DOES ETHICS NEED GOD?

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This essay presents a moral argument for the rationality of theistic belief. If all I have to go on morally are my own moral intuitions and reasoning and those of others, I am rationally led to skepticism, both about the possibility of moral knowledge and about my moral effectiveness. This skepticism is extensive, amounting to moral despair. But such despair cannot be rational. It follows that the assumption of the argument must be false and I must be able to rely on more than my own human powers and those of others in attempting to live a moral life. The Christian God has such a function. Hence, if it is rational to attempt a moral life, it is rational to believe in the Christian God.

Whenever anyone begins a study of ethics, a natural question to ask is why should we undertake such a study at all. I am satisfied with the answer that ethics teaches us how to be moral and anyone who understands what morality is will thereby want to live by it, just as anyone who understands the meaning of an analytic proposition will thereby see its truth. But wanting to be moral, I believe, is not sufficient to justify either the study of ethics or the attempt to practice morality. The question, "Should I *try* to be moral?" is not the same as the classic question, "Why be moral?" The latter question is sufficiently answered by the response that morality is its own justification. Morality aims at the good and anyone who understands what good means will see that its pursuit is justified. It is much harder, though, to answer the question, "Should I try to be moral?" This is because there is no point in trying to do something I cannot do. It is not enough to know that morality is intrinsically worthy of pursuit. There is simply no reason for me to pursue something unless I have good reason to think that I am capable of pursuing it successfully. So it is not rational to attempt to lead a moral life without a strong response to the fear of moral impotence, a fear which, I will argue, is rationally motivated and not easy to meet. In this paper I will attempt to show that it is not rational to try to be moral unless it is rational to believe that the attempt has a reasonable chance for success. But it is not rational to believe success is reasonably likely unless one believes there is a factor which explains how. A providential God is such a factor. Since it is rational to try to be moral, it is rational to believe in a providential God.

One source of the fear of attempting to lead a moral life is the vague suspicion that the whole enterprise is futile. To see what generates this fear we ought to look at what the point of morality and moral studies is. It is, clearly, a practical

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one, and in this respect the study of ethics is quite different from other academic studies and even other branches of philosophy. The point is not simply to know certain things, to satisfy one's intellectual curiosity; it is not even to become wise. The purpose is to produce good and to prevent evil and to make oneself into a virtuous person. Of course, most philosophers have pointed out the practical end of ethics, though some have thought it exhausted in the doing of right acts and the avoidance of wrong acts or in the attainment of happiness. It seems to me that in producing good and avoiding evil I am primarily aiming at producing something independent of myself, so morality is not just practical, but creative. In this way it is like art. Art also aims at producing something independent of oneself, though it is creations of beauty rather than creations of good. But while almost anybody would agree that art is worthy of pursuit, some individual might reasonably conclude that there is no point in *her* trying to pursue it if she doubts her ability to do it successfully. The same point applies to a host of other worthwhile activities—Olympic-level gymnastics, a career as a solo cellist, finding a cure for leukemia—each is obviously worth doing, but knowing that it is worth doing is not sufficient to provide me with a rational motivation for attempting it, even if I want to do it very much. Similarly, it is not enough for me to know that morality is worthwhile in order for me to see the point in trying to pursue it myself. I need some assurance that my chances of success are not too remote.

The problem is intensified when we realize that the moral life involves more than time and effort. At least some of the time it involves the sacrifice of self-interest. It is not rational, however, to give up a known good unless it is probable that the sacrifice really is for a greater good. This means that I need assurance on several counts. First, I need confidence that I can have moral knowledge. That is, I need good reasons to believe that my individual moral judgments, both about obligations and about values, are correct. Second, I need confidence in my moral efficacy, both in the sense that I can overcome moral weakness, and in the sense that I have the causal power to being about good in the world. Third, in so far as many moral goals require cooperation, I need confidence in the moral knowledge and moral efficacy of other people.

The argument I will present can be cast in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. If all I have to go on morally is my own moral intuitions and reasoning and the intuitions and reasoning of others, then I am rationally led to skepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge. Furthermore, my experience and that of others leads me to be skeptical of a person's ability to follow moral beliefs. In addition, it is rational to be skeptical of human moral power in the sense that we can, by acting individually and collectively, bring about good and prevent evil in the world. The assumption of this argument therefore leads me to a very extensive moral skepticism, amounting actually to moral despair. But such despair

cannot be rational. Therefore, the assumption of the argument must be false and I must be able to rely on more than my own human powers and those of others in attempting to live a moral life.

The first step of the argument is that a considered use of my moral and perceptual faculties and reasoning leads me to be skeptical of the possibility of attaining moral knowledge using these faculties alone. This skepticism is, I think, the most rational and fair-minded response to moral pluralism. I am not denying that there are many cases of moral agreement, even cross-culturally. Moral agreements typically involve general principles about the promotion of certain goods and the prevention of certain evils where no conflicts with other values arise. So almost anybody anywhere would accept a principle prohibiting the infliction of gratuitous suffering, or a principle advocating the acquisition of knowledge when no other good need be sacrificed. But when it is said that we ought to join the moral endeavor, this is not taken to mean that we ought to limit our efforts to the noncontroversial cases. Our efforts are in fact required in the large areas in which there is considerable controversy.

In almost every area of morality it is a common human experience to find that people make very different moral judgments. The differences arise at every level of belief—at the level of judging the rightness or wrongness of particular acts, at the level of general principles of obligation, at the level of basic moral values, at the metaethical level. In some cases these differences are resolvable. Some are due to differences in beliefs about circumstances or causal relationships. So a moral disagreement about withholding medical treatment might reduce to a disagreement about a patient's chances of recovery, or a disagreement about some method of famine relief might turn on the question of whether it would cause more famine later. Another kind of resolvable moral difference arises when one party to the dispute makes a fallacious inference in reasoning. Since a part of reasoning has been codified into fairly clear and commonly-accepted rules, disputes involving the violation of one of these rules should be easy to resolve. Still another kind of difference is one in which one disputant is lacking in sensitivity to a basic value. Some people may be incapable of appreciating a particular good and some of the time this can be detected. Perhaps he does not put much value in beauty or knowledge or love. We think of such a person as having a cognitive or emotional defect, and at least some of the time we may even reach general agreement on such a judgment.

All these cases, though resolvable, are rather uninteresting, and perhaps they are uninteresting precisely because they *are* resolvable. The really interesting cases of moral disputes are those which fall under none of these categories. They are disputes which cannot be blamed on factual error or error in logic or insensitivity to value. These are the cases that are not rationally decidable. This is not to say that in such cases no error in reasoning has been made, nor is it to

say that no mistake has been made in the detection of value. What I am claiming is that there are cases in which we have no non-question-begging procedure for deciding where the error lies. Whenever I find significant disagreement with one of my moral judgments I could, of course, simply claim that the people who disagree with me are irrational or insensitive to good and evil, or have made some factual error, or any combination of these defects. But if I am honest, shouldn't I admit that I have no right to use correspondence with what seems to *me* to be rational and intuitively correct as a way of deciding the trustworthiness of others when my own trustworthiness is presumably also open to question?

Descartes remarks in the opening lines of the *Discourse on Method* that good sense must be more equally distributed than anything else since everyone is content with his share. It seems true that each person is content with his share of good judgment, in moral as well as in non-moral matters, but I do not see that it follows that such judgment is equally shared by all. People not so well endowed with practical wisdom might not be aware of their limitations. In fact, I suspect they usually are not. This is because the lack of practical wisdom involves the inability to judge character and moral ability, including one's own. So if I were lacking in the ability to make good moral judgments, I would not know it. How am I, then, to know that I am one of the luckier, more morally gifted ones? On the other hand, suppose Descartes' point is right and good judgment in moral matters really *is* equally distributed among people. Again many moral differences would be irresolvable. So regardless of the way good moral judgment is distributed among people, some moral disputes are undecidable. Either they are undecidable because such judgment is equal and so no one person's judgment counts more than another;s, or they are undecidable because such judgment is unequal, but there is no non-question-begging procedure I can use to determine who has the better judgment. I conclude that in cases in which there is considerable moral disagreement which cannot be resolved by a commonly-accepted procedure, I ought to mistrust the judgments on both sides of the dispute, including my own.

The skepticism I am talking about is extensive and drastic, not the innocuous amount of skepticism that is healthy and no doubt required by intellectual honesty and modesty. To see how serious the problem is, we should address two further questions: (1) How widespread are the disagreements of the kind I have called undecidable, and (2) How strong a doubt should a rational person adopt as the result of these disagreements? The answer to both questions, I think, is that it is considerable.

To take the first question first, what reasons do we have to think that undecidable moral disagreements are widespread? It is obvious that there are very many moral disagreements. It is probably almost as obvious that in very many cases these disagreements have not been resolved to the satisfaction of most interested,

rational people. But, of course, the fact that so many moral disagreements remain unresolved does not entail that they are unresolvable. Philosophers and others spend a lot of effort at attempting to resolve such disputes. Surely they must think it is possible to settle these matters; otherwise, they would not attempt it. If I am right, wouldn't this make most professional ethics, as well as most moral deliberation, misguided? Since the point of my argument in this paper is to save moral reasoning and action from being misguided, I do want to say that the reliance on our human faculties is not sufficient to save it from hopeless skepticism. However, an activity can be saved from hopelessness by something about which some of its practitioners are unaware. I am attempting to give a moral argument for the rationality of theistic belief. If I am right, then God's existence makes the moral life rational. God's existence does this whether the people who deliberate about and attempt to live a moral life know it or not.

Let us now consider the second question. Why should the fact that there are very many moral issues which are undecidable lead to such extreme skepticism? Perhaps a person could admit that many moral disputes are undecidable, but instead of concluding that such disputes have no resolution which has been adequately shown to be rational enough to support action, he might conclude instead that they're all rationally justified, or, at least, that many of them are.[1] This position seems reasonable when applied to disagreements about such things as scientific or historical theories, where one has little or nothing to lose if one is wrong, but it seems extremely implausible when applied to morality. It would be very odd to tell a woman contemplating an abortion that her position is rationally justified and that she ought to go ahead and act on it, but add that the contrary position is equally justified. I would think such information would be unhelpful in the extreme and would no doubt give her no motivation to act one way or the other.

Another way we might consider avoiding the consequence of accepting despair from this skeptical argument is to embrace a more benign form of skepticism such as that of David Hume. This type of skepticism does not have any practical effect on the way one lives one's life, nor even on one's tendency to acquire and keep beliefs. Hume argues, for example, for skepticism about the existence of enduring physical objects, the existence of an enduring self, and the justification of induction. However, he admits that his skepticism has no effect on our tendency to believe in the existence of enduring objects and a self or to make inductive inferences. When he says these beliefs are not rationally justified, he does not mean that we ought not to believe them. This is because it cannot be the case that we ought not to do something we cannot help doing, and Hume says we cannot help having these beliefs. My moral case is quite different, however. We have a strong natural motivation to be moral, but unlike Humean doubt, moral beliefs are very vulnerable to the doubt I have described, and it is not true that

we cannot help having them. Skepticism does not take away the natural desire to be moral, but it does take away the motivating force because morality is intimately connected with feelings, commitments, sacrifices, expectations, and hopes. The moral life involves risk, both because of the personal sacrifices it requires and because of the emotional commitment it involves. This makes it very vulnerable to skepticism; hence, the despair.

The argument that moral pluralism rationally leads to moral skepticism depends in part on the assumption that the acquisition of knowledge is social. Though I do not intend to defend it in this paper, this assumption seems to me to be true and to be applicable to knowledge in the moral sphere. We learn the meaning and application of moral terms socially; we have our moral sensitivities socially educated; we learn the trustworthiness of our moral reasoning, as we do all other forms of reasoning, by the responses of others; and we learn the validity of those perceptual and other factual beliefs which we use in making specific moral judgments by comparing them with the judgments of others. This is not to say, of course, that the reasoning and judgments of others are always the last word, but it is to say that they must be taken into account and the reliability of our own moral judgments is significantly weakened when they conflict with those of others. They are, at least, unless we have some reasonable explanation of the conflict which settles the disagreement in our favor.

So far I have argued that if all we have to go on in moral deliberation is our human faculties, then the existence of moral pluralism makes many moral disagreements undecidable and this ought to lead us rationally into an extensive skepticism about moral knowledge. The skepticism we are rationally led to, though, is not limited to knowledge of moral truths. If we are rational, we must also doubt our moral efficacy. In the first place, the predominance of moral weakness ought to lead us to lack trust in our own moral powers and those of others. Furthermore, even when moral weakness is not a problem, there is good reason to doubt our moral efficacy in the sense of our causal power over good and evil. People have been struggling to promote good and to prevent evil for as long as people have had a moral sense at all, but is there good evidence that good is increasing and evil decreasing? Even when good is produced or evil eliminated, do we have good reason to think that it is usually the result of a conscious, morally-motivated human choice? Of course, some of the time it probably is, but if I impartially consider the probability that on any given occasion I can, by my efforts, produce good or eliminate evil, would I calculate that the probability is sufficiently great to be worth the emotional risk and personal sacrifice of making the effort? If I were certain that my judgment about what is good and how to attain it were true, the doubt about my moral efficacy might still leave it rational to act on my moral judgment and take the risk of being ineffective. But when doubt about the judgment itself is added to doubt about

my ability to act on it effectively, the result is a very serious degree of skepticism, making it irrational in many cases to accept the sacrifices of attempting to be moral.

In deciding whether or not to attempt a moral life, I must weigh the probability that a certain quantity of good will be produced by my efforts against the probability that a sacrifice of a certain quantity of good will result.

Let i = the increase in the probability that a good will obtain as a result of my efforts.

s = the probability that my efforts will result in a sacrifice of certain lesser goods.

V^1 = the value of the good I might produce by attempting a moral life.

V^2 = the value of the good I would sacrifice.

We could then calculate the expected value of the attempt to be moral as:

VM (value of moral effort) = $i \times V^1 - s \times V^2$.

It should be recognized that part of the value V^1 will be internal goods which accrue to me simply in virtue of my efforts at being moral. The probability that this part of V^1 will obtain may be very high. However, I have argued that the value i, which is the overall probability that I can produce V^1, might be so much lower than the probability value s, it could easily happen that the value VM is negative, even though we would expect V^1 to be much greater than V^2.

I have argued that if all we have to go on morally are our human faculties, then we are rationally led to extensive moral skepticism, both about the possibility of moral knowledge and about moral efficacy. If one's actions are consistent with one's beliefs such skepticism would have a devastating effect on the attempt to lead a moral life. It rationally leads to moral despair. But moral despair cannot be rational since we know the attempt to lead a moral life *is* rational. The assumption of the argument, that our human faculties alone make the rational attempt to practice morality possible, must therefore be false.

This argument is, as I have pointed out, a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. It is not, however, a reductio in the usual logician's sense of a reduction to a logical contradiction. The absurdity is of a different kind. Total and unrelenting moral despair, I presume, is an absurd state. It cannot be rational to be in such a state, though I do not intend to argue for this. There may be people influenced by some aspects of existentialism who believe that life is absurd and simply accept it. This paper is not intended for those people. It is intended for those people who believe that if life is truly absurd, it ought not to be lived. Since it ought to be lived, it must not be absurd. I am assuming that nihilism is neither natural nor rational, and in spite of Nietzsche, it is certainly not comforting.

In the famous essay, "A Free Man's Worship," Bertrand Russell attempted to exalt human life on a foundation of moral despair by endowing it with the beauty of tragedy. He thought the right attitude toward the moral history of the universe is complete resignation, but the morally sensitive person with sufficient

imagination can find all the motivation he needs to live a morally worthy life in the purely aesthetic qualities of such a life, and in this there is a kind of freedom. That there are people who can find sufficient motivation to live in such a manner may be possible, but whether it is rational or even praiseworthy to give up lesser goods in what is thought to be a vain attempt to obtain greater goods is dubious, even if the attempt itself is beautiful.

If moral despair is irrational, then we must be able to trust more than our own human faculties of perception, reasoning and intuition in attempting to lead a moral life. What kind of trust do we need in order to avoid such despair? I argued that skepticism faces us at several points in attempting to be moral. First, there is skepticism about the possibility of attaining moral knowledge. In attempting to live morally we need trust that there is something beyond our human cognitive and moral faculties which can provide guidance in knowing moral truth. The Christian God has such a function. Second, I argued that there is skepticism about moral efficacy in the sense of moral weakness. This suggests that the attempt to lead a moral life requires trust in something that can help us overcome such weakness. The Christian notion of grace serves such a function. Third, there is skepticism about moral causal power, both my own and that of others. 'This means that the attempt to live morally requires trust that the ultimate goal of morality can be reached, that good can be created and preserved and evil can be prevented or eliminated, in spite of the fact that people differ greatly in their moral judgments and often seem to be acting at cross-purposes. The Christian notion of divine providence serves this requirement for the moral life.

I conclude that it is only rational to do ethics and attempt to lead a moral life if there is something we can trust which will save us from these three forms of moral skepticism. I have not argued that the Christian God is the only thing that can serve the need for trust in living the moral life, but the Christian God does serve these needs. It is therefore more rational for a person who believes in the rationality of the attempt to live morally to believe in such a God than not to believe in anything in which she can put such trust.

The argument can be summarized as follows: It is not rational to try to be moral unless it is rational to believe the attempt likely to be successful. At least, the likelihood of its success must not be outweighed by the sacrifices such an attempt entails. But it is not rational to believe such an attempt likely to be successful if all we have to go on in the moral life are our own faculties. This is because those faculties rationally lead us to extensive skepticism both about moral knowledge and about moral efficacy. Since it *is* rational to try to be moral, we must have more to go on in the moral life than our own human faculties. In particular, the possibility of success in the moral life requires something which enables us to get out of skepticism. The Christian God has such a function.

An objector might say that though the Christian concepts of grace and provi-

dence are adequate to forestall skepticism about moral efficacy, how does the existence of God prevent skepticism about moral knowledge? Isn't the theist as much faced with the problem of moral pluralism as is the non-theist? In response, it seems to me that it is certainly true that the theist is faced with a certain amount of skepticism about his own particular moral judgments. Theism does not guarantee the possession of moral truth to the believer. However, the theist has a better way of dealing with the problem of moral pluralism than the non-theist in two ways. First, the theist has another source of moral knowledge in divine revelation and the teachings of the Church, and second, the theist's trust in divine providence gives him reason to believe in moral progress, not only with respect to moral efficacy, but also with respect to moral knowledge. This is not to suggest that the theist has no problems with doubt about the interpretation of God's will. Such a suggestion would be naive. But again, the Christian concept of providence provides confidence that these problems are resolvable.

There is one more way in which my conclusion might be blocked. It might be agreed that the assumption of my argument rationally leads to despair, that such despair is not rational, and that therefore it is rational to have trust in attempting to be moral. But perhaps the human need for trust is its own justification; it is not necessary to bring in the existence of a providential God to justify it. If the human need for trust is strong enough, it might outweigh the skepticism I have defended. We might call this the alternative of blind trust, or trust out of the sheer need to avoid despair. Such trust would be, I think, more rational than despair, but some trust can be more rational than others, and the trust I have defended is a trust with a set of beliefs which explains its rationality. This seems to be far more rational than blind trust.

In this paper I have given a moral argument for the rationality of belief in the Christian God. I have assumed that it is rational to try to be moral, but given certain problems in the moral life, it is not rational unless certain conditions obtain—those conditions which free a person from the three forms of skepticism I have discussed. The argument is Kantian in its general structure since, like Kant, the claim is that moral endeavor presupposes the existence of something like God as a condition for the rational possibility of its achievement. Theistic belief is, therefore, justified in the practical domain of reason. I have not argued, though, that belief in the Christian God is the only conceivable way to provide the conditions necessary for making moral effort rational, but it has no competitors that I know of. It follows that the theist is acting more rationally than the non-theist when they both act on their moral beliefs and claim that those beliefs are justified. Since most non-theists do not hesitate to do this, it follows that it would be more rational for them to believe in God than not to.

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NOTE

1. This seems to be the position of Richard W. Miller in "Ways of Moral Learning," *Philosophical Review* XCIV, 4, (October 1985). See esp. pp. 507-509, 548-556, and fn. 33, p. 539.