MORAL OBLIGATION AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONCERNS FROM IMMANUEL KANT, G. W. F. HEGEL, AND ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE

By H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr.

I. The Obligatoriness of Moral Obligation in a Secular Age

Doubts about the absolute claim or compelling character of morality absent God are a cardinal[1] element of G. E. M. Anscombe's famous observation that the absence of God recasts the significance of morality. As she notes, once God is removed from the understanding of morality, it is "as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten."[2] Moral discourse may still have the sense that moral obligations are real and should trump prudential or self-interested concerns, but the traditional ground of morality's compelling character is gone. There is no guarantee, absent God as the Enforcer[3] of morality, that one will always be worse off for acting immorally. Immanuel Kant saw this point before Anscombe, when he argued for the practical necessity of affirming God's existence.

Granted, even without God there remains a sense that acting immorally means that, from a particular moral perspective, one has acted against the right and/or the good. That is, within a framework of right-making conditions of the sort that is supported by a Kantian commitment equating morality with a particular account of acting rationally, one is blameworthy, not worthy of happiness, if one acts immorally—although one's immoral actions may make one very happy. So, too, one can be held to have acted immorally if by one's actions one does not maximize the greatest good for the greatest number, as understood within a particular utilitarian account of morality (whether act- or rule-utilitarian, preference-satisfaction-oriented, etc.)—although one may have maximized the good for all those to whom one is most intimately committed. Once the existence of a God Who reliably rewards and punishes is no longer recognized, the question arises as to why moral obligations should always be

[1] In this essay, the term "cardinal" is used in the first sense given in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (2d ed., 1960): "of basic importance; main; chief; as, *cardinal* principles."

[2] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (January 1958): 6.

[3] For ease in identifying references to God, and following traditional usage, pronouns and other terms referring to God are capitalized.

doi:10.1017/S0265052509990252

decisive, especially when there appear to be compelling prudential grounds to act immorally. Why ought one to act morally, when acting immorally will lead to great benefit to oneself and to those with whom one is most closely associated, while acting morally will lead to great harm to oneself and to those with whom one is most closely associated?

The problem is that when the God Who reliably rewards the virtuous and punishes the guilty is no longer acknowledged, the general priority of morality over prudence is brought into question.[4] Or, to phrase matters in a more Kantian idiom, absent a necessary connection between acting rightly and the achievement of happiness, the rationality of morality will be brought into question in a range of cases. These cases are those in which the commitment to act rightly (or even to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number or to have the character of being virtuous) will be plausibly outweighed by the substantial nonmoral costs (to oneself, to those to whom one is most closely bound, and to one's particular community) of acting morally, as well as by the significant benefits of acting immorally. The question is how to determine which among the many normative viewpoints one should invoke to secure the proper priority of morality over prudence. This highlights a further problem of moral pluralism. Absent something like the unique perspective of God, the unity of morality is also brought into question by an in principle irresolvable plurality of moral perspectives.[5] The loss of a God's-eye perspective that would establish the canonical morality has wide-ranging implications for morality. Absent a canonically authoritative moral sense (as endorsed from the perspective of God), there is also the question of what standards one should use to rank cardinal human goods and right-making conditions so as to establish a particular morality.

One way to cut through these puzzles is by affirming that the moral point of view—the ground and perspective for the justification of morality—is that perspective that canonically specifies the content of morality and unites being and morality, such that there is no way to escape due punishment for one's immoral actions, as with an appeal to the perspective of the God Who created and ordered all, and Who will

[4] In this essay, "prudence" is used to identify seeking one's own welfare and the welfare of those for whom one is most concerned. As Kant puts it, "Skill in the choice of means to one's own highest welfare can be called prudence in the narrowest sense." Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 33 [Akademie edition, IV.416].

[5] Much has been written addressing the issue of moral pluralism. See, for example, Gilbert Harman, *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); David B. Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and David B. Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For my early arguments on this matter, see H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., "Can Ethics Take Pluralism Seriously?" *Hastings Center Report* 19 (September 1989), 33–34.

punish the wicked and reward the just.[6] If one makes this affirmation, then one has in principle identified at least a possible canonical perspective from which to address these puzzles.[7] In such circumstances, the genesis, justification, and compelling character of morality have an ultimate unity. Much more would need to be said if one embraces this option, but at least in terms of such a theological appeal, one can in principle envisage a defining and compelling perspective: the point of ultimate unity and enforcement of morality that has played a central role in Western thought. The loss of such a final perspective, God's perspective, as an ultimate unity and grounding of morality, marks a rupture in Western culture. After that rupture, the force of moral obligation changes.

As controversial as invocations of God may be, it seems relatively uncontroversial that a theological appeal played a central role in framing the sense of moral obligation that was articulated by European culture after the establishment of Christianity. A distinctly Western culture, church, morality, and moral philosophy came into existence with Pope Leo III's crowning of Charles the Great (December 25, 800) and Pope John XII's crowning of Otto the Great (February 2, 962), along with the establishment of the regal papacy with Pope Nicholas I (858–867) and Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII, 1073–1085).[8] Western moral reflections were set within a dominant culture where morality received a grounding that was partially theocentric but also reflected the Western European synthesis of faith and reason. Against this background, the taken-for-granted character of morality changed when the theocentric grounding was no longer accepted. The Enlightenment moved the West away from a theocentric moral culture and to the contemporary secular culture—a culture that acts as if the universe were ultimately without meaning (e.g., acts according to a principle of methodological atheism). And once this move was made, the taken-for-granted unity of morality—along with the harmony of being and morality, and therefore the unity and obligatory force of morality—was brought into question.

[6] "And His righteousness is to children's children, to such as keep His covenant" (LXX Psalm 102:17–18).

[7] For a recent defense of the rationality of affirming the existence of God, see Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason,* 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

[8] The crowning of Charles the Great created a distinctively Western cultural domain set off against that which had previously constituted a united Christian empire and culture. The crowning was a historically momentous event. "The coronation of Charles is not only the central event of the Middle Ages, it is also one of those very few events of which, taking them singly, it may be said that if they had not happened, the history of the world would have been different." James Bryce, "The Coronation as a Revival of the Roman Empire in the West," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne,* ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1959), 41. The coronation was followed by the excommunication in A.D. 867 of Pope Nicholas I by St. Photios the Great of Constantinople. Subsequently, a stronger Western empire and a stronger papacy emerged when Pope John XII crowned Otto the Great. The "reforms" of Pope Gregory VII solidified a Western viewpoint nurturing cultural grounds for what became the Western European synthesis of Christian thought and philosophy.

After the secularization of Western culture through the Enlightenment—and especially following the French Revolution and Napoleon's victory at the Battle of Jena on August 6, 1806, which ended the Western empire—a post-traditional culture emerged unanchored in God. Among the consequences was the recognition, however implicitly, that philosophical reason could not substitute for a God in Whom the dominant culture no longer believed. The expectation of a single, canonical, content-full morality was radically brought into question. Moreover, the expectation that moral concerns should trump concerns of prudence and self-interest was also brought into question. This circumstance and its implications for the force of moral obligation have been addressed, in various ways, by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and G. E. M. Anscombe (1919–2001). This essay explores these implications, discussing how they bear on the possibilities for a general, secular understanding of the unity of morality and the force of moral obligation.

II. Moral Pluralism

As I have already noted, there is the problem of the unity of morality, of establishing which among the many possible moral points of view is canonical and then showing why morality should always trump prudential concerns. Without a defining perspective as provided by God, the coherence of morality will be threatened by an irreducible plurality of moral perspectives, a diversity of moral rationalities, a moral pluralism grounded in different rankings of cardinal values and right-making conditions. These different rankings will presuppose different basic moral premises and rules of evidence, and there will be no canonical perspective by which to choose among them. This state of affairs has momentous implications for the philosophical appreciation of morality. After all, Western European thought from the beginning of the second millennium presupposed that philosophical reflection could establish the proper moral perspective, so that there ought, in principle, to be one common global morality. As the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo puts it, "Atheism appears in this light as another catastrophic Tower of Babel. . . ."[9] Vattimo recognizes that without something like the Divine perspective, one faces the challenge of specifying a canonical moral point of view, with its canonical ranking of cardinal values and right-making conditions, to which one can appeal in order to resolve moral pluralism.

The problem is that there is no one moral perspective to substitute for the perspective of God. Once the deep unity of morality and reality is no longer assumed, establishing as canonical any particular perspective requires establishing as canonical the perspective of a particular hypo-

[9] Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity,* ed. Jon Snyder (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 31.

thetical, rational decision-maker, a particular set of rational contractors, a particular ethic of discourse, a particular, rational, game-theoretic perspective, etc. To specify such a perspective, one must first determine how one ought to order cardinal right-making conditions and values, such as liberty, equality, prosperity, harmony, and security. To do this, however, one must already possess a normative standard to determine which basic moral premises and rules of moral evidence should determine the canonical ranking. The difficulty is that all attempts to achieve a canonical perspective from nowhere turn out to require endorsing a particular perspective from somewhere in order to acquire content (that is, the perspectives end up presupposing a particular thin theory of the good and particular rules of moral evidence). As a consequence, one cannot in a principled fashion choose among the competing somewheres without begging the question, arguing in a circle, or engaging in an infinite regress. That is, one must first concede basic axioms and rules of evidence.

Appeals to philosophical reflection do not settle the issue but, indeed, complicate matters. One must choose through philosophical reflection among substantively different philosophical approaches to (and accounts of) the nature and substance of morality. One must choose, for example, between a Kantian deontological and a Benthamite teleological approach, as well as among various competing accounts of the proper ordering of right-making conditions and primary human goods. In different accounts, the force and content of morality are different. For example, in Kant's view, one ought never to lie no matter what the consequences. In contrast, in Jeremy Bentham's (1748–1832) view, all moral concerns, including the morality of lying, depend on whether the action will generally maximize pleasure over pain. At stake is the problem of determining the proper content of moral obligations, and of establishing the canonical ranking of cardinal human goods and right-making conditions—matters about which there is foundational disagreement. De facto, one is confronted with a plurality of substantially different moralities and different accounts of moral obligation. This must be the case, for if one means by a morality a generally coherent set of settled judgments about what it is to act rightly, what good one should pursue, and what it means to be virtuous or have good character, then we do not share such a morality.

This is the case because moralities are more discordant, the more they support different views about the central elements of human life, such as different views about when it is obligatory, permitted, or forbidden to take human life, have sex, or redistribute property. Moralities are distinguished by moral and metaphysical disagreements regarding such issues as the moral propriety of abortion, homosexual acts, social-welfare states, physician-assisted suicide, and capital punishment. For instance, depending on how one regards the moral authority of householders, one will endorse a Texan moral vision that affirms (and indeed celebrates) the prompt shooting of trespassers after dark who cause householders to fear

for their lives and/or bodily integrity, or a moral vision that holds that such intruders should be dispatched only as a last resort (or perhaps never at all). Depending on one's view of the importance of retributive justice and the obligation to render it, one will celebrate capital punishment and without embarrassment read Moses Maimonides' (1135–1204) account of the four ways pleasing to God to execute the guilty, or one will regard such views as shocking and immoral.[10]

The point is that philosophical reflection cannot provide a surrogate for a God's-eye perspective that could, in principle, give a canonical unity to morality. Moralities remain different, even if different moralities share the same values but merely rank them differently. Common moral values are not enough to constitute a common morality. For example, depending on how one orders the importance of liberty, equality, prosperity, and security, either one will endorse a social-democratic morality and polity, or one will endorse elitist, capitalist-Confucian polities, such as that in Singapore. Differences also turn on disparate views regarding right-making conditions and their ranking. There is, for example, a growing Confucian bioethical literature that reflects a Confucian morality and affirms the family as the proper locus of authority in medical decision-making. The adherents of this morality seek to replace individual consent with family consent, and affirm a gradation in moral obligation that gives priority to concerns for family, friends, and associates over concern for others.[11] As one would expect, across the world one encounters different moral points of view and philosophical accounts of these views, because there is a plurality of views regarding understandings of the proper ranking of cardinal values and right-making conditions. There are also different lists of such conditions, as well as different understandings of the nature of morality, human flourishing, and the character of the virtuous life.[12] One

[10] "Four types of execution were given to the court: stoning, burning, decapitation with a sword, and strangulation." Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah,* Hilchot Sanhedrin V'Haonshin Hamesurim Lahem 14.1 (New York: Moznaim, 2001), 104.

[11] As an example of the salience of moral pluralism, one should note that the place of individually oriented consent in medical treatment is not unchallenged, even within "Western" bioethics. Indeed, within Western health care policy, a larger role for family authority exists than might at first blush have been expected, given the widespread surface endorsement of respect for individual autonomy and choice as a right-making condition. See, for example, Mark Cherry and H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., "Informed Consent in Texas: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2004): 237–52. For an introduction to East Asian perspectives on such matters, see Yali Cong, "Doctor-Family-Patient Relationship: The Chinese Paradigm of Informed Consent," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2004): 149–78; Ruiping Fan and Benfu Li, "Truth Telling in Medicine: The Confucian View," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2004): 179–94; Ruiping Fan and Julia Tao, "Consent to Medical Treatment: The Complex Interplay of Patients, Families, and Physicians," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2004): 139–48; and Ruiping Fan, "Which Care? Whose Responsibility? And Why Family? A Confucian Account of Long-Term Care for the Elderly," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 32, no. 5 (September–October 2007): 495–517.

[12] A sampling of contemporary moral diversity at the level of both community life and philosophical reflection on morality is offered by East Asian moral reflections that differ

is constrained to recognize that moralities are disparate, and that moral pluralism is real. De facto, there is no common human morality.

That our moral diversity cannot be set aside by sound rational argument has been well recognized since Clement of Alexandria (155–220), who observed that one cannot argue one's way beyond a pluralism of philosophical views, given that disagreement is grounded in different foundational assumptions. "Should one say that Knowledge is founded on demonstration by a process of reasoning, let him hear that first principles are incapable of demonstration; for they are known neither by art nor sagacity."[13] Agrippa, a third-century philosopher, summarized this state of affairs in terms of five ways of showing that philosophical argument cannot bring rational closure to foundational philosophical and moral disputes. His point was that, since seven hundred years of philosophical analysis and argument had not resolved the disputes at hand, one should not have much hope for the future. Moreover, since disputants argue from their own perspectives, they will always speak past each other and not resolve their controversy by sound rational argument. In addition, absent common basic premises and rules of evidence, disputants will always argue in a circle, beg the question, or engage in an infinite regress, again precluding resolution by sound rational argument.[14]

Faced with the problems that Agrippa summarized, one can retreat to a form of morality grounded in the will. That is, one can settle with merely giving permission or authorization to a particular framework for cooperation, thus creating a common world of moral authority for those who agree to collaborate. This will allow persons to act together with common agreement and therefore common authority. Such a default procedural morality does not require any particular substantive understanding of the good. Nor can one say that it is good, right, or obligatory to act in this way, outside of the inherent "rightness" found within and defining the practice itself. In the process, claims to a canonical moral content must

---

among themselves and from dominant European and North American moral perspectives. See, for example, Angeles Tan Alora and Josephine M. Lumitao, eds., *Beyond a Western Bioethics: Voices from the Developing World* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001); Julia Tao Lai Po-wah, ed., *Cross-Cultural Perspectives* on the *(Im)Possibility of Global Bioethics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002); H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., and L. M. Rasmussen, eds., *Bioethics and Moral Content: National Traditions of Health Care Morality* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002); and Ren-Zong Qiu, ed., *Bioethics: Asian Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004). See also Ruiping Fan, *Reconstructionist Confucianism: Morality after the West* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

[13] Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata," Book 2, chapter IV, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), vol. 2, p. 350.

[14] For an overview of Agrippa's *pente tropoi,* his five ways of showing that controversies, such as those regarding the canonical content of morality, cannot be resolved by sound rational argument, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers,* Pyrrho 9, 88–89. See also Sextus Empiricus, "Outlines of Pyrrhonism," I.15.164–69.

be abandoned.[15] In a world regarded as being without ultimate meaning, a world without a unique and final canonical moral perspective, moral pluralism becomes in principle intractable. In summary, one has good grounds for holding that a definitive choice among competing, content-full moral viewpoints cannot be made on the basis of a conclusive, secular, sound rational argument.

The matter of moral pluralism is compounded by the circumstance that any empirical attempt to account for the phenomenon of reality as a biological or sociobiological phenomenon will favor recognizing a further ground for moral pluralism. Insofar as one considers morality an expression of an adaptation that has maximized inclusive fitness, one should presume that, as with other phenotypic characteristics with a genotypic basis, there may be a plurality of forms of adaptation. As with blood types, for example, it is likely that there will be a plurality of moral inclinations and dispositions to "moral intuitions" that have arisen, given different selective pressures in different environments. It is likely that different environments will favor different balances among genetically based moral proclivities to particular moral inclinations and intuitions, as on the model of balances between homozygotes and heterozygotes, as with sickle-cell anemia and thalassemia. For example, in different ecological niches, one would presume that natural selection would favor different balances between altruistically and egoistically inclined individuals, between those who act honestly and those who act prudently, though hypocritically. Insofar as morality has a biological basis, one would not expect a single, common, pretheoretic set of moral inclinations or intuitions. One would expect that, as biological phenomena, moral inclinations and intuitions would be plural, and one would expect different balances among such inclinations to be favored in different environments.[16] This observation does not involve endorsing the naturalistic fallacy. Instead, it suggests a likely divergence of proclivities to moral inclinations and intuitions prior to any judgment as to which inclinations or intuitions are morally to be affirmed or condemned. All of this is to say that Anscombe is right: the loss of a theocentric grounding for morality

[15] A moral framework grounded in permission can, by default, function as a practice into which moral agents can enter independently of any particular content-full morality (i.e., without affirming or assuming a particular ordering of primary goods). Such a moral framework underlies the market. This moral framework, anchored in actual permission, functions as a transcendental framework. It provides the necessary conditions for a general human practice that allows participants to act with an authority derived from their common agreement. This practice will thus implicitly include the agreement only to use each other with permission. Permission, in the sense of authorization, creates a web of moral authority. But this perspective does not establish an obligation to enter this practice based on the goodness or the rightness of always acting morally in this way. Only "within" the practice is there a sense of rightness and wrongness. See H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics,* 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[16] For a classic overview of the biological basis of moral inclinations, see Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1975), chap. 5.

radically changes the character of morality in a way that cannot be remedied by an appeal to a philosophically constructed rational perspective.

An appeal to God surely does not, in itself, resolve the problem of moral pluralism, especially given the plurality of accounts of God and of what God requires. Yet the possibility of a God's-eye perspective offers the possibility of a canonical moral perspective and of a reliable enforcer of morality. In addition, an appeal to God lies in the background of Western European moral philosophy, which assumed the existence of one God and one morality, and which then, with Kant, assumed a rational perspective from which one can establish a canonical morality. A theocentric appeal does at least envisage the possibility, in principle, of an authoritative perspective: a unique Judge Who can determine the canonical ranking of goods and right-making conditions. This is the case, whether one regards God as *the* authority Who fully knows how properly to rank cardinal human goods and right-making conditions, or whether God is simply regarded as in authority to do the ranking, or both.[17] The Enlightenment attempted to substitute a canonical view of reason or rationality for the perspective of God. The difficulty is that there is, in principle, a plurality of senses of moral authority and moral rationality, so that morality becomes in principle plural.

III. Morality, Prudence, and the Existence of God

The loss of the appeal to God's perspective also has the effect of undermining the claim that moral considerations should always trump prudential considerations, as I have already noted. To appreciate the force of this change, one might elaborate the fictive binary and inescapable choice suggested earlier. The first option in this fictive example is to act morally in the sense of never using others as means merely, and maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number (however one would hold the latter should be calculated). This option produces high nonmoral costs to oneself, including (let us say) the prolonged physical violation and painful death of oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community, along with the destruction of the nonmoral interests of oneself and

[17] The issue in the background is not just whether God approves of the good because it is good or whether the good is good because God approves of it (the issue that Plato raises in the *Euthyphro*). The matter is more complicated, because there is the further question as to whether the correct ranking of the good is the one endorsed by God because it is the correct ranking, or whether it is correct because God affirms it as correct. Then there is the more profound question as to whether, given an omnipotent Creator God, one can make adequate sense of the good, the right, and the virtuous without reference to this God. Is it possible, absent reference to the Holy (that is, to God) to make sense of a dependent, created universe, including the morality that should structure relationships within such a universe, without reference to the Creator? See H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., "The *Euthyphro's* Dilemma Reconsidered: A Variation on a Theme from Brody on Halakhic Method," in *Pluralistic Casuistry*, ed. Mark Cherry and Ana Iltis (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 109–30.

one's family, friends, etc. The second option in the example involves violating a minor right-making condition, such as using persons in a minor fashion as means merely, while also acting to lower slightly the average and total amount of benefits over harms for persons generally (that is, choosing this option would decrease the greatest good for the greatest number). This option avoids the terrible consequences to oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community, while also leading to the security, immense prosperity, pleasure, and general flourishing in nonmoral ways of oneself and one's family, friends, etc., all without one's family, friends, close associates, and community actually being formally involved in any immoral activity or one's immoral choice (that is, without their consenting to or affirming one's immorality). They would not be involved in formal cooperation with the immoral act. The first of these two options would, in the usual sense, be the moral choice. It would be what one is obliged to choose in the usual sense of acting morally (in that it would honor right-making conditions of respect for all persons qua persons, and/or it would maximize benefits over harms for the greatest number), but it would be personally very costly. The second option would be an immoral choice in the sense of using others as means merely and diminishing the amount of good for the greatest number, but it would be highly advantageous for oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community.

In a universe considered to lack any necessary connection between worthiness of happiness and actual happiness, there is a strong sense in which, in such circumstances, acting morally would be irrational: it would involve acting contrary to very important personal interests. In contrast, acting prudently would be rational, in the sense of being in accord with very good grounds for action. One might attempt to contain the threat to morality posed by circumstances in which acting prudently rather than morally would appear more rational, by creating within morality a basis for such exceptions. Thus, one might attempt to argue that it would be morally allowable to preserve very important interests of oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community, as long as the moral costs to other persons are not very high, and the costs of not so acting would be very high to oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community. The result would be a sort of Confucian moral principle of graduated love, in terms of which it would be appropriate in certain circumstances to give precedence to one's own good and that of one's family, friends, close associates, and community, where there would otherwise be great harm to oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community, but only minor immoral use of others and/or only a small diminishment of the greatest good for the greatest number.[18] The

[18] A traditional interpretation of Confucian moral thought requires one to weigh one's obligations to the good of one's family, friends, close associates, and community higher than

question then arises as to how one could establish and then limit the governance of such a principled *de minimis* condition for immoral actions—a condition that permitted one (held that one was allowed and/or obliged), at least in some cases, to be partial to oneself and one's family, friends, close associates, and community as long as prudential concerns were significant and the moral costs were not too high. The point is not so much how exactly to answer the question about the correct balance of the claims of morality and the concerns of prudence in particular circumstances, but to recognize that no definitive answer is possible, once God is out of the picture as the arbiter and enforcer of morality. There is no canonical answer regarding who gets the final say, and by what standards, when weighing moral obligations against the claims of prudential rationality.

IV. God for the Sake of Morality: Kant's Account

Kant attempts to address the problem of balancing the claims of morality and prudence by establishing the absolute force of moral obligation. He does this by making the idea of God central to his understanding of morality, all without acknowledging God's existence. At the end of the eighteenth century, there remained a general acceptance of the special metaphysics of natural theology that often included proofs for the existence of God.[19] Kant's theological reflections, in rejecting the possibility of knowing whether a God exists, represent a substantive break from the antecedent philosophical tradition that had shaped Western European culture. Kant does retain, for epistemology and morality, an indispensable place for the idea of God and a basis for postulating God's existence. Yet Kant's failure actually to affirm the existence of God should come as no surprise, not just given the character of his epistemology, but because, as Manfred Kuehn indicates in his biography of Kant, it is very likely that "Kant did not really believe in God."[20] The idea of God remains central for Kant after the publication of *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), even if the actual existence of God is no longer recognized.

In his critical works,[21] Kant develops an implicit distinction between (1) acting as if God existed in order to guide empirical study and (2) affirming what he terms a pure practical postulate of God's existence as a basis for moral action. In the latter case, one acts in a way that affirms

one's obligations to distant and especially anonymous others. See, for example, Ruiping Fan, "Which Care? Whose Responsibility? And Why Family?"

[19] Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysik* (Stoughton, WI: Books on Demand, 2004).

[20] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 391–92; see also 3–4.

[21] The critical works of Kant refer to those published beginning with the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, which critically bring into question what had been the taken-for-granted understanding of epistemology, metaphysics, and morality in Western European philosophy.

the postulate's truth. As to matters epistemological, Kant invokes God as an idea that can warrant one in acting in empirical investigations *as if* reality will always have a fine-grain intelligible unity. In the appendix to the transcendental dialectic of *The Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant develops his account of God as a regulative ideal in order to "guide the empirical employment of *our* reason [so] as to secure its greatest possible extension—that is, by viewing all objects *as if* they drew their origin from such an archetype."[22] Kant recognizes that, if one acted as if the universe were surd in its origins, one would lack a necessary basis for always looking for the richness of the unities and affinities that had been assumed when the universe had been recognized as the creation of God Who established its physical regularities. Kant presupposes that he can maintain the plausibility of looking for a deep intelligible unity in empirical reality by an appeal to a regulative idea of God, but without claiming the actual existence of even a deistic God.[23]

Kant, however, does not explicitly recognize the challenge of moral pluralism that becomes salient once a God's-eye perspective is lost. Nor does he explicitly appeal to God to set moral pluralism aside, although this appeal is present implicitly in his regulative employment of God in investigating the coherence of empirical reality. The idea of God implies that reason, including moral reason, is united in its character. An appeal to God to vindicate the unity of morality is also implicitly present in Kant's account of the kingdom of ends in *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785).[24] There Kant, by characterizing God as having a holy will, which is necessarily in unison with the law, creates the assumption that there is but one rationally defensible morality. In *Opus Postumum* (1804), Kant does speak of God as the Law-giver, and therefore as the source of the unity of the moral law. As Kant puts it:

> There exists a God, that is, one principle which, as substance, is morally law-giving. . . . [T]he concept of duty (of a universal practical principle) is contained identically in the concept of a divine being as an ideal of human reason for the sake of the latter's law-giving.[25]

The coherence and unity of morality is secured by the role of the idea of God.

As I have already noted, Kant's view is also that the force of moral obligation will be undercut without a God Who guarantees the harmony

[22] Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1964), 553, A672=B700. Emphasis is in the original unless otherwise noted.
[23] Ibid., A675=B703.
[24] Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* Akademie ed., IV.414.
[25] Kant, *Opus Postumum,* ed. Eckart Förster, trans. Eckart Förster and Michael Rosen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 204, 22:122–23. (The text breaks off after "law-giving.")

of happiness with the worthiness to be happy. Kant's point is that an important element of the rationality of the priority of morality over prudential concerns is undermined in the absence of a God Who coordinates happiness with worthiness of happiness. Kant's account is more subtle than Anscombe's point, noted above, that without God the very character of morality changes, because it is "as if the notion 'criminal' were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten."[26] Anscombe's view is straightforwardly that the compelling character of moral obligations presupposed an omniscient and omnipotent God Who enforces morality through eternal rewards and punishments. In contrast, Kant's point concerns the challenge to the rationality or coherence of moral obligation, absent a coordination of happiness with worthiness of happiness. Kant's position is not about conforming to morality in order to avoid God's punishment. Such a motive, for Kant, would be a heteronomous consideration (i.e., it would involve acting motivated by a fear of being punished for one's misdeeds), rather than an appropriate moral motive (i.e., that of acting out of respect for the moral law).[27]

In *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant stresses this point while advancing his moralized account of Christianity:

> The Christian principle of morality is not theological and thus heteronomous, . . . it does not make the knowledge of God and His will the basis of these laws but makes such knowledge the basis only of succeeding to the highest good on condition of obedience to these laws; it places the real incentive for obedience to the law not in the desired consequences of obedience but in the conception of duty alone, in true observance of which the worthiness to attain the latter [i.e., the consequences of obedience] alone consists.[28]

Kant recognizes that in the absence of a coordination of happiness with worthiness to be happy, there would be a deep irrationality in affirming the obligation to give precedence to morality over prudential concerns—an affirmation he takes to involve also affirming the idea of happiness being in proportion to worthiness of happiness.

In the "Canon of Pure Reason" at the end of *The Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant underscores the necessity of the postulates of God's existence and of immortality in order to secure what he terms the ideal of the supreme good (the coordination of happiness and worthiness of happiness):

> The idea of such an intelligence [God] in which the most perfect moral will, united with supreme blessedness, is the cause of all hap-

[26] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 6.

[27] Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* Akademie ed., IV.433.

[28] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 133–34, Akademie ed., V.129–30.

> piness in the world—so far as happiness stands in exact relation with morality, that is, with worthiness to be happy—I entitle the *ideal of the supreme good.* It is, therefore, only in the ideal of the supreme *original* good that pure reason can find the ground of this connection, which is necessary from the practical point of view. . . .[29] Thus without a God and without a world invisible to us now but hoped for, the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action. For they do not fulfil in its completeness that end which is natural to every rational being and which is determined *a priori,* and rendered necessary, by that same pure reason.[30]

Because Kant holds that we cannot avoid thinking of ourselves as moral agents, and because Kant also holds that morality cannot be fully coherent, absent our representing the right and the good as ultimately in harmony, he finds himself required to affirm God and immortality. For Kant, if the rational priority of morality is defeated, the rationality of morality itself is defeated, a point he also stresses in *The Critique of Pure Reason.* Again, for Kant, this affirmation of God does not involve a theoretical claim—that is, an epistemic claim that God exists. Instead, the claim concerns the coherence of moral conduct: it is the practical claim that it is morally necessary to affirm God's existence in order coherently to maintain the rationality of the absolute claims of morality over prudence.

In *The Critique of Practical Reason,* Kant develops this point further through his solution to the antinomy of pure practical reason. As in *The Critique of Pure Reason,* where Kant presents a pair of propositions, both of which appear to have a claim to truth while both are in tension (are antinomies), so, too, in *The Critique of Practical Reason,* he addresses an apparent antinomy in morality. He examines the proposition that by seeking happiness one can achieve virtue, and the proposition that by being virtuous one will necessarily be happy. The first proposition he holds to be inadmissible because it would render virtue an effect of the allure of happiness, not an autonomous choice. This proposition is incompatible with what Kant holds to be morality. The second proposition he holds to be false "only if I assume existence in this world to be the only mode of existence of a rational being."[31] Thus, Kant is able to hold that being virtuous will lead to happiness in proportion to worthiness, and he is able to save the rationality of moral obligation by affirming his postulates of pure practical reason:

> These postulates are those of immortality, of freedom affirmatively regarded (as the causality of a being so far as he belongs to the

[29] Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason,* 639, A811–12=B838–39.
[30] Ibid., 640, A813=B841.
[31] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason,* 119, Akademie ed., V.115.

> intelligible world), and of the existence of God. . . . The prospect of the highest good, necessary through respect for the moral law and the consequent supposition of its objective reality, thus leads through postulates of practical reason to concepts which the speculative reason only exhibited as problems which it could not solve.[32]

The requirement that God's existence be affirmed in the practice of morality is so serious for Kant that he affirms it not merely as an *as-if* existence; instead, he affirms the existence of God as a necessary postulate for moral action. God is recognized as integral to the ideal of the supreme good, although God's actual existence is not affirmed.

In this fashion, Kant completes his recasting of natural theology. In *The Critique of Pure Reason,* he argues that natural theology as a project aimed at metaphysical knowledge fails. For Kant, whether God exists or not is a matter that lies beyond theoretical or empirical knowledge. Nevertheless, ever ready to restore the elements of his pre-critical landscape to a post-critical standing, Kant invokes God to guide scientific inquiry and to provide coherence to morality, thus maintaining the force of moral obligation. At the same time, this allows Kant's moralization of religion, his reduction of religion to its moral significance. Kant's position permits him to maintain a moral attitude and a sense of moral obligation that is in continuity with the moral-philosophical views that emerged with the Renaissance and the Reformation, views that had their roots in Western Christendom's synthesis of faith and reason, though they became shorn of their metaphysical foundations.

V. The State as a Surrogate for God: Moral Obligation with the Force of Reason, Custom, and Law

Hegel seeks to give an account of the nature of moral obligation that contrasts with Kant's account, both in terms of the force of moral obligation and in terms of the significance of religion and theology. Although Hegel obscures the significance of his project in a theological language disengaged from traditional theological commitments, his focus is on creating a post-Christian, post-metaphysical perspective.[33] His use of theological language is not disingenuous: Hegel regards himself as disclosing (and perhaps also effecting) a profound shift in Western European culture. He seeks to maintain, while nevertheless recasting, traditional theological language so as to allow him to recognize (as he assumes) how

[32] Ibid., 137, Akademie ed., V.133.

[33] Hegel's reference to the death of God is not without controversy. For some further reflections on the matter, see Gabriel Amengual, "Nihilismus und Gottesbegriff," in *Hegel-Jahrbuch* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 38–44; and William Franke, "The Deaths of God in Hegel and Nietzsche and the Crisis of Values in Secular Modernity and Post-Secular Postmodernity," *Religion and the Arts* 11, no. 2 (2007): 214–41.

religious concerns have become a dimension of his post-Enlightenment culture.

To begin with, Hegel lodges morality fully within a dimension (or what Hegel terms a "moment") of *Sittlichkeit.* Hegel contrasts what he calls *Moralität* (morality as it can be understood, as the universalization of intention and will) with *Sittlichkeit* (a form of morality that is, for Hegel, framed by established moral custom). Morality for Hegel must be understood and realized within the framework of customary morality, the highest category of *Sittlichkeit,* which includes the state.[34] It is within the state that there is the political or legal enforcement, the actual realization, of moral norms.[35] Hegel also introduces *Sittlichkeit* as a way of identifying a moral perspective in terms of which contingent, normative content can be given to morality. Hegel notes that it is only in *Sittlichkeit* that morality gains its full content. Hegel's category of *Sittlichkeit* is meant to overcome the one-sidedness and incompleteness of Kant's account of morality. First, Hegel wishes to moderate Kant's claims regarding the right's priority over the good: "[R]ight is not the good without welfare (*fiat iustitia* should not have *pereat mundus* as its consequence)."[36] Unlike Kant, Hegel does not hold that one should do what is right, if this will have significantly bad consequences. Second, Hegel diagnoses the source of Kant's inability to derive concrete moral guidance from his appeal to universalizability, his appeal to the categorical imperative: "Kant's further form—the capacity of an action to be envisaged as a *universal* maxim—does yield a more *concrete* representation of the situation in question, but it does not in itself

[34] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right,* secs. 258–60. "Category" in this essay is used in the first sense given in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (2d ed., 1960): "an ultimate concept or form of thought; one of the primary fundamental conceptions to which all knowledge can be reduced." Although the state is the highest category of *Sittlichkeit,* the highest category of the state is world history, that is, the transition to Absolute Spirit within which philosophy is the highest category.

[35] In his account of moral categories, Hegel begins with an abstract account of rights claims and then shows that this discourse is one-sided and incomplete without an account of the good that he addresses under the rubric *Moralität.* Hegel then creates a distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit,* thus fashioning a new terminology for his moral philosophy. As Michael Inwood notes, "All three German words for 'morality' derive from a word for 'CUSTOM': *Ethik* is from the Greek *ethos, Moralität* from the Latin *mos* (plural: *mores*), and *Sittlichkeit* from the German *Sitte.* But only in the case of *Sittlichkeit* ('ETHICAL LIFE') does Hegel stress this genealogy: *Ethik* has little significance for him, but is occasionally used to cover both *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität. Moralität* is regularly used for 'individual morality', especially as conceived by Kant." Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 191.

The difficulty that *Moralität* poses and that *Sittlichkeit* solves is the problem of establishing canonical moral content. *Moralität* seeks but fails to establish particular content-full moral obligations as canonical. The content of morality, Hegel argues, is necessarily contingent, sociohistorically conditioned. As with all actuality, for Hegel there is a necessary dimension of contingency. Abstract right and *Moralität* must therefore be understood within the particularity and contingent content of *Sittlichkeit,* which takes shape within a family, a civil society, and a state.

[36] G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 157, sec. 130. The Latin derives from the famous phrase *"Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus"* ("Let there be justice, though the world perish").

contain any principle apart from formal identity and [the] absence of contradiction."[37] Kant fails to derive concrete moral guidance, on Hegel's view, because actual moral obligation presupposes the contingent content supplied by an existing moral community:

> In an *ethical* community, it is easy to say what man must do, what are the duties he has to fulfil in order to be virtuous: he has simply to follow the well-known and explicit rules of his own situation. Rectitude is the general character which may be demanded of him by law or custom. . . . In an existing ethical order in which a complete system of ethical relations has been developed and actualized, virtue in the strict sense of the word is in place. . . .[38]

The necessity of the contingency of *Sittlichkeit*'s content involves the claim that the content needed for the moral life comes from the moral life's sociohistorical embeddedness. Hegel thus radically rejects Kant's attempt to ground morality in universalizability and rationality alone, thereby providing a new account of moral norms.

Through his postulates of pure practical reason, Kant appeals to God in order to ensure the coordination of happiness and worthiness of happiness, but for Hegel it is the state, not God, that provides the basis for the harmonization (as far as possible, given sociohistorical circumstances) of morality with happiness. It is a particular culture, framed by its civil society and realized through law, that affirms and establishes one among the plurality of constellations of moral norms. The state, as Hegel contends, is "the march of God in the world [*Es ist der Gang Gottes in der Welt, dass der Staat ist*]." The state is the "actual God [*der wirkliche Gott*]," the category of reality within which moral rights become fully actual by being politically realized. It is within the state that the moral status of persons is secured through law.[39] Through the rule of law, as well as through welfare interventions,[40] the state for Hegel can achieve the harmony of the right and the good, insofar as this is possible in a particular sociohistorical context. Moral norms, and the force of moral obligations, take on a more concrete substance by being enforced through laws that can punish crime and reward virtue. In this way, the state becomes the actual agent for achieving happiness in proportion to one's worthiness to be happy, insofar as this is possible within the limits of place and history. Where Kant seeks to retain the idea of God so as to secure the absolute priority of morality over prudence, Hegel seeks no such abstract absolute priority at the normative level. For

[37] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* 162, sec. 135.
[38] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right,* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 107f., sec. 150.
[39] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right,* 279, sec. 258 Addition.
[40] Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right,* secs. 244, 247.

Hegel, *Sittlichkeit* will generally specify the appropriate balance between the good and the right. Hegel thus meets Anscombe's concerns with an affirmation of actual criminal courts, laws, and punishments as integral to the *Sittlichkeit* within which morality receives its concrete significance, and within which moral obligations are concretely realized and enforced. Hegel does not reduce the moral to the legal. Instead, Hegel's position is such that a morality not realized through law is only an abstract wish. It is within this cultural realm that the rational force of moral norms is supplemented with the force of custom and law.

Hegel is committed to eschewing the absolute claims of Kant's ahistorical morality and instead accepting the foundational recasting of moral obligation in the absence of a recognition of the transcendent God to which both Kant and Anscombe refer. Hegel takes this approach because, for him, in contrast with Kant, there is no legitimate idea of God as fully transcendent. God has become a category fully integral to Hegel's speculative reason, but is no longer to be thought of as transcendent. For Hegel, the truth of God is fully realized as Absolute Spirit, which is simply the standpoint of philosophy, a moment of *Geist,* of culture philosophically conscious of itself. As a transcendent noumenal entity, God for Hegel is thus dead. Hence, Hegel's observation concerning "the feeling that 'God Himself is dead'"[41] is set within a complex categorial recasting of religion within philosophy. The possible transcendent space of which Kant spoke (when affirming the practical postulate of God's existence in bolstering moral obligation) is rendered explicitly immanent to thought. God is no longer to be considered a Being in a noumenal beyond.[42] Hegel seeks to reconceptualize and immanentize the noumenal, which had been understood as a domain of existence to which one could refer beyond the bounds of possible experience. The appreciation of God as transcendent is deflated, and God is reconstrued as a way of envisaging the meaning of reality as a whole.[43] In the pro-

[41] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge,* trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 190 [414]. The number in square brackets refers to the critical edition of Hegel's work: Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke,* ed. Hartmut Buchner and Otto Pöggeler (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968).

[42] The nonmetaphysical account of Hegel's project, which this essay embraces, understands Hegel's mature project as an attempt to appreciate categorial thought, to understand how one can think about thinking about being. Hegel's project is the examination and ordering of the ways that thought apprehends being and being is for thought. This account underlying this essay is deeply indebted to the work of Klaus Hartmann. See, for example, Klaus Hartmann, "On Taking the Transcendental Turn," *Review of Metaphysics* 20, no. 2 (1966): 223–49; Klaus Hartmann, ed., *Die Ontologische Option* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976); Klaus Hartmann, "Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View," in *Hegel,* ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 101–24; and Terry Pinkard, "What Is the Non-Metaphysical Reading of Hegel? A Reply to F. Beiser," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 34 (1996): 13–20. See also H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., and Terry Pinkard, eds., *Hegel Reconsidered* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994).

[43] For an introduction to some of the controversies regarding what Hegel really meant about God, see Klaus Brinkmann, "Panthéisme, panlogisme et protestantisme dans la

cess, the force of moral obligations as grounded in a transcendent God is likewise reconstrued.

Hegel takes this position early in his career. Already in 1802, there is no longer a "beyond" for Hegel—beyond what we know, beyond what can be compassed in categorial thought within the horizon of the finite and the immanent. For Hegel, "being and thought are one," [44] and thus, in his criticism of Kant even in this early period, Hegel already rejects Kant's reflections on the transcendent.[45] In this way, Hegel seeks to render religious reality, including God, into a philosophical category in which being is fully comprehended by thought. Hegel's foundational critique of Kant's view is that Kant wrongly construes the thing-in-itself and God as possible existents beyond the horizon of possible experience. For Hegel, both the thing-in-itself and God are immanentized and brought within the sphere of experience and categorial knowledge, so that God is rendered an immanent reality within culture. The most consistent account of Hegel's philosophical project in light of his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), *Philosophy of Right* (1821), *Science of Logic* (1812, 1813, and 1816), and *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (published in three editions in 1817, 1827, and 1830) is that he sought to frame a categorial, nonmetaphysical account of reality that requires no reference to the noumenal, to the fully transcendent. Hegel's accounts of reality and of morality are not anchored in any understanding of being that cannot be exhaustively categorially compassed in human thought. Hegel contends that being, insofar as it is, must in principle be fully for thought and that thought can fully apprehend being because there is nothing coherently to be thought about being (such as Kant's *Ding-an-sich*) beyond the bounds of thought. For Hegel, being has been rendered immanent and thought is sovereign. Hegel denies that there is noetic knowledge of the noumenon, knowledge of any being independent of and beyond human thought.[46] Hegel is right in his claims if there is no noumenon. Hegel is also right for practical purposes, if no

philosophie de Hegel," in *Les Philosophes et la question de Dieu,* ed. Luc Langlois (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 223–38; William Desmond, "Hegel's God, Transcendence, and the Counterfeit Double: A Figure of Dialectical Equivocity?" *Owl of Minerva* 36, no. 2 (2005): 91–110; William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Peter C. Hodgson, "Hegel's God: Counterfeit or Real?" *Owl of Minerva* 36, no. 2 (2005): 153–63; Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel, Desmond, and the Problem of God's Transcendence," *Owl of Minerva* 36, no. 2 (2005): 131–52; Quentin Lauer, *Hegel's Concept of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); James Kreines, "Between the Bounds of Experience and Divine Intuition: Kant's Epistemic Limits and Hegel's Ambitions," *Inquiry* 50, no. 3 (June 2007): 306–34; Craig M. Nichols, "The Eschatological Theogony of the God Who May Be: Exploring the Concept of Divine Presence in Kearney, Hegel, and Heidegger," *Metaphilosophy* 36, no. 5 (October 2005): 750–61; and Alan M. Olson, *Hegel and the Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[44] Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge,* 109 [413].

[45] G. W. F. Hegel, "Glauben und Wissen," *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie,* Band 2, no. 1 (Tübingen: Cotta, 1802) [325].

[46] "Noetic" is used in the adjectival form of the second sense given in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (2d ed., 1960): "cognition, esp. through direct and self-evident knowledge."

one has the capacity for noetic experience of any being whose nature is not fully compassed in human sensible experience and speculative reflection.[47]

Hegel's final standpoint, Absolute Spirit, as a result becomes, for him, the realization of philosophy, in the sense of philosophy reflectively appreciating the order and rationality of philosophy's major categories. Absolute Spirit is *thought categorially thinking about the unity of being and thought*.[48] Philosophy asks and answers all general rational questions (now set within the horizon of the immanent), so that there is no rational standpoint beyond its standpoint. Philosophy is therefore final or absolute. As Peter Kalkavage puts it, "Hegel's critique of the supersensible Beyond" is the central defining characteristic of his philosophical project.[49] As a consequence, the Kantian support for the authority of moral obligation that was anchored in God collapses. There are good grounds in terms of Hegel's personal views, not just his theoretical commitments, to conclude that Hegel was far from a traditional believer.[50] He was not even a believer for the sake of the rationality of morality, as was Kant.[51] Hegel is quite

[47] See H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., "Critical Reflections on Theology's Handmaid," *Philosophy and Theology* 18, no. 1 (2006): 53–75.

[48] At the close of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences,* in the third part ("The Philosophy of Mind") in the section on "Philosophy," Hegel states: "This notion of philosophy is the self-thinking Idea, the truth aware of itself. . . ." G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind,* trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 313, sec. 574. Hegel considers philosophy to be the esoteric study of God (ibid., sec. 573). Indeed, Hegel's point is that philosophers philosophizing are God. Here Hegel recasts, shorn of metaphysical foundation, Aristotle's account of the life of the unmoved Mover, God, which is the life of thought thinking itself: "And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is *capable* of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought." Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle,* ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 2, 1695, 1072b18–22.

[49] Peter Kalkavage, *The Logic of Desire: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2008), 455.

[50] Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966); Horst Althaus, *Hegel: An Intellectual Biography,* trans. Michael Tarsh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 254.

[51] On this point, Kaufmann quotes Heinrich Heine's (1797–1856) report about an evening with Hegel:

> I, a young man of twenty-two who had just eaten well and had good coffee, enthused about the stars and called them the abode of the blessed. But the master grumbled to himself: "The stars, hum! Hum! The stars are only a gleaming leprosy in the sky!" For God's sake, I shouted, then there is no happy locality up there to reward virtue after death? But he, staring at me with his pale eyes, said cuttingly: "So you want to get a tip for having nursed your sick mother and for not having poisoned your dear brother?"—Saying that, he looked around anxiously, but he immediately seemed reassured when he saw that it was only Heinrich Beer, who had approached to invite him to play whist. . . .
>
> I was young and proud, and it pleased my vanity when I learned from Hegel that it was not the dear God who lived in heaven that was God, as my grandmother supposed, but I myself here on earth. (Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation,* 367)

willing to approach morality without Kant's practical postulate of God's existence, because for Hegel God does not exist even as an idea of a transcendent or noumenal reality to be thought beyond the bounds of the immanent, and because morality itself has been recast so that Kant's assumptions regarding the unity of morality and his claims regarding the priority of the right over the good have been categorially domesticated. Hegel can accept both moral pluralism and the deflation of the force of moral obligation. The importance of God has also been deflated for Hegel. In Hegel's *Encyclopedia,* religion is placed as the penultimate category and is speculatively relocated as a moment within philosophy's reflections. The idea of God has become a way of picturing the wholeness of being. In "The Philosophy of Mind" at the end of his *Encyclopedia,* Hegel states: "God is God only so far as he knows himself: his self-knowledge is, further, a self-consciousness in man and man's knowledge *of* God, which proceeds to man's self-knowledge *in* God." [52]

Hegel recognizes that his proposal is radical. The death and resurrection of God of which Hegel speaks are meant to identify God's death as a metaphysical entity and His resurrection as a cultural entity by and in philosophy. The result is that theology has been fully placed within the demands of philosophy. As Hegel sees the matter, his account is meant to "re-establish for philosophy . . . the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday. Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness." [53] For Hegel, God as traditionally understood in Western European Christianity dies as metaphysically existing, but is resurrected as Hegel's philosophically domesticated God.[54] The idea of God, as Kant understood it, is transformed so as to be rendered a category of cultural

---

For a slightly different translation of this passage, see Heinrich Heine, *Heinrich Heine's Memoirs from his Works, Letters, and Conversations,* ed. Gustav Karpeles, trans. Gilbert Cannan (London: Heinemann, 1910), 114.

[52] Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind,* 298, sec. 564.

[53] Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge,* 191 [414].

[54] Western Christianity began its journey to Hegel's philosophical domestication and recasting of God when, from the early second millennium, it began to presuppose an analogy (i.e., an *analogia entis*) between what human moral rationality could know about created being and the being of God. This move allowed Western culture to assume that philosophical accounts of natural law and discursive accounts of philosophical rationality could substitute for the perspective of God. For an account of how different this Western position was from that of the original Christianity, see David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Philosophy was assumed to be able to discover and lay out a moral perspective that was the same as the perspective of God. In time, this led to recasting God in terms of philosophy's interests. For an account of the quite different original Christian epistemology, grounded in a noetic experience of God, see H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Salem, MA: Scrivener Press, 2000); Engelhardt, "Sin and Bioethics: Why a Liturgical Anthropology Is Foundational," *Christian Bioethics* 11, no. 2 (August 2005): 221–39; Engelhardt, "What Is Christian about Christian Bioethics? Metaphysical, Epistemological, and Moral Differences," *Christian Bioethics* 11, no. 3 (December 2005): 241–53; and Engelhardt, "Critical Reflections on Theology's Handmaid."

reality appreciated in philosophical reflection. Hegel renders God fully immanent, while relativizing the priority of the right over the prudent. In the process, the meaning of moral obligation is foundationally recast.

In all of this, it is important to note that Hegel is not directly developing particular morally normative claims. Hegel is not immediately interested in how, within particular circumstances, moral claims can be defeated by prudential concerns. Instead, Hegel is offering a categorial ordering of various levels of normative concerns or discourse. This categorial ordering is aimed *inter alia* at domesticating the noumenal (e.g., God) along with moral norms by placing them all inside the horizon of the immanent. The result is that all is rendered transparent to categorial thought, to philosophical reflection on how being can be for thought, and how thought can apprehend being. Hegel's moral concerns, including his concerns for the nature and force of moral obligation, are situated within this systematic epistemological and ontological project. The force of moral obligation is to be understood within the sociohistorical character of a particular realization of *Sittlichkeit*, a particular sociohistorically realized morality. The force of moral obligations is thus contingent and sociohistorically situated.

VI. Conclusion: Moral Obligations in a World without God

Today we still confront the concerns raised by Kant and Anscombe regarding the compelling character of moral obligation apart from God as the unifier, judge, and enforcer of moral norms. Granted that there are important senses in which it is wrong simpliciter to engage in immoral acts, nevertheless one can still ask whether morality should always trump prudential rationality in the decisions of actual individuals in particular circumstances. If there is a God Who sufficiently punishes the wicked and sufficiently rewards the virtuous into eternity, then it will never be prudentially rational to act immorally. If there is no such God, the question remains as to why it would always be rational to favor moral rationality over prudential rationality. It will not be enough, following Mill, simply to appeal to a feeling of obligation or a feeling of guilt associated with the violation of moral norms as a sanction to dissuade immorality.[55] One can always critically bring feelings of obligation and guilt into question, so as to redirect one's feelings in terms of what one judges appropriate within particular understandings of morality and of prudential rationality, and then redirect one's behavior.

Hegel's categorial account holds that morality is the higher truth of the perspective from which one can understand the full significance of merely prudential choices. Within the sphere of moral norms, one has, for Hegel,

[55] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism,* chap. 3, "Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility."

stepped beyond the encounter that generates the master-slave relationship.[56] But this does not mean that one is always, in all particular circumstances, acting rationally by giving priority to moral considerations over prudential considerations.[57] After Hegel has settled the matter regarding the categorial ordering of domains of normative concern, the question still remains: Why should one necessarily give precedence, in a particular circumstance, to moral rationality over prudential rationality, in the absence of the God Who punishes and rewards, especially in circumstances in which the state is unlikely to punish or reward effectively? The matter of the ordering of moral considerations over prudential considerations will be settled by local *Sittlichkeit* and its appreciation of custom and law. However, there will remain the noncategorial but nevertheless pressing normative question, in particular circumstances, of the priority of moral considerations over prudential considerations, even after Hegel has finished his categorial ordering of normative realms.

Absent a transcendent point of reference, all will develop and change over time. For Hegel, because being and thought are one, as categories change, reality and morality themselves change.[58] This is a point appreciated in part by Anscombe in less radical terms, when she recognizes that across Western cultures there has not been one practice of morality. In that, for Hegel, there is no beyond, beyond the horizon of the finite and the immanent, the full sense of moral norms, of what one can coherently say about morality, will be found within the fullness of *Geist*, a fullness that encompasses moral diversity. There can be disparate histories, as long as there can be a history of these histories. Hegel can also recognize different *Sittlichkeiten*, as long as he can philosophically characterize or comprehend this diversity. Hegel can allow a post-modernity, a plurality of moral accounts, as long as this plurality is located within a categorial account of that moral pluralism. Hegel is able to live with a categorially comprehensible moral pluralism, on the condition that he can categorially place and understand that moral diversity.

[56] Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, secs. 430–37. In his treatment of "Phenomenology of Mind" in the *Encyclopedia* (he also treats the issue in his book *The Phenomenology of Mind*), Hegel examines the struggle for recognition under an encounter that initially leads to a master and a slave, but that culminates in the emergence of a universal self-consciousness, a step on the way to morality.

[57] Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, sec. 130.

[58] Hegel put the matter of categorial change in this fashion: "All cultural change reduces itself to a difference of categories. All revolutions, whether in the sciences or world history, occur merely because spirit has changed its categories in order to understand and examine what belongs to it, in order to possess and grasp itself in a truer, deeper, more intimate and unified manner." G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Michael John Petry (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970), 202, sec. 246 Addition. For Hegel, when categories change, reality changes, because there is no independent perspective beyond our categories, save our categorial reflections on the categories (which thought about thought is Absolute Spirit), that could serve as an independent and objective standard. Hegel with malice aforethought has attempted to deflate any acknowledgment of the existence and perspective of the transcendent God, so as firmly to place reality within his categorial account.

The question that Kant and Anscombe present to us is whether, after the Enlightenment, we are still in possession of a sufficiently robust account of moral obligation. It is surely the case that a significant change in the meaning of morality and moral obligation occurs, once God is no longer recognized as the source of the unity and enforcement of morality. If one embraces an atheistic or agnostic methodological postulate, morality remains in principle plural, and the claims of morality cannot always rationally trump the claims of prudential rationality. If reality comes from nowhere, is going nowhere, and serves no ultimate purpose, then the only final perspectives from which to order cardinal moral goods, as well as establish the priority of moral concerns, are provisional, finite, sociohistorically conditioned perspectives articulated within particular cultural understandings. For Kant, God provided at least a basis for denying moral pluralism and for asserting the priority of morality over prudence. Hegel marks the abandonment of a recognition of such a grounding for the unity of morality and the loss of a fully reliable source for the enforcement of moral obligation. In comparison to what had generally been accepted in Western culture prior to the Enlightenment as the force or compelling character of moral obligation, the force of moral obligation is now deflated. The loss of the recognition of the existence of God—the death of God of which Hegel speaks—is no mean loss.

Philosophy, Rice University