HOW GOD MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE TO MORALITY

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The existence of God makes no difference to the fact that there are moral truths; but it makes a great difference[1] to the content of morality, to the seriousness of morality, to our knowledge of morality, and to the possibility of our being morally good people in good moral standing. All this — given Christian claims that Jesus Christ was God Incarnate, and that he taught that God has issued certain commands, that his life and death constituted an atonement (in a way to be described) for our sins, and that there is an after–life.

I

Actions may be morally good, bad, or indifferent. Among good actions are those which are obligatory (or duties), and ones which go beyond obligation and which we call "supererogatory". I am obliged to pay my debts, but not to give my life to save that of a comrade — supremely, supererogatorily good though it is that I should do so. The obligatory are those which we are blameworthy for not doing, the supererogatory are those which we are praiseworthy for doing. Likewise among bad actions, there are those which it is obligatory not to do — these are wrong actions; and there are bad actions which are not wrong, and which I call infravetatory. It is wrong to rape or steal, but it is bad, but not wrong to watch many low grade thrillers on TV rather than read one or two great works of literature.

Quite clearly some moral judgments (that is, judgments that some particular action or kind of action is morally obligatory or wrong or whatever)

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1 "Makes a great difference" in the sense that things are very different if there is a God and we exist, compared with the situation when there is no God and we still exist. I ignore the point that most probably if there were no God, we too would not exist.

are true and others are false. As a result of experience and reflection, it is evident to us Westerners at the beginning of the twenty first century that genocide is morally wrong, and so is suttee and so is slavery; and it is morally obligatory to keep your promises at any rate when it causes you little trouble, barring quite extraordinary counter–considerations. And so on, and so on. And if those of some other culture think otherwise, they are obviously mistaken — just as obviously mistaken as are solipsists and flat–earthers. In morals, as in everything else, we must believe that things are as, overwhelmingly, they appear to be. We start our construction of a world view from what seems most evident — including the immediate deliverances of sense (e. g. "I am now giving a lecture") and of memory (e. g. "Two days ago I was in England"), universally hold beliefs (e. g. that the earth is millions of years old), and obvious truths of reason (e. g. "2 + 2 = 4'). Although allowing the theoretical possibility of error, it is on the foundations of these basic beliefs that we must construct a world view; for no foundations are surer than the most evident ones, and these include some of the most obvious moral beliefs. If some philosopher"s theory of meaning or knowledge has the consequence that there cannot be moral truths or that we cannot know what they are, then we must reject his theory since it is more obvious that genocide is wrong than that his theory is true.

Now the moral properties (i. e. moral goodness, badness etc.) of particular actions (picked out in terms of who did them where and when) are supervenient on their non–moral properties. What Hitler did on such and such occasions in 1942 and 1943 was morally wrong because it was an act of genocide. What you did yesterday was good because it was an act of feeding the staving etc. No action can be just morally good or bad; it is good or bad because it has certain other non–moral properties — those of the kinds which I illustrated earlier. And any other action which had just those non–moral properties would have the same moral properties. The conjunction of non–moral properties which gives rise to the moral property may be a long one or a short one. It may be that all acts of telling lies are bad, or it may be that all acts of telling lies in such and such circumstances (the description of which is a long one) are bad. But it must be that if there is a world W in which a certain action *a* having various non–moral properties (e. g. being an act of killing someone to whom the killer had a certain kind of relation) is bad, there could not be another world W" which was exactly the same as W in all non–moral respects, but in which *a* was not bad. A difference in moral properties has to arise from a difference in non–moral properties. If a certain sort of killing is not bad in one world, but bad in another world, there must be some difference between the two worlds (e. g. in social organisation or the prevalence of crime) which makes for the moral difference. Moral properties, to repeat the jargon, are supervenient on non–moral properties. And the supervenience must be logical

supervenience. Our concept of the moral is such that it makes no *sense* to suppose both that there is a world W in which *a* is wrong and a world W" exactly the same as W except that in W" *a* is good. It follows that there are logically necessary truths of the form "If an action has non–moral properties A, B and C, it is morally good", "If an action has non–moral properties C and D, it is morally wrong" and so on. If there are moral truths, there are necessary moral truths — general principles of morality. I re–emphasise that, for all I have said so far, these may often be very complicated principles — e. g. "All actions of promise breaking in circumstances C, D, E, F, and G are wrong", rather than just "All actions of promise breaking are wrong". All moral truths are either necessary (of the above kind) or contingent. Contingent moral truths — e. g. that what you did yesterday was good — derive their truth from some contingent non–moral truth (e. g. that what you did yesterday was to feed the starving) and some necessary moral truth (e. g. that all acts of feeding the starving are good).

So what makes it the case that promise keeping and truth telling (possibly subject to some qualifications about circumstances) are obligatory, and killing someone (except perhaps an enemy combatant in a just war or a criminal justly sentenced to death) morally wrong? My answer is simple — the very nature of the act itself. An act of killing being an act of killing (not in the specified circumstances) entails that it is morally wrong. Just as a surface could not be blue without having something in common with a surface which is green, which something is being coloured; so promise–keeping and truth–telling could not be what they are without having it in common that they are (possibly subject to qualifications) both morally obligatory.

We acquire a sense of morality by being told that such and such actions are obligatory or good beyond obligation, and our parents praising us for doing the latter and blaming us when we fail to do the former; and certain other actions are wrong or bad, and our parents blaming us for doing the former, and praising us for failing to do the latter. As with all fundamental concepts, be it "cause" or "believe" or "deduce", we need to be shown or have described to us many instances of their correct application as well as their logical relations to other concepts (e. g. praise or blame) before we can grasp the concepts. The paradigm instances of the "morally good" (or whatever) will fall into describable kinds — keeping promises, talking to the lonely, giving money to feed the starving and naked etc. Once we have in this way via particular instances or kinds of instances, grasped the concept of the "morally good", we can come to recognise that some of the instances by which we have been introduced to it are rather different from the others, and if "praise" is an appropriate response to the former it is not an appropriate response to the latter. We might be told that fighting a duel to defend one"s honour is morally obligatory, but we may come to see that it is rather different from the other actions

which are said to be morally obligatory, so that if praise is appropriate to the latter it is not appropriate to duelling. This kind of reflection can lead each of us and (over the centuries) the whole human race to improve our grasp of what are the necessary truths of morality. But if someone started with paradigm case of actions which he calls "morally good" which had nothing in common with what most of us regard as morally good, I see no reason to suppose that he has a concept of morality. Suppose that a person were introduced to the concept of "moral obligation" only by being told that it is "morally obligatory in all circumstances to walk on alternate paving stones, to touch your head three times before getting out of bed in the morning, and to do actions of other kinds which we would think (barring special contingent circumstances) to be morally indifferent, and were praised for doing such actions, we would surely regard him as not having been introduced to the concept we call moral obligation. The difference between him and the rest of us would be not that we and he have different views about which actions are morally obligatory, but that he would not have the concept of moral obligation. There has to be a measure of agreement about what are paradigm cases of actions which are morally good, obligatory etc for disputants to have a common concept about the further application of which they are in disagreement.

Disagreement about the necessary truths of morality is disagreement about which actions are similar in the right ways to paradigm instances of the morally obligatory, good etc to be themselves morally obligatory. We may acquire a full grasp of the necessary truths without realizing their consequences for us through ignorance of the contingent truths which determine their application. I may believe that it is good to give money to the starving, but not believe the TV news when it tells us that people are starving in Africa and so may not realize that it is good to give money for food for Africans. Moral disagreement about the contingent truths of morality is easier to resolve when it does not depend on disagreement about necessary truths. But there is no reason to suppose that the latter is not resolvable when there is enough agreement about paradigm cases for serious reflection on and experience of actions whose moral status is disputed, to enable us to see whether they have enough of the right features in common with paradigm cases of actions which are (e. g.) morally obligatory to be themselves morally obligatory.

Theists and most atheists alike are introduced to this common concept of morality by being shown many of the same paradigm cases — keeping promises, talking to the lonely etc are both morally good actions, and so on; and they recognize that these are morally good actions in virtue of what is involved making a promise or being lonely. Hence theists and atheists may agree –as clearly they do –both about the moral status (good or bad, as the case may be) of many particualar actions, and also about the reasons why those actions

have the moral status that they do. The existence of God makes no difference to the fact that these are moral truths.

II

But the existence of God does make a great difference to what these truths are. Among the necessary moral truths, which atheists as well as theists may come to recognise is that it is very good to reverence the good and the wise and the truly great, and obligatory to thank and please benefactors. If there is a God, he is all–good and all–wise, and truly great, and for that reason alone it is very good to worship him. But he is also our supreme benefactor. He is so much more the source of our being than are parents. God keeps us in existence from moment to moment, gives us knowledge and power and friends; and all the help that other benefactors give us arises from God sustaining in them the power to do so. Hence it becomes a duty to thank him abundantly but properly to thank someone involves showing that you know who they are and what is their relation to you. You must take them seriously. So thanking God will involve rendering the kind of thanks appropriate to the all–good all–wise source of everything; that means that grateful worship is a dominant obligation. That there is a God is a contingent truth (logically contingent, that is, it entails no contradiction. It is no doubt necessary in other ways). So it becomes a contingent moral truth that we have a dominant obligation to give him grateful worship.

All the western theistic religions claim that God has issued specific commands to humans, among them the "Ten Commandments". The first and obvious way to please benefactors is to obey their commands. It is in virtue of the necessary truth that beneficiaries have a duty to please benefactors that parents who are not just biological parents but are educating and nurturing parents have certain rights over their children while they are still young to tell them to do certain things — e. g. to do the family shopping — and the command creates an obligation which would not otherwise exist. Such parents are our greatest earthly benefactors. If follows that if children have limited duties to obey parents, humans have obligations far less limited in extent to obey God. His command will make it contingently the case that some action which would otherwise be only supererogatorily good or morally indifferent is now obligatory; and his forbidding it will make an action contingently wrong when previously it was only infravetatorily bad or morally indifferent. But there are other necessary truths (and so other contingent truths) of morality, including the ones which I mentioned earlier, which relate the obligatory or the supererogatory good to features of human situations not connected with divine command or commendation.

There are however limits to the rights of parents over children — parents to not have the right to command children to serve them day and night; and so, beyond a certain point, parental commands would impose no obligation. Likewise (though the main argument of this paper in no way depends on this view) my own view is that God"s rights over us are also limited, even more narrowly than by the fact that he cannot command us to do what we are obliged (in virtue of some other necessary moral truth) not to do — e. g. torture children just for fun. God has the right to demand a lot from us by way of service to others and worship — but if he chooses to create free rational beings, I suggest, thereby he limits his right to control their lives totally. If there are such limits, it will then follow that in virtue of his perfect goodness, God will not command us to do actions beyond those limits — for to command what you have no right to command is wrong.

What God does not command, he may commend. And since (perhaps up to a limit) it is supererogatorily good to please benefactors more than you are obliged to, God"s commendation can make an action supererogatorily good, when it does not make it obligatory. And because he sees what is good and obligatory for reasons other than his command and commendation, and we do not always, he can inform of which actions are good or obligatory for such reasons. And, like human parents, he may command us to do what is obligatory anyway (e. g. keeping our promises to other humans), and commend us to do what is good anyway. And his command and commendation can add to the obligation or goodness of the act. But, if what I have written earlier is correct, there are limits to what God can *make* to be good or obligatory (whether by command or unexpressed will). And because of the limits to our obligations, there is scope for "works of supererogation" as the Catholic tradition has maintained.

In Plato"s dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates asked the famous question: "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?"[2] Put in Christian terms (and phrased simply in terms of command and obligation), the Euthyphro dilemma becomes: does God command what is obligatory for other reasons, or is what is obligatory obligatory because God commands it? The view which I am putting forward involves taking the first horn for some obligations. We ought not to torture children just for fun, whether or not there is a God; here God can only command us to do what is our duty anyway. But it involves taking the second horn for other obligations — but for a divine command there would be no obligation to worship on Sundays rather than on Tuesdays. That there are very general principles of morality, including not only the principle of the obligation to

2 *Euthyphro* 10a.

please benefactors but other principles as well, was recognised by both Aquinas and Scotus. Aquinas held that "the first principles of natural law are altogether unalterable"[3]. He does not tell us much in the *Summa Theologiae* about which these are, but he does write that they are principles too general to be mentioned in the ten commandments, principles such as that no one ought to do evil to anyone, which he says are "inscribed in natural reason as self–evident"[4]. Scotus tells us that the only moral obligations from which God could not dispense us are the duties to love and reverence God himself; which he sees as constituted by the first three of the Ten Commandments.[5] So both writers hold — and, I have argued, are right to hold — that there are necessary moral truths independent of the will of God, but that the will of God makes a very great difference to what are the contingent moral truths.

III

The existence and commands of God make acting morally always more important and sometimes very much more important than it would otherwise be. Apart from the existence and commands of God, it is still bad if I do not give money to some medical charity for research (which may or may not produce results) into how to prevent the spread of some rare disease in China (when the occasion arises, and I have money to spare.) But it seems doubtful whether I have a duty or obligation to give the money. One might plausibly say — even if I have some minimum duty to help any sentient being in a crisis, I don"t owe all my spare money to help Chinese in a non–emergency situation; they have given me nothing, and so I cannot owe them this kind of non–emergency help. True, I owe my parents much; and perhaps I owe all my ancestors something — since but for their actions (of begetting and nurturing) I would not exist. A debt to a parent or ancestor can be satisfied by caring for those whom they love, or repaying a debt which they forgot to pay. And if I and the Chinese have common ancestors (as surely somewhere in remote past we do), then that might create an obligation on me to help them. And if my parents benefitted by the exploitation of Chinese in the past, that too might create an obligation on me to help them now. But the links are somewhat tenuous, and any obligation correspondingly limited. And maybe on some distant planet there may appear rational creatures who have no historical connections with

3 *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 2a. 94. 5

4 *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 2a. 100. 3

5 Ordinatio III, suppl. dist. 37, text and translation on pp. 268–87 and commentary on pp. 60–4 of Allan B. Wolter (ed.), *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, Catholic University of America Press, 1986.

ourselves. Any obligation to care for them (at least in non–emergency situations) might be very limited.

But if God made me from nothing, and sustains the laws of nature which allow others to feed, clothe and educate me, I have an enormous debt to him; and so there is a much greater obligation than there would be otherwise, to care for others whom he has benefited in the same way and which in nature of his perfect goodness he would want me to do. The mere existence of a perfectly good creator makes it so. Also as I noted, the Christian tradition, like that of Judaism and Islam, holds that God has issued commands; and these commands impose obligations. By his commands, God makes it a duty on all of us to help others in various ways; and he commands many individuals to follow very demanding vocations. What would otherwise be superogratory often becomes obligatory; and what was obligatory becomes a much greater obligation. And God wants to take to Heaven those who have dealt with their past (a phrase which I shall explain shortly) and who because they love to do good would be happy in Heaven. For Heaven is a place where people see God as he is, and respond in grateful worship and service (for example by asking God to help others on earth)–without the obstacles to such activity which are so prevalent on earth (obstacles in the form for example of clouded vision and temptations to do what is bad). Only if someone loves the good will they want to see God and worship him, and serve him and others. We can make ourselves the sort of people who love to do good by making ourselves do good despite these obstacles, so that doing good becomes natural. And so, not just because it is good in itself and because God commands it, but also for the sake of our own future, it matters greatly that we should do good. God makes morality a much more serious matter than it would be otherwise.

IV

How do we know what is morally good? If there is a God, all this knowledge is due to God. First, because he made us and gave us moral awareness, and awareness of many of the non–moral facts of the world which enable us to apply the necessary moral truths. And he gave us experience of the world, and the ability to discuss moral issues with others, so that we could improve our understanding of what are the necessary moral truths — in the way I discussed earlier. God did not give moral awareness to cats and dogs. And the second reason why our knowledge of morality is due to God is that God teaches us many moral truths which hold independently of his will (some of which we can grasp and have already grasped by our natural reason); and also issues commands and commendations to us which created new moral truths, through Jesus Christ and the church which he founded. He authenticated the

authority of Jesus Christ and his church by raising Jesus from the dead. The Resurrection, being a violation of nature laws, could only be done by the action or permission of God who alone governs the world and so keeps the laws of nature operative. That is not to say that there is no scope for reason here — to show that the Resurrection occurred, and to show which proclamations of the Church have divine authority and which do not. But God allows us to do a little of the sorting out for ourselves.

V

And finally the existence of God makes a difference to the possibility of our being morally good people in good moral standing.

What I mean by our being in good moral standing is that we have dealt with our moral debts; when we have wronged others, we acquire a guilt which needs to be removed. Guilt needs to be dealt with whether or not there is a God. If I wrong you intentionally and in a serious way, say I steal money from you, I owe it to you not merely to repay the money (with an additional sum to compensate for my temporary loss) but to apologize sincerely (that is both repent and apologize) and do something extra (perhaps give you a further present as well) in token of my sincerity. All of this together constitutes my making atonement for my wrongdoing: I need to repent, apologize, make reparation, and do something extra which I shall call "penance". Reparation means restoring you to the position in which you would have been if I had not wronged you, or to a position of equivalent value. But except where the wrong is literally stealing, making reparation is not going to involve giving you back an item. If I have broken something of yours, I must give you an item as similar as possible to the one broken (plus compensation for loss). If I have unjustly damaged your reputation, I must let people know that what I said about you was false; and perhaps tell them a few good things about you as well. If I fail to perform some task for you when I promised, I must do it now and more thoroughly than I would have done before. The person wronged (you, the victim) may let me off the reparation and penance; and that might be good for him to do if the wrong is not serious: but if the wrong is serious it is not necessarily good for the victim to say that I need not make any attempt at reparation — since it is good that I should take my wrongdoing seriously enough to make some attempt at reparation. But repentance and apology are always needed if I am to atone for my wrongdoing. When I have made atonement, you, if you are kind, will agree to treat me in future as though I had never wronged you, that is you will forgive me. By your forgiveness, my guilt is removed (though you can have no obligation to forgive me — I cannot put you under an obligation by wronging you and then making atonement.) It is,

within limits, up to the person wronged whether our guilt remains. You can forgive me after a half–hearted apology; or insist on deep repentance, repeated apology, total reparation and some penance. But I suggest, from reflection on mundane examples, if the wrongdoer does all of this and still the victim, you, refuse to forgive, my guilt does disappear. For although my wronging you gives you some rights over me, it does not give you infinite rights.

Alas in earthly relationships, making atonement is hard to achieve. We often don"t take the trouble to apologize, and offer reparation; or sometimes we are in no position to make reparation. (We may have spent the stolen money, or the task we promised to do cannot be done at a later stage; or the person we killed cannot be brought back to life.) Or the victim is dead and cannot receive our apology.

If there is a God, our situation is initially a lot worse. For, as we have seen, we owe so much to God — both directly in worship and service, and indirectly in service to our fellow creatures; and we have failed to do so much of it. There is a lot more wrongdoing to be dealt with; and as I noted, when our wrongdoing is serious, it is good that we should not merely repent and apologize, but attempt to make reparation. Yet we are normally in no position to make reparation; we owe to God a life of service anyway, and we cannot serve him twice–over in the second half of our lives to make up for the failings of the first half, even if we had the will to do so. But, Christianity teaches, God himself helps us to do something about our situation. It teaches that God himself in Christ lived a perfect life better than the life we owed to God, a life which he did not owe to God (for you cannot owe anything to yourself; and it teaches that this life constitutes an atonement for our sins. But it could not avail to remove our guilt without our using it for this purpose. That is, we must repent and apologize and offer this life of Christ as our reparation (and penance) for the life we ought to have led. Aquinas accepts a comment that "the man who sins must do the repenting and confess", but adds that "satisfaction has to do with the exterior act, and here one can make us of instruments, a category under which friends are included"[6] Friends, including our greatest friend, can make the reparation for us — if we will accept their help. So by pleading the passion of Christ with repentance and apology, as we do in our worship and especially in baptism and the eucharist, we can use Christ"s reparation to make our atonement; and God will then, he assures us, forgive us without asking more and thus remove our guilt.

But what about the guilt we acquire as a result of the wrong we have done to our fellow–creatures. Christianity teaches that there is an after–life in which God can ensure that those we have wronged on earth will hear our plea for

6 *Summa Theologiae* 3a, 48. 2 obj 1 and ad 1.

forgiveness. They too owe a lot to God, and, Christianity teaches, God makes it a condition, the only condition, for forgiving them their sins when they repent and apologize and offer the sacrifice of Christ, that they should forgive those who have wrong them (without, I suggest, much further need for reparation.) We are taught to ask for forgiveness with the words "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespass against us". And if someone whom we have wronged still fails to forgive us, then so long as our repentance and apology are full and sincere, God himself can provide to the victim any necessary reparation and penance — by deeming its equivalent in the reparation and penance which the victim himself owes to God to be correspondingly less. That way our guilt will disappear.

So even though, if there is a God, we are a lot more guilty than we would otherwise be, we are in far better position for dealing with all our guilt (both the guilt arising from hurting God and that arising from hurting our fellows).

And not merely are we in a better position for dealing with the past, but we are in a better position to become naturally good people in future. For — on the Christian view — he makes available the nurturing community of the church — its teaching, sacraments, and pastoral care— to help and encourage those who seek to do good. As I commented earlier, humans are so made that if they persist in doing good when it is difficult because of temptations to do otherwise, doing good becomes easier; we tend to become more naturally good people. But for most of us on earth the temptations will always be there. God makes a promise that if (assisted by grace in the church) we deal with our past and struggle in this life to be good people, he will reward us with a Heaven in which the temptations to be anything else are removed. Then doing good (including the supremely good tasks of worship of God and service to others) will be totally natural, and so what we natually want to do. We will be happy for happiness consists in doing what you want. And we will be blessed, because being blessed consists in being happy in doing what is supremely worthwhile. Only those who love to do good would be happy in Heaven. So if there is a God who acts as described in Christian teaching, morality becomes very serious and demanding, but we can know what its demands are, deal with our failures to conform to them, and allow ourselves to be made the sort of people who are naturally morally good in a world where we have abundant opportunity to do greatly worthwhile actions— for ever.