An Examination of an Alleged Theological Basis of Morality

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THERE is a powerful argument first set forth by Plato that shows that a morality, even a religious morality, cannot be based on a belief in God or the gods. It may be prudent to do what a powerful being—a Hitler or a Stalin, for example—commands, but this certainly does not make the doing of it morally obligatory. It does not by itself even constitute a relevant moral reason for doing it. For 'God commanded it' to be a morally relevant reason for doing something, let alone a definitive moral reason for doing it, it must, at least, be the case that God is good. A believer, of course, believes this to be the case, but what **grounds** does he have for this belief? If he says that he knows this to be true because the record of the Bible, the state of the world, or the behaviour of Jesus show or display God's goodness, the believer himself clearly displays by his very response that he has some logically prior criterion for moral belief that is not based on the fact—if, indeed, it is a fact—that there is a Diety. Yet it is more natural for a believer to reject the very question 'How do you know God is good?' on the grounds that it is a senseless question. It is like asking 'How do you know that scarlet things are red?' or 'How do you know that puppies are young?' If he is a bit of a philosopher he might tell you 'God is good' like 'Puppies are young' is analytic. It is a truth of language. We could not—logically could not—call any being, ground of being, power or force 'God' if we were not also prepared to attribute or ascribe goodness to it. This is indeed so. As we can only call the dog we see in the park 'a puppy', if we already understand 'young' and know how to judge whether or not a dog is young, so we can only properly call some being, force or power 'God' if we already understand what it is for something to be good and know how to judge whether or not such a being, force or power is good. In this fundamental way even the devout religious believer cannot possibly base his morality on his religion—that is, on his belief in God. He, too, has an even more fundamental criterion for judging something to be good or morally obligatory. Since this is so, God cannot be the only criterion for moral belief, let alone the only fundamental or adequate moral criterion. We must look elsewhere for the foundations of Morality.[1]

A defender of Judeo-Christian ethics could accept this and still maintain that there could be no adequate or genuine morality without God. Surely we must have some understanding of 'good'; surely we must have some criteria for moral terms which are not derived from our religion, but it remains the case that only a God-centered morality could satisfy our most persistent moral demands.

How could religious moralists defend such a claim? They could start by arguing that I have considered the question of morality and religion in too rarified an atmosphere. I have treated morality as if it were in a kind of vacuum. I have failed to take into consideration the enormous importance to morality of questions concerning man's human nature (his actual desires and needs) and the concrete nature of the world he

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[1] I have developed this argument in my "Some Remarks on the Independence of Morality from Religion", *Mind*, vol. 70 N.S. No. 278 (April 1961) and "Morality and God", *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 12 no. 47 (April 1962).

lives in. Indeed we cannot derive what we ought to do from any statements which merely assert that so and so is the case; but in deciding what to make the case, in deciding what is worth seeking, what is ultimately desirable, we most surely need to have some clear understanding of what is the case. Such an understanding is something to which any sane morality aspires.

Any realistic morality — secular or religious—links morality in some close way with what men on reflection actually desire and with that illusive thing we call "human happiness". Such moralists would be in fundamental agreement with Nowell-Smith's remark that "if men had no desires and aversions, if they felt no joy and no remorse, if they were totally indifferent to everything in the universe, there would be no such thing as choice and we should have no concept of morality, of good and evil".[2] We surely cannot crudely identify 'good' with 'object of desire' yet if men did not have certain desires and aversions, certain wants and needs, there would be no morality at all.

They could then go on to point out that philosophers as different as Aristotle and Mill have wanted to say something more than this. We, indeed, seek many things and have many desires, yet they are but particular expressions of a more general desire. A man may want a civic office, a well-heeled wife, the ownership of a newspaper, a trusteeship in a university but he wants these things because they are means to power and prestige. He, in turn, craves power and prestige because he is seeking security. He seeks security because only through attaining security can he attain what all men desire, namely, human happiness. **The secular moralist's great mistake is in failing to see that in God alone can man find lasting happiness—the end of all moral striving.**[3]

John Hick, an able Protestant theologian, defends such a view in his essay "Belief and Life: The Fundamental Nature of the Christian Ethic".[4] Like Aristotle, Professor Hick claims that our basic desire is the desire for happiness. It is the ultimate goal for all human beings. Professor Hick recognizes that to make this claim is not to assert a grand anthropological hypothesis. He makes it quite explicit that his statement has the status of an implicit definition. Yet, he goes on to claim that this does not make the identification of the final object of human desire trivial.

Christian philosophers like Professor Hick take yet another step with Aristotle. While not sharing Aristotle's particular conception of the content of human happiness or lasting contentment, they do share his overall semantical requirement that we identify human happiness with whatever it is that we human beings desire simply for its own sake and never simply as a means to anything else. That is, they agree, that Aristotle was right in claiming that 'happiness is that which mankind desires above all else." We seek this or that specific objective because we rightly or wrongly believe that its attainment will minister to our happiness.

The question as to what will and what will not **make** us happy or contribute to our happiness is a factual question. The correct answer will depend on what men are like and how the world goes. Aristotle (as well as Plato) thought that the happiness of any kind of creature consisted in its fulfiillment of its own **Telos** or purpose, that is, in the realization of its own end. The happiness of a human being must ac-

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[2] P. H. Nowell-Smith, "Morality: Religious and Secular," *The Rationalist Annual* (1961), p. 9.

[3] To show this is one of the fundamental aims of Pascal's *Pensees.*

[4] John Hick, "Belief and Life: The Fundamental Nature of the Christian Ethic," *Encounter,* vol. 20 No. 4 (Fall, 1959), pp. 494-516.

cordingly consist in the fulfillment of what it is that makes a man a man. In Cardinal Mercier's phrase, it consists in the achievement of "man's rational nature." If we realize our distinctively human potentialities we will attain happiness. if not, not.

If we have a firm faith in God and if we have some understanding of what He wishes for us, we can come to see that man's actual purpose is very different from what a man with secular knowledge alone would take to be man's purpose. In fact, God in a very real sense, is the sustainer or custodian of our values, for without God, our lives would have no purpose. Even if 'good', cannot be defined as 'what God wills,' a knowledge of the reality revealed in the Jewish and Christian creeds makes it plain that man is not for himself alone but was created by God for fellowship with Him. Man's purpose involves the love and acknowledgment of God. This is the fundamental reason for man's existence. If the fulfilling of one's nature is in harmony with the determining realities of one's total environment, such a fulfillment will bring happiness. If we accept the creeds of Judaism and Christianity, we believe that the "divine purpose of man is destined to final fruition." We trust that the universe is not such as to finally frustrate man's efforts to fulfill his purpose and to attain not only happiness but eternal bliss. If we come to know God we must also come to regard Him as a good shepherd who will protect His children and guide their lives according to His own good purpose.

A recognition of this fact about our world will free man from anxiety. Our attitude toward life will, in some significant respects, be like the attitude of a very small child whose parents unambivalently love him. The child's sense of being securely loved is a major psychological device in giving him a sense of peace, warmth and stability. Similarly, "the knight of faith" will, Hick argues, manifest the "fruit of the spirit" which is "love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control". If our faith could be like a child's, we could live with this inner contentment and give uncalculatingly to others; but Hick, like Niebuhr, is aware that since "the fall" the ambivalent, tortured creature we call "the human animal" cannot attain this blissful state. Nonetheless, he can sometimes approximate it, and the closer he comes to this, the closer he comes to attaining genuine happiness.

On just three grounds, religious morality has a competitor in secular morality. Secular moralists (or, at least, many of them) see that the overall rationale of moral rules is linked to achieving the maximum in human happiness and the minimum in human suffering for all the people involved. But secular moralities, like utilitarianism, lack a real understanding of what happiness is, for they lack the awareness of a transcendent Divine Purpose that gives man the supreme gift of blessedness, whose full glory transcends our imaginations. As the Scottish Shorter Catechism puts it, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever and ever." Man's fullest happiness, man's distinctive flourishing, consists in the attainment of this state.

It may, indeed, be true that we cannot determine what is good or what we ought to do from a knowledge that there is a Deity and that He issues certain commands. In that sense Plato is right and morality is independent of religion, but in another deeper, more important sense, morality is dependent on religion. The above remarks about happiness and man's purpose should make this 'deeper sense' reasonably clear. Understanding what morality is all about, secularists and religious people alike, know that morality is integrally connected with human hap-

piness. But the man of faith alone realizes that man, with his deep and pervasive longing for immortality, can only find "lasting and supreme happiness" in God. As St. Augustine says, "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." Without God life is just one damn thing after another, without our ever knowing what we want or why we want it. Without a belief in a God—a Sovereign Lord—who loves us, promises us protection and finally the bliss of immortality, our lives must remain impoverished. Inner peace and contentment can only come through a belief in God.

Secular ethics also links morality with human desires and needs, but the picture of human happiness it gives us is, at best, superficial. Missing the dark insights of Pascal and Kierkegaard, secular ethics exhibits no deep understanding of the innermost wishes, fears, anxieties or hopes of the human animal. But a religiously backed morality does understand that without God man's deepest wishes cannot be gratified. Without God, man will despair and not attain the deepest, truest form of human happiness.

It is not only true that man will despair without God, but if we are aware of the reality of God we will come to see that many of the things we would otherwise rationally desire are not really worth having. Like Hesse's Siddartha, we will undergo a radical transformation. We will come to see that many of our hopes are vain and that the possibility of realizing other deeper, more lasting, desires becomes a reality for us when we come to know the reality of God. What it is rational to do, and what constitutes a reasonable wish, depends on the environment in which we live. The recognition of the truth, or even the meaningfulness of certain creedal or doctrinal statements, makes it rational to seek certain things that it would otherwise be irrational to seek. If (for example) we accept the creedal and doctrinal statements of Christianity, the moral teachings of this religion become rational, while without the creed and the doctrine, the moral code is "absurdly quixotic and unpractical." **In this way** the Christian ethic is based on Christian beliefs about the nature of God and His relation to man. If we understand them we can understand the point of doing some things that would otherwise seem very foolish. As Niebuhr has said, the Christian ethic is not an ethic that squares with our secular understanding of what we ought to do. In accepting the Christian ethic, or, for that matter, any religious ethic, we are not just accepting a set of commands; beyond that we are freely adopting a way of life that will radically transform our aims in life. And the way of life depicted in Jesus' teachings directs us voluntarily to relinquish much that we would ordinarily prize. We are asked to give up wealth, power and the approval of one's peers. Christian morality, as any religious morality, is a way of life that aims, in general, not at promoting the agent's own interests, as these are usually identified, but rather at serving his neighbors in their various needs. While it need not be an ascetic or "world-renouncing" ethic, the Christian ethic is a markedly other-regarding ethic. It requires sacrifices of human beings and it requires them to put aside what, from a purely secular point of view, they would take to be in their own rational interest. But it is also claiming that human beings will only achieve lasting human happiness if they so act.

God supplies us with the motive for acting in what, from a secular point of view, seems to be a very odd way. It is Professor Hick's contention that once we come to **really know God,** once we come to know what He is like and why He has created us, that we will freely decide to live in a radically different way than we would if we did not know our redeemer. In fact, if we really know

God, we must love Him; 'knowing' here is not just an acquaintance with a certain experience or the acknowledgment that a certain statement is true: to know "God as Lord and Father is to live in a certain way, which is determined by the character and purposes of God".[5] To be aware of God is to see the world from a different slant and to react differently to it. (That does not mean that such awareness is **just** to see the world from such a slant.) Given this specifically religious awareness, many policies and aims that would otherwise be unreasonable become, in virtue of this very awareness, highly reasonable and desirable aims or policies. Given a proper understanding of the nature of reality, the seemingly unpractical nature of the Christian and Jewish code will now be seen to be highly practical—it, indeed, squares with what a rational man would desire. Given such a new understanding of the world, we see what genuine happiness is and how it is utterly dependent on God. As Hick puts it:

> Jesus' teaching does not demand that we live in a way which runs counter to our deepest desires, and which would thus require some extraordinary counterbalancing inducement. Rather he reveals to us the true nature of the world in which we are living and indicates in the light of this the only way in which our deepest desires can be fulfilled. In an important sense then, Jesus does not propose any new motive for action. He does not set up a new end to be sought, or provide a new impulse to seek an already familiar end. Instead he offers a new vision, or mode of appreciation, of the world, such that to live humanly in the world as it is thus seen to be, is to live the kind of life which Jesus describes. The various attitudes and policies for living which he sought to replace are expressions of a sense of insecurity which is natural enough if the world really is, as most people take it to be, an arena of competing interests in which each must safeguard himself and his own against the rival egoisms of his neighbors. If human life is essentially a form of animal life, and human civilization a refined jungle in which self-concern operates more subtly but not less surely than by animal tooth and claw, then the quest for invulnerability in its many guises is entirely rational. To seek security in the form of power over others, whether physical, psychological, economic, or political, or in the form of recognition and acclaim would then be indicated by the character of our environment. But Jesus rejects these attitudes and objectives as based upon an estimate of the world which is false because it is atheistic; it assumes that there is no God, or at least none such as Jesus knew. Jesus was accordingly far from being an idealist, if by this we mean one who sets up ideals and recommends us to be guided by them instead of by the realities around us. He was a realist presenting a life in which the neighbor is valued equally with the self as indicated by the character of the universe as it really is. He urged men to live in terms of reality; and his morality differs from the normal morality of the world because his view of reality differs from the normal view of the world... The universe is so constituted that to live in it in the manner which Jesus has described is to build one's life upon enduring foundations, whilst to live in the opposite way is to go 'against the grain' of things and to court ultimate disaster. Jesus assumes that as rational beings we want to live in terms of reality, and he is concerned to tell us what the true structure of reality is.[6]

What are we to say to this? One thing is quite plain—and here I am in agreement with Professor Hick—if the creedal and doctrinal claims of Judaism or Christianity were true, then it would indeed be rational to act as Hick's believer is convinced we ought to act. We cannot deduce moral statements from factual ones but we all repeatedly and typically use factual statements to back up our moral statements. The effects of the continued testing of H-bombs on our genetic make-up and the way the Soviet Union and China will

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 495.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp 498-9.

behave are, indeed, relevant to whether or not we ought to continue nuclear testing. That Jones habitually sleeps around and periodically drinks himself into a stupor is patently relevant to Frannie's decision that she ought not to marry him. A person who knowingly ignores such factual considerations in making moral decisions is a perfect model of a mad man. Such a "knight of the absurd" is a man that clearly belongs in an insane asylum.

So far, I am with Hick. We should make our moral judgments in the light of what the facts are. But it is just Hick's account of the facts—and accounts like his—that seem to me to be so totally unrealistic, so devoid of a genuine sense of reality. In critically considering his account, all the old, as well as some new, objections to religion come trouping back in. We haven't any evidence at all for believing in the existence or love of God. None of the proofs work; we (or some of us, at any rate) have religious experiences but these religious experiences do not establish, even with any probability, that there is an Unlimited being, a Transcendent Cause of the universe. These experiences can always be interpreted naturalistically or non-theistically. There is no logical bridge from these experiences to God.[7] Worse still, the very meaning of the term 'God' is opaque. We say 'God is distinct from the Universe and the creator of the Universe' but we have no idea of what we would have to encounter now or hereafter to encounter a Transcendent Cause or a Creator of the Universe. If we speak, as Father Bochenski recently has, of "Supernatural Perceptions", we are (to put it mildly) "explaining" the obscure by the still more obscure. The plain fact is that we do not have any **grounds** for believing that God exists or for believing His Purposes are good; and our troubles are compounded when we realize that we do not even know what we would have to experience, or fail to experience, for it to be true, or even probable that God exists, or that God loves man. That this is so, raises, as Professor Hick is keenly aware, serious questions about the very intelligibility of such utterances. It will do no good to say "We now see as through a darkened glass but hereafter we shall see face-to-face" for, even if man is immortal, if we do not now know what it would be like to verify or confirm the statements, 'God exists' or 'God loves us', the simple fact that we someday may wake up on "the other shore" will not help us to verify or confirm that there is a God. Immortality is possible even in a Godless universe.

Hick, as part of a good Protestant tradition, might welcome all this. Unless we are in "the circle of faith", unless we have **faith**, we cannot even understand these matters. But this reply won't do, for while we might take it on faith that God exists in lieu of having evidence for His existence, we cannot establish the **intelligibility** of 'God exists' or 'God shall raise the quick and the dead' on faith, for we must first understand **what** it is we are to take on faith.[8] But even if we were able to appeal to faith here, we are still faced with the quite elementary and yet quite staggering anthropological fact that there are thousands of religions with conflicting revelations, most of them claiming ultimate authority and ultimate truth in matters of religion. Which one are we to choose? Why should we think, as finite men, historically and ethnically bounded, that our religion and our tribe alone should have the One True Revelation? We are members of one historically bounded culture on a minor planet in a unbelievably vast universe. Why should it be that in these matters we have a unique hold on the

[7] Exactly the same considerations hold for mystical experiences.

[8] On this point see my "Can Faith Validate God-talk?", *Theology Today*, (July, 1963).

Truth? To think that we do is to have a fantastically unrealistic picture of the world.

If we say, by way of rebuttal, that in talking about religion we should only consider the great or the higher religions, we run into a host of difficulties. First, these religions often differ very radically from each other. Consider, for example, Judaism and Thervada Buddhism. Furthermore, the laudatory labels 'great' and 'higher' are very question-begging. Do we decide they are higher by an appeal to our own faith or our own Revelation? If we do, we go in a very small and vicious circle. Do we decide they are 'higher' or 'great' religions because they have more members or cover geographically wider areas? If we do, why should such considerations be taken as relevant reasons for such a judgment? Certainly we do not use such criteria in judging which cultures have the most advanced forms of music, dance or science. Such an appeal in religion is quite arbitrary. If we say that we call these religions higher because they exhibit a deeper moral insight into man's condition, then we have used as I think we often do in practice—our own quite secular moral understanding to judge religions and we clearly indicate that we do not need these religions to back up our morality. (Looked at in this way, by the way, Christianity and Judaism do not seem to me to come off as spectacular successes.)

In short, there is not the slightest reason to believe that the Christian is living according to "The Reality Principle" while the non-Christian, and the secularist in particular, are deluded about man's true estate. Christianity is myth-eaten. The very intelligibility of the key concepts of the religion are seriously in question; there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of God; and the Revelation and Authority of Christianity is but **one** Revelation and **one** Authority among thousands of conflicting revelations and authorities. Given this state of affairs, it is the epitome of self-delusion to believe that Jesus really reveals what the true structure of reality is.

Those in the tradition of Kierkegaard are likely to assert here that I have missed the deepest appeal of Christianity. Certainly God, Christ, and religion in generally are absured; Christianity is surely a genuine scandal to the intellect, but we need it all the same for, as Camus and Sartre recognize, man's very condition in this world is absurd and if there is no God man's life must be meaningless — a stupid game of charades, without any rationale at all. It is true, as Luther said, that if a man is to be a sound-believing Christian, he must tear out the eyes of his reason, but unless he does this, unless he makes the leap of faith, he will never attain lasting happiness. Without God he will be driven to despair. This is so because man can only find lasting happiness in God. This is why, in spite of all the intellectual and emotional impediments to belief, one should join the circle of faith.

In all sobriety, what we need to ask is this: is there good sociological or psychological evidence to show that people will despair, will lose their sense of identity and purpose if they do not become followers of Christ? There are cultures, cultures that have never even heard of Christianity, let alone adopted it, that have, as far as we can tell, members who are just as happy and live with just as much a sense of purpose as we do. This surely shows that it is not true that we can save ourselves from despair only by following Christ. The burden of proof is surely on the Christian to show that the Christian faith alone saves man from despair and gives orientation and point to his life.

Perhaps what is being claimed is the more general thesis that without God man will be driven to despair? But

while it is true that there are people whose lives would lose all direction if **they** lost their God, it is also true that there are non-believers who have lived happy and productive lives, e,g. John Dewey, George Eliot and George Bernard Shaw. To this it is natural to reply: 'Well, that may work for intellectuals, for some severely reflective men who will not draw warmth from the tribal campfire, but it will never work for the plain man.' But it has. Chinese civilization, for example, or that part of it under the sway of Confucianism, has a religion which, for all practical purposes, is Godless, yet Confucianists have continued to live purposeful lives.

It is interesting to note that when such arguments for the necessity of faith are made by religious apologists, they do not, as a rule, put such consideration to empirical test but assert, after the fashion of Kierkegaard, that a man **must** despair without God. The non-believer who does not show despair is really a man who suffers from some "hidden perturbation"—some deep but disguised estrangement from his true being. While this is indeed true of some non-believers, the burden of proof is surely on the believer to show that there is in all non-believers some such disguised disquietude. (They might start by considering the lives of Bentham, Freud and Dewey.) We need evidence here and not just **a priori dicta** that man must despair without God or that man will be happier with a belief in God.

Surely, as Pascal shows in his **Pensees,** with Christ man has the hope of redemptioon and eternal bliss, but with the Jewish and Christian religion one also has a sense of sin and unworthiness that, as in the case of Stephan Dedalus in **The Portrait of An Aristist as a Young Man,** or Jerome in **La Porte Etroite,** can drive one to self-loathing and despair. If it is replied that since The Fall we have been tormented and that the "old adam" is in us all—even after Christ came to redeem us—then what grounds have we for claiming that people within Christianity will be happier than people outside the "circle of faith"?

As far as I can see, the plain facts are: generally speaking, believers are neither happier nor are they better adjusted than non-believers. There are sick, paranoid and vile believers and there are sick, paranoid and vile non-believers; there are sane, humane and happy believers and there are sane, humane and happy non-believers. Personal virtue and vice seem to be completely independent of doctrinal affiliation.

Actually, not many (if any) religious apologist wish to make this issue an empirical, anthropological issue. They have a certain "picture of life", and reasoning in accordance with this picture, they conclude that man **must** despair without God. Secular moralists, they argue, can have no real understanding of what human happiness is. Here we have a purely **a priori** philosophical argument. But is it a good one? I think not. In the first place, the religionist frequently depicts a secularist morality in a way—as Hick actually does—that makes it seem egoistic and a kind of gross hedonism in which man is nothing more than a purely self-concerned, clever little animal.[9] We come to picture secular moralities as committing us to a vision of the good life that consists in devotion to pleasures like those gained from taking Turkish baths and watching belly dancers. But no secularist need deny the dignity of man nor devote himself exclusively, or at all, to such pleasures. Once we rid ourselves of such sterotypes, why exactly should we say that the believer alone knows what "true happiness" is?

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[9] Ronald Hepburn has some very effective things to say against this argument. See Ronald Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox,* (London: 1958), pp 147-54.

At this point Hick, and other theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, trot out a very ancient argument—an argument that in essence goes back to Plato and Aristotle. The happiness of a human being must consist in the fullfillment of what it is that makes a man a man. Only when he achieves what it is that he was "cut out to be" will he achieve lasting contentment. But the believer alone knows what man was cut out to be, so he alone can know the nature of "true happiness" and thus of "true virtue". (That is a slippery 'thus' but let's let it pass.)

But why should we assume that man was "cut out" to be anything, that he has some function that he must realize if he is not to suffer alienation? Man has certain distinctive capacities: he can reason, that is he can use symbols; he is permanently sexed; he alone laughs; he is the only animal to suffer anxiety and fear death. But why does he "realize himself" more adequately by developing any or all of those capacities? Perhaps he would be happier, for example, if he were less intellectual? And how can we show that he was "cut out" for anything? Policemen, teachers, thiefs, bar-maids, janitors and barbers have certain roles, certain more or less distinctive functions. So do husbands, suitors, fathers and daughters. All of us have diverse social roles—roles that frequently conflict. But what is our role or function **qua** human being? While fireman have a clear function, man does not. "What are people for?' has no clear meaning in the way that 'What are custom officers for?' does. And to say men were made to worship and love God is completely question-begging. As far as I can see, man wasn't made for anything.[10]

The inevitable answer is, if man wasn't made for something, if there isn't something he was cut out to be, human life will be a Sartrean nightmare, for man's life will then be totally without purpose or point. If God did not create man for some end there can be no purpose to human living. It is just when we see this—it is just when we see that without God life would be as Hardy and Schopenhauer depict it—that we are driven to God. We will then realize, as Tolstoy came to, that without God our lives will be without a purpose, without a rationale.

There is a plethora of confusion in such apologetics. It is indeed true that a purposeless life is a horrible life, a life that no sane man could tolerate. Dostoyevsky shrewdly observes in **The House of the Dead** "that if one wanted to crush, to annihilate a man utterly, to inflict on him the most terrible of punishments so that the most ferocious murderer would shudder at it and dread it beforehand, one need only give him work of an absolutely, completely useless and irrational character." If a man were condemned to pour water from one bucket to another and then back again, day after day, year after year, it would indeed drive him to despair. A life made up of actions which were devoid of all rational point or intent would be a maddening, meaningless life. But when traditional Christian philosophers were talking about purpose and the purpose of life they were not talking about having a purpose in that sense. They argued, as Cardinal Mercier and Professor Hick have argued, that man is a creature of God, created by God to worship God and to enter into a covenant with Him. That is man's purpose. It is in this sense that life must have a purpose if man is to achieve final happiness. Yet this sort of purpose is far more esoteric and metaphysical than the purpose Dostoyevsky was talking about. These religious moralists assume, as we have seen, that man has an essence or a **telos**—a purpose, that is an end, which he will realize if, and only if, he becomes what he was "cut

[10] See here Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," (Canberra, Australia, 1957).

out" by his Creator to become. It is not enough that we avoid the sort of situations Dostoyevsky alludes to, but we must fulfill our essence as well, for without this we will remain alienated and estranged.

But, as we have seen, this makes the groundless and perhaps even senseless assumption that man has a **telos** or an essence and that he will be happy when, and only then, he achieves it. Furthermore, the claim that man's life will lack purpose without God trades on a crucial ambiguity about 'purpose'. When it is claimed that without God life would have no purpose, the religious apologist is talking about a purpose for man, **qua** man, as we might say, an artifact, plumber, merchant, doctor, or policeman, has a purpose. But it is far from clear that man has a purpose in that sense. It is also entirely unclear that man must remain estranged, sensing to the full that his lot in the world is absurd, if he does not have **such** a purpose.

Many people feel that if man wasn't made for a purpose his life must be without purpose. But here a spiritual **malaise** is being engendered by a conceptual confusion. Sometimes 'purpose' is used to mean 'function' or 'role'. But sometimes 'purpose' is used to indicate that an action was delibertely or intentionally done, that it was the carrying out of someone's aim or wish.

The second use of 'purpose'—the use of 'purpose' that Dostoyevsky was talking about in our initial example—is such that we would say that only people and perhaps, some animals could have it. When we use 'purpose' in this sense we are speaking of peoples' goals, aims, intentions, motives, ends and the like. 'Purpose' has this sense when we speak of our purpose in doing so and so, i.e. 'What was your purpose in bringing home that dog?' and 'I wonder what his purpose was in coming here? Now this is one major way in which 'purpose' is used in which the Theist and non-Theist alike are in complete accord that there is purpose in our lives—God or no God. And it is true that a life devoid of purpose **in that sense** would, without doubt, be a dreadful, senseless affair. By contrast use 'purpose' in the first sense when we ask: 'What is the purpose of that gadget in the kitchen?' or 'What is the purpose of that fence along the road?' Here we imply "that someone did something, in the doing of which he had some purpose; namely, to bring about the thing with the purpose. Of course **his** purpose is not identical with **its** purpose." [11] If we accept a scientific world picture and reject a Theistic world picture, we are indeed forced to say that in this **first sense** life is purposeless. But it is completely contrary to the truth to say that a rejection of the Theistic world view robs our lives of purpose in the **second sense** of 'purpose'. On the contrary, one could well claim, as Baier does, that "Science has not only not robbed us of any purpose which we had before, but it has furnished us with enormously greater power to achieve these purposes. Instead of praying for rain or a good harvest or offspring, we now use ice pellects, artificial manure, or artificial insemination." [12]

More importantly still, when we say 'Life must have a purpose or there is no point of going on', we are usually using 'purpose' in the second sense. It is in this sense that we so desperately want life to have a purpose. But life can have a purpose **in that sense** in the twilight or even the complete absence of the Gods. And whether or not something has or does not have purpose in the **first sense** of 'purpose' does not matter at all, for having or lacking a purpose in this first sense carriers neither kudos nor stigma. To say that a man has a purpose in this **first sense** is actually offensive for it involves treating man as a kind of tool or artifact. It

[11] Kurt Baier, *op. cit.*, p 19.
[12] *Ibid*: p 20.

is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If I turned to you and said 'What are you for?' it would be insulting to you. It would be as if I had reduced you to "the level of a gadget, a domestic animal or perhaps a slave." [13] I would be treating you merely as a means and not as an end. Failing to have a purpose in that sense does not at all detract from the meaningfulness of life. In fact, many of us, at any rate, would be very disturbed and think our lives meaningless if we **did** have a purpose in this **first sense.**

The whole tendency to think that if there is no God and if God did not create man with a built-in design then life would be totally without worth, arises from muddled thinking. People who claim that if God is dead nothing matters "mistakenly conclude that there can be no purpose **in** life because there is no purpose **of** life; that **men** cannot themselves adopt and achieve purposes because man, unlike a robot or a watchdog, is not a creature with a purpose." [14]

In sum, I have argued here that morality and religion are logically independent—that is, we cannot derive moral claims from such cosmological claims as 'God exists', 'God shall raise the quick and the dead', or 'God laid the foundations of the earth'. 'X ought to be done' or 'X is good' is never identical with or derivable from 'God wills X' or 'God created X'. It is not senseless (conceptually unintelligible) to question the will of God, though it is blasphemous. I then went on to argue, as against Professor Hick and others, that a God-centered ethic has no claim to provide the most adequate criterion of moral actions because it possesses the deepest and most accurate understanding of man's condition. I argued that the claims to intelligibility and claims to truth given us by Christianity and Judaism are so scandulously weak that we have no grounds for using these religions as a basis for morality or as an answer to the "riddle of human destiny". Finally, I argued that there are no good grounds for claiming that a man's life is without purpose if there is no God. In the only sense in which it really matters, we can and do have purposes in a Godless world.

[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.*