



Rationality and Religious Belief

Edited with an Introduction by
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Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief

ROBERT MERRIHEW ADAMS

Moral arguments were the type of theistic argument most characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently they have become one of philosophy's abandoned farms. The fields are still fertile, but they have not been cultivated systematically since the latest methods came in. The rambling Victorian farmhouse has not been kept up as well as similar structures, and people have not been stripping the sentimental gingerbread off the porches to reveal the clean lines of argument. This paper is intended to contribute to the remedy of this neglect. It will deal with quite a number of arguments, because I think we can understand them better if we place them in relation to each other. This will not leave time to be as subtle, historically or philosophically, as I would like to be, but I hope I will be able to prove something more than my own taste for Victoriana.

I

Let us begin with one of the most obvious, though perhaps never the most fashionable, arguments on the farm: an Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong. We believe quite firmly that certain things are morally right and others are morally wrong—for example, that it is wrong to torture another person to death just for fun. Questions may be raised about the nature of that which is believed in these beliefs: what does the

rightness or wrongness of an act consist in? I believe that the most adequate answer is provided by a theory that entails the existence of God—specifically, by the theory that moral rightness and wrongness consist in agreement and disagreement, respectively, with the will or commands of a loving God. One of the most generally accepted reasons for believing in the existence of anything is that its existence is implied by the theory that seems to account most adequately for some subject matter. I take it, therefore, that my metaethical views provide me with a reason of some weight for believing in the existence of God.

Perhaps some will think it disreputably “tender-minded” to accept such a reason where the subject matter is moral. It may be suggested that the epistemological status of moral beliefs is so far inferior to that of physical beliefs, for example, that any moral belief found to entail the existence of an otherwise unknown object ought simply to be abandoned. But in spite of the general uneasiness about morality that pervades our culture, most of us do hold many moral beliefs with almost the highest degree of confidence. So long as we think it reasonable to argue at all from grounds that are not absolutely certain, there is no clear reason why such confident beliefs, in ethics as in other fields, should not be accepted as premises in arguing for the existence of anything that is required for the most satisfactory theory of their subject matter.¹

The divine command theory of the nature of right and wrong combines two advantages not jointly possessed by any of its non-theological competitors. These advantages are sufficiently obvious that their nature can be indicated quite briefly to persons familiar with the metaethical debate, though they are also so controversial that it would take a book-length review of the contending theories to defend my claims. The first advantage of divine command metaethics is that it presents facts of moral rightness and wrongness as objective, non-natural facts—objective in the sense that whether they obtain or not does not depend on whether any human being thinks they do; and non-natural in the sense that they cannot be stated entirely in the language of physics, chemistry, biology, and

human or animal psychology. For it is an objective but not a natural fact that God commands, permits, or forbids something. Intuitively this is an advantage. If we are tempted to say that there are only natural facts of right and wrong, or that there are no objective facts of right and wrong at all, it is chiefly because we have found so much obscurity in theories about objective, non-natural ethical facts. We seem not to be acquainted with the simple, non-natural ethical properties of the Intuitionists, and we do not understand what a Platonic Form of the Good or the Just would be. The second advantage of divine command metaethics is that it is relatively intelligible. There are certainly difficulties in the notion of a divine command, but at least it provides us more clearly with matter for thought than the Intuitionist and Platonic conceptions do.

We need not discuss here to what extent these advantages of the divine command theory may be possessed by other theological metaethical theories—for example, by views according to which moral principles do not depend on God's will for their validity, but on His understanding for their ontological status. Such theories, if one is inclined to accept them, can of course be made the basis of an argument for theism.²

What we cannot avoid discussing, and at greater length than the advantages, are the alleged disadvantages of divine command metaethics. The advantages may be easily recognized, but the disadvantages are generally thought to be decisive. I have argued elsewhere, in some detail, that they are not decisive.³ Here let us concentrate on three objections that are particularly important for the present argument.

(1) In accordance with the conception of metaethics as analysis of the meanings of terms, a divine command theory is often construed as claiming that 'right' *means* commanded (or permitted) by God, and that 'wrong' *means* forbidden by God. This gives rise to the objection that people who do not believe that there exists a God to command or forbid still use the terms 'right' and 'wrong', and are said (even by theists) to believe that certain actions are right and others wrong. Surely those atheists do not mean by 'right' and 'wrong' what the divine command theory seems to say they must mean. Moreover, it may be objected that any argument for the existence of God from the

premise that certain actions are right and others wrong will be viciously circular if that premise *means* that certain actions are commanded or permitted by God and others forbidden by God.

One might reply that it is not obviously impossible for someone to disbelieve something that is analytically implied by something else that he asserts. Nor is it impossible for the conclusion of a perfectly good, non-circular argument to be analytically implied by its premises. But issues about the nature of conceptual analysis, and of circularity in argument, can be avoided here. For in the present argument, a divine command theory need not be construed as saying that the existence of God is analytically implied by ascriptions of rightness and wrongness. It can be construed as proposing an answer to a question left open by the meaning of "right" and "wrong," rather than as a theory of the meaning of those terms.

The ordinary meanings of many terms that signify properties, such as 'hot' and 'electrically charged', do not contain enough information to answer all questions about the nature (or even in some cases the identity) of the properties signified. Analysis of the meaning of 'wrong' might show, for example, that 'Nuclear deterrence is wrong' ascribes to nuclear deterrence a property about which the speaker may be certain of very little except that it belongs, independently of his views, to many actions that he opposes, such as torturing people just for fun. The analysis of meaning need not completely determine the identity of this property, but it may still be argued that a divine command theory identifies it most adequately.

(2) The gravest objection to the more extreme forms of divine command theory is that they imply that if God commanded us, for example, to make it our chief end in life to inflict suffering on other human beings, for no other reason than that He commanded it, it would be *wrong* not to obey. Finding this conclusion unacceptable, I prefer a less extreme, or modified, divine command theory, which identifies the ethical property of wrongness with the property of being contrary to the commands of a *loving* God. Since a God who commanded us to practice cruelty for its own sake would not be a loving God, this modified divine command theory does not imply that it would be wrong to disobey such a command.

But the objector may continue his attack: "Suppose that God did not exist, or that He existed but did not love us. Even the modified divine command theory implies that in that case it would not be wrong to be cruel to other people. But surely it would be wrong."

The objector may have failed to distinguish sharply two claims he may want to make: that some acts *would* be wrong even if God *did* not exist, and that some acts *are* wrong even if God *does* not exist. I grant the latter. Even if divine command metaethics is the best theory of the nature of right and wrong, there are other theories which are more plausible than denying that cruelty is wrong. If God does not exist, my theory is false; but presumably the best alternative to it is true, and cruelty is still wrong.

But suppose there is in fact a God—indeed a loving God—and that the ethical property of wrongness is the property of being forbidden by a loving God. It follows that no actions would be wrong in a world in which no loving God existed, if 'wrong' designates rigidly (that is, in every possible world) the property that it actually designates.⁴ For no actions would have that property in such a world. Even in a world without God, however, the best remaining alternative to divine command metaethics might be correct in the following way. In such a world there could be people very like us who would say truly, "Kindness is right," and "Cruelty is wrong." They would be speaking about kindness and cruelty, but not about rightness and wrongness. That is, they would not be speaking about the properties that *are* rightness and wrongness, though they might be speaking about properties (perhaps natural properties) that they would be *calling* 'rightness' and 'wrongness.' But they would be using the words 'right' and 'wrong' with the same *meaning* as we actually do. For the meaning of the words, I assume, leaves open some questions about the identity of the properties they designate.

Some divine command theorists could not consistently reply as I have suggested to the present objection. Their theory is about the meaning of 'right' and 'wrong', or they think all

alternatives to it (except the complete denial of moral distinctions) are too absurd to play the role I have suggested for alternative theories. But there is another reply that is open to them. They can say that although wrongness is not a property that would be possessed by cruelty in a world without God, the possibility or idea of cruelty-in-a-world-without-God *does* possess, in the actual world (with God), a property that is close kin to wrongness: the property of being frowned on, or viewed with disfavor, by God. The experience of responding emotionally to fiction should convince us that it is possible to view with the strongest favor or disfavor events regarded as taking place in a world that would not, or might not, include one's own existence—and if possible for us, why not for God? If we are inclined to say that cruelty in a world without God would be wrong, that is surely because of an attitude of disfavor that we have in the actual world toward such a possibility. And if our attitude corresponds to an objective, non-natural moral fact, why cannot that fact be one that obtains in the actual world, rather than in the supposed world without God?

(3) It may be objected that the advantages of the divine command theory can be obtained without an entailment of God's existence. For the rightness of an action might be said to consist in the fact that the action *would* agree with the commands of a loving God if one existed, *or* does so agree if a loving God exists. This modification transforms the divine command theory into a non-naturalistic form of the ideal observer theory of the nature of right and wrong.⁵ It has the advantage of identifying rightness and wrongness with properties that actions could have even if God does not exist. And of course it takes away the basis of my metaethical argument for theism.

The flaw in this theory is that it is difficult to see what is supposed to be the force of the counterfactual conditional that is centrally involved in it. If there is no loving God, what makes it the case if there were one, He would command this rather than that? Without an answer to this question, the crucial counterfactual lacks a clear sense. I can see only two possible answers: either that what any possible loving God would command is

logically determined by the concept of a loving God, or that it is determined by a causal law. Neither answer seems likely to work without depriving the theory of some part of the advantages of divine command metaethics.

No doubt some conclusions about what He would not command follow *logically* or analytically from the concept of a loving God. He would not command us to practice cruelty for its own sake, for example. But in some cases, at least, in which we believe the act is wrong, it seems only contingent that a loving God does or would frown on increasing the happiness of other people by the painless and undetected killing of a person who wants to live but will almost certainly not live happily.⁶ Very diverse preferences about what things are to be treated as personal rights seem compatible with love and certainly with deity. Of course, you could explicitly build all your moral principles into the definition of the kind of hypothetical divine commands that you take to make facts of right and wrong. But then the fact that your principles *would* be endorsed by the commands of such a God adds nothing to the principles themselves; whereas endorsement by an *actual* divine command would add something, which is one of the advantages of divine command metaethics.

Nor is it plausible to suppose that there are *causal* laws that determine what would be commanded by a loving God, if there is no God. All causal laws, at bottom, are about actual things. There are no causal laws, though there could be legends, about the metabolism of chimeras or the susceptibility of centaurs to polio. There are physical laws about frictionless motions which never occur, but they are extrapolated from facts about actual motions. And we can hardly obtain a causal law about the commands of a possible loving God by extrapolating from causal laws governing the behavior of monkeys, chimpanzees, and human beings, as if every possible God would simply be a very superior primate. Any such extrapolation, moreover, would destroy the character of the theory of hypothetical divine commands as a theory of *non-natural* facts.

Our discussion of the Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong may be concluded with some reflections on the

nature of the God in whose existence it gives us some reason to believe. (1) The appeal of the argument lies in the provision of an explanation of moral facts of whose truth we are already confident. It must therefore be taken as an argument for the existence of a God whose commands—and presumably, whose purposes and character as well—are in accord with our most confident judgments of right and wrong. I have suggested that He must be a loving God. (2) He must be an intelligent being, so that it makes sense to speak of His having a will and issuing commands. Maximum adequacy of a divine command theory surely requires that God be supposed to have enormous knowledge and understanding of ethically relevant facts, if not absolute omniscience. He should be a God “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” (3) The argument does not seem to imply very much about God’s power, however—certainly not that He is omnipotent. (4) Nor is it obvious that the argument supports belief in the unity or uniqueness of God. Maybe the metaethical place of divine commands could be taken by the unanimous deliverances of a senate of deities—although that conception raises troublesome questions about the nature of the morality or quasi-morality that must govern the relations of the gods with each other.

II

The most influential moral arguments for theistic belief have been a family of arguments that may be called Kantian. They have a common center in the idea of a moral order of the universe and are arguments for belief in a God sufficiently powerful to establish and maintain such an order. The Kantian family has members on both sides of one of the most fundamental distinctions in this area—the distinction between *theoretical* and *practical* arguments. By “a theoretical moral argument for theistic belief” I mean an argument having an ethical premise and purporting to prove the *truth*, or enhance the *probability*, of theism. By “a practical argument for theistic

belief" I mean an argument purporting only to give ethical or other practical reasons for *believing* that God exists. The practical argument may have no direct bearing at all on the truth or probability of the belief whose practical advantage it extols.

Arguments from the Nature of Right and Wrong are clearly theoretical moral arguments for theistic belief. Kant, without warning us of any such distinction, gives us sometimes a theoretical and sometimes a practical argument (in my sense of "theoretical" and "practical," not his). His theoretical argument goes roughly as follows:

- (A) We ought (morally) to promote the realization of the highest good.
- (B) What we ought to do must be possible for us to do.
- (C) It is not possible for us to promote the realization of the highest good unless there exists a God who makes the realization possible.
- (D) Therefore, there exists such a God.

Kant was not clear about the theoretical character of this argument, and stated as its conclusion that "it is morally necessary to *assume* the existence of God."⁷ Its premises, however, plainly imply the more theoretical conclusion that God exists.

(C) needs explanation. Kant conceived of the highest good as composed of two elements. The first element, moral virtue, depends on the wills of moral agents and does not require divine intervention for its possibility. But the second element, the happiness of moral agents in strict proportion to their virtue, will not be realized unless there is a moral order of the universe. Such an order, Kant argues, cannot be expected of the laws of nature, without God.

Doubts may be raised whether Kant's conception of the highest good is ethically correct and whether there might not be some non-theistic basis for a perfect proportionment of happiness to virtue. But a more decisive objection has often been made to (A): in any reasonable morality we will be obligated to promote only the best attainable approximation of the highest good. For this reason Kant's theoretical moral argument for theism does not seem very promising to me.⁸

Elsewhere Kant argues quite differently. He even denies that a command to promote the highest good is contained in, or analytically derivable from, the moral law. He claims rather that we will be "hindered" from doing what the moral law commands us to do unless we can regard our actions as contributing to the realization of "a final end of all things" which we can also make a "final end for all our actions and abstinctions." He argues that only the highest good can serve morally as such a final end and that we therefore have a compelling moral need to believe in the possibility of its realization.⁹ This yields only a practical argument for theistic belief. Stripped of some of its more distinctively Kantian dress, it can be stated in terms of "demoralization," by which I mean a weakening or deterioration of moral motivation.

- (E) It would be demoralizing not to believe there is a moral order of the universe; for then we would have to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what we do.
- (F) Demoralization is morally undesirable.
- (G) Therefore, there is moral advantage in believing that there is a moral order of the universe.
- (H) Theism provides the most adequate theory of a moral order of the universe.
- (J) Therefore, there is a moral advantage in accepting theism.

What is a moral order of the universe? I shall not formulate any necessary condition. But let us say that the following is *logically sufficient* for the universe's having a moral order: (1) a good world-history requires something besides human virtue (it might, as Kant thought, require the happiness of the virtuous); but (2) the universe is such that morally good actions will probably contribute to a good world-history. (I use 'world' as a convenient synonym for 'universe'.)

Theism has several secular competitors as a theory of a moral order of the universe in this sense. The idea of scientific and cultural progress has provided liberal thinkers, and Marxism has provided socialists, with hopes of a good world-history

without God. It would be rash to attempt to adjudicate this competition here. I shall therefore not comment further on the truth of (H) but concentrate on the argument from (E) and (F) to (G). It is, after all, of great interest in itself, religiously and in other ways, if morality gives us a reason to believe in a moral order of the universe.

Is (E) true? Would it indeed be demoralizing not to believe there is a moral order of the universe? The issue is in large part empirical. It is for sociologists and psychologists to investigate scientifically what are the effects of various beliefs on human motivation. And the motivational effects of religious belief form one of the central themes of the classics of speculative sociology.¹⁰ But I have the impression that there has not yet been very much "hard" empirical research casting light directly on the question whether (E) is true.

It may be particularly difficult to develop empirical research techniques subtle enough philosophically to produce results relevant to our present argument. One would have to specify which phenomena count as a weakening or deterioration of moral motivation. One would also have to distinguish the effects of belief in a moral world-order from the effects of other religious beliefs, for (E) could be true even if, as some have held, the effects of actual religious beliefs have been predominantly bad from a moral point of view. The bad consequences might be due to doctrines which are separable from faith in a moral order of the universe.

Lacking scientifically established answers to the empirical aspects of our question, we may say, provisionally, what seems plausible to us. And (E) does seem quite plausible to me. Seeing our lives as contributing to a valued larger whole is one of the things that gives them a point in our own eyes. The morally good person cares about the goodness of what happens in the world and not just about the goodness of his own actions. If a right action can be seen as contributing to some great good, that increases the importance it has for him. Conversely, if he thinks that things will turn out badly no matter what he does, and especially if he thinks that (as often appears to be the case) the long-range effects of right action are about as likely to be bad as good,¹¹ that will diminish the emotional attraction that

duty exerts on him.¹² Having to regard it as very likely that the history of the universe will not be good on the whole, no matter what one does, seems apt to induce a cynical sense of futility about the moral life, undermining one's moral resolve and one's interest in moral considerations. My judgment on this issue is subject to two qualifications, however.

(1) We cannot plausibly ascribe more than a demoralizing *tendency* to disbelief in a moral order of the universe. There are certainly people who do not believe in such an order, but show no signs of demoralization.

(2) It may be doubted how much most people are affected by beliefs or expectations about the history of the universe as a whole. Perhaps most of us could sustain with comparative equanimity the bleakest of pessimism about the twenty-third century if only we held brighter hopes for the nearer future of our own culture, country, or family, or even (God forgive us!) our own philosophy department. The belief that we can accomplish something significant and good for our own immediate collectivities may be quite enough to keep us going morally. On the other hand, belief in a larger-scale moral order of the universe might be an important bulwark against demoralization if all or most of one's more immediate hopes were being dashed. I doubt that there has ever been a time when moralists could afford to ignore questions about the motivational resources available in such desperate situations. Certainly it would be unimaginative to suppose that we live in such a time.

Some will object that those with the finest moral motivation can find all the inspiration they need in a tragic beauty of the moral life itself, even if they despair about the course of history. The most persuasive argument for this view is a presentation that succeeds in evoking moral emotion in connection with the thought of tragedy; Bertrand Russell's early essay "A Free Man's Worship"¹³ is an eloquent example. But I remain somewhat skeptical. Regarded aesthetically, from the outside, tragedy may be sublimely beautiful; lived from the inside, over a long period of time, I fear it is only too likely to end in discouragement and bitterness, though no doubt there have been shining exceptions.

But the main objection to the present argument is an objection to all practical arguments. It is claimed that none of them give justifying reasons for believing anything at all. If there are any practical advantages that are worthy to sway us in accepting or rejecting a belief, the advantage of not being demoralized is surely one of them. But can it be right, and intellectually honest, to believe something, or try to believe it, for the sake of any practical advantage, however noble?

I believe it can. This favorable verdict on practical arguments for theoretical conclusions is particularly plausible in "cases where faith creates its own verification," as William James puts it¹⁴—or where your wish is at least more likely to come true if you believe it will. Suppose you are running for Congress and an unexpected misfortune has made it doubtful whether you still have a good chance of winning. Probably it will at least be clear that you are more likely to win if you continue to believe that your chances are good. Believing will keep up your spirits and your alertness, boost the morale of your campaign workers, and make other people more likely to take you seriously. In this case it seems to me eminently reasonable for you to cling, for the sake of practical advantage, to the belief that you have a good chance of winning.

Another type of belief for which practical arguments can seem particularly compelling is trust in a person. Suppose a close friend of mine is accused of a serious crime. I know him well and can hardly believe he would do such a thing. He insists he is innocent. But the evidence against him, though not conclusive, is very strong. So far as I can judge the total evidence (including my knowledge of his character) in a cool, detached way, I would have to say it is quite evenly balanced. I want to believe in his innocence, and there is reason to think that I ought, morally, to believe in it if I can. For he may well be innocent. If he is, he will have a deep psychological need for someone to believe him. If no one believes him, he will suffer unjustly a loneliness perhaps greater than the loneliness of guilt. And who will believe him if his close friends do not? Who will believe him if I do not? Of course I could try to *pretend* to believe him. If I do that I will certainly be less honest with him, and I doubt that I will be more honest with myself, than if

I really cling to the belief that he is innocent. Moreover, the pretense is unlikely to satisfy his need to be believed. If he knows me well and sees me often, my insincerity will probably betray itself to him in some spontaneous reaction.

The legitimacy of practical arguments must obviously be subject to some restrictions. Two important restrictions were suggested by William James. (1) Practical arguments should be employed only on questions that "cannot . . . be decided on intellectual grounds."¹⁵ There should be a plurality of alternatives that one finds intellectually plausible. (The option should be "living," as James would put it.) Faith ought not to be "believing what you know ain't so." It also ought not to short-circuit rational inquiry; we ought not to try to settle by practical argument an issue that we could settle by further investigation of evidence in the time available for settling it. (2) The question to be decided by practical argument should be urgent and of practical importance ("forced" and "momentous," James would say). If it can wait or is pragmatically inconsequential, we can afford to suspend judgment about it; and it is healthier to do so.

To these I would add a third important restriction: it would be irrational to accept a belief on the ground that it gives you a *reason* for doing something that you want to do. To the extent that your belief is based on a desire to do *x*, it cannot add to your reasons for doing *x*. There will be a vicious practical circle in a practical argument for any belief unless it is judged that the belief would be advantageous even if it were no more probable than it seems to be in advance of the practical argument. It may be rational to be swayed by a practical argument, on the other hand, if one is not inventing a reason for doing something, but trying to sustain in oneself the emotional conditions for doing something one already has enough reason to want to do.

Suppose again that you are a congressional candidate trying, for practical reasons, to maintain in yourself the belief that you have a good chance to win. This is irrational if your aim is to get yourself to do things that you think it would be unreasonable to do if you were less confident. But it is not irrational if your primary aim is to foster in yourself the right spirit to do

most effectively things you think it reasonable to do anyway. The rationality of your trying, for practical reasons, to believe depends in this case on the strengths of your antecedent commitment to going all out to win the election.

Similarly I think that the rationality of trying for moral reasons to believe in a moral order of the universe depends in large measure on the antecedent strength of one's commitment to morality. If one is strongly committed, so that one wishes to be moral even if the world is not, and if one seeks, not reasons to be moral, but emotional undergirding for the moral life, then it may well be rational to be swayed by the practical argument for the belief.

It can also be intellectually honest, provided that one acknowledges to oneself the partly voluntary character and practical basis of one's belief. In speaking of honesty here, what I have in mind is that there is no self-deception going on, and that one is forming one's belief in accordance with principles that one approves and would commend in other cases.

But there are other intellectual virtues besides honesty.¹⁶ It is an intellectual virtue to proportion the strength of one's belief to the strength of the evidence in most cases.¹⁷ On the other hand, it seems to be an intellectual virtue, and is surely not a vice, to think charitably of other people. And what is it to think charitably of others? It is, in part, to require less evidence to think well of them than to think ill of them, and thus, in some cases, not to proportion the strength of one's belief to the strength of the evidence. Yet thinking charitably of others is not a species of intellectual dishonesty. Neither is it invariably an intellectual vice to be swayed by practical arguments.

III

Both Kantian and Christian theism imply that true self-interest is in harmony with morality. Kant believed that in the long run one's happiness will be strictly proportioned to one's virtue. And if that would be denied by many Christian theologians for the sake of the doctrine of grace, they would at

least maintain that no one can enjoy the greatest happiness without a deep moral commitment and that every good person will be very happy in the long run. They believe that the most important parts of a good person's self-interest are eternally *safe*, no matter how much his virtue or saintliness may lead him to sacrifice here below. The truth of these beliefs is surely another logically sufficient condition of the universe's having a moral order. (I assume that virtue is not so richly its own reward as to be sufficient in itself for happiness.)

There are both theoretical and practical arguments for theistic belief which are first of all arguments for faith in a moral world-order that harmonizes self-interest with morality. As such, they belong to the Kantian type. For obvious reasons, let us call them "individualistic," by contrast with Kant's own, more "universalistic," arguments.

The practical arguments of this individualistic Kantian type depend on the claim that it would be demoralizing not to believe in a harmony of self-interest with virtue. Many religious and social thinkers, from Greek antiquity to Freud,¹⁸ have ascribed to the gods the function of invisible policemen, reinforcing moral motivation with self-concern, through belief in supernatural rewards and punishments. Disbelief in this cosmic constabulary has been widely feared as a breach in the dike that holds back our baser desires. It is doubtful, however, that the gods have been effective policemen. One of the few relatively "hard" empirical data in this area is that criminal behavior is not negatively correlated with assent to religious doctrines.¹⁹

For this reason I think we are likely to obtain a more plausible argument for the moral advantage of belief in a harmony of self-interest with virtue if we focus not on gross but on subtle demoralization—not on the avoidance of crime but on the higher reaches of the moral life.²⁰ The conviction that every good person will be very happy in the long run has often contributed, in religious believers, to a cheerfulness and single-heartedness of moral devotion that they probably would not have had without it. This integration of motives may be regarded as morally advantageous even if its loss does not lead to criminality.

I anticipate the objection that self-interest has no place in the highest ethical motives, and that belief in the harmony of self-interest with morality therefore debases rather than elevates one's motivation. What could be nobler than the virtuous sacrifice of what one regards as one's only chance for great happiness? Yet such sacrifice is rendered impossible by faith in the sure reward of virtue.

I have two replies. (1) Self-interest remains a powerful motive in the best of us; a life of which that was not true would hardly be recognizable as human. It is not obvious that a hard-won victory over even the most enlightened self-interest is morally preferable to the integration of motives resulting from the belief that it will be well with the righteous in the long run. Those who hold that belief still have plenty of victories to win over shorter-sighted desires. And it is plausible to suppose—though I do not know that anyone has proved it—that we are *more likely* to attain to the goodness that is possible through an integration of motives, than to win a death-struggle with our own deepest self-interest, since the latter is so hard.

(2) It is not only in our own case that we have to be concerned about the relation between self-interest and virtue. We influence the actions of other people and particularly of people we love. Morally, no doubt, we ought to influence them in the direction of always doing right (so far as it is appropriate to influence them deliberately at all). But as we care about their self-interest too, our encouragement of virtue in them is apt to be more wholehearted and therefore more effective, if we believe that they will be happy in the long run if they do right.²¹ It is hard to see any ground for a charge of selfishness in this aspect of faith in the sure reward of virtue. It is not unambiguously noble (though it might be right) to encourage someone else—even someone you love—to make a great and permanent sacrifice of his true self-interest. We have no reason to regret the loss of opportunities to influence others so sadly.

I am more disturbed by another objection. I have said that it is irrational to accept a belief on the ground that it gives you a *reason* for doing something. Someone may, of course, seriously and reflectively want to live always as he morally

ought, even if doing so really costs him his only chance at happiness. He may therefore already have reason enough to resist cowardice, weakness of will, and any grudging attitude toward his duty. And he may correctly judge that thinking of his happiness as assured in the long run (in a life after death, if necessary) would provide *emotional* strength against such temptations. Only in such a case may one reasonably be swayed by a practical argument for faith in a harmony of self-interest with virtue. But this faith—much more than faith in the possibility of a good world-history—seems perilously likely to be regarded as morally advantageous chiefly on the fraudulent ground that it gives one a reason for living virtuously, or perhaps takes away reasons for not living virtuously. Indeed, where it is our encouragement of *other* people's virtue that is at issue, it seems doubtful that we *ought* to seek comfort or fortitude in anything but reasons. There is no particular virtue in my *feeling* better about the sacrifices I encourage you to make.

This interest in reasons for being moral, which threatens to vitiate a practical argument, forms the basis of an interesting theoretical moral argument for a harmony of self-interest with morality.²² It is widely thought that moral judgments have an action- and preference-guiding force that they could not have unless everyone had reason to follow them in his actions and preferences. But there has also been widespread dissatisfaction with arguments purporting to show that everyone does have reason always to be moral. It has even been suggested that this dissatisfaction ought to lead us to moderate the claims we have been accustomed to make for the force of the moral "ought."²³

It is plausibly assumed, however, that virtually everyone has a deep and strong desire for his own happiness. So if happiness will in the long run be strictly proportioned to moral goodness, that explains how virtually everyone does have an important reason to want to be good. We may fairly count this as a theoretical advantage of Kantian theism, if we are intuitively inclined to believe that moral judgments have a force that implies that virtually everyone has reason to follow them.

This advantage of Kantian theism may be shared by other, perhaps more Christian theologies in which the connection

between happiness and virtue is less strict, provided they imply (as I would expect them to) that everyone would be very happy, and more satisfied with his life, in the long run, if he lived always as he morally and religiously ought. The advantage is certainly shared by some non-theistic theories. The Buddhist doctrine of Karma is instanced by Sidgwick as a theory of "rewards inseparably attaching to right conduct . . . by the natural operation of an impersonal Law."²⁴ I think it is plausible, however, to suppose that if we are to have such a harmony of self-interest with duty, we must have recourse to the supernatural and presumably to an enormously powerful and knowledgeable virtuous agent.

I doubt that this line of argument can provide a really strong support for any sort of theism. For on the basis of intuitive appeal, the premise that moral judgments have a force that implies that virtually everyone has reason to follow them will not bear nearly as much weight as the conviction that some acts are morally right and others wrong, which served as a premise in my Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong.

I have focused, as most philosophical discussion of the moral arguments has, on the connections of theism with the nature of right and wrong and with the idea of a moral order of the universe. I am keenly aware that they form only part of the total moral case for theistic belief. Theistic conceptions of guilt and forgiveness,²⁵ for example, or of God as a friend who witnesses, judges, appreciates, and can remember all of our actions, choices, and emotions, may well have theoretical and practical moral advantages at least as compelling as any that we have discussed.

IV

Perhaps moral arguments establish at most subsidiary advantages of belief in God's existence. They are more crucial to the case for His goodness. Causal arguments, in particular, from the existence and qualities of the world, may have some

force to persuade us that there is a God; but they plainly have much less support to offer the proposition,

(K) If there is a God, He is morally very good.

(Here I define 'a God' as a creator and governor of the whole universe, supreme in understanding and knowledge as well as in power, so that (K) is not a tautology.)

There is a powerful moral argument for (K). Belief in the existence of an evil or amoral God would be morally intolerable. In view of His power, such belief would be apt to carry with it all the disadvantages, theoretical and practical, of disbelief in a moral order of the universe. But I am even more concerned about the consequences it would have in view of His knowledge and understanding. We are to think of a being who understands human life much better than we do—understands it well enough to create and control it. Among other things, He must surely understand our moral ideas and feelings. He understands everyone's point of view, and has a more objective, or at least a more complete and balanced view of human relationships than any of us can have. He has whatever self-control, stability, and integration of purpose are implied in His having produced a world as constant in its causal order as our own. And now we are to suppose that that being does not care to support with His will the moral principles that we believe are true. We are to suppose that He either opposes some of them, or does not care enough about some of them to act on them. I submit that if we really believed there is a God like that, who understands so much and yet disregards some or all of our moral principles, it would be extremely difficult for us to continue to regard those principles with the respect that we believe is due them. Since we believe that we ought to pay them that respect, this is a great moral disadvantage of the belief that there is an evil or amoral God.

I think the same disadvantage attends even the belief that there is a morally slack God, since moral slackness involves some disregard of moral principles. There might seem to be less danger in the belief that there is a morally weak God—perhaps

one who can't resist the impulse to toy with us immorally, but who feels guilty about it. At least He would be seen as caring enough about moral principles to feel guilty. But He would not be seen as caring enough about them to control a childish impulse. And I think that our respect for the moral law will be undermined by any belief which implies that our moral sensibilities were created, and are thoroughly understood, by a being who does not find an absolutely controlling importance in the ends and principles of true morality.

I shall not offer here a definitive answer to the question, whether this moral argument for belief in God's goodness is theoretical or practical. There may be metaethical views—perhaps some ideal observer theory—which imply that nothing could be a true moral principle if there is a God who does not fully accept it. Such views, together with the thesis that there are true moral principles, would imply the truth of (K) and not merely the desirability of believing (K). That would produce a theoretical argument.

On the other hand, it might be claimed that moral principles would still be true, and the respect that is due them undiminished, if there were an evil or amoral God, but that it would be psychologically difficult or impossible for us to respect them as we ought if we believed them to be disregarded or lightly regarded by an all-knowing Creator. This claim implies that there is a morally important advantage in believing that if there is a God He is morally very good. I think that this practical argument for believing (K) is sound, if the theoretical argument is not.

In closing, I shall permit myself an argument *ad hominem*. The hypothesis that there is an amoral God is not open to the best known objection to theism, the argument from evil. Whatever may be said against the design argument for theism, it is at least far from obvious that the world was not designed. Yet hardly any philosopher really takes seriously the hypothesis that it was designed by an amoral or evil being. Are there any good grounds for rejecting that hypothesis? Only moral grounds. One ought to reflect on that before asserting that moral arguments are out of place in these matters.²⁶

NOTES

1. Cf. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 509: "Those who hold that the edifice of physical science is really constructed of conclusions inferred from self-evident premises, may reasonably demand that any practical judgments claiming philosophic certainty should be based on an equally firm foundation. If on the other hand we find that in our supposed knowledge of the world of nature propositions are commonly taken to be universally true, which yet seem to rest on no other grounds than that we have a strong disposition to accept them, and that they are indispensable to the systematic coherence of our beliefs,—it will be more difficult to reject a similarly supported assumption in ethics, without opening the door to universal scepticism." (Sidgwick is discussing the legitimacy of postulating, on ethical grounds, a coincidence of self-interest with duty.) Cf. also A. E. Taylor, *Does God Exist?* (London: Macmillan, 1945), p. 84f.

2. A theistic Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong, proposed by Hastings Rashdall (*The Theory of Good and Evil* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907], pp. 206-20) and taken up by W. R. Sorley (*Moral Values and the Idea of God* [Cambridge University Press, 1921], pp. 346-53) and A. E. Taylor (*Does God Exist?* p. 92f.), focuses on the question of ontological status rather than validity. It is not clear to me exactly what view those authors meant to take of the relation between God's will and moral truths.

3. Robert Merrihew Adams, "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., eds., *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), pp. 318-47. I take a somewhat different view here, laying more emphasis on questions of property-identity, and less on questions of meaning, than in my earlier work.

4. Here and in this discussion generally my debt to recent treatments, by Saul Kripke and others, of the relations between modality and property-identity is obvious.

5. A very similar modification is proposed by Richard B. Brandt in *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 73f. Brandt explicitly envisages a naturalistic version of the theory, however, thereby giving up, in my opinion, an important advantage of the divine command theory.

6. Perhaps it is necessary that if a loving God commanded killing in such circumstances, He would cause us to feel otherwise than we do about killing. But our belief is not: it is wrong for us to kill in these situations so long as we (and/or people generally) feel as we do about it. We believe rather: our feelings indicate to us a moral fact about such killing that is not a fact about our feelings.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), p. 130 (p. 125 of the Prussian Academy edition).

8. C. D. Broad, in his review of A. E. Taylor's *The Faith of a Moralists* (*Mind*, 40 [1931], 364-75), neatly distills from Taylor a recognizable but interestingly different variant of Kant's theoretical argument. But that version still does not persuade me.

9. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 5-7. (The long footnote is particularly important.) In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 147-51 (142-46, Prussian Academy edition), Kant seems to me to be presenting his argument predominantly as practical, but less clearly so than in the later work. In my reading of Kant I owe much to Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

10. One thinks of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons.

11. Here I am indebted to R. M. Hare, "The Simple Believer," in Outka and Reeder, eds., pp. 412-14. Actually Hare proposes what I would call a theoretical moral argument. He seems to think that no set of moral principles could be right unless following them would generally turn out for the best (best from a moral point of view, that is). From this and from the belief that some (intuitively acceptable) set of moral principles is right, it follows that there is such a moral order of the universe that following some (intuitively acceptable) set of moral principles will generally turn out for the best. Of course many utilitarians would say that there is such a moral order in the universe with or without God. I am not so sure as Hare that it is a theoretical requirement that following moral principles must generally turn out for the the best if the principles are correct, but his idea can at least be used in a practical argument.

12. It is not necessary to discuss here to what extent I am agreeing or disagreeing with Kant's views about the motives that a morally good person should have.

13. 1903, reprinted in Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian, and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon and Schuster, n.d.).

14. William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 97.

15. William James, "The Will to Believe," *ibid.*, p. 11. The terminology of "living," "forced," and "momentous options" comes from the same essay.

16. This paragraph was inspired by a similar remark on the variety of intellectual virtues by Nicholas Wolterstorff.

17. Cf. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, Part I, 4th paragraph.

18. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by W. D. Robson-Scott, rev. by James Strachey (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1964). Freud thought (though he expressed uncertainty) that society could learn to get along without this function of religion. A vivid ancient Greek statement of this reason for prizing belief in gods is quoted by Wallace I. Matson, *The Existence of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 221f.

19. See Michael Argyle, *Religious Behaviour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 96-99.

20. Cf. John Stuart Mill, *Utility of Religion*, ed., with Mill's *Nature*, by George Nakhnikian (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), p. 62: "The value of religion as a supplement to human laws, a more cunning sort of police, an auxiliary to the thief-catcher and the hangman, is not that part of its claims which the more high-minded of its votaries are fondest of insisting on; and they would probably be as ready as anyone to admit that, if the nobler offices of religion in the soul could be dispensed with, a substitute might be found for so coarse and selfish a social instrument as the fear of hell. In their view of the matter, the best of mankind absolutely require religion for the perfection of their own character, even though the coercion of the worst might possibly be accomplished without its aid."

21. Cf. the interesting argument on the relevance of faith in a moral order of the universe to child-rearing in Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 66-71.

22. The attempt to discover or prove such a harmony has been one of the recurrent preoccupations of moral theory. Sidgwick thought it might be necessary to postulate "a connexion of Virtue and self-interest" in order to avoid "an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct" (*The Methods of Ethics*, p. 508). This led him into what may fairly be described as a flirtation with a moral argument for faith in a moral world-order if not in God. He believed that our intuitions endorse both the principle that one ought always to do what will maximize one's own happiness and the principle that one ought always to do what will maximize the happiness of all. But these principles cannot both be true unless there is a moral order of the universe by virtue of which the act that maximizes universal happiness always maximizes the agent's happiness too. I think Sidgwick's reasoning claims too much obligatoriness for the egoistic principle. But the inspiration for the argument I present in the text came originally from him and from William K. Frankena, "Sidgwick and the Dualism of Practical Reason," *The Monist*, 58 (1974), 449-67.

23. I take Philippa Foot to be suggesting this in "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *The Philosophical Review*, 81 (1972), 305-16.

24. *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 507n.

25. A theistic argument from the nature of guilt has been offered by A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*, vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 206-10. Cf. also H. P. Owen, *The Moral Argument for Christian Theism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), pp. 57-59.

26. I have discussed the topics of this paper for several years in classes at the University of Michigan and UCLA, with students and colleagues to whom I am indebted in more ways than I can now remember. I am particularly grateful to Thomas E. Hill, Jr., Bernard Kobes, and Barry Miller for their comments on the penultimate draft.