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The Continuing 'Euthyphro' Debate

R.L. Sturch

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EUTHYPHRO: 'Holiness is what all the gods love, and its opposite, what all the gods hate, is inholiness.'

SOCRATES: 'Is holiness loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved?'¹

Well, we mightn't put it in quite those words nowadays. 'God' would replace 'the gods', for one thing. And contemporary moral philosophers might prefer to talk about 'goodness' or 'rightness' rather than 'holiness'. Partly, no doubt, this last is because many of them are not Christians, and not much interested in holiness. But, apart from that, it surely is God's love that makes something holy, not the other way round; there seems to be an obvious answer to Socrates' question as he put it: whereas with goodness and rightness the answer is by no means so obvious. In fact, the debate is going on to this day.

How can we best put the problem which gives rise to this debate in Christian terms? All Christians are likely to agree that God wishes us to do right and to abstain from doing that which is wrong; and also that as soon as we know that God wishes us to do something it is our duty to go and do it, and sinful to refrain from doing so. But this could be explained in more than one way.

Firstly, it might be said that 'right' *means* 'commanded by God,' rather as 'legally obligatory' means 'commanded by the laws of the land'. The usual name for this position (for historical reasons which need not detain us here) is *Naturalism*. (Strictly speaking, this should be 'theological Naturalism', as there are other 'naturalist' views too, but as these do not come into the 'Euthyphro' debate, we can use the shorter form.)

Secondly, it might be said that God's commands, and these alone, make an action right, and that His prohibitions, and these alone, make an action wrong. Right and wrong thus depend on God's will, *voluntas*, and the view is generally known as *Voluntarism*.

And thirdly, it might be said that since God is omniscient, He knows what is right, and since He is utter goodness, He will wish us to do all that is right and nothing that is wrong. This view has no special name that I know of, but as it treats right and wrong as in some sense 'autonomous', independent of God's decree, I shall call it *Autonomism*. Socrates, in the quotation with which we started, seems to be offering Euthyphro a choice between Autonomism (it is loved by the gods because it is holy) and—well, at that time Naturalism and Voluntarism had not perhaps been fully distinguished. They have quite similar consequences and quite similar drawbacks.

What are these drawbacks? They must be serious ones, for many philosophers take Autonomism more or less for granted. Let us consider a group of seven alleged drawbacks, of which the first three are arguments against Naturalism alone, the rest against both it and Voluntarism.

¹ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 9E-10A.

Firstly, it is argued that it is not possible to define ethical words like 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong' wholly in terms of non-ethical words, without losing their

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essential meaning in the process. It would be like trying to define 'holiness' or 'salvation' in non-religious terms. You could perhaps pin down some of the content of the word defined (or rather mis-defined), but not its real significance.

Secondly, suppose such a definition could be found, such as 'commanded by God'. At once a serious difficulty arises. Atheists use ethical words quite intelligibly. We can discuss the rightness or wrongness of a proposed action with them without finding ourselves talking at cross-purposes. Yet on the Naturalist view either they are meaning something quite different from what we are, or else they are in reality believers in God. Both conclusions seem quite absurd.

Thirdly, if 'right' means 'commanded by God', how can we sensibly say that it is right to do what God commands? This surely makes sense. We can urge others, or ourselves, to obedience by reminding ourselves that we ought to obey. Yet on the Naturalist view it can only mean 'God commands us to do what He commands', which is not indeed nonsense if that means 'unintelligible', but is certainly a rather futile and tautologous assertion.

None of these points affects the Voluntarist. But the fourth one does. If God's commands alone make an action right or wrong (whether by definition, as the Naturalist would hold, or not), does this not imply that He can command anything He chooses? He did in fact forbid murder, adultery, theft, false witness and covetousness; but might He not equally well have chosen to command all these things? And if so, would they not at once become good and right? This seems intolerable.

Fifthly, unless some form of Autonomism is true, can we call God good? Surely we wish to do so; surely the Bible does so; yet if goodness depends on God's commands, all this can mean is that God obeys Himself, which is ridiculous.

Sixthly, is it not the case (to quote Professor P. H. Nowell-Smith) that the mere fact that a command has been issued by a competent authority, even by God, is not a logically good reason for obeying it?² Religious people will, he agrees, think themselves obliged to do it; 'but this is because they have a general proattitude to doing whatever God commands'. That attitude is necessary in order to convert any fact—here the fact that God commands something—into the acceptance of an obligation. (It should be noted that Nowell-Smith does not mean that this fact is no reason at all for doing whatever it may be; only that it is not by itself enough to produce the obligation.)

And seventhly, surely God's commands and moral duties are distinguished regularly even by Christians? There are many situations which are not covered by explicit commands in the Scriptures, and where Christians have to try to 'judge for themselves what is right'.³ And conversely there are many commands—in the ceremonial law of the Old Covenant, for

² *Ethics* 1954, 192.

³ Luke 12: 57.

example—which could hardly be called moral duties. It is precisely the fact that in their case the duty of Israel to obey them really did derive from the commandments of the Lord and from those alone which makes it very hard to believe that exactly the same holds for 'Thou shalt not kill'.

This is quite a formidable set of arguments. Not all of course are of the same cogency, but between them they have convinced the majority of contemporary British and American moral philosophers that some form of Autonomism is inescapable. (Of course, many of them do not believe in God in the first place, in which case they will have to think that ethics is independent of His will, and a

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philosopher who has developed an ethical theory on non-theistic lines will naturally be reluctant to think that it ought to be abandoned if there turned out to be a God after all.) But there remain a number who feel that Autonomism limits God, setting moral values somehow above even Him, and that this is incompatible with Christian belief in an infinite and sovereign God. Can Autonomism be denied, then, or, failing that, some compromise position be discovered?

A few have attempted to meet the challenge head-on, so to speak, accepting the apparent paradoxes, or some of them at least. Thus we find R. W. Butler writing that God 'does not judge impartially from a neutral standpoint but from the absolute concreteness of his own good pleasure'; 'the distinction between an omniscient person who knows the difference between right and wrong... but who could only show us where the line runs—he cannot draw it, and the Christian God who knows the line precisely because he has drawn it, is the *Ausgangspunkt* between a secular and a Christian ethic'.⁴ And Butler appears to be not just a Voluntarist but a Naturalist: 'Christian theistic ethics defines the supreme good as the revealed word of God'.⁵ Can such a position be maintained? Can our seven objections be met? Let us take them one by one and see what sort of an answer might be made. (It will not necessarily be the answer these writers actually make; they are often concerned with different criticisms, or with counter-criticisms of their own, and do not always deal with precisely the same points as I have outlined.)

Does a Naturalist view, then, necessarily omit something vital to ethics? Non-theistic forms of Naturalism almost certainly do. But does this apply to theistic forms as well? Is not the very name 'God', as a Christian understands it, charged with ethical meaning, so that 'God commands X' is likewise fully ethical? 'For the believer to ask "Is what God wills good?"', granted he understands the meaning of God, is tantamount to an evasion of morality itself.'⁶ This saves the full ethical meaning of morality, but at a serious cost. For the name 'God' surely bears ethical meaning itself either because of some linguistic convention whereby the name would not be used of any being, however powerful, who was not utterly good, or (far more probably) because of the Christian's absolute conviction that his Lord is indeed utterly good. And both of these seem to imply something on Autonomist lines: goodness exists 'in its own right', and God is (actually or by definition) good. Or, to put what is basically the same point in another way, we cannot define the meaning of 'good' so as to include a reference to

⁴ *Christian Creationist Ethics* 1976, 12-14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34 (my italics). For a more definitely Voluntarist position cf. e.g. P. Brown, 'Religious Morality' in *Mind*, n.s. 72, no. 286, 1963 235ff.

⁶ Butler, *op. cit.*, 43.

God and at the same time define the meaning of 'God' so as to include a reference to goodness. One or the other, perhaps, but not both, not without going round and round in a circle.

Can we who are believers sensibly discuss moral problems with atheists or agnostics, if Naturalism be true? If Voluntarism is true, we certainly can—just as we could discuss lightning with an ancient Norseman who believed it to be the hammer-stroke of Thor. But this is because there is at least one aspect of lightning which is the same both for him and for us—the visible and dangerous flash. Is there an aspect of ethics which is similarly the same for Christian and atheist? R. M. Adams has argued⁷ that there are in fact at least five such. We use the same ethical words (with certain exceptions like 'sin' and 'holy'), and we treat them as having the same grammatical and logical status; we agree to a large extent about what kinds of action are to be called 'wrong'; we express similar emotional attitudes in passing moral judgments; and calling something wrong has similar *social*

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functions for us all. Now all this is certainly correct; but are not all five points as it were *peripheral* to the ethical core of meaning? The visible flash of the lightning is the point where we start; beliefs about electric discharges or the hammer of Thor are a step further on. But all Adams's five depend on a starting-point of what we can only call *wrongness*; and on a Naturalist theory this does not exist except as an abbreviation for 'forbidden-by-Godness'. Naturalism completely fails to meet this objection.

I am not sure that the same applies to the third objection, that for a Naturalist such an assertion as Peter's reply to the High Priest, 'We ought to obey God rather than men'⁸ can only be a mere tautology. If 'ought' and 'right' have no other meaning than that God commands whatever it is, all Peter was saying was that God had commanded us to do what God commanded us to do, which is not a very helpful remark. But I think the Naturalist could answer that such assertions are what the late Ian Ramsey called 'significant tautologies',⁹ on the lines of 'Well, duty is duty' or 'Why did I do it? Because I chose to; because I'm me'. What Peter was telling the High Priest was something like 'God is God, and you aren't'—part a 'significant tautology' and part not. Such a reply might not justify all assertions that we ought to obey God, but it would certainly justify a great many of them. And perhaps the rest, if any, really should be scrapped.

Still, the first two objections seem to be enough to render Naturalism untenable, with or without the third. But perhaps it can be modified in some way so as to avoid them? This seems to be what Adams is trying to do.¹⁰ He presents us with a theory according to which 'when I say "It is wrong to do X", (at least part of) what I mean is that it is contrary to God's commands to do X. "It is wrong to do X" implies "It is contrary to God's commands to do X". But "It is contrary to God's commands to do X" implies "It is wrong to do X" only if certain conditions are assumed—namely, only if it is assumed that God has the character which I believe Him to have of loving His human creatures.'¹¹

⁷ 'A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness' in Outka and Reeder (eds.), *Religion and Morality* 1973, 342ff.

⁸ Acts 5: 29.

⁹ *Religious Language* 1957, 40ff.

¹⁰ *Art. cit.*, 318ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 321-2.

Now this does avoid nearly all the criticisms raised earlier. But we need not go into this in detail. For the real trouble with Adams's view is that it is a sophisticated version of the reply already suggested to our first objection, and, like it, amounts in the end to an admission of Voluntarism or Autonomism. We can see this best, I think, by using an analogy. Christians believe that all things exist solely because they have been created by God. If, then, a Christian asserts, 'There are rings round the planet Saturn,' part of what he has in mind is, 'God has created the planet Saturn with rings;' in a way, his assertion implies this. But clearly the assertion could equally well be made by an unbeliever, by an atheist or by someone who did not believe God was the Creator, like an ancient Marcionite. Now Christian and unbeliever assert the existence of the rings, and in exactly the same sense; it is simply that the Christian believes something about the rings over and above what the other does. Similarly with 'wrong': the Christian means by 'wrong' just what the non-Christian does, but he believes more about it than the other. (What more he believes will vary according to whether he is a Voluntarist or an Autonomist.)

What then of Voluntarism, which is so far unscathed? The first objection to that was that it seems to allow that it was just luck that God had forbidden murder and commanded love; that He might equally well have done the opposite, and that in that case murder would have been a duty and love a vice. Some have quite simply accepted this. William of Ockham is the best-known example from past

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history, but not the only one. The same line seems, for instance, to be taken by G. H. Clark: 'Morality as much as physics is what it is because God thinks this way;'¹² honesty is better than stealing because that is how God has made the world, but we cannot guess what sort of moral standards He might set up for some hypothetical world. While this position seems logically unassailable, even if paradoxical, an arbitrary God of this kind is hardly the God of the Bible; and accordingly appeal is sometimes made to God's nature. If God is, as Scripture says, righteous, He will presumably command only that which is righteous, whatever world He makes. Possibly this lets in autonomism? But that may be avoidable. Some, such as Patterson Brown,¹³ have argued that God is not indeed obliged to will one thing rather than another, but since He is just and loving, His will is anything but arbitrary. This does avoid Autonomism over goodness and rightness, but seems to let it in over justice (not, I imagine, over love). And in general, appeal to God's nature will save His will from arbitrariness, only to raise the same question or dilemma—arbitrariness or Autonomism?—at a deeper level.

Still, this may be unfair to the Voluntarist. Let us concede the point and move on to the next objection, which was that on a Voluntarist (or Naturalist) basis it actually become impossible to call the Lord righteous at all. For righteousness, it seems, consists of obeying God's commands, and can we really say that God does that?

Quite possibly we can. 'Do you think I wouldn't obey my own rules?' Aslan asks Lucy in one of C. S. Lewis's 'Narnia' stories.¹⁴ Of course, many of God's commands are simply inapplicable to God Himself: He cannot steal, because all property is only 'on trust' from Him

¹² *Religion, Reason and Revelation* 1961, 189.

¹³ Brown, *art. cit.*, 241.

¹⁴ *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'* 1952, 136.

in the first place, and so He cannot refrain from stealing either. But this is not true of all. God forbids lying, for example, and this is a commandment He can, and does, keep Himself. God commands that we love one another; and He Himself loves us. It may be objected that even in His love and truth God cannot be said to be obeying Himself. But I am not sure of this; and even if it is true, God clearly can and does act in a way which would be righteous in a created being, and may by extension be called 'righteous' in Him. The objection from the divine righteousness, crucial though some have thought it, fails completely. Such additional points as those raised by Adams,¹⁵ that the goodness of God commonly means goodness *to us*,¹⁶ while sound enough, are not necessary. Of course, the Autonomist will feel that God has better reasons for commanding truth and love than just arbitrary choice, but that is going back to the previous objection, and in any case the Voluntarist may be able to answer that God desires, we believe, the welfare of His creatures, and for that reason could well command truth and love as being conducive to that welfare.¹⁷

Nowell-Smith's objection needs careful handling. It involves two rather unfamiliar notions, those of a 'logically good reason' for doing something and of a 'general pro-attitude'. By the former Nowell-Smith means 'a reason which leaves no further room either for the question "What shall I do?" or for the question, "Why did you (he) do that?"'¹⁸ By the latter he means such attitudes as enjoying, wanting, approving, and finding happiness in.¹⁹ And it is characteristic of 'pro-words' (and of course 'con-words' too) that they provide logically good explanations of choice. If I am going out, and, asked why, say 'For a short walk', you may ask 'Why are you going for a walk?' But if I now answer 'Because I like walking', there is no point in your going on with your 'whys'. And what Nowell-

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Smith is arguing is that the mere statement 'God has told me to do X' is by itself not a logically good explanation of my doing X. You can still ask me 'Why do you obey God?' The answer will presumably be 'I wish to please Him', 'I am pledged as a Christian to keep His commandments' or the like—answers which do provide logically good reasons for doing X.

But to most Christians this will seem very peculiar. 'Why are you obeying God?' is a question that makes sense to an unbeliever, no doubt; to the Christian it is as absurd as 'Why are you doing what you enjoy?' We do not need a pro-attitude to obeying God before having a reason to do X; to regard X as an act of obedience to God is *ipso facto* to have a pro-attitude to it, just as to regard it as enjoyable is. Of course this is not obvious to the unbeliever; but that is because of the gap in his experience. That doing X is painful is a logically good reason for avoiding it; but every now and then someone is born who is incapable of feeling pain, and such a person could quite rationally ask 'Why are you avoiding this pain?', absurd though this will seem to the rest of us. Similarly with 'Why are you obeying God?' There are of course more believers in the world than there are people who feel no pain; but that is the only difference between the two cases.

Certainly it is possible to imagine very queer circumstances in which 'Why are you obeying God?' could make sense even on the lips of someone who believed in Him. A Satanist might

¹⁵ Adams, *art. cit.*, 338.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Psalm 107: 8, Romans 2: 4.

¹⁷ Cf. Adams, *art. cit.*, 340; and see also the discussion of Meynell, below.

¹⁸ Nowell-Smith, *op. cit.*, 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112f.

ask it of a colleague who showed signs of forward-sliding. But then the same applies to 'enjoyment' and the like. We can imagine some peculiarly ascetic community of monks with the Abbot demanding of a weaker brother 'And why were you doing something you enjoyed?' Nowell-Smith's objection seems to rest on too narrow a view of what constitutes a pro-attitude.

A view that is in some ways related to that of Nowell-Smith is that of Kai Nielsen.²⁰ So far from morality's being based on religion, he holds, the reverse is more nearly true; 'for nothing can be God unless he or it is an object worthy of worship, and it is our moral insight that must tell us if anything at all could possibly be worthy of worship'.²¹

Nielsen's argument may be expressed, I think, somewhat as follows: Before I can know that a given being X can properly be called 'God', I must know that he or it is worthy of worship. But before I can know *that*, I must know that X is good, or that what X commands is good. Therefore I must be able to make moral judgments before I can even say 'The LORD, He is God'. And surely this means that, so far from its being God's command that makes an action right, it is the rightness of X's commands that is one of the conditions for X's being genuinely God.

This argument, however, is far weaker than Nowell-Smith's, and can be faulted at several points. Its first step looks plausible, because Christians, and millions of others, do of course believe that God is indeed worthy of worship. But there also have been and are many people who have thought God was *not* worthy of worship—not in the sense that He is *unworthy* of it, but in the sense that worship is inappropriate to Him. Possibly eighteenth-century Deism would exemplify this. Certainly there are many forms of 'primal' religion in which there is belief in a supreme Creator to whom it is natural to refer as 'God', but who receives little or no direct worship; while it might be said that the most obvious refutation of Nielsen's first step is the millions of people in modern Western society who would say, if asked, that they believed in a God but to whom it never occurs to worship Him or pray to Him at all.

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Similarly, it is also clear that many people have in fact worshipped (imaginary) beings who did not receive their moral approval. The legends told of the Greek gods, for instance, notoriously depicted them as deceitful, lecherous and violent; yet they were thought worthy of worship. I should not, however, press this point as much as the previous one, for among the Greeks themselves there did develop a strong feeling that if the gods really behaved like that they were not worthy of worship. Not, even then, that religion came to depend on morality: the conclusion they drew was not that their worship was misplaced but that the legends were untrue. The sense of worshipfulness was felt just as strongly as the sense of morality.

But in any case Nielsen's argument says nothing against Voluntarism, even if it is valid. For the Voluntarist does not deny that right and wrong are realities which our own moral insight can recognise. Hence it would be perfectly legitimate, according to him, for someone who was (say) uncertain whether Christ or Krishna were truly God incarnate, to decide between the two according to their moral character. Such a person would be recognising that one of the two fitted the pattern of goodness recognised by human moral insight better than the other

²⁰ *Ethics without God* 1973.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 17.

did. The fact that the pattern depended on God's will would make no difference. That God's will is enough to make an action right does not exclude, indeed it positively entails, that only if an action is right can anyone who commands it be God.

It is the last objection to Voluntarism that seems to me the most difficult to overcome. It is quite clear that God has not revealed specific commandments to cover all possible moral choices. Of course, it may be held that He reveals His will not only in Scripture but in reason and the conscience. But these do not normally speak to us in terms of 'God commands you to do such-and-such'; it is more normally in purely ethical terms like 'You ought to do this' or 'It would be wrong to do that'. This, of course, is an objection to Naturalism more than to Voluntarism. But the converse is an equal difficulty to either. The civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament—or indeed the commandment concerning the Lord's Supper in the New—really were the more or less arbitrary commands of a God who could perfectly well have ordered them differently, and who did in fact abrogate the one and institute the other; there is no question of moral goodness or of doing right about them, except, naturally, in so far as keeping them is or was obedience to God. Neither reason nor conscience has anything to say of them until it is known that God has revealed them to be His will, and the wrongness of neglecting them lies solely in the disobedience involved, without any admixture of other elements. The best sort of reply I can think of would be to distinguish between God's *will* and His *commands*. His general will might be what made an act good; if He commands some act, of ceremonial or sacrament for example, which is not part of His general will, it is still good to obey Him because obedience is itself part of that general will. But commandments (including those mediated by reason and conscience) are surely all we have to indicate what His will is; to suppose a general will that makes all the difference to ethics and yet is inaccessible to us seems unnecessary and unhelpful; it does justice neither to morality nor to revelation.

But if a full-blooded defence of Naturalism, or even of Voluntarism, is not possible, is there some modified position which is more defensible? Several such have been advanced at one time or another. One version looks to the structure

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of the world as the key. This is to be found, for example, in Dr. Hugo Meynell's contribution to a symposium on the 'Euthyphro' problem some years back.²² Meynell poses the dilemma that goodness cannot depend on God's will without an intolerable arbitrariness (our fourth objection above), but that if God exists, what is good must surely depend on His will. One way out would clearly be atheism; but it is not the only one. We must distinguish between two aspects of God's will. One is given to us in special revelation; the other is inferred from the way the world has been made, and more specifically from the conditions whereby we are able to find happiness and fulfilment. Now what God reveals in His commandments is not arbitrary; He commands that which is already good. But what is good depends in its turn on the circumstances in which we can find happiness and fulfilment; and these circumstances themselves depend on God's creative will, His will in the second aspect.

This suggestion has obvious attractions. It seems to combine a genuine element of autonomy with an assertion of the ultimate sovereignty of God. But it depends very much on the view that what is right can be inferred from the conditions whereby we find happiness

²² *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 46, 1972.

and fulfilment. But is this obvious? Christians are of course sure that what is right will turn out in the end to be for our good as well; our Father who sees in secret will reward us. But for Meynell's suggestion to be correct, we must surely know that what is right depends on what is for our good independently of God's revelation, or indeed of belief in God at all; we are to infer what is right, not just to learn it from Him. And it is by no means obvious that we know any such thing. We normally draw quite a sharp distinction between what we ought to do and what it would benefit us to do, and suppose that the two need not always coincide. Perhaps this is because with the latter of these we fail to take into account the long-term benefits, or the benefits of a quiet conscience? But consider the case of an atheist, or other person with no belief in a life after death, who gives up his or her life for a righteous cause. Such a person is presumably doing what he or she thinks right; but clearly this cannot have been inferred from any beliefs about dying being conducive to happiness and fulfilment.

Can we, however, modify this theory in such a way as to take account of the objection? One possible method is suggested by some remarks of Jeremy Taylor²³ and a view apparently held by Duns Scotus.²⁴ Both accepted a 'natural law' view of the goodness of actions, agreeing with Meynell (and of course many others) that this did depend on the ways in which human nature can find happiness and fulfilment. But they drew a distinction between the goodness of an action and its rightness, the fact of its being a duty. A duty can only arise where a command is given. It may be best for an army in a battle that certain particular troops attack such-and-such an outpost of the enemy; but it is not their duty to do so unless they are ordered to by a superior officer. So it may be, indeed is, best for us if we practise justice, chastity, courage and the like; these things are quite definitely good: but it is only God's commands that make them duties. Now the advantage of this theory over Meynell's is that it is not limited by the theories of goodness that Scotus and Taylor actually held. The goodness of an action could be determined in any way reason might suggest, and still its rightness be derived from God's commandment. Hence we can, if we wish, be Autonomists as far as goodness is concerned, but Voluntarists when we turn to the notion of duty. Moreover, this theory accounts very well for the difference between God's moral

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and ceremonial commandments which seemed so serious an objection to Voluntarism. 'A sin which is a sin only because it is forbidden,' says Scotus, 'is less of a sin in form than that which is evil in itself... Sins which concern the Ten Commandments are, in their form, not merely evil because they are forbidden but forbidden because they are evil.'²⁵

Yet even this approach has its difficulties. We normally recognise other 'duties to obey' besides the duty to obey God, though of course less important than and subordinate to that one. The duty of soldiers to obey their officers has already been mentioned, but many others can easily be thought of—children to parents, citizens to the legislature, and so on. If we deny that any of these would exist without a commandment of God to elicit them, are we not cutting off the branch we are sitting on? We could originally illustrate the position of Taylor and Scotus by citing secular parallels. But if all duties depend on God's commands, there are no secular parallels. No commands issued by any human authority give rise to any duties of

²³ *Ductor Dubitantium* 1660, II, i, 1, 'On Natural Law'.

²⁴ So e.g. Wolter in Edwards, P. (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 1967, vol. 2, p. 435; and Copleston, F., *A History of Philosophy* 1946ff., vol. 2, 547.

²⁵ *Reportatio*, 2, 22, art. 3. I owe the quotation to Copleston, *loc. cit.*, but have slightly altered his rendering of the Latin; the sense is not affected.

themselves. We may obey them out of self-interest, or agreement with their contents, or goodwill towards the authority, but not out of any justified sense of obligation. Presumably, then, any notion of duty which is not held in a theistic context is illusory; and this both is itself hard to believe and makes it hard to see how the non-illusory notion which does arise in a theistic context ever got going. (This last point might perhaps be met by an appeal to revelation: conceivably God revealed both His commands and the correlative notion of duty together. But even so the abandonment of all 'human' duties remains difficult to swallow.) If, on the other hand, we accept the existence of what I have called 'secular parallels,' we have in effect abandoned Voluntarism for duties as a whole (though of course it remains as a perfectly possible basis for particular duties, and an extra summons to all).

Could we bring in here the rather startling position taken up (in an article²⁶ published some twenty years ago) by Professor G. E. M. Anscombe? She wished quite simply to deny the meaningfulness of expressions like 'ought morally' 'morally wrong' and the like, *except* in a Christian context, or one which, like Christianity, thinks in terms of a divinely given law. (Judaism and Stoicism are other examples she mentions.) Words like 'should' and 'ought' can only be used in ethics where law is involved: they acquired their special ethical senses (they have of course many others) 'by being equated in the relevant contexts with "is obliged" or "is bound" or "is required to", in the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law, or something can be required by law'.²⁷ And historically speaking this equating came about because of Christianity and its law conception of ethics, derived of course originally from the Torah. To moralists who have no belief in Christianity (or Judaism or Stoicism), this special ethical sense can have no real meaning; it is only linguistic habit that makes them go on using the words, and naturally enough they find serious philosophical difficulty in explaining this use. This is borne out by the fact that moralists like Aristotle, who wrote before Christianity or Stoicism and in ignorance of Judaism, do not use such words. Aristotle has no 'blanket term' like our 'wrong' (i.e. 'unlawful'); although Anscombe does devise an expression in Aristotelian language which would apply whenever our 'wrong' did, this takes forty-one words, and even then does not have the same connotation. We must *either* retain the notion of divine law as basic *or* develop an ethics of goodness, badness and virtues which does not talk in terms of

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'right' or 'should' at all. Hence the only 'secular parallels' to duties generated by divine commands are those generated by secular laws. These we can accept. The duty to drive on the left-hand side of the road (in Britain!) is not a moral duty, except in so far as it can be supported by divine commands—e.g. to obey one's rulers, or to love one's neighbour on the road as oneself. It is a legal duty. 'Moral duty' is an expression which only arises if there is a divine Lawgiver, just as legal duty arises from a human legislature. Combine this position with the Scotus-Taylor one, and we have perhaps the best 'divine command' ethics we have so far looked at.

We could try to support Anscombe's argument with one adduced by Professor P. T. Geach.²⁸ Geach too denies that there can be such a thing as a Sense of Duty (his capitals) apart from a belief in God's commands. (In fact, I doubt if he would accept such a thing even with that

²⁶ 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in *Philosophy*, vol. 33 1958, 1-19.

²⁷ *Art. cit.*, 5.

²⁸ *The Virtues* 1977, pp. 8-9; cf. *God and the Soul* 1969, 121 f.

belief; his position is evidently nearer Meynell's.) In Nowell-Smith terms, he denies that 'You must not' (i.e. morally must not) is a logically good reason for not doing whatever it is. People may feel that it is, but such a feeling is quite irrational, the sort of thing that may be induced in us by childhood traumas or the machinations of a totalitarian State. Geach's argument for this is that a Sense of Duty can be a positively evil thing to have: 'the conscientiousness of a villain like Himmler, his triumph over his own feelings in order to do monstrous deeds, only makes him more detestable'.²⁹ This seems very doubtful to me. Even obedience to the commands of God can lead to monstrous deeds: 'the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God,' said our Lord,³⁰ and history has shown how rightly He spoke. But just as it was not his obedience to what he thought God's will that made (say) Torquemada detestable, so it was not his conscientiousness (if he was conscientious) that made Himmler detestable. In both cases it is the perverted refusal to recognise the truth that their feelings conveyed which appals us. What Geach has shown (and here he is perfectly right) is that our consciences—like our interpretations of God's will—are fallible, and that in those whose consciences have been corrupted the feelings may be a better guide to what is really good, if only they will heed them.

However, this does not affect Anscombe's argument. The main difficulty with the suggested combining of her views with Scotus's is that the Anscombe half seems to involve Naturalism, with all Naturalism's extra drawbacks. For 'I ought (legally) to do X' really does mean the same thing as 'The law commands me to do X'. (Not, as we shall see, 'The legislature commands me to do X'.) So to make moral obligation dependent on God's law in the same way as legal obligation depends on human law is to say that 'I ought (morally) to do X' actually means the same as 'God commands me to do X', which is of course just what Naturalism asserts. And we could well adapt here a serious point made by Geach.³¹ Our knowledge that *lying* is bad cannot, he says, come from revelation. If we did not know this already (here I am altering Geach's argument slightly), it would be no good for God to tell us it was, for, since as far as we knew previously lying was perfectly legitimate, God might in His goodness be lying to us when He said it was wrong. We cannot therefore hold a Naturalist position where lying is concerned, for on the Naturalist view 'Lying is wrong' simply means 'God forbids lying', and this last can only be known to us by revelation.

Of course, if Anscombe is right, at least one of the objections to Naturalism, and that the most formidable, loses force. Atheists, on her view, do *not* use ethical

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words in the same way as theists; indeed, they do not use them intelligibly at all. (Or rather, they can only use some ethical words intelligibly; such words as 'just', 'courageous' and 'generous' would still be available to them, and in some uses even more general words might be.) So it seems possible that if we are willing to maintain that except in a context of theism (and theism, at that, whose ethics is law-based) words like 'ought' 'should' 'right' and 'wrong' simply have no ethical meaning at all, we can avoid Autonomism. Now I myself see no good reason to think that we *should* maintain this. Anscombe may perhaps be right on the historical point, though the use of words like *χρή* and *oportet* in non-philosophical Greek and Latin makes me rather doubtful even here; but that there is a logical dependence of words like

²⁹ *The Virtues*, 8.

³⁰ John 16: 2.

³¹ *God and the Soul*, 119-20; cf. *The Virtues*, 96.

'ought' on the notion of law needs more proof than it has received. (And might we not add that law does not require a legislator even in human terms? Custom is a good source of law too; murder was a crime before ever there was a Parliament to enact statutes against it.)

Hitherto I have been assuming that Naturalism, Voluntarism and Autonomism are the only possible relationships between ethics and the commandments of God (for a believer, that is). But it may be that we can find some other possibility. One might be found, perhaps, in a recent book by P. L. Quinn, *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements*.³² Quinn, in effect, avoids the Voluntarist/Autonomist quarrel by developing divine command theories in purely neutral terms. Thus his 'simple theory' states three things which it claims to be necessary truths: For any action *p*, it is required (permitted) (forbidden) that *p* be done if and only if God commands that *p* be done (it is not the case that God commands that *not-p* be done) (God commands that *not-p*).³³ More complex theories are later described which bring in other beliefs about God—e.g. that He created the world, or is almighty, or loves us. Clearly all these theories are completely neutral between Voluntarism and Autonomism (or even Naturalism), all of which views yield the three truths, and yield them as necessary truths too.

Later on, Quinn comes to what he calls the 'Euthyphro Objections'.³⁴ He sees a certain ambiguity in these: the objector denies that acts are 'required because they are commanded by God' but does not say whether this 'because' is the 'because' of *causes* or the 'because' of *reasons*. (Actually, Quinn does not explain precisely how he would define this distinction in this particular case.)

As Quinn sees it, the 'causal' objection can be met either by a straight denial—a thing's being commanded by God *does* bring about its being required (i.e. our duty)—or, more satisfactorily perhaps, by pointing out that a divine command theory on the lines proposed makes no causal claims one way or the other. The 'reasons' objection is more difficult. Again, it maybe met by a straight denial. But Quinn feels a little uneasy about this. It would be more plausible, he thinks, to say that a thing's having been commanded by God is not a *complete* reason for its being required—so far the 'Euthyphro Objection' is correct—but is *part* of a complete reason. The remainder of the complete reason could be God's being our wise Creator or our loving Father, 'for surely we owe obedience to the commands of a wise creator... (and) we ought to do what a loving parent commands'. (This is of course to move from Quinn's 'simple theory' to one of his 'complex' ones, but that does not matter much.)

Now Quinn's last reply is open to the same objection as the Taylor/Scotus theory, only more so. Certainly we ought to do what a loving parent commands.

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But we cannot use this as the basis for a divine command theory of ethics, for on that theory we have *no* duty to obey a loving parent unless (as is of course true) God tells us to. 'Wise creator' is in similar case, except that 'wise' looks as if it could also be opening the door to Autonomism. (It might not; it might only open it to something like Meynell's position.) And flat denial seems to be open to our old fundamental criticism of Voluntarism, that it leaves no real difference between the old Covenant's commands not to murder and not to eat shellfish.

³² *Divine Commands and Moral Requirements* 1978.

³³ *Op. cit.*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-52.

The main strength of Quinn's position is its uncommittedness. His original theories, simple or complex, are as I said neutral between Naturalism, Voluntarism and Autonomism. If there are objections to any of these, they must all be valid before Quinn's position can be considered refuted. Hence a perfectly sound objection to any one of the three leaves his position untouched; and hence also his ability to reply to the 'Euthyphro Objections' that he made no causal claims one way or the other. But this is a major weakness as well as a strength. It avoids difficulties simply by refusing to ask the questions that give rise to them; and since it was these questions that we began with, Quinn provides no real solution for us. (I should add that this is not intended for criticism of Quinn's book as a whole; this covers many questions which we have not raised here at all, and does so in considerable and painstaking detail.)

If we cannot evade the distinction between Voluntarism and Autonomism, can we deny that it exists? This is, I fear, our last hope if we wish to avoid choice; and it may seem so implausible that we can ignore it. Yet it has in fact been suggested. The notion goes back at least to Fichte; the 'living and operative moral order', he wrote, 'is itself God. We need no other God, and we cannot conceive any other'.³⁵ But it has been revived more recently in Professor W. G. Maclagan's Edward Cadbury Lectures.³⁶ Maclagan insists strongly that the 'moral demand' requires what we have been calling Autonomism. Yet he feels, too, that it is unsatisfactory to view the moral law as something independent of God. 'What then can we say but that it *is* God?' The obvious catch, he recognises, is that the term 'God' cannot be treated as precisely equivalent to the term 'moral law'! But this is not what he claimed. God is perhaps the moral law and much else besides. 'I am not claiming,' says Maclagan, 'that "true religion" can be reduced to "nothing but morality"'. There is a 'legitimate overplus of meaning attaching to the term "God"'. And this overplus may well *illuminate* the moral law, enabling it to be seen 'as an aspect of (the) richer totality of Divine Being'; morality will be illuminated by what Maclagan calls 'lateral enrichment', not by the 'vertical grounding' which the Voluntarist supposes.

This appears to me to be an admirable resolution of our difficulties—if the notion of God's actually being (amongst other things) the moral law is an intelligible one. I must confess that I very much doubt whether it is. The only way in which to make it look even remotely plausible is, I think, to adopt some near-pantheist view in which 'God' is the name for, shall we say, the ground of all being. (It is worth noting that Maclagan himself dislikes the idea of calling God 'personal'.) Such a 'ground' would presumably include all the structures, moral, logical, and so on, which are inescapably parts of reality. Perhaps some such position is tenable. But to discuss it would take us into areas of subtle and complex theology and metaphysics which hardly belong in the present paper, and in which I for one should probably become hopelessly lost.

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I am inclined, therefore, to believe that some form of Autonomism is inevitable. And though many Christians may feel they cannot accept this, that in Butler's words it is a secular ethic, not a Christian one, I am not convinced that this is the case. Perhaps I may conclude with a few remarks on this topic that are not purely philosophical ones.

³⁵ *On the Basis of our Belief in a Divine Providence* 1798, quoted by Copleston, *op. cit.*, vol. 7, 80.

³⁶ *The Theological Frontier of Ethics* 1961, 81 ff.

I do not believe that Scripture anywhere depicts God as somehow sovereign over good and evil in the sense that He can make a thing, or an act, or a person come under one of these descriptions simply by decree. He can of course—in His mercy He has and does—turn evil into good and make sinners righteous; but it cost Him more than a mere fiat, and changed people and the world rather than relabelled them. But Scripture does most certainly depict God as 'knowing good and evil', as loving the one and hating the other, as one in whose Christ are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I doubt if in the end it makes sense to think of God as deciding to make an act right or wrong, any more than it does to think of Him as deciding whether to make two plus two equal four or seventeen. But it does make very good sense to believe that from the very fact of the Lord's being what and who He is, and of our being what and who we are, there arises the first and great commandment, that we are to love the Lord our God with heart and soul and mind and strength.

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Prepared for the Web in September 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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