PART ONE

Moral Thinking
The essays in this chapter consider what are often some of the first questions that are asked as people begin to study ethics. One is the connection between morality, on the one hand, and self-interest, on the other. Is morality opposed to self-interest, as some suppose, or is it in some sense to everyone’s advantage? Another related question involves peoples’ actual motives. While we sometimes think we act for the sake of morality, is it possible that this is mistaken and that ultimately our real motives are always selfish ones? These questions lead naturally to the topic of the last essays in the chapter: the connections, if any, between morality and religion and the relationships between motives of sympathy for others and moral duty.

Leviathan: Morality as Rational Advantage

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 when the approach of the Spanish Armada was threatening Britain. “Fear and I were born twins,” he would later say, emphasizing his conviction that the need for security was the foundation of society and the basis of political obligation. He lived during a critical and difficult period of English history, which included struggles over the traditional authority of the church and the emerging role of modern science. He also saw radical political change, including the absolutism of the Stuart monarchy, the English civil war, and the abolition and subsequent restoration of the monarchy. He died just before constitutional government won its final victory. Hobbes served as tutor for Charles II, who gave Hobbes a pension after being restored to the throne. After publishing early works expressing antiroyalist attitudes, Hobbes was sent into exile, he was condemned in the House of Commons, and, even after he died, his books were burned at Oxford. He was suspected of atheism and, perhaps most important, he rejected the divine basis of political authority. God, he said, is beyond rational understanding; we can only know he exists as the first cause of the universe. Hobbes lived until the
age of ninety-one, enjoying a life of travel, study, polemi-
cal controversy, and literary and philosophical activity. He
was personally temperate, lively, and a loyal friend; he
played tennis until the age of seventy-five and attributed
his lifelong good health to exercise and singing in bed. He
wrote on a variety of subjects, but his most famous work
by far is *Leviathan*, published in 1651.

Hobbes was heavily influenced by the new Galilean
scientific method and thought that physical laws could
account for human behavior, just as they do for all other
phenomena. He sought to understand human beings (and
politics) in accord with the new scientific methods.

Just before the selection reprinted here, Hobbes
argued that the world, including human beings, is com-
posed of material particles. Minds, he argued, are there-
fore no different from bodies; human “motion,” such as
walking, speaking, and other acts, is caused by our de-
sires, appetites, and aversions. In this selection, Hobbes
discusses how reason and the human condition induce
people to leave a “state of nature” and agree to be ruled
by a common power strong enough to enforce contracts
and ensure peace. Morality is, therefore, a form of con-
vention, agreed to by all in order to avoid the war of all
against all. Without an agreement and the threat of harm
imposed by the sovereign, there can be neither morality
nor justice. Power and threats are the necessary bases of
all obligations.

The First Part: Of Man

**Good. Evil. . . .** Whatever is the object of any
man’s appetite or desire, that is it which he for his
part calleth good: and the object of his hate and
aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and incon-
siderable. For these words of good, evil, and con-
temptible, are ever used with relation to the person
that useth them: there being nothing simply and
absolutely so. . . .

**Deliberation.** When in the mind of man, appe-
tites, and aversions, hopes, and fears, concern-
ing one and the same thing, arise alternately; and
divers good and evil consequences of the doing,
or omitting the thing propounded, come succes-
sively into our thoughts; so that sometimes we
have an appetite to it; sometimes an aversion from
it; sometimes hope to be able to do it; sometimes
despair, or fear to attempt it; the whole sum of de-
sires, aversions, hopes and fears continued till the
thing be either done, or thought impossible, is that
we call deliberation. . . .

**The Will.** In deliberation, the last appetite, or aver-
sion, immediately adhering to the action, or to the
omission thereof, is that we call the will. . . .

**Felicity.** Continual success in obtaining those
things which a man from time to time desireth,
that is to say, continual prospering, is that men call
felicity; I mean the felicity of this life. For there
is no such thing as perpetual tranquility of mind,
while we live here; because life itself is but motion,
and can never be without desire, nor without fear,
no more than without sense. . . .
Chapter 1. Self-Interest, Religion, and Conscience

is, than all men but themselves, and a few others, whom by fame, or for concurring with themselves, they approve.

From Equality Proceeds Diffidence. From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only, endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass, that where an invader hath no more to fear, than another man’s single power: if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life, or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another.

From Diffidence War. And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: and this is no more than his own conservation requireth, and is generally allowed. Also because there be some, that taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires; if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, [for a] long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist. And by consequence, such augmentation of dominion over men being necessary to a man’s conservation, it ought to be allowed him.

Again, men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company, where there is no power able to overawe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himself; and upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavors, as far as he dares, (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet, is far enough to make them destroy each other), to extort a greater value from his contemplers, by damage; and from others, by the example.

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory.

The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men’s persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

Out of Civil States, There Is Always War of Every One Against Every One. Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. For war, consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of time, is to be considered in the nature of war; as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather, lieth not in a shower or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many days together: so the nature of war, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is peace.

The Incommodities of Such a War. Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force;
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no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

It may seem strange to some man, that has not well weighed these things; that nature should thus dissociate, and render men apt to invade, and destroy one another: and he may therefore, not trusting to this inference, made from the passions, desire perhaps to have the same confirmed by experience. Let him therefore consider with himself, when taking a journey, he arms himself, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there be laws, and public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done him; what opinion he has of his fellow-subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow citizens, when he locks his doors; and of his children, and servants, when he locks his chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words? But neither of us accuse man’s nature in it. The desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions, that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them: which till laws be made they cannot know: nor can any law be made, till they have agreed upon the person that shall make it.

It may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time, nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places, where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before. Howsoever, it may be perceived what manner of life there would be, where there were no common power to fear, by the manner of life, which men that have formerly lived under a peaceful government, use to degenerate into, in a civil war.

But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another; yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms; and continual spies upon their neighbours; which is a posture of war. But because they uphold thereby, the industry of their subjects; there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the liberty of particular men.

In Such a War Nothing Is Unjust. To this war of every man, against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice. Force, and fraud, are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice, and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses, and passions. They are qualities, that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition, that there be no propriety, no dominion, no mine and thine distinct; but only that to be every man’s, that he can get: and for so long, as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition, which man by mere nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his reason.

The Passions That Incline Men to Peace. The passions that incline men to peace, are fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These articles, are they, which otherwise are called the Laws of Nature: whereof I shall speak more particularly.

Of the First and Second Natural Laws, and of Contracts

Right of Nature What. The right of nature, which writers commonly call jus naturale, is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life: and consequently, of doing any thing, which in his own judgment, and
reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.

**Liberty What.** By liberty, is understood, according to the proper signification of the word, the absence of external impediments: which impediments, may oft take away part of a man’s power to do what he would; but cannot hinder him from using the power left him, according as his judgment, and reason shall dictate to him.

**A Law of Nature What. Difference of Right and Law.** A law of nature, lex naturalis, is a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.

**Naturally Every Man Has Right to Every Thing. The Fundamental Law of Nature.** And because the condition of man, as hath been declared [above], is a condition of war of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; it followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a right to every thing; even to one another’s body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time, which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason, that every man, ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war.

**The Second Law of Nature.** From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavor peace, is derived this second law; that a man be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself. For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war. But if other men will not lay down their right, as well as he; then there is no reason for anyone to divest himself of his; for that were to expose himself to prey, which no man is bound to, rather than to dispose himself to peace.

**Not All Rights Are Alienable.** Whenvsoever a man transferreth his right, or renounceth it; it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself; or for some other good he hopeth for thereby. For it is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself. And therefore there be some rights, which no man can be understood by any words, or other signs, to have abandoned, or transferred. As first a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them, that assault him by force, to take away his life; because he cannot be understood to aim thereby, at any good to himself. The same may be said of wounds, and chains, and imprisonment; because there is no benefit consequent to such patience; as there is to the patience of suffering another to be wounded, or imprisoned.

**Covenants of Mutual Trust, When Invalid.** If a covenant be made, wherein neither of the parties perform presently, but trust one another; in the condition of mere nature, which is a condition of war of every man against every man, upon any reasonable suspicion, it is void; but if there be a common power set over them both, with right and force sufficient to compel performance, it is not void. For he that performeth first, has no assurance the other will perform after; because the bonds of words are too weak to bridle men’s ambition, avarice, anger, and other passions, without the fear of some coercive power; which in the condition of mere nature, where all men are equal, and judges of the justness of their own fears, cannot possibly be supposed. And therefore he which performeth first does but betray himself to his enemy; contrary to the right, he can never abandon, of defending his life, and means of living.

**Covenants Extorted by Fear Are Valid.** Covenants entered into by fear, in the condition of mere nature, are obligatory. For example, if I covenant to pay a ransom, or service for my life, to an enemy;
I am bound by it: for it is a contract, wherein one receiveth the benefit of life; the other is to receive money, or service for it; and consequently, where no other law, as in the condition of mere nature, forbiddeth the performance, the covenant is valid. . . .

Of Other Laws of Nature

The Third Law of Nature, Justice. From that law of nature, by which we are obliged to transfer to another, such rights, as being retained, hinder the peace of mankind, there followeth a third; which is this, that men perform their covenants made: without which, covenants are in vain, and but empty words; and the right of all men to all things remaining, we are still in the condition of war.

Justice and Injustice What. And in this law of nature, consisteth the fountain and original of justice. For where no covenant hath preceded, there hath no right been transferred, and every man has right to every thing; and consequently, no action can be unjust. But when a covenant is made, then to break it is unjust: and the definition of injustice, is no other than the not performance of covenant. And whatsoever is not unjust, is just.

Justice and Propriety Begin with the Constitution of Commonwealth. But because covenants of mutual trust, where there is a fear of not performance on either part, as hath been said in the former chapter, are invalid; though the original of justice be the making of covenants; yet injustice actually there can be none, till the cause of such fear be taken away; which while men are in the natural condition of war, cannot be done. Therefore before the names of just, and unjust can have place, there must be some coercive power, to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant; and to make good that propriety, which by mutual contract men acquire, in recompense of the universal right they abandon: and such power there is none before the erection of a commonwealth. . . .

Justice Not Contrary to Reason. The fool hath said in his heart, there is no such thing as justice; and sometimes also with his tongue: seriously alleging, that every man’s conservation, and contentment, being committed to his own care, there could be no reason, why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto. He does not therein deny, that there are covenants; and that they are sometimes broken, sometimes kept; but he questioneth whether injustice, taking away the fear of God, may not sometimes stand with that reason, which dictateth to every man his own good. . . .

[I say that] in a condition of war, wherein every man to every man, for want of a common power to keep them all in awe, is an enemy, there is no man who can hope by his own strength, or wit, to defend himself from destruction without the help of confederates; where every one expects the same defence by the confederation, that any one else does: and therefore he which declares he thinks it reason to deceive those that help him, can in reason expect no other means of safety than what can be had from his own single power. He therefore that breaketh his covenant, and consequently declareth that he thinks he may with reason do so, cannot be received into any society, that unite themselves for peace and defence, but by the error of them that receive him; nor when he is received, be retained in it, without seeing the danger of their error; which errors a man cannot reasonably reckon upon as the means of his security: and consequently against the reason of his preservation. . . .

The Second Part: Of Commonwealth

Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth

The End of Commonwealth, Particular Security. The final cause, end, or design of men, who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others, in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in commonwealths, is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of
war, which is necessarily consequent, as hath been shown, to the natural passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants, and observation of those laws of nature set down [above].

Which Is Not to be Had From the Law of Nature. For the laws of nature, as justice, equality, modesty, mercy, and, in sum, doing to others, as we would be done to, of themselves, without the terror of some power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like. And covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all. Therefore notwithstanding the laws of nature (which every one hath then kept, when he has the will to keep them, when he can do it safely) if there be no power erected or not great enough for our security; every man will, and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men. . . . For if we could suppose a great multitude of men to consent in the observation of justice, and other laws of nature, without a common power to keep them all in awe; we might as well suppose all mankind to do the same; and then there neither would be, nor need to be any civil government, or commonwealth at all; because there would be peace without subjection. . . .

The Generation of a Commonwealth. The Definition of a Commonwealth. The only way to erect such a common power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their own industry, and by the fruits of the earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is, to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will; which is as much as to say, to appoint one man, or assembly of men, to bear their person; and every one to own, and acknowledge himself to be author of whatsoever he that so beareth their person, shall act, or cause to be acted, in those things which concern the common peace and safety; and therein to submit their wills, every one to his will, and their judgments, to his judgment.

This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man, in such manner, as if every man should say to every man, I authorize and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner. This done, the multitude so united in one person, is called a commonwealth, in Latin civitas. This is the generation of that great leviathan, or rather, to speak more reverently, of that mortal god, to which we owe under the immortal God, our peace and defence. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad. And in him consisteth the essence of the commonwealth; which, to define it, is one person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defence.

Of the Liberty of Subjects Liberty, What. Liberty, or freedom, signifieth, properly, the absence of opposition; by opposition, I mean external impediments of motion; and may be applied no less to irrational, and inanimate creatures, than to rational. For whatsoever is so tied, or environed, as it cannot move but within a certain space, which space is determined by the opposition of some external body, we say it hath not liberty to go further. . . .

What It Is to Be Free. And according to this proper, and generally received meaning of the word, a freeman, is he that in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to. . . . From the use of the word free-will, no liberty can be inferred
of the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do.

**Fear and Liberty Consistent.** Fear and liberty are consistent; as when a man throweth his goods into the sea for fear the ship should sink, he doth it nevertheless very willingly, and may refuse to do it if he will: it is therefore the action of one that was free: so a man sometimes pays his debt, only for fear of imprisonment, which because nobody hindered him from detaining, was the action of a man at liberty. And generally all actions which men do in commonwealths, for fear of the law, are actions, which the doers had liberty to omit.

**Liberty and Necessity Consistent.** Liberty, and necessity are consistent: as in the water, that hath not only liberty, but a necessity of descending by the channel; so likewise in the actions which men voluntarily do: which, because they proceed from their will, proceed from liberty; and yet, because every act of man’s will, and every desire, and inclination proceedeth from some cause, and that from another cause, in a continual chain, whose first link is the hand of God the first of all causes, proceed from necessity. So that to him that could see the connexion of those causes, the necessity of all men’s voluntary actions, would appear manifest.

**Review and Discussion Questions**

1. Hobbes is often described as a “psychological egoist.” What might that mean, given his understanding of human deliberation and motivation?
2. How does Hobbes understand felicity, or happiness?
3. Describe the state of nature. When does Hobbes think it would arise? What would life be like under it? In what sense are people free?
4. What are the laws of nature, according to Hobbes?
5. Explain how all of morality, not just politics, may be understood as an agreement for mutual advantage.
6. How does Hobbes respond to the “fool” who claims that justice is contrary to reason and that a rational person would act unjustly?
7. What is freedom, according to Hobbes? Do people have both freedom and free will? Explain.
8. Does Hobbes think morality applies in a state of war when there is no state or society? Explain.
9. Evaluate Hobbes’s answer to question 8. Why do you agree or disagree?

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**Morality and Rational Self-Interest**

**Baruch Brody**

In this selection, Baruch Brody discusses the problem of whether morality conflicts with self-interest and whether it is rational for a person to follow the dictates of morality rather than self-interest. Then, in the final section, he assesses psychological egoism, the notion that however much people may appear to be acting unselfishly, it is self-interest that always motivates human action. Baruch Brody is professor of philosophy at Rice University.

**The Conventional Answers**

There is a variety of conventional attempts to meet this problem [of the possible conflict between self-interest and morality]. The simplest is the plain denial that it exists. Consider, for example, the familiar maxim “Honesty is the best policy.” This and other such sayings essentially claim that, if we look at the matter fully, considering long-range as well as short-range considerations, we will see that...
our self-interest is best served by doing the right thing. There is clearly some truth to these maxims. There are cases in which doing the wrong action will clearly hurt us in the long run.

For example, many students know that it is often possible to get a good grade, with much less work, by cheating on an exam. And this dishonest course of action might at first seem to be in their self-interest. But look carefully at the long-range consequences of cheating. Suppose, for example, you really need to know the material you were being tested on at some later time, perhaps in another course, or outside of school. You may lose out then because you cheat now. Marital infidelity is another example. Many people have found they can be unfaithful to their spouses and “get away with it.” The immediate pleasures obtained from doing so have made it seem as though this dishonest act is really in their self-interest. But again, one should carefully examine the long-range consequences, for example, the psychological effects on one’s relationship with one’s spouse. This might well reveal that faithfulness is really in one’s true interest.

There may well be many such cases in which “honesty pays.” But it would be rash to conclude that this is true in all cases. At first glance, in fact, it would seem that there are many cases in which the opposite is true. Consider some of your actions that you know to have been wrong. Did you really always lose because you did them? If you didn’t lose, then wasn’t it the smart thing to do? Why shouldn’t we perform the wrong action in such cases?

Let’s consider these questions more closely. First of all, does the fear of being caught and punished enter into the issue? Perhaps we shouldn’t do the wrong action because the punishment we will receive for doing it outweighs any gain we receive. I suspect that this answer is widely believed. It seems, for example, to lie behind the belief that a strong system of criminal justice will deter crime. The trouble with this answer is that it assumes that we will always be caught and punished. It doesn’t address itself to the cases in which we have a good chance of getting away with our wrongdoings. When the probability of being caught is low enough, and the gain from wrongdoing large enough, it would seem rational to gamble on getting away with the wrong action.

The moral training which many parents give their children unfortunately emphasizes just this possibility of being caught and punished. This leads children, not unreasonably, to conclude that there is an eleventh commandment: “Thou shall not get caught.” Children conclude that being moral is appropriate only when there is little chance of getting away with being immoral. If we don’t want children to draw that conclusion, we must train them otherwise. But we must be able to give them a different reason for behaving morally—so we return to our basic question.

Things would be very different, of course, if we knew that we would always be caught and punished. However, the opposite is true; all too often, we have a good chance of avoiding punishment, at least the ordinary forms of punishment. This last remark will suggest to many that there may be other forms of punishment, ones that always work, and that our problem can be solved if we will turn our attention to them.

What could these super-effective forms of punishment be? One is the internal pangs of conscience. After all, say some moralists, we always know when we do wrong, and our conscience bothers us about it. The reason then for doing the right action, even if we could get away with wrongdoing, is that we will be punished by our consciences for doing the wrong action. Another kind of punishment is divine retribution. According to some religious moralists, we shouldn’t do wrong, even if we can get away with it, because God will always know about it. He will punish us, if not in this life, then in the afterlife.

There is no doubt that some wrongdoers suffer greatly from pangs of conscience. But as a general solution to the question of why one should be moral, this appeal to the pangs of conscience is insufficient because: (1) it does not apply to all people, since the voice of conscience seems to be weak in many people; (2) it does not apply to all cases, since in many cases one’s conscience is not particularly bothered and the gain from wrongdoing may
outweigh the slight stirrings of conscience; (3) it does not take into account the way our consciences come to terms with our shortcomings. As I think we all know from our own experience, we tend to find justifications for our shortcomings, especially when they are repeated. After a while, our consciences no longer bother us. It is this malleability of conscience that makes it an uncertain basis for doing the right action.

The appeal to divine punishment is a different matter. For if God does exist and does punish all evil-doers, then we always have a powerful reason—and one based on self-interest—for doing the right action. However, most philosophers have not wanted to rest the case for being moral on our desire to avoid divine retribution. To begin with, no matter how sound that case may be logically, it does not seem to be psychologically effective. Perhaps this is because divine punishment seems so far away, belonging to some unknown existence after death. . . . Perhaps most important, this type of argument would force us to reevaluate our feelings about the nobility of moral behavior. If the reason for behaving morally is just to avoid punishment (even divine punishment), then we have no reason to treat moral self-sacrifice as a noble form of behavior.

This last point is extremely important, and we will examine other aspects of it later. . . . But it has a special significance in the religious context, one that should be noted now. Let us begin with an example. Suppose that someone gives a very large sum of money to a noble cause. We would normally approve of that action and think highly of the person who gave the money. The action, so to speak, raises his moral worth. But now suppose that we discover that he gave the money because (1) he was promised even more in return if he gave it, and (2) he was told that he would be severely punished if he didn't give it. We would still be glad that he gave the money (it is good, after all, for the cause to have the funds). But we would no longer think so highly of the donor. The action no longer raises his moral worth in our view. Now when the religious person says we should act out of a fear of divine punishment and a desire for divine reward, that person is advocating that we all act with motives similar to those of our “pseudo-philanthropist.” And this seems a terrible thing to advocate. In short, while religious moralists may believe that God will punish the evil and reward the good, they should oppose the view that these rewards and punishments give us our reason for behaving morally.

**Thomas Hobbes’s Solution**

Hobbes begins with a fundamental assumption about human nature: that human beings are essentially self-interested agents, each acting to obtain what he thinks is in his self-interest and prepared to harm other human beings in order to obtain it. Now this would be okay if there were enough goods to completely satisfy everyone. But since there are not, human beings compete for what is available and come into armed conflict with each other. Hobbes calls this state of human conflict the state of nature.

Now there are those who would say that Hobbes's picture of human nature is too bleak, and that he is not justified in supposing that human beings would actually behave in that way. Hobbes felt, however, that he could justify his pessimistic views by reference to facts that we could all observe.

It may seem strong to some man that has not well weighed these things that Nature should thus dissociate and render men apt to invade and destroy one another; and he may therefore desire . . . to have the same confirmed by experience. Let him, therefore, consider with himself: when taking a journey, he arms himself and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests: and this when he knows there be laws and public officers. . . . Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions as I do by my words? (Leviathan, chapter 13)

Now, said Hobbes, it is clear that no rational person would want to live in the state of nature. It would not be so bad if we could be sure of winning. But no person is so strong that he doesn’t have to fear conflicts with other people (or groups of people). So the state of nature is something we should want to avoid.

The basic idea behind Hobbes's argument for acting morally is then very simple: the rational
Chapter 1. Self-Interest, Religion, and Conscience

self-interested person should agree to abide by certain moral principles, which would regulate his relations with other human beings, in order to be able to live without this fear of conflict. Or, to put this point another way, if we are to live with other people, we must follow certain moral rules respecting the rights and interests of other people. Only in that way can people live in peace with one another.

Hobbes clearly has an important point. Even if we do give up something by behaving morally, and even if we would in a particular case gain by behaving immorally, we know that we would lose even more if everyone behaved immorally. And it is this knowledge that leads us to behave morally.

But isn’t there a confusion here? Hobbes is right in saying that we would be better off if everyone behaved morally than if everyone pursued his own self-interest without regard to morality. But wouldn’t I be better off if I could follow my own self-interest while others worried about morality? And if so, isn’t it rational for me to do just that? Shouldn’t I try to get away with advantageous acts of immorality while urging others to be moral?

Imagine] an immoral but advantageous act—spreading a vicious lie in order to get a lucrative position. What would Hobbes say to a person considering such an act? Presumably, Hobbes would say to him that he would be better off if no one did that than if everyone did that sort of thing. And no doubt that claim of Hobbes is true. After all, if everyone went around spreading such lies, our would-be liar could certainly be harmed by them as well. But couldn’t our person then reply to Hobbes by saying that he would gain if he spread such lies while others did not and that that is exactly what he hopes to do by surreptitiously spreading lies while encouraging others to be moral. How could Hobbes meet that reply?

Hobbes was very aware of such questions and problems. He preferred, however, to think of them as follows. Suppose that I decide to behave morally and not pursue my immediate self-interest. Suppose, for example, I decide not to spread the lie about my competitor. This will be fine if others also decide to behave that way; if, for example, my competitor also decides not to spread lies about me. But suppose that other people then decide to treat me immorally. Suppose my competitor decides to tell the lies about me, after all. Then I will really be in trouble. My interests will suffer greatly if I obey the restrictions of morality while others do not. How, asked Hobbes, can I be sure that this won’t happen? How can I take the chance of behaving morally when I know that others may decide not to follow suit?

Hobbes’s own solution to all of these problems is that we should institute a very powerful state, one that has almost absolute power. This sort of state will ensure that everyone obeys the restrictions of morality.

The only way to erect such a common power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort as that by their own industry and by the fruits of the earth they may nourish themselves and live contentedly, is to confer all their strength and power upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that they may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, onto one will. (Leviathan, chapter 17)

There are many who feel that such a solution is unacceptable because we would have to give up too many of our liberties to the state. The price, they would say, is too high. And if we won’t have Hobbes’s state his solution apparently collapses. Some of these philosophers have claimed, however, that Hobbes’s absolute state is not required to ensure moral behavior. Kurt Baier, for example, claimed that:

[R]eason can support morality, only when the presumption about other people’s behavior is reversed. Hobbes thought that this could be achieved only by the creation of an absolute ruler with absolute power to enforce his laws. We have already seen that this is not true and that it can also be achieved if people live in a society, that is, if they have common ways of life, which are taught to all members and somehow enforced by the group. Its members have reason to expect their fellows generally to obey its rules, that is, its religion, morality, customs, and law, even when doing so is not, on certain occasions,
in their interest. Hence they too have reason to follow these rules. (*The Moral Point of View*, chapter 7, section 3)

This claim is not, however, entirely convincing. To begin with, it seems to be overly optimistic about the extent to which moral training and social pressure lead people to behave morally. Second, and more important, even if we could expect most people to behave morally in most cases, not all of our problems would be solved. It’s true that we wouldn’t need to worry about others cheating if we behaved morally. But the question would still remain as to why we should behave morally if we could get away with advantageous immoral acts. Without something like Hobbes’s absolute government, there will be cases in which we could get away with advantageous immoralities. Baier doesn’t really explain why we should not gain personal advantages by performing those actions.

**More Radical Approaches**

We have so far examined attempts to show that being moral is always in our self-interest. These we have found lacking. This leads us to wonder if it’s even possible to connect morality and self-interest. Suppose that it’s not. What does that mean?

There are philosophers who feel that this failure is not really very important. Some believe, in fact, that the whole attempt was a mistake. One such philosopher was H. A. Prichard. He wrote:

> A general but not very critical familiarity with the literature of Moral Philosophy might well lead to the remark that much of it is occupied with attempts either to prove that there is a necessary connexion between duty and interest or in certain cases even to exhibit the connexion as something self-evident. . . . When we read the attempts referred to we naturally cannot help in a way wishing them to succeed; and we might express our wish in the form that we should all like to be able to believe that honesty is the best policy. At the same time we also cannot help feeling that somehow they are out of place, so that the real question is not so much whether they are successful, but whether they ought ever to have been made. (*Duty and Interest*)

Philosophers like Prichard feel there is no need to prove that morality is identical with self-interest because we have reason to be moral even if it is not in our self-interest. . . . Prichard and his followers believe that there are other reasons for acting morally. And, they say, since there are these other reasons, it is not very important if we cannot prove that morality is in our self-interest.

What are these other reasons? Prichard says, for one thing, that we want to do the right thing: We obviously are referring to a fact when we speak of someone as possessing a sense of duty and, again, a strong sense of duty. And if we consider what we are thinking of in these individuals whom we think of as possessing it, we find that we cannot exclude from it a desire to do what is a duty, as such, for its own sake, or, more simply, a desire to do what is a duty. . . . If we admit the existence of a desire to do what is right, then there is no longer any reason for maintaining as a general thesis that in any case in which a man knows some action to be right, he must, if he is to be led to do it, be convinced that he will gain by doing it. For we shall be able to maintain that his desire to do what is right, if strong enough, will lead him to do the action in question in spite of any aversion from doing it which he may feel on account of its disadvantages. (ibid.)

Other philosophers have said the reason is that we have a concern for the welfare of others. Francis Hutcheson, for example, said that the true reason for virtuous action is “some determination of our nature to study the good of others, or some instinct, antecedent to all reason from interest, which influences us to the love of others.”

Let us return now to our case of the two competitors for the one job. According to Prichard, the one competitor should not spread the damaging lie about the other because doing so will fly in the face of his desire to do the right thing. According to Hutcheson, the one competitor should not spread the damaging lie about the other because doing so will fly in the face of his concern for the well-being of others.

This whole approach, if accepted, would certainly affect our ideas about moral training. We
have already remarked that in the moral training of a child, it is a mistake to emphasize the personal benefits that come from being moral. If we do emphasize this, of course, we do not provide the child with a reason for being moral in cases where morality and self-interest conflict. Prichard’s theory suggests, as an alternative, that moral training should develop in the child a desire to do the right thing. Hutcheson’s views suggest that moral training should develop the child’s concern for the well-being of others. John Stuart Mill envisaged just this kind of moral training.

In an improving state of the human mind, the influences are constantly on the increase, which tend to generate in each individual a feeling of unity with all the rest; which, if perfect, would make him never think of, or desire, any beneficial condition for himself, in the benefits of which they are not included. If we now suppose this feeling of unity to be taught as a religion, and the whole force of education, of institutions, and of opinion, directed . . . to make every person grow up from infancy surrounded on all sides both by the profession and the practice of it. I think that no one, who can realise this conception, will feel any misgiving about the sufficiency of the ultimate sanction. (Utilitarianism, chapter 3)

The Prichard-Hutcheson view also helps explain an important fact about morality. Because of their motives, we often distinguish between two people who have performed the same action, praising one while not praising the other. A philanthropist who gives to gain public acclaim is not as praiseworthy as one who gives for truly charitable motives. Now if self-interest were really the only motive for human action, there could be no such distinction. All actions would be selfishly motivated and no one would deserve praise for moral behavior. But if Prichard or Hutcheson is right, we can distinguish those who deserve praise from those who do not. Those who act with motives other than self-interest will clearly be the ones deserving praise. . . .

We have seen attractive features in the views of Prichard and Hutcheson. They seem to provide us with a reason for being moral even against our own self-interest. They offer us an interesting approach to moral training and education. And they provide us with a satisfactory account of when actions and people are truly praiseworthy. There are, nevertheless, two large problems which they must face:

1. Assume that one of their theories is true. That means that we have at least two radically different types of motives: self-interest, on the one hand, and, on the other, duty or benevolence. How then are we to choose between them when they conflict? No doubt these theories provide us with a reason for being moral. But we are also left with a reason for being immoral. What rational basis is there for choosing between these reasons? Consider again the competitors for the job. If either Hutcheson or Prichard is right, then the competitors have a reason for not spreading the lie (concern for the “good of others,” or the “desire to do what is right”). But they also have a reason for spreading it (self-interest). So how shall they decide between these two reasons?

2. Are their theories correct? Do we ever really act from any motive other than self-interest? From our own experiences we all are painfully aware of people who seem to be acting from the loftiest of motives but who are really acting out of self-interest. Maybe that is true in all cases.

In the final sections we will deal with these two objections.

What Really Are Our Motives?

Let us begin with the second objection, which raises the question of human motives. Hutcheson and Prichard are attacking the thesis of psychological egoism, the view that the only reason or motive for any action is self-interest. They insist that there must be other reasons for human actions.

What arguments do they offer for their views? To begin with, they think that the truth of their views is something that we can experience in our own feelings. Thus, Hutcheson writes:

But what will most effectually convince us of the truth on this point is reflection upon our own hearts, whether we have not a desire of the good
of others, generally without any consideration or intention of obtaining these pleasant reflections on our own virtue. (*An Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*)

Secondly, they feel that we can see in the actions of others clear examples of actions not based on self-interest. Finally, they appeal to the fact that only their views explain (as we saw above) the fact that some people are praiseworthy.

Prichard and Hutcheson certainly recognize that those who act out of nonselfish motives are often motivated by self-interest, too. All that they want to claim is that this does leave a place open for the nonselfish motives:

But it must be here observed that as all men have self-love as well as benevolence, these two principles may jointly excite a man to the same action, and then they are to be considered as two forces impelling the same body to motion. . . . Thus if a man has such strong benevolence as would have produced an action without any views of self-interest, that such a man has also in view private advantage, along with public good, as the effect of his action, does in no way diminish the benevolence of the action. When he would not have produced so much public good had it not been for prospect of self-interest, then the effect of self-love is to be deducted, and his benevolence is proportioned to the remainder of good, which pure benevolence would have produced. (*Hutcheson, op cit.*)

Many people are skeptical about these claims. They suggest that the only thing that we really desire is what is in our own self-interest. Such people offer three arguments for this view:

1. When we look at examples of supposedly nonselfish actions, we often find that they are motivated by hidden considerations of self-interest.
2. People who supposedly act from benevolent motives or from a sense of duty are really acting to obtain the pleasure of seeing others happy or the pleasure of feeling that they are virtuous. So they are really acting to obtain their own pleasure, and that is an act motivated by self-interest.
3. In any case, we act to satisfy our desires, whatever they are, and that makes our actions motivated by self-interest.

The first of these arguments has a great deal of intuitive appeal. After all, we have all been fooled that way. We have all admired people for their supposedly noble and generous actions only to discover the truly selfish motives that have moved them. Nevertheless, these experiences, while enough to make us somewhat skeptical about people’s motives, are not enough to establish the general truth of egoism. They do not establish that people only act from selfish motives. And there is, after all, the evidence that Hutcheson and Prichard appeal to that suggests that egoism is not valid.

The second argument is more substantial. It concedes that there is some psychological truth in the Hutcheson-Prichard thesis, but it claims that the thesis distorts the nature of that truth. We are not moved, says the argument, by a desire to do what is right or to see others happy; what really moves us is the pleasure we get from thinking of ourselves as doing the right thing or from seeing others happy. Since it is this desire for our pleasure that moves us, egoism is still correct. This view was forcefully presented by Moritz Schlick:

The idea of personal destruction is, in general, one of the most terrifying; not the most terrifying, for there are enough miseries in comparison with which death is felt as a soothing relief. Yet we observe, in life and history, acts of will whose fatal and miserable consequences are not only inevitable for the performer, but are clearly seen by him to be involved as the goal of his action. The martyr accepts pain and death for the sake of an idea, a friend gives his life or “happiness” for his friend. Can any one in earnest say of such persons that their decisions are determined by the motives which possess the most pleasant or the least unpleasant emotional tones?

According to my firm conviction, one cannot say anything else if one would tell the truth, for such are the facts. Let us then try to analyze and understand the motive of heroism. The
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Observations of others to suggest that these claims are false. Hutcheson, for example, seems correct when he writes:

Reflections in our minds again will best discover the truth. Many have never thought upon this connection; nor do we ordinarily intend the obtaining of any such pleasure when we do generous offices. We all often feel delight upon seeing others happy, but during our pursuit of their happiness we have no intention of obtaining this delight. We often feel the pain of compassion, but were our sole ultimate intention or desire the freeing ourselves from this pain, would the deity offer us either wholly to blot out all memory of the person in distress, or to take away this connection, so that we should be easy during the misery of our friend, on the one hand, or on the other would relieve him from his misery, we should be as ready to choose the former way as the latter, since either of them would free us from our pain, which upon this scheme is the sole end proposed by the compassionate person. Don't we find in ourselves that our desire does not terminate upon the removal of our own pain? Were this our sole intention, we would run away, shut our eyes, or divert our thoughts from the miserable object, as the readiest way of removing our pain. (ibid.)

The third of the arguments noted above rests on a common confusion. It supposes that if I do an action to satisfy some desire of mine, then, no matter what the nature of the desire, the action is based on self-interest. But this supposition is a mistake. A “self-interested action” is one done to satisfy certain interests of mine, or certain desires for my own happiness, and not merely one done to satisfy any desire.

Nevertheless, this second argument does not really succeed. To begin with, even if its claims were true, we would still have a reason for acting morally. After all, the pleasure we get from thinking of ourselves as righteous or from seeing others happy is just as much a reason for doing the right action as Prichard’s sense of duty or Hutcheson’s sense of benevolence. But more important, there is evidence from both introspection and our observations of others to suggest that these claims are false. Hutcheson, for example, seems correct when he writes:

The third of the arguments noted above rests on a common confusion. It supposes that if I do an action to satisfy some desire of mine, then, no matter what the nature of the desire, the action is based on self-interest. But this supposition is a mistake. A “self-interested action” is one done to satisfy certain interests of mine, or certain desires for my own happiness, and not merely one done to satisfy any desire.

This point can also be put as follows: Those who make this third objection have the following picture in mind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>self-interested</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>action done</td>
<td>action not done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to satisfy a desire</td>
<td>to satisfy a desire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given this picture, and the plausible assumption that all actions satisfy a desire, they conclude that the "other" category is empty and that all actions are self-interested actions. The trouble with this argument is that they are working with the wrong picture. The correct picture of the distinction is rather this one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>self-interested</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>action done to satisfy a desire for my own well-being</td>
<td>action done to satisfy a desire for something other than my own well-being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given this picture, we can agree that all actions are done to satisfy some desire of the agent and still claim that not all actions are self-interested. All we need to suppose is that the agent can have desires for something other than his own well-being. And this certainly seems reasonable.

**REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why does Brody reject the conventional ideas about the conflict between self-interest and morality?
2. Why does Brody reject Hobbes's solution?
3. What are the radical solutions Brody suggests?
4. "To act morally when it is against your self-interest is irrational." How would Brody respond to this statement?
5. What distinction does Brody rely on to refute the position of the psychological egoist? Does he succeed? Why or why not?

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**Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation**

**ROBERT MERRIHIW ADAMS**

How should we understand our deepest sources of obligation in life? As demands created from our own self-interest? As demands derived from our moral ideals? As demands created by society? In this selection, Robert Merrihew Adams argues that our deepest obligations are best understood to arise from relationships, but we can only account for the objectivity of these obligations and the ways we are motivated by these obligations if, beyond our human relationships, they arise from a relationship with a loving God through divine commands. Robert Merrihew Adams was a professor at UCLA and Yale University.

Divine command metaethics is a type of social theory of the nature of obligation. . . .

The central idea in divine command metaethics is the expansion of our vision of the social dimension of ethics to include God as the most important participant in our system of personal relationships. In this paper I will first try to show how facts about human relationships can fill some of the role that facts of obligation are supposed to play, specifically with regard to moral motivation (in section 1) and guilt (in section 2). Then (in section 3) I will note certain problems that arise for social theories of obligation, and argue that they can be dealt with more adequately by a divine command theory. . . .

**Section 1: How Social Requirements Motivate**

It is essential to the point of any conception of obligation that obligations motivate—that having an obligation to do x is generally regarded as a reason for doing x. One problem about the nature of obligation is to understand this motivation.

This will not be much of a problem if we assume that one is obliged only to do things that one expects to have good results. Then the goodness of the results provides a reason, and one's desires for such good consequences a motive, for doing what one is obliged to do. Unfortunately, those who (like...
me) are not utilitarians cannot assume that obligations will always be so happily attuned to the value of expected results. We think we are sometimes obliged to tell the truth and to keep promises, for example, when we do not expect the consequences to be good. What would motivate us to do such a thing?

Even non-utilitarian moralists may not be satisfied with the reply that the conscientious agent has good enough reason for her action simply in the fact that it is right. This seems too abstract. John Rawls (certainly no utilitarian) writes,

> The doctrine of the purely conscientious act is irrational. This doctrine holds ... that the highest moral motive is the desire to do what is right and just simply because it is right and just, no other description being appropriate. ... But on this interpretation the sense of right lacks any apparent reason; it resembles a preference for tea rather than coffee.¹

If we are to see the fact of having an obligation as itself a reason for action, we need a richer, less abstract understanding of the nature of obligation, in which we might find something to motivate us.

According to social theories of the nature of obligation, having an obligation to do something consists in being required (in a certain way, under certain circumstances), by another person or a group of persons, to do it. This opens more than one possibility for understanding obligations as reasons for action. One reason or motive for complying with a social requirement, of course, is that we fear punishment or retaliation for non-compliance. This is undoubtedly a real factor, which helps to keep morality (and other benign, and not so benign, social institutions) afloat. But here we are primarily interested in what other motives there may be for compliance.

The alternative explanation that I wish to pursue in this section is that valuing one's social bonds gives one, under certain conditions, a reason to do what is required of one by one's associates or one's community (and thus to fulfill obligations, understood as social requirements). ... The pattern of motivation to which I wish to call attention is one in which I value the relationship which I see myself as actually having, and my complying is an expression of my valuing and respecting the relationship. It is one in which I act primarily out of a valuing of the relationship, rather than with the obtaining or maintaining of the relationship as an end.

There are at least four aspects of the relational situation that matter motivationally with regard to compliance with social requirements. (1) It matters that the demand is actually made. It is a question here of what other people do in fact (reasonably or rightly) require of me, not just of what they could reasonably require. ... Actual demands made on us in relationships that we value are undeniably real and motivationally strong. Most actual conscientiousness rests at least partly on people's sense of such demands. Our awareness of this source of moral motivation is reflected in appeals to "be a good citizen"—or, when in a foreign country, to "remember that you are a guest."

The actual making of the demand is important, not only to the strength, but also to the character, of the motive. Not every good reason for doing something makes it intelligible that I should feel that I have to do it. This is one of the ways in which having even the best of reasons for doing something does not as such amount to having an obligation to do it. But the perception that something is demanded of me by other people, in a relationship that I value, does help to make it intelligible that I should feel that I have to do it.

(2) It also matters motivationally how the individual who is subject to the demand is related, and feels related, to those persons who are making the demand. Let us assume, for purposes of this discussion, that the demand is made by a community. ... A "community" is a group of people who live their lives to some extent—possibly a very limited extent—in common. To see myself as "belonging" to a community is to see the institution or other members of the group as "having something to say about" how I live and act—perhaps not about every department of my life, and only to a reasonable extent about any department of it, but it is part of the terms of the relationship that their demands on certain subjects are expected to have some weight.
with me. And valuing such a relationship—loving it or respecting it—implies some willingness to submit to reasonable demands of the community. One is willing to comply, not as a means of satisfying a desire to belong, but as an expression of one’s sense that one does belong, and one’s endorsement of that relationship.

(3) It also matters what are the attributes of the demander. To put it crudely and simply, one will have more reason to comply with demands made by an individual or group that one admires than by one that one holds a mean opinion of. If the demander is particularly impressive or admirable in any way—one will see more reason to comply than if the demander seems ill-informed, foolish, or in some other way contemptible.

(4) Finally, it matters motivationally how the demandee evaluates the demand itself. . . . Is the demand one which appeals to you, or one which disgusts or revolts you? Is it one which seems to be conducive to the things that you prize most, admire most, and so forth? You could ask that about your particular compliance, or you could ask it about general compliance, if that is what is being demanded. And what is the wider social significance of the demand? Is it an expression of a project or social movement that seems good or bad to you? No obligation concepts at all are employed in these questions; yet the answers to them both will and should affect the extent to which a social requirement gives you a reason for action. . . .

Section 2: Guilt and Relationship

The nature of obligations cannot be understood apart from the reactions that people have and are expected to have to the breach of an obligation; and central to these reactions is the notion of guilt. This is one of the main differences between obligations and other sorts of reasons for action. If I fail to do what I had the most reason to do, I am not necessarily guilty, and there is apt to be nothing offensive about my reacting quite light-hearted to the lapse. But if I fail to do what I have an obligation to do, then (other things being equal) I am guilty, and a light-hearted reaction would normally be offensive.

The word ‘guilt’ is not properly the name of a feeling, but of an objective moral condition which may rightly be recognized by others even if it is not recognized by the guilty person. However, feelings of guilt, and other reactions to guilt, may reasonably be taken as a source of understanding of the objective fact of guilt to which they point. . . .

In our first experience of guilt its principal significance was an action or attitude of ours that ruptured or strained our relationship with a parent. There did not have to be a failure of benevolence or a violation of a rule; perhaps we were even too young to understand rules. It was enough that something we did or expressed offended the parent, and seemed to threaten the relationship. This is the original context in which the obligation cluster of moral concepts and sentiments arise. We do not begin with a set of moral principles but with a relationship, actual in part and in part desired, which is immensely valued for its own sake. Everything that attacks or opposes that relationship seems to us bad.

Of course this starkly simple mentality is pre-moral. We do not really have obligation concepts until we can make some sort of distinction, among the things we do that strain relationships, between those in which we are at fault or wrong and those in which we are innocent or right (not to mention those in which we are partly wrong and partly right). We begin to grasp such a distinction as we learn such facts as the following: Not every demand or expectation laid on us by other people constitutes an obligation, but only demands made in certain ways in certain kinds of relationship (for instance, commands of one’s parents and teachers), and expectations that arise in certain ways (for instance, from promises). An unexpressed wish is not a command. One is not guilty for anything one has not really done. The fact that somebody is angry does not necessarily imply that an obligation has been violated.

This development is compatible, however, with regarding obligations as a species of social requirement, and guilt as consisting largely in alienation from those who have required of us what we did not do. I believe it is not childish, but perceptive and correct, to persist in this way of thinking
about obligation and guilt. This is a controversial position. It is generally agreed that learning about guilt begins in the way that I have indicated, and that the value we place on good relationships, not only with parents but also with peers, is crucial to moral development. But many moralists hold that in the highest stages of the moral life (perhaps not reached by many adults) the center of moral motivation is transplanted from the messy soil of concrete relationships to the pure realm of moral principles; and a corresponding development is envisaged for the sense of guilt. Thus John Rawls traces the development of the sense of justice from a “morality of authority” through a “morality of association” to a “morality of principles”; corresponding to these three stages, he speaks of “feelings of (authority) guilt,” “feelings of (association) guilt,” and “feeling of (principle) guilt”—only the last of these counting as “feelings of guilt in the strict sense.”

It is certainly possible to come to value—even to love—an ethical principle for its own sake, and this provides a motive for conforming to it. I doubt that this is ever the most powerful of ethical motives; but what I would emphasize here is that this way of relating to ethical principles has more to do with ideals than with obligations. To love truthfulness is one thing; to feel that one has to tell the truth is something else. Similarly, it seems to me that there is something wrong-headed about the idea of “principle guilt.”

To be sure, there are feelings of guilt for the violation of a rule, where no person is seen as offended. But these are typically remnants of a morality of authority, and most plausibly understood as rooted in an internalization of childhood perceptions of requirements imposed by parents or other authority figures. They are part of a heteronomous, not an autonomous, reaction. The fact that the rule is seen as imposed on me, as something that I have to obey, is the ghost of my conception of it as sponsored by a person or persons who will be (understandably) offended if it is violated.

Feelings of “principle guilt,” as Rawls conceives of them, are not like that. They are autonomous and based on one’s valuing the rules, seeing them as expressing one’s nature as a rational agent in a society of free and equal members. It is this non-compulsive, rational reaction to the breach of a personally valued principle that seems to me not to be a recognition of guilt, but of something different.

Suppose I have done something that is simply contrary to some principle that I believe in. It is not that I have done significant harm to anyone, or alienated myself from anyone. The situation does not call for apologies or reactions to anticipated or possible or appropriate anger, because there is no one (let’s suppose not even God) who might be understandably angry with me about it. It does not seem either natural or appropriate for me to feel guilty in such a situation. Maybe someone is entitled to think less of me for the deed. Perhaps I will see less value in my own life on account of it. I may in this way be alienated from myself, though not from anyone else. But these are reasons for feeling ashamed or degraded, rather than for feeling guilty. Guilt is not necessarily worse than degradation, but they are different. And I think a main point of difference between them is that, in typical cases, guilt involves alienation from someone else who required or expected of us what we were obligated to do and have not done.

Section 3: The Supreme Demander

Much can be understood about the nature of obligation in terms of human social relationships, as I have been trying to show. We even have a use for a notion of “an obligation” that can be understood purely sociologically, and therefore “naturalistically,” in terms of a description of social practices such as commanding, promising, punishing, and apologizing, without any attempt to evaluate these practices as good or bad. This is a pre-moral notion in at least two ways.

(1) It is not the notion of an obligation that is “overriding” in the way that fully moral obligation is. An obligation, in this sense, must give most participants in the social system some reason to do what it obliges them to do; but it need not override other considerations. So no understanding is presupposed here of the nature of such an overriding.

(2) More fundamentally, the purely sociological notion is not the notion of a morally valid or
binding obligation. It is just the notion of an obligation or duty, in the sense in which we can agree that Adolf Eichmann had a duty to arrange for the transportation of Jews to extermination camps. Certainly this was not a morally valid or binding duty at all, but it was in some sense a duty. It played a part in a system of social relationships such that there were superiors who, understandably (though immorally), would be angry if he did not do it, and in relation to who he would feel uncomfortable if he did not do it, even if they did not know of this omission. Obligations in this pre-moral sense can be good or bad; they can even be morally repugnant, as Eichmann’s was.

The nature of obligation in the pre-moral sense does not need a divine command theory to explain it. That is a good thing, because divine command metaethics itself presupposes a pre-moral, sociological conception of obligation. It is the very core of a divine command theory to think of the divine/human relationship on the model of a social relationship in which authority, commands, obedience, loyalty, and belonging play a part. But we cannot really have these things without both the reality and the concept of an obligation, in some sense. A command imposes an obligation, or is the sort of thing that could impose an obligation. And one who obeys a command sees herself as fulfilling an obligation arising out of the command. There must therefore be some sort of obligation whose nature cannot without circularity be explained in terms of anyone’s commands. What divine command metaethics is meant to explain is the nature of obligation, not in the minimal, pre-moral sense, but in a stronger, fully moral sense.

The earlier sections of this paper were meant to show something of the importance of interpersonal or social relationships for the nature of obligation in even a fully moral sense. The idea of trying to understand all obligation, including moral obligation, as constituted by some sort of social requirement has its attractions. As the Eichmann case makes clear, however, any acceptable account of the nature of moral obligation in terms of social requirements must incorporate some way of evaluating the requirements; and it may be doubted whether a descriptive sociological theory has the resources for the evaluation that is needed.

In section 1 I described some ways in which, without appealing to any criterion of obligation as such, an individual can evaluate, and would naturally be expected to evaluate, demands made on her by other people, or by her community. That sort of evaluation is subjective, however. Its subjectivity does not keep it from being important to the motivational significance of obligation. But a definition of moral obligation in terms of social requirements that “pass” that kind of evaluation would not ascribe to moral obligation the objectivity or interpersonal validity that it is supposed to have.

The need for a standard by which to evaluate them is not the only disadvantage of human social requirements as a basis for understanding the nature of moral obligation. They also fail to cover the whole territory of moral obligation. We find that there are situations in which we would say, at least retrospectively, that none of the existing human communities demanded as much as they should have, or that there was something that really ought to have been required that was not demanded by any community, or perhaps even by any human individual, in the situation.

Moral obligation seems therefore to need a source or standard that is superior to human social requirements. Can it be found? . . . The attempt has certainly been made to find it, after all, in a human society, in some way both actual and ideal, to which we can be seen as belonging. Emile Durkheim’s lectures on Moral Education present a great sociologist’s fascinating development of this idea. But it seems pretty clear that no actual human society is going to come close to filling this bill. To put it crudely and simply, no actual human society is good enough for that.

Where else would we look for an ideal source of moral obligation? My proposal is that we look to the set of ideas on which Durkheim quite openly and frankly modeled his secular, sociological account of morality—that is, the theistic ideas. Durkheim, following in the steps of Comte, was turning theistic ethics inside out, as it were, to get his conception of society as the source of moral
Chapter 1. Self-Interest, Religion, and Conscience

commands as coming from someone who completely understands both us and our situation.

It matters not only that God is loving but also that he is just. 'Just' is to be understood here in a sense that is quite naturalistic and largely procedural. We are applying to God a concept that has its original home in courts of law. Without any appeal to a standard of fully moral obligation we can recognize certain truths about justice: A just judge punishes people, if at all, only for things that they have actually done. Merit and demerit have some relevance to the way it is just to treat people. The just judge is interested in getting out, and acting in accordance with, the truth.

Another important attribute of God is that he is beautiful or wonderful. This is a point at which Durkheim understood religious ethics rather well, and tried to exploit it for his purposes. "The good," he wrote, "is society . . . insofar as it is a reality richer than our own, to which we cannot attach ourselves without a resulting enrichment of our nature." The religious root of this idea is obvious and requires no further comment, except to say that Durkheim is quite right in thinking that the richness, for us, of the being from which requirements proceed is a powerful motivating factor.

It is undoubtedly important that in theistic ethics the divine legislation is generally seen as upholding the binding character of a large proportion of the "obligations" defined by human institutions and practices. The divine/human relationship is not simply a superior alternative to human society
as a source of obligation. Rather, God is seen as the chief member of a more comprehensive social system or “family,” which is reflected, though imperfectly, in actual human relationships. Thus the motivational significance of divine and human requirements is to a large extent integrated.

(4) Finally, it matters that the requirements are actually imposed by God. Critics have argued that this does not really matter in divine command metaethics as I have expounded it. They suggest that all the work is being done by the stipulation that it is the demands of a loving God that bind—that really nothing would be lost if we just said that our overriding, fully moral obligation is constituted by what would be commanded by a loving God, whether there is one or not. I want to say why I think that that is not an adequate substitute.

My reasons on this point parallel my reasons for not being satisfied with an ideal, non-actual human authority as a source of moral obligation. First of all, I do not believe in the counterfactuals. I do not believe that there is a unique set of commands that would be issued by any loving God. There are some things that a loving God might command and might not command. In particular, among the things that I believe actually to be valid moral demands, there are some that I think might have been arranged differently by a God who would still be loving, and who would still satisfy the additional requirements of the metaethical theory. For example, a loving God could have commanded different principles regarding euthanasia from those that I believe are actually in force.

In the second place, even aside from any doubts about whether these counterfactuals about loving Gods are true, it seems to me that they are motivationally weak. They do not have anything like the motivational or reason-generating power of the belief that something actually is demanded of me by my loving creator and heavenly father. The latter belief is therefore one that metaethics cannot easily afford to exchange for the belief that such and such would have been demanded of me by a loving God.

Can the nature of moral obligation be adequately understood in terms of social requirements? Yes, if our system of social relationships includes God.6

NOTES
3. It is significant that insofar as my reaction arises from my personally valuing a principle, or seeing it as expressing my nature, it does not seem to matter very much whether the principle is moral or aesthetic or intellectual. I could be degraded in my own eyes by doing something I regard as aesthetically or intellectually unworthy of me.
4. The possibility of speaking of divine “requirements” here, rather than always of “commands,” may serve to suggest the diversity of ways (by no means limited to explicit injunctions in sacred texts) in which God’s demands may be communicated.
6. Some of my work on this material was supported by a sabbatical leave from UCLA and a fellowship at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, NJ; both are acknowledged with thanks. A version of the paper was presented to a summer institute on the philosophy of religion, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, at Western Washington University in 1986. I am grateful for the many comments received there, and to Marilyn McCord Adams for helpful discussion of a draft.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Adams discusses four characteristics of being obligated that arise from being in relationships with other persons. What are these characteristics?
2. How does Adams analyze the nature of guilt? What is his criticism of “principle guilt”?
3. Why does Adams believe that it’s unconvincing that real obligation arises solely from within human society?
4. How would Brody or Hobbes respond to Adams’s argument?
Mortality, Religion, and Conscience

John Arthur

What is morality? Does it depend in some way on religion, and, if so, how? This essay first describes, then assesses, three different ways in which it has sometimes been thought that morality requires religion as its basis. The article concludes with a brief discussion of John Dewey’s suggestion that “morality is social” and what that might imply about moral reflection and about moral education. John Arthur was professor of philosophy and director of the Program in Philosophy, Politics, and Law at Binghamton University, State University of New York.

The question I discuss in this paper was famously captured by a character in Dostoyevsky’s novel The Brothers Karamazov: “Without God” said Ivan, “everything is permitted.” I want to argue that this is wrong: there is in fact no important sense in which morality depends on religion. Yet, I will also argue, there do remain important other respects in which the two are related. In the concluding section I extend the discussion of the origins of morality beyond religion by considering the nature of conscience, the ways morality is “social,” and the implications of these ideas for moral education. First, however, I want to say something about the subjects: just what are we referring to when we speak of morality and of religion?

1. Morality and Religion

A useful way to approach the first question—the nature of morality—is to ask what it would mean for a society to exist without a social moral code. How would such people think and behave? What would that society look like? First, it seems clear that such people would never feel guilt or resentment. For example, the notions that I ought to remember my parents’ anniversary, that he has a moral responsibility to help care for his children after the divorce, that she has a right to equal pay for equal work, and that discrimination on the basis of race is unfair would be absent in such a society. Notions of duty, rights, and obligations would not be present, except perhaps in the legal sense; concepts of justice and fairness would also be foreign to these people. In short, people would have no tendency to evaluate or criticize the behavior of others, nor to feel remorse about their own behavior. Children would not be taught to be ashamed when they steal or hurt others, nor would they be allowed to complain when others treat them badly. (People might, however, feel regret at a decision that didn’t turn out as they had hoped; but that would only be because their expectations were frustrated, not because they feel guilty.)

Such a society lacks a moral code. What, then, of religion? Is it possible that people lacking a morality would nonetheless have religious beliefs? It seems clear that it is possible. Suppose every day these same people file into their place of worship to pay homage to God (they may believe in many gods or in one all-powerful creator of heaven and earth). Often they can be heard praying to God for help in dealing with their problems and thanking Him for their good fortune. Frequently they give sacrifices to God, sometimes in the form of money spent to build beautiful temples and churches, other times by performing actions they believe God would approve such as helping those in need. These practices might also be institutionalized, in the sense that certain people are assigned important leadership roles. Specific texts might also be taken as authoritative, indicating the ways God has acted in history and His role in their lives or the lives of their ancestors.

To have a moral code, then, is to tend to evaluate (perhaps without even expressing it) the behavior of others and to feel guilt at certain
actions when we perform them. Religion, on the other hand, involves beliefs in supernatural power(s) that created and perhaps also control nature, the tendency to worship and pray to those supernatural forces or beings, and the presence of organizational structures and authoritative texts. The practices of morality and religion are thus importantly different. One involves our attitudes toward various forms of behavior (lying and killing, for example), typically expressed using the notions of rules, rights, and obligations. The other, religion, typically involves prayer, worship, beliefs about the supernatural, institutional forms, and authoritative texts.

We come, then, to the central question: What is the connection, if any, between a society’s moral code and its religious practices and beliefs? Many people have felt that morality is in some way dependent on religion or religious truths. But what sort of “dependence” might there be? In what follows I distinguish various ways in which one might claim that religion is necessary for morality, arguing against those who claim morality depends in some way on religion. I will also suggest, however, some other important ways in which the two are related, concluding with a brief discussion of conscience and moral education.

2. Religious Motivation and Guidance

One possible role which religion might play in morality relates to motives people have. Religion, it is often said, is necessary so that people will do right. Typically, the argument begins with the important point that doing what is right often has costs: refusing to shoplift or cheat can mean people go without some good or fail a test; returning a billfold means they don’t get the contents. Religion is therefore said to be necessary in that it provides motivation to do the right thing. God rewards those who follow His commands by providing for them a place in heaven or by insuring that they prosper and are happy on earth. He also punishes those who violate the moral law. Others emphasize less self-interested ways in which religious motives may encourage people to act rightly. Since God is the creator of the universe and has ordained that His plan should be followed, they point out, it is important to live one’s life in accord with this divinely ordained plan. Only by living a moral life, it is said, can people live in harmony with the larger, divinely created order.

The first claim, then, is that religion is necessary to provide moral motivation. The problem with that argument, however, is that religious motives are far from the only ones people have. For most of us, a decision to do the right thing (if that is our decision) is made for a variety of reasons: “What if I get caught? What if somebody sees me—what will he or she think? How will I feel afterwards? Will I regret it?” Or maybe the thought of cheating just doesn’t arise. We were raised to be a decent person, and that’s what we are—period. Behaving fairly and treating others well is more important than whatever we might gain from stealing or cheating, let alone seriously harming another person. So it seems clear that many motives for doing the right thing have nothing whatsoever to do with religion. Most of us, in fact, do worry about getting caught, being blamed, and being looked down on by others. We also may do what is right just because it’s right, or because we don’t want to hurt others or embarrass family and friends. To say that we need religion to act morally is mistaken; indeed, it seems to me that many of us, when it really gets down to it, don’t give much of a thought to religion when making moral decisions. Most of us, in fact, do worry about getting caught, being blamed, and being looked down on by others. We also may do what is right just because it’s right, or because we don’t want to hurt others or embarrass family and friends. To say that we need religion to act morally is mistaken; indeed, it seems to me that many of us, when it really gets down to it, don’t give much of a thought to religion when making moral decisions. All those other reasons are the ones which we tend to consider, or else we just don’t consider cheating and stealing at all. So far, then, there seems to be no reason to suppose that people can’t be moral yet irreligious at the same time.

A second argument that is available for those who think religion is necessary to morality, however, focuses on moral guidance and knowledge rather than on people’s motives. However much people may want to do the right thing, according to this view, we cannot ever know for certain what is right without the guidance of religious teaching. Human understanding is simply inadequate to this difficult and controversial task; morality involves immensely complex problems, and so we must consult religious revelation for help.
Again, however, this argument fails. First, consider how much we would need to know about religion and revelation in order for religion to provide moral guidance. Besides being sure that there is a God, we'd also have to think about which of the many religions is true. How can anybody be sure his or her religion is the right one? But even if we assume the Judeo-Christian God is the real one, we still need to find out just what it is He wants us to do, which means we must think about revelation.

Revelation comes in at least two forms, and not even all Christians agree on which is the best way to understand revelation. Some hold that revelation occurs when God tells us what He wants by providing us with His words: the Ten Commandments are an example. Many even believe, as evangelist Billy Graham once said, that the entire Bible was written by God using thirty-nine secretaries. Others, however, doubt that the “word of God” refers literally to the words God has spoken but believe instead that the Bible is a historical document, written by human beings, of the events or occasions in which God revealed Himself. It is an especially important document, of course, but nothing more than that. So on this second view revelation is not understood as statements made by God but rather as His acts such as leading His people from Egypt, testing Job, and sending His son as an example of the ideal life. The Bible is not itself revelation; it’s the historical account of revelatory actions.

If we are to use revelation as a moral guide, then we must first know what is to count as revelation—words given us by God, historical events, or both? But even supposing that we could somehow answer those questions, the problems of relying on revelation are still not over since we still must interpret that revelation. Some feel, for example, that the Bible justifies various forms of killing, including war and capital punishment, on the basis of such statements as “An eye for an eye.” Others, emphasizing such sayings as “Judge not lest ye be judged” and “Thou shalt not kill,” believe the Bible demands absolute pacifism. How are we to know which interpretation is correct? It is likely, of course, that the answer people give to such religious questions will be influenced in part at least by their own moral beliefs: if capital punishment is thought to be unjust, for example, then an interpreter will seek to read the Bible in a way that is consistent with that moral truth. That is not, however, a happy conclusion for those wishing to rest morality on revelation, for it means that their understanding of what God has revealed is itself dependent on their prior moral views. Rather than revelation serving as a guide for morality, morality is serving as a guide for how we interpret revelation.

So my general conclusion is that far from providing a shortcut to moral understanding, looking to revelation for guidance often creates more questions and problems. It seems wiser under the circumstances to address complex moral problems like abortion, capital punishment, and affirmative action directly, considering the pros and cons of each side, rather than to seek answers through the much more controversial and difficult route of revelation.

3. The Divine Command Theory

It may seem, however, that we have still not really gotten to the heart of the matter. Even if religion is not necessary for moral motivation or guidance, it is often claimed, religion is necessary in another more fundamental sense. According to this view, religion is necessary for morality because without God there could be no right or wrong. God, in other words, provides the foundation or bedrock on which morality is grounded. This idea was expressed by Bishop R. C. Mortimer:

> God made us and all the world. Because of that He has an absolute claim on our obedience. . . . From [this] it follows that a thing is not right simply because we think it is. It is right because God commands it.\(^1\)

What Bishop Mortimer has in mind can be seen by comparing moral rules with legal ones. Legal statutes, we know, are created by legislatures; if the state assembly of New York had not passed a law limiting the speed people can travel, then there would be no such legal obligation. Without the statutory enactments, such a law simply would not exist. Mortimer’s view, the divine-command theory, would mean that God has the same sort of relation to moral law as the legislature has to statutes.
it enacts: without God’s commands there would be no moral rules, just as without a legislature there would be no statutes.

Defenders of the divine-command theory often add to this a further claim, that only by assuming God sits at the foundation of morality can we explain the objective difference between right and wrong. This point was forcefully argued by F. C. Copleston in a 1948 British Broadcasting Corporation radio debate with Bertrand Russell.

**Copleston:** . . . The validity of such an interpretation of man’s conduct depends on the recognition of God’s existence, obviously. . . . Let’s take a look at the Commandant of the [Nazi] concentration camp at Belsen. That appears to you as undesirable and evil and to me too. To Adolph Hitler we suppose it appeared as something good and desirable. I suppose you’d have to admit that for Hitler it was good and for you it is evil.

**Russell:** No, I shouldn’t go so far as that. I mean, I think people can make mistakes in that as they can in other things. If you have jaundice you see things yellow that are not yellow. You’re making a mistake.

**Copleston:** Yes, one can make mistakes, but can you make a mistake if it’s simply a question of reference to a feeling or emotion? Surely Hitler would be the only possible judge of what appealed to his emotions.

**Russell:** . . . You can say various things about that; among others, that if that sort of thing makes that sort of appeal to Hitler’s emotions, then Hitler makes quite a different appeal to my emotions.

**Copleston:** Granted. But there’s no objective criterion outside feeling then for condemning the conduct of the Commandant of Belsen, in your view. . . . The human being’s idea of the content of the moral law depends certainly to a large extent on education and environment, and a man has to use his reason in assessing the validity of the actual moral ideas of his social group. But the possibility of criticizing the accepted moral code presupposes that there is an objective standard, that there is an ideal moral order, which imposes itself. . . . It implies the existence of a real foundation of God.²

Against those who, like Bertrand Russell, seek to ground morality in feelings and attitudes, Copleston argues that there must be a more solid foundation if we are to be able to claim truly that the Nazis were evil. God, according to Copleston, is able to provide the objective basis for the distinction, which we all know to exist, between right and wrong. Without divine commands at the root of human obligations, we would have no real reason for condemning the behavior of anybody, even Nazis. Morality, Copleston thinks, would then be nothing more than an expression of personal feeling.

To begin assessing the divine-command theory, let’s first consider this last point. Is it really true that only the commands of God can provide an objective basis for moral judgments? Certainly many philosophers have felt that morality rests on its own perfectly sound footing, be it reason, human nature, or natural sentiments. It seems wrong to conclude, automatically, that morality cannot rest on anything but religion. And it is also possible that morality doesn’t have any foundation or basis at all, so that its claims should be ignored in favor of whatever serves our own self-interest.

In addition to these problems with Copleston’s argument, the divine-command theory faces other problems as well. First, we would need to say much more about the relationship between morality and divine commands. Certainly the expressions “is commanded by God” and “is morally required” do not mean the same thing. People and even whole societies can use moral concepts without understanding them to make any reference to God. And while it is true that God (or any other moral being, for that matter) would tend to want others to do the right thing, this hardly shows that being right and being commanded by God are the same thing. Parents want their children to do the right thing, too, but that doesn’t mean parents, or anybody else, can make a thing right just by commanding it!

I think that, in fact, theists should reject the divine-command theory. One reason is what it
implies. Suppose we were to grant (just for the sake of argument) that the divine-command theory is correct, so that actions are right just because they are commanded by God. The same, of course, can be said about those deeds that we believe are wrong. If God hadn’t commanded us not to do them, they would not be wrong.

But now notice this consequence of the divine command theory. Since God is all-powerful, and since right is determined solely by His commands, is it not possible that He might change the rules and make what we now think of as wrong into right? It would seem that according to the divine-command theory the answer is “yes”: it is theoretically possible that tomorrow God would decree that virtues such as kindness and courage have become vices while actions that show cruelty and cowardice will henceforth be the right actions. (Recall the analogy with a legislature and the power it has to change law.) So now rather than it being right for people to help each other out and prevent innocent people from suffering unnecessarily, it would be right (God having changed His mind) to create as much pain among innocent children as we possibly can! To adopt the divine-command theory therefore commits its advocate to the seemingly absurd position that even the greatest atrocities might be not only acceptable but morally required if God were to command them.

Plato made a similar point in the dialogue Euthyphro. Socrates is asking Euthyphro what it is that makes the virtue of holiness a virtue, just as we have been asking what makes kindness and courage virtues. Euthyphro has suggested that holiness is just whatever all the gods love.

**Socrates:** Well, then, Euthyphro, what do we say about holiness? Is it not loved by all the gods, according to your definition?

**Euthyphro:** Yes.

**Socrates:** Because it is holy, or for some other reason?

**Euthyphro:** No, because it is holy.

**Socrates:** Then it is loved by the gods because it is holy: it is not holy because it is loved by them?

**Euthyphro:** It seems so.

**Socrates:** . . . Then holiness is not what is pleasing to the gods, and what is pleasing to the gods is not holy as you say, Euthyphro. They are different things.

**Euthyphro:** And why, Socrates?

**Socrates:** Because we are agreed that the gods love holiness because it is holy: and that it is not holy because they love it.3

This raises an interesting question: Why, having claimed at first that virtues are merely what is loved (or commanded) by the gods, would Euthyphro so quickly contradict this and agree that the gods love holiness because it’s holy, rather than the reverse? One likely possibility is that Euthyphro believes that whenever the gods love something they do so with good reason, not without justification and arbitrarily. To deny this, and say that it is merely the gods’ love that makes holiness a virtue, would mean that the gods have no basis for their attitudes, that they are arbitrary in what they love. Yet—and this is the crucial point—it’s far from clear that a religious person would want to say that God is arbitrary in that way. If we say that it is simply God’s loving something that makes it right, then what sense would it make to say God wants us to do right? All that could mean, it seems, is that God wants us to do what He wants us to do; He would have no reason for wanting it. Similarly, “God is good” would mean little more than “God does what He pleases.” The divine-command theory therefore leads us to the results that God is morally arbitrary, and that His wishing us to do good or even God’s being just mean nothing more than that God does what He does and wants whatever He wants. Religious people who reject that consequence would also, I am suggesting, have reason to reject the divine-command theory itself, seeking a different understanding of morality.

This now raises another problem, however. If God approves kindness because it is a virtue and hates the Nazis because they were evil, then it seems that God discovers morality rather than inventing it. So haven’t we then identified a limitation on God’s power, since He now, being a good
God, must love kindness and command us not to be cruel? Without the divine-command theory, in other words, what is left of God’s omnipotence?

But why, we may ask, is such a limitation on God unacceptable? It is not at all clear that God really can do anything at all. Can God, for example, destroy Himself? Or make a rock so heavy that He cannot lift it? Or create a universe which was never created by Him? Many have thought that God cannot do these things but also that His inability to do them does not constitute a genuine limitation on His power since these are things that cannot be done at all: to do them would violate the laws of logic. Christianity’s most influential theologian, Thomas Aquinas, wrote in this regard that “whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done than that God cannot do them.”

How, then, ought we to understand God’s relationship to morality if we reject the divine-command theory? Can religious people consistently maintain their faith in God the Creator and yet deny that what is right is right because He commands it? I think the answer to this is “yes.” Making cruelty good is not like making a universe that wasn’t made, of course. It’s a moral limit on God rather than a logical one. But why suppose that God’s limits are only logical?

One final point about this. Even if we agree that God loves justice or kindness because of their nature, not arbitrarily, there still remains a sense in which God could change morality, even having rejected the divine-command theory. That’s because if we assume, plausibly I think, that morality depends in part on how we reason, what we desire and need, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves, then morality will still be under God’s control since God could have constructed us or our environment very differently. Suppose, for instance, that he created us so that we couldn’t be hurt by others or didn’t care about freedom. Or perhaps our natural environment were created differently, so that all we would have to do is ask and anything we want would be given to us. If God had created either nature or us that way, then it seems likely our morality might also be different in important ways from the one we now think correct. In that sense, then, morality depends on God whether or not one supports the divine-command theory.

4. On Dewey’s Thought That “Morality Is Social”

I have argued here that religion is not necessary in providing moral motivation or guidance and against the divine-command theory’s claim that God is necessary for there to be morality at all. In this last section, I want first to look briefly at how religion and moral codes sometimes do influence each other. Then I will consider the development of moral conscience and the important ways in which morality might correctly be thought to be “social.”

Nothing I have said so far means that morality and religion are independent of each other. But in what ways are they related, assuming I am correct in claiming morality does not depend on religion? First, of course, we should note the historical influence religions have had on the development of morality as well as on politics and law. Many of the important leaders of the abolitionist and civil rights movements were religious leaders, as are many current members of the pro-life movement. The relationship is not, however, one sided: morality has also influenced religion, as the current debate within the Catholic church over the role of women, abortion, and other social issues shows. In reality, then, it seems clear that the practices of morality and religion have historically each exerted an influence on the other.

But just as the two have shaped each other historically, so too do they interact at the personal level. I have already suggested how people’s understanding of revelation, for instance, is often shaped by morality as they seek the best interpretations of revealed texts. Whether trying to understand a work of art, a legal statute, or a religious text, interpreters regularly seek to understand them in the best light—to make them as good as they can be, which requires that they bring moral judgment to the task of religious interpretation and understanding.
The relationship can go the other direction as well, however, as people’s moral views are shaped by their religious training and beliefs. These relationships between morality and religion are often complex, hidden even from ourselves, but it does seem clear that our views on important moral issues, from sexual morality and war to welfare and capital punishment, are often influenced by our religious outlook. So not only are religious and moral practices and understandings historically linked, but for many religious people the relationship extends to the personal level—to their understanding of moral obligations as well as their sense of who they are and their vision of who they wish to be.

Morality, then, is influenced by religion (as is religion by morality), but morality’s social character extends deeper even than that, I want to argue. First, of course, we possess a socially acquired language within which we think about our various choices and the alternatives we ought to follow, including whether a possible course of action is the right thing to do. Second, morality is social in that it governs relationships among people, defining our responsibilities to others and theirs to us. Morality provides the standards we rely on in gauging our interactions with family, lovers, friends, fellow citizens, and even strangers. Third, morality is social in the sense that we are, in fact, subject to criticism by others for our actions. We discuss with others what we should do and often hear from them concerning whether our decisions were acceptable. Blame and praise are a central feature of morality.

While not disputing any of this, John Dewey has stressed another, less obvious aspect of morality’s social character. Consider then the following comments regarding the origins of morality and conscience in an article he titled “Morality Is Social”:

In language and imagination we rehearse the responses of others just as we dramatically enact other consequences. We foreknow how others will act, and the foreknowledge is the beginning of judgment passed on action. We know with them; there is conscience. An assembly is formed within our breast which discusses and appraises proposed and performed acts. The community without becomes a forum and tribunal within, a judgment-seat of charges, assessments and exculpations. Our thoughts of our own actions are saturated with the ideas that others entertain about them. . . . Explicit recognition of this fact is a prerequisite of improvement in moral education. . . . Reflection is morally indispensable.5

So Dewey’s thought is that to consider matters from the moral point of view means we must think beyond ourselves, by which he means imagining how we as well as others might respond to various choices now being contemplated. To consider a decision from the moral perspective, says Dewey, requires that we envision an “assembly of others” that is “formed within our breast.” That means, in turn, that morality and conscience cannot be sharply distinguished from our nature as social beings since conscience invariably brings with it, or constitutes, the perspective of the other. “Is this right?” and “What would this look like were I to have to defend it to others?” are not separable questions.6

It is important not to confuse Dewey’s point here, however. He is not saying that what is right is finally to be determined by the reactions of actually existing other people, or even by the reaction of society as a whole. What is right or fair can never be finally decided by what is popular, and indeed might not meet the approval of any specific group. But what then might Dewey mean in speaking of such an “assembly of others” as the basis of morality? The answer is that rather than actual people or groups, the assembly Dewey envisions is hypothetical or “ideal.” The “community without” is thus transformed into a “forum and tribunal within, a judgment seat of charges, assessments and exculpations.” So it is through the powers of our imagination that we can meet our moral responsibilities and exercise moral judgment, using these powers to determine what morality requires by imagining the reaction of Dewey’s “assembly of others.”
Morality is therefore inherently social in a variety of ways. It depends on socially learned language, is learned from interactions with others, and governs our interactions with others in society. But it also demands, as Dewey put it, that we know “with” others, envisioning for ourselves what their points of view would require along with our own. Conscience demands we occupy the positions of others.

Viewed in this light, God would play a role in a religious person’s moral reflection and conscience since it is unlikely a religious person would wish to exclude God from the “forum and tribunal” that constitutes conscience. Rather, for the religious person conscience would almost certainly include the imagined reaction of God along with the reactions of others who might be affected by the action. Other people are also important, however, since it is often an open question just what God’s reaction would be; revelation’s meaning, as I have argued, is subject to interpretation. So it seems that for a religious person, morality and God’s will cannot be separated, though the connection between them is not the one envisioned by defenders of the divine-command theory.

Which leads to my final point, about moral education. If Dewey is correct, then it seems clear there is an important sense in which morality not only can be taught but must be. Besides early moral training, moral thinking depends on our ability to imagine others’ reactions and to imaginatively put ourselves into their shoes. “What would somebody (including, perhaps, God) think if this got out?” expresses more than a concern with being embarrassed or punished; it is also the voice of conscience and indeed of morality itself. But that would mean, thinking of education, that listening to others, reading about what others think and do, and reflecting within ourselves about our actions and whether we could defend them to others are part of the practice of morality itself. Morality cannot exist without the broader, social perspective introduced by others, and this social nature ties it, in that way, with education and with public discussion, both actual and imagined. “Private” moral reflection taking place independent of the social world would be no moral reflection at all. It follows that moral education, in the form of both studying others’ moral ideas and subjecting our own to discussion and criticism, is not only possible, but essential.

NOTES

2. This debate was broadcast on the Third Program of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1948.
6. Obligations to animals raise an interesting problem for this conception of morality. Is it wrong to torture animals only because other people could be expected to disapprove? Or is it that the animal itself would disapprove? Or, perhaps, duties to animals rest on sympathy and compassion while human moral relations are more like Dewey describes, resting on morality’s inherently social nature and on the dictates of conscience viewed as an assembly of others.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Arthur respond to those who argue that religion is necessary for moral motivation?
2. Arthur denies that religion is necessary for moral understanding or knowledge. Why does he think that?
3. How does the analogy with a legal system suggest that God may be necessary for there to be a right and wrong?
4. Why does Arthur reject the divine-command theory?
5. In what ways are morality and religion connected, according to Arthur?
6. “Morality is social,” said John Dewey. What did he mean by that?
7. What is the significance of Dewey’s idea for moral education? What would Dewey probably have thought about a class in ethics?
8. In footnote 6, Arthur raises the problem of humans’ obligations to animals. How would you be inclined to answer the questions he asks there?
Sometimes a situation will arise in which a person feels a conflict between doing the right thing and sympathy for those who may be hurt as a result of meeting morality’s demands. Here, Jonathan Bennett graphically illustrates this conflict in three surprising and fascinating examples: Huck Finn’s conflict over whether to free his slave friend Jim; Nazi commander Himmler’s feelings for the Jews and the duty he felt to kill them; and Jonathan Edwards’s attitudes toward fallen people, who he thought were doomed to live in hell, and the justice of the wrathful God who condemns them. Bennett uses these examples to explore the relations between duty and sympathy as well as the wisdom of relying on our feelings when they conflict with duty. Jonathan Bennett is professor of philosophy at Syracuse University.

In this paper, I shall present not just the conscience of Huckleberry Finn but two others as well. One of them is the conscience of Heinrich Himmler. He became a Nazi in 1923; he served drably and quietly, but well, and was rewarded with increasing responsibility and power. At the peak of his career he held many offices and commands, of which the most powerful was that of leader of the S.S.—the principal police force of the Nazi regime. In this capacity, Himmler commanded the whole concentration-camp system, and was responsible for the execution of the so-called final solution of the Jewish problem. It is important for my purposes that this piece of social engineering should be thought of not abstractly but in concrete terms of Jewish families being marched to what they think are bathhouses, to the accompaniment of loudspeaker renditions of extracts from The Merry Widow and Tales of Hoffman, there to be choked to death by poisonous gases. Altogether, Himmler succeeded in murdering about four and a half million of them as well as several million gentiles, mainly Poles and Russians.

The other conscience to be discussed is that of the Calvinist theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards. He lived in the first half of the eighteenth century, and has a good claim to be considered America’s first serious and considerable philosophical thinker. He was for many years a widely renowned preacher and Congregationalist minister in New England; in 1748, a dispute with his congregation led him to resign (he couldn’t accept their view that unbelievers should be admitted to the Lord’s Supper in the hope that it would convert them); for some years after that, he worked as a missionary, preaching to Indians through an interpreter; then, in 1758, he accepted the presidency of what is now Princeton University and within two months died from a smallpox inoculation. Along the way he wrote some first-rate philosophy: his book attacking the notion of free will is still sometimes read. Why I should be interested in Edwards’s conscience will be explained in due course.

I shall use Heinrich Himmler, Jonathan Edwards, and Huckleberry Finn to illustrate different aspects of a single theme, namely the relationship between sympathy on the one hand and bad morality on the other.

All that I can mean by a “bad morality” is a morality whose principles I deeply disapprove of. When I call a morality bad, I cannot prove that mine is better; but when I here call any morality bad, I think you will agree with me that it is bad, and that is all I need.

There could be dispute as to whether the springs of someone’s actions constitute a morality. I think, though, that we must admit that someone who acts in ways which conflict grossly with our morality may nevertheless have a morality of his own—a set of principles of action which he sincerely assents to, so that for him the problem of acting well or rightly or in obedience to conscience is the problem of conforming to those principles. The problem of conscientiousness can arise as acutely...
for a bad morality as for any other: rotten principles may be as difficult to keep as decent ones.

As for “sympathy”: I use this term to cover every sort of fellow-feeling, as when one feels pity over someone’s loneliness or horrified compassion over his pain or when one feels a shrinking reluctance to act in a way which will bring misfortune to someone else. These feelings must not be confused with moral judgments. My sympathy for someone in distress may lead me to help him or even to think that I ought to help him; but in itself it is not a judgment about what I ought to do but just a feeling for him in his plight. We shall get some light on the difference between feelings and moral judgments when we consider Huckleberry Finn.

Obviously, feelings can impel one to action, and so can moral judgments; and in a particular case sympathy and morality may pull in opposite directions. This can happen not just with bad moralities but also with good ones like yours and mine. For example, a small child, sick and miserable, clings tightly to his mother and screams in terror when she tries to pass him over to the doctor to be examined. If the mother gave way to her sympathy, that is to her feeling for the child’s misery and fright, she would hold it close and not let the doctor come near, but don’t we agree that it might be wrong for her to act on such a feeling? Quite generally, then, anyone’s moral principles may apply to a particular situation in a way which runs contrary to the particular thrusts of fellow-feeling that he has in that situation. My immediate concern is with sympathy in relation to bad morality, but not because such conflicts occur only when the morality is bad.

Now, suppose that someone who accepts a bad morality is struggling to make himself act in accordance with it in a particular situation where his sympathies pull him another way. He sees the struggle as one between doing the right, conscientious thing, and acting wrongly and weakly, like the mother who won’t let the doctor come near her sick, frightened baby. Since we don’t accept this person’s morality, we may see the situation very differently, thoroughly disapproving of the action he regards as the right one and endorsing the action which from his point of view constitutes weakness and backsliding.

Conflicts between sympathy and bad morality won’t always be like this, for we won’t disagree with every single dictate of a bad morality. Still, it can happen in the way I have described, with the agent’s right action being our wrong one, and vice versa. That is just what happens in a certain episode in Chapter 16 of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, an episode which brilliantly illustrates how fiction can be instructive about real life.

Huck Finn has been helping his slave friend Jim to run away from Miss Watson, who is Jim’s owner. In their raft-journey down the Mississippi River, they are near to the place at which Jim will become legally free. Now let Huck take over the story:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was most free—and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn’t get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. It hadn’t ever come home to me, before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it stayed with me, and scorched me more and more. I tried to make out to myself that I warn’t to blame, because I didn’t run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn’t no use, conscience up and say, every time: “But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody.” That was so— I couldn’t get around that, no way. That was where it pinched. Conscience says to me: “What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? . . .” I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished I was dead.

Jim speaks of his plan to save up to buy his wife, and then his children, out of slavery; and he adds that if the children cannot be bought he will arrange to steal them. Huck is horrified:

Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed
and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn’t even know; a man that hadn’t ever done me no harm.

I was sorry to hear Jim say that, it was such a lowering of him. My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it: “Let up on me—it ain’t too late, yet—I’ll paddle ashore at first light, and tell.” I felt easy, and happy, and light as a feather, right off. All my troubles was gone.

This is bad morality all right. In his earliest years Huck wasn’t taught any principles, and the only ones he has encountered since then are those of rural Missouri, in which slaveowning is just one kind of ownership and is not subject to critical pressure. It hasn’t occurred to Huck to question those principles. So the action, to us abhorrent, of turning Jim in to the authorities presents itself clearly to Huck as the right thing to do.

For us, morality and sympathy would both dictate helping Jim to escape. If we felt any conflict, it would have both these on one side and something else on the other—greed for a reward, or fear of punishment. But Huck’s morality conflicts with his sympathy, that is, with his unargued, natural feeling for his friend. The conflict starts when Huck sets off in the canoe toward the shore, pretending that he is going to reconnoitre, but really planning to turn Jim in:

As I shoved off, [Jim] says: “Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout’n for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck I’s a free man . . . Jim won’t ever forgit you, Huck; you’s de bes’ fren’ Jim’s ever had; en you’s de only fren’ old Jim’s got now.”

I was paddling off, all in a sweat to tell on him; but when he says this, it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me. I went along slow then, and I warn’t right down certain whether I was glad I started or whether I warn’t. When I was fifty yards off, Jim says:

“Dah you goes, de ole true Huck; de on’y white genlman dat ever kep’ his promise to ole Jim.” Well, I just felt sick. But I says. I got to do it—I can’t get out of it.

In the upshot, sympathy wins over morality. Huck hasn’t the strength of will to do what he sincerely thinks he ought to do. Two men hunting for runaway slaves ask him whether the man on his raft is black or white:

I didn’t answer up prompt, I tried to, but the words wouldn’t come. I tried, for a second or two, to brace up and out with it, but I warn’t man enough—hadn’t the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says: “He's white.”

So Huck enables Jim to escape, thus acting weakly and wickedly—he thinks. In this conflict between sympathy and morality, sympathy wins.

One critic has cited this episode in support of the statement that Huck suffers “excruciating moments of wavering between honesty and respectability.” That is hopelessly wrong, and I agree with the perceptive comment on it by another critic, who says:

The conflict waged in Huck is much more serious: he scarcely cares for respectability and never hesitates to relinquish it, but he does care for honesty and gratitude—and both honesty and gratitude require that he should give Jim up. It is not, in Huck, honesty at war with respectability but love and compassion for Jim struggling against his conscience. His decision is for Jim and hell: a right decision made in the mental chains that Huck never breaks. His concern for Jim is and remains irrational. Huck finds many reasons for giving Jim up and none for stealing him. To the end Huck sees his compassion for Jim as a weak, ignorant, and wicked felony.2

That is precisely correct—and it can have that virtue only because Mark Twain wrote the episode with such unerring precision. The crucial point concerns reasons, which all occur on one side of the conflict. On the side of conscience we have principles, arguments, considerations, ways of looking at things:

“It hadn’t ever come home to me before what I was doing”

“I tried to make out that I warn’t to blame”

“Conscience said ‘But you knowed . . . ’—I couldn’t get around that”

“What had poor Miss Watson done to you?”

“This is what comes of my not thinking”

“children that belonged to a man I didn’t even know.”
On the other side, the side of feeling, we get nothing like that. When Jim rejoices in Huck, as his only friend, Huck doesn’t consider the claims of friendship or have the situation “come home” to him in a different light. All that happens is: “When he says this, it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me. I went along slow then, and I warn’t right down certain whether I was glad I started or whether I warn’t.” Again, Jim’s words about Huck’s “promise” to him don’t give Huck any reason for changing his plan: in his morality, promises to slaves probably don’t count. Their effect on him is of a different kind: “Well, I just felt sick.” And when the moment for final decision comes, Huck doesn’t weigh up pros and cons: he simply fails to do what he believes to be right—he isn’t strong enough, hasn’t “the spunk of a rabbit.” This passage in the novel is notable not just for its finely wrought irony, with Huck’s weakness of will leading him to do the right thing, but also for its masterly handling of the difference between general moral principles and particular unreasoned emotional pulls.

Consider now another case of bad morality in conflict with human sympathy, the case of odious Himmler. Here, from a speech he made to some S.S. generals, is an indication of the content of his morality:

What happens to a Russian, to a Czech, does not interest me in the slightest. What the nations can offer in the way of good blood of our type, we will take, if necessary by kidnapping their children and raising them here with us. Whether nations live in prosperity or starve to death like cattle interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves to our Kultur; otherwise it is of no interest to me. Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an antitank ditch interests me only in so far as the antitank ditch for Germany is finished.¹

But has this a moral basis at all? And if it has, was there in Himmler’s own mind any conflict between morality and sympathy? Yes there was. Here is more from the same speech:

I also want to talk to you quite frankly on a very grave matter. . . . I mean . . . the extermination of the Jewish race. . . . Most of you must know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500, or 1,000. To have stuck it out and at the same time—apart from exceptions caused by human weakness—to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written.

Himmler saw his policies as being hard to implement while still retaining one’s human sympathies—while still remaining a “decent fellow.” He is saying that only the weak take the easy way out and just squelch their sympathies and is praising the stronger and more glorious course of retaining one’s sympathies while acting in violation of them. In the same spirit, he ordered that when executions were carried out in concentration camps, those responsible “are to be influenced in such a way as to suffer no ill effect in their character and mental attitude.” A year later he boasted that the S.S. had wiped out the Jews without our leaders and their men suffering any damage in their minds and souls. The danger was considerable, for there was only a narrow path between the Scylla of their becoming heartless ruffians unable any longer to treasure life, and the Charybdis of their becoming soft and suffering nervous breakdowns.

And there really can’t be any doubt that the basis of Himmler’s policies was a set of principles which constituted his morality—a sick, bad, wicked morality. He described himself as caught in “the old tragic conflict between will and obligation.” And when his physician Kersten protested at the intention to destroy the Jews, saying that the suffering involved was “not to be contemplated,” Kersten reports that Himmler replied:

He knew that it would mean much suffering for the Jews. . . . “It is the curse of greatness that it must step over dead bodies to create new life. Yet we must cleanse the soil or it will never bear fruit. It will be a great burden for me to bear.”

This, I submit, is the language of morality.

So in this case, tragically, bad morality won out over sympathy. I am sure that many of Himmler’s killers did extinguish their sympathies, becoming
“heartless ruffians” rather than “decent fellows”; but not Himmler himself. Although his policies ran against the human grain to a horrible degree, he did not sandpaper down his emotional surfaces so that there was no grain there, allowing his actions to slide along smoothly and easily. He did, after all, bear his hideous burden and even paid a price for it. He suffered a variety of nervous and physical disabilities, including nausea and stomach convulsions, and Kersten was doubtless right in saying that these were “the expression of a psychic division which extended over his whole life.”

This same division must have been present in some of those officials of the church who ordered heretics to be tortured so as to change their theological opinions. Along with the brutes and the cold careerists, there must have been some who cared and who suffered from the conflict between their sympathies and their bad morality.

In the conflict between sympathy and bad morality, then, the victory may go to sympathy, as in the case of Huck Finn, or to morality, as the case of Himmler.

Another possibility is that the conflict may be avoided by giving up, or not ever having, those sympathies which might interfere with one's principles. That seems to have been the case with Jonathan Edwards. I am afraid that I shall be doing an injustice to Edwards's many virtues and to his great intellectual energy and inventiveness; for my concern is only with the worst thing about him—namely his morality, which was worse than Himmler's.

According to Edwards, God condemns some men to an eternity of unimaginably awful pain, though he arbitrarily spares others—“arbitrarily” because none deserve to be spared:

Natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell . . .; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them . . .; and . . . there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. . . . All that preserves them is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted unobliged forebearance of an incensed God.\(^4\)

Notice that he says “they have deserved the fiery pit.” Edwards insists that men ought to be condemned to eternal pain, and his position isn’t that this is right because God wants it but rather that God wants it because it is right. For him, moral standards exist independently of God, and God can be assessed in the light of them (and of course found to be perfect). For example, he says:

They deserve to be cast into hell; so that . . . justice never stands in the way, it makes no objection against God’s using his power at any moment to destroy them. Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins.

Elsewhere, he gives elaborate arguments to show that God is acting justly in damning sinners. For example, he argues that a punishment should be exactly as bad as the crime being punished: God is infinitely excellent, so any crime against him is infinitely bad, and so eternal damnation is exactly right as a punishment—it is infinite, but, as Edwards is careful also to say, it is “no more than infinite.”

Of course, Edwards himself didn’t torment the damned; but the question still arises of whether his sympathies didn't conflict with his approval of eternal torment. Didn't he find it painful to contemplate any fellow human's being tortured for ever? Apparently not:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; . . . he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

When God is presented as being as misanthropic as that, one suspects misanthropy in the theologian. This suspicion is increased when Edwards claims that “the saints in glory will . . . understand how terrible the sufferings of the damned are; yet . . . will not be sorry for [them].”\(^5\) He bases this partly
on a view of human nature whose ugliness he seems not to notice:

The seeing of the calamities of others tends to heighten the sense of our own enjoyments. When the saints in glory, therefore, shall see the doleful state of the damned, how will this heighten their sense of the blessedness of their own state. . . . When they shall see how miserable others of their fellow-creatures are. . . ; when they shall see the smoke of their torment, . . . and hear their dolorous shrieks and cries, and consider that they in the mean time are in the most blissful state, and shall surely be in it to all eternity; how they will rejoice!

I hope this is less than the whole truth! His other main point about why the saints will rejoice to see the torments of the damned is that it is right that they should do so:

The heavenly inhabitants . . . will have no love nor pity to the damned. . . . [This will not show] a want of a spirit of love in them . . . ; for the heavenly inhabitants will know that it is not fit that they should love [the damned] because they will know then, that God has no love to them, nor pity for them.

The implication that of course one can adjust one’s feelings of pity so that they conform to the dictates of some authority—doesn’t this suggest that ordinary human sympathies played only a small part in Edwards’s life?

Huck Finn, whose sympathies are wide and deep, could never avoid the conflict in that way; but he is determined to avoid it, and so he opts for the only other alternative he can see—to give up morality altogether. After he has tricked the slave-hunters, he returns to the raft and undergoes a peculiar crisis:

I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knew very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn’t no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don’t get started right when he’s little, ain’t got no show—when the pinch comes there ain’t nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat. Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on—s’pose you’d a done right and give Jim up; would you feel better than what you do now? No, says I, I’d feel bad—I’d feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what’s the use of you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and ain’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn’t answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn’t bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.

Huck clearly cannot conceive of having any morality except the one he has learned—too late, he thinks—from his society. He is not entirely a prisoner of that morality, because he does after all reject it; but for him that is a decision to relinquish morality as such; he cannot envisage revising his morality, altering its content in face of the various pressures to which it is subject, including pressures from his sympathies. For example, he does not begin to approach the thought that slavery should be rejected on moral grounds or the thought that what he is doing is not theft because a person cannot be owned and therefore cannot be stolen.

The basic trouble is that he cannot or will not engage in abstract intellectual operations of any sort. In Chapter 33 he finds himself “feeling to blame, somehow” for something he knows he had no hand in; he assumes that this feeling is a delivery of conscience; and this confirms him in his belief that conscience shouldn’t be listened to:

It don’t make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person’s conscience ain’t got no sense, and just goes for him anyway. If I had a yaller dog and didn’t know no more than a person’s conscience does, I would poison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person’s insides, and yet ain’t no good, nohow.

That brisk, incurious dismissiveness fits well with the comprehensive rejection of morality back on the raft. But this is a digression.

On the raft, Huck decides not to live by principles, but just to do whatever “comes handiest at the time”—always acting according to the mood of the moment. Since the morality he is rejecting is narrow and cruel and his sympathies are broad and kind, the results will be good. But moral principles are good to have because they help to protect one from acting badly at moments when one’s
sympathies happen to be in abeyance. On the highest possible estimate of the role one's sympathies should have, one can still allow for principles as embodiments of one's best feelings, one's broadest and keenest sympathies. On that view, principles can help one across intervals when one's feelings are at less than their best, that is, through periods of misanthropy or meanness or self-centredness or depression or anger.

What Huck didn't see is that one can live by principles and yet have ultimate control over their content. And one way such control can be exercised is by checking one's principles in the light of one's sympathies. This is sometimes a pretty straightforward matter. It can happen that a certain moral principle becomes untenable—meaning literally that one cannot hold it any longer—because it conflicts intolerably with the pity or revulsion or whatever that one feels when one sees what the principle leads to. One's experience may play a large part here: experiences evoke feelings, and feelings force one to modify principles. Something like this happened to the English poet Wilfred Owen, whose experiences in the First World War transformed him from an enthusiastic soldier into a virtual pacifist. I can't document his change of conscience in detail; but I want to present something which he wrote about the way experience can put pressure on morality.6

The Latin poet Horace wrote that it is sweet and fitting (or right) to die for one's country—*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—and Owen wrote a fine poem about how experience could lead one to relinquish that particular moral principle. He describes a man who is too slow donning his gas mask during a gas attack—"As under a green sea, I saw him drowning," Owen says. The poem ends like this:

> In all my dreams, before my helpless sight  
> He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.  
> If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
> Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
> And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
> His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

There is a difficulty about drawing from all this a moral for ourselves. I imagine that we agree in our rejection of slavery, eternal damnation, genocide, and uncritical patriotic self-abnegation; so we shall agree that Huck Finn, Jonathan Edwards, Heinrich Himmler, and the poet Horace would have done well to bring certain of their principles under severe pressure from ordinary human sympathies. But then we can say this because we can say that all those are bad moralities, whereas we cannot look at our own moralities and declare them bad. This is not arrogance: it is obviously incoherent for someone to declare the system of moral principles that he accepts to be bad, just as one cannot coherently say of anything that one believes it but it is false.

Still, although I can't point to any of my beliefs and say "That is false," I don't doubt that some of my beliefs are false; and so I should try to remain open to correction. Similarly, I accept every single item in my morality—that is inevitable—but I am sure that my morality could be improved, which is to say that it could undergo changes which I should be glad of once I had made them. So I must try to keep my morality open to revision, exposing it to whatever valid pressures there are—including pressures from my sympathies.

I don't give my sympathies a blank check in advance. In a conflict between principle and sympathy, principles ought sometimes to win. For example, although I think it was right to take part in the Second World War on the Allied side, there were many ghastly individual incidents which might have led someone to doubt the rightness of his participation in that war. I think it would have been right for such a person to keep his sympathies in a subordinate place on those occasions, not allowing them to modify his principles in such a way as to make a pacifist of him.

Still, one's sympathies should be kept as sharp and sensitive and aware as possible, and not only because they can sometimes affect one's principles
or one's conduct or both. Owen, at any rate, says that feelings and sympathies are vital even when they can do nothing but bring pain and distress. In another poem he speaks of the blessings of being numb in one's feelings: "Happy are the men who yet before they are killed/Can let their veins run cold," he says. These are the ones who do not suffer from any compassion which, as Owen puts it, "makes their feet/Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brother." He contrasts these "happy" ones, who "lose imagination" with himself and others "who with a thought besmirch/Blood over all our soul." Yet the poem's verdict goes against the "happy" ones. Owen does not say that they will act worse than the others whose souls are besmirched with blood because of their keen awareness of human suffering. He merely says that they are the losers because they have cut themselves off from the human condition:

By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

NOTES
1. This paper began life as the Potter Memorial Lecture, given at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, in 1972.
5. This and the next two quotations are from “The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous: or, The Torments of the Wicked in Hell, No Occasion of Grief to the Saints in Heaven,” from The Works of President Edwards (London, 1817), vol. IV, pp. 507–8, 511–12 and 509, respectively.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Describe the examples Bennett uses to illustrate how feelings and duty may conflict.
2. How does Bennett characterize the relationship between morality and sympathy? In light of his examples, do you agree with the role he gives to each?
3. Why does Bennett think Edwards’s morality was worse than Himmler’s?
4. Besides sympathy, what means are available to criticize our own or others’ moral principles.

Essay and Paper Topics for Chapter 1
1. Discuss Hobbes’s claim that morality is ultimately grounded in self-interest. Are the answers given by Brody adequate?
2. How are morality and religion related, if they are? What are the most important contrasts between the perspectives of Arthur and Adams?
3. “No matter how it may appear, people’s real motives are ultimately about self-interest.” Discuss.
4. Are duty, self-interest, and sympathy opposed to one another, or can they be mutually supportive? Are there real conflicts between these motives or are they in the end only apparent conflict? Explain.