

**MORALITY, GOD, AND POSSIBLE WORLDS**  
**A paper inspired by Richard Swinburne's *God and Morality***

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Let us imagine two possible worlds, similar to ours. They are both the same in all non-moral respects with the exception of one component: in the first world God exists and is the creator of all that exists (apart from Him) in this world; in the second world, God does not exist. Do the two worlds – the world-with-God and the world-without-God (the Godless world) – differ as to their moral contents? Richard Swinburne (if I understand him correctly) says yes<sup>1</sup>. According to him, the “moral” differences between the two worlds are considerable, although they do not concern the essence of morality itself. Both worlds are equally “moral” in the sense that there are moral properties in them; these properties are in a sense supervenient on non-moral properties and independent of the existence and activity of God. The world-with-God, however, is morally “richer” than the world-without-God, but only in the sense that:

(I) The existence of God – the creator and benefactor – entails some additional and specific obligations for people: they are obliged to obey and worship Him. These obligations are analogous to our obligations towards our parents, lawful and just rulers, or persons (benefactors) that deserve special respect.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Swinburne, “God and Morality”, *Think* 20, vol. 7 (Winter 2008), pp. 7-15 (cf. also R. Swinburne, “What Difference Does God Make to Morality?”, [in:] R.K. Garcia, N.L. King, *Is Goodness without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 2008, pp. 151-163). I present Swinburne’s theses by means of a conceptual apparatus somewhat different than his. In this text I use the terminology of possible worlds. Swinburne has used this terminology only twice. I distance myself here from the problem of the ontological and methodological status of possible worlds. I treat them only as hypothetical equivalents of certain global possibilities (of all that exists).

(II) God may affect moral “facts” through creating (or not creating) states of affairs on which (by necessity and independently of His will) particular moral properties are supervenient. To use an example other than Swinburne’s: if ammunition, shot at people, did not of its nature cause death or wounds, but pleasure, then shooting at innocent or unarmed people would, in principle, be not a bad act (or not as bad as it is in our actual world).

(III) God, as the highest epistemic and deontic authority, may (especially by way of revelation) teach us about our obligations or enhance our motivation to implement them. He may also formulate (within limits) some additional commands that help people to accomplish their (most fundamental) good.

Let us assume that we agree with Swinburne with regard to the above “moral differences” between the worlds under consideration<sup>2</sup>. Contrary to Swinburne, I think that these differences entail differences as to the nature of morality: morality in the world-with-God is indeed something different than morality in the world-without-God. In order to realise this let us have a closer look at the differences (I)-(III).

## OBLIGATIONS TOWARDS GOD

If there is a God – a rational creator and benefactor – then we not only have some specific obligations towards Him, but all our obligations are (at least indirectly) obligations towards Him. Why?

In the world-with-God everything that exists (apart from Him) exists thanks to Him, is the result of His conscious, free and gratuitous act of

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<sup>2</sup> I think that the most debatable thing in Swinburne’s reasoning is that he treats moral properties as logical consequences of non-moral properties. It is not clear how the second (by virtue of logical or quasi-logical necessity) should determine the first. I omit here this question, although some of my remarks may be treated as certain suggestions towards solving this problem. Let me add something which seems obvious, namely that both Swinburne and I presuppose that in both possible worlds – with God and without God – there are people who are free and responsible moral subjects. Thereby we presuppose that neither God’s omniscience, and omnipotence, (appropriately understood) nor natural laws (appropriately understood) exclude man’s real freedom. The argumentation on behalf of this presupposition, and discussion of attendant problems, go beyond the framework of this text.

creation. In this world all our obligations – both natural and contractual – towards whoever (or whatever) are therefore obligations towards God. Persons or things towards which we have obligations exist and bear obligation-making properties just because of God's creative act. We owe honour to our parents since they are the most proximate source of our existence. However, although we have received our existence by the mediation of certain created beings, ultimately, we have received our existence, and our parents, only from God. He is therefore (as Swinburne writes) 'much more the source of our being than are our parents'<sup>3</sup>. As we can see, in the theistic perspective gratitude, honour and obedience to parents are, ultimately, (though not directly) gratitude, honour, and obedience to God Himself, as the ultimate source of our parents. In like manner, we can say about all beings created by God, towards which we have obligations: these obligations are indirectly obligations towards God. The relationship of being obligated, like the relationship of existential derivation (or of being caused), seems to be a transitive relationship.

It follows from the above that all moral obligations in the world-with-God reach much further than obligations in the world-without-God. In the first world our obligations are always also obligations towards the being on Whom we are ontically dependent and Who is fully (insofar as this is logically possible) rational and good. In the second world our obligations are always obligations exclusively towards beings limited with respect to their ontological status, rationality, and goodness. In this sense, morality in the world-with-God is absolute, and morality in the world-without-God is relative. We may discuss our duties towards beings to whom we owe only a little, and who are only partially rational and good. However, it is difficult to do this in relation to the being to Whom we owe everything and Who is entirely rational and good.

### GOD'S INFLUENCE ON MORALITY

According to Swinburne, in the world-with-God 'God brings about the circumstances which (in virtue of some necessary moral truth) make

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<sup>3</sup> Swinburne, *God and Morality*, p. 11.

an action of some kind good or bad<sup>4</sup>. This thesis is illustrated by Swinburne's example of capital punishment and my example of shooting (see above). I think that God's creative prerogatives, in relation to morality in the world-with-God, have much more important consequences. Let us note that:

- (a) if God did not create any beings – or non-moral properties – there would not exist any moral properties supervenient on those beings or non-moral properties;
- (b) if God created only non-personal beings, the moral properties supervenient on them would exist at most potentially, being made actual only in the moment when persons come into existence;
- (c) if God created a world radically different from ours with respect to non-moral contents, it would differ from our world also with respect to moral contents: the lack of certain beings (or non-moral properties) would result in the lack of certain moral properties, and the existence of other beings, or non-moral properties (unknown to us), would entail the existence of other moral properties (somewhat new to us).

I am not going to speculate here how far our world could be different (in its non-moral and moral respects). It suffices to note that once we accept (a)-(c), we are brought to the conclusion that in the world-with-God, God's decisions are (at least) a necessary condition of the existence of morality (see the points a-b) and a necessary condition of the moral contents (see point c). Such being the case, the metaphorical (analogous) statement that God is the "author" or "giver" of morality turns out to be obviously justified (for those inhabitants of the world-with-God who are aware of this fact). One may even say: God, in creating beings that found morality, is (indirectly) the creator of morality; by deciding *what* exists and *how* it exists, God (indirectly) decides *what* is good or bad and *how* it is good or bad. The fact that sense qualities supervene on light or sound waves etc., and aesthetic qualities supervene on sense qualities, does not undermine the theist's belief that God is the creator of sense and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

aesthetic qualities, and that they were consciously projected or designed by Him. For this same reason the consequent theist should recognise that morality (the set of non-moral properties and their resultant moral properties or normative propositions) is God's conscious work<sup>5</sup>. Now the consequent atheist should recognise that morality is a "brute fact" or a fact that is supervenient on the "brute fact" of the contingent existence of our actual world. Obviously, the atheist may also say that morality supervenes on the non-moral contents of our world, which exists and is such as it is of necessity, or thanks to rational "self-regulation." This position seems, however, fairly peculiar and it is an example of pantheism rather than atheism.

#### ADDITIONAL COMMANDS

If God can indirectly create morality – (i) as the ultimate correlate of moral obligations and (ii) as the creator of (this and not another) "ontological foundation" of morality – then why could He not make it directly? The absolute sovereignty of God the Creator entails His ontic power and deontic right to directly determine such moral obligations that are not (only) the consequence of His existence or the consequence of the existence of the non-moral contents of the world created by Him.

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<sup>5</sup> God is absolutely free, but within the confines of his own – rational and good – nature (the scholastics sought to describe this by means of the first principles of being, knowledge, and morality). Once we assume this thesis we may – following Swinburne's approach – solve the Euthyphro dilemma: part of our duties results from God's decision, and part of them results from the fact that they are good as such. (I am leaving aside here the quantitative and qualitative definition of these "parts"). This does not lead to antitheistic consequences, if we bear in mind that any free decisions on God's part are decisions of a being with a concrete – rational and good – nature, and this nature of God, that determines good (and indirectly evil), is something internal to Him. As we can see, God does not have to be redundant in moral explanation, and the morality established by Him does not have to be arbitrary. I omit here the solutions of the dilemma based directly on the doctrine of God's simplicity. According to E. Stump (*Simplicity*, [in:] P.L. Quinn, Ch. Taliaferro (ed.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1999, p. 225), God is 'identical with perfect goodness' and God's simplicity entails that 'there is an essential relationship between God and the standard for moral goodness, and that standard is not external to God.'

Swinburne seems to accept the above thesis, but his examples suggest not that God may add essential new duties (in relation to the “natural” morality that is supervenient on the non-moral contents of the world), but, rather, that He may enhance, make clear, or develop the existing and “natural” duties. For the inhabitants of the world-with-God it is justified to assume that since the recognition of the moral consequences of non-moral properties is difficult and causes conflicts, one may expect that God will directly help people to recognise moral good and bad, and assist in their moral betterment, by means of revelation (confirmed by miraculous signs). I think, however, that for the inhabitants of this world it is justified to assume also that God (by means of revelation) may not only (as Swinburne suggests) interpret, or partially correct, the morality that already exists, but that He may add to it something radically new. Obviously, we can hardly expect that, in doing this, God should be inconsequent and order that which is “naturally” bad or prohibit that which is “naturally” good. However, it is a fact that in the world-with-God some moral obligations may come directly from God’s commands, and not from the “natural” contents of the world; and that some of those additional obligations may be known only by virtue of God’s revelation, and not for instance through philosophical consideration. Such a circumstance does not occur in the world-without-God: in that world the range of moral obligations is smaller, and their recognition is brought about solely by means of natural human cognitive capacities.

The above point should be supplemented with one reservation. Just as it is not easy to determine the content of our “natural” obligations, it is difficult, and perhaps even more difficult, to determine whether and where God’s revelation was put into practice and what it contains. Therefore we have religious debates between believers of various religions and confessions. Such being the case, it is most prudent to base public life on “natural morality,” and on its interpretation, which – as Swinburne writes – is ‘a result of discussion and experience over many centuries’<sup>6</sup>. Any additional commands which may possibly arise through revelation should, then, be treated as obligatory only for those who have recognised these commands as coming directly from God, and as binding for them, by virtue of their personal or communal relationship with God<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Swinburne, *God and Morality*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> The Decalogue may be interpreted either as a set of revealed Divine commandments

## SWINBURNE AND THE MORAL ARGUMENT

As we can see, in this commentary to Swinburne's article I have tried to prove that the moral differences between the world-with-God and the world-without-God are much greater than Swinburne suggests. I have not undermined, however, his main thesis 'that the existence and actions of God make no difference to the fact that there are moral truths, but that they make a great difference to what those truths are'<sup>8</sup>. Indeed in both worlds there are moral truths. In the world-without-God, however, some moral truths – namely those that refer to God or those that are established by God – are, at most, counterfactual truths ("if God existed, then..."); while all 'general principles of morality' are necessary truths, though their application to the world is based on the "brute fact" of the existence of some contingent and non-moral states of affairs, that, ultimately, are not intended by anyone. Now in the world-with-God the range of factual moral truths is greater, and their obligatoriness and application to the world are based on the following:

- either on the fact that God exists;
- or on the fact that some non-moral states of affairs have on purpose been created by God;
- or on the fact that God issued and revealed special commands or prohibitions.<sup>9</sup>

The above differences between the worlds under consideration lead to 'a great difference' (greater than Swinburne suggests) in understanding

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(within the framework of particular religions) or as a cultural inscription of "natural" moral consciousness, whether derived from God or not. This consciousness would, for instance, be a consequence of the fact that an obligation-making value supervenes on human life, or on life in general; thus the principal commandment 'thou shalt not kill!' could be expressed positively as: protect life! The remaining commandments would indicate (incompletely) various ways of protecting life: through the preservation of appropriate relations with the sources of our life, whether more or less proximate, as well as with the means of life, and with those with whom we share our life.

<sup>8</sup> Swinburne, *God and Morality*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> The proponents of the so-called Divine Commands Ethics emphasise the latter possibility (see J.M. Idziak, *Divine Commands Ethics*, [in:] P.L. Quinn, Ch. Taliaferro (ed.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, op. cit., pp. 453 and 458). In the broad sense we find its moderate or indirect representatives among all those who accept all the above three possibilities.

morality: in the world-without-God morality is at most a consequence of a certain contingent complex of non-moral states of affairs; whereas in the world-with-God it is the correlate and intended “work” of a perfect personal being. A difference in how we understand morality entails a difference in how we live it out. One may assume that, in being aware of the fact that God exists in their world, the inhabitants of the world-with-God will live out their moral obligations as more absolute and exceptionless than the inhabitants of the world-without-God, who are aware of the fact that God does not exist in their world: indeed, the foundation and correlate of morality is something greater for the first group than for the second.

The latter remark may be the basis for a certain version of an argument for the existence of God in the style of Swinburne. His arguments for the existence of God (together making up a cumulative argument) are based on a common procedure which, put simply, consists in proving that the theistic explanation of a given phenomenon (or a class of phenomena) is better (especially simpler) than some competing explanations; in other words, it is more probable (or expected) that a given phenomenon (or a class of phenomena) will come about in the light of the theistic hypothesis than in the light of competing hypotheses.<sup>10</sup>

In order to apply the above procedure to the phenomenon of morality let us assume that the majority of people (in the whole history of mankind) experience morality as absolute and exceptionless, as something very serious and objectively binding. Let us ask then in which of the possible worlds – in the world-with-God or in the world-without-God – it is more probable (or expected) that such moral consciousness will occur. I think that the probability of the existence of such consciousness in the second world is small. Moral consciousness in this world could be a result of some coincidence, a result of biological or social processes, or simply an illusion.<sup>11</sup> Such factors, however, can evoke various, and also contrary, effects. We can hardly expect factors of such mutability and accidentalness to evoke moral consciousness, which is permanent and

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<sup>10</sup> Swinburne develops this type of argument in his book *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979 (reprinted 1987).

<sup>11</sup> I do not take into consideration the non-naturalistic and at the same time non-theistic explanations of morality, for they seem to be too complicated, therefore they violate the criterion of explanatory simplicity.



absolute. It is different in the case of the first world: if there is a rational and good God-Creator, then we may presume with high probability that (directly or indirectly) He will lead to the existence of moral consciousness in people. He has both sufficient power and sufficient reasons to do this, e.g. He wants to preserve rational order in the life of free creatures created by Him and to show them His absolute and exceptional authority. (In any case the fact of the existence of God makes absolute moral consciousness something understandable: it has sense only if there is a personal source of all beings, towards Whom we are absolutely morally obliged and responsible). If it is more probable (or expected) that the phenomenon under consideration should appear in the world-with-God than in the world-without-God, then it is more probable that the world in which we live, and in which this phenomenon occurs, is identical with the world-with-God, rather than with the world-without-God. I think that the above argument is formally correct.

Let us end with one additional remark. Swinburne (*The Existence of God*, pp. 175-179) criticises the argument 'from man's moral consciousness', for according to him it is not difficult 'to explain [this phenomenon] by normal scientific [esp. evolutionary] processes'. I think, however, that this (scientific) explanation is possible, but not in relation to absolute moral consciousness, that corresponds to absolute, objective claims of moral obligation. According to Swinburne, an argument 'from the fact of morality itself' is faulty, because the fundamental moral truths (principles) are analytically necessary and as such do not need explanation. I think, however, that their necessity (which is, in my opinion, synthetic rather than analytic) is only conditional or relative, i.e. they are indeed related to the world insofar as there are some contingent non-moral states of affairs. Swinburne (though using a conceptual apparatus different than mine) notices this fact and proposes to formulate the following argument from morality: 'actions *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, are obligatory; they would not be obligatory unless they were *Q*, *R*, *S*, *T*. It is more probable that there are actions which are *Q*, *R*, *S*, *T*, if there is a God than if there is not; therefore the obligatoriness of *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, confirms the existence of God.' Swinburne, however, rejects this argument because it is difficult to find such actions accepted by standard ethical theories whose probability (of existence and obligation) rises together with the existence of God. In my opinion the probability of the obligatoriness of any actions

rises together with the existence of God because without His existence and creative action there could be no other beings or any obligations. However, the above statement transforms the moral argument into a metaphysical or cosmological argument. No wonder, then, that Swinburne states that: "I find »the moral law within« considerably less good testimony to God than »the starry heavens above«". Swinburne also states that the belief that "the voice of conscience is the voice of God" is only a consequence of our non-ethical knowledge about the existence and action of God. Despite this we may still be surprised by the fact that, in relation to natural phenomena, Swinburne ultimately uses personal explanation and not scientific (nomological) explanation, whereas in relation to moral phenomena he goes the other way round. According to him, morality is not ultimately explained by the intentions and powers of a perfect person, but by certain laws of correlation between natural (non-moral) and moral properties. Perhaps by postulating a personal explanation of morality I would like to be more "Swinburnean" than Swinburne. The problem, however, consists in showing whether its main premise – the premise of the universal existence of absolute moral consciousness – is true and whether the knowledge of its truth is independent of knowledge about the existence of God (or faith in the existence of God). One thing is certain: the debate on the character of moral consciousness and morality itself has been going on for ages, and in a sense it is connected with the debate on the existence of God.