

God and the Grounding of Morality

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Abstract:

There is a classic mantra amongst many theists that divinity is the origin and fountain of ethical norms and only God can weave the warp and weft of the web of moral values. There has also recently been a concerted effort to rehabilitate religion in the field of philosophy in general and the subdiscipline of ethics specifically by harking back to this type of ethical grounding. Although the trend under the rubric of theistic ethics has as much claim to recognition as any other branches of applied ethics, its proponents and practitioners appear to harbor the higher ambition of underwriting ethics *in toto* and thereby furnish the fundamental foundations for moral judgments. The contention seems to be that without theism ethics will be rudderless and devoid of its proper footing and focus. It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to see how far this ambition can be sustained in view of a significant number of issues that theism faces in its liaison with ethics specifically and philosophy in general. The hope is that such a survey will allow a more measured approach to the interaction between religion and ethics that would ultimately benefit both parties in this transaction.

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To a good number of historical attestations and accounts, the nineteenth century seems to have been intellectually a tremendously trying time for religion in Europe, if not on a wider scale all over the globe. Apparently, more than anything else, religious thinkers and intellectuals were predominantly preoccupied with how to keep the ark of religion afloat in the turbulent ocean of theoretical and practical criticisms and censures by rebuilding and restructuring religion to meet the new milieus and mandates. On the oriental side of Europe, for example, Fyodor Dostoyevsky pleads in his influential novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), that without God there is no virtue and everything is permitted. And likewise, on the occidental side of Europe, Matthew Arnold attempts to resurrect religion in his *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (1873) by drawing on the very concept of morality that religion is ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling. For Arnold, the passage from morality to religion is made when emotion is applied to morality, and the true meaning of religion is thus not simply morality, but morality touched by emotion. In fact, Arnold audaciously argues that God is really a deeply moved way of saying conduct or righteousness.¹

However, historically speaking since at least the inception of the Abrahamic or Semitic religious tradition in the antiquity, there has been a consistent common conception that religion is the sole source or the foremost fountain of moral values, and thereby giving rise to the early forms of the divine command theory in ethics. Often than not the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments as narrated in the book of *Exodus* in the *Hebrew Testament* is taken to be the best exemplar of this perspective. These commandments ‘written with the finger of God’ (*Exodus* 31:18) are then followed by *another* set of normative regulations commonly referred to as the Book of the Covenant whereby the relationship between the divine being and the people with whom the covenant is made is placed under a covenant fidelity.

A more imaginative and fabulous portrayal of this type of ethical theism – in this specific case, ethical monotheism – is presented in the book of *Proverbs* in the literary style of *Wisdom Woman* calls. “Lady Wisdom” – a personified call of conscience and measure of moral rectitude that seems to be a (mysterious allegorical) combination of goddess, prophetess, and angel² – makes her appearance bemoaning humanity that

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge. (*Proverbs* 8: 1-9; New Revised Standard Version)

Then, after a few more admonitions and advices, she swiftly moves on to stamp her authority and establish her credentials by reminding her audience that,

The Lord created me at the beginning³ of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (*Proverbs* 8: 22-23; New Revised Standard Version)

And, with this declaration emphasising the genesis and source of moral precepts and percepts prior to other divine creations including humanity, one more time the reader is reminded of the true *authorship* of ethical values and norms, namely, the ultimate divine being.

Despite the intellectual and philosophical vicissitude of the foregoing ethical theism over the past several millennia⁴, one may set the *upshot* of this theistic outlook on morality against the statement of one of the most preeminent ethicists of the twentieth century where the chapter on the relationship between morality and religion is concluded by the comment that the ‘trouble with religious morality comes not from morality’s being inescapably pure, but from religion’s being

incurably unintelligible.’⁵ Furthermore, in a later work, he renews his criticism of religious ethics by remarking that ‘the development of the ethical consciousness means the collapse of religion’ not because a religious ethics (even a crude one) ‘is logically debarred from being ethical’ but rather for the dialectical reason that ‘if the self-understanding of religion is not to be left behind by the ethical consciousness, it has to move in a direction that will destroy religion.’⁶

Notwithstanding Williams’ pessimism and in view of the recent rise of intense interest in the relationship between morality and religion, it may not be amiss to explore the prospects of theistic ethics by charting out the contours of its territory where it might run afoul of the development of our ethical consciousness. This will obviously provide an opportunity to forestall possible pitfalls and problems that might render theistic ethics, in Williams’ word, ‘unintelligible’.

To chart out this conceptual cartography, one may start by first recognizing that the concept of theistic ethics is multivocal in the sense of being subject to two broad types of scrutiny. *First*, the idea of theistic ethics may be examined through two different *approaches*: (A) theistic ethics as *a set of moral values* whereby a type of normative ethics based on God and religion is being offered, and (B) theistic ethics as *a source of moral values* whereby a type of metaethics founded on Divine Command Theory is being offered. *Second*, one may examine the idea of theistic ethics from two *perspectives*: (a) theistic ethics from an internal (*ab intra*) or “within the community of believers” perspective, and (b) theistic ethics from an external (*ab extra*) or “without the community of believers” perspective thereby involving the community of “all”. There are thus four possible combinations of examining the content and character of theistic ethics as follows:

- (I) theistic normative ethics from an internal perspective (Problems (i) and (ii) below),
- (II) theistic metaethics from an internal perspective (Problem (iii) below),
- (III) theistic normative ethics from an external perspective (Problems (iv) to (viii) below),
and
- (IV) theistic metaethics from an external perspective (Problems (ix) to (xv) below).

To sketch the first stage of this four-fold schema, one may look at theistic ethics by applying the internal perspective to the two foregoing approaches: that is, probing the problems and issues arising from taking theistic ethics as a normative theory and then as a metaethical theory. From an internal perspective, the normative interpretation of theistic ethics faces two central concerns: (i) the phenomenon of moral difference and disagreement among believers in terms of what ethical values are sanctioned by the scriptural sources creates a problem of consistency and authenticity. Patently the fact of moral difference and divergence – possibly as a consequence of the variety of scriptural interpretation due to, for example, context sensitivity of understanding – is not in itself a critical cause of concern until one appreciates the *absence* of a relevant *decision procedure* to resolve such conflicts and clashes. Moreover, the problem is heightened if, as the result of the development of our

ethical consciousness, we come to subscribe to the doctrine of ethical conflict-regulation whereby it is stipulated that moral requirements must be capable of authoritatively regulating ethical conflicts.

(ii) A related, though separate, second problem in the same category is what may be called *Abraham's Sorites* where the prophet presented God with a sorites series in his intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah when God was intent on destroying the *whole* cities and Abraham posing the question: 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' (*Genesis* 18: 20-33). Abraham thus sets up the sorites by asking God: 'Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?' God's response to Abraham is: 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Immediately Abraham unleashes the sorites by asking God: 'Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?', to which God says, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Abraham seizes upon this and pushes the number of righteous down to forty and thereby engages God in a sorites of highest ethical proportion! In the extant text, Abraham goes as far as ten righteous people with the same response from God and then suddenly the conversation is brought to an end without a clear indication of what if, for example, there is only one righteous person in the city. Wittingly or otherwise, what is very significant about this sorites by Abraham is to highlight the complexity and intricacy of the *epistemology* of making moral judgments. How does one make a moral judgment?

(iii) This concern conveniently connects to the third issue arising from the application of the internal perspective to theistic ethics not as a normative theory but as a metaethical theory when Abraham in his pleading with God says that it 'is impossible' for God to 'kill the innocent with the guilty'. In other words, Abraham is setting a *constitutive constraint* on the nature of divinity by requiring that the 'judge of all the earth *has to act justly*' (emphasis added), thereby implying, if not declaring outright, the independence of a significant *source* of morality from God. In fact, it is not surprising that historically one comes across sects of, for example, various Abrahamic or Semitic religions that explicitly impose the condition of justice on divinity such as Karaites in the Jewish tradition and Motazalites among Muslims.

To pursue the second stage of the four-fold division, one may look at theistic ethics by applying the external perspective to it as a normative theory and then as a metaethical theory. From an external perspective, the normative interpretation of theistic ethics faces the following five interrelated issues: (iv) Problem of Universality: how universal are the moral values emanating from a theistic normative theory? This issue obviously overlaps with a family of positions centered around the idea of *moral particularism* according to which there is substantial doubt about understanding morality in principled terms. (v) Problem of Compatibility: how compatible are the moral values of a theistic normative system with non-theistic moral values? (vi) Problem of Partiality: how does a theistic normative theory account for the *partiality* promised and presumed in such frameworks towards certain "chosen" or "favoured" people? (vii) Emergence of New Moral Values: how does a theistic normative account handle and regulate the advent of new moral values? (viii) Problem of

Incompleteness: how does a theistic normative theory explain one of the lessons of the process of what Williams calls ‘the development of the ethical consciousness’ that our moral outlook is ultimately incomplete?

Lastly, in covering the final step of the four-fold permutations, the external perspective as applied to theistic ethics in the form of a metaethical theory draws our attention to the following six subjects: (ix) Euthyphro Dilemma: modernising the terminology of Plato’s Socrates in the dialogue *Euthyphro* for our contemporary purposes, the issue can be stated as, ‘Is what is morally good, morally good because God approves it, or does God approve it because it is morally good?’ (x) Abraham’s Sorites: in this incarnation, the sorites can be used to sow the seeds of moral scepticism and consequently to cast doubt on the viability of any theistic ethics. The idea here is predicated on the use of sorites by sceptics of both ancient and contemporary eras to undermine a variety of epistemological as well as ontological realisms and objectivist outlooks. (xi) Problem of Subjectivity: can God know what it feels like to be a non-divine moral agent and thereby questioning the fairness or justness of God’s sitting in judgment on such moral agents? This problem has an interesting connection with a variant of the paradox of omnipotence, *viz.*, the paradox of sin: can God commit sin? (xii) God’s Command of Moral Values and Omniscience: does God really know what moral commands to make in light of the occurrence of *divine regret*? Having observed ‘how wicked everyone on earth was and how evil their thoughts were all the time,’ God laments that ‘he was *sorry* that he had ever made them and put them on the earth. He was so filled with *regret* that he said, “I will wipe out these people I have created, and also the animals and the birds, because I am *sorry* that I made any of them.”’ (*Genesis* 6: 5-7, emphasis added) Generally, there is a tremendous tension between omniscience and regret, especially in the context of a divine being authoring moral mores for “creatures” that will belie them by their beliefs and deeds. (xiii) God’s Existence and Moral Motivation: can the existence of God provide motivation for acting morally? This question actually manifests itself in three different forms: (1) the Socratic version in the form of Euthyphro Dilemma, (2) the Kantian version in the form of Categorical Imperative, and (3) the Humean version in the form of “is/ought” or naturalistic fallacy. (xiv) God’s Creation of Moral Agents: can God create moral agents that freely always choose the good? Obviously, the question has an important overlap with the traditional problem of evil. And, finally, (xv) Problem of Moral Luck: if, as part of the development of the ethical consciousness, we have come to realize the significance and impact of moral luck on our actions and inactions, how does a theistic ethics deal with *this* pervasive trait of our lives?

To summarize the upshot of the discussion, by having identified a number of crucial conceptual, logical and empirical challenges in both normative and metaethical components of theistic ethics from an internal as well as external perspective, one may cautiously conclude: without some satisfactory grip on these problems, the theoretical and practical tenets of theistic ethics seem unable to account for the profoundly human phenomenon of ethical consciousness.

Endnotes:

1. Among the most recent incarnations of this approach of grounding morality or a significant aspect of it through God or religion is C. Stephen Evans's *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). However, somewhat ironically or should one say modestly, the monograph is peppered with such disclaimers as it 'is not quite right to say that there would be nothing left of morality if God did not exist' (p. 1), or 'people who do not believe in God, and thus do not realize that moral obligations are divine commands, can still have reasons to behave morally that are sufficient to motivate moral behavior' (p. 33), and even skepticism about moral obligation 'cannot be proven to be wrong' (p. 24).
2. Historically speaking, there is an interesting predecessor of the biblical Lady Wisdom in the character of the ancient Egyptian goddess *Ma'at*, daughter of the creator god *Amun Re*, where she personifies *justice* and *equity*.
3. Or *me as the beginning*.
4. Compare, for instance, the very first statement of Francis Macdonald Cornford – one of the foremost authors of his generation on ancient Greek philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century – in the preface to his *From Religion to Philosophy* in 1912 (New York: Harper Torchbooks/Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957): 'The words, Religion and Philosophy, perhaps suggest to most people two distinct provinces of thought, between which ... there is commonly held to be some sort of *border warfare*.' (p. v; emphasis added)
5. Bernard Williams, *Morality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 86.
6. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana Press/Collins, 1985, p. 33.

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