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Towards a Religious Morality

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Towards a religious morality

Both morality and religion have always suffered from the laziness and unconcern of mankind at large. The ordinary man's unwillingness to take morality seriously was deftly portrayed in the fourth century B.C. by Plato in the speeches which he put into the mouths of Glaucon and Adeimantus at the beginning of the second book of the *Republic*. In the modern world, however, the ordinary man often feels, possibly only in a vague sort of way, that he now has strong allies among the intellectuals. There can be no doubt at all, and this has been admitted by professionals themselves, that the teaching of psychoanalysis has been interpreted by many to suggest that there is no rational foundation for the demands of morality. The work of comparative anthropologists—although this is by no means new—has also undermined the belief in any absolute in morality. It is claimed on all sides that morality is relative, and although there is a sense in which this is true, it is more commonly interpreted in a manner which is both false and practically dangerous. In the field of religion itself it would be nothing short of disastrous to imagine that the battle between science and religion, first seriously joined in the nineteenth century, has as yet been fought out. The first artillery bombardments and infantry assaults have now settled into a much more serious war of attrition. The dominating place of science in our society today tends to create a cultural atmosphere in which it is increasingly difficult for young people brought up within this scientific tradition to take the claims of religion seriously. Rhetorical appeals to return to religion or to the moral beliefs of our ancestors inevitably fall on deaf ears. While it would be absurd to deny the importance and value of sound rhetoric, whether in preaching or in any other field, it may be doubted whether the younger generation today is in a position to make the distinction between sound and unsound rhetoric. The mass media of communication have so swamped them with slipshod and sentimental rubbish that their powers of judgment in this field are warped. On the other hand, and this perhaps acts as a counterweight, there is an active spirit of genuine enquiry among younger people, they are prepared to discuss and to listen to solid argument provided that they have no grounds for suspecting deceit in any form, whether moral or intellectual. The intellectual defence of both religion and morality is not something which can be achieved once and for all by any school of thought but is a constant need in our society.

The actual state of thought about the relation between religion and morality may be roughly described as follows:

a) among *philosophers* there is almost complete unanimity that morality is an independent and autonomous sphere of human activity requiring no support from religion. (b) Among *theologians* there does not appear to be the same degree of unanimity, one way or the other, but there does exist a school of theological thought, that associated with the name of Karl Barth, which appears to dismiss any morality which does not rest on a religious foundation as mere moralism having no serious value. (c) Among *anthropologists* there has been for a long time a tendency to assume that religion and morality are nearly always found in causal dependence one upon the other. Only in recent times have efforts been made to discriminate between them: the anthropological evidence, as discussed for example by Macbeath,¹ must at present be treated as ambiguous. (d) Among *men in the street* there is either puzzled confusion or contemptuous indifference. Those who acquired their moral beliefs in a predominantly religious atmosphere are often quite unaware of the serious concern for morality shown by those who sincerely cannot accept any of the great religious traditions. The humanists, on the other hand, are jealous for the autonomy of morality and are fearful, rightly or wrongly, of the intolerance and even persecution which has sometimes characterised religious bodies which have acquired any degree of social or political power.

Now, whatever view we may ultimately adopt concerning the relation between religion and morality, the initial assumption upon which any discussion must proceed is that the two words 'morality' and 'religion' do not simply mean the same thing. It would appear that logically there are at least four ways in which it might be held that religion and morality, treated as distinct modes of human activity, are related to one another. Historically there may be many varieties of the views to be distinguished but here attention will be confined to purely logical possibilities.

In the first place, at one of the extremes as it were, it might be held that morality and religion are completely independent fields of activity and that there is neither any possibility nor any need for co-operation between them. This has not perhaps been a very common position either among philosophers or among theologians, but it would be represented by supporters of a purely humanist morality who maintain that morality must not in any way be contaminated by religious considerations.

Secondly, it might be claimed that morality is simply an off-shoot of religion, and that it is always to be found in strict causal dependence

1. See A. MACBEATH, *Experiments in Living* (Macmillan 1952), chapters XI and XII.

on religion. This view is not at all uncommon. It is held by a great many unreflective persons who happen to have received their moral education within a religious frame of reference. It has been a common assumption among field anthropologists, and it is also represented by some among the neo-orthodox theologians.¹

Thirdly, it might be suggested that morality is ultimately the more fundamental of the two activities, and that what is in the end really important in religion is the moral attitude. This would appear to be the view adopted by R. B. Braithwaite² in his influential Eddington lecture and also, though more tentatively, by W. D. MacLagan³ in his brilliantly argued discussion of this theme.

Fourthly, it may be argued that morality is indeed a completely autonomous activity, but that it is capable of being transformed and raised to a higher level when brought into contact with the teaching of religion and the agency of the divine being. The morally good man acting under the grace of God may be held to exemplify the reality of love. This fourth view might commend itself as doing justice both to the demands of morality and to the potentiality of religion as revealed in the Christian tradition.

The widespread popularity, in one form or another, of the second of these views, according to which genuine morality exists only in causal dependence on religion, makes it essential, before further discussion of these four views, to consider what is to be understood by the ambiguous word 'morality' and by the claim that morality is autonomous.

Let us first consider how morality makes itself known to the average person. Generally speaking, when we talk of morality we think first of the ordinary moral rules which are supposed to govern our day to day conduct or of the duties which are incumbent upon us in virtue of the station or position which we hold in life. These rules and duties become known to us very largely through the teaching of parents and other educational authorities. In any society which subscribes to one of the great ethical religions, the task of moral instruction is also undertaken by professional religious teachers. Although it is never merely this, explicit moral instruction must very largely consist in making the younger generation aware of what moral rules in fact hold good in our society and of what duties they are expected to perform. The conventional morality which is the first, and quite often the only, outcome of such teaching is often asserted to depend for its force on the vague apprehension of external sanctions. While this may

1. For an excellent discussion of the point of view adopted by members of the Barthian school of theology, see H. D. LEWIS, *Morality and Religion, Philosophy*, No. 88, 1949.

2. R. B. BRAITHWAITE, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge University Press, 1955).

3. W. G. MACLAGAN, *The Theological Frontiers of Ethics* (Allen and Unwin, 1961).

be true, it seems more likely that the vast majority of young people accept the moral teaching they are given in much the same way that they accept the other things that they are taught such as history and geography. They are in a learning situation and they learn and accept without question. At an early stage in the process of education, this appears normal and natural; in almost all fields, instruction must precede questioning and critical reflection. For the most part young people are taught to behave in the way in which their elders are alleged to behave and there is no obvious reason why they should not follow in their footsteps. In this way what may be called *the morality of the ordinary decencies* develops and holds sway over a large part of social life. We may refer to this as a morality of convention in that it represents nothing more than an acceptance of the conventions of our society. We may also call it a morality of authority insofar as the moral instruction about what rules to follow and what duties to perform is accepted on the authority of the teachers without question or without any serious consideration of the grounds on which it is based. At this level, since there is no reflection, there is no attempt on the part of the ordinary man to discriminate between types of moral teachers, or between the sources from which that teaching is derived. In a society like our own, where moral instruction is in fact given by both religious and non-religious authorities, where it is given both within and without the church, there is no reason to expect the unreflective person to discriminate between religion and morality as separate and distinct modes of activity. The two will be naturally associated in his mind. While moral teaching is given by both religious and lay sources, it does not follow that the main emphasis or the methods of teaching will be the same. There is none the less bound to be a fairly large overlap in content. Truthfulness, honesty, courage, temperance, and respect for life and property are encouraged both by religious and by lay teachers while meanness, dishonesty, sexual promiscuity, greed and selfishness are frowned upon by both.

It is clearly vital for the existence of any society that such a level of conventional morality be reached by at least the majority of its members. Indeed, it has been argued that this degree of morality is built into, forms an integral part of, the very idea of a society or social group. Socrates suggested in his discussion with Thrasymachus¹ that without at least a tincture of morality there can be no genuine social cohesion at all. The continued existence of society requires that there be in it at least an approximation to conventional morality. On the other hand, it may be argued with equal force that in a society in which there is *only* conventional morality, there can be no understanding of the nature of genuine or authentic morality. We use the adjective "conventional" to describe one level of human conduct

1. PLATO, *Republic* 351.

precisely because it is but a pale imitation of what a fully developed or authentic morality would be. It is true that a person living at the level of conventional morality will frequently have to make difficult and painful decisions to act in one way rather than another. Life in society constantly presents situations demanding decisions, but at the level of conventional morality, while the decisions will indeed be decisions, they will not have the characteristics of fully authentic moral decisions.

By a genuine or authentically moral decision is meant a decision to act in one way rather than another when that decision springs from an inner reasoned conviction that the way chosen is in fact the right one. It is not enough to say that the decision must spring from a deep inner conviction. A person may be psychologically in a state of strong conviction without being aware of any solid grounds on which his conviction might logically be based. The inner conviction must be a *reasoned* one in the sense that the man who holds it must at some time or another have sought for rational grounds on which to rest it. The moral agent must not merely have been *taught* the moral principles which underly his decisions, he must not merely have accepted them from someone else; he must have made them his own¹ by considering them rationally in the light of evidence on which they could be based. The sorts of arguments or reasoning that are appropriate in ethical thinking is a large and complex topic which is not our immediate concern. The point is that the moral agent who has achieved the level of authentic morality must at least have passed the stage of having to reply when challenged "Well this is what I was taught was right when I was young"; he must have reached the stage of being able to say "This is what I really think to be right² and I am prepared to take my stand on it." His moral convictions, in a word, must be not second hand but first hand.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, two points must be made clear. (a) Moral decisions vary greatly in what they demand in the process of seeking to carry them out. Once a person has decided that he ought morally to act in such and such a way he may find that it requires comparatively little effort to do the action. Fortunately, many of the things we ought to do are also things we want to do. On the

1. The phrase "to make them his own" must not be interpreted to mean that the moral agent invents or creates his own principles. From whatever source they may have been derived, the agent accepts them as his. In Aristotle's phrase (*Nic. Eth.*, 1144 b 26) he will be acting not merely *κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον* but *μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου*. For a penetrating criticism of the doctrine that the moral agent originates his own principles, see W. H. WALSH, *Moral Authority and Moral Choice*, Proc. Aristotelian Society, 1964-65.

2. There is no implication here that what the agent thinks to be right is right. The emphasis falls on the fact that he has reflected on the grounds upon which his principles rest.

other hand, many moral decisions require for their fulfilment considerable effort and a great deal of personal sacrifice. However, this distinction among moral decisions, that between those which are easy and those which are difficult to carry out, is a distinction which may appear both at the level of conventional morality and also at the level of genuine morality. What is sometimes called a heroic moral action, highly praised by all who hear of it, may be done by a man who has never given a moment's serious thought to the grounds of the moral convictions which he holds. We praise such a man not for his depth of moral insight but rather for his moral courage, or strength. [Perhaps we can even interpret such situations—and in both war and peace there are many of them—as occasions on which some gleam of genuine morality breaks through the grey clouds of a merely conventional morality.] The effort of will required to implement any moral decision is indeed an integral part of morality and its importance must not be underestimated. Equal recognition must be accorded to the necessity in any genuine morality of intellectual grasp of moral principle in relation to the reasons underlying it.

(b) A question may arise about the way in which a person moves from the level of unreasoned to reasoned conviction about moral principles. Again, it is not our present concern to discuss the epistemological question about how we reach our rational moral convictions (whether by rational intuition, by purely reasoned arguments, or less formally as a consequence of rational moral discussion), but to underline the fact that human beings do move from unreasoned to reasoned conviction in moral affairs, and that this transition represents the achievement of authentic morality. The stimulus which brings the rational activity into play will vary from person to person. Some may be moved by general intellectual curiosity about the grounds of their beliefs in general; others may be driven to it because of frequent clashes between duty and personal inclination; to others it may have come as the result of some outstanding event in their own personal history, the occurrence of some striking disaster, the hearing of some chance remark which pierced their armour of social indifference, the reading of a book which intellectually awakened their dormant capacities, or even the melancholy discovery that those who originally taught them what moral rules to follow were themselves capable of breaking them through weakness or a more deeprooted lack of moral concern. It may be doubted whether there is anything that could be described as a natural passage from the state of unreasoned to the state of reasoned moral conviction. The evidence does not seem to suggest that left to themselves the majority of men and women will move from one level to the other, and Plato may even have been right in his view that the capacities of human beings are such that we must reconcile ourselves to the permanent existence of two levels

of morality.¹ On the other hand, there are undoubtedly grounds for believing that people do in fact move from the level of conventional unthinking morality to the level of reflective reasoned morality, generally in consequence of the kind of stimulus just mentioned. If and when convictions about moral principles, obligations and duties have become reasoned, when the agent is prepared to give grounds for his moral beliefs and regards himself as essentially committed to them in practice, then the resulting moral decisions are genuine and authentic moral decisions. There is of course no question of such decisions being regarded as infallibly correct. Infallibility is not a human characteristic and human beings must be prepared in the moral sphere as in others to live with that degree of uncertainty which appears to be an essential ingredient in the human situation. One element in the complex concept of moral freedom is the freedom enjoyed by the moral agent to come to an understanding of his moral beliefs by reflection on their grounds, and so to achieve authentic and autonomous morality. It may be argued, along the lines indicated by Plato in the *Republic*, that the continued existence of any kind of morality in society at large depends on there being in that society a reasonable number of persons who have achieved the level of authentic morality, and who may therefore be described as its guardians.²

Authentic morality must be distinguished from both mere legalism and authoritarian morality. A person's morality may be described as authoritarian when his moral principles are not only derived directly from some authority outside himself, but accepted because of the respect in which that authority is held. A child may have this feeling of respect towards parental moral teaching. If the personal relationship between child and parents has been one of strong personal affection and mutual trust, then it may well happen that the parental teaching about morality is accepted and acted upon without any serious thought being directed to the rational grounds on which it is based. The result may be a conventionally good life, which may even on occasion rise to heights of moral heroism. It will not, however, exemplify what is meant by genuine morality. The morality of such a person will be authoritarian in the sense that his moral convictions are held on the basis of authority. In the same sort of way, the morality of a person who regards the moral law as simply and nothing but a summary

1. This would appear to be the implication of the division of society, according to capacity, into the two main classes of the Guardians in the strict sense and all the rest (including the auxiliaries). The morality of the latter rests on habit, while that of the former rests on understanding.

2. Unless we adopt an extremely literal interpretation of the *Republic* as some kind of political tract, the essential point is surely the claim that morality is the cohesive force in society and that there must be some responsible group (Plato calls them by the unfortunate name of 'philosopher-kings') of persons within society whose express function it is to achieve and to communicate a rational understanding of the basis of morality.

of divine commands will also afford an example of authoritarian morality. It is not necessary here to enter into a discussion of the age-old controversy, first started by Socrates in the *Euthyphro*, as to whether actions are right because God commands them or whether God commands them because they are right. The distinction with which we are at present concerned is that between two states of mind, that of authentic autonomous morality where moral principles, no matter from what source they were originally derived, have become the agent's own principles, and that of authoritarian morality where moral beliefs may be held with strong conviction but where they have been taken over from some outside source without that basis of personal reflection which would convert them into reasoned convictions. The famous Socratic dictum that no man does wrong willingly loses something of its paradoxical air when this distinction is borne in mind.

Authoritarian morality becomes a danger to both religion and authentic morality when someone whose own morality is authoritarian in this sense attempts to apply his principles to persons other than himself. It then tends to degenerate into mere legalism. The obedience to law of any kind simply because the law is regarded as having teeth in the shape of sanctions, natural or supernatural, is probably the lowest form of human action, although in the present state of human society it must simply be accepted *faute de mieux*. Mere legalism is manifested in that attitude of mind which characterises those who are determined that the law shall be obeyed, the conventions observed, no matter how that obedience or conformity is achieved. When mere legalism masquerades as morality an ugly situation is liable to develop. The law may be enforced indeed, but the act of enforcing it at the same time destroys the very roots of genuine morality. It is not in the least surprising that when this happens young people should apparently lose all respect for morality. In asking for the bread of genuine morality, they are offered the hard stone of legalism. The path to higher standards of moral conduct in the community does not lie through the easy method of simply enforcing the law on uncomprehending young people in the name of morality, for morality will repudiate all such action. Moral progress lies through the much harder path of serious moral teaching based both on genuine moral concern for the persons taught and on reflective consideration of the rational foundations of morality. This point is of course not new, for it was made emphatically by Plato some twenty three hundred years ago, but it is often forgotten.

While the conception of genuine morality must be distinguished from both authoritarian morality and its degenerate offspring legalism, there is no implication that any of these forms exist in a pure state. The moral life of any individual will probably contain a mixture of all three forms. The states of mind that have been described are possible states: how widespread they are is an empirical matter about which

we may suspect little is known, but we can at least recognise them when they manifest themselves.

Let us now re-examine the four views concerning the relations between religion and morality. The first view was that religion and morality are in fact completely independent fields of activity, neither requiring the support of the other, and neither wishing to be contaminated by the other. Genuine autonomous morality could certainly claim to be independent in this sense, and presumably religion too could claim such independence from morality if it is described as consisting exclusively and essentially in ritual practices and in the holding of beliefs of an almost purely metaphysical type. While it is logically possible to describe religion in this way, and while it is possible that historically there have been religions of this type, the description would not hold of any of the great ethical religions, and least of all of Christianity which has always been interpreted to include a way of life. This view of the relation between religion and morality would, if seriously held and acted on, lead to the impoverishment of both.

The second possibility, that morality should be taken to be simply an offshoot of religion and wholly dependent on it, is crudely expressed in the statement that where there is no religion or no religious belief there is no morality. We have already seen that among anthropologists the presence of this view concerning the relation between religion and morality is now thought to have distorted the reported anthropological findings. Among theologians this view is usually presented as the claim that morality without religion is mere moralism, that conduct does not qualify as genuinely moral unless it is supported by or infused with religion in some form or another. This view appears to be simply false to the facts. It is widely held to be plain fact that a man who has no religious beliefs at all, may lead an exemplary moral life, may do a moral action bordering even on the heroic, out of a firmly held, rationally-grounded moral conviction. It may be suggested by way of refuting this point that where such an action is performed, the account given above is a faulty interpretation of what is happening; that, for example, the agent is enabled to do the action because of some species of divine assistance of which he happens to be completely unaware. This will not do, for the objector would then be open to the accusation of converting his account of moral-religious action into a purely analytic one. All cases of heroic or saintly moral action would become by definition actions done by divine help, and then there would be no cases by which we could test the truth of the assertion. In the face of what looks suspiciously like religious dogmatism it must be pointed out that there exist many accounts of moral action which do not in fact contain any reference to divine help of any kind, and that there are also parallel cases where the moral agent would sincerely declare that he had been enabled to do what he did only by the grace or assistance of God. Both types of account have been given

and both seem valid in the sense that as phenomenological descriptions they are accurate accounts of what is said and of what may actually happen.

Against the claim that autonomous action of this type does in fact occur, it might still be objected that such action is morally at a lower level than similar action done from within a framework of religious belief or from an explicitly religious motive. This objection is unconvincing. First, it does not appear possible to say that such action is *morally* at a lower level because it is itself the very standard in terms of which we give the expression "moral action" a definite and distinctive meaning. From the moral point of view it must rank high among the various types of moral action. Secondly, if it is then urged that although not morally on a lower level it is still on a lower level of spiritual value, that it does not as it were exploit all the spiritual possibilities, then it may be replied that this may well be so, but it would leave unaffected the claim that such action does possess autonomous moral value. Not to recognise this is to move perilously near the sin of hubris. This second account of the relation between religion and morality, resting on the claim that genuine morality must essentially and causally depend upon the presence in the agent either of religious belief or of some kind of divine agency, does not commend itself as plausible.

Turning now to the third possibility, that in the joint field of religion and morality it is in the end the moral element that really counts and is fundamental, we confront a view that is popular in the twentieth century. It accords well with the feelings of those who, while deeply affected by the implications of the modern scientific account of the nature of the universe, are none the less unwilling simply to jettison religion. The view, however, has difficulties which need not be rehearsed in detail. In the first place, it would seem that it requires us to accept a form of religion without a God. While this is a debatable point in general, it is quite unacceptable within the framework of the Christian religion. Secondly, it seems incapable of doing justice to a definite element in Christian morality. If it is maintained, as for example by Maclagan, that "genuine moral commitment is itself religious in quality whether or not a man so describes it in his own case,"¹ we may ask whether there is any room left for what appears to be a vitally important distinction, that between a morality of obligation and a morality of love. Maclagan indeed takes his stand on the morality of obligation and Braithwaite shows no sign of having heard of any other conception. If there is any one point that can be taken as quite central in Christian thought about God it is surely the doctrine of love between the Creator and His creatures, a doctrine underlined in the two fundamental commandments. It is because this

1. W. G. MACLAGAN, *op. cit.*, p.183.

third view seems incapable of doing justice to this outstanding fact about the Christian religion that we may be inclined to reject it even if we remain sympathetic to the motives which have led so many philosophers to espouse it.

The fourth view was that religion is capable of transforming and transmuting a purely humanist and autonomous morality by the infusion of a motive of a special kind. This has the advantage that it respects the nature and achievements of a purely human or non-religious morality, while at the same time it introduces a new element which can be recognised at the purely human level as demanding a far higher standard of performance in human conduct than is envisaged by a purely humanist morality. At the same time it leaves open the possibility of a more metaphysical interpretation in terms of an actual divine infusion of grace or love. Considered from the purely humanist standpoint, the motive of obligation must remain central, respect for the moral law as such. Immanuel Kant is the great representative of humanist morality and he was notoriously unable to understand the Christian concept of love. Indeed, in the ethics of Kant love is reduced to the level of what is more usually referred to as benevolence, one among the many possible good motives to right action.

We are left, it would appear, with a choice between two serious possibilities. *Either* we follow to some extent the line adopted by those who are committed to the third view of the relation between morality and religion, in which case we must say that morality (which in its highest form on this view is religious in any case) can become specifically Christian when love is substituted for the sense of obligation not only as the highest but as the sole motive underlying truly moral action: *or*, taking our metaphysical courage in our hands, we can adopt the standpoint of those who are sympathetic to the fourth view, in which case we are in a position to say that human morality is capable of being transmuted into Christian morality when, by an act of divine grace, the moral agent is filled with love towards his fellow human beings and acts in terms of it. Kant was perturbed by the thought of a *command* to love one's neighbour and many other philosophers have shared his feelings. This particular difficulty may perhaps be surmounted if we hold, as the fourth view will allow us to do, that He who gives the command also makes possible the fulfilment of it.

Almost any account of the relation between religion and morality is bound to give rise to a series of metaphysical problems. Since the metaphysical problems suggested by the fourth view do not appear to be any more insoluble than those raised by the other views, we may leave the task of disentangling them to the theologians and metaphysicians. The conclusion towards which our brief analysis of a very large problem would appear to point is that only the fourth view of the relation between religion and morality outlined above is capable of doing justice to what is essential in an autonomous morality

and also to what is fundamental in the Christian religion. Morality is recognised to be an independent and self-contained field of human endeavour and at the same time religion is admitted to be the source of a unique element which may, under certain circumstances, enter into and transform the nature of morality. It is possible on this view to say that only when it is touched by the hand of God does the human soul rise to the highest level of moral achievement where human conduct is infused with the spirit of love. The point was made symbolically by the founder of Christianity when he said that he was come not to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfil them.

A. R. C. DUNCAN.

