

Religion and Ethics¹²

by
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You will remember that in the Gospels the ten commandments are summed up in two – that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength, and that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. And you sometimes find people identifying the distinction between Religion and Ethics with that between these 2 commandments – loving God is religion, loving our neighbours is ethics. But I don't think this will do. In one of the epistles it is said that pure religion and undefiled [before our God and Father]³ consists in caring for widows and the [fatherless]⁴ orphans; and Jesus himself seems to have said that loving our neighbour {2} is loving God: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me.'⁵ So religion covers both parts of this antithesis, loving God and loving our neighbours; and so far as duty comes into it, Ethics covers both parts and the antithesis too, for Ethics is concerned with the notion of duty as such, whether it be duty to God or duty to man.

Quite straightforwardly, religion has to do with our relation to God, while ethics has to do with the antithesis of good and bad, right and wrong. And there are many very prickly questions indeed connected with the relation between {3} these 2 cases. For example, I once saw a fat medieval book by Duns Scotus full of curious questions, one of which is, Can God sin? I wonder what you think about that. Sometimes people have argued that God can't sin, not because He's all that different from people who can and do sin, but simply because if He did a thing it just wouldn't be sin – sin is going against God's will, and what God wishes and does is ipso facto and by definition right.

Does God will the good because it is good, or are things made good simply by His willing them?
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There's an allied question raised by some of the characters in Dostoevsky's novel The Brothers Karamazov, namely the question whether 'all things are lawful' if God doesn't exist. It would

¹ Edited by Martin Prior, Jørgen Albretsen, David Jakobsen and Peter Øhrstrøm. The original is kept in the Prior Collection at Bodleian Library, Oxford, Box 7.

² Some editorial notes: The text has not been dated. But since there is a reference to Lord Hailsham's book (see note 7 below), it must have been written sometime after the publication of this book in 1959. The page numbers in Prior's handwritten original have been put in {...}. All underlinings in the text are Prior's. There are no footnotes by Prior in this text. All notes have been produced by the editors.

³ This seems to be a reference the James 1:27, ("Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." – King James Version.)

⁴ There is only an 'f' discernible here.

⁵ This seems to be a reference to Matthew 25:40 ("And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." King James Version.)

certainly seem that if good just is what God wants and bad what He doesn't want, then if there were no God there would be no good or bad.

That was a question much debated in the 19th century, when there were a good many eminent men, Huxley for instance, who had given up belief in God but who nevertheless had keen commonsense⁶ and strong moral convictions. The Dostoevskian view would be that such people are inconsistent, {5} and that sooner or later man must either recover their faith or give up their morals. That's a view, you see, which screws up very tightly the connexion between the two fields; it makes religion the foundation of ethics. And often we are told that it is illogical for ethics to be without a foundation, and that the only foundation for ethics that is really sense is a religious {6} one. For example, Lord Hailsham, in his Penguin book called The Conservative Case, asserts that 'Religion, i.e. the recognition of the spiritual brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God, is the sole philosophical justification for any sort of morality between man and man.'⁷

Another way in which faith and duty are brought into close relation is through the completion⁸ of special religious duties, e.g. the duty to worship God, the duty to pray to Him, {7} and even the duty to believe in Him. In the New Testament people are continually urged and commanded to believe in God and in Jesus, and unbelief is spoken of as something blameworthy. To the modern mind this seems an extraordinary and quite unjust thing. For surely we can only be praised or blamed for what is in our power, and what we believe or don't believe isn't in our power. Sometimes it is said that 'belief' in the New Testament sense isn't just an intellectual thing but is something more like trust, but surely this presupposes belief in the intellectual sense, for how can you put your trust in what you believe, in the ordinary sense of believe, to be non-existent? He that cometh unto God, as the New Testament also says, must believe {8} that he is, but what sort of "must" is this? What if the man can't?

At the opposite extreme from these views which together bind ethics to religion, there is the view that the two have nothing to do with one another. I should say that the best defender of this view was the 18th century philosopher David Hume, at the end of his Dialogues on Natural Religion. Even if God does exist, Hume argues, there is no reason to suppose that moral distinctions mean anything to Him or that He cares what human beings do; moral distinctions are just expressions of our own feelings and are consistent⁹ with our relations with one another. {9} He says further that religion is neither necessary nor useful in making people behave morally. Preachers themselves, he argues rather ingeniously, are always complaining that man's religious beliefs don't affect their actions, and then in the next breath they say that religion is an indispensable basis to civil society. In fact, Hume says, 'it is certain, from experience, that smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on man's conduct, than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems'.

⁶ The text is a bit unclear here.

⁷ Viscount Hailsham, *The Conservative Case*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1959.

⁸ The text is unclear at this point.

⁹ The text is unclear at this point.

{10} These are some of the main problems that arise in connection with the relation between religion and ethics, and you will perhaps want to know what I think about them, and why. So I'll now make a list, as it were, of some of the main things I believe and don't believe in this area, and why.

The first is that I don't think that ethics has to have a foundation, that is to say a logical foundation, in the sense of some other thing, not itself ethics, from which ethics can be logically derived. [And in particular God, or a belief in God cannot provide a foundation for ethical distinction.]¹⁰ That is, there isn't and can't be and needn't any deeper thing from which the differences between right and wrong logically flows. And in {11} particular the will of God cannot provide such a basis for the difference between right and wrong. For let it be granted that we do have a duty to obey God's will, i.e. that we ought to do what God requires of us – let us suppose that this is true. But this truth presupposes that there is a difference between what we ought to do and what ought not to do – being itself an assertion of what it is right to do, it doesn't and cannot explain the difference between right and wrong but presupposes it. The only way out of this would be to take the line that when we say that it is our duty to do God's will {12} this is just explanation of what is meant by the term 'duty'. But that would be not to provide a foundation of morality but either to destroy it or simply to change the subject. For words don't have meanings in vacuo, - they have the meanings people give to them, and if a person says 'Look I insist on using the word "duty" to mean simply what God wills' – if a person says that, then I can reply to him, 'O.K. – it is a free country, so if you want to use the word "duty" in that way, the you just go ahead and use it like that. But in that case if you tell me that it is my duty to do as God wishes I won't and needn't take this seriously, because from your own explanation I know that when you tell me I {13} ought to do God's will, all you mean is that I'll be doing God's will if I do God's will, and I knew that before anyway. Also, if you tell that your God, as opposed to the gods of the heathen, is a good and righteous God, I'll know that all you mean by this is that He does He wishes, which makes me inclined to say, "Isn't he lucky¹¹?" rather than "Isn't he good?". That, then, is the first article in my Credo on this topic. The second is a doubt rather than a belief – I doubt whether {14} God wants to be fussed over as much as some people make out. I doubt, in other words, whether He gets all that much kick out of people constantly¹² telling Him, and one another, how wonderful He is. I am not at all sure, to put it another way again, that God enjoys flunky services. And although I am rather sorry to doubt this, I also doubt whether He enjoys theological arguments, since He knows all the answers. And I see no reason why He should, and no reason to believe that He does, worry very much about whether people believe in His existence. When He is fed up with the fulsome compliments that are {15} showered on Him from all sides, it probably gives Him pleasure to hear people abusing Him or denying His existence. In any case, whether it pleases God or not, it seems clear that we have no duty to believe any propositions about Him except those which we can't help believing because they seem to us to be true, and even with those ones, since we can't help believing them, it's a bit odd to talk about duty. Nor have we a duty to avoid circumstances and situations in which belief in

¹⁰ This has been crossed out in the MS.

¹¹ The text is a bit unclear here.

¹² The word could be 'continually'.

God is liable to become more difficult. Our {16} first duty in this matter, it seems to me, is to try and find out what the truth is, and if there are any circumstances and situations to avoid, they are those circumstances and situations which make us bemused and befuddled, like spending all our time with some set of people whose constant attitudes and manners will push us into either a thoughtless belief or a thoughtless unbelief. At least I think that's my duty and most people's duty but of course there are special vocations and it's bumptious to lay down the law too confidently for other people. Still, however it may {17} be with other people, everyone here has the vocation of a student – you're at a University, and if people here don't spend some time in thinking, goodness knows where else they'll do it. And the thing about Christianity that I personally find it most difficult to stomach is the rider that it's important whether you're a Christian or not. I can't myself see that this is important; and perhaps it isn't really a part of Christianity to believe that it is – on this point the evidence of the {18} New Testament seems to me conflicting.

But to continue with my private and quite impertinent speculations about what God likes and what He doesn't like. As I said earlier, I see no reason to believe that He dislikes people abusing him, but something he might dislike is people painting Him as a horrible tyrant or perhaps as a vain ridiculous person and then bowing down and praising Him for these vices – saying, for instance, that He torments people everlastingly, and describing this as His 'justice' and urging people to reverence [of] Him for it. I would like to believe {19} that God detests this, and do half believe it, but I must admit that the evidence for it is small, since He does let these horrors go on in His name. I wonder why this is – perhaps it's because He just isn't there, i.e. perhaps atheism is the truth of the matter; perhaps, as Hume thought He is there alright, but indifferent to what goes on; perhaps as some Christians say, He cares very much but feels He must hold His hand, suffer, and let things work themselves out, for some reason we can't see. [Perhaps the strongest evidence that there is] [20] In any case – whether God does anything about it or not – it is clear that any religion which teaches us to call good evil and evil good is a bad religion and it is clear that there are bad religions that worship¹³ bad Gods; in fact it is one of the merits of Christianity that it is honest about this and doesn't put about the story that anything is good so long as it's religion otherworldly and spiritual.¹⁴

{20}¹⁵ He is doing something about it, in spite of all appearances, in that someone has put it around that God has said that in being kind or cruel to other men we are being kind or cruel to Him 'Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these' He is reported to have said 'ye have done it unto me.' Now surely the first thing that should strike us about saying this is that it is strange that God should think it an argument in favour of kindly behaviour. If we are unmoved by the sufferings of men, why should we be moved {21} by being told that these are really the sufferings of God?¹⁶

¹³ In the text the abbreviation wp. is used, assumed to mean 'worship'.

¹⁴ The next page does not at the outset seem to continue the text.

¹⁵ Two pages have been numbered '20'.

¹⁶ The following text has been crossed out here: "As it says elsewhere, if we do love our brother whom we see, how should we love God whom we do not see? Yet the fact is, and God must know it, that there are people who"

And I'm sure God does not mean or wish to command this unnatural state of mind. Yet it exists – this state of mind in which people are so full of their supposed duties to God that they forget their real duties to man – and God seems so worried about it that He cannot wait until people wake up from this dream but must supply them with a motive for kindness that¹⁷

¹⁷ The rest of the text is missing.