

A CASE AGAINST THEISTIC MORALITY

Sometimes the word 'moral' is used to indicate the specific nature of some judgements which are distinguished from factual or descriptive statements. In this sense the opposite of the term 'moral' is 'non-moral' rather than 'immoral'. This sense may, therefore, be called 'neutral' or 'non-evaluative'. But when we employ it for judging human beings and their conduct, we use it in an 'evaluative' sense. The opposite of the word 'moral' would then be 'immoral'. I shall use 'moral' in this sense while explaining the meaning of 'morality' and presenting my arguments against theistic morality in this paper.

Morality is a system of certain customs, rules, principles, values and ideals for guiding and regulating man's conduct and his relations with his fellow-beings with a view to ensure human well-being. This means that morality is necessarily a social institution evolved by mankind. Man, as Aristotle rightly declared long ago, is by nature a social being, and he always lives in some kind of community or society. We cannot even think of man's life in isolation from society, for his very existence and survival wholly depend upon some kind of social order. Each individual's actions directly or indirectly influence the lives of his fellow-beings who, in their turn, influence his own life by their actions. It is this fact pertaining to the social nature of man which gives rise to the need of morality for establishing and maintaining peace and security in society. Thus, morality is necessarily a product of society which needs it for its own

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survival and growth. In fact, morality can have no meaning for a man existing in isolation from society, if this is at all possible.

The objective of morality, i.e., social well-being, does not exclude the well-being of an individual, for society is nothing but a well-organized group of people bound together by the need of mutual help and cooperation. All moral rules or principles, such as non-killing, non-stealing, promise-keeping, truth-telling, helping others in need or distress, etc., have been propounded and are observed only to promote this fundamental objective of morality, the well-being of both an individual and the society he belongs to. All of us learn these moral principles in our very early life, and normally we abide by them without any external pressure or compulsion when we grow up. In the beginning we do feel some kind of social pressure or compulsion for complying with these moral principles, but gradually their observance becomes part and parcel of our life; and, eventually our habit of observing them without effort and compulsion takes the form of what is commonly known as 'conscience'. Thus, our conscience is necessarily a social product in the sense that it is the result of the early education or instruction we receive from our elders, teachers and neighbours. It is this conscience which later regulates and guides our conduct throughout our life. But unfortunately, most of us forget its social origin and begin to look upon its commands or voice as divine commands or voice of God. This, however, is proved to be wholly erroneous by the fact that diverse - and even opposite - commands are issued by the conscience of people belonging to different groups or communities. It is, indeed, impossible for theists to find any rational and satisfactory explanation for God's issuing different or opposite commands regarding the same action or object. This difficulty strongly supports our contention that man's

conscience is only the voice of his society rather than that of God.

There is a group of thinkers who believe that the origin of morality can be traced to the will or commands of a transcendent God who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, loving, just and perfectly good, and who alone is the creator, governor and sustainer of this universe. According to these thinkers, moral rules or principles are obligatory for us, since they are his commands. Such rules or principles can have no meaning for us if we do not regard them as divine commands. Thus, morality, for these thinkers, is nothing but a system of divine directives or commands, and we must obey them, because God is perfectly good and we are his creatures. It is this kind of morality, depending solely upon the will or commands of God, which is generally known as 'theistic morality'. Most of the theists fully subscribe to this sort of morality. They contend that morality is rooted in religion which, for them, can be defined as the belief in and worship of God. This is why theistic morality is also called 'religious morality'. These theists hold that religion, precisely speaking, theistic religion, alone provides a real and firm basis for morality which is bound to be destroyed if it is disconnected from religion. Thus, according to these theists, morality can have no meaning for us without the belief in God who constitutes a permanent basis for all moral principles, values and ideals.

Many Western thinkers have put forward their arguments in support of theistic morality. I shall present below some arguments of John E. Smith.

"The ideals (content), which are to govern human existence in society, are derived from the nature of the divine, and it is the love of God (form) that furnishes the power to live the good life in a world which often thwarts our most determined

attempts to embody Christian perfection. In Biblical religion man is required to be just and merciful, because God is both just and merciful in all relations with his people. Man is required to manifest love in his earthly life, because, according to the essence of Christian faith, God is of the nature of love. And in all cases the love of God dwelling within the person of the individual believer is what provides the motive and inspiration for all our human efforts... The nature of God provides the norm for conduct, ... and the love of God provides the motive and passion necessary to perform. ... Prophetic Judaism and Classical Christianity are at one in maintaining that morality without religion is ultimately impossible. ... Ultimately no view of good life, no serious doctrine of what man ought to do, is ever possible apart from some view of his final destiny; and such a view introduces the religious element. This is the most important consideration in showing that morality is necessarily related to religion. .. A morality that has no foundation in a reality transcending itself is inevitably subject to corruption precisely because it recognises no judge beyond its own commands. A morality, however, truly based on a love of God that is religious in character and one that recognises the power of God as judge is protected, in principle, from such corruption and consequent transformation into ideology. ... It remains true that, in addition to determining the content of morality, religion is the final judge of morality. ... Religion supplies the inspiration for the moral life and provides, at the same time, something even more important – the meaning and purpose of moral striving. ... Morality is both unsure and incomplete without a living connection with religious faith. ... Morality implies religion; and when it is not founded on religion, it is continually threatened with destruction".¹

This long quotation from Smith represents the general viewpoint of theists about the divine basis of morality. Many other

thinkers, like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, etc, are also strong protagonists of theistic morality.

Now, the question to be considered here is : Can this view concerning theistic morality be rationally justified ? It seems to me that it cannot. There are many serious philosophical or logical objections which can be urged against the defence of theistic morality contained in the position maintained by Smith in the above quotation and in the similar views maintained by other theistic moralists. I shall mention here briefly some of these objections which pose some formidable difficulties for theistic morality.

1. The advocates of theistic morality presuppose the existence of God who is the sole ultimate basis of all moral principles, values and ideals. But it is a well-known fact that this presupposition is highly debatable. All arguments, so far advanced for the existence of God, have been conclusively proved to be fallacious by some philosophers, Indian and non-Indian. Moreover, many have also presented several cogent arguments against the existence of God. This debate concerning the arguments for and against the existence of God is too well-known to need an elaborate discussion. However, in view of this long controversy among philosophers about the existence of God, we can reasonably maintain that there is no conclusive proof for his existence. If this is correct, the very basis of theistic morality becomes shaky or undependable. Theists cannot reasonably talk of basing morality on God's will and command, if his own existence is controversial. Moreover, from an ethical point of view also, to base morality on an unproved and unprovable belief in the existence of God also appears to be immoral, as it is to base anything on an ill-founded belief.

2. But even if we accept, just for the sake of argument, that God, as a personal being possessing good will and other

good human qualities, exists, the problems of theistic morality are not thereby solved at all. For example, some of the questions theists would then be required to answer are as follows : How do we know God's will or commands which we are supposed to obey ? Why ought we to act according to his will or why ought we to obey his commands ? On what grounds does he issue these commands ? Does something become good because he commands it ? Or does he command it because it is good ? Does the fact that God commands X entail that X is good or right ? All these are very difficult questions; and so far as I know, theists have not been able to answer them satisfactorily.

Take, for example, the first question : How do we know what God wills or commands ? According to theists, moral rules or principles are inviolable divine commands. But our problem is that it is impossible for us to know God's will or commands, since he is considered by theists to be a wholly transcendent being beyond human experience and reason. If God is an absolutely transcendent being in this sense, then we can never know what kind of being he is like and what he wills or commands. In order to overcome this difficulty, theists may say that we know his will and commands through revelation. But this reply does not at all solve our problem, because very divergent and even opposite commands are said to have been issued by God, if revelation, as presented in various religions, is to be trusted. How can God, who is said to be perfect in all respects, issue contradictory or conflicting commands ? So far as I know, theists have given no satisfactory and rationally acceptable answer to this crucial question.

3, But suppose that we know God's will and commands. Then we can very well ask : Why ought we to obey his commands ? In answer to this question theists can say - and some of them have really said - that if we disobey them he will punish

us in this or next life; and if we obey them, he will bestow prosperity and happiness on us here or hereafter. But this answer is highly objectionable, since it makes morality wholly dependent upon selfish or external considerations. This sort of morality cannot be called morality in the proper sense of the term. To obey a command simply for the sake of getting some reward or avoiding punishment is sheer expediency or prudence rather than morality. It is on this ground that Kant rejected the above-mentioned theological principle of morality as a "heteronomous principle". In order to overcome this serious difficulty, theists can say that we ought to obey God's commands because he is perfectly good, and whatever he commands is necessarily good. But this view makes morality completely independent of God, for we must know clearly what is good before we can meaningfully call God 'perfectly good'. Theists cannot then consistently hold the above-mentioned contention, because it contradicts their basic doctrine that morality is wholly dependent on the will or commands of God.

4. Another important question, that arises with regard to theistic morality, is : Why, or on what grounds, does God command us to do certain actions and to refrain from doing some others ? In other words, the question to be answered by theists, is : Do the grounds (that is, goodness or rightness, badness or wrongness) of God's commands lie in the actions themselves, or do they lie in God himself ? This, indeed, is an old philosophical problem which was discussed by Plato in his *Euthyphro* (XII, 10). He presented it in this form : "Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it ? In our contemporary terminology we can put the same question as follows : "Is X good because God wills or commands it, or does God will or command X because it is good ?" If theists hold that X is good simply because God wills or com-

mands it, they will be confronted with the same difficulty which has been discussed above, namely, that it makes morality totally dependent upon an external source, imposing a heteronomous principle on the agent. In view of this difficulty, theists may adopt the second alternative by saying that God wills or commands X because it is good. But if they do, it would make morality completely independent of God's will or commands, since, then, the acceptability of his will or command would depend upon the goodness of X alone. It is quite obvious that this alternative cannot be acceptable to theists, for it contradicts their basic doctrine of morality or God.

5. Another serious objection to theistic morality is concerned with the attempt of the theists to derive moral judgements from descriptive or factual statements. According to them "X is willed or commanded by God" means, or is identical with, "X is good" or "we ought to do X". This clearly amounts to deducing ethical judgements from, or identifying them with, descriptive statements. But recent studies of the logic of moral discourse have shown that this move is indefensible. This is because the nature of the two kinds of judgements is basically different. Moral judgements evaluate or guide human conduct, while descriptive statements merely describe states of affairs. Therefore, following David Hume, most of the contemporary moral philosophers maintain that 'ought' cannot be derived from 'is'. I may know the facts of any kind whatsoever, but I cannot logically deduce any moral judgement from these facts. For instance, I may know that X is willed or commanded by God. But from this factual knowledge, I cannot derive a moral judgement to the effect that X is good or we ought to do X.

G. E. Moore has conclusively shown by his "open question argument" that a moral judgement can never be the same as a factual judgement. If, for example, "X is good" is the same as

“X is willed by God”, then we cannot meaningfully say that what is willed by God is good. This is because if these two judgements are identical, we only utter, then, a meaningless tautology—what is willed by God is willed by God.

6. It has been stated above that, according to theists morality is bound to get corrupted and destroyed if it does not recognise a judge beyond its own commands—that is, if it does not depend upon God. But, in fact, there is no rational justification for this contention. The purpose of morality is to evaluate, guide or regulate human conduct with a view to securing the well-being of mankind on this earth. Now, if we accept this purpose or object of morality, there is no need of God or any other supernatural reality to serve as its foundation. On the contrary, the belief in a supernatural reality is likely to thwart it. This is because the belief may lead to escapism on the part of man by encouraging him to look for his happiness in the alleged other world or some imaginary heaven. In this way, it may make him indifferent or unconcerned towards the hard reality of evil that we find in the world in the form of suffering or wickedness. If a man sincerely believes that God alone will protect all moral values and ideals, he is likely to become complacent and lose the will to struggle against the evils he finds around him. He may then not bother about the suffering of his fellow-beings and even about his own suffering.

7. If the contention of the advocates of theistic morality is correct, then atheists or non-believers must be supposed to be immoral persons having no moral principles and ideals to guide their conduct. They must be considered to be wholly selfish and egoistic persons who simply do not bother about the well-being and suffering of others. But, as a matter of fact, the life and conduct of many great non-theistic thinkers all over the world do not at all support this accusation. Human history bears a

testimony to the well-known fact that some of these thinkers have always championed the noble cause of selfless service and well-being of mankind as a whole, irrespective of religion, race, country and sex. By their unorthodox and revolutionary views and deeds they have always tried their best to alleviate human suffering. The lives of Gautam Buddha, Mahavīra, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre, and many other great non-theistic thinkers prove this fact. Moreover, when we evaluate any person's conduct from the moral point of view in our practical life, we do not consider it relevant to know whether or not he believes in the existence of God. On the contrary, we judge his conduct irrespective of his belief in God's existence.

8. The protagonists of theistic morality contend that morality has a divine origin in the sense that its ultimate source is the will of God which alone gives to it its real meaning and significance. But, once again, the facts concerning the origin and growth of morality do not at all support this theistic contention. Suppose we ask what is the basis of our distinction between good and evil. To my mind, the only reasonable answer, which can be given to this question, is that the distinction is rooted in human nature. Human beings are, by nature, endowed with certain basic needs, desires, wishes and feelings which constitute the ultimate sources of the distinction between good and evil. It is a well-known psychological fact that those things which satisfy human needs and desires are called good or desirable, while those that frustrate them are called bad or evil. If human beings had no desires and needs and if they had been incapable of feeling pain and pleasure, nothing would have been called by them good or bad. We cannot meaningfully talk of anything being good or bad on a planet which is devoid of living beings having some desires and needs and the capacity to feel pain and pleasure.

Against the above objection, the advocates of theistic morality may argue that it is God who has created man with his basic needs, desires, etc.; therefore, he is the ultimate basis of morality. But this argument presupposes the plausibility of the theory of creation which holds that God alone is the creator, sustainer and moral governor of this universe. But the veracity of this theory is, as already hinted at, extremely doubtful. Many Indian and Western thinkers have pointed out several serious problems and difficulties in accepting it. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them.

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NOTE

1. John E. Smith, *Reason and God – Encounters of Philosophy with Religion*, pp. 197–202.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF KALIDAS BHATTACHARYYA

Proceedings of a seminar organised by the Department of Philosophy, Rajasthan University, the book contains a critical appraisal of various aspects of the late **Kalidas Bhattacharyya's** philosophical thought, and includes his own final formulation of his philosophical position.

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