GOD AND THE BASIS OF MORALITY

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ABSTRACT

It is sometimes thought that belief in God is rationally required of human beings, for without such a religious belief moral beliefs are without any appropriate ground or rationale. Some have argued that in a Godless world we have no grounds for being persons of good will or for doing what is morally required of us. Indeed, nothing in such a world is morally required of us. If there is no God the concept of moral requiredness becomes a Holmesless Watson. A variety of grounds for such a conception of the relation of religion to morality are explored and shown to be unsatisfactory. To make sense of life or to make sense of morality, belief in God is not necessary. Indeed, only if we do have some autonomous appreciation of morality can we even understand the concept of God embedded in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition.

I

Consider the fundamental religious beliefs common to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. If, as it seems likely, they cannot be proven to be true, can they be reasonably believed to be true because they can in some other way be justified? What I want to know is whether it is more reasonable to hold fundamental religious beliefs, such as there is a God and that we shall survive the death of our present bodies, than not to hold them. (I have discussed such general questions in Nielsen, 1971a, 1971b, 1973a and 1982a.)

Part of that probing, the whole of which is surely complicated and many-faceted, will be the burden of this essay. Here I shall put questions of immortality and bodily resurrection aside and only consider what is indeed even more central to Judaism and Christianity, namely belief in God. It is—rightly or wrongly—widely believed now that no proof can be given of God's existence and that it is not even the case that we can give evidence or grounds for the claim that it is probable that God exists. Indeed, the very notion of trying to do any of these things is frequently thought to be a confusion based on a misconception of the realities of Jewish and Christian belief. (There are forceful statements of this in MacIntyre, 1957 and 1959.) But it is also sometimes thought that such apologetic moves are entirely unnecessary, for, scandal to the intellect or not, a reasonable, morally concerned human being will accept God humbly on faith, for, without that faith and the belief in God

which it entails, morality, human integrity, and the basis of our self-respect will be undermined and life will be revealed as an utterly useless passion. We must believe in God to make sense of our lives and to find a moral Archimedean point. Whatever intellectual impediments we have to belief in God, such a religious belief is morally necessary. Without it we can hardly have a rooted moral belief-system and without that, as social theorists such as Durkheim and Bell have stressed, we cannot have a stable, well-ordered society. I am not suggesting that the claim is, or should be, that we can "will to believe" but I am asserting that the apologetic claim is that without belief in the God characteristic of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition reasonable people should conclude that a moral community is impossible and that life is indeed meaningless.

I shall argue that such an apologetic claim has not been sustained. There are in my judgment fundamental unresolved questions about the foundations of morality, and attempts, such as those of Mill, Kant, Sidgwick, and Rawls, to lay out a systematic moral philosophy to assess our moral practices and social institutions have not been remarkable for their success (Nielsen, 1982b, 1982c). But such difficulties notwithstanding, there is no good ground for claiming that only through belief in God can we attain a sufficient moral anchorage to make sense of our tangled lives. I shall argue that there is some moral understanding that is *logically independent* of belief in God and is necessary even to be able to understand the concept of God and that, God or no God, some actions can be appreciated to be desirable and some as through and through evil and despicable. It is not true that if God is dead nothing matters. Belief in God cannot be justified, shown to be something we must just accept, if we are to be through and through reasonable, because it is a necessary foundation for the moral life. That, I shall argue, is just not so.

II

Let us first ask: "Is something good because God wills or commands it or does God command it because it is good?" If we say God commands it because it is good, this implies that something can be good independently of God. This is so because "God commands it *because* it is good" implies that God apprehends it to be good or takes it to be good or in some way knows it to be good and then tells us to do it. But if God does this, then it is at least *logically* possible for us to come to see or in some way know or come to appreciate that it is good without God's telling us to do it or informing us that it is good. Moreover, on this alternative, its goodness does not depend on its being willed by God or even on there being a God.

The points made above need explanation and justification. In making

those remarks, I am giving to understand that good is not a creation of God but rather that something is good is something which is itself apprehended by God or known by God. (If all that talk seems too "cognitive" a way to speak of moral notions, we can alternatively speak of God's appreciating something to be good.) If this is so, it is in some way there to be apprehended or known or appreciated and thus it is at least *logically* possible for us to apprehend it or know it or appreciate it without knowing anything of God. Furthermore, since God himself apprehends it to be good and since it doesn't, on this alternative, become good simply because he wills it or commands it, there can be this goodness even in a godless world. Translated into the concrete, this means that, at the very least, it could be correct to assert that even in a world without God, killing little children is evil and caring for them is good.

Someone might grant that there is this logical (conceptual) independence of morality from religion, but still argue that, given man's corrupt and vicious nature in his fallen state, he, as a matter of fact, needs God's help to understand what is good, to know what he ought to do and to quite categorically bind himself to striving to act as morality requires.

Though there is indeed extensive corruption in the palace of justice, such a response is still confused. With or without a belief in God, we can recognize such corruption. In some concrete situations at least, we understand perfectly well what is good, what we ought to do, and what morality requires of us. Moreover, the corruption religious apologists have noted does not lie here. The corruption comes not principally in our knowledge or understanding but in our "weakness of will." We find it in our inability to do what in a cool hour, we acknowledge to be good—"the good I would do that I do not." Religion, for some people at any rate, may be of value in putting their *hearts* into virtue, but that religion is necessary for some in this way does not show us how it can provide us with a knowledge of good and evil or an ultimate criterion for making such judgments (Toulmin, 1950:202–225). It does not provide us, even if we are believers, with an ultimate standard of goodness.

Suppose we say instead—as Emil Brunner (1947) or C. F. Henry (1957), for example, surely would—that an action or attitude is right or good simply because God *wills* it or *commands* it. Its goodness arises from Divine *fiat*. God makes something good simply by commanding it.

Can *anything* be good or become good simply by being commanded or willed? Can a fiat, command, or ban *create* goodness or moral obligation? I do not think so. To see that it cannot, consider first some ordinary, mundane examples of ordering or commanding. Suppose I tell my students in a class I am teaching, "You must get a loose leaf notebook for this class." My commanding it, my telling my class they must do it, does not *eo ipso* make it something they *ought* to do or even make doing it good, though it might make it a prudent thing for them to do. But, whether or not it is prudent for

them to do it, given my position of authority *vis-à-vis* them, it is, if there are no reasons for it, a perfectly arbitrary injunction on my part and not something that could correctly be said to be good.

Suppose, to use another example, a mother says to her college-age daughter, "It's not a good thing to go to school dressed like that." Her telling her daughter that does not *eo ipso* make her daughter's manner of dress a bad thing. For her mother to be right here, she must be able to give reasons for her judgment that her daughter ought not to dress like that.

More generally speaking, the following are all perfectly intelligible:

(1) X wills y but should I do it?
(2) X commands it but is it good?
(3) X told me to do it, but all the same I ought not to do it.
(4) X proclaimed it but all the same what he proclaimed is evil.

(3) and (4) are not contradictions and (1) and (2) are not senseless, self-answering questions like "Is a wife a married woman?" This clearly indicates that the moral concepts 'should,' 'good,' and 'ought' are not identified with the willing of something, the commanding or the proclaiming of something, or even with simply telling someone to do something. Even if moral utterances characteristically tell us to do something, not all "tellings to" are moral utterances. Among other things, "moral tellings to" are "tellings to" which, typically at least, must be supportable by *reasons.* This, however, is not true for simple commands or imperatives. In short, as a mere inspection of usage reveals, moral utterances are not identifiable with commands or anything of that order.

To this it will surely be replied: "It is true that these moral concepts cannot be identified with just any old command, but it is their being *Divine* commands which makes all the difference. It is *God's* willing it, *God's* telling us to do it, that makes it good" (Falk, 1956:123–131).

It is indeed true, for the believer at least, that it is *God's* commanding it or God's willing it which makes all the difference. This is so because the believer assumes and indeed fervently believes that God is good. But how, it should be asked, does the believer *know* that God is good, except by what is in the end his own quite fallible moral judgment or, if you will, appreciation or perception, that God is good? We must, to know that God is good, see that his acts, his revelation, his commands, are good. It is through the majesty and the goodness of his revelation, the depth and extent of his love, as revealed in the Scriptures, that we come to understand that God is good, that —so the claim goes— God is in reality the ultimate criterion for all our moral actions and attitudes.

It could, of course, be denied that *all* the commands, all the attitudes, exhibited in the Bible are of the highest moral quality. The behavior of Lot's daughters and the damnation of unbelievers are cases in point. But let us assume that the moral insights revealed in our scriptures are of the very highest

and that through his acts God reveals his goodness to us. But here we have in effect conceded the critical point put by the secularist. We can see from the very argumentation here that we must quite unavoidably use our own moral insight to decide that God's acts are good. We finally, and quite unavoidably, to come to any conclusion here, must judge for ourselves the moral quality of the alleged revelation; or, if you will, it is finally by what is no doubt fallible human insight that we must judge that what *purports* to be revelation is *indeed* revelation. We cannot avoid using our own moral understanding, corruptible and deceitful though it be, if we are ever to know that God is good. Fallible or not, our own moral understanding and judgment here is the *logically* prior thing.

The believer might indeed concede that if we start to inquire into, to deliberate about, the goodness of God, we cannot but end up saying what I have just said. But my mistake, he could argue, is in ever starting this line of inquiry in the first place. Who is man to inquire into, to question, the goodness of God? Who is he to ask whether God should be obeyed? That is utter blasphemy and folly. No *genuine believer* thinks for one moment he can question God's goodness or the bindingness of God's will. That God is good, that indeed God is the Perfect Good, is *a given* for the believer. "God is good" or "God is the perfect Good" are, in the technical jargon of philosophy, analytic. Given the believer's usage, it makes no sense to ask if what God commands is good or if God is good. Any being who was not good could not properly be called "God," where what we are talking about is the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Similarly, we could not properly call anything that was not perfectly good God. A person who seriously queried "Should I do what God ordains?" could not possibly be a believer. Indeed Jews and Christians do not mean by "He should do x," "God ordains x"; and "One should do what God ordains" is not equivalent to "What God ordains God ordains"; but not all tautologies, or analytic propositions, are statements of identity. It is not only blasphemy, it is, as well, logically speaking *senseless to question* the goodness of God.

Whence then, one might ask, the ancient problem of evil? But let us, for the occasion, assume, what it is at least reasonable to assume, namely that in some way "God is good" and "God is the Perfect Good" are analytic or "truths of reason." Even if this is so, it still remains true—though now it is a little less easy to see this—that we can only come to know that anything is good or evil through our own moral insight.

Let us see how this is so. First it is important to see that "God is good" is not an identity statement, e.g., "God" is not equivalent to "good." "God spoke to Moses" makes sense. "Good spoke to Moses" is not even English. "The steak is good" and "Knowles's speech in Parliament was good" are both standard English sentences but if "God" replaces "good" as the last word in these sentences we have gibberish. But, as I have just said, not all tautologies

are statements of identity. "Wives are women," "Triangles are three-sided" are not statements of identity, but they are clear cases of analytic propositions. It is at least reasonable to argue "God is good" has the same status, but, if it does, we still must independently understand what is meant by "good" and thus the criterion of goodness remains *independent* of God.

As we could not apply the predicate "women" to wives, if we did not first understand what women are, and the predicate "three-sided" to triangles if we did not understand what it was for something to be three-sided, so we could not apply the predicate "good" to God unless we already understood what it meant to say that something was good and unless we had some criterion of goodness. Furthermore, we can and do meaningfully apply the predicate "good" to many things and attitudes that can be understood by a person who knows nothing of God. Even in a godless world, to relieve suffering would still be good.

But is not "God is the Perfect Good" an identity statement? Do not "God" and "the Perfect Good" refer to and/or mean the same thing? The meaning of both of these terms is so very indefinite that it is hard to be sure, but it is plain enough that a believer cannot seriously question the truth of "God is the Perfect Good" and still remain a Christian or Jewish believer. But granting that, we still must have a criterion for goodness that is independent of religion, that is, independent of a belief in God, for clearly we could not judge anything to be *perfectly* good unless we could judge that it was good, and we have already seen that our criterion for goodness must be at least logically independent of God.

Someone still might say: Something must have gone wrong somewhere. No believer thinks he can question or presume to *judge* God. A devoutly religious person simply must use God as his *ultimate criterion* for moral behavior. (Brown, 1963:235–244; and 1966–67:269–276. But in response see Nielsen, 1971a:243–257.) If God wills it, he, as a "knight of faith," must do it!

Surely this is *in a way* so, but it is perfectly compatible with everything I have so far said. "God" by *definition* is "a being worthy of worship," "wholly good," "a being upon whom we are completely dependent." These phrases partially define the God of Judaism and Christianity. This being so, it makes no sense at all to speak of *judging* God or deciding that God is good or worthy of worship. But the crucial point here is this: before we can make any judgments at all that any conceivable being, force, Ground of Being, transcendental reality, Person or whatever could be *worthy* of worship, could be properly called "good," let alone "the Perfect Good," we must have a logically prior understanding of goodness (Nielsen, 1964). That we could call anything, or any foundation of anything, "God," presupposes we have a moral understanding and the ability to discern what would be *worthy* of worship or perfectly good. Morality does not presuppose religion; religion presupposes morality. Feuerbach was at least partially right: our very con-

cept of God seems, in an essential part at least, a logical product of our moral categories. (For contemporary statements of this see Braithwaite, 1964 and Hare, 1973. See in critical response Nielsen, 1981a.)

It is the failure to keep firmly in mind many of the distinctions that I have drawn above, some of which I also drew years ago in *Mind,* which makes it possible for D. Z. Phillips (1970: 223–233) to continue to claim that "nothing could be further from the truth" than to claim that "moral judgment is necessarily prior to religious assent" (Nielsen, 1961: 175–186). It is not a question of "submitting God to moral judgment" but of the recognition that even to speak of a being or Being as being God is already to have come to understand that that being is superlatively worthy of worship. This means that the person must have decided – using his own sense of good and evil – that there is some being who is worthy of worship and is properly called "God" and thus is to be unconditionally obeyed. What Phillips fails to appreciate is that this very movement of thought and judgment shows that moral judgment is logically prior to religious assent. There is in short no recognition that something is worthy of worship without first recognizing that it is good.

It is worth noting that Phillips does nothing in his "God and Ought" (1970: 223–233) to show, against the standard objections, how for believers, or for anyone else, "'good' means 'whatever God wills'." A person with certain moral commitments – commitments about the worth of family relationships and the institution of the family – will pass from "He is my Father" to "I must not leave him destitute." But, as criticisms of Searle's attempted derivation of an ought from an is in effect show, the institutional facts appealed to are not themselves normatively neutral: they already embody certain moral commitments (Jaggar, 1974; Nielsen, 1978; Mackie, 1977). Similarly a religious person will automatically go from "God wills it" to "I should do it," but he can do this only because he has already come to accept certain moral views in coming to believe *in* God. But that those distinctively religious normative views have not been enshrined, as logical or conceptual truths built into a language common to believer and nonbeliever alike, is shown in the fact that both believers and skeptics alike can intelligibly ask, as even Phillips admits, "Ought God's will be obeyed?".

Phillips also remarks that to "understand what it *means* to believe in God is to understand why God must be obeyed" (1970: 223–233). But this is plainly false, for one can very well understand what it is to believe in God and still not believe in God because one does not believe that there is, or perhaps even could be, anything *worthy* of worship, though, if one does believe in God – and does not just believe that there is an all powerful and all knowing being who created the world from nothing – one will also conclude that God must be obeyed. To believe in God is to accept an internal connection between the will of God and what one ought to do, but that is only possible for someone who comes to believe that there actually is a being *worthy* of worship who is

to be called "God," i.e., believes that this is to be his proper honorific title. Yet that very recognition, i.e., that there can be and indeed is a being worthy of worship, requires in a way that Phillips utterly misses, a moral judgment which is not logically dependent on any religious or theological understanding at all (1970: 223–233).

In *sum* then we can say this: a radically Reformationist ethic, divorcing itself from natural moral law conceptions, breaks down because something's being commanded cannot *eo ipso* make something good. Some Jews and Christians mistakenly think it can because they take God to be good and to be a being who always wills what is good. And it is probably true that "God is good" has the status of a tautology or analyticity in Christian thought; still "God is good" is not a statement of identity and we must first understand what "good" means (including what criteria it has) before we can employ with understanding "God is good" and "God is Perfectly Good." Moreover, we must be able to judge ourselves, concerning *any command* whatever, whether it ought to be obeyed; and we must use, whether we like it or not, our own moral insight and wisdom, defective though it undoubtedly is, to judge of anything whatsoever whether it is good. And if we are to avow such propositions at all, we cannot escape this for judgments about the Perfect Good. Indeed, with all our confusions and inadequacies, it is we human beings who finally must judge whether anything could *possibly* be so perfectly good or *worthy* of worship. If this be arrogance or Promethean hubris, it is inescapable, for such conceptual links are built into the logic of our language about God. We cannot base our morality on our conception of God. Rather our very ability to have the Jewish-Christian concept of God presupposes a reasonably sophisticated and independent moral understanding on our part. Brunner and Divine Command theorists like him have the whole *matter* topsy-turvy.[1]

III

Suppose someone argues that it is a matter of *faith* with him that what God commands is what he ought to do; it is a matter of *faith* with him that God's willing it is his ultimate criterion for something's being good. He might say, "I see the force of your argument, but for me it remains a straight matter of faith that there can be no goodness without God. I do not *know* that this is so; I cannot give *grounds* for believing that this is so; I simply humbly accept it on faith that something is good simply because God says that it is. I have no independent moral criterion."

My answer to such a fideist—to fix him with a label—is that in the very way he reasons, in his very talk of God as a being *worthy* of worship, he

shows, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, that he has such an independent criterion. He shows in his very behavior, including his linguistic behavior, that something being willed or commanded does not *eo ipso* make it good or make it something that he ought to do, but that its being willed by a being *he takes* to be superlatively *worthy* of worship does make it something he, morally speaking, must do. But we should also note that it is by his own reflective decisions, by his own honest avowals, that he takes some being or, if you will, some x to be so *worthy* of worship, and thus he shows, in his very behavior, including his linguistic behavior, though not in his talk *about* his behavior, that he does not even take anything to be properly called "God" unless he has already made a moral judgment about that being. He *says* that he takes God as his ultimate criterion for good on faith, but his actions, including, of course, his everyday linguistic behavior and not just his talk about talk, speak louder than his words, and he shows by them that even his God is in part a product of his moral awareness. Only if he had such a moral awareness could he use the word "God," as a Jew or a Christian uses it. So that his protestations notwithstanding, he clearly has a criterion for good and evil that is *logically independent* of his belief in God. His talk of faith does not and cannot at all alter that.

If the fideist replies: "Look, I take it on faith that your argument here or any such skeptical argument is wrong. I'll not trust you or any philosopher or even *my* own reason against *my* faith. I take my stand here on faith and I won't listen to anyone." If he takes his stand here, we must shift our argument. Whether he will listen or not, we can indeed point out that in so acting, he is acting like a blind, fanatical irrationalist—a man suffering from the systematic false consciousness of a *total* ideology.

Suppose he replies: "So what? Then I am an irrationalist!" We can then point out to him the painful consequences to himself and others of his irrationalism. We can point out to him that, even if, for some reason, he is right in claiming that one ought to accept a religious morality, he is mistaken in accepting it on such irrational grounds. The consequences of irrationalism are such that anything goes, and this, if really lived, would be disastrous for him and others. If he says, "So what; I do not even care about that," then it seems to me that, if we were to continue to reason with him, we would now have to, perhaps like a psychoanalytic sleuth, question his *motives* for responding in such a way. He can no longer have any reasons for his claims; we can only reasonably inquire into what *makes* him take this absurd stance.

There is another objection that I need briefly to consider. Someone might say: "I'm not so sure about all these fancy semantical arguments of yours. I confess I do not know exactly what to say to them, but one thing is certain, if there is a God, then he is the author, the creator, and the sustainer of everything. He created everything other than himself. Nothing else could exist

without God and in this fundamental way morality and everything else is totally dependent on God. Without God there could be nothing to which moral principles or moral claims could be applied. Thus, in one important respect, morality, logic, and everything else are dependent on God."

I first would like to argue that there is a strict sense in which this claim of the religionist is not so. When we talk about what is morally good or morally right, we are not talking about what, except incidentally, is the case but about what ought to be the case or about what ought to exist. Even if there was nothing at all, that is, if there were no objects, processes, relations, or sentient creatures, it would still be correct to say that *if* there were sentient creatures, then a world in which there was less pain, suffering, degradation, and exploitation than there is in the present world would be a better world than a world such as ours. The truth of this is quite independent of the *actual* existence of either the world or of anything existing at all, though indeed we would have to have some *idea* of what it would be like for there to be sentient life and thus a world to understand such talk. Though no one could announce this truth if there were no people, and there would be no actual "we" or actual understanding of such talk, it still would be true that if there were such a country and it had a parliament, then it would be wrong to do certain things in it. It would be wrong to pass a law which allowed the exploitation of children or the torture of the innocent. To talk about what exists is one thing; to talk about what is good or about what ought to exist is another. God, let us assume, could, and indeed did, create the world, but he could not —logically could not—create moral values. Existence is one thing; value is another (Nielsen, 1978). And it is no contravention of God's omnipotence to point out that he cannot do what is *logically* impossible.

If all this talk of what ought to be as being something independent of what is, is stuff of a too heady nature for you, consider this supplementary argument against the theist's reply. To assert that nothing would be good or bad, right or wrong, if nothing existed, is not to deny that we can come to understand, without reference to God, that it is wrong to exploit underdeveloped countries and that religious tolerance is a good thing. The religious moralist has not shown that such exploitation would not be wrong and that such tolerance would not be good even if the atheist were right and God did not exist. But, if his position is to be made out, the religious apologist must show that in a godless world morality and moral values would be impossible. He must show that in such a world nothing could be good or bad or right or wrong. If there is no reason to believe that torturing little children would cease to be bad in a godless world, we have no reason to believe that, in any important sense, morality is dependent on religion. But God or no God, religion or no religion, it is still wrong to inflict pain on helpless infants when so inflicting pain on them is without any rational point (Ewing, 1957:49).

IV

There is a further stage in the dialectic of the argument about religion and ethics that I want now to consider. I have shown that in a purely logical sense moral notions cannot simply rest on the doctrinal cosmic claims of religion. In fact quite the reverse is the case, namely that only if a human being has a concept of good and evil which is not religiously dependent can he even have the Jewish-Christian-Islamic conception of Deity. In this very fundamental sense, it is not morality that rests on religion but religion on morality. Note that this argument could be made out, even if we grant the theist his metaphysical claims about what there is. That is to say, the claims I have hitherto made are quite independent of skeptical arguments about the reliability or even the coherence of claims to the effect that God exists.

Some defenders of the faith will grant that there is indeed such a fundamental independence of ethical belief from religious belief, though very few would accept my last argument about the dependence of religious belief on human moral understanding. But what is important to see here is that they could accept at least part of my basic claim and still argue that to develop a *fully human and adequate normative* ethic one must make it a God-centered ethic (Hick, 1959: 494–516). (For a criticism of such views see Nielsen, 1973.) Here in the arguments, for and against, the intellectual reliability of religious claims will become relevant.

The claim that such a religious moralist wishes to make is that only with a God-centered morality could we get a morality that would be adequate, that would go beyond the relativities and formalisms of a nonreligious ethic. Only a God-centered and perhaps only a Christ-centered morality could meet our deepest and most persistent moral demands. People have certain desires and needs; they experience loneliness and despair; they create certain "images of excellence;" they seek happiness and love. If the human animal was not like this, if man were not this searching, anxiety-ridden creature with a thirst for happiness and with strong desires and aversions, there would be no good and evil, no morality at all. In short, our moralities are relative to our human natures. And given the human nature that we in fact have, we cannot be satisfied with any purely secular ethic. Nothing "the world" can give us will finally satisfy us. We thirst for a father who will protect us – who will not let life be just one damn thing after another until we die and rot; we long for a God who can offer us the promise of a blissful everlasting life with him. We need to love and obey such a father. Unless we can convincingly picture to ourselves that we are creatures of such a loving sovereign, our deepest moral hopes will be frustrated.

No purely secular ethic can – or indeed should – offer such a hope, a hope that is perhaps built on an illusion, but still a hope that is worth, the believer

will claim, the full risk of faith. Whatever the rationality of such a faith, our very human nature, some Christian moralists maintain, makes us long for such assurances. Without it our lives will be without significance, without moral sense; morality finds its *psychologically realistic foundation* in certain human purposes. And given human beings with their nostalgia for the absolute, human life without God will be devoid of all purpose or at least devoid of everything but trivial purposes. Thus without a belief in God, there could be no humanly satisfying morality. Secular humanism in any of its many varieties is in reality inhuman.

It is true that a secular morality can offer no hope for a blissful immortality or a bodily resurrection to a "new life," and it is also true that secular morality does not provide for a protecting, loving father or some over-arching purpose *to* life. But we have to balance this off against the fact that these religious concepts are myths—sources of illusion and self-deception. We human beings are helpless, utterly dependent creatures for years and years. Because of this long period of infancy, there develops in us a deep psychological need for an all protecting father; we thirst for such security, but there is not the slightest reason to think that there is *such* security. Moreover, that people have feelings of dependence does not mean that there is something on which they can depend. That we have such needs most certainly does not give us any reason at all to think that there is such a super-mundane prop for our feelings of dependence.

Furthermore, and more importantly, if there is no such architectonic purpose *to* life, as our religions claim, this does not at all mean that there is no purpose *in* life—that there is no way of living that is ultimately satisfying and significant. It indeed appears to be true that all small purposes, if pursued too relentlessly and exclusively, leave us with a sense of emptiness. Even Mozart quartets listened to endlessly become boring, but a varied life lived with verve and with a variety of conscious aims can survive the destruction of Valhalla. That there is no purpose *to* life does not imply that there is no purpose *in* life. Human beings may not have a function and if this is so, then, unlike a tape recorder or a pencil or even a kind of homunculus, we do not have a purpose. There is nothing we are made for. But even so, we can and do have purposes in the sense that we have aims, goals, and things we find worth seeking and admiring. There are indeed things we prize and admire; the achievement of these things and the realization of our aims and desires, including those we are most deeply committed to, give moral significance to our lives (Baier, 1981; Nielsen, 1981b). We do not need a God to *give* meaning to our lives by making us for his sovereign purpose and perhaps thereby robbing us of our freedom. We, by our deliberate acts and commitments, can give meaning to our own lives. Here man has that "dreadful freedom" that makes possible his human dignity; freedom will indeed bring him anxiety, but he will then be the *rider* and not the *ridden* and, by being able to

choose, seek out and sometimes realize those things he most deeply prizes and admires, his life will take on a significance (Berlin, 1969). A life lived without purpose is indeed a most dreadful life—a life in which we might have what the existentialists rather pedantically call the experience of nothingness. But we do not need God or the gods to give purpose to our lives or to give the lie to this claim about nothingness. And we can grow into a fallibilism without a nostalgia for the absolute.

There are believers who would resist some of this and who would respond that these purely human purposes, forged in freedom and anguish, are not sufficient to meet our deepest moral needs. Beyond that, they argue, man needs very much to see himself as a creature with a purpose in a divinely ordered universe. He needs to find some *cosmic* significance for his ideals and commitments; he wants and needs the protection and certainty of having a function. This certainty, as the Grand Inquisitor realized, is even more desirable than his freedom. He wants and needs to live and be guided by the utterly sovereign will of God.

If, after wrestling through the kind of philosophical considerations I have been concerned to set forth, a religious moralist still really wants this and would continue to want it after repeated careful reflection, after all the consequences of his view and the alternatives had been placed vividly before him, after logical confusions had been dispelled, and after he had taken the matter to heart, his secularist interlocutor may find that with him he is finally caught in some ultimate disagreement in attitude.[2] Even this is far from certain, however, for it is not at all clear that there are certain determinate places in such dubious battles where argument and the giving of reasons just must come to an end and we must instead resort to persuasion or some other nonrational methods if we are to resolve our fundamental disagreements (Stevenson, 1944: Chapters VIII, IX and XIII; Stevenson, 1963: Chapter IV; Stevenson, 1966: 197–217).[3] But even if we finally do end up in such "pure disagreements in attitude," before we get there, there is a good bit that can be said. How could his purposes really be *his* own purposes, if he were a creature made to serve God's sovereign purpose and to live under the sovereign will of God? In such a circumstance would his ends be something he had deliberately chosen or would they simply be something that he could not help realizing? Moreover, is it really compatible with human dignity to be *made for* something? We should reflect here that we cannot without insulting people ask what they are for. Finally, is it not *infantile* to go on looking for some father, some order, some absolute, that will lift all the burden of *decision* from us? (Evans, 1973) Children follow rules blindly, but do we want to be children all our lives? Is it really *hubris* or arrogance or sin on our part to wish for a life where we make our own decisions, where we follow the rules we do because we see the *point* of them and where we need not crucify our intellects by believing in some transcendent purpose whose very intelligi-

bility is seriously in question? Perhaps by saying this I am only exhibiting my own *hubris,* my own corruption of soul, but I cannot believe that to ask this question is to exhibit such arrogance.

NOTES

1. In reviewing my *Ethics Without God,* Robert A. Oakes claims that "God is good" is both analytic and substantive, whatever that could mean. Moreover, he believes that "X is good" follows from "God wills X." "God's will," he tells us, "can be *criterial* of moral goodness without being constitutive of it." God's will "is to be taken as criterial of moral goodness precisely because 'a perfectly good being' is part of what is meant by 'God'." But this utterly fails to meet my argument that to even be able intelligibly to assert that there is a *perfectly* good being, we must have a logically prior criterion of what it is for something to be good. Thus, God's will cannot be our ultimate or most basic criterion of goodness. We must not only understand how to use "good" before we can understand how to use "God"; we must have some logically prior criterion of goodness or we could not know that there is a God, i.e., a perfectly good being or a being worthy of worship or even understand what it is to make such a claim. It is not a dogma, or even a mistake, to claim that analytic propositions are nonsubstantive. There are no logically necessary genuine *existential* propositions, though there are propositions of a "There is" form which are logically necessary, e.g., "There is an infinite number of natural numbers," but, as Stuart Brown among others has shown against Norman Malcolm, there are very good grounds for believing that none of these statements are both existential and logically necessary (see Stuart Brown, 1973:33–40; and Robert A. Oakes, 1975:275). I should add that Oakes's account also misses the force of my arguments about appeals to God's will as being criterial of moral goodness (Nielsen, 1971a:251–253).

2. That there is still a lot of room for argument here is brought out by Findlay (1963:Chapters IV, VI, IX and XV; and Findlay, 1957:97–114).

3. Even if as thoroughly as Alasdair MacIntyre we reject the "emotivism" of the "enlightenment project," we do not have a more objective basis for our moral claims if we follow MacIntyre's positive program (MacIntyre, 1980 and 1981).

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