

DEIFORM MORALITY

*In A New Theist Response to the New Atheists, ed. Kevin
Vallier and Joshua Rasmussen (Routledge, 2020)*

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Part II

God and morality

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Ward explicates a common line of New Atheist critique of divine command theory and theistic moral motivation. Ward notes some agreement with these critiques and then goes on to explain why these critiques are actually consistent with the heart of Christian ethics. He does this by sketching an account of God and morality that is immune to the critiques. Ward focuses on two great medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, who, despite some significant differences, are both representatives of a grand tradition of Christian thought. These thinkers conceive morality as ordered to an eternal life of loving union with God. Love for God and neighbor is the primary moral motivation in this picture. Within this moral framework, morality is not arbitrarily decided by fiat. Such a conception of morality clarifies the Christian view of God's relationship to morality.

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1. New Atheist critique

New Atheists have argued forcefully that we don't need God to be moral. ~~This claim that we don't need God to be moral~~ admits of a distinction between two logically independent but closely related claims:

- 1 Moral facts do not depend on God (whether or not God exists, there are moral facts about right and wrong).
- 2 Moral motivation does not depend on God (whether or not God exists, there are motivating reasons to act morally).

These claims are logically independent because (1) is about the source or ground of morality, whereas (2) is about moral motivation. One could consistently hold that God is not the source of morality but is nonetheless the source of ultimate moral accountability; if so, then one's motivation for being moral might have a lot to do with God, even while one denies that moral facts depend on God. So (1) and (2) are logically independent claims, even if they are not always treated as such. New Atheist writers aim to defend both claims.

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When Richard Dawkins addresses the issue of God's relation to moral motivation, he suggests that the only sort of motivating role God might play in someone's moral life is in the capacity of judge. Beginning with a rhetorical question, he writes,

If there is no God, why be good? Posed like that, the question sounds positively ignoble. [To a person who asks this question,] my immediate temptation is to issue the following challenge: "Do you really mean to tell me the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward, or to avoid his disapproval and punishment? That's not morality, that's just sucking up."²

Thus construing God's motivating role in the moral lives of believers, he goes on to offer a paraphrase of Michael Shermer's Euthyphro-style dilemma, amounting to a critique of one version of a God-centered view of morality.³ Similar critiques are also to be found in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett.⁴ I will refer to it as Dawkins's Dilemma:

If you agree that, in the absence of God, you would commit robbery, rape, and murder, you reveal yourself as an immoral person. . . . If, on the other hand, you admit that you would continue to be a good person even when not under divine surveillance, you have fatally undermined your claim that God is necessary for us to be good.⁵

The dilemma is designed to show that a religious person who thinks morality depends on God is either immoral or irrational. I think it contains some wisdom, but I also think the main thrust of its attack on religiously motivated moralists is off the mark. It's crafted for rhetorical punch over precision, but its meaning is clear enough for us to state the criticism in a more specific way.

As I argued earlier, a claim about morality's dependence on God (or failure to depend on God) is distinguishable into two logically independent claims: one about moral facts' dependence on God (or failure to depend on God), and another about moral motivation's

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dependence on God (or failure to depend on God). Thus, one could interpret the dilemma in two ways: one, as a criticism of the claim that moral facts depend on God, and second, as a criticism of the claim that moral motivation depends on God. So we can restate the dilemma in a way that makes these two possible interpretations explicit. I will call the first the Moral Facts Version of the Dilemma, or MF:

MF1 On the one hand, if you now believe that moral facts depend on God, such that if you later came to believe that God does not exist you would not believe that there are moral facts, then you are now an immoral person.

MF2 On the other hand, if you now believe that God exists but you would continue to believe that there are moral facts even if you later came to believe that God does not exist, then you now do not believe that moral facts depend on God.

And I will call the second the Moral Motivation Version of the Dilemma, or MM:

MM1 On the one hand, if you now believe that moral motivation depends on God, such that if you later came to believe that God does not exist you would act immorally, then you are now an immoral person.

MM2 On the other hand, if you now believe that God exists but you would continue to act morally even if you later came to believe that God does not exist, then moral motivation does not depend on God.

If successful, MF shows that someone who believes moral facts depend on God is either immoral (for being prepared to act immorally) or irrational (for being committed to inconsistent beliefs).

If MM is successful, it shows that someone who believes moral motivation depends on God is either immoral (for being prepared to act immorally) or irrational (for being committed to inconsistent beliefs).

Let's consider MF first. Here is a reason to think that MF1, the first "horn" of the dilemma, is false. This reason is that believing there are no moral facts does not make someone

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an immoral person. For example, as I mentioned earlier, Alex Rosenberg does not believe that there are moral facts, but he professes a strong commitment to morality. Although I do not personally know Alex Rosenberg, I have no reason to doubt his commitment to morality. So we have reason to reject MF1.

Now, if MF were a successful dilemma, the rejection of MF1 would commit us to accepting MF2, the second horn of the dilemma. But there is also strong reason to reject MF2. Imagine someone who now believes in God and thinks that moral facts depend on God. This person is thoughtful and open-minded, and recognizes some good sense in God-free accounts of moral facts. It would not be crazy for this person to have something like a “back-up option” about morality, expressed in the form, “If it turns out I’m wrong about this God stuff, I would be a . . . about moral facts,” where some God-free theory about what grounds moral facts fills in the blank. This position is respectable. Personally, my back-up option would be Aristotelian naturalism (discussed later on). Consider, by analogy, the atheist who wonders what he would think about morality if it turned out he were wrong about atheism. Having a “back-up option” is reasonable for the atheist who does not think there is a God on whom morality depends, and so, too, for the theist who does think that morality depends on God. Given these reasons against MF1 and MF2, then, we have reason to reject MF. Therefore, MF fails to show that someone who believes moral facts depend on God is either irrational or immoral.

Consider MM. I will start with the second horn, MM2—that your belief that moral motivation comes from God is undermined if you would act morally even if you didn’t believe in God. MM2 is false for a reason very similar to the reason that shows MF2 to be false, namely, that it is consistent and even reasonable to have a “back-up option” for moral motivation, such that if one lost one’s belief in God (and *a fortiori* one’s belief that moral motivation depends on God), one would have some other good reason for acting morally.

So consider the final option, MM1—basically that you are immoral if you would not act morally were you not to believe in God. This proposal has the ring of truth. Implicit or explicit, when Dawkins and other New Atheists talk about God providing religious believers with their

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motivation for being moral, they are talking about fear of divine punishment and hope for divine reward. Later, I will address the prospect of having other motivations. But MM1, read in the context of how New Atheists construe God-dependent moral motivation, claims that if your *only* reasons for now acting morally are that you fear God and want him to give you good things but you would otherwise be acting immorally, then you are now an immoral person. And this proposal seems to me exactly right.

Summing up, then, if we interpret Dawkins's Dilemma in a manner that is aimed against the view that moral facts depend on God, as we did in MF, then the dilemma is unsuccessful, for MF is a false dilemma. Someone holding this view need be neither immoral (as MF1 alleged) nor committed to inconsistent beliefs (as MF2 alleged). But interpreting Dawkins's Dilemma as we did in MM, as aimed against the view that moral motivation depends (solely) on God, the dilemma is successful, for while someone who holds such a view need not be committed to inconsistent beliefs (as MM2 alleged), such a person is immoral (as MM1 alleged)—again, on the assumption that his *only* reason for not being immoral is fear of punishment and hope of reward.

I think Dawkins and others are right, then, to be repelled by the punishment/reward view of moral motivation, if such a view is exalted as the only reasonable view of moral motivation. They are also right to recognize that it is possible to apprehend value in the world, including moral value, absent a belief in God. Additionally, though not for the reasons advanced in the MF reading of Dawkins's Dilemma, I think they are right to reject a standard divine command theory, according to which all moral facts are what they are solely due to a divine command or other act of divine will. So I think there are things to admire about Dawkins's and others' criticisms of one view of God's relationship to morality and one view of how God motivates moral action.

2. A theistic response

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Nevertheless, there are other views of God's relationship to morality and other views of how God motivates moral action. In fact, many Christian thinkers have not held that basic moral facts do not depend on God's commands; rather, they are inscribed within God's perfect nature. Of course, insofar as a Christian thinks that God has made everything other than himself, there is a clear sense in which everything, morality included, depends on God. In this framework, it would follow that it is impossible to be moral without God, just as it would be impossible to sing without God, or have brown hair, or exist without God. But it would *not* follow from this that without God, all actions are permissible. In this view, without God, there is nothing, and so nothing to be permissible. In this sense morality's dependence on God comes from no special *moral* consideration, but a strictly *metaphysical* consideration of the dependence of the universe on a divine being. I will set aside this sense of morality's dependence on God, however, because it is not what's at issue in New Atheist critiques of God's relationship to morality.

Among the Christian thinkers who thought that at least some moral truths are established independent of any specific acts of divine commanding are, well, virtually every major Christian thinker. Even William Ockham, the infamous voluntarist, believed that at least the moral obligation to love God above all does not depend on a divine command. An especially fruitful period for thinking about how a naturalism about ethics intersected with Christian theology was the late medieval period, roughly the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, during which time Christian theologians reassimilated Aristotle's philosophy into the intellectual culture of Western Europe.

This medieval reassimilation of Aristotle is worth considering, because it shows how a Christian moral framework is compatible with secular moral theorizing. Aristotle believed in a **god**, but a **god** very different from the one Christians worship, and also thought that this **god** had nothing whatsoever to do with morality. Instead, Aristotle thought that we can discern good and bad, right and wrong, merely by reflecting on human nature. We human beings share the same human nature, and this human nature has certain norms built in, as it were. This is most evidently seen in our shared physiology. We all agree that medical science is the science that is concerned

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with what it is for a human body to be healthy or unhealthy, along with what it takes to restore the unhealthy to health. A doctor has the knowledge and authority to declare how a human body ought to be and to judge the degree to which this or that patient matches up to the standard of human (physiological) health. Similarly, moral science, or ethics, is supposed to be that science that is concerned with what it is for a human being to be good or bad in thought and action. Aristotle's method in ethics is to consider the various capacities we human beings have simply by virtue of being human. Those capacities that Aristotle identified as most distinctively human he attributed to an umbrella capacity, which he called reason or rationality. Aristotle thought that we are right to judge a human being to be doing well or badly based on the extent to which he or she is actualizing these rational capacities. What we call the vices are those habits that incline us to fail to actualize our full potential as human beings. The virtues, by contrast, are those habits that do incline us to actualize our full potential. Aristotelianism also has a lot to say about our conduct toward others, inasmuch as it recognizes that there are goods of community life in which our flourishing as individuals partly consists.

The main point to draw from this little summary of Aristotelian ethics is that, for Aristotle, ethics is a perfectly natural enterprise. There is nothing mysterious or religious about it. Just as an expert gardener understands the conditions under which a rose bush flourishes and those under which it languishes (he knows what sort of soil the rose needs, how much sunlight and water, how much fertilizer and what kind, when and how to prune, etc.), so, too, the moral expert understands what a human being needs for its flourishing. To take a relatively trivial example: if you eat too much ice cream, you won't be well off as a person. If you have a habit of eating too much ice cream, we can say that you have a vice, a habit that inclines you to do what's bad for you. The moral expert understands just what role ice cream can play in a flourishing life—just a little bit on an ordinary day, maybe a bit more at birthday parties and holidays.

If I were an atheist or agnostic, I'd be an Aristotelian and would be mostly unmoved by the old Sartrean quip that without God, everything is permissible. But here's a pragmatic reason why even the atheist Aristotelian might be uncomfortable with a purely naturalistic ethics.

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Suppose I came to stop caring about morality—not that I became a moral skeptic, but simply that I stopped caring. I decide that I want a Don Juan sort of life, morality and propriety be damned. It’s hard to see what sorts of reasons could persuade me to continue the moral life. This suggests a weakness in a purely naturalistic Aristotelianism as a moral theory: as a system of morality, it can’t offer any reasons for being moral to those who aren’t already committed or disposed to be committed to the moral life. Morality for these naturalistic Aristotelians is a kind of hobby; the expert quilter can write a book all about how to make quilts well, but only those interested in quilting will, or should, care to learn anything from it. But morality seems to be universal in the sense that if there is an objectively true system of ethics, it applies to all persons, or at least to all human beings. Moreover, morality also seems to be the sort of thing that all persons, or at least all humans, have good reasons to care about. We should strive, then, if only for pragmatic reasons, for an ethics that captures these two goals of moral theory: universality (everyone’s under it) and relevance (everyone has good reasons to be motivated by it). Naturalistic Aristotelianism achieves the goal of universality, because it derives morality from human nature; but it fails to achieve relevance, because it can’t offer good reasons for being moral to the immoralist, who understands the claims of morality and believes them but is just not interested.

As a theistic alternative, consider a version of Aristotelianism about ethics that also holds that there is a God who is interested in moral judgment, with punishment or reward awaiting us all. With this theory I would have a very compelling reason for at least attempting to conform to morality—a self-interested reason, sure, but a compelling one. We wouldn’t think very highly of someone who cared for morality only out of fear of punishment; but all things considered, it’s better, at least for the rest of us, for the would-be Don Juans of the world to act morally for base reasons. So, with this theistic Aristotelianism, we could say that although the content of morality is determined totally by our human nature, there is an accountability to morality built into the system. And this accountability gives us the relevance we should be seeking in a moral theory.

But it must be stressed, in full agreement with the New Atheists, what an impoverished view of God’s relationship to morality we get if we *only* focus on fear of divine retribution as a

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reason to be moral. It's not just that this fear ultimately ought to play no role in a perfect moral life; additionally, it seems pretty intuitive that actions motivated solely by fear aren't properly moral actions at all.

Taking stock, the theistic moral view I have sketched so far makes moral facts grounded not in God's will but in our human nature. Moral motivation comes from at least two sources: first, we can be motivated simply by the goodness of acting toward ourselves and others in a way that promotes our flourishing as human beings; but, second, where this natural goodness fails to motivate, we can be motivated by the thought that God holds us accountable to morality.

Having briefly looked at this one way in which God has traditionally been thought to play a role in morality, I'd like now to go a bit deeper. Although the Christian life is compatible with secular moral theorizing, it ultimately transcends it in a profound way, for the goal of the Christian life is a loving relationship with God.

Many Christian thinkers in the medieval period thought that the perfectly moral life or the perfectly just city as envisioned by Aristotle is not our final end as human beings. They all thought, paradoxically, that the ultimate goal of human life is something beyond the human. They thought, to continue the paradox, that all human striving, ineluctably and by nature, pursues a goal that it cannot possibly achieve on its own: a perfect loving relationship with God, which involves a union with God so intimate that many theologians and mystics have thought it appropriate to say that the glorified human being is *deified*, *made divine*, by the union.

This transcendent goal of human life invites a critical examination of the role that morality is supposed to play in achieving this goal. Augustine's polemics banished Pelagianism from Western Christianity: we can't earn our salvation; we're dependent on divine assistance. It follows that even perfect success in the moral life, if this is possible, does not entail that we reach the transcendent end of union with God. Whatever role morality is supposed to play in getting us to our final end, it is nothing like a cause-effect relationship. Being moral cannot be the cause of our achieving our supernatural end. Nor can it be anything like an economic transaction or

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contractual relationship, if these were to imply any obligation on God's part to raise to glory those who reached moral perfection.

And yet we find in the Christian tradition, going all the way back to the New Testament, a very close connection between morality and achieving our supernatural end. Everyone thought that living a morally perfect life is among the things we aim at as we aim at our supernatural end. St. Augustine made a great deal of sense out of the connection between morality and our supernatural end when he taught that the love for God ought to transform our earthly loves so that we love finite things not just for their own value but also because they are loved and valued by God. In this way the moral life is taken up into the mystical life and becomes a concrete, day-to-day way to habituate oneself to the loving relationship with God we hope eventually to enjoy.

In this respect, Christians do indeed seek a divine "reward" as they pursue the moral life. But this reward should not be conceived as the wages of good works. Christians believe that God has been revealed to humanity most fully in Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe to be God-incarnate, fully God and fully human. In the Bible, just before he is about to be executed, Jesus calls his disciples not servants but friends (John 15:15). For the Christian, then, friendship is an important way to characterize the relationship with God we seek to cultivate. Of course, being a friend involves following certain norms. But when you're actually in a friendship, you don't do something good for your friend just so that he'll do something good for you. Instead, each of you delight both in giving to and receiving from the other. The delight, or "reward," of friendship just is this mutual giving and receiving; it is not something external, tacked on as a prize for being a good friend. Friendship is its own reward, to adapt the cliché. Thus, although it is true to say that Christians are motivated to act morally partially out of hope for divine reward, it is not accurate to describe this hope of reward as self-serving calculation or sucking up. Of course, most Christians are not always motivated to act for the reasons they recognize as the best reasons to act. In this respect, Christians are like everyone else. We all fail to live up to our most noble vision of the moral life.

Notes

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- 2 Dawkins 2006, 259.
- 3 Shermer 2005, 154.
- 4 Sinnott-Armstrong 2009, 107; Hitchens 2007, 184–193; Dennett 2006, 279–285.
- 5 Dawkins 2006, 259.