

Prof. Dr. John Edmund Hare

ETHICS AND RELIGION

The topic for today is three ways in which we can establish the dependence of morality upon religion. I will give these three ways the names, 'the argument from providence,' 'the argument from grace,' and 'the argument from justification'. This lecture is a modified version of the first chapter of my book *God's Command* that defends what I call 'Divine Command Theory', the theory that what makes something morally obligatory is that God commands it. In the book I give significant space to all three arguments, but for reasons of time in this lecture I will focus on the third. The second part of the lecture aims at providing a justification of the claim that all human beings have the same basic dignity from the claim that all humans have a call from God.

Perhaps it is worth saying a word about why we should go back to Kant. He is, in my judgement, the most important philosopher of the modern period in the West. All current moral philosophers I know of are either Kantian or anti-Kantian, that is, they feel they have to explain why they disagree with him. His work is fundamental in understanding how we have come to the notion of human rights, and the dignity of the human person. If I am right about the centrality of religion to his account, Kantians will have to ask themselves whether his moral system makes sense without it, or whether it becomes, as he thought, rationally unstable. One important note here: I am not saying morality depends upon religion in the sense that only religious people can be morally good. To the contrary, there are non-religious people whose moral goodness puts many religious people to shame. Kant already knows this, and argues for it in the case of Spinoza. What I am talking about is a rational instability, a failure of fit, between two beliefs, namely the belief that we have moral obligations and the belief that there is no God.

The first argument, the argument from providence, is that morality becomes rationally unstable if we do not have a way to assure ourselves that morality and happiness are consistent, and Kant argues that believing in God is necessary for such assurance. Since we are both rational beings and creatures of sense and of need, our highest good requires a union of virtue and happiness. This union is not merely for us as individuals, but our morality

gives us the end or goal of the happiness of all together with the virtue of all. This end is the combination of the four items that Kant says are, taken together, the matter of morality: our own happiness, and the happiness of others, and our own virtue and the virtue of others. But since our morality gives us this end, the highest good, we must, if we are to pursue the morally good life in a way that is rationally stable, believe that this highest good is really (and not merely logically) possible. Real possibility has to be founded on what is actual. But we do not see that we have the capacity to bring this highest good about. What we see, on the contrary, is a world in which people who are not committed to the moral law get large amounts of what they wish and will, and those who are committed to it often end in misery and frustration. Nature, Kant says in one of his most purple passages, is indifferent to our moral purposes. In order to sustain our belief in the real possibility of the highest good, we therefore have to postulate the existence of an 'author of nature,' who can bring about the conjunction of happiness and virtue, and thus, I quote, 'morality inevitably leads to religion'.

Kant is not, in the usual sense a 'divine command theorist' But he does say, throughout his published work, that we have to recognize our duties as God's commands. His reason relates, primarily, to this first argument I have given. We have to recognize our duties as God's commands because it is only if they are God's commands that we can rationally believe in the real possibility of the highest good which is the end that morality itself gives to us. God is in Kant's conception, the sovereign of the universe who gives us the moral law, runs the universe so that what is morally good can be achieved in it and then judges our attempts to live that way. God thus has the three distinct sovereign roles, legislative, executive and judicial. When Kant defines religion as 'recognizing our duties as 'God's commands' the notion of religion is of a moral faith that how things ought to be is sustained by how things fundamentally are, that is, by the governance of the universe.

I will say briefly, with respect to each of the three arguments, how its conclusion could be avoided and what the costs would be of this avoidance. I think the best strategy for avoiding the conclusion of the argument from Providence is to deny that we have to believe the highest good is really possible, and to hold with some of the existentialists that morality is absurd. Think of Sisyphus, in the ancient Greek myth as told by the existentialist philosopher Camus, Sisyphus has to roll the rock up the mountain again and again only to see it roll down again to the bottom. He shakes his fist at the gods who have given him this task. Perhaps morality is like this. But my guess is that if we really thought morality was absurd we would not in fact sustain our attempt to live morally. Consider the possibility of an evil demon

rather like the evil demon Descartes imagines in the *Meditations* who makes it impossible for us say, seventy percent of the time to carry out what is morally good and we actually end up harming people instead. Would we sustain the moral life in such a world?

The second way of establishing a dependence relation of morality upon God is by means of what I called 'the argument from grace'. To explain Kant's argument I need to mention that he recommends that we see revelation as two concentric circles with historical revelation (the revelation to particular people at particular times and places, for example the Holy Scriptures) in the outer circle and the revelation to reason (supposedly to all people at all times and places) in the inner circle. His project is then to see if the Christian doctrines in the outer circle can be translated into the language of the inner circle by means of the moral concepts. This is what I call Kant's translation project. We humans are born Kant says in his translation of the Christian doctrine of the Fall under the evil maxim which subordinates duty to happiness. Duty is here a very high standard: treating all those affected by our choices as having the same value as we do. Evil is not though we are sometimes tempted to think so, simply the product of our sensory inclinations. Rather it is a choice in the will to rank our happiness over our duty. Since we are born under this ranking of happiness over duty, we cannot reverse the ranking by our own devices for this would require a choice that was already under the opposite ranking. Here we have the problem that I have elsewhere called the problem of 'the moral gap' a gap between how we ought to live and how we can live by our own devices. Kant has a principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. In other words if we ought to do something it must be the case that we can do it. But in the case of the moral gap we ought to give duty the priority ranking but we seem to have a radical incapacity to do so.

By presenting the problem in this way, Kant puts himself in the tradition of Luther and Augustine. Augustine says that God bids us do what we cannot, in order that we might learn our dependence upon God. The key to a solution to the problem of the moral gap is to see that while 'ought' implies 'can', 'ought' does not imply 'can by our own devices'. There are things we can do but only with assistance from outside. Kant thus appeals to God's assistance in accomplishing what he calls 'a revolution of the will', by which the ranking of happiness over duty is reversed. This divine assistance is an effect of grace.

It is always possible to avoid the conclusion of this argument by denying the premise about the stringency of the demand. There are many ways to lower the moral demand by distancing it from Kant's account. For

example, the Kantian formulation requires us to treat humanity in every person as creating obligations for us so that we are to share the morally permitted ends of all those in need all over the world whom we could help. One way to reduce the demand is to say that we should consider that we have obligations only to the people we know and care about who are related to us in special relations of family or friendship or community. But the cost of reducing the demand to caring for family, friends and community is to make our morality parochial, unacceptably narrow, though I do not know of any non-question-begging way to demonstrate this.

The third way of establishing a dependence relation of morality upon God is by means of what I called 'the argument from justification'. We can ask what has been called 'the normative question', which is 'Why should I be moral?' or 'Why should I accept morality as a proper demand upon me? Here I will not rely upon an argument from Kant. I will end however by claiming an indirect connection with Kant's view that our dignity as humans resides in our responsiveness to the moral law.

A divine command theorist will say that the answer to the normative question is that I should accept morality as a proper demand upon me because it is God who places this demand. This statement is however incomplete. A justification of a normative claim cannot be derived from a factual claim alone. To say that I ought to live a certain way because God tells me to do so requires, for completeness the claim that I ought to do what God tells me to do. This feature of justification has led some philosophers to think that a divine-command justification is question-begging. They ask, 'Why should I do what God tells me to do?'

The difficulty they raise can be put in terms of a dilemma: Either obedience to God is itself a moral obligation or it is not. If it is then to justify moral obligation by appealing to it is viciously circular. It says you should keep your moral obligations because God tells you to and you should do what God tells you to do because this is a moral obligation. But if obedience to God is not a moral obligation then it seems no justification is available by this route. For it seems impossible that we could justify the claim that we have an obligation by appealing to something that is not itself a higher obligation. Consider Socrates' attempt to show Crito that there is an obligation to obey the laws of the city. He tried various justifications. Simplifying the case, he tried arguing that it is wrong to disobey because disobeying harms the city and it is always wrong to harm someone even in return for a harm one has received oneself. He tried arguing that we have to obey the city because we have the obligation of gratitude to what has formed us in the way that we have the

obligation of gratitude to our parents. He tried arguing that we ought to obey because it would be unfair to take the benefit of general obedience by the citizens without paying our share of the cost. I am not here endorsing these arguments but they all have the form of deriving a justification of a claim that we have an obligation of a certain kind by deriving it from a higher obligation. It is hard to see what other kind of justification there could be. But then the project of justifying our moral obligations as a whole seems hopeless.

There is a reply to this difficulty however. Here I will use a distinction drawn by Duns Scotus the medieval Franciscan philosopher and theologian. He thinks that the command to love God given in the first table of the ten commandments the law brought down by Moses on two tablets from Mt. Sinai is known to be true just by knowing its terms (or it follows from propositions known in this way). The second table concerns our various duties to the neighbor for example not to lie or steal or murder and Scotus thinks it is true but not by necessity. For our present purposes we need to focus on the first table. It is necessarily true Scotus holds, that God is to be loved. We know this just by knowing the terms 'God' and 'to be loved'. This is because we know that if God exists, God is supremely good and we know that what is supremely good is to be loved. William of Ockham was a Franciscan in the generation after Scotus and he puts it this way, 'It is because God is the greatest good that He is to be loved above all'. It is also true that we know that to love God is to obey God. There is warrant for this in the sacred texts that to love God is to obey God. But we know this also because we know that to love God is to will what God wills for us to will. Ockham says, 'In the act of charity I love God and everything that God wills me to love'. Loving God is not simply to repeat God's will in our will because there are things God wills that God does not will for us to will. So what we are to repeat in our wills is God's will for our willing. But willing what God wills for our willing just is obedience. So it is necessarily true not just that God is to be loved but that God is to be obeyed. Suppose I justify the claim that the moral demand is a proper demand upon me by saying that what makes something morally obligatory is that God commands it. What I have just tried to show is that this does not rely on something that itself requires justification except in as far as we have to justify the claim that God exists.

We can now return to the answer to the normative question that the demand of morality is a proper demand upon me because it is God who makes the demand. The theist claims that what is good and deserves our love is supremely God. She may add that secondarily, what is good and therefore worthy of love is her own love of God, and others' love of God. She may say, thirdly, that what promotes this love of God or draws us towards it is good.

This enables us to see that there can be two seemingly opposite priority relations between what is obligatory (or right) and what is good to use the terms of John Rawls. On the one hand, the good has priority over the obligatory because the justification relation is as I have just been explaining it; I should try to meet my moral obligations because God gives them to me and obeying (or loving) God is (necessarily) good if God exists. On the other hand, the obligatory has priority over the good because there is an enormous number probably an infinite number, of good things, and God, in prescribing some obligation, selects some of these goods and neglects others. Only the ones God selects for prescription are obligatory. I tend to agree with the twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth that God's prescriptions are most importantly to particular people at particular times, and not general commands to humans in general. This makes it easier to see how God in prescribing, is selecting some goods and neglecting others for the goods central for one person at one time may be different from those that are central for another person, or for the same person at a different time. The two priority relations between the obligatory and the good are the opposite way round, but there is nothing contradictory in this, because we have two different kinds of priority. The good has priority to the obligatory because everything that is obligatory is good though not everything that is good is obligatory. We might call this 'priority in account' because the account of obligation requires mention of the good, but not the other way round. The obligatory has priority to the good because what God commands is so to speak trumps. We might call this 'priority in accountability' because the obligatory gives us the standard to which we are finally accountable.

In this description of the two different priority relations we can see already a reply to one typical objection to divine command theory, namely that it makes morality arbitrary. This objection is sometimes tied to Plato's account in the *Euthyphro* of Socrates' question, 'Is the holy because it is loved by the gods, or do they love it because it is holy?' Socrates is clear that the answer to this question is the second alternative that the gods love the holy because it is holy: otherwise, the holy would be completely arbitrary – whatever the gods wanted – so that if they wanted us to torture babies it would be holy to torture babies. But Socrates' answer has seemed to many philosophers to be fatal to divine command theory. If the gods love the holy because it is already holy then they do not make it holy by loving it. I have elsewhere argued in a commentary on Plato's *Euthyphro* that Socrates' argument for his conclusion leaves a great deal out. But I now want to make a different point that Socrates has a truth here, but one that is consistent with divine command theory as I have been describing it. God's commands are not

arbitrary because what God commands is good, and the goodness is not constituted by the command. This does not however, make God's command redundant because only those good things that God does command are obligatory.

So this third argument for the dependence of morality upon religion is to say that morality depends for its justification upon God's command. If one wanted to avoid the conclusion of this third argument, the best strategy would be to deny that morality needs a justification at all. We could take what Kant calls 'the fact of reason' that we are under the moral law, as an axiom, a primitive not itself justified by anything else. But there is a cost to this strategy. The moral life is very difficult especially at those times when it seems to conflict with our own happiness. If we ask at those times, 'Why should I?', it helps to have some answer, and not simply to have to fall back on the reply 'Well, I just should, and there's no more to be said'.

The justification of moral obligation by God's command is more intimate than I have yet explained and this will be the second and shorter section of this lecture. God's command, after all, creates not only moral obligation but ceremonial and religious obligations. But with moral obligation we might say that God's command gives us also the content of the obligation. I need to explain what I mean by this.

Kantian morality requires that we give equal moral status or dignity (as opposed to price) to all human beings. But it has proved hard to justify this status. I will start with some brief remarks about Kant's own view. But I will then suggest that the theist can locate human dignity in our call by God where a call is a kind of command. If I can make good this suggestion then divine command will not merely give us a justification for the claim that we are under obligation but it will ground the particular kind of obligation that is characteristic of morality.

Kant scholars disagree about how Kant grounds his views about human moral status. He says that we are to treat humanity whether in our own person or the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means. Moreover, 'morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality is that which alone has dignity'. We might want to take an inclusive interpretation of this, according to which only persons have moral status all human beings have moral status and therefore all human beings are persons. The problem with this is that on Kant's criterion for being a person namely 'the susceptibility to respect for the moral law as of itself a sufficient incentive to the will', many human beings, including normal human infants but also adults with little cognitive functioning surely lack moral status. On this

interpretation then Kant ends up disallowing important subgroups of human beings from having moral status.

If we take what Kant says about the predisposition to the good seriously however we have a partial answer to this difficulty? In Kant's biological and psychological writing he uses the language of 'predispositions' and 'germs' or 'seeds' to talk about a nature that each member of a given species shares as a result of its membership. Kant's translation of the doctrine of creation is that we are born with a predisposition to the good a natural disposition to acquire respect for the moral law. And the language of 'predisposition' suggests strongly that he has the species in mind. This would explain why he says that 'children, as persons, have from procreation an original innate (not acquired) right to the care of their parents until they are able to look after themselves'. For Kant, rights are correlative to obligations and he holds that we only have obligations to persons. He therefore commits himself here to the view that humans are persons from conception. This means that what makes something a person is not the manifestation of respect for the law. Rather, moral status is given by membership in a species in which some members have this kind of potentiality for responding to the moral law even though other members do not.

If this is Kant's view, he can overcome some of the objections I have mentioned. Two-month old infants and adults with severe cognitive impairment belong to the human species and so have moral status. There is a difficulty however. It is unclear why we should give status to members of a species who do not themselves have the relevant capacities, for example infants born with severe mental retardation if it is the existence of just those capacities in some of its members that is supposed to make the species valuable in the particular way that moral status implies. I myself do not see how to overcome this difficulty. Are we then left without a good way to ground human dignity? I want now to suggest that within the Abrahamic faiths we have a way to do this. I will proceed by setting aside two ways that have been used within the traditions of these faiths, and then I will propose a third that takes us back to divine command.

Suppose we ground human dignity in the fact that humans were created in the image of God. I am not setting this aside. According to Genesis 1: 26-7, Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" According to Genesis 9: 6, 'Whoever sheds the blood of a human by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind'. The trouble is that these passages tell us very little about what the image of God in a human being amounts to. Speculation has been

continuous and manifold ranging from our rationality or our freedom to our capacity for stewardship of creation. The problem with all these accounts is that they are based on our capacities in this life. This is the first way I am setting aside because it is not clear how any capacity-based account like this can cover all human beings and give them the same basic dignity. Consider, for example, the capacity for stewardship of creation. There are surely many humans who do not have any significant capacity to look after or steward creation.

One response to this point is to look for a theistic account of the basis of human dignity not in human capacities but in God's activity of conferring or bestowing value. This is the second way I am setting aside. Nicholas Wolterstorff my predecessor at Yale says, What we need, for a theistic grounding of natural human rights, is some worth-imparting relation of human beings to God that does not in any way involve a reference to human capacities. I will argue that being loved by God is such a relation; being loved by God gives a human being great worth. And if God loves equally and permanently each and every creature who bears the [image of God], then the relational property of being loved by God is what we have been looking for'. Wolterstorff goes on to give an analogy. My friend shows me a particularly ugly stuffed animal, a rabbit but tells me that this is the animal loved by his son, Nathan. Nathan 'may acknowledge that lots of others are "nicer". But this is the one he loves, not any of those. This is the one he is attached to; this is the one he is bonded with.' Wolterstorff suggests that God loves us as Nathan loves the rabbit; but God loves every human being equally and permanently with the love of attachment. He says that this is just what respect for human worth requires.

There is a problem with this account however. We want an account of human value that makes it intrinsic to us. In the biblical account after the creation of human beings, God saw everything 'that God had made, and, behold, [it was] very good'. God is not portrayed here as reflecting upon the divine attachment but seeing something good in the created order and especially in the human life. Paul Weithman makes this objection to Wolterstorff's analysis, focusing on the analogy of the stuffed animal. If an adult abused the stuffed animal, for example by dropping it in the lake she 'would do something very hurtful to Nathan. ... In performing the act the adult would be under-respecting Nathan and failing to value Nathan highly enough'. But would the adult be failing to respect the stuffed animal itself? It is hard to see that she would be. The analysis of human value as imparted value makes this value too transparent as though we see through it to God's value without any value added. A successful theistic account of human value needs to

accommodate both the relation to God who is the ultimate source of all value and the intrinsic value of what God creates.

There is an account that meets these conditions. I take it from David Kelsey, my colleague, but it descends from the theologian Karl Barth. Kelsey writes, 'Human beings' inherent accountability for their response to God provides the theological basis on which the peculiar dignity of human creatures is to be understood. ... Human dignity is thus ... grounded and centered outside human creatures'. But, we might ask, if dignity is centered outside human creatures how can it be intrinsic to the human creature? Kelsey asks what is the justification for ascribing this kind of value to human beings and he answers that the justification is not from our capacities but from God's calling us to a certain vocation. This calling is particular, different for each concrete human person. In this way the ground is not something abstract or universal like what Kant calls 'personality'. There is a good reply here to the problem we found with Wolterstorff's account, that locating the ground of human value in God's attachment to us makes our value extrinsic. On the conception I am defending, there is a call by God to each one of us, a call to love God in a particular and unique way. There is a name about which are told in the last book of the Christian Bible, where God says, 'and [I] will give him a white stone and in the stone a new name written, which no-one knows except the one that receives it.' We can think of this name as giving us the nature into which we are being called, and if we think of this nature, as Scotus does, as a way of loving God, then we can think of the value of each of us as residing in us, in our particular relation to God. What we have here is an intrinsic good in a slightly odd sense; not that we have value, each of us, all by ourselves, which is one thing 'intrinsic value' can mean, since we have value in relation to God but the value is not reducible to the valuing by a divine person outside us on this account, but resides in what each of us can uniquely be in relation to God. In order that this account can escape the objection to a this-world capacity-based account, we have to be able to believe that God proportions or fits the call to each human being, and there may not be much we can recognize as cognitive capacity in this life that is a precondition of such proportioning. I recognize that to many non-theists this belief will seem merely an attempt to escape from harsh reality.

This picture of the grounding of human dignity also comes from Kant, but indirectly. Kant recognizes the problem of our falling short of the life we ought to lead, the problem that I call 'the moral gap'. Kant quotes from the Scriptures: "Be ye holy (in the conduct of your lives) as your Father in Heaven is holy", and Kant translates this as the requirement of 'the conformity of the conduct of one's life to the holiness of the law.' With this translation in mind,

we can see Kant's language about our dignity residing in our responsiveness to the moral law or what he says is 'the call of human beings to be citizens of an ethical state' as a translation of more traditional language about responsiveness to God's call or command. I am not saying that Kant has the idea of the uniqueness of the call to each individual; I think he does not have this. But he does have the idea that what gives us our dignity is our responsiveness not our actual response. The basic idea of locating our dignity in our responsiveness to God's call is already in Kant in what he calls 'the predisposition to the good', and is part of his inheritance from the Lutheran catechisms of his youth. What I have added to Kant is that this responsiveness may not come in this life, but in the next.

To sum up, briefly, what was done in this lecture. Three arguments were distinguished for the dependence of morality upon religion, the argument from providence and the argument from grace and the lecture spent most time on the third, the argument from justification. The justification of obligation, that it is obedience to God's commands was shown to rely on a basic premise that God is to be loved. That premise does not itself require justification (except that we need to justify the claim that God exists) and so does not generate a vicious circle or an infinite regress. This justification also does not fall prey to the Euthyphro objection about arbitrariness if we make a separation between the good and the obligatory in the way suggested. Finally, in the second part of the lecture I claimed that this justification gives us a way to ground the basic principle of Kantian morality that gives the same dignity to every human being. The grounding lies in the notion of a unique call by God to each individual.