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Perfectly Good and a Source of Moral Obligation

A THEIST normally holds that God is by nature morally perfectly good and also that men have a duty to obey the commands of God—that the commands of God create moral obligations.

Perfect Goodness

In claiming that God is by nature morally perfectly good, I suggest that the theist be interpreted as claiming that God is so constituted that he always does the morally best action (when there is one), and no morally bad action. For God, as for us, there is often no one best action, but a choice of equal best actions, only one of which can be done.[1] We may have a choice of whether to give £10 to this charity or to give £10 to that charity, but having only £10 cannot do both. The limits on what an omnipotent being can do being only those described in Chapter 9, he is not restricted by shortage of money or other contingent limitations on his power, but the limits of logic remain. It may be good that one nation be a 'chosen people' to help other nations, but equally good that it be Israel or Moab. Even God cannot make both of them the one chosen people. God may also sometimes have a choice of a kind we do not, to which in effect I referred briefly earlier,

[1] See Ch. 8 n. 17. There cannot, I suggest, be a 'best of all possible worlds'; and so, despite Leibniz, God's perfect goodness cannot be manifested in creating one; and so it is not a good objection to the existence of God, that this world is not the best of all possible worlds. See my discussion of this in *The Existence of God*, pp. 113 f.

between an infinite number of actions, only one of which can be done for logical reasons, each worse than some other, and there being no best. If there is an equal best action, a morally perfect being will do one such; but where any action the being does, though good, is worse than he could do, his perfect goodness has no consequences for which he will choose. If an action of a certain kind is the best kind of action, however, even if there is no best of that kind, perfect goodness seems to involve doing an action of that kind.

I distinguish among good (or right) acts those which are obligatory (which the agent ought to do or has a duty to do, i.e. would be at fault not to do) from those which go beyond obligation, which are supererogatory; and similarly among bad acts, those which are wrong (i.e. which the agent ought not to do) from those which are bad but not wrong—and which I shall call infravetatory. Even if the boundary between the obligatory and the supererogatory is not easy to draw, there are clear cases on either side. To pay my debts is an obligation, to give my life to save the life of a friend goes beyond obligation. An agent who does a wrong act is at fault and deserves blame; praiseworthiness, by contrast, belongs to the agent of supererogatory acts. Perfect moral goodness includes doing both the obligatory and supererogatory and doing nothing wrong or bad in other ways. Obligations are a limited set. They arise out of certain relations we have to other animate beings (for example, to parents and children, and many others with whom we are involved). A God who creates no one beyond himself has no obligations; and he wrongs no one if he does not create, for there is then no one to wrong—good though it is that he create others. But if he does create animate creatures, he may have certain obligations to them (for example, to keep any promises he makes to them). And perfect moral goodness surely involves fulfilling one's moral obligations. But the range of possible supererogatory acts open even to us often stretches without obvious limit; and those open to an omnipotent being may be quite limitless.

But what is it to judge that an action is morally good or bad, as opposed to being good or bad in other respects? We often contrast moral goodness with goodness of other kinds. We may allow that some action is good in some respects (e.g. in

respect of the pleasure which it gives to the agent), while denying that it is morally good. Or, conversely, we may hold that what a man did was in various ways not a good action—it was poorly executed, perhaps, or aesthetically unpleasing—while allowing that morally it was a good action. So what is it to judge that some action is morally good? I suggest that to judge that an action is morally good is to judge that it is, overall, taking all reasons into consideration, better to do than not to do; the reasons for doing it override (are, as reasons, more cogent than) the reasons for not doing it. Conversely an action's being morally bad is it being one which overall is better not to do than to do, which there is overriding reason not to do. Within the class of morally good actions, obligatory actions are those which an agent is at fault for not doing. Within the class of morally bad actions, wrong actions are those which an agent is at fault for doing.[2]

Some philosophers have given different accounts of what moral goodness consists in. According to one school, for example, to judge that an action is morally good is to judge that it is good in the respect that good (i.e. well-being, pleasure, or something of that kind) for humans (or, perhaps, other sentient beings) results from the action. Moral judgements about actions are those which assess actions in respect of the good or harm for humans (or other sentient beings) which result from them. Feeding the starving or showing friendship to the lonely would be fairly evident cases of morally good actions. But keeping promises to the dying or refraining from lying (when to lie would lead to the saving of life) would not, on this account, be cases of morally good actions—unless in some complicated way human well-being resulted from them. But this definition of the moral has the odd consequence that there is no obvious logical incoherence in claiming that it is sometimes overall better to do some action other than the morally best action. Yet on a very natural use of 'moral' nothing could be more important than morality. Or again, the man who says 'it matters more that I should paint pictures than that I should do my moral duty' says something

[2] The account in the last two paragraphs of the nature of moral goodness and its division into the supererogatory and the obligatory is a brief and over-simple one. For further elaboration, see my *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford, 1989), Part I.

paradoxical in a way in which the man who says 'my moral duty is to paint pictures rather than to bring happiness to men' does not. The latter judgement may be false, but it does not have the evident appearance of being a self-contradiction which the former has. This suggests that at any rate often in ordinary language 'morally' good actions are those which it is of overriding importance to do, which are over all better than other ones.[3]

This definition too is surely the one which we require for our purposes. In saying that God is morally perfectly good, the theist does commit himself to the view that God does whatever it is of overriding importance that he should do, including any actions, if there are any such, which are of overriding importance although they bring no happiness to humans or other sentient beings.

Sometimes of course theists have denied that God is 'morally' good or at all concerned with 'morality', but a little examination of what they are saying will, I suggest, reveal that they, unlike other theists, do not construe 'moral' in a way in which the 'moral' is what matters. The man who says 'God is above morality' means only that God is concerned with things more important than human good or harm, or with things other than those which men think will bring them happiness. He does not mean that God does not do what is of ultimate importance. I suggest that in our sense of 'moral' all theists hold that God is perfectly good, and that this is a central claim of theism.

That there can be a person who is by nature morally perfectly good in our sense seems evidently a coherent claim. It seems coherent to suppose that there be a person who is so constituted that he always does what there is overriding reason to do, and always refrains from doing what there is overriding reason for not doing. He always does the good because that is how he is made. But is perfect goodness compatible with perfect freedom? For surely a free agent may choose good or evil; his choice cannot be predetermined.

We have already seen in earlier chapters the outlines of the

[3] For examples of these different theories of moral goodness, see the collection edited by G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker, *The Definition of Morality* (London, 1970); and my discussion of them in *Responsibility and Atonement*, Ch. 1.

answer to this difficulty. I propose to argue that not merely is perfect goodness compatible with perfect freedom,[4] but that it is logically necessary that an omniscient and perfectly free being be perfectly good. We saw in Chapter 8 that a perfectly free being will always do an action if he judges that there is overriding reason for doing it rather than for refraining from doing it. But what is it to judge that there is overriding reason for doing an action? Is it merely to take up an attitude towards that action, an attitude which does not stand in need of rational justification? Or is it rather to believe a statement about how things are which could be true or false, to judge that an action has the property of being supported by an overriding reason, of being over all better to do than to refrain from doing? If the latter, if 'judgement' really means judgement, then an omniscient being will—of logical necessity—makes those judgements about overriding reasons for doing actions which are true judgements. Hence if he is perfectly free he will do those actions which there is overriding reason to do and refrain from those actions from which there is overriding reason to refrain.

So, to prove my point, I need to show that judgements about overriding reasons for doing actions, about one action being over all better than another, are statements which are true or false.

The Objectivity of Moral Judgements—(1) The Issue

The issue then is whether the moral goodness of actions in the sense defined is an objective matter, and much of the rest of this chapter will be devoted to tackling this. Is it either true or false that abortion or euthanasia are always wrong actions, that truth-telling is always right, that this or that or the other particular actions are morally good or bad? If I say 'we are now living in England' or 'grass is green in summer' or 'the cat is on the mat' what I say will normally be true or false—the statements are true if they correctly report how things are,

[4] I do not wish to deny that there is an incoherence in supposing that a free agent subject to non-rational influences (and so to temptations) be so constituted as always to choose the good. But that is not what is at issue here.

or correspond to the facts; and if they do not do these things, they are false. Such a statement will only fail to have a truth value if its referring expressions fail to refer (e.g. there is no object to which 'the cat' can properly be taken to refer), or of it lies on the border between truth and falsity (e.g. the grass is blue-green) so that it is as true to say that the statement is true as to say that it is false. Are moral judgements normally true or false in the way in which the above statements are true or false? I will term the view that they are objectivism and the view that they are not subjectivism. The objectivist maintains that it is as much a fact about an action that it is right or wrong as that it causes pain or takes a long time to perform. The subjectivist maintains that saying that an action is right or wrong is not stating a fact about it but merely expressing approval of it or commending it or doing some such similar thing. I shall attempt firstly to show that all arguments for subjectivism manifestly fail, and secondly to produce a strong argument for objectivism. Inevitably my discussion will be more brief than the topic and the vast amount of current philosophical writing about it deserve. However, I can only plead the excuse which I made in the introduction to this book that there are considerable advantages in discussing within the compass of one book all the philosophical issues relevant to the coherence of theism.

The objectivist holds that a sentence such as 'capital punishment is always wrong', which expresses a moral judgement, expresses a proposition which is true or false. It ascribes a property to all actions of a certain type. Rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness are, he holds, moral properties. The objectivist may claim for his moral properties either that they are logically distinct from the 'natural' properties of things or that possession of the former is entailed by possession of certain of the latter. The former view I will term anti-naturalism, the latter naturalism. By natural properties I mean such properties as being square, yellow, magnetically charged, causing pain, or making someone happy, properties which those who do not think that morality is objective are content to suppose to belong to things; properties which we ascribe to things when not overtly engaged in moral discourse. Most predicates denote natural properties. The naturalist

claims that if something has a moral property such as goodness or rightness, its possession of this property is entailed by its possession of a natural property. The naturalist position may be subdivided further. A naturalist may claim that possession of a moral property just is possession of a certain natural property—e.g. he might claim that right actions just are those actions which forward the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The claim is that the moral word just is the name of a natural property—'right' just means 'forwarding the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. Alternatively, the naturalist may claim that moral properties are properties distinct from natural properties, although possession of the former is entailed by possession of certain of the latter. Clearly one statement may entail another which makes a claim very different from the claim made by the former. Thus 'he has eleven cars' entails 'the number of cars which he owns is equal to the next prime number greater than 7'; but the latter says something very different from the former. The relation between statements ascribing natural properties and statements ascribing moral properties is of this kind, according to the second type of naturalist theory. On theories of this latter type, as on anti-naturalist theories to be described below, moral properties being properties distinct from natural properties may be termed non-natural properties.

On the anti-naturalist view possession of natural properties never entails possession of moral properties. Moral properties are logically distinct from natural properties, and so it is logically possible that any moral property be possessed by an object with any combination of natural properties. Various versions of anti-naturalism are possible, according to what view is taken about how one gets to know that a certain moral property belongs to a certain object. The view that this is something one just 'sees' is intuitionism. One could develop an alternative view that one gets to know that an object possesses some moral property by means of a non-deductive inference from its possession of certain natural properties.

An anti-naturalist view seems to be implausible because of the problem of supervenience.[5] The anti-naturalist allows the

[5] See R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 80 f.

logical possibility of two objects being exactly alike in their natural properties but differing in their moral properties—e.g. two actions of killing a man in exactly the same circumstances differing only in that the one action is right and the other wrong. But this does seem incoherent. An action cannot be just wrong—it must be wrong because of some natural feature which it possesses, e.g. because it causes pain or is forbidden by the government. An action being right or wrong is thus said to be supervenient on its possession of natural properties. Now if it is the possession of certain natural features which makes the action wrong, then any other action which had just those natural features would also be wrong. In this sense all moral judgements are universalizable. If certain men or actions or states of affairs are good, any other man, action, or state of affairs which are qualitatively identical, in their natural properties would also be good. Since two objects which agree in their natural properties must agree in their moral properties, anti-naturalism is false.

The first form of naturalism also seems implausible. If 'good' or 'right' were *definable* in natural terms, then if you and I agree about the natural properties of an action but disagree about whether it is 'right', either we are using words in different senses, or one or other of us does not know English. Yet that seems implausible. The fact that you say that capital punishment is always 'wrong' and I say that it is not always 'wrong' does not guarantee that we are talking about different things.[6] Surely moral disagreement is a genuine phenomenon!

[6] It is the first form of naturalism which is open to Hare's well-known objection. 'If it were true that a good A meant the same as an A which is C (when "C" is a "descriptive" term) then it would be impossible to use the sentence "An A which is C is good" in order to commend A's which are C; for this sentence would be analytic and equivalent to "an A which is C is C". Now it seems clear that we do use sentences of the form "an A which is C is good" in order to commend A's which are C; and that when we do so, we are not doing the same sort of thing as when we say "a puppy is a young dog", that is to say, commending is not the same sort of linguistic activity as defining' (ibid., pp. 90 f.) The second form of naturalism does not assert that 'good' means 'C' (where 'C' is some descriptive term). However, even naturalists who subscribe to a naturalistic theory of the first form have a defence. They can point out that some statements which ascribe natural properties to objects are on occasion 'used to commend'. One may commend by saying 'He is an extremely persevering student', 'He will certainly get a first', 'This is real leather', etc. etc. So the fact that moral judgements are often used to commend does not show that they do not ascribe properties of any kind.

I conclude that the objectivist must retreat to the second form of naturalism, and in defending objectivism this is the form of it which I will henceforward adopt.[7,8]

The naturalist must claim that there are two kinds of moral truth—(logically) necessary moral truths and contingent moral truths. The naturalist claims that when an object *a* has a certain moral property, say *M*, its possession of it is entailed by it possessing certain natural properties, say *A*, *B*, and *C*. Then it is a necessary truth that anything which is *A*, *B*, and *C* is *M*; but a contingent truth that *a* is *M* or that there is an object which is *A* and *M*. Contingent moral truths hold because of the contingent feature of the world that certain objects have certain natural properties. Thus among contingent moral truths are such statements as 'I ought now to pay £10 to the bookshop' or 'I ought to give Smith a fail mark on his ethics paper'. These moral truths are contingent, because, although the cited actions are obligatory on me, they are obligatory only because things have the natural properties which they do. Why I ought to pay the bookshop £10 is because I bought £10 of books from them and they have sent me a bill for the books. If such contingent circumstances did not hold, I would have no obligation to pay the bookshop £10. Contingent moral truths hold because the world is as it is in respect of natural properties. But that those moral truths hold under those circumstances is itself a necessary moral truth. For if we state fully the natural features of the world which make a contingent moral truth to hold, it cannot be a contingent matter that it does hold under those circumstances.

[7] Hume's well-known objection to naturalism (see *Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.1.1) does not tell against the second form. Hume rightly comments that when we pass from propositions containing 'is' and 'is not' to propositions containing 'ought' and 'ought not', the latter express 'some new relation or affirmation'. He goes on to claim that it 'seems altogether inconceivable' that 'this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it'. Contrary to Hume, as the example on p. 190 should bear out, this is not at all inconceivable. Deducing new relations from old is the life-blood of philosophy and mathematics.

[8] The naturalist must hold that all, not merely some, true moral judgements about particular objects are propositions entailed by propositions correctly reporting their possession of natural properties. If he claims that there are some true moral judgements of which the latter is not true the principle of supervenience makes his position very implausible, as has been well argued by S. W. Blackburn (see 'Moral Realism' in John Casey (ed.), *Morality and Moral Reasoning*, London, 1971).

Yet it is a moral truth that it does, and hence a necessary moral truth. It is a necessary moral truth that when I have bought £10 of books from the bookshop and they send me a bill for this, I ought to pay the bill. No doubt this moral truth holds because a much more general moral truth holds—that men ought to pay their debts—of which the specific truth is a consequence. Among the necessary moral truths one would expect to find general principles of conduct such as that one ought to care for one's children, not punish the innocent, not tell lies (subject to whatever qualifications are needed).

The Objectivity of Moral Judgements—(2) The Failure of Arguments Against Objectivism

Now that I have clarified the form of objectivism which I wish to defend, let us turn to arguments against it. I know of four initially plausible objections to the position which I have described. The first, which may be found in very many writers, is that 'argument fails us when we come to deal with pure questions of value, as distinct from questions of fact'.[9] According to this objection dispute about a moral matter may have two elements—a 'factual' element and a 'moral' element. If I say that *a* is wrong and you say that it is right, then our dispute may arise because we have different factual beliefs about *a*. If I say that capital punishment is right and you say that it is wrong, our disagreement may arise because we have differing views about the deterrent effects of capital punishment. I may think that the existence of capital punishment as a penalty for some crime deters men from committing that crime and you may think that it does not. This factual disagreement is in principle settlable, and settling it may lead to moral agreement. But we may still disagree about whether capital punishment is wrong when we have come to agree about the 'facts'—e.g. that it is an effective deterrent. If we do, our disagreement is a pure moral one, and then, the objection goes, our disagreement is not resoluble by argument. This shows, it is claimed, that factual premisses do not entail

[9] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 111.

moral conclusions—because if they did, one could prove a moral conclusion to someone by deducing it from the 'facts', and thus cases of pure moral disagreement could be resolved.

This objection is often stated rather loosely. Let us try to state it more carefully. To do so, I will talk not about 'facts', but about 'natural facts', and thus avoid begging the question whether morality is a factual matter. I define pure moral disagreement as disagreement about whether things are right, wrong, good, bad, etc. which remains or would remain after agreement has been reached about relevant natural facts. Pure moral judgements are judgements about what kinds of thing are right, wrong, etc. which do not depend for their truth on any claims about natural facts. (I will call moral judgements which are not pure ones, impure ones.) The objection has the form of an argument from a premiss to the conclusion (C) 'premisses stating natural facts do not entail moral conclusions'. What is the premiss from which the objector seeks to infer (C)? It may be one of three premisses:

(P1): Seldom does any one change his pure moral views as a result of argument.

(P2): Never does any one change his pure moral views as a result of argument.

(P3): Nobody knows how to go about producing arguments to settle pure moral disagreements.

We now have three different forms of the first objection to objectivism, according to which premiss we use in attempting to prove (C). I now proceed to argue that the objection does not work in any of its three forms. (P1), though true, does not yield (C); and (P2) and (P3) are false, and so whether or not (C) follows from them does not matter.

(P1) is undoubtedly true. But then a statistical survey of arguments of all kinds would, I suggest, show that most of them do not end in agreement. Arguments about whether a man or his wife left the door open, whether the reintroduction of capital punishment would lead to a decrease in the number of murders, or increases in tax rates will lead to people working less hard, typically do not end in agreement. Yet even

on a subjectivist account of morals the arguments surely concern facts. The mere fact that arguments in a certain field often do not end in agreement does not show that they cannot or would not if men were rational and persevering enough. And in the case of moral argument, there is a good explanation of why agreement is even less likely to be found here than in other fields. This is that the temptations to irrationality and lack of perseverance are greater here than in other fields. This is because of the close connection of morality with behaviour. Suppose I change my mind about a purely moral matter and come to see action of a certain kind as wrong instead of right. Then I come to see it as an action of a type which it is important to avoid, which any man has an overriding reason for avoiding. Hence if I am to be rational, to act in accordance with my beliefs, to 'live up to my principles', I shall have to change my behaviour. If I come to agree that corporal punishment is wrong, then I shall have to stop beating my children. Men often do not wish to change their pattern of behaviour, yet wish to 'live up to their principles'. Hence the temptation to irrationality and lack of perseverance in moral argument. Changing my mind about natural facts, such as details of history or chemistry, however, seldom has such consequences. I may believe that I ought to do actions of kind *A*, and yet naturally avoid doing actions of kind *B*. *x* may be an action of kind *B* and hence one which I naturally avoid. Yet you may persuade me that *x* is really also of kind *A*. This will have the consequence that, if I am to live up to my principles, I ought to do *x*. I may believe that I ought to give up murderers to the police, yet naturally avoid giving up my son to the police. If I come to agree that my son is a murderer, this will have unpleasant consequences for my behaviour. It is indeed just in such cases of arguments about natural facts that men are at their most irrational in argument about natural facts. This bears out my point that there is a ready explanation of why arguments about purely moral matters do not very often end in agreement.

However, (P1), as we saw, does not yield (C). (P2), however, is false, and we can ignore the question whether or not it yields (C). Argument sometimes does settle pure moral disagreements. *A* says that capital punishment is wrong; *B*

says that it is right. Their disagreement, we may suppose, does not result from any disagreement about natural facts, such as the extent of the deterrent effect. *A* then points out to *B* various considerations—ones of which *B* was aware but to which he had not given weight—that the judge may make a mistake, imprisonment can reform men whereas capital punishment does not, etc. etc.; and in the end *B* comes to agree with *A* and to say that he made a mistake before. Such procedures do occur. A man may say that this procedure is not argument about how things are; it is persuasion to adopt a stance. But, let us suppose, *B* gradually admits that the various considerations tend to show his view 'wrong', 'mistaken', 'in error', 'untrue', and tend to 'establish' a 'conclusion' different from his original view. In a like situation, where *A* and *B* are discussing history and *A* has one opinion and *B* a different one, and *A* adduces considerations which, *B* admits, tend to show his view false, we would say that *A* and *B* are arguing. Why not in this case? Settling disputes by the sort of procedure just described is what we mean by settling disputes by argument.

(P3) is also false and so we can ignore also the question of whether it yields (C). Most of us know how to go about producing arguments to settle pure moral disagreements. To start with, a disputant may draw an opponent's attention to his own moral principles, and to the fact that they have consequences other than those which the opponent has appreciated. You and I may both agree that an action *a* has natural properties *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*. Yet your moral principles may have as a consequence that *A*-type actions are wrong. You may not have appreciated this. I point out the consequence and this resolves the disagreement. Thus I might believe that signing a false statement on an income-tax form is a case of lying and also believe that men ought not to lie. Yet I may not have drawn the obvious conclusion from this that I ought not to sign a false statement on the tax form. Secondly, a disputant may endeavour to show a man that his moral principles are incorrect. He will typically do this by pointing out some counter-intuitive consequence which they have. I may describe in detail, and if possible actually show you, the nature and consequences of some action which by your

principles is morally justifiable, and then ask if you really agree with this consequence of your principles. You may then see this consequence as obviously unacceptable, and so have to reject the principles. Professor Hare has described this process in *Freedom and Reason*.[10] He shows how, often, a man can be made to give up the view that Jews ought to be exterminated when some of its consequences are delineated (e.g. that if he was a Jew, he ought to be exterminated). Or we may show a man the orphaned children of someone killed in battle and ask him if he still wants to say that war is sometimes morally justified. In turn he can show us some of the horrible things which governments do and ask us if we are really going to allow such things to go on without trying to stop them by force. Cases such as these make men think that their principles are wrong and they then modify them so that they yield what seems to them the correct judgement about the awkward cases. Instead of saying 'war is wrong', I may say instead 'war is wrong unless it is trying to prevent extermination of peoples'. We look for the moral principle which most naturally fits the particular judgements we make. The process of getting people to change their moral principles by describing counter-intuitive consequences of them will be aided if we can point out to a opponent that one of his moral principles yields different judgements about particular cases from some other of his own principles, and therefore one or other must be wrong. In turn certain moral principles which we develop may seem so obviously right that we have to change our judgements about particular cases. It may have seemed obvious to a man that the British were right to fight the Second World War; but it may now seem to him, as a result of considering other wars, that war is never justified; and so he may come to change his judgement about the Second World War. In the course of argument others may lead us along such a path.

Now argument on the above lines certainly goes on and most of us know how to argue on those lines. So (P3) is false. Whatever a man's initial moral position, argument is relevant to changing it. Argument will start from some principles,

[10] See esp. Chs. 6 and 11.

showing that others conflict with them, or from particular cases where, an opponent claims, some action is obviously right or wrong. A disputant encourages his opponent to extrapolate correct moral principles from particular cases. *x* is obviously wrong, he says, and that is purely because it is *A*, and so surely *A*-things are wrong, he suggests. In order for moral argument between two persons to get off the ground, two disputants have to agree about some moral principles or some judgements about the morality of particular cases. People in general do have that kind of community of agreement. You and I may differ over all sorts of well-publicized moral issues—abortion, capital punishment, taxation, and war. But typically we share moral judgements over all sorts of particular cases, most of which are so obvious that the moralist does not bother to comment on them. Which are the moral judgements which I share with you will depend on who you are, but typically I may agree with others—that people ought not to write poison-pen letters, that Florence Nightingale did better actions than Hitler, that men ought not to lie in courts of law on oath, that I ought not to break your arm just because I dislike you, etc. etc. Although I have discussed moral matters with many and various people over many years, I do not recall ever having discussed them with someone with whom I found myself sharing no moral judgements at all. From particular moral judgements we draw out moral principles. Normally the rebel does *not* throw out all the morality with which he has been born. What happens is that he draws out what he thinks to be the principles implicit in certain moral judgements to which his society is committed, and those principles have consequences which conflict with other judgements which his society makes. Thus the first-century Jew judged that you ought to help your neighbour if he gets into real trouble. He then began to reflect what was it about your neighbour which made it your duty to help him. He might then see as the natural answer the answer suggested by Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan that it was the fact that that neighbour was a human being. A consequence of this is that you ought to help the Gentile too if he was in real trouble, a judgement which some of Christ's contemporaries opposed. Generalization of principles which are supposed to

apply within a nation or a family to worldwide application is indeed typical of moral development.

I am not claiming that moral disagreements are always readily settled. As I have admitted, this does not often happen. But this may be because argument does not go on long enough or because men are irrational. All that I am claiming is that there are recognized ways of going about settling a moral disagreement, and most of us know how to use them.

I turn now to the second objection to the objectivity of moral judgements. This says that however fully we describe an action in natural terms, as 'ϕ' (e.g. 'killing a man not in self-defence, nor in execution of a judicial process, nor in war . . .'), it always makes sense for one man to say 'ϕ is not always a right action'. Both of these remarks are intelligible. Yet if an action being ϕ entailed it being right or entailed it being not always right, one or other of these remarks would be incoherent, which they are not.[11]

The conclusion that one or other remark must be incoherent is certainly one which the naturalist must accept. But incoherence is typically not always visible on the surface—if it was, most philosophers would be out of business. 'There is more than one space', 'time has many dimensions', 'men survive their death' may or may not be incoherent claims, but if they are it needs books of argument to show them to be so. There may be a similar incoherence buried in 'capital punishment is always wrong', or in 'capital punishment is sometimes right', and generally in one or other of all statements of the form 'ϕ is always a right action' and 'ϕ is not always a right action' (where 'ϕ' gives as full a description as you like of an action in natural terms). The fact that one or other of these may ultimately be incoherent is not

[11] For this objection see, among others, C. L. Stevenson and R. M. Hare. Thus Stevenson: 'Persons who make opposed ethical judgments may (so far as theoretical possibility is concerned) continue to do in the face of all manner of reasons that their argument includes, even though neither makes any logical or empirical error' (*Ethics and Language*, New Haven, 1944, pp. 30 f.). And Hare: 'it is possible for two people without logical absurdity to agree about the description but disagree about the evaluation' ('Descriptivism', repub. in W. D. Hudson (ed.), *The Is/Ought Question*, London, 1969. See p. 246).

touched by the suggestion that statements of both forms are always 'intelligible'. We can understand what is being said by the negation of most analytic statements (other than very trivial tautologies). We can understand what is being said by 'π is greater than 3.2' and by 'π is less than 3.2', but a little argument will show that there is an incoherence buried in the first claim. It may well be like this with moral judgements for anything that the second objection has shown. The incoherence would have to lie buried fairly deep in the case of one or other of some pairs of moral judgements. But some incoherences are buried very deep. Consider again Goldbach's famous conjecture, put forward in the eighteenth century, that 'every even number is the sum of two prime numbers'. This has been proved to hold for many million even numbers, but no one has yet proved either that it holds universally or that there is an exception to it. Yet given the definitions of the terms codified in the axioms of arithmetic, there is presumably an incoherence either in 'every even number is the sum of two primes' or in 'not every even number is the sum of two primes'; that is, a contradiction can be derived from one or other claim. Yet after two hundred years of hard work no one has yet proved which claim is incoherent.

I pass now to the two objections which concern the connections of moral judgements with attitudes and actions respectively. The third objection claims that (to put the matter in our terminology) agreement on natural facts does not entail agreement in attitude whereas agreement about moral matters does entail agreement in attitude. This suggests a strong disanalogy between agreement about natural facts and agreement about morals, suggesting that agreement of the latter kind is not agreement about any kind of fact at all. Thus Stevenson: 'Supporting reasons have only to do with beliefs, and in so far as they in turn are proved by demonstrative or empirical methods, only agreement in belief will, in the first instance, be secured. Ethical agreement, however, requires more than agreement in belief; it requires agreement in attitude.'[12]

The difficulty with this objection concerns what is meant by

[12] Op. cit., p. 31.

an 'attitude'. In one sense of 'attitude' agreement about natural facts seems to require agreement in attitude. To believe that a is ϕ involves thinking of a as ϕ and thus, if taking an attitude is a mere cognitive stance, taking an attitude towards a as towards a ϕ-thing. 'There are beliefs such as the belief that something is alive which may also entail the possession of an attitude, even if all that can be said about the attitude is that it is one which one feels towards things which are alive, but not towards other things.'[13] Yet if taking an attitude is a matter of emotive stance, moral agreement does not necessarily involve community of attitude. I may judge that some action is my duty, without liking to do it or wanting to do it. The only hope for this objection seems to be to spell out 'agreement in attitude' as 'agreement in commitment to action' and thus the third objection turns into what I term the fourth objection—the objection concerned with the close connection between moral judgements and actions.[14]

This objection brings to our notice the fact that which moral judgements I accept makes a difference to what I do, and the fact that the connection between moral judgement and action does not appear to be a merely contingent one. Yet the connection between beliefs about natural facts and actions does appear to be contingent. This suggests a strong disanalogy between beliefs about natural facts and moral judgements, suggesting that the latter are not beliefs about facts at all. The connection between moral judgement and action has been described in various ways. Some writers hold the connection to be rather tighter than do others. For Hare moral judgements entail self-addressed imperatives; and to accept an imperative is to obey it. Thus '*X* is wrong' entails 'let me not do *X*'; and I accept the latter if and only if I do not do *X*. I accept a moral judgement, according to Hare, only if I

[13] Blackburn, op. cit. 103. Blackburn seems to consider that this entailment only holds for some beliefs; but that claim suffices for our purposes.

[14] Stevenson explains 'opposition of attitudes' as being 'opposition of purposes, aspirations, wants, preferences, desires, and so on' (op. cit., p. 3). But this is very vague, and confuses things which need to be kept distinct if any clear account of morality is to be given. For one can have agreement of 'purposes' but opposition of 'wants'. Does one then have moral agreement?

act in accordance with it. There are well-known difficulties in asserting so tight a connection. Cannot a man believe that *X* is wrong, and yet do *X*—through weakness of will? Yet surely there does exist a rather looser connection between moral judgements and actions, and the following account of it, developed at the end of Chapter 8, follows from the definition of morality with which we are working. Moral judgements provide overiding reasons for doing things. If I accept that morally I ought to do *X* rather than *Y*, I have to agree that doing *X* rather than *Y* would be doing the action which is over all the better; that there is stronger reason for doing *X* rather than *Y*. I may not of course conform to reason. I may give in to pressures or inclinations and do *Y*. Yet in so far as I act on reason, I will do *X*. The fourth objection can now be expressed in the light of this account of the connection between moral judgements and action as follows: claims about natural facts do not entail the existence of reasons for doing things, whereas moral judgements do. Such claim about natural facts as that there is food in the larder may provide a reason for doing something, e.g. going to the larder, but it only does so under certain contingent circumstances—e.g. if I am hungry, or want to ensure that there is no food left for anyone else—and it need not do so even then; there is no entailment from claims about natural facts to the existence of reasons for actions.

Yet the objection seems mistaken. There are claims about natural facts which do entail the existence of reasons for doing things. These are claims about a man's wants, desires, purposes, and intentions. My wanting to eat the food in the larder does seem to entail the existence of a reason for my going to the larder. The reason is not necessarily an overriding one—I may well have reasons for not going to the larder, e.g. if I wish to slim or if I have promised to fast. But surely my wanting to eat the food in the larder entails the existence of a reason for my going to the larder. Although there might be other reasons for not going to the larder which overrode the reason for going, circumstances could hardly be such as to make my wanting the food no reason at all for going to get it. Or, more generally, circumstances could hardly be such as to make my wants no reason at all for doing anything. It does

seem incoherent to say of me 'although he knows that there is food in the larder, and wants the food, he has no reason for going to the larder'. That being so, claims about natural facts do entail the existence of reasons for doing things. True, only moral judgements (or any statements about natural facts which entail moral judgements) entail the existence of overriding reasons for actions. But since it is the defining characteristic of moral judgements that they are concerned with over-all goodness and overriding reasons, it is hardly surprising that they (together with any statements about natural facts which entail moral judgements) alone carry such entailment. Yet pointing out that some claims about natural facts do entail the existence of reasons for action breaks down the suggested strong disanalogy between claims about natural facts, and moral judgements.

The Objectivity of Moral Judgements—(3) An Argument for Objectivism

If objections to objectivism fail, what can be said more positively in its favour?

One might of course just say that surely nothing needs to be said. 'Good', 'right', etc. are adjectives of our language which qualify nouns. To call things 'square' or 'red' or 'unpopular' or to apply almost any other adjective to a thing is to attribute a property to it, such that (with the qualifications mentioned on p. 189) it is either true or false to say that the thing possesses that property. If anybody claims that 'good' and 'right' do not function in this way like other adjectives the onus is on him to show the difference; and, as I have shown, attempts to do so fail.

However, a more positive argument is perhaps called for in view of the widespread scepticism about the objectivity of moral judgements. Before I provide one, however, it would be useful to develop more fully how the naturalist will interpret the account of moral argument given earlier. For I argued that if morality is an objective discipline, the naturalist account of it is to be preferred to others. In the naturalist's view the moralist in trying to establish a corpus of pure moral judgements is trying to establish a set of analytic truths. We

saw earlier that argument about pure moral judgements consists of trying to show that they are entailed by or alternatively are incompatible with other moral judgements agreed by the disputants to be obviously true. The naturalist claims that in accepting the moral judgement as true a disputant is accepting a claim about what is the case. The naturalist believes that pure moral judgements—that actions of types *A*, *B*, and *C* are wrong; actions of types *D*, *E*, and *F* are right—are either logically necessary propositions or ultimately incoherent ones. True pure moral judgements are logically necessary and false ones are ultimately incoherent. Other judgements that particular actions or kinds of actions are morally good or bad, i.e. impure moral judgements, are contingent propositions—they depend for their truth value on factual propositions about which natural properties the action or kind of action has, as well as on the necessary propositions connecting the natural and moral properties of actions. There are recognized ways of showing of factual components of moral judgements whether they are true or false. The other component, the pure moral judgement, is in the naturalist's view either a necessarily false (i.e. incoherent) proposition, or a necessarily true one (i.e. one which is coherent, but has an incoherent negation). Now we saw in Chapter 3 that the only way to prove a proposition to be incoherent is to show that it entails a contradiction; and since judging that *p* entails *q* involves judging that *p*-and-not-*q* is incoherent, proving one proposition to be incoherent is only possible if you assume another one to be incoherent. We also saw in Chapter 3 that the only way to prove a proposition coherent is to show that it is entailed by another coherent proposition; and so proving one proposition to be coherent is only possible if you assume another one to be coherent (and that the latter entails the former). Hence arguments about morality, in assuming certain moral judgements to be true for the purpose of proving others, make (as well, maybe, as factual assumptions) assumptions of the kind which philosophers must make in proving propositions to be coherent. In both cases we assume what is more obviously so for the purpose of proving what is less obviously so. But on another occasion what is assumed on this occasion can be *shown* to be so or not to be so from what

is even more obvious. Moral argument can take place and make progress, so long as there is consensus about some moral truths, just as philosophical argument can take place and make progress, so long as there is some consensus about what is coherent and what is not.

Having thus developed how the naturalist will interpret the account of moral argument given earlier, I return to the question of producing a positive argument for the objectivity of moral judgments. We saw in Chapter 3 that it is a sufficient condition (though not a necessary condition) of a sentence expressing a statement, in other words of a judgement being true or false, that there are established ways of arguing for or against what it expresses. Now we know how to go about showing whether a thing is square or yellow or sour; and though we cannot always in practice reach a definite conclusion, we know what procedures would settle the matter. Ultimately agreement depends on agreement in observation—reports and agreement about which observation reports render which other claims probable. We know too in general how to reach conclusions in theoretical physics and in history—though here procedures are often somewhat lengthier and less sure. The same applies to mathematics. Yet in all these cases we must admit that quite often disagreement may persist after a substantial amount of argument; that we are only fairly well agreed as to how to go about resolving it; and that to some extent criteria for assessing arguments are not precise enough to make all issues settlable. Nevertheless, the procedures are sufficiently well agreed for us to say that physics, history, and mathematics are objective disciplines, the 'conclusions' of which are true or false.

Now I argued earlier that if morality is objective, the naturalistic account of it is to be preferred to others. On that account, as we saw above, morality is a deductive discipline seeking to establish a core of analytic truths. In that case (after any factual issues have been disposed of) moral argument would clearly be of a kind with argument in philosophy or mathematics. If we can find that agreement on procedures and results is as easy or hard to get in one of these clearly objective disciplines as in morals, that will indicate that there is enough agreement on procedures and results in

morals for us to term it an objective discipline. I suggest that the required parallel for morals exists in philosophy, and in particular in philosophical argument about what sorts of thing are and are not logically possible. Philosophers try to prove such things as that it is not logically possible for an event to precede its cause, for there to be more than one space, for there to be uncaused events, etc. etc. Philosophy looks like an objective discipline; looks as if, like history or physics, it is concerned to establish results which are true or false. Yet of course it is notorious that after years of argument philosophers often continue to disagree. Why then should we call it an objective discipline?

Surely for the following reason. There is quite substantial agreement between most people with respect to many sentences as to whether they express logically possible suppositions. 'He is older than his elder brother' does not, and 'Mr Heath is no longer Prime Minister' does, express a logically possible supposition, most would agree. Further, as we saw in detail in Chapter 3, there are agreed ways of proving whether or not other suppositions are logically possible. You can prove that a supposition is logically possible if you can prove that it is a consequence of something else that is logically possible. Thus you can prove that 'there is more than one space' is logically possible if you can describe a logically possible state of affairs in which, you can deduce, there is more than one space. You can prove that a supposition is not logically possible, if you can deduce from it a consequence which is not logically possible, e.g. a self-contradictory statement. Further, people are often brought to change their mind about philosophical issues by application of the above techniques. And if agreement is not reached in a finite time disputants normally know how to locate the area of disagreement and know the kinds of arguments which would have relevance in that area.

Now the situation with regard to morals is altogether parallel, as we saw earlier in this chapter. Most people share quite an area of moral agreement. They start from their common basis to try to settle disagreement by the recognized routes which I sketched earlier in the chapter. This procedure may not always produce agreement within a finite time, but

there is no obvious stopping-point. There are always ways of going on. We can adduce new cases, argue further about consistency, etc. Since philosophy is just like morals in the extent of ready agreement that can be reached, there is an obvious conclusion—that if philosophy is an objective discipline, so is morals. You may say that I have exaggerated the extent of the parallels between philosophy and morals, and that agreement is easier to come by in philosophy. I do not think that I have exaggerated; but even if agreement is easier to come by in philosophy, there are explanations of this which are very plausible and have nothing to do with philosophy being a more objective kind of discipline. These are the temptations to irrationality in morals—which we saw earlier—and the great skill which philosophers possess in argument.

So my argument in summary is as follows. If morality is objective, the naturalistic account of it is correct and morality is based on a set of logically necessary truths. In one discipline concerned with logically necessary truths, viz. philosophy, it is as easy or difficult to reach agreed results as it is in morals. Yet there is a sufficient amount and kind of agreement over methods and results in philosophy for it to be termed an objective discipline, and its results termed true or false. Therefore morals is also properly accounted an objective discipline and moral judgements correctly termed true or false. The extent to which agreement on moral judgements is possible when men are determined to reach conclusions to which they can honestly assent is emphasized by Hare in *Freedom and Reason*. But he does not draw the conclusion which seems to me to follow—that morality is a discipline which yields results which are true or false. Of course morality has its 'fanatics', uncovertible to the majority view in a lifetime; but philosophy has its fair share of those too. Their existence is not seen to cast a serious doubt on the objectivity of philosophy. Why take them more seriously in morals?

I conclude that moral judgements such as that an action x is a right action or that it is morally better than y, or that actions of type A are never morally good, are statements which are true or false. To say this is, however, not to deny that actions are often morally on a level. I do not wish to deny that often

there are no overriding reasons for doing some one action rather than some other action or rather than refraining from any action at all. Nor do I wish to deny that various life-styles are often morally on a level—your way of living may be very different from mine, and yet there be no overriding reason for pursuing my life-style rather than yours. All that I am claiming is that sometimes it is not like this—some actions, some life-styles are morally better or worse than others. And judgements which affirm that this is so, as also judgements which affirm that it is not morally better to do a certain action than not to do it, are statements which are true or false. We have good reason for saying that judgements about the moral goodness or badness of actions are true or false. That being so, an omniscient person (one 'omniscient' in the attenuated sense delineated at the end of Chapter 10) will know of any action, the characteristics of which are fully set out (e.g. that it is done by a person of such-and-such a kind in such-and-such circumstances), whether or not that action is morally good or bad. While we have rather cloudy feelings that abortion and euthanasia are evils, he will know the truth about these matters (whatever it is) with crystal clarity. He will in consequence know at any time of the actions which it is logically possible that he do at that time whether or not they are good or bad. An omniscient person who is also perfectly free will necessarily do good actions and avoid bad ones—since, we saw in Chapter 8, being perfectly free, he will necessarily do those actions which he believes overall good and avoid those which he believes overall bad, and, we have now seen, being omniscient, he will hold true beliefs in this field.[15] A man may fail to do his duty because he does not recognize what his duty is or because he yields to non-rational influences outside his control. But neither of these possibilities is a possibility for a perfectly free and omniscient person. It is logically necessary that a perfectly free and omniscient person be perfectly good.

While I have argued in this chapter that moral judgements

[15] Kant describes the moral situation of such a being in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Ch. II (see p. 81 in the translation by H. J. Paton of this work under the title *The Moral Law*, London, 1953).

are true or false, I have not argued for the truth or falsity of any particular moral judgement. Where the issue is in dispute, an attempt to show in any way conclusively that some particular moral judgement is true can be a lengthy business. However, two of my subsequent results depend for their correctness on the truth or falsity of some particular moral judgement. I shall produce arguments for the judgement in question. I regard these arguments as good arguments and I hope that they will convince many. Some readers, however, will find them too brief. I can only plead considerations as to what is a desirable length of this book as my excuse. Adequate argument in favour of these moral judgements could only be given in the context of a book about morality, and this book is not primarily about morality.

A Source of Moral Obligation

The second claim of theism to be analysed in this chapter is the claim that if God issues commands they create moral obligations; that actions become our duty or become wrong, when commanded or forbidden, as the case may be, by God; that man's duty is to conform to the announced will of God. Is it coherent to suppose that man's duty is to conform to the announced will of a certain perfectly free and omnipresent spirit who is the creator of the universe, omnipotent, and omniscient?

A theist who makes the claim about duty is faced with a traditional dilemma first stated in Plato's *Euthyphro*[16]—are actions which are obligatory, obligatory because God makes them so (e.g. by commanding men to do them), or does God urge us to do them because they are obligatory anyway? To take the first horn of this dilemma is to claim that God can of his free choice make actions obligatory or non-obligatory (or make it obligatory not to do some action). Yet the critic may rightly object that torturing children or genocide are immoral, whether or not God commands them. God's command could not make such actions right. To take the second horn of the

[16] *Euthyphro*, 9c.

dilemma is to claim that actions are obligatory or wrong in themselves and remain so whatever choices God makes. This horn has seemed an uncomfortable one for the theist for three reasons. The first is that it seems to place a restriction on God's power if he cannot make any action which he chooses obligatory. Our answer to this objection is clear. It is no restriction on God's power that he cannot do the logically impossible. *If* it is logically necessary, as we have claimed, that *certain* actions, e.g. genocide, are wrong, then God can no more make them obligatory than he can make a man both married and a bachelor at the same time. The second objection to taking the second horn is that it seems to limit what God can command us to do. God, if he is to be God, cannot command us to do what, independently of his will, is wrong—since, it is plausible to suppose, it is morally wrong to command a man to do what is morally wrong. Our answer to this objection is similar to our answer to the first objection. An omniscient and perfectly free being can—for logical reasons—do no wrong. Hence he cannot command wrong-doing. This in a way limits his power but makes him, for reasons considered earlier, no less worthy of worship. The third objection to taking the second horn is that traditionally God has been believed to have the right at will to command men to do at any rate many things, and men to have an obligation to do those things merely because he commanded them.

To meet this third objection to taking the second horn and also the earlier objection to taking the first horn, it seems to me that the most plausible course for the theist to take is to take different horns for different actions, and to say that *some* actions are obligatory or wrong independently of what anyone commands, and that *some* actions are made obligatory or wrong by divine command. Genocide and torturing children are wrong and would remain so whatever commands any person issued. It would follow, as we have seen that no omniscient and perfectly free person could command us to do them.[17] However, the theist may claim that *many* actions are such that if God commands them we have an obligation to do them. It would be because it is an analytic truth that if anyone with certain properties commanded us to do such and such actions, we would have an obligation to do them. For example it may be suggested that a man has an obligation to attend mass on Sundays or to care for the sick in Africa, if God commands, but not otherwise.

A powerful argument against this position is that we know perfectly well how to decide moral issues without bringing in the commands of God. Suppose we debate the rightness or wrongness of capital punishment. We know the kind of considerations which count for or against the wrongness of capital punishment as a penalty for murder. For is the consideration that if you find out that you have wrongly executed a man, you cannot remit any of his penalty or make amends. Against is the horror of murder and the need for an adequate punishment. Statistics of the deterrent effect of capital punishment or the lack of it are also relevant to one or other side of the controversy. We know how to settle the matter without bringing God in. Rightness or wrongness being establishable independently of God, his command cannot alter things.

This argument, though it seems initially powerful, is confused. Certainly we know how to decide moral issues if we ignore divine commands by supposing that there are none. But that does not mean that divine commands, if there are any, are irrelevant to moral issues; any more than the fact (if it is a fact) that we can show the wrongness of capital punishment, if we ignore any possible deterrent effect (i.e. suppose there to be none), means that deterrent effects, if they exist, are irrelevant to its rightness or wrongness. Maybe divine commands, if they exist, are relevant, possibly decisively relevant, even though we can settle moral issues on the assumption that divine commands do not exist. I shall now proceed to argue that if God has issued commands, they do have moral relevance.

Their relevance is nothing to do with the power of God.[18]

[17] That the rightness or wrongness of certain actions is unalterable by divine command is the view of Aquinas. See his *Summa Theologiae*, II.2ae.100.8ad 2 and also II.2ae.94.5. For Aquinas the first principles of natural law are completely unalterable.

[18] Contrary to what Peter Geach seems to claim. See his *God and the Soul* (London 1969), p. 127. For criticism of this see D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality*, Ch. 2.

Power does not give the right to command, even if it is infinite power and even if it is benevolent power. There seem to me at least two different characteristics among those traditionally ascribed to God which make his commands impose moral obligations on a man which would not otherwise exist. The first is that he is that man's creator and sustainer. Men depend for their existence at each instant on his will. Now many would hold that men have an obligation to please their benefactors. A man who makes no effort to please those who have done much for him is generally felt to be behaving in a morally bad way. A consequence of the general principle that men have an obligation to please their benefactors is that children have an obligation to please parents, who brought them into the world and keep them alive, clothe, and feed them. The obligation to please parents would be fulfilled by conforming to the parents' wishes (which may be expressed by commands), e.g. that the child should do the shopping or the washing-up, go to bed at a certain time or shut the door. There might be no special reason why the child ought or ought not to go to bed at the time in question other than that the parent has commanded it. But the parent's command makes what was otherwise not a duty a duty for the child. The child owes something to the parent in view of the parent's status. It is not that children have a duty to pay something back to the parent, but that because in an important respect the parent is a source of their being he is entitled to their consideration.

The moral views expressed in the last paragraph are by no means universal, but they are, I suspect, held by a considerable majority of the human race. A morality which did not think the worse of a man for making no effort to please those who had done him much good would seem a pretty poor morality. If the moral views of the last paragraph are correct then men are under a great obligation to obey the commands of God—a great obligation because, if God is our creator and sustainer, our dependence as the children of God on God is so much greater than the dependence of the children of men on men. We depend to a large extent on our parents for our initial existence and to some extent for our subsequent existence—they provide food, shelter, etc. But we depend on other persons too for our subsequent existence—the police, our parents' employers, the state's welfare officers, etc. And our parents are only able to bring us into existence and sustain us because of the operation of various natural laws (e.g. the laws of genetics and embryology), the operation of which, is, on the theistic hypothesis, due to God. However, our dependence on God, the author of nature, is, if he exists, far greater. He gave to our parents the power and inclination to bring us into being, and to them and to others the power to keep us alive. He keeps operative natural laws, as a result of which we have food and drink and health. Our obligation to God must be correspondingly very much greater than to our parents.

The other characteristic among those traditionally ascribed to God which makes his commands impose moral obligations which would not otherwise exist is that he is the creator of the rest of the universe other than man; he brought it into existence and keeps it in existence, and so is properly adjudged its owner. What greater claim could one have to property than having created it *e nihilo*, and kept it in being by one's free choice, unaided? The owner of property has the right to tell those to whom he has loaned it what they are allowed to do with it. Consequently God has a right to lay down how that property, the inanimate world, shall be used and by whom. If God has made the earth, he can say which of his children can use which part. The Bible is full of claims that God has given to persons various possessions (and thereby commanded other persons to leave them alone). Thus the Lord is said to have declared to Joshua that he gave to the Israelites the land of Canaan (Joshua 1:2 ff.). The right of God to dispose of the material objects of the world as he wishes is affirmed by Aquinas: 'What is taken by God's command, who is the owner of the universe, is not against the owner's will, and this is the essence of theft'.[19] It follows from this that it is logically impossible for God to command a man to steal—for whatever God commands a man to take thereby becomes that man's and so his taking it is not stealing.

Again, the moral principle about property to which I have

[19] *Summa Theologiae*, vol. xxviii (London, 1966; trans. Thomas Gilby, O.P.), Ia.2ae.94.5.ad 2.

appealed would not be universally accepted, but, possibly with qualifications, it would, I believe, be very generally accepted, and for those who do accept it the conclusion about God follows directly. So appealing to widely accepted moral principles,[20] I have argued that, if God is the creator of man and of the inanimate world, his commands can impose obligations which did not exist before. By parity of argument the commands of the creator can add to the obligation to do an action which is obligatory anyway. An action of a child which is wrong anyway becomes wrong in a new way if the parent forbids it.

Still, there are surely limits to the obligations which a divine command could create. Exactly where they are to be put men will differ. There are certainly limits to the obligations which a human parent's command can create, and to the obligations to obey a human owner of property in respect of its use. If a parent commands a child to kill his neighbour, the command imposes no obligation. Nor does the command of an owner of vast estates not to use some of his unwanted corn to feed the starving. At least, most people would accept these moral judgements. Some might urge that if God is our creator, he is so much more truly the author of our being and the owner of the land than are human parents and property-owners that there are no limits to the obligations which would be produced by his commands.[21] But most would surely judge that even God could not remove my obligation to keep a solemn promise when the keeping of it would cause harm to no one, or my obligation not to torture the innocent. But if God has the properties which we have discussed so far and there is some action *A* which it would still be our duty not to do even if God commanded it; then, as we saw earlier, God would not command us to do *A*. For then commanding us to do *A* would be commanding us to do wrong. Since, it is plausible to

[20] In his paper 'Morality and Religion Reconsidered' (pub. in Baruch A. Brody (ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*) Baruch A. Brody argues along similar lines to myself, that the two cited moral principles may provide a reason why the commands of God make actions right or wrong.

[21] As William of Ockham seems to have held. See F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. iii (London, 1953), pp. 104 f.

suppose, to command to do wrong is morally wrong, God who necessarily wills the good would not incite to evil.

I have argued in the last few paragraphs for the truth of certain moral principles. It would follow from the truth of these principles that an omnipresent spirit, who is perfectly free, the creator of the universe, omnipotent, and omniscient, would have a right to command men to do many things, though perhaps not quite everything. It would also follow that in so far as he did not have the right to command, it would be for logical reasons that he did not have this right (because it is an analytic truth that certain actions are right or wrong, whatever any person may command). It would also follow that, being omniscient and perfectly free, he would not command that which he had no right to command.

The obligation to please a benefactor may be more extensive than the obligation to obey his commands; he may issue no commands, but there is (with a large benefit, and to a limited extent) an obligation on the recipient to find out and satisfy some wish of the benefactor. Often the obligation to obey a command may be an obligation to do what, but for the command, would be supererogatorily good. Scotus[22] claimed that the commands of God can make it obligatory to do acts which are otherwise good, and wrong to do acts which are otherwise bad but not wrong. Further, the wishes or preferences or commendations of God can make supererogatorily good or infravetatorily bad what otherwise would be neither good nor bad. There is an obligation for children to obey or otherwise please parents (up to a limit), and yet it is good (though not obligatory) that they please parents by conforming to their wishes in some additional ways beyond obligation. It is a good thing to show gratitude to benefactors by actions beyond those which we are strictly obliged to do. A God is so much greater our benefactor than are human parents that pleasing him is so much more a good than pleasing them.

It follows from the arguments of this chapter that—given that there is an omnipresent spirit, perfectly free, creator of the universe, omnipotent, and omniscient—not merely is it coherent to suppose that he is perfectly good and the source of

[22] See Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. ii (London, 1950), p. 547.

the obligatoriness of many duties, but that it would be incoherent to suppose anything else. An individual's being perfectly good and the source of the obligatoriness of many duties follows from his possession of the other properties just listed.

12

Eternal and Immutable

THE argument of Part II so far has been that it is coherent to suppose that there exists now an omnipotent spirit, who is perfectly free, the creator of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and a source of moral obligation—so long as 'omnipotent' and 'omniscient' are understood in somewhat restricted senses. I shall consider in this chapter two further suppositions which the theist makes—that this being is an eternal being and is immutable.

Eternal

The property of being creator of the universe is different from the other properties which we have considered so far in the following respect. To say that there exists now a being with the other properties does not entail the existence of such a being at any other time. A being with all the other properties could come into existence yesterday and cease to exist today—though his ceasing to exist today could not have been something which was against his choice; otherwise he would not have been omnipotent before ceasing to exist. However if a creator of the universe exists now, he must have existed at least as long as there have been other logically contingent existing things. For a creator of the universe is (see pp. 133 f.) one who brings about or makes or permits other beings to bring about the existence of all logically contingent things which exist, i.e. have existed, exist, or will exist. On the assumption that an agent can only bring about effects subsequent to his action, he must have existed at least as long as created things.