethical oversight that Isaac was the son. In other words, if faith is taken away by becoming *Nul* and *Nichts*, all that remains is the brutal fact that Abraham meant to murder Isaac, which is easy enough for anyone to

imitate if he does not have faith—that is, the faith that makes it difficult for him. . . .

I wonder if anyone in my generation is able to make the movements of faith? If I am not mistaken, my generation is rather inclined to be proud of doing what it probably does not even believe me capable of—that is, the imperfect. My soul balks at doing what is so often done—talking inhumanly about the great, as if a few centuries were an enormous distance. I prefer to speak humanly about it, as if it happened yesterday, and only let the greatness itself be the distance that either elevates or judges. If I (*in the capacity of tragic hero*, for higher I cannot come) had been ordered to take such an extraordinary royal journey as the one to Mount Moriah, I know very well what I would have done. I would not have been cowardly enough to stay at home, nor would I have dragged and drifted along the road or forgotten the knife in order to cause a delay. I am quite sure that I would have been punctual and all prepared—more than likely, I would have arrived too early in order to get it over sooner. But I also know what else I would have done. The moment I mounted the horse, I would have said to myself: Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy—yet God is love and continues to be that for me, for in the world of time God and I cannot talk with each other, we have no language in common. Perhaps someone in our time would be so foolish, so envious of the great, as to want to delude himself and me into believing that if I had actually done this I would have done something even greater than what Abraham did, for my immense resignation . . . would be far more ideal and poetic than Abraham's small-mindedness. But this is utterly false, for my immense resignation would be a substitute for faith. I would not be able to do more than make the infinite movement in order to find myself and again rest in myself. Neither would I have loved Isaac as Abraham loved him. That I was determined to make the movement could prove my courage, humanly speaking—that I loved him with my whole soul is the presupposition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed—nevertheless I would not love as Abraham loved, for then I would have held back at the very last minute, without, however, arriving

too late at Mount Moriah. Furthermore, by my behavior I would have spoiled the whole story, for if I had gotten Isaac again, I would have been in an awkward position. What was the easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me—once again to be happy in Isaac!—for he who with all the infinity of his soul, *proprio motu et propriis auspiciis* [of his own accord and on his own responsibility], has made the infinite movement and cannot do more, he keeps Isaac only with pain.

But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too early nor too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the road. During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double-movement he had attained his first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time. Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago. It is evident that sorrow can make a man mentally ill, and that is hard enough; it is also evident that there is a willpower that can haul to the wind so drastically that it rescues the understanding, even though a person becomes a little odd (and I do not intend to disparage this). But to be able to lose one's understanding and along with it everything finite, for which it is the stockbroker, and then to win the very same finitude again by virtue of the absurd—this appalls me, but that does not make me say it is something inferior, since, on the contrary, it is the one and only marvel. It is commonly supposed that what faith produces is no work of art, that it is a coarse and boorish piece of work, only for the more uncouth natures, but it is

far from being that. The *dialectic* of faith is the finest and the most extraordinary of all; it has an elevation of which I can certainly form a conception, but no more than that. I can make the mighty trampoline leap whereby I cross over into infinity; my back is like a tightrope dancer's, twisted in my childhood, and therefore it is easy for me. One, two, three—I can walk upside down in existence, but I cannot make the next movement, for the marvelous I cannot do—I can only be amazed at it. Indeed, if Abraham, the moment he swung his leg over the ass's back, had said to himself: Now Isaac is lost, I could just as well sacrifice him here at home as ride the long way to Moriah—then I do not need Abraham, whereas now I bow seven times to his name and seventy times to his deed. This he did not do, as I can prove by his really fervent joy on receiving Isaac and by his needing no preparation and no time to rally to finitude and its joy. If it had been otherwise with Abraham, he perhaps would have loved God but would not have had faith, for he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself; he who loves God in faith reflects upon God.

This is the peak on which Abraham stands. The last stage to pass from his view is the stage of infinite resignation. He actually goes further and comes to faith. All those travesties of faith—the wretched, lukewarm lethargy that thinks: There's no urgency, there's no use in grieving beforehand; the despicable hope that says: One just can't know what will happen, it could just possibly be—those travesties are native to the paltriness of life, and infinite resignation has already infinitely disdained them.

Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed. If someone deludes himself into thinking he may be moved to have faith by pondering the outcome of that story, he cheats himself and cheats God out of the first movement of faith—he wants to suck worldly wisdom out of the paradox. Someone might succeed, for our generation does not stop with faith, does not stop with miracle of faith, turning water into wine—it goes further and turns wine into water.

Would it not be best to stop with faith, and is it not shocking that everyone wants to go further? Where will it all end when in our age, as declared in so many ways, one does not want to stop with love?

In wordly shrewdness, in petty calculation, in paltriness and meanness, in everything that can make man's divine origin doubtful. Would it not be best to remain standing at faith and for him who stands to see to it that he does not fall, for the movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but yet in such a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact. For my part, I presumably can describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them. In learning to go through the motions of swimming, one can be suspended from the ceiling in a harness and then presumably describe the movements, but one is not swimming. In the same way I can describe the movements of faith. If I am thrown out into the water, I presumably do swim (for I do not belong to the waders), but I make different movements, the movements of infinity, whereas faith makes the opposite movements: after having made the movements of infinity, it makes the movements of finitude. Fortunate is the person who can make these movements! He does the marvelous, and I shall never weary of admiring him; it makes no difference to me whether it is Abraham or a slave in Abraham's house, whether it is a professor of philosophy or a poor servant girl—I pay attention only to the movements. But I do pay attention to them, and I do not let myself be fooled, either by myself or by anyone else. The knights of the infinite resignation are easily recognizable—their walk is light and bold. But they who carry the treasure of faith are likely to disappoint, for externally they have a striking resemblance to bourgeois philistinism, which infinite resignation, like faith, deeply disdains.

I honestly confess that in my experience I have not found a single authentic instance, although I do not therefore deny that every second person may be such an instance. Meanwhile, I have been looking for it for many years, but in vain. Generally, people travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, colorful birds, freakish fish, preposterous races of mankind; they indulge in the brutish stupor that gawks at life and thinks it has seen something. That does not occupy me. But if I knew where a knight of faith lived, I would travel on foot to him, for this marvel occupies me absolutely. I would not leave him

for a second, I would watch him every minute to see how he made the movements; I would consider myself taken care of for life and would divide my time between watching him and practicing myself, and thus spend all my time in admiring him. . . .

IS THERE A TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL?

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* [end, purpose] but is itself the *telos* for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his *telos* in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. As soon as the single individual asserts himself in his singularity before the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal. Every time the single individual, after having entered the universal, feels an impulse to assert himself as the single individual, he is in a spiritual trial . . . , from which he can work himself only by repentantly surrendering as the single individual in the universal. If this is the highest that can be said of man and his existence, then the ethical is of the same nature as a person's eternal salvation, which is his *telos* forevermore and at all times, since it would be a contradiction for this to be capable of being surrendered (that is, teleologically suspended), because as soon as this is suspended it is relinquished, whereas that which is suspended is not relinquished but is preserved in the higher, which is its *telos*. . . .

Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, is justified before it, not as inferior to it but as superior—yet in such a way, please note, that it is the single individual who, after being subordinate as the single individual to the universal, now by

means of the universal becomes the single individual who as the single individual is superior, that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought. And yet faith is this paradox, or else (and I ask the reader to bear these consequences [in mind] even though it would be too prolix for me to write them all down) or else faith has never existed simply because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost.

It is certainly true that the single individual can easily confuse this paradox with spiritual trial . . . , but it ought not to be concealed for that reason. It is certainly true that many persons may be so constituted that they are repulsed by it, but faith ought not therefore to be made into something else to enable one to have it, but one ought rather to admit to not having it, while those who have faith ought to be prepared to set forth some characteristics whereby the paradox can be distinguished from a spiritual trial.

The story of Abraham contains just such a **teleological suspension of the ethical**. There is no dearth of keen minds and careful scholars who have found analogies to it. What their wisdom amounts to is the beautiful proposition that basically everything is the same. If one looks more closely, I doubt very much that anyone in the whole wide world will find one single analogy, except for a later one, which proves nothing if it is certain that Abraham represents faith and that it is manifested normatively in him, whose life not only is the most paradoxical that can be thought but is also so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought. He acts by virtue of the absurd, for it is precisely the absurd that he as the single individual is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated, for as soon as Abraham begins to do so, he has to confess that he was in a spiritual trial, and if that is the case, he will never sacrifice Isaac, or if he did sacrifice Isaac, then in repentance he must come back to the universal. He gets Isaac back again by virtue of the absurd. Therefore, Abraham is at no time a tragic hero but is something entirely different, either a murderer or a man of faith. Abraham does not have the middle term that

saves the tragic hero. This is why I can understand a tragic hero but cannot understand Abraham, even though in a certain demented sense I admire him more than all others.

In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself. But within its own confines the ethical has various gradations. We shall see whether this story contains any higher expression for the ethical that can ethically explain his behavior, can ethically justify his suspending the ethical obligation to the son, but without moving beyond the teleology of the ethical. . . .

The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is very obvious. The tragic hero is still within the ethical. He allows an expression of the ethical to have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; he scales down the ethical relation between father and son or daughter and father to a feeling that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of moral conduct. Here there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself.

Abraham's situation is different. By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it. For I certainly would like to know how Abraham's act can be related to the universal, whether any point of contact between what Abraham did and the universal can be found other than that Abraham transgressed it. It is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the state that Abraham does it; it is not to appease the angry gods. If it were a matter of the deity's being angry, then he was, after all, angry only with Abraham, and Abraham's act is totally unrelated to the universal, is a purely private endeavor. Therefore, while the tragic hero is great because of his moral virtue, Abraham is great because of a purely personal virtue. There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than that the father shall love the son. The ethical in the sense of the moral is entirely beside the point. Insofar as the universal was present, it was cryptically in Isaac, hidden, so to speak, in Isaac's loins, and must cry out with Isaac's mouth: Do not do this, you are destroying everything.

Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake. He does it for God's sake because God

demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it. The unity of the two is altogether correctly expressed in the word already used to describe this relationship. It is an ordeal, a temptation. A temptation—but what does that mean? As a rule, what tempts a person is something that will hold him back from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would hold him back from doing God's will. But what is duty? Duty is simply the expression for God's will.

Here the necessity of a new category for the understanding of Abraham becomes apparent. Paganism does not know such a relationship to the divine. The tragic hero does not enter into any private relationship to the divine, but the ethical is the divine, and thus the paradox therein can be mediated in the universal.

Abraham cannot be mediated; in other words, he cannot speak. As soon as I speak, I express the universal, and if I do not do so, no one can understand me. As soon as Abraham wants to express himself in the universal, he must declare that his situation is a spiritual trial . . . , for he has no higher expression of the universal that ranks above the universal he violates. . . .

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain what is meant by *the teleological suspension of the ethical*. How does Kierkegaard use this concept in his reading of the binding of Isaac?
2. How is Abraham's situation different from that of the tragic hero?
3. Why is Abraham's faith "faith by virtue of the absurd"?
4. *Some critics of Kierkegaard observe that, in the historical period in which the Abraham story is set, sacrificing children to God was standard practice. How might this observation undermine Kierkegaard's portrayal of Abraham's conflict?
5. *Abraham loved Isaac dearly and saw in him his only chance for an heir. Therefore, Abraham's conflict, it would seem, need not be portrayed as one between *morality* and God's command but,

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READINGS IN PHILOSOPHY

Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief

Robert Merrihew Adams*

Introduction. Moral arguments were the type of theistic argument most characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently they have become one of philosophy's abandoned farms. The fields are still fertile, but they have not been cultivated systematically since the latest methods came in. The rambling Victorian farmhouse has not been kept up as well as similar structures, and people have not been stripping the sentimental gingerbread off the porches to reveal the clean lines of argument. This paper is intended to contribute to the remedy of this neglect. It will deal with quite a number of arguments, because I think we can understand them better if we place them in relation to each other. This will not leave time to be as subtle, historically or philosophically, as I would like to be, but I hope I will be able to prove something more than my own taste for Victoriana.

An argument from the nature of right and wrong. Let us begin with one of the most obvious, though perhaps never the most fashionable, arguments on the farm: an Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong. We believe quite firmly that certain things are morally right and others are morally wrong (for example, that it is wrong to torture another person to death just for fun). Questions may be raised about the nature of that which is believed in these beliefs: what does the rightness or wrongness of an act consist in? I believe that the most adequate answer is provided by a theory that entails the existence of God—specifically, by the theory that moral rightness and wrongness consist in agreement and disagreement, respectively, with the will or commands of a loving God. One of the most generally accepted reasons for believing in the existence of anything is that its existence is implied by the theory that seems to account most adequately for some subject matter. I take it, therefore that my metaethical views provide me with a reason of some weight for believing in the existence of God.

Perhaps some will think it disreputably “tender-minded” to accept such a reason where the subject matter is moral. It may be suggested that the epistemological status of moral beliefs is so far inferior to that of physical beliefs, for example, that any moral belief found to entail the existence of an otherwise unknown object ought simply to be abandoned. But in spite of the general uneasiness about morality that pervades our culture, most of us do hold many moral beliefs with almost the highest degree of confidence. So long as we think it reasonable to argue at all from grounds that are not absolutely certain, there is no clear reason why such con-

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fidant beliefs, in ethics as in other fields, should not be accepted as premises in arguing for the existence of anything that is required for the most satisfactory theory of their subject matter.¹

Advantages. The divine command theory of the nature of right and wrong combines two advantages not jointly possessed by any of its nontheological competitors. These advantages are sufficiently obvious that their nature can be indicated quite briefly to persons familiar with the metaethical debate, though they are also so controversial that it would take a book-length review of the contending theories to defend my claims. The first advantage of divine command metaethics is that it presents facts of moral rightness and wrongness as objective, nonnatural facts—objective in the sense that whether they obtain or not does not depend on whether any human being thinks they do, and nonnatural in the sense that they cannot be stated entirely in the language of physics, chemistry, biology, and human or animal psychology. For it is an objective but not a natural fact that God commands, permits, or forbids something. Intuitively this is an advantage....

Alleged disadvantages. What we cannot avoid discussing, and at greater length than the advantages, are the alleged disadvantages of divine command metaethics. The advantages may be easily recognized, but the disadvantages are generally thought to be decisive. I have argued elsewhere, in some detail, that they are not decisive. Here let us concentrate on ... the gravest objection to the more extreme forms of divine command theory [which is] is that they imply that if God commanded us, for example, to make it our chief end in life to inflict suffering on other human beings, for no other reason than that he commanded it, it would be wrong not to obey. Finding this conclusion unacceptable, I prefer a less extreme, or modified, divine command theory, which identifies the ethical property of wrongness with the property of being contrary to the commands of a *loving* God. Since a God who commanded us to practice cruelty for its own sake would not be a loving God, this modified divine command theory does not imply that it would be wrong to disobey such a command....

Our discussion of the Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong may be concluded with some reflections on the nature of the God in whose existence it gives us some reason to believe. (1) The appeal of the argument lies in the provision of an explanation of moral facts of whose truth we are already confident. It must therefore be taken as an argument for the existence of a God whose commands—and presumably, whose purposes and character as well—are in accord with our most confident judgments of right and wrong. I have suggested that he must be a loving God. (2) He must be an intelligent being, so that it makes sense to speak of his having a will and issuing commands. Maximum adequacy of a divine command theory surely requires that God be supposed to have enormous knowledge and understanding of ethically relevant facts, if not absolute omniscience. He should be a God “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from

whom no secrets are hid." (3) The argument does not seem to imply very much about God's power, however—certainly not that he is omnipotent. (4) Nor is it obvious that the argument supports belief in the unity or uniqueness of God. Maybe the metaethical place of divine commands could be taken by the unanimous deliverances of a senate of deities, although that conception raises troublesome questions about the nature of the morality or quasi-morality that must govern the relations of the gods with each other.

Kantian arguments. The most influential moral arguments for theistic belief have been a family of arguments that may be called Kantian. They have a common center in the idea of a moral order of the universe and are arguments for belief in a God sufficiently powerful to establish and maintain such an order. The Kantian family has members on both sides of one of the most fundamental distinctions in this area: the distinction between theoretical and practical arguments. By "a theoretical moral argument for theistic belief" I mean an argument having an ethical premise and purporting to prove the *truth*, or enhance the *probability*, of theism. By "a practical argument for theistic belief" I mean an argument purporting only to give ethical or other practical reasons for *believing* that God exists. The practical argument may have no direct bearing at all on the truth or probability of the belief whose practical advantage it extols.

Arguments from the Nature of Right and Wrong are clearly theoretical moral arguments for theistic belief. Kant, without warning us of any such distinction, gives us sometimes a theoretical and sometimes a practical argument (in my sense of "theoretical" and "practical," not his). His theoretical argument goes roughly as follows:

- (A) We ought (morally) to promote the realization of the highest good.
- (B) What we ought to do must be possible for us to do.
- (C) It is not possible for us to promote the realization of the highest good unless there exists a God who makes the realization possible.
- (D) Therefore, there exists such a God.

Kant was not clear about the theoretical character of this argument, and stated as its conclusion that "it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God."² Its premises, however, plainly imply the more theoretical conclusion that God exists.

(C) needs explanation. Kant conceived of the highest good as composed of two elements. The first element, moral virtue, depends on the wills of moral agents and does not require divine intervention for its possibility. But the second element, the happiness of moral agents in strict proportion to their virtue, will not be realized unless there is a moral order of the universe. Such an order, Kant argues, cannot be expected of the laws of nature, without God.

Doubts may be raised whether Kant's conception of the highest good is ethically correct and whether there might not be some nontheistic basis for a perfect

proportionment of happiness to virtue. But a more decisive objection has often been made to (A): In any reasonable morality we will be obligated to promote only the best attainable approximation of the highest good. For this reason Kant's theoretical moral argument for theism does not seem very promising to me.

Elsewhere Kant argues quite differently. He even denies that a command to promote the highest good is contained in, or analytically derivable from, the moral law. He claims rather that we will be "hindered" from doing what the moral law commands us to do unless we can regard our actions as contributing to the realization of "a final end of all things" which we can also make a "final end for all our actions and abstentions." He argues that only the highest good can serve morally as such a final end and that we therefore have a compelling moral need to believe in the possibility of its realization.³ This yields only a practical argument for theistic belief. Stripped of some of its more distinctively Kantian dress, it can be stated in terms of "demoralization," by which I mean a weakening or deterioration of moral motivation.

- (E) It would be demoralizing not to believe there is a moral order of the universe, for then we would have to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what we do.
- (F) Demoralization is morally undesirable.
- (G) Therefore, there is moral advantage in believing that there is a moral order of the universe.
- (H) Theism provides the most adequate theory of a moral order of the universe.
- (J) Therefore, there is a moral advantage in accepting theism.

What is a moral order of the universe? I shall not formulate any necessary condition. But let us say that the following is *logically sufficient* for the universe's having a moral order: (1) A good world-history requires something besides human virtue (it might, as Kant thought, require the happiness of the virtuous); but (2) the universe is such that morally good actions will probably contribute to a good world-history. (I use "world" as a convenient synonym for "universe.")

Avoiding demoralization. Theism has several secular competitors as a theory of a moral order of the universe in this sense. The idea of scientific and cultural progress has provided liberal thinkers, and Marxism has provided socialists, with hopes of a good world-history without God. It would be rash to attempt to adjudicate this competition here. I shall therefore not comment further on the truth of (H) but concentrate on the argument from (E) and (F) to (G). It is, after all, of great interest in itself, religiously and in other ways, if morality gives us a reason to believe in a moral order of the universe.

Is (E) true? Would it indeed be demoralizing not to believe there is a moral order of the universe? The issue is in large part empirical. It is for sociologists and

psychologists to investigate scientifically what are the effects of various beliefs on human motivation.... But I have the impression there has not yet been very much hard, empirical research casting light directly on the question whether (E) is true.... Lacking scientifically established answers to the empirical aspects of our question, we may say, provisionally, what seems plausible to us. And (E) does seem quite plausible to me. Seeing our lives as contributing to a valued larger whole is one of the things that gives them a point in our own eyes. The morally good person cares about the goodness of what happens in the world and not just about the goodness of his own actions. If a right action can be seen as contributing to some great good, that increases the importance it has for him. Conversely, if he thinks that things will turn out badly no matter what he does, and especially if he thinks that (as often appears to be the case) the long-range effects of right action are about as likely to be bad as good, that will diminish the emotional attraction that duty exerts on him. Having to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what one does, seems apt to induce a cynical sense of futility about the moral life, undermining one's moral resolve and one's interest in moral considerations. My judgment on this issue is subject to two qualifications, however.

- (1) We cannot plausibly ascribe more than a demoralizing tendency to disbelief in a moral order of the universe. There are certainly people who do not believe in such an order, but show no signs of demoralization.
- (2) It may be doubted how much most people are affected by beliefs or expectations about the history of the universe as a whole....

Some will object that those with the finest moral motivation can find all the inspiration they need in a tragic beauty of the moral life itself, even if they despair about the course of history. The most persuasive argument for this view is a presentation that succeeds in evoking moral emotion in connection with the thought of tragedy: Bertrand Russell's early essay "A Free Man's Worship"⁴ is an eloquent example. But I remain somewhat skeptical. Regarded aesthetically, from the outside, tragedy may be sublimely beautiful; lived from the inside, over a long period of time, I fear it is only too likely to end in discouragement and bitterness, though no doubt there have been shining exceptions.

Defending practical arguments. But the main objection to the present argument is an objection to all practical arguments. It is claimed that none of them give justifying reasons for believing anything at all. If there are any practical advantages that are worthy to sway us in accepting or rejecting a belief, the advantage of not being demoralized is surely one of them. But can it be right, and intellectually honest, to believe something, or try to believe it, for the sake of any practical advantage, however noble?

I believe it can. This favorable verdict on practical arguments for theoretical conclusions is particularly plausible in "cases where faith creates its own verifica-

tion," as William James puts it,⁵ or where your wish is at least more likely to come true if you believe it will. Suppose you are running for Congress and an unexpected misfortune has made it doubtful whether you still have a good chance of winning. Probably it will at least be clear that you are more likely to win if you continue to believe that your chances are good. Believing will keep up your spirits and your alertness, boost the morale of your campaign workers, and make other people more likely to take you seriously. In this case it seems to me eminently reasonable for you to cling, for the sake of practical advantage, to the belief that you have a good chance of winning.

Another type of belief for which practical arguments can seem particularly compelling is trust in a person. Suppose a close friend of mine is accused of a serious crime. I know him well and can hardly believe he would do such a thing. He insists he is innocent. But the evidence against him, though not conclusive, is very strong. So far as I can judge the total evidence (including my knowledge of his character) in a cool, detached way, I would have to say it is quite evenly balanced. I want to believe in his innocence, and there is reason to think that I ought, morally, to believe in it if I can. For he may well be innocent. If he is, he will have a deep psychological need for someone to believe him. If no one believes him, he will suffer unjustly a loneliness perhaps greater than the loneliness of guilt. And who will believe him if his close friends do not? Who will believe him if I do not? Of course I could try to pretend to believe him. If I do that I will certainly be less honest with him, and I doubt that I will be more honest with myself, than if I really cling to the belief that he is innocent. Moreover, the pretense is unlikely to satisfy his need to be believed. If he knows me well and sees me often, my insincerity will probably betray itself to him in some spontaneous reaction.

The legitimacy of practical arguments must obviously be subject to some restrictions. Two important restrictions were suggested by William James. (1) Practical arguments should be employed only on questions that "cannot ... be decided on intellectual grounds."⁶ There should be a plurality of alternatives that one finds intellectually plausible. (The option should be "living," as James would put it.) Faith ought not to be "believing what you know ain't so." It also ought not to short-circuit rational inquiry; we ought not to try to settle by practical argument an issue that we could settle by further investigation of evidence in the time available for settling it. (2) The question to be decided by practical argument should be urgent and of practical importance ("forced" and "momentous," James would say). If it can wait or is pragmatically inconsequential, we can afford to suspend judgment about it and it is healthier to do so....

Similarly I think that the rationality of trying for moral reasons to believe in a moral order of the universe depends in large measure on the antecedent strength of one's commitment to morality. If one is strongly committed, so that one wishes to be moral even if the world is not, and if one seeks, not reasons to be moral, but emotional undergirding for the moral life, then it may well be rational to be swayed by the practical argument for the belief....

Self-interest and morality. Both Kantian and Christian theism imply that true self-interest is in harmony with morality. Kant believed that in the long run one's happiness will be strictly proportioned to one's virtue. And if that would be denied by many Christian theologians for the sake of the doctrine of grace, they would at least maintain that no one can enjoy the greatest happiness without a deep moral commitment and that every good person will be very happy in the long run. They believe that the most important parts of a good person's self-interest are eternally *safe*, no matter how much his virtue or saintliness may lead him to sacrifice here below. The truth of these beliefs is surely another logically sufficient condition of the universe's having a moral order. (I assume that virtue is not so richly its own reward as to be sufficient in itself for happiness.)

There are both theoretical and practical arguments for theistic belief which are first of all arguments for faith in a moral world order that harmonizes self-interest with morality. As such, they belong to the Kantian type. For obvious reasons, let us call them "individualistic," by contrast with Kant's own, more "universalistic," arguments.

The practical arguments of this individualistic Kantian type depend on the claim that it would be demoralizing not to believe in a harmony of self-interest with virtue.... The conviction that every good person will be very happy in the long run has often contributed, in religious believers, to a cheerfulness and single-heartedness of moral devotion that they probably would not have had without it. This integration of motives may be regarded as morally advantageous even if its loss does not lead to criminality.

I anticipate the objection that self-interest has no place in the highest ethical motives, and that belief in the harmony of self-interest with morality therefore debases rather than elevates one's motivation. What could be nobler than the virtuous sacrifice of what one regards as one's only chance for great happiness? Yet such sacrifice is rendered impossible by faith in the sure reward of virtue.

I have two replies: (1) Self-interest remains a powerful motive in the best of us; a life of which that was not true would hardly be recognizable as human. It is not obvious that a hardwon victory over even the most enlightened self-interest is morally preferable to the integration of motives resulting from the belief that it will be well with the righteous in the long run. Those who hold that belief still have plenty of victories to win over shorter-sighted desires. And it is plausible to suppose—though I do not know that anyone has proved it—that we are more likely to attain to the goodness that is possible through an integration of motives, than to win a death struggle with our own deepest self-interest, since the latter is so hard.

(2) It is not only in our own case that we have to be concerned about the relation between self-interest and virtue. We influence the actions of other people and particularly of people we love. Morally, no doubt, we ought to influence them in the direction of always doing right (so far as it is appropriate to influence them deliberately at all). But as we care about their self-interest too, our encouragement

of virtue in them is apt to be more wholehearted and therefore more effective, if we believe that they will be happy in the long run if they do right. It is hard to see any ground for a charge of selfishness in this aspect of faith in the sure reward of virtue. It is not unambiguously noble (though it might be right) to encourage someone else—even someone you love—to make a great and permanent sacrifice of his true self-interest. We have no reason to regret the loss of opportunities to influence others so sadly....

I have focused, as most philosophical discussion of the moral arguments has, on the connections of theism with the nature of right and wrong and with the idea of a moral order of the universe. I am keenly aware that they form only part of the total moral case for theistic belief. Theistic conceptions of guilt and forgiveness,⁷ for example, or of God as a friend who witnesses, judges, appreciates, and can remember all of our actions, choices, and emotions, may well have theoretical and practical moral advantages at least as compelling as any that we have discussed.

God's goodness. Perhaps moral arguments establish, at most, subsidiary advantages of belief in God's existence. They are more crucial to the case for his goodness. Causal arguments from the existence and qualities of the world may have some force to persuade us that there is a God, but they plainly have much less support to offer the proposition,

(K) If there is a God, he is morally very good.

(Here I define "a God" as a creator and governor of the whole universe, supreme in understanding and knowledge as well as in power, so that (K) is not a tautology.)

There is a powerful moral argument for (K). Belief in the existence of an evil or amoral God would be morally intolerable. In view of his power, such belief would be apt to carry with it all the disadvantages, theoretical and practical, of disbelief in a moral order of the universe. But I am even more concerned about the consequences it would have in view of his knowledge and understanding. We are to think of a being who understands human life much better than we do—understands it well enough to create and control it. Among other things, he must surely understand our moral ideas and feelings. He understands everyone's point of view, and has a more objective, or at least a more complete and balanced view of human relationships than any of us can have. He has whatever self-control, stability, and integration of purpose are implied in his having produced a world as constant in its causal order as our own. And now we are to suppose that that being does not care to support with his will the moral principles that we believe are true. We are to suppose that he either opposes some of them, or does not care enough about some of them to act on them. I submit that if we really believed there is a God like that, who understands so much and yet disregards some or all of our

moral principles, it would be extremely difficult for us to continue to regard those principles with the respect that we believe is due them. Since we believe that we ought to pay them that respect, this is a great moral disadvantage of the belief that there is an evil or amoral God....

Conclusion. In closing, I shall permit myself an argument *ad hominem*. The hypothesis that there is an amoral God is not open to the best known objection to theism, the argument from evil. Whatever may be said against the design argument for theism, it is at least far from obvious that the world was not designed. Yet hardly any philosopher takes seriously the hypothesis that it was designed by an amoral or evil being. Are there any good grounds for rejecting that hypothesis? Only moral grounds. One ought to reflect on that before asserting that moral arguments are out of place in these matters.

Notes

1. Cf. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 509.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L.W. Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), p. 130 (p. 125 of the Prussian Academy edition).
3. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T.M. Greene and H.H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 5-7. (The long footnote is particularly important.) In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 147-51 (142-46, Prussian Academy edition).
4. 1903, reprinted in Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon and Schuster, n.d.).
5. William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 97.
6. William James, *The Will to Believe*, *ibid.*, p. 11.
7. A theistic argument from the nature of guilt has been offered by A.E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*, vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 206-10. Cf. also H.P. Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), pp. 57-59.

Discussion

1. How does Adams attempt to solve the Euthyphro problem? Do you think he is successful?
2. Adams claims that the most adequate explanation of right and wrong is the agreement or disagreement with the commands of God. What are some other explanations of the nature of right and wrong? Is God's will more adequate?
3. Why does Adams think that the pursuit of morality, on some accounts of the nature of morality, would be demoralizing? How does theism improve on those competing accounts?