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atheism

Atheism (the belief that neither God nor any other supernatural phenomena exist) was once thought to be a form of madness. As late as the seventeenth century even such a progressive thinker as John LOCKE (1632–1704) thought atheism to be beyond the pale of intellectual and moral respectability. But by the end of the twentieth century, particularly among the intelligentsia, atheism had become commonplace. There is no distinctive ethical theory that goes with atheism, though atheists will typically have the spectrum of values characteristic of the Enlightenment. Atheists are frequently utilitarians; but some are deontologists or perfectionists. In META-ETHICS atheism fits well with either ethical NATURALISM or noncognitivism. While religious thinkers *tend* to be cognitivists and intuitionists, the link, however, is not tight. Henry SIDGWICK (1838–1900), G. E. MOORE (1873–1958), and C. D. Broad (1887–1971) were distinguished intuitionists, one might say the most distinguished intuitionists. Yet they were either atheists or agnostics.

The key problem for atheists vis-à-vis morality is not to work out a distinctive ethical theory providing the unique fit for atheism but to meet the challenge thrown out by religious believers and even by some existentialist atheists—CAMUS (1913–1960) and SARTRE (1905–1980)—that if God is dead nothing matters, or at least nothing really ultimately matters. Or, more moderately, atheists need to meet the claim of some religious moralists that a secular ethic must be inadequate when compared with at least a properly nuanced religious morality.

In our societies moral perplexity runs deep and cynicism or at least ambivalence about moral belief is extensive. A recognition of this situation is common ground between reflective and informed atheists and believers. Atheists will argue that there is no reason to lose our nerve and claim that we must have religious commitments in order to make sense of morality. Torturing human beings is wrong, CRUELTY to human beings and animals is wrong, treating one's PROMISES lightly or being careless about the truth is wrong, exploiting or degrading human be-

ings is vile. If we know anything to be wrong, we know these things to be wrong and to be just as wrong in a godless world as in a world with God. God's not existing has no effect on their moral status or on our moral standing.

There is a philosophical problem about how we know these things to be wrong, but that is as much a problem for the believer as for the atheist. For if any person, believer and nonbeliever alike, has an understanding of the concept of morality, has an understanding of what it is to take the MORAL POINT OF VIEW, than that person will *eo ipso* have an understanding that it is wrong to harm others, that promises are to be kept and truth is to be told. This does not mean that such a person will be committed to the belief that a lie can never be told, that a promise can never be broken, or that a human being in *no circumstance* whatsoever can rightly be harmed. But if there is no understanding that such acts always require special justification and that the presumption of morality is always against them, then there is no understanding of the concept of morality. But this understanding is not logically bound up with a belief in God or adherence to a religious point of view.

Divine Command Theory

Defenders of Divine Command Theory, one of the major types of religious ethical theories, maintain that such an understanding does imply at least some minimal knowledge of God because we know things to be wrong only when we know they are against God's will. Something is good only because God wills it, and wrong only because He prohibits it. That is the central claim of the Divine Command Theory.

Setting aside skeptical questions about how we can know what God does and does not will, the old conundrum arises—something as old as PLATO (c. 430–347 B.C.E.): Is something good simply because God wills it, or does God will it because it is good? Leaving God aside for the moment, what is evident is that something is not good simply because it is willed or commanded. A military officer can command his troops to take no prisoners, or a father can command his son to lie to his mother. Neither of these things becomes good or in any way morally acceptable simply in virtue of being commanded. Indeed, something is not even morally speaking a good thing to do simply because it is willed or com-

manded by an omnipotent and perfectly intelligent being. Unless we wish to reduce morality to PRUDENCE, to take the will of such a being as our moral law is to reduce morality to POWER worship. Might, even omnipotence, doesn't make right; a perfectly intelligent being could be evil through and through.

However, to this criticism of the Divine Command Theory it is not implausible to respond that it is *God's* commanding that makes all the difference, for God, after all, is the *supreme, perfect* good. In turn, it can be asked how we know that. If we say we know it through studying the scriptures and through the example of Jesus where his goodness is manifest, then we know it only by virtue of our own quite autonomous moral appreciation of his goodness. In Bible stories we read about behavior which we take to be morally exemplary. However, it is through our own appreciation of what goodness is, our own at least rudimentary conception of goodness, that we can appreciate morally exemplary behavior. Understanding something of what morality is, we feel the moral force of the story of Jesus dying on the cross to save humankind. Moral understanding is not grounded in a belief in God; just the reverse is so. An understanding of the religious significance of Jesus and the scriptures presupposes a logically independent moral understanding.

If alternatively we claim that we do not come to understand that God is the supreme and perfect good in that way, but instead understand it as a necessary truth like 'puppies are young dogs' (something which is true by definition), then we still should ask, how do we understand that putatively necessary proposition? But again we should recognize that it is only by having an understanding of what goodness is that we come to have some glimmering of the more complex and extremely perplexing notions of supreme or perfect goodness. Only if we understand what a good meal is can we possibly have any inkling of what a wonderfully good meal is. Only if we understand what a sacrifice is can we understand what a supreme sacrifice is.

The crucial thing to see is that there are things which we can come to appreciate on reflection to be wrong, God or no God. Whatever foundational account of morality we give, or indeed whether we can give one or need to give one at all, we can be far more confident we are right in claiming that torturing, lying, or breaking faith with people is wrong than we can be in claiming any rational belief in God

or knowledge of his order or of what he requires of us. There are primitive moral certainties that are vastly more certain than any religious belief, and these certainties are not at all undermined by 'the death of God.'

God, Morality, and the Causal Order

Someone might respond to the above critique of Divine Command Theory by maintaining that since God, assuming there is a God, is the cause of everything, there could be (if the Judeo-Christian cosmological story is true) no goodness or anything else if there were no God. Given the truth of that tale, without God there would be nothing, and thus there would be no valuable somethings. But this confuses *causes* with *reasons:* confuses questions about bringing something into existence causally and sustaining and justifying its existence. If God exists and if he is what the scriptures say he is, everything causally depends on him. However, even if there were no God who made the world, it still would be vile to torture little children. Even if God had not created people and thus there were no people to be kind, it would still be timelessly true that kindness is a good thing. The goodness of kindness does not become good or cease to be good by God's fiat or anyone else's, or even because of the fact that there happen to be kind people. In terms of its *fundamental rationale,* morality is utterly independent of belief in God. Atheists can respond to the religious claim that if God is dead nothing matters by asserting that to make sense of our lives as moral beings there is no need to make what may be an intellectually stultifying blind leap of religious faith. Such a moral understanding, as well as a capacity for moral response and action, is available to us even if we are utterly without religious faith. There is no reason the atheist should be morally at sea.

Religious versus Secular Morality

There are religious moralists who would acknowledge this and yet still maintain that there are religious moralities which are (morally speaking) more adequate than anything available to atheists. We are religious beings in need of rituals and saving myths. Without belief in God and immortality, our lives remain fragmented and meaningless. A secular morality can afford us no sense of providential care, while a Jewish, Christian, or Islamic morality can. God, on such conceptions, is taken to be a creator who is the supreme source of CARE, protection, and moral guidance. At least in certain vital respects we will be, if our faith is strong, free of anxiety and fear. With a firm belief in God, we have the reassurance that, if we orient our will to God, we will be saved, EVIL will not ultimately triumph, and our moral struggles will not be in vain because the evil in the world will not prevail and overwhelm us. In belief in God we can find peace and reassurance that all is not hopeless. Jews, Christians, and Moslems can, if their faith is strong, have a confident, future-oriented view of the world. Such a view would affirm that there is a purpose to life, that we are creatures of God made for a purpose in which ultimately there will be human liberation in a life of bliss. There is, the claim goes, a hope and moral promise arising from faith that no secular morality can match.

At this stage in the argument the viability of the truth-claims of religion become important in a way that is not the case in arguing about the Divine Command Theory. If, as atheists claim, we cannot know or even reasonably believe what religious people claim we know or can reasonably take on faith, we should not crucify our intellects, and try to rely on a religious morality. Moreover, the religious moralist portrays things in a godless world as being much grimmer than they actually are. There is no good reason to think life without God is senseless or without point. There are purposes *in* life even if there is no purpose *to* life. And to be made for a purpose as the religious story maintains is not so morally unproblematic, for at the very least it seems to rob us of our autonomy. An atheist need not be limited to small, rather personal purposes in life. There are also larger, rather impersonal things that can perhaps be realized through political and social struggle, things that we can make our own purposes by our own deliberate acts. At a minimum, we can fight the plague; maximally, we can struggle to transform the world. Such efforts afford plenty of meaning in life and prevent the threat of meaninglessness.

Morality, it should be added, still has a fundamental function in a godless world, just as much as in any other kind of world: namely, its function to adjudicate in a fair way the conflicts of INTERESTS between persons. Atheists as well as religious people might very well come reflectively to desire that something like a kingdom of ends will obtain. An

atheist, just as well as the religious person, can respect persons simply because they are persons. Atheists, as others, will recognize SELF-RESPECT to be a fundamental good. This will lead them to a respect for others, for as moral agents we will recognize, if we think at all carefully, that if self-respect is a good for ourselves as individuals it will be a good for everyone else as well. UNIVERSALIZABILITY and FAIRNESS require us to go beyond ourselves and at least acknowledge the appropriateness of a world in which respect for persons plays center stage. Similar things should be said for the relief of human suffering. If we can know anything to be bad we can know that suffering is bad. (It *may* sometimes be *instrumentally* good but it is never *intrinsically* good.) Where there is some reasonable expectation that we can, at least without extensive sacrifice, do something about suffering, we have, God or no God, an obligation to relieve it.

Again, a religious moralist can acknowledge the truth of at least a number of the points raised above and still respond that there are morally relevant NEEDS that religious morality responds to that secular morality does not. But it is also true that there are needs that a secular morality responds to that religious morality does not. There is a question of choices and of trade-offs. With a religious morality there is a hope for immortality and a belief in a world of providential care in which we can have at least the putative guarantee that our moral efforts will not be defeated. If religious beliefs, including belief in immortality, are held to be reasonably plausible, that might be enough to tip the scale in favor of a religious morality; but if, as atheists believe, belief in the existence of God and immortality is highly implausible, then a religious ethic becomes less attractive, for it appears that to adhere to it there must be a crucifixion of the intellect which, *pace* Kierkegaard, is not such a plainly desirable thing. In such a circumstance, moral INTEGRITY is a threat to or at least a problem for a religious morality. Atheists will argue that there is something to be said for the person who can hold steadily on course in the moral world without telling herself fairy tales or feeling the need to believe things which are wildly implausible, perhaps even incoherent. Moral integrity, fraternity, and love of humankind are worth subscribing to without a thought to whether such virtues will be rewarded in heaven or will predominate in our world.

There are trade-offs here, and the trade-offs atheists will make are not, to put it circumspectly, obviously mistaken or indicative of a shallow worldview with a shallow morality and conception of life. The atheist's view is that there is no need to make an arbitrary Kierkegaardian leap of faith and believe to make sense of one's life, including one's moral life, in what one admittedly takes to be absurd. What should be had by way of moral belief and commitment is not independent of the probabilities here. Atheists believe, and not unreasonably, that the probabilities go very much against religious belief. To have a robust moral conception of life one need not go against those at least putative probabilities.

See also: ABSURD, THE; AGNOSTICISM; ALIENATION; AUTONOMY OF ETHICS; AUTONOMY OF MORAL AGENTS; CHRISTIAN ETHICS; DEONTOLOGY; EVIL; FAIRNESS; GOOD, THEORIES OF THE; HUMANISM; INTEGRITY; ISLAMIC ETHICS; JEWISH ETHICS; METAETHICS; MORAL POINT OF VIEW; NATURALISM; NIHILISM; PERFECTIONISM; PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION; RELIGION; THEISM; UNIVERSALIZABILITY; VOLUNTARISM.

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attention

See moral attention; moral perception.

Augustine, Saint (354–430)

Aurelius Augustinus, bishop of Hippo and Christian church father, was born in Thagaste, Northern Africa (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria). He was trained in rhetoric in Thagaste and Carthage and, except for five years in Rome and Milan, from 383–388, he lived his life in North Africa and died in Hippo (modern Annaba, Algeria) in 430.

Augustine had nothing that one could properly describe as formal training in philosophy, nor did he ever enjoy the company of another philosopher as good, or even nearly as good, as he was. He was trained in rhetoric and he became a teacher of rhetoric. His studies led him to become a great admirer of Cicero (106–43 b.c.e.). Augustine's study of Cicero's works influenced more than his writing style; through a careful and extensive reading of him, Augustine got much of his education in philosophy, as well as much of his early enthusiasm for the subject. Of the various philosophical schools known to him, neo-Platonism influenced him the most. But he took the skepticism of the New Academy seriously enough to try to answer it in brief discussions scattered throughout his writings. His most celebrated response to the skeptic's challenge, "What if you are dreaming?", includes the assertion, "If I am mistaken, I am" (*si fallor, sum,* in *City of God* 11.26), which foreshadows Descartes's (1596–1650) even more famous saying, *cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am").

Only the earliest of Augustine's voluminous writings are explicitly philosophical. But in virtually everything Augustine wrote, including the letters, the sermons, and the biblical commentaries, he displays characteristically philosophical preoccupations along with his theological and pastoral concerns. One often finds a philosophically interesting paragraph tucked away in a sermon or letter that is otherwise devoted to biblical exegesis or pastoral advice.

Heresy

Among the Christian church fathers, Augustine is, perhaps, the leading definer of heresy, and hence, of Christian orthodoxy. In particular, he wrote extensively to define and reject Pelagianism, Manicheanism, and Donatism. In the case of each of these heresies, both Augustine's own view and the view he rejects have implications for ethics.

Pelagianism denies that "in Adam's sin we sinned all," and puts forward instead the notion that human beings have it within their natural power to be without sin. Pelagianism affirms the dictum, known to modern philosophers through Kant (1724–1804), ought implies can. Through his formulation and defense of the doctrines of original sin and human depravity, Augustine denies human perfectibility and maintains that inability to perform an action unaided by the unearned grace of God does not free an agent from the obligation to perform that action.

Early in his adult life Augustine was himself a Manichee; thus, he supposed there to be a principle of evil, or darkness, roughly coequal with the principle of goodness, or light. In rejecting *Manicheanism* he took on the burden of showing how the existence of an all-good and all-powerful god is compatible with the existence of evil (the classic "problem of evil"). (For a statement of the problem in Augustine, see *Confessions* 7.5.)

Among Augustine's many responses to the problem of evil is the neo-Platonic suggestion that evil is a privation, so that "whatever is, is good" (*Confessions* 7.12). The idea seems to be that if, strictly speaking, evil does not exist, there can be no problem about how the existence of evil is compatible with there being an all-good and all-powerful god.

Another influential Augustinian response to the problem of evil is the suggestion that evil, or sin, is like a dark color in a beautiful painting—in itself, ugly, but in context something that contributes to the beauty and goodness of the whole (*City of God* 11.23). He also suggested, though left undeveloped, the idea that free will is a good of sufficient value that an all-good and all-powerful being would want to create it, even at the risk of the evil that has resulted from it (*De libero arbitrio* 1.18.186).

Donatism is the view that the Christian sacra-