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The Status of God's Moral Judgments

In the *Euthyphro* Plato provides an argument the general point of which has come to be widely accepted as a fatal criticism of any attempt to define 'right' or 'good' in terms of the will of God. The point is this: if the claim that something is right is taken to *mean* that it is willed by God, then it does not make significant sense to say that God wills things *because* they are right. But since the latter *does* make significant sense, the proposed definition fails. An acceptance of this argument by many philosophers and theologians has led them to formulate the relationship between an act's being right and its being willed by God in some less stringent manner.

One such formulation has recently been offered by Wallace I. Matson. After explaining and defending Plato's point he writes:

This is not to say that theology is altogether irrelevant to morals. It may still be of great practical importance to deciding what is right. Let us take a mundane parallel: suppose I am a poor arithmetician, but my teacher never makes a mistake. Then if I add up a sum and am in doubt about the correctness of the answer, the reasonable thing for me to do is to ask teacher what the right answer is. I may have much better reason for thinking that teacher's answer is right than for trusting my own calculation. But I should not confuse the true statement, 'Teacher's answers are always right,' with the absurd one, 'Teacher's saying so is what makes the answer right.' What makes the answer right is inherent in the concepts themselves; my faith in teacher is justified by her superior powers of understanding these concepts.

So also, if we know that there is a benevolent deity, and, further, we have some means of knowing what He commands, we would be justified in taking His commandments as more reliable indications of the right and the good than our own admittedly imperfect insights – even if these commandments seem to us very strange.¹

A theist might well be appreciative of this formulation, not only because it is a sympathetic statement in the midst of a discussion the main thrust of which is not designed to encourage theistic belief, but also because it is not rare to find the kind of reliance on moral authority which seems to be rather central to Christianity derided as a morally disreputable infantilism.² Very often critics of theism will assess theistic claims with a rigour which they would not think of applying in other areas of thought and practice; for example,

1. *The Existence of God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 233–4.

2. Cf. P. H. Nowell-Smith, 'Morality: Religious and Secular,' in Ian Ramsey, ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 95–112.

Thomas Huxley, in making his well-known claim that belief in God is 'immoral,' assumed the truth of the rather dubious premise that it is always (morally) wrong to believe that for which one does not have 'logically satisfactory evidence.'³ When such judgments are made it is important to expose their harshness, and Professor Matson's offering of a 'mundane parallel' to the believer's reliance on God as moral authority provides that kind of exposure.

Furthermore, Professor Matson's comments are helpful in that they provide a basis for pointing to a kind of confusion which is often imbedded in writings on 'Christian Ethics.' Present-day moral theologians and casuists often fail to realize that a distinction is to be made between the question of what provides a *justification* for some moral judgment and the question of what might be one's *source* for that judgment. One often gets the impression that Christian moral theorists consider the principle, 'Do the will of God,' to occupy the same place in Christian moral reasoning as, 'Promote the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness,' does in the utilitarian's scheme and as, 'Do your (intrinsic) duty,' does in the deontologist's.

As Matson points out, the mistake of thinking that God's willing something is what *makes* it right is analogous to the mistake of thinking that 'Teacher says so' is the appropriate answer to the question, 'What makes that arithmetic answer correct?' What *justifies* our thinking that a certain arithmetical formula is a theorem of some deductive system is that it follows from the axioms of that system in accordance with the rules for deriving theorems in that system. Some of us are very poor at understanding axioms and mastering rules; and so it is that we shall often accept 'on faith' the answers of some expert. He is the *source* of our answers. But what makes the answer correct is not that he is our source but that *he* understands the axioms and follows the rules well.

What moral philosophers look for is the moral axiom, or axioms, which when conjoined with certain factual claims will provide a justification for moral judgments. Theists must surely encourage, and even join, this enterprise. But in seeking to make moral decisions they will, at least on occasion, note the fact that they have received advice from God, the moral expert. Believing that God has a perfect understanding of moral axioms, as well as a complete store of factual knowledge, they will often rely on moral advice from God for which they themselves cannot supply a justification. But they accept this advice as reliable because they believe that a justification *can* be arrived at, that were they in a position to comprehend God's considerations they would concur in His judgment. Thus, the frequency – among 'common' believers – of such comments as 'I don't understand why this had to happen, but God knows best!'

So much for the light which Professor Matson's comment sheds. But does his parallel completely clarify the proper relation between moral rightness and the will of God? Is the only alternative to the strong relation, which Plato has taught us to reject, the view that God's moral advice is merely 'more reliable'

3. *Science and Christian Tradition: Essays* (New York: 1896), p. 310.

than our own? Can the Christian theist be satisfied with the weak admission that 'theology is [not] altogether irrelevant to morals'?

I want to suggest the possibility that there is a philosophically respectable view which is stronger than the formulation which Matson gives and yet is not identical to the one which Plato rejects. And I must stress the *suggestive* nature of my scheme. My project is a patchwork one: to show that there are two claims which have been considered with some favour by recent moral philosophers, and that these claims – when conjoined to a claim which many theists hold to be true – might provide a satisfactory view about the relation between moral rightness and the will of God.

1 *The making of significant moral judgments logically implies the truth of ethical absolutism.* By 'absolutism' I mean the view that there cannot be two equally 'correct,' but conflicting, answers to a clear, basic moral question. While some contemporary writers may be wary of the label, 'absolutism,' many would be sympathetic to some version of (1). The following comments, by two recent writers, indicate, I think such sympathy:

There are, as I have admitted, varying moral codes and varying moral beliefs. For there are various customs, traditions, and institutions, just as there are different conditions, needs, and goals. Thus the morality of *some* matters can depend on custom and tradition and even edict ... But all of this is both allowed for and accounted for by my concept of local rules and neutral norms, and none of it can apply to fundamental moral rules or moral principles.⁴

It will probably be objected against the position we have now tentatively reached – that, notwithstanding the general 'antinaturalist' doctrine, there are certain kinds of facts or features which are necessarily criteria of *moral* evaluation – that this implies that moral arguments might in principle be demonstrative, logically cogent. The position we have reached does, I think, have this implication; but I see no reason why we should be alarmed by that.⁵

The latter comment suggests that moral judgments can be construed as conclusions which follow from certain premises. And, of course, this position raises the question whether there is a way of showing that the premises, especially those which state fundamental moral principles, are universally binding. Without presenting detail, it is not unfair to say that many recent moral philosophers have tried to show just that. In any event, the point I am making here is that some recent writers have defended the view that in making a moral judgment there is an implicit appeal to certain criteria which are universally binding, and that a judgment is correct or incorrect insofar as it is or is not justifiable according to these criteria.⁶ The upshot of this is not that

4. M. G. Singer, *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 339–40.

5. G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 69.

6. Cf. Philippa Foot, 'Moral Arguments,' *Mind*, 67 (1958), 502–13.

absolutism is true, but that the making of moral judgments *implies* the truth of absolutism.

2 *Ethical absolutism implies that all perfectly rational beings would be in agreement on moral matters.* Strictly speaking, we should think of this as referring to any perfectly rational beings that there *might be*, since it would be difficult to argue that absolutism, as I am understanding it, implies that there are *existing* beings which are perfectly rational.

The point of (2) is developed by Paul W. Taylor in his discussion of ethical relativism:

If everyone in the world came to have the same opinion naturally, without any interference from despots or thought controllers, then the relativist's position would be invalidated. The crux of this argument lies in the meaning of the word 'naturally.' If this means spontaneously and emotionally, without the discipline of rational thought, then relativism remains untouched. But if 'naturally' means by the free exercise of reason and intelligence, then relativism would indeed be invalidated, but it would not be invalidated just because everyone agreed about morals ... For in this case rational beings would come to agree about what is right and wrong, and their agreement would be morally justifiable. But what would justify them is not their agreement but their rationality. (Being rational *means* being able to justify, to give good reasons for, one's opinions.)⁷

Taylor goes on to speak of '*completely* rational and enlightened judges' – a necessary qualification, since any defect in the rationality or enlightenment of the beings in question would once again leave the issue between absolutism and relativism undecided.

The point here should be clear: ethical absolutism as a view about moral objectivity is incompatible with the existence of any completely rational and enlightened beings which disagree on moral matters – and this incompatibility is a *logical* one. For absolutism implies that moral claims are either ultimately justifiable or unjustifiable; and this implies, further, that all beings who are capable of arriving at such justifications will agree with respect to specific claims.

If we accept (1) and (2) as true, we can arrive at this teaching: if the making of moral judgments implies the truth of absolutism, and if the truth of absolutism implies that any completely rational and enlightened beings will agree on moral matters, then it follows – by the unassailable principle that if P implies Q and Q implies R, then P implies R – that the making of a moral judgment implies that all completely rational and enlightened beings agree on moral matters. Furthermore, this latter conclusion surely can be spelled out in this way: that in making a moral judgment one is implicitly claiming that all completely rational and enlightened beings would concur in the making of that judgment.

7. 'Social Science and Ethical Relativism,' in P. W. Taylor, ed., *Problems in Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Ethics* (Belmont, California: Dickenson, 1967), p. 68; originally in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 52 (1955).

The claim just arrived at is rather explicitly agreed to by William Frankena, although I do not know whether he would approve of the further use I shall make of this claim. Frankena speaks of 'the fact that ethical and value judgments claim a consensus on the part of others,' adding:

[One who makes such judgments] is not claiming an actual consensus, he is claiming that in the end – which never comes or comes only on the Day of Judgment – his position will be concurred in by those who freely and clear-headedly review the facts from the moral point of view. In other words, he is claiming an *ideal* consensus which transcends majorities and actual societies ... He may be mistaken, but, like Luther, he cannot do otherwise.⁸

3 *There is only one completely rational and enlightened being, and that being has publicised his moral views.* Many orthodox theists hold this third claim to be true. Most theists would hold that it is a 'contingent' truth that there is such a being, but that given that he does exist it is impossible that there could be another being equal or superior to him with respect to his perfections. Thus, they would hold that there is only one perfectly rational and enlightened (i.e., omniscient) being, and that this being is benevolent, that is, he has 'adopted' the moral point of view. In effect this theistic belief entails the claim that all members of the class of completely rational and enlightened beings are in agreement on moral matters, and that the situation has never been otherwise and that it will never change.

What bearing does this have on Matson's formulation? It would seem that if one takes both (1) and (2) to be true, and also (3), and if the theist takes 'God' to be an abbreviation for 'the only completely rational and enlightened, etc., being' then the proposition 'God's moral advice is always correct,' as understood by theists, has a different logical force than 'Teacher's arithmetic answers are always correct.' Indeed, to slightly extend the example, if one understands God – as did Sir Isaac Newton – as being an expert in geometry, and if God is a perfectly rational being, then God's *geometrical* abilities are of a different order than those which might have been possessed by Matson's teacher. For while 'God's geometry answers are always correct' is not, by itself, a 'necessary' truth, 'A perfectly rational and enlightened being's geometry answers are always correct' *would* appear to be so. For if we mean by 'perfectly rational and enlightened' that the being, among other things, adopts 'the geometric point of view,' so that he works with the most reasonable set of axioms and rules, and wants to *succeed* geometrically, then mistakes would seem to be ruled out a priori.

If we construe 'A completely rational and enlightened being's moral answers are always correct' in an analogous fashion, and if we take God to be such a being – one who freely and clearheadedly reviews all facts from the moral point of view – then mistakes on God's part could also be ruled out a priori. But this is not to deny Plato's point; for it is by no means tautologically true that, for all senses of 'God,' God is a perfectly rational being. Thus one can significantly ask whether what God decides with respect to morality is correct.

8. *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 96.

And a proper answer to that question would be, 'Yes, because He is a perfectly rational and enlightened being.' And if *that* answer is correct, then God's moral advice is more than merely a 'more reliable' guide than our own deliberations.

One final qualification must be added to satisfy the logicians. I have argued toward the conclusion that 'x is right' *implies* 'God approves of x.' On the logician's use of 'implies' it does not follow from this that 'God approves of x' implies 'x is right.' To demonstrate with a common example, while 'It is raining' certainly implies 'The ground is wet,' the reverse is not true, since the ground's wetness can come from some *other* source. What *does* follow from this example is (by 'contraposition'): 'It is not the case that the ground is wet' implies 'It is not the case that it is raining.' (Logicians ignore the story of Gideon and the dry fleece.) Similarly, the only implication that follows from the one at the beginning of this paragraph is: 'It is not the case that God approves of x' implies 'It is not the case that x is right.'

I suspect that some stricter relation than the 'material implication' of logicians holds between the claims which I have been discussing. But leaving that matter aside here, if all of the foregoing is correct, then, at the very least, the theist can work out some necessary relation between statements of divine *dis-*approval and *negative* moral judgments.

All of this is as yet hypothetical, for it rests on only a tentative acceptance of ethical analyses which surely merit considerable discussion. In any event, there is *some* apologetic benefit to be gained merely from the demonstration that certain theistic claims are consistent with some current philosophical views. Of course, this account could still be attacked on the grounds that the theist is mistaken in thinking that there is a God, or in his belief that God is a perfectly rational and enlightened being; and this would be to suggest that what is wrong with the theist's method of moral reasoning is not that he does not know what a moral justification looks like, but that he is confused over how many, and what sorts of, beings there are. But, in at least some circles, it is less of an insult to be accused of metaphysical confusion than it is to be charged with moral ineptitude.