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Dmitri Karamazov's challenge: "If there is no God, everything is permitted"

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Material conditional and the grounding of ethics: “If there is no God, everything is permitted”

Abstract: The famous saying “If there is no God, everything is permitted” deserves more attention than the traditional reaction of philosophical despise against popular ethics. In this paper, we are going to pay attention to different versions of this saying. We are going to argue that it is not just to saying that it is not the case that God does not exist and that some deeds are prohibited. There is something more in the saying than what is suggested by the logical form of a material conditional. The first part of the paper deals with this additional content. In the second part, we are making an attempt to justify the famous saying. There are different ways of deriving morality from religion, and the one we will explore is the one which derives morality from natural religion, but not from revealed divine commands. We will try to show that the mere existence of God conceived as a creator provides us with a justification that some deeds are not permitted. So there might be normative states of affairs, that are not decreed by any supreme being, and that are nevertheless depending on his existence as a creator. To put it briefly: given God and the exercise of his creative power, there are some obligations, due to God, but not necessarily commanded by God.

Introduction: Metaethics or out-dated folk psychology?

Metaethics can be defined as the study of foundations, if any, of moral statements. Over the centuries, among different cultural areas, many (if not all) moral statements have been linked with divine commands. But it is far from certain that obeying divine commands, for fear of reprimand, satisfies the concept of moral rightness. Except if God is supposed to conform his commands to what is morally good. And then, if the sole motive for obeying a divine command is that its content is morally right (be it obligatory or supererogatory), divine command will be but a reminder. For, if God (or any supernatural authorized agent) commands some action that is already morally obligatory, God is but recommending it. And, in the case of supererogatory actions commanded by God, their conformity to moral standards still does not depend on God. One could rephrase Euthyphro’s dilemma as follows, where theological voluntarism (and its related arbitrariness problem) is challenged by the Independence of the Good (and its related problem of the subordination of God to the Good):

Some action is morally right because it is commanded by God. (*Theological Voluntarism*)

Some action is commanded by God because it is morally right. (*Independence of the Good*)

Maybe the multi-secular secularization of ethics is partly due to the failure at solving the dilemma, or at least to the difficulty of accepting the purported solutions to the dilemma. It is well known that, at least since Hugo Grotius¹, the foundation of ethics is not a theological

¹ A careful reading of Grotius’ frequently invoked work (*De Jure belli et pacis*, 1625) shows that he does not support the Independence of the Good and the Right. More on this later. Interestingly enough, according to Aquinas, moral principles and norms (*praecepta*) can be inferred from the moral first principle of love of neighbour as self: *ST I-II Q. 99 a. 1 ad 2*. But they are not necessarily inferred from God’s existence as a creator and source of all persons and benefits, for the epistemic access to God is not self-evident. See Finnis, John, “Aquinas’ Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy”, 3.2.1, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/aquinas-moral-political/>. Nevertheless, ontologically, God remains the reason why good should be done and evil avoided, and this is due to the fact that rational creatures are designed by and for Him, the Good in itself who is their ultimate

matter any more, even not a matter of natural theology. Are we left with the view that the standard of Goodness does not depend on God? What about the old school saying: “If there is no God, everything is permitted”? Certainly, it looks outdated. At best, it will evoke the proverbial reply in one of the most tremendous novels ever written (Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*). At worst, it will favour the revival of violent theocracies. But some eventual misuses of the formula could reveal to be misleading. Before reassessing the saying, I intend to analyse these uses in the following.

I. Analysis of the saying

A conditional

Let us first analyse the famous saying, logically and contextually. “If there is no God, everything is permitted” is phrased like a conditional. Following a precious remark made by W.V.O. Quine, “A conditional [...] is ordinarily affirmed only in ignorance of the truth values of its components”, e.g: “If Hawkshaw saw me, the jig is up”². To some extent, it would be pointless for me to know whether Hawkshaw saw me or not, and nevertheless to stick to “If Hawkshaw saw me, the jig is up”. I would rather say then: “Since Hawkshaw saw me, the jig etc” or: “Since Hawkshaw did not see me, the show can go on”, for “If he had seen me, the jig would be up”. Those latter statements seem then to reveal that some believed causal connection had entered into the motivation of the former conditional. It will normally be *because* Hawkshaw saw me, that I consider that the game is over. Considering the conditional “If there is no God, everything is permitted”, we should therefore neutralize every theistic/atheistic or meta-ethical commitments, in order to get the true point of the formula.

Furthermore, a conditional statement can be interpreted as a “general” conditional, or as a “subjunctive” or “counterfactual” conditional. It can also be construed as a material conditional. The general conditional implies a connection between the antecedent (God’s non existence) and the consequent (universal permissiveness). This connection does not merely figure in the motivation of the statement “If there is no God, everything is permitted”, it has to be the content of the statement. On the subjunctive or counterfactual form of the conditional, we would get: “If there were no God, everything would be permitted”. Here, the speaker seems to be committed to the falsity of the antecedent. Any person who claims: “If there were no God, everything would be permitted” would probably wish to imply that there is a God and that, therefore, not everything is permitted. Note that this conditional is compatible with “There is a God and everything is permitted” (God is more liberal and permissive than supposedly). The material conditional has no causal or explanatory meaning. It just reduces to saying “It is not the case that God does not exist AND that not everything is permitted”, that is to say “God exists OR everything is permitted”. We will elaborate on this point more fully when considering whether “If there is no God, everything is permitted” can be construed as a mere material conditional.

end. The thomistic notion of natural law is rooted in the view that the universe is caused and cared for by God, since all things are “subject to Divine providence and ruled and measured by the eternal law”, the natural law being “the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature” (ST I-II, Q. 91, art. 2, Resp.). In this paper, we try to articulate otherwise this connection between God’s existence and moral obligation.

² *Elementary Logic*, Revised Edition, Harper & Row, New York 1965, p. 18.

A double-edged premise

Literally, the saying “If there is no God, everything is permitted” may count as a premise for a theistic argument. For you just need to add a second premise: “Not everything is permitted” in order to get the conclusion: “Therefore, there is a God”.

But this very saying could equally help justifying moral indifferentism, by adding another premise: “There is no God” in order to get: “Therefore everything is permitted”. By moral indifferentism, I understand the view that whatever a person does, it is morally permitted. Moral nihilism is the view that there are no moral facts, that nothing is right or wrong, or morally good or bad. According to moral nihilism, nothing being intrinsically moral or immoral, everything is permitted too, but in a weaker sense of “permitted”. As quite often in philosophical debates, and as recalled by H. Putnam, the *modus ponens* of the one is the *modus tollens* of the other³.

The theistic argument (<i>modus tollens</i>)	The moral indifferentist argument (<i>modus ponens</i>)
If there is no God, everything is permitted ($p \rightarrow q$) Not everything is permitted (not- q) Therefore there is a God (not- p)	If there is no God, everything is permitted ($p \rightarrow q$) There is no God (p) Therefore everything is permitted (q)

It should be noticed that the saying is not necessarily connected to the topics of divine command ethics. Suppose the theistic argument holds: it does not imply that the non-permission of everything is due to God commanding not to perform such or such action. To some extent, I shall try in this paper to disentangle both issues, in order to conceive a relationships between God and morality that does not essentially consists in God commanding or forbidding some deeds. There are different ways of deriving morality from religion, and the way we will explore is that which derives morality from natural religion. We will try to show that the mere existence of God conceived as a creator provides us with a justification that some deeds are not permitted (without wondering which ones). So there might be moral absolute facts, or norms about right and wrong, that are not decreed by any supreme being, and nevertheless depend on his existence as a creator. To put it briefly: given God, there is some duty, eventually due to God, but not commanded by God.

Having considered the conditional as a premise for arguments either to theism or to moral indifferentism, we should now focus on the conditional itself, rather than on its possible uses in arguments.

Several versions of the saying

If we grant that the conditional is true, we get then an entailment. The antecedent “There is no God” is then considered as a sufficient condition for “everything is permitted”. It is sufficient that there be no God for everything to be permitted. And “everything is permitted” turns out to be a necessary condition for the non-existence of God, for if the entailment is correct, it is

³ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 280.

not possible that the antecedent “There is no God” be true and the consequent “everything is permitted” be false. (In the following, we will read “permitted” as meaning morally authorized, and not merely legally authorized. Since we are considering the conditional, we are not necessarily committed to the existence of natural obligations (*vs* positive rules). Nevertheless, excluding them from the picture would largely impoverish the topic). Before inquiring into whether the conditional “If there is no God, everything is permitted” can be justified, we should consider that it admits several versions.

To begin with, we shall evoke an ironical version of the conditional, borrowed from Voltaire, and that should not be confused with our saying. Here is it: “I want my attorney, my tailor, my valets and even my wife to believe in God, and I fancy that then I would be robbed and cuckolded less”⁴. Implicitly, the conditional here at stake would be: if a person *believes* in God, she will be less inclined to do as she pleases. To some extent, it implies that when people do not believe in God, they easily go over the line. For even if, it does not follow necessarily, from $p \rightarrow q$, that $not-p \rightarrow not-q$, Voltaire’s sally, by saying that believing in God lessens the propensity to wrongdoing, seems to imply that not believing in God does not lessen, but favours this propensity. Here it appears that in our investigation, something has to be taken in account, which is not reducible to the logical relation of entailment: a causal link (here a motivational one) between God and morality. More on this later.

Nevertheless, note that here the entailment is NOT making the ontological point: “If there *is* no God, everything is permitted” (meaning: no God, no moral obligation). It is rather stating a motivation of people’s behaviour: if people believe in God, they will not dare to take too many liberties. Believing in God plays the role of a safeguard to ensure the loyalty and safety of human relations. As such, it does not (although it is consistent with it) require that God’s non existence would suffice to render everything permitted. It is the belief that there is a God (be it justified or not) that makes people stick to the rules and remain quiet. Clearly, believing in God (not God’s existence) is here supposed to have an inhibiting effect. Anyway there is a fictionnalist version of Voltaire’s sally, this is Baudelaire’s aphorism that “God is the only being who, in order to reign, doesn’t even need to exist”⁵. I do not wish to deny the relevance of this in social history and anthropology. Many deeds can be at least partly explained by the fear that the sky is going to fall down. Fear of divine punishment, desire of divine rewarding might play a key role in the psychological explanation of many (past?) human actions. But since it accounts for interest, it is not likely to ground what we call a moral obligation (unless

⁴ *L’A, B, C ou Dialogues entre A, B et C* (1768), “Seventeenth Talk, *On curious things*”. The discussion is about the eternity of the universe, biblical chronology, and then turns on the belief “in a rewarding and punishing God (en un Dieu rémunérateur et punisseur)”. One of the discussants (named A.) claims: “I know whatever has been told on this abstruse matter, and I do not mind”. He then makes the sally above considered: “I want my attorney, my taylor, my valets...” before concluding: “so useful an opinion to the human kind should not be undermined (il ne faut point ébranler une opinion si utile au genre humain)”. C. argues: “Are you kidding ? I have known a dozen of churchy ladies who gave their husbands foreign heirs”. Still more pragmatic, A. replies “But I have known one that the fear of God has refrained, and this is sufficient to me! So you think your dozen of shameless women would have been more faithful if they had been atheists?” (*Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, Œuvres philosophiques, Leroi et Féret, Paris 1833, p. 1977).

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes* (1864-1867, posth.1887) *Fusées. Œuvres complètes*, tome I, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1975, p. 649. This is the second sentence from this fragment, which begins with: « Even if God did not exist, religion still would be holy and divine ». This is counterfactual fictionalism.

moral obligation be reduced to interest).

In order to clarify the distinction between the ontological grounding and the epistemic link, let us assume there is no God. If there is no God, certainly nothing is permitted or allowed *due to God*, and nevertheless the belief that there is a (rewarding or punishing) God could play an important role in the moral motivations of agents. Note that the motivation could be disentangled from fear of punishment or hope for reward. One could conceive moral duties towards God without any rewarding or punishing interventions. But it still would not solve the issue as to whether “if there is no God, everything is permitted”.

Voltaire’s sally has been recently challenged in the newyorker atheist campaign of 2006 : “You don’t have to believe in God to be a moral or ethical person”. There is no need to believe in God to behave morally good. Believing in God is not a necessary condition to be virtuous. To put it formally, the claim is:

$\forall p, \text{ not } (p \text{ is morally good} \rightarrow p \text{ believes in God}).$

It is sufficient, to make the preceding claim true, to yield a counter-example:

$\exists p, (p \text{ is morally good}) \text{ and } (p \text{ does not believe in God}).$

But this is still not the issue of “If there is no God, everything is permitted”, which states an entailment from divine inexistence to total moral permissiveness.

The fact that some (or many) people agree that believing in God is not a necessary condition of moral virtue cannot be opposed to the truth of the conditional “If there is no God, everything is permitted”: for both claims are mutually consistent. The conditional is claiming for an ontological link, the claim for virtuous atheists or ethical non-believers is making an epistemic and psychological assumption. Suppose p is an atheist, and “a moral or ethical person”, not only in the weak sense that p behaves according to ethical standards (if any), but even in the stronger sense that p performs her doings only in order to satisfy those standards, notwithstanding her subjective interests. Clearly p assumes God’s non-existence, but has not identified God’s non-existence as a sufficient condition for universal moral permissiveness. p has nevertheless true moral intuitions, and perfect kantian obedience to the moral law. Of course, the slogan of the newyorker atheist’s campaign could be interpreted as suggesting that « Not-believing in God is a necessary condition for being a moral or ethical person ». (It could be argued that believing in God reduces morality to fear or interest). But even in this case, the conditional “If there is no God, everything is permitted”, could be true.

The existence of virtuous atheists does not defeat “If there is no God, everything is permitted”. But could the existence of vicious theists do the job? Think of Tartuffe’s reply in Act IV, scene V of Molière’s masterwork:

“If Heaven is all that stands now in my way,

I’ll easily remove that little hindrance;

[...]

I can dispel these foolish fears, dear madam;

I know the art of pacifying scruples

Heaven forbids, ’tis true, some satisfactions;

But we find means to make things right with Heaven”.

Well, what can be inferred from Tartuffe’s reply? Not much. It just reveals that some purported theists may display a subtle rhetoric in order to pacify scruples, pretending to be able to make divine commands exceptionable, or rendering right what has been forbidden. But

it still does not defeat “If there is no God, everything is permitted”.

The field of possible answers

Let us now inquire into what possibilities are opened by the issue “If there is no God, is everything permitted?”. I am inclined to say: two times four answers. If we stick to the above mentioned view that “a conditional is ordinarily affirmed only in ignorance of the truth values of its components”, at least initially, we have two broad answers as regards the truth of the conditional: a positive one, which accepts the conditional as valid (the conditional is then an entailment), and a negative one, which denies the conditional to be true.

But, in order to motivate the broad answers, one may need to consider the truth-value of the antecedent (“there is no God”), or the truth-value of (“everything is permitted”). Note that, as soon as you are assessing a truth-value to both components, the validity of the conditional will follow mechanically.

The trivial cases when both the consequent and the antecedent are said to be true or false could be interpreted in terms of accidental coincidence (there is no God and everything is permitted, there is a God and everything is not permitted). The only case when the conditional is directly denied (there is no God and everything is not permitted) does not suggest either any causal or explanatory connection between the antecedent and the consequent. More interesting is the case of falsity of the antecedent, whereas the conditional is nevertheless said to be correct, and the case of falsity of the consequent, whereas the conditional is said not to be valid.

Karamazov’s conditional is all the more interesting that it is said to be true when the antecedent is denied, and false when the consequent is denied.

We then get the following kinds of answer:

1°) *Positive answers*: “indeed, if there is no God, everything is permitted”. From a purely logical point of view, claiming the truth of the material conditional only commits you to: it is not the case that God does not exist *and* that not everything is permitted. But if we take into account the possible motivations of defending the conditional claim, from the truth or falsity of the sole consequent or of the sole antecedent, we enter the discussion as to whether there is a (causal ? explanatory ?) link between divinity and morals. We get then four sub-kinds of positive answer:

- a) true, there is no God (as a matter of fact) and therefore everything is permitted
- b) true, but God exists, so this is a counterfactual truth: if God did not exist, everything would be permitted (which, by contraposition, turns out to say that God is a necessary condition for the existence of moral prohibitions)
- c) true, everything is permitted, and this must be due to God’s non-existence
- d) true, everything is not permitted, but if everything were, only God’s absence could account for that

2°) *Negative answers*: “Not at all! On the opposite, if there is no God, not everything is permitted”

Once again, from a purely logical point of view, disclaiming the conditional only commits you to: “there is no God and not everything is permitted”. But pragmatically, there is more to the denial of the conditional than just the conjunction of the antecedent with the negation of

the consequent. And this additional content expresses views concerning a link between divinity and moral obligation:

- a) God exists, but even if He did not, it would not imply that everything is permitted (God is not the unique source nor the sole warrant of moral obligation)
- b) although there is no God, not everything is permitted (morals can survive the death of God)
- c) not everything is permitted, but this is not due to God's existence
- d) everything is permitted, but this is not due to God's non existence

Here, the counterfactual of the one is the assertive conditional of the other. To put it briefly,

Truth-value of the conditional/ truth-value of the antecedent	The conditional is true	The conditional is false
The antecedent is true	there is no God and therefore everything is permitted	although there is no God, everything is not permitted
The antecedent is false	if God did not exist, everything would be permitted	even if God did not exist, it would not follow that everything is permitted

Let us apply the same to the truth of the consequent

Truth-value of the conditional/ truth-value of the consequent	The conditional is true	The conditional is false
The consequent is true	everything is permitted, since there is no God	God's non-existence is not a sufficient condition for moral permissivity
The consequent is false	if everything were permitted, this would follow from God's non being	even if everything were permitted, that would not follow from God's non existence

Let us turn to illustrate the effective meaning of those different answers. In the following, we reduce the positive and negative answers to two sub-kinds, in order to get rid of the preceding redundancies.

First positive answer: a) True, there is no God and therefore everything is permitted.

In october 2008, the British Humanist Association has campaigned for this answer, written up on London buses: "There is probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life" (to put it otherwise: "when the cat's away, the mice will play"). And this implies a frequent but surprising connection between the existence of God and worry, chore, prohibition, uneasiness. God is then conceived, or rather counterfactually conceived as a threat to the pleasures of existence, as a troublemaker, as a source of fear, which has to be denied at all cost. This conception is surely widespread, and may be deep-rooted in human psychology. Along this view, God would be a kind of parental superego telling us what we should not want. But is it justified? It is far from clear that, if there is a God, the pursuit of pleasure and the desire to

enjoy one's life are offending the author of life. There is no reason why enjoying one's life should be a source of worry. Of course, there might be misuses of the so-called gift of life.

Second positive answer: b) If God did not exist, everything would be permitted

The second positive answer is pretty well phrased in the famous claim made by Dmitri in Dostoevski's *Brothers Karamazov*. It is worth being a little more contextualized than usually: "What if He doesn't exist? What if Rakitin's right—that it's an idea made up by men? Then if He doesn't exist, man is the chief of the earth, of the universe. Magnificent! Only how is he going to be good without God? That's the question. [...] But after all, what is goodness? Answer me that, Alexey. Goodness is one thing with me and another with a Chinaman, so it's a relative thing. Or isn't it? Is it not relative? A treacherous question! [...] Then everything is lawful, if it is so?"⁶

In the following, I do not wish to imply that Dmitri Karamazov is making an argument. My concern is not to interpret the subtle psychology of Dostoevsky's characters. I just intend to discuss the role played by the saying "If there is no God, everything is lawful (or permitted)" And Dmitri's speech is suggesting interesting mediations or links between God's existence and moral obligation. Let us turn to consider those missing links in the implicit argumentation. Dmitri's claim could be construed as follows:

- (1) if God doesn't exist, man is the chief of the earth, of the universe
- (2) if man is the chief of the universe, it is up to man to define goodness
- (3) the human definition of goodness is relative to cultures
- (4) if the definition of goodness is relative, there is no universal moral obligation
- (5) if there is no universal moral obligation, everything is permitted/lawful

Therefore, (6): "If God does not exist, everything is lawful".

Let us turn to review each of those steps. Step (1) alone is already problematic: it does not follow, from God's non-existence, that man is the chief of the universe. There could be no chief at all. The universe could be anarchistic. As regards step (2), it is equally far from evident. One could be the chief of the universe, without being capable of defining goodness. The very notions of moral authority, and moral value are questionable. This is pretty well argued by Sartre's claim in *Existentialism is a humanism*, with an explicit reference to Dostoevsky: "if God does not exist...thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think of. Dostoevsky once wrote: "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted"; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist... Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor ahead of us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse."⁷ Even if step (3) is granted, step (4) raises another problem: for the lack of

⁶ *Brothers Karamazov*, transl. Constance Garnett, The Lowell Press, New York, 1912, p. 669.

⁷ *Existentialism Is a Humanism* [1946] transl. Philip Mairet, World Publishing Company (1956). Thirty years later, in an interview with Simone de Beauvoir, concerning the famous "If God does not exist, everything is permitted", Sartre grants that "it is abstractly true". He adds: "I see that killing a man is bad. Directly, absolutely bad. [...]. I consider that morals, and the moral activity of man *is like some absolute in the relativity*" (Simone

unanimity to define goodness (due to the existence of moral aliens, the reign of moral skepticism, or of moral nihilism) does not entail the non-existence of any universal moral obligation (just as the existence of ignorant persons in arithmetics, or of mistakes in calculations does not entail the falsity or the uncertainty of arithmetics). Moreover, under the reign of different substantive conceptions of goodness, there could be, as suggested by Montaigne or Descartes a formal common obligation to follow the moral standards of the culture you live in. Inference (5) is then not warranted.

The truth of the conditional (6) is rendered dubious by the weakness of steps (1) to (5).

Let us now turn to consider the two principal negative forms to the answer.

First Negative answer: a) even if God did not exist, not everything would be permitted

The first kind of negative answers consists in claiming: False ! even if God did not exist, everything would not be permitted. This is the kind of claim made in the campaign whybelieveingod.org : on a poster you could see a young woman disguised in Santa Claus with a simple comment: "Just be good for goodness's sake". More familiar to the scholars is the very often quoted Foreword to Hugo .s' *De jure belli ac pacis*: "And indeed, all we have now said would take place (*locum aliquem haberent*) though we should even grant, what without the greatest Wickedness cannot be granted, that there is no God, or that he takes no Care of human Affairs (*etiamsi daremus, quod sine summo scelere dari nequit, non esse Deum, aut non curari ab eo negotia humana*)" ⁸. The claim is that morals, or the conviction of inconditionnal duties or obligations is epistemically independent of God's existence. As a matter of fact, many people feel committed to moral duties without feeling committed to the acceptance of God's existence. But this is not sufficient to defeat the entailment "If there is no God, everything is permitted".

Grotius is thus supposed to have claimed that the right and the wrong can be conceived without God. Nevertheless, Grotius adds: "And this now is another Original of Right, besides that of Nature, being that which proceeds from the free Will of God, to which our Understading infallibly assures us, we ought to be subject: And even the Law of Nature itself, whether it be that which consists in the Maintenance of Society, or that which in a looser Sense is so called, though it flows from the internal Principles of Man, may notwithstanding be justly ascribed to God, because it was his Pleasure that these Principles should be in us. And in this Sense *Chrysippus* and the *Stoicks* said, that the Original of Right is to be derived from no other than *Jupiter* himself; from which Word *Jupiter* it is probable the *Latins* gave it the Name *Jus*" ⁹.

de Beauvoir, *La cérémonie des adieux* - Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre août-septembre 1974, Paris, Gallimard 1982, p. 552, my translation).

⁸ Hugonis Grotii, *De Jure belli ac pacis libri tres*, in quibus jus naturae et gentium, item juris publici praecipua explicantur, apud N. Buon, Parisiis 1625, Prolegomena (no pages), english version Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, edited and with an Introduction by Richard Tuck, from the Edition by Jean Barbeyrac (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), vol 1. p. 89. But this claim of independent self sustained morals is immediatly contradicted: "it hence follows, that God, as being our Creator, and to whom we owe our Being, and all that we have, ought to be obeyed by us in all Things without Exception, especially since he has so many Ways shewn his infinite Goodness and Almighty Power" (*Ibid.*, pp. 89-90). We will elaborate later on the transition from *owe* ("God, our Creator, to whom we owe our being") to *ought* ("ought to be obeyed by us in all Things").

⁹ Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, edited and with an Introduction by Richard Tuck, from the Edition by Jean Barbeyrac (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), vol. 1, pp. 90-91. As a matter of fact, Grotius also

If God is a source of moral obligations, it will be in virtue of his creative operation. Anyway, appealing to such or such reading or interpretation of Grotius is not relevant. I am not concerned with the exegesis of Hugo Grotius, but with the truth of the claim. In the second part of this paper, I will inquire into the justification of this link between creative power and moral obligation.

Second negative answer: b) There is no God, but not everything is permitted.

The second kind of negative answer is: There is no God, but not everything is permitted. The death of God does not jeopardize the authority of morals. It frees morals from its mystic packaging.

Consider the famous claim by Kant: “So far it is grounded on the concept of man, as a free being who therefore obliges himself with his reason to unconditional laws, morals neither require the idea of a distinct superior being above him, who would let him know his duty, nor any motive of observance but the law itself”. Following Kant, the self-sufficiency of morals as regards religion is not only epistemic: moral truth (or rather moral standards) are ontologically independent on God’s existence. As Kant puts it a few lines later: “Therefore, to the extent to which it is its concern, morality (objectively, as regards the will, but equally subjectively, as regards power) needs in no way religion, but is self-sufficient thanks to the pure practical reason”¹⁰.

Another example is the view of “*morale indépendante*”, which becomes in the 1860, the title of a weekly prospect, issued by Caubet. Issue n°156 of 26th July 1868 contrasts the strangeness, the bizarrerie, and the atrocity of positive cults (“dogmas, mysteries, miracles, discipline, amulets, etc.” and “the common ground” of “prescriptions of which the reason, the law, if one is willing to think of them, is the respect due to the person”. Hence the following claim: “morality is one, universal, the same for everyone” and the prophecy: “Either everything has to be secularized, or everything has to become religious again”.

“If there is no God, everything is permitted”: a mere material entailment?

Until now, we have been inquiring into four possible answers to the issue as whether, given no God, everything is permitted. As noticed above, the conditional “If there is no God, everything is permitted” can be construed like a material conditional, that is to say like the entailment defined, in terms of merely stipulated truth conditions, by “ $p \rightarrow q$ is false only when p is true and q is false”. The only conjunction excluded by the material conditional is then: “There is no God” AND “Not everything is permitted”. It is compatible with “There is no God, and everything is permitted”, with “God exists, and everything is permitted” and even with: “God exists and not everything is permitted”. It is equivalent to the disjunction: “God exists or everything is permitted”.

claims that “natural law is so unalterable, that God himself cannot change it (*est autem jus naturale adeo immutabile, ut ne a Deo quidem mutari queat*). ... as God himself cannot effect that twice two should not be four; so neither can he, that what is intrinsically Evil (*intrinseca ratione malum*), should not be Evil ” (Cap. I, §X, 5, p. 155). Neither can God change his own essence. But this does not mean that natural law does not depend on God who remains “the author of nature”(Cap. I, § X, 1, p. 151). They differ “from a Voluntary Divine Right” (Cap. I, §X, 2, p. 152) but still depend on Him as the author of nature.

¹⁰ *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft (Religion within the limits of reason alone), Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Erste Abteilung : Werke, Band VI, Berlin, Georg Reimer 1914, p. 3 lines 3-7 and 11-14.

The material implication does not make the claim that God's non-existence is a necessary condition for universal ethical permissiveness. Neither does it state that ethical permissiveness would be a strictly necessary consequence of atheism.

Nevertheless, when a person is making the claim: "If there is no God, everything is permitted", she certainly does not reduce her claim to: "it is not the case that there is no God and that (nevertheless) not everything is permitted". For such a claim is saying nothing about the relationships between God's existence (if any) and moral obligation (again: if any). It could be but an empirical statement: "Look ! what a coincidence ! when there is no God, there is no moral obligation".

This is obviously not the statement made by those who are claiming: "If there is no God, everything is permitted". It is more legitimate to construe this claims in terms of a bi-conditional endowed with an explanatory strength (to put it otherwise, in terms of an exclusive foundational relation), as in the following statements: "if not everything is permitted, then there must be a God. The mere existence of moral obligation implies God's existence as its grounding: no moral obligation (in the sens of a universal ethical duty) would hold without God as its source. The existence of moral obligation would be then the *ratio cognoscendi* of divine existence. And, conversely, if there is a god, not everything is permitted: God's existence would be the *ratio essendi* of moral obligation.

It would be because not everything is permitted that we would know that there is a God (a universal source of moral obligation).

And conversely, it would be because of God's existence that not everything is permitted.

It is because, and only to that extent, that God exists (or if, and only if God existed), that not everything is (or would be) permitted.

It is this bi-conditional form endowed with a foundational meaning that I will now try to justify. I will try to support the ontological claim that God's existence and moral obligation are related. With some qualification: I will support the view that the existence of moral obligation without God, even if logically possible, is not metaphysically probable: given some conditions to be fulfilled for the existence of moral responsibility, God's existence is the best explanation as to whether there are moral obligations. In the following, I will consider the first half of the bi-conditional: "No moral obligation without God". I will not pay much attention to the second half of the bi-conditional: "No God without moral obligation", but it seems that, given a world of agents endowed with libertarian free will, the absolute lack of moral obligation would render this libertarian free will pointless. Whatever you would do would be permitted, so that your choice would make no moral difference to the world. Again, if God is identified with the Good, any wrongdoing would be prohibited, so that you would have the moral obligation to refrain or to abstain doing it. Of course, a God that does not bring about a world with free agents could be said to exist, in absence of any moral obligation. Nevertheless, we will focus on the issue as to which extent God's existence is required for there being moral obligation.

II. An attempt to justify the saying

God: one trivial answer and three worries

In our introductory comments, we have been evocating the obsolete, or even obscene theocratic foundation of ethical obligation. We are now revisiting this out-dated solution. In a sense, God can be considered as a trivial answer to the issue of the foundation of ethical obligation. For if we define God (or if we identify God with) “the one whose existence alone brings about (or would bring about) that everything is not permitted”, then the saying “If there is no God, everything is permitted” turns out to be tautological. If we grant that God is the sole possible moral legislator, the saying is ipso facto justified. But here we encounter a threefold problem.

1°) the first worry is: why should moral obligation need any source or foundation? “Not everything is permitted”, even construed like an objective statement, could be a brute unaccountable fact, foreign to any heteronomous intrusion by some “moral theology”. Any theological foundation of morals would represent a “supernaturalistic fallacy”, or a case of category error. What is prohibited would be intrinsically bad, and not subject to any theological justification.

2°) the second worry is the classical *is-ought* problem: why on earth the fact that there *is* a God could imply that such and such deeds ought not to be done?

3°) finally, there is the worry about the arbitrariness of divine command ethics. As G. Sayre-MacCord puts it: “[if] there is something special about God's power, or about His role as creator, that makes his commands distinctively legitimate. What is needed is an account of what is special”¹¹.

As previously announced, we will advocate the view that there are absolute moral facts that are connected with God’s existence as a creator, nevertheless without depending on divine decrees. The fact that God would reveal or decree them would not render them more legitimate (which does not mean that it would not be useful).

First worry: why on earth should ethics require God as a foundation?

Let us first focus on the first worry. Why should we look for any foundation of Ethics? Is not Ethics self-sustained? Since the age of enlightenment, many attempts have been made to free ethics from divinity. Those efforts culminate in G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, whose conception of goodness is that of some intrinsic unanalysable and underivable value. God’s existence is supposed to be out of the picture. Nevertheless, there is an interesting issue as to whether what we describe as absolutely unanalysable and underivable is not linked with the conception of some godhead. And, the explanatory power of a theory of the Good as intrinsic value has to be compared with that of a theory linking moral obligation with divinity. Of course we will not assess Moore’s theory in the following. Anyway our age is the age of moral pluralism, or even moral nihilism (according to J.-L. Mackie, the non-existence of the Good is the best explanation for moral disagreement). My suggestion is, if moral is to be saved from nihilism, it requires a refoundation. In absence of any universal ethical consensus (which probably never occurred), the claim for the objectiveness of the Good is crying out for

¹¹ Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey, "Metaethics", "2. The Euthyphro problem", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/metaethics/>>. See also “Theological voluntarism”, by Mark Murphy, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/voluntarism-theological/>> especially 3.2 “Theological voluntarism and arbitrariness”.

an explanation. The failure of the programme of an autonomous and universally acknowledged ethics has completely changed the deal.

The second worry: the is-ought problem

In such a context, any theory providing us with a plausible explanation for the existence of universal moral obligation is welcome (at least when one is not satisfied with pluralism or nihilism).

Following this line, I will try to support the relevance of a relationship (not only factually bi-conditional, but foundational) between God's existence and the existence of moral obligation. But the second worry remains: how on earth could some existing state of affairs generate duties, obligation, how an 'ought' could be rightly inferred from an 'is'? And, if moral obligation is to be derived from God's existence, how are we to escape the arbitrariness of divine command ethics?

We have to specify the requirements of "Not everything is permitted". There are two versions of it: a weak one, according to which in every cultural area, in each society, there are prohibitions, bans or taboos. Then, there is a strong version according to which there are prohibitions, bans or taboos that are embedded in every cultural area or in each society. (This is a case of quantifier shift: $\forall s \exists d$ such as s prohibits d vs. $\exists d \forall s$ such as s prohibits d , where s designates a society and d some deed). I will favour the second version, the strong one, for it seems to me more coherent that God's existence would be related with the stability and unanimity of moral standards. A good God will probably not bring about a world of moral aliens.

So I understand the clause 'Not everything is permitted' as implying the existence of universal moral obligations or prohibitions. We are then looking for a source of universal obligation that cannot be jeopardized or challenged neither by cultural exceptions, nor by communitarian claims. To some extent, Wittgenstein has sketched this universal and objective source of moral obligation: "...the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about". But Wittgenstein adds: "And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge"¹².

Once again (this is the classical Humean objection) there is a non sequitur from a state of affairs to an obligation. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's characterization of this chimeral 'absolute good' is powerfully suggestive: it suggests that the source of universal obligation should be endowed with what he terms 'the coercive power of an absolute judge'. Its efficiency requires the power of an agent. In Wittgenstein's view, this is why the absolute good is not a state of affairs. But why should it be a state of affairs? And why coercive? The source of obligation could consist in the relationships between some agent endowed with the power of an absolute judge, and moral agents. But what legitimates this power? And to which extent is it (or has it to be) coercive?

Following Wittgenstein's paradoxical suggestion, I would like to emphasize that the traditional God of western philosophical theism is a good candidate for the place of source of

¹² "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics" [1929], *The Philosophical Review*, LXXIV, 1965, p. 7.

universal moral obligation. This is the traditional claim of natural right, as Cicero puts it: “There exists, therefore, since nothing is better than reason, and since this is the common property of God and man, a certain aboriginal rational intercourse between divine and human natures. This reason, which is common to both, therefore, can be none other than right reason; and since this right reason is what we call Law, God and men are said by Law to be consociated. Between whom, since there is a communion of law, there must be also a communication of Justice”¹³.

Summing up Marcus’ claims, Atticus declares: “first, that the gods have been pleased to enrich and adorn us with their gifts, on purpose that we might administer them justly. Secondly, that all mankind bear a fraternal resemblance and relationships to each other. And lastly, that these natural brethren are bound together by the reciprocal obligations of friendship and affection, as well as social rights”¹⁴. This doctrine is still alive at the age of Enlightenment, as can be noticed in Voltaire’s *Traité sur la tolérance*, at the beginning of the last chapter (ch. XXII): “I say that we should regard all men as our brothers.[...] Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?”¹⁵. Jefferson takes it as the basis of his declaration: ... all men are created equal and endowed by their creator of certain unalienable rights... » (*The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America*, 1776).

To many, if not to all, this theistic foundation of ethics will appear outdated. Nevertheless, it satisfies the criterion of universality, since the relationships of God the creator (if He exists) to the creatures is universal. Each and every creature will equally depend on their ontological source. But is the criterion of moral obligation (vs. metaphysical causation) satisfied? Does the *is* dependence generate a *ought*? Does the *owe* entails a *ought*?

Does creation generate obligation?

The trivial answer is of course questionable. God’s existence has certainly played a paradigmatic role as foundation stone of the Human Rights. But does this historical circumstance have any justifying value as a conceptual foundation? This is the claim I want to support. If we owe our existence and faculties to a creator, this ontological dependence is likely to generate some obligation. How and why? For we are radically indebted to God for the steady exercise of His creating and sustaining power. We permanently owe to him, although through secondary causes (of biological heredity and cultural inheritance), our very

¹³ Cicero, *Treatise on the laws*, transl. Francis Barham, *The political works of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, London, 1842, vol. II., p. 40. Cf. Atticus’ ironical reaction: “Good heavens, my Cicero! from what a tremendous distance are you deducing the principles of justice!” (p. 44).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50. Cicero identifies this law “whose origin coincides with the raising of divine mind (*orta est simul cum mente divina*)”, with “the right reason of the supreme Jupiter (*ratio recta summi Iovis*)” the “most powerful God (*praepotens deus*)”. “Therefore, that aboriginal and supreme law is the Spirit of God himself; enjoining virtue, and restraining vice. For this reason it is, that this law, which the gods have bestowed on the human race, is so justly applauded. For it is the reason and mind of Wisdom, urging us to good, and deterring us from evil”. *Ibid.*, p. 81; “and divine reason must necessarily be possessed of a power to determine what is virtuous and what is vicious” (*Ibid.*, p. 82). “And this has the force of a law, not from the time it was written, but from the first moment it began to exist. Now, this existence of moral obligation is coeternal with that of the divine mind. Therefore the true and supreme law, whose commands and prohibitions are equally infallible, is the right reason of the Sovereign Deity” (*Ibid.*, p. 83).

¹⁵ *Oeuvres de Voltaire*, Tome XLI. Mélanges. — Tome V. Paris, Lefèvre, Firmin-Didot, Lequien, MDCCCXXXI, p. 363. Many quotes in the same mood are to be found in Grotius *Treatise*.

existence, our faculties and their operation. We owe him a debt of gratitude.

But of course, one might object, a gift as such does not require gratitude: it has to be a good gift, and the giver must be a benefactor. Suppose that existence, life and the faculties we are endowed with, turn out to be but continuous occasions of distress, deep suffering and despairing horror. In order to support the view that the author of existence deserves gratitude, we need an additional premise that God is, on the balance, a benefactor¹⁶. The problem of evil has to be addressed: why should a so-called benefactor allow natural or moral evils? Should we consider that the higher-order good of freedom outweighs the terrible cost of so many sufferings that are due to the misuses of freewill, etc. ? There is something shocking in considering that the One whose existence (this is the hypothesis we are supporting) and creation entails that not everything is permitted not only allows, but ontologically sustains the existence and operation of the arm of the executioner...

Many problems of theodicy are at stake, which is not surprising since we are considering the relationships between God the Creator and the existence of moral obligations. For the sake of our argument, we have to adopt an eudemonic view of existence. This is a strong presupposition: that any individual (at least human) existence, on the whole, is something good. If existence, and especially human life, is not endowed with intrinsic positive value, the source of existence will not be a benefactor. And the fact that we (human beings) owe Him our existence, life, faculties and their operation does not generate any obligation to pay respect to this gift, which reveals to be poisoned.

The requirements for “Not everything is permitted” involve a special structure of the world where we operate as agents. Following Hutcheson, Swinburne remarks that not any possible world allows its inhabitants to experience moral responsibility. Experiencing moral responsibility requires:

- A current predictability of the effects of our basic actions¹⁷;
- A coherence of our intentions and of the actions that we bring about through basic actions;
- The possibility of answers to actions that are neither (all of them) determined by reflex patterns or deterministic laws, nor governed by mere chance;
- The faculty of exerting diachronically libertarian free-will, through a spatialized body;
- An epistemic access to the source, or at least to the existence of universal moral obligation.

This makes quite a few requirements. If those requirements are to be easily satisfied, they are not crying out for a theistic explanation any more. It is only to the extent that God’s existence

¹⁶ This is Cicero’s view in *De legibus*: “For he who knows himself must be conscious that he is inspired by a divine principle. He will look upon his rational part as a resemblance to some divinity consecrated within him, and will always be careful that his sentiments, as well as his external behaviour, be worthy of this inestimable gift of God. A serious and thorough examination of all his powers, will inform him what signal advantages he has received from nature, and with what infinite help he is furnished for the attainment of wisdom. For, from his first entrance into the world, he has, as it were, the intelligible principles of things delineated on his mind, by the enlightening assistance of which, and the guidance of wisdom, he may become a good, and, consequently, a happy man” (*Treatise on the laws*, transl. Francis Barham, *The political works of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, London, 1842, vol. II., p. 69).

¹⁷ See for example Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 215-217, p. 247.

makes them more probable than not, that God's existence accounts for the existence of moral obligations.

Let us consider by contrast the explanatory power of the atheistic hypothesis as regards the existence of universal moral obligation. Taken seriously, the atheistic hypothesis is that of a pervasive naturalism (pluralistic or monist). Given a self-existent universe (or multiverse), no part of it owes nothing to any other. As a consequence, there are neither morally right nor wrong states of affairs, for nothing ought to be otherwise than it is. (This is a point made by Spinoza). There are but emotive or physiological reactions of pleasure and pain. But no physical state of affairs generates any moral obligation. At most, it will raise interests for survival or desires of death. I do not wish to imply that atheists are necessarily committed to moral nihilism. Most of them (Good heavens!) will promote moral objectivism, or even a doctrine of human inalienable rights, whereas such or such "religious" people will despise it. But I am not concerned here with convictions or with behaviour, but with justification or foundation. A virtuous atheist is less justified in claiming moral objectivism than a theist.

In a self-existent and self-sustained universe, structural or dispositional regularities are mere exceptions, the predictability of causal chains is but mere chance, and the power of agentive mental causation turns out to be a brute unaccountable fact. Moral responsibility is therefore highly improbable. Moral obligation is then pointless¹⁸.

The third worry: Euthyphro's dilemma.

Let us grant that the God of the philosophers is a good candidate for the role as source of universal and objective moral obligation. We are then left with our third worry: the arbitrariness of God's moral authority. At least since Scot and Ockham, there is a claim that God could have commanded what actually contradicts our moral standards: absolutely speaking, not only he could have, but he still could command murder, or even the hatred of the creator¹⁹. This is the classical dilemma as to whether God's will can determine the moral value of some, or of any deed.

Let us now recall the context of the platonic dialogue. Socrates is asking Euthyphro about the essence of piety: "tell me then what is the pious?" (5d). After some attempts, Euthyphro claims that "the pious is what all the gods love" (9e): Piety is what Gods approve of. But as Socrates suggests, there are two ways of construing this claim: Do the Gods approve of what is pious because it is pious, or is it pious because the Gods approve of it? (10a) Following this line of distinction, Norman Kretzmann²⁰ has contrasted two theories of religious morality (which he expressed monotheistically)

¹⁸ According to Hanna Arendt, the resentment of everything given, and the claim for self-existence favours amorality (in the sense that "everything is permitted"). This is the diagnosis she makes: « modern man has come to resent everything given, even his own existence – to resent the very fact that he is not the creator of the universe and himself. In this fundamental resentment, he refuses to see rhyme or reason in the given world. In his resentment of all laws merely given to him, he proclaims openly that everything is permitted and believes secretly that everything is possible ». (*The Burden of Our Time*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1951, pp. 437-438).

¹⁹ See Mark C. Murphy, "Divine Command, Divine Will, and Moral Obligation." (*Faith and Philosophy* (1998), 15: 3–27), *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; William Mann, "Theism and the Foundations of Ethics." In William Mann, ed., *Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, Malden: Blackwell 2005, pp. 283–304. Alexander R. Pruss, "Another Step in Divine Command Dialectics" *Faith and Philosophy*, 2009, 26, pp. 432–439.

²⁰ See Norman Kretzmann, « Abraham, Isaac and Euthyphro : God and the basis of Morality », in D.V. Stump, ed., *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition*, New York, Edwin Mellen Press 1983.

(Moral Objectivism, hereafter MO) God approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong

(Divine Moral Subjectivism, hereafter DMS) Right actions are right just because God approves of them and wrong just because God disapproves of them.

This theory corresponds partly to divine command ethics (supported by Mansell and duly criticized by Mill). Gabriel Biel, for instance, seems to support this view of divine moral subjectivism: “It is not because something is right or just, that God wants it; but it is because God wants it, that it is right and just (*Non enim quia aliquid rectum est aut justum, ideo Deus vult, sed quia Deus vult, ideo justum et rectum*)”²¹.

As Kretzmann puts it, (DMS) is welcoming “the possibility that absolutely any action could be made morally right simply in virtue of God’s commanding or approving of it”. It would be pointless to claim that God is good and so “can be relied on not to approve of moral evil”, for, according to (DMS), “the only standard of moral goodness is God’s approval”: some divine arbitrary will generates servile obedience (“For such is our personal will”).

And then there is no objective grounding of morality (but only the subjective arbitrariness of God’s will). So it seems that any theist who wants to advocate moral objectivism is committed to Theological Moral Objectivism. But this theory, if less shocking, raises a problem.

In this theory God has nothing essential to do with morality. He just happens to command, or to approve of, what is defined as morally right, and to forbid and disapprove of what is defined as morally wrong.

The standard of moral goodness is above God. And there is still the question: where does it come from? Which process, or who is responsible for this brute unaccountable state of affairs that such and such deeds are said to be objectively morally right or wrong?

Identification of God with Goodness in itself

So, on the one hand, morality is an arbitrary matter. On the other hand, God is not the supreme standard of Goodness any more. But there is a way out to escape this dilemma. It consists in claiming that “God is identical with goodness”. On this view, God does not arbitrarily chose what is good. And, being the Good in itself, God cannot but create states of affairs that are good. He cannot but see “that it was good”. Nor does God passively conform to standards of morality. In creating, he acts well and does good deeds, for he is the Good in itself.

And then there is no more contrast between objectivism and subjectivism, there is no more dependency of God on preexisting rules of morals, and no more arbitrary choice of God. Therefore Kretzmann rephrases the two branches of the dilemma which then vanishes:

(DO’) God conceived as a moral judge identical with perfect moral goodness in itself approves of right actions just because they are right and disapproves of wrong actions just because they are wrong.

²¹ Gabriel Biel, *Collectiorum circa quattuor libros Sententiarum*, l. I dist. XVII, qu. 1 a 3, corell. 1K. nevertheless, Adolphe Gesché quotes another sentence which seems to imply God’s identity with Goodness: “Deus non postest contra rectam rationem, verum est, sed recta ratio quantum ad exteriora est voluntas sua. Nom enim habet aliam regulam cui teneatur se conformare sed ipsa divina voluntas est regula omnium contingentium”, in « Le christianisme comme athéisme suspensif », *Revue Théologique de Louvain*, 33, 2002, 187-210, p. 199.

(DMS') Right actions are right just because God, seen as a moral judge identical with perfect goodness in itself, approves of them

Once more, this may be a way of solving the is/ought problem. For if God is identical with perfect goodness itself, the world He brings about owes its existence to Goodness itself, and then rational agents who, as a matter of fact, owe their existence and capacities to Goodness, may be supposed to acknowledge and act justly, neither on the basis of arbitrary commands, nor in conforming to moral standards independent from God. God's power is not limited by other normative states of affairs. No moral requirements exist prior to God, but they do not exist by God's arbitrary choice. They depend on God's will only to the extent that God chooses to create. But moral obligations do not supervene on creation, they are bound to the dependence of the creatures on the creator. The ontological dependence of all creatures would then generate intrinsically the set of moral obligations.

The Good is then identified with God himself, and this identification is supposed to solve the deontology/teleology dilemma. The Good is in itself both imperative and attractive, because it is God, towards Whom everyone owes a debt. The Good is what God commands, but God Himself is the Good, so that he recommends Himself to us as a benefactor, by creating and sustaining the world and its inhabitants. As a consequence, what we are (rational creatures ontologically derived from Supreme Goodness) suggests how we ought to live: in respecting life and sharing the natural resources we owe to the creator, and so on... This was, as recalled above, the traditional justification of the Rights of Man, and already the justification of Natural Right according to Cicero or Grotius.

Note that this identification of God with Goodness in itself requires an epistemically independent preconception of what is good (moral intuition, voice of conscience, right reason...). This preconception provides us with a criterion as regards revealed divine commands. If what is commanded is not good, neither *prima facie* nor on second thoughts, we have some reason to deny that this command is divine. A bad god is a wrong god. For example, a command of murdering innocent people is certainly incoherent with the goodness of a universal creator. As a consequence, many literal interpretations of God's revenge on his enemies, or of God's purpose to eradicate non-believers (which is different from the purpose to favour belief) are to be corrected. Think of a passage of the Talmud of Babylon, where the Eternal is invited by his angels to celebrate the victory on Pharaoh and his army drowned in the red sea, and makes this reply: "Silence! It is my children who died". A good God will certainly not create human beings with in mind the design that it will be good than some of them exterminate the other part. If God is the source of every existence, he can be expected to endow his rational creatures with moral intuitions, such as the equal dignity of all human beings, the prohibition of murder, even in the name of God, the obligation to provide help, especially to protect weaker persons from stronger ones, etc. This endowment does not give rise fatally to a diallel such as: God can legitimately be obeyed for He is the Good in itself, and He is the Good in itself for he can legitimately be obeyed. In order to escape the diallel, it is sufficient that those intuitions be epistemically independent from the acknowledgment of God's existence. And, as regards Mackie's claim against the objectivity of moral intuitions, the divergence of those intuitions is not a knock-down argument against the objectivity of morals. Moral consciousness is likely to be obscured by passion, interest, fear. But of course,

I do not pretend to solve the objections against moral objectivism within four lines. In this paper, I have taken moral objectivism as granted and I have been concerned with the justification of its link with theism. Natural religion, seems to me, provides us with a good non-confessional foundational basis for moral obligation.

To conclude.

From our assessment of the (too) famous saying “If there is no God, everything is permitted”, we are inclined to make the following statements:

Probably if, and probably only if God (conceived as the Good in itself) exists, there are universal moral obligations for rational creatures.

Why should we adopt the probabilization of the statement? For there is no contradiction in the conjunction: “There is no God and there are universal moral obligations” (which is the negation of the saying “If there is no God, everything is permitted”).

Neither the following conjunction is contradictory: “There is a God and there are no universal moral obligations” (which negates “If God exists, not everything is permitted”).

Then there is no contradiction in the statement: “Everything is permitted if and only if God does not exist”.

Nevertheless, I hope to have suggested that the universal feature of moral obligation is best explained by the existence of God the creator of all existence, and is better justified than it would be by invoking a brute fact of practical reason.

The hypothesis of a perfectly good God, creator of the universe, is more likely to account for universal moral objective obligation, than the hypothesis of atheistic naturalism, or even the hypothesis of the independence of morals. Morals can be epistemically independent from natural religion (you can have moral intuitions without the natural knowledge of God’s existence, - although you have to stick to some absoluteness of those intuitions), but it can hardly be ontologically independent of God’s creative and sustaining power, which makes them subject to moral obligation. Note that this moral obligation is not defined in terms of obeying God’s commands. This normative state of affairs would still obtain even if God did not exert any commanding activity.

To some extent, this was Simone Weil’s claim in *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*: “There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she *is* a human being, without any other condition requiring to be filled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned”. Quite surprisingly, Simone Weil writes: “This obligation has no foundation, but only a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscience”. But she nevertheless endows this obligation towards human being with some justification: “The fact that a human being possesses an eternal destiny imposes only one obligation: respect”. Where does this eternal destiny come from? The reference to a transient reality becomes very clear, for this neoplatonic thinker: “Whoever has her attention actually focused on the reality outside the world simultaneously acknowledges she is subject, in public or private life, to the unique and perpetual obligation to remedy, proportionally to her responsibility and power, to all the losses of the soul and of the body that are likely to destroy

or mutilate a human's being's earthly existence"²².

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²² Simone Weil, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard 2013, tome V, vol. 2, « Ecrits de New York et de Londres », pp. 95-99. My translation.