The Source of Goodness*

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1. Fire and the Sun

Let me begin with a fable. (I claim no great originality for it, since there is a long tradition going back to Plato, which explicates the idea of a source of goodness by using the symbol of the sun.) Suppose there is a planet – let us call it Oceana – which is surrounded by an impenetrable luminous watery mist. The inhabitants believe, arguably with good reason (since there is no evidence of anything other), that they inhabit a 'closed' cosmos: that their world, and its surrounding atmosphere, is the universe, comprising everything that exists. Their world is a watery world – they live and reproduce and move around in a marine-style environment. In addition to the faint luminosity which enables them to find their way around, their world contains *fires* – strange burning islands of what we would call wood, which float around on the ocean, giving out light and heat. The expert scientists of Oceana have mapped out with great mathematical precision and accuracy the laws which govern all the watery phenomena of their ocean and their atmosphere. But the workings of the 'fires' do not seem to be derivable from, or explicable in terms of, any of the natural watery phenomena that their science has so successfully investigated.

Some of their philosophers, the *aqualists*, propose that, despite appearances, the 'fires' must after all be reducible to some kind of watery interactions, and that it is just a matter of time until they are explained in terms of standard aquatic science. Others (highly respected for their philosophical profundity) say that fire is a *sui-generis*, irreducibly *non-aquatic* property. But (though the jury is out) neither aqualism nor non-aqualism has so far completely carried the day. There is, however, a third group, the *super-aqualists*, who maintain that the fiery phenomena derive ultimately from a super-fiery transcendent source, a source that is wholly other than the universe comprising Oceana and its atmosphere. They identify this source with Sol, a traditional object of worship since time immemorial, which is supposed to be the source not just of fieriness, but of everything that exists.

There are, of course, many objections to the Sol theory from the aqualists, and even from the non-aqualists. If Sol, supremely warm and fiery, is the source of everything, how come there are parts of the planet that are cold and dark? This is known as the Problem of Darkness. But quite apart from such general objections, a further more specific criticism of invoking Sol as the source of fieriness is commonly put forward, namely that it fails as an explanation. For if we are puzzled by the existence of fieriness in the ordinary world (so runs the objection), it surely does nothing to assuage our puzzlement to be told that it derives from something, beyond the world, that is *itself* fiery – precisely the property we sought to explain in the first place.

I will pause with the science fiction before it becomes too laboured; but the cluster of Euthyphro-type problems associated with theistic accounts of goodness will already have begun to be visible in the guise of our fable, if we substitute goodness for fieriness. The dilemma posed in Plato's *Euthyphro* was (in updated and simplified form): is something good because God ordains it, or does God ordain it because it is good? I will here assume (what I take to be pretty clear) that the first horn of the dilemma is a very unpromising one for the theist to take: even God cannot

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arbitrarily make something good, just by ordaining it (if he could, then wanton cruelty would become good if so ordained, which is absurd). In any case, most theists will want to say that God would never issue such repugnant commands: because he is essentially good, he would only ordain good things. This suggests we should take the second horn of the dilemma, that things are ordained by God because they are already, as it were, good. But then we face, in effect, a *vicious regress*. Very crudely, we wanted to be given some account of this mysterious property called goodness which things have; we then are told it derives from God, who is himself good, and from his ordaining things because they are themselves good. But that doesn't appear to get us any further from an explanatory point of view. The *explanandum*, the self-same phenomenon of goodness that we were seeking to explain, is re-imported and served up again: it pops up in the *explanans*, and we are no further forward.

I hope the parallel in our fable is reasonably clear. Fieriness, which was our explanandum phenomenon, re-appears as a property of Sol, the very entity that was invoked to provide an explanation for fieriness in the first place. The threat of a regress of this kind has a long history. In the *Parmenides*, Plato famously canvasses an objection to his theory of Forms which has subsequently become known as the 'Third Man' argument: if what makes something F is participation in the Form of F, and every Form of F is itself F, then we have an explanatory regress: we still haven't really explained what makes the Form itself count as F, unless we posit a further, 'third' entity, in which the previously posited Form and its instances all partake – and so on ad infinitum.[1] For our purposes in this paper, for F-ness read goodness. If we block the regress by saying that the Form of the Good, or God, is just good in virtue of its nature, or in a way that requires no further explanation, then it is not clear that our initial puzzlement about what makes for goodness has really been assuaged.

Are regresses always vicious? No. If I want to know how or why my house, and my neighbour's house, are on fire, then it will, in one way, be a perfectly good explanation to say that they were struck by a fiery meteorite from above. I have explained a given object's possession of a particular property by invoking its 'participation' in a property coming from outside, or by the property's having been transmitted from a supra-terrestrial body which itself possessed the relevant property of fieriness. As far as concerns explaining the particular phenomenon I started with, this is fine. But if I want to explain how fieriness *in general* comes about, or what fieriness consists in, invoking a further fiery object, however exalted, does not seem to do any useful work.

For all the reasons just given, it seems that the scientists of Oceana are perfectly justified in being impatient with the those who invoke the supposed fiery body Sol as a putative explanation of fieriness. And if we cash out the fable and apply it to theism, and to the invocation of God as the source of goodness, then it seems that those who object that this explains nothing about the nature of goodness are in one way perfectly correct. Indeed, I am inclined to think (though I cannot argue this out here) that the same applies to any attempt to explain problematic features of reality by invoking a transcendent source which is itself supposed to incorporate the relevant features. In my view (as I have argued elsewhere), God is not, and cannot be invoked as, an *explanation* in anything like the way explanations are understood in a scientific context. For God's transcendence means that he is wholly outside the normal chain of events and causes. As Anthony Kenny has aptly put it, 'God is not a part of any of the explanatory series which he is invoked to account for.'[2]

Yet for all that, and notwithstanding these difficulties, it seems to me that we can perhaps glimpse (at least by analogy) how a transcendent God might be responsible for our world, or even certain aspects of it. Let us go back to world of Oceana. With respect to this world, we who have created or imagined the story have, so to speak, a window on the transcendent. We are in the fortunate position of being outside the limiting framework within which the unfortunate scientists of that planet had to operate, given their impermeable atmosphere. We can see, from the point of

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[1] Plato, *Parmenides* [*c.* 360 BC], 132 a-b. The argument concerns the form of largeness; Aristotle's reference this type of argument as 'the third man' occurs in his *Metaphysics* [*c.* 325 BC], 990b17.
[2] A. Kenny, *What is Faith?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 111.

view of our privileged perspective, that their world is *not* a closed cosmos, and that the luminosity of their atmosphere does in fact derive from its being exposed to the light of a star, to something in some ways like what the super-aqualists imagined as the transcendent deity, Sol (though of course this is only an analogy, since, for us, stars and suns are not transcendent items, but part of our natural universe). We can also see, again from our privileged perspective, that their positing of Sol as the source of the fieriness of their islands was in a certain sense correct. It is not that their sun somehow transmitted fieriness to the floating wooden islands either causally or in virtue of some mysterious fiat; nor indeed is it true that that Sol is itself fiery in anything like the same sense as the flaming wooden islands (the working of a solar nuclear furnace being radically different from the combustion of wood). Instead, the sun (as we privileged observers know) is the source of fieriness in a quite different sense, which the isolated scientists and philosophers of Oceana could not possibly conceive of: it is the source of that energy without which their planet could have contained no life, no plants, no photo-synthesis, and therefore no trees or bushes of any kind, able to store the energy later released on the burning wooden islands. The mysterious phenomenon of the combustion of wood, wholly outside the scope of any of their laws for aquatic phenomena (accurate and complete though those laws were, as far as they went) – this mysterious and apparently anomalous phenomenon, the manifestation of energy accompanied by heat and flame, was indeed (as we privileged external observers can see) made possible in virtue of a vast and to them inconceivable extra-planetary source of energy. A supreme fire – fiery, albeit only by analogy with the ordinary fires they observed – was indeed the ultimate source.

Could God be the source of goodness in our own world, in something like that way? I will not claim that our fable has made such a view more plausible. But I think it does suggest the possibility cannot be dismissed out of hand – unless, of course, we are prepared to follow the dogmatic naturalist metaphysicians of Oceana and insist that the cosmos we inhabit must be a closed cosmos, that total set of objects and events occurring since the big bang comprises all the reality that there is.

2. God as source

Having completed this (perhaps rather protracted) preliminary softening up process, let me turn directly to theistic accounts of goodness. God, the God who is the object of worship in the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions is conceived of as the source of truth, beauty and goodness. He is, as the Epistle of James puts it, the giver of 'every good and every perfect gift'; or in the words of the seventeenth-century Cambridge philosopher Peter Sterry, the 'stream of the divine love' is the source of 'all truths, goodness, joys, beauties and blessedness.'[3] For the worshipper, involved in the praxis of daily or weekly liturgy, this idea is pretty much central, the basis of the sense of joy and exaltation experienced as one turns to God in praise and thanksgiving.

But once we are out of the church (synagogue or mosque), and back in the study, particularly in the cold and unforgiving light of the analytic philosopher's study, questions arise about what exactly it can mean to say that God is the source of truth, beauty and goodness. Well, I suppose one of the most important things it implies, to begin with, is a firm denial of relativism. If an eternal, necessary being, existing independently of us, is the source of truth, then this rules out pragmatic and relativistic conceptions according to which truth is simply what works for us, or what is currently accepted in our culture circle. And similarly, beauty, if stemming from God, cannot not simply be 'in the eye of the beholder' – just a function of the subjective tastes of various human beings. And similarly, goodness, and value generally, cannot be dependent merely on our personal or societal preferences, let alone something we can create or invent by our own

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[3] Epistle General of James [*c.* AD 50], 1: 17: *pasa dosis agathê kai pan dôrêma teleion anôthen esti, katabainon apo tou patros tôn phôtôn* ('Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights.'). Peter Sterry, *A Discourse of the Freedom of the Will* [1675]; repr. in C. Taliaferro and A. J. Teply (eds), *Cambridge Platonist Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), p. 179.

magnificent acts of will, as Friedrich Nietzsche maintained.[4] All these things, truth, beauty and goodness, must, on the contrary, be objectively based.

In addition to underwriting *objectivity* and *non-relativity*, the idea of a divine source for truth beauty and goodness also implies a certain kind of *authority*. This seems to connect with the notion (by no means confined to theists) that truth, beauty and goodness exert some kind of normative pull on us. Truth is *to be believed*; beauty is *to be admired*; goodness is *to be pursued*. These imperatives in a certain sense constrain us, whether we like it or not. We can of course deviate from them, and often do, but that does not seem to alter their validity. They are, to use an apt metaphor employed by Gottlob Frege in a rather different context, rather like 'boundary stones which our thought can overflow, but not dislodge.'[5]

The Oxford philosopher John Mackie famously put the point, or something close to it, by observing that there is something 'queer' about goodness and other moral properties. They have a magnetic quality, a kind of inbuilt 'to be pursuedness'; and it is hard, Mackie pointed out, to see how such normativity could be a function of merely empirically observable features of things. There is, Mackie in effect noted, an unexplained connection involved in the transition from 'this action wilfully inflicts distress' to 'this action is bad/wrong'; or from 'this helps someone in distress' to 'this is good/right';[6] and establishing this 'synthetic connection' as he put it, was the kind of thing that might be done by God. Mackie himself was of course a convinced atheist, and was also a subjectivist about value (he followed the Humean line that goodness is simply a projection of our own inclinations and desires). But in his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* he concedes that if there *were* such a thing as objective goodness, then it might provide a good argument for theism. For if objectivism were true, argues Mackie, then there would have to be some objective relationship (a 'supervenience' relation, in the jargon) between a natural empirical property (e.g. an action's alleviating suffering) and the property of its being good: 'If we adopted moral objectivism, then we should have to regard the relations of supervenience which connect values and obligations with their natural grounds as synthetic: they would then be in principle something that god may conceivably create; and since they would otherwise be a *very odd sort of thing*, the admitting of them would be an inductive ground for admitting also a god to create them.'[7]

So far, perhaps, so good. But *how* exactly does God create these connections? Or, more generally, how does God function as the 'source' of truth, beauty and goodness? God does not, surely, 'create' these things by some arbitrary act of will or preference – that would merely be a sort of subjectivism or relativism transposed to the celestial realm. Instead, in the case of truth, first of all, one must presumably envisage God as the source of truth in so far as he establishes those objective features of reality in virtue of which the propositions that rational beings assert can be true or false. God, in other words, does not 'create truth', whatever that would mean, but creates the *truth-makers*, as it were. He creates (as the first verse of Genesis has it) the 'heavens and the earth', in other words, the universe (how – in what stages, or via what evolutionary process – need not concern us here); and in consequence of the coming into being of the resulting properties and configurations of stars, planets, plants, molecules, atoms and so on, certain beliefs or propositions now have the property of being true or false. That seems (relatively, at least) quite straightforward. There may be a more complex account to be told of the kind of truth enjoyed by the eternal and necessary truths of logic and mathematics (and theists differ amongst themselves about what

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[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], §203.

[5] G. Frege, *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* [*Die Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, Vol. I, 1893], transl. M. Furth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 13.

[6] There are of course differences between 'good/bad' and 'right/wrong', but important though these are, they will be ignored for present purposes, since they do not affect the general structure of the argument we are considering.

[7] J. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), p. 118; emphasis supplied.

exactly is God's relation to them) but for present purposes we may leave this to the experts in modal logic to sort out.

What about beauty? Perhaps the simplest picture would be to think of God creating beauty analogously to the way in which a human creative artist is responsible for it – namely by creating beautiful objects. When an artist paints a beautiful picture, he does so by endowing it with beauty-making properties – harmony of colour, symmetry, rhythm, proportionality, and so on. Again, it is not beauty itself that is created, whatever that would mean, but rather those objects or entities with their relevant properties and qualities in virtue of which they are beautiful. The Andromeda galaxy, seen though a telescope, is extraordinarily beautiful – a coruscating spiral of millions of blazing stars of different hues, wheeling around in an infinitely complex gravitational dance. The Psalmist of the Hebrew Bible could not of course see these features, but he could see (as most us sadly no longer can because of pollution) the awesome splendour of what we now call our own 'local' galaxy. So affirming the beauty and wonder of God's creation, referring to the various observable properties in virtue of which it is glorious or beautiful – all the natural properties visible in the diurnal cycle of the sun and stars – he wrote 'the heavens declare the glory of the Lord, and the firmament shows his handiwork' (Psalm 19 [18]).

So beauty, like truth, is relatively easy for the believer to see as divinely sourced, in the sense just explicated. But what about goodness, and in particular, moral goodness? Following the kind of model so far adopted, we will want to say that God creates goodness by performing actions with good-making properties – for example, he 'protects strangers and supports the fatherless and the widow' (Psalm 146 [145]). He is the source of goodness in this sense; and in addition, of course, he brings into existence creatures who themselves have the power to perform such actions. They may not always do so, because they are free to refrain (or even to do things with bad-making properties). But when they do what is good, they are fulfilling one of the purposes for which God created them. In this sense, then, God may be said to be the source of the goodness not only of his own acts but of that which pertains to the acts of his creatures. (An interesting question, which is the subject of another paper, is why God is not also the source of the evil acts performed by humans; there are, of course, many responses familiar from the theodicy literature, most hinging on the idea that God does not create anyone with the intention that they should perform such evil actions, albeit foreseeing that they may do so.)

Now if we adopt the above picture, we seem to be implicitly favouring a so-called 'buck-passing' account of goodness, of the kind that has become fashionable among moral philosophers in recent years.[8] The focus, in such accounts, is not on goodness itself, but on the various good-making properties in virtue of which something counts as good. So, if we start with a non-moral example, to say that a knife is good is not to refer to some special property it has in addition to its ordinary empirically observable properties; rather 'the buck is passed', and the goodness devolves down to the ordinary properties (sharpness, strength, durability) that make it fit to be chosen as a cutting implement. In creating a knife with these ordinary, natural properties, a human craftsman has automatically thereby made a good knife. And similarly with moral goodness, by enacting beneficent actions (such as helping the fatherless), or by creating humans who can perform beneficent actions, God automatically qualifies as a source of goodness in the world. Nothing more, as it were, is needed. This is consistent, incidentally, with the first chapter of Genesis, where it is said of God, looking on his creation, that he 'saw that it was good' – not that he decided it was good, or ordained that it should qualify as good. God does not have to enact any additional decrees in order to create goodness; rather he creates the world as it is, with all its various good-making properties, and then (so to speak) he can just see, in virtue of those created properties, that it is good.

But now the following question arises. If the goodness devolves down to the various observable good-making properties in this way, then don't we have to say that it exists in the world

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[8] T. Scanlon, *What we Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap, 1998), pp. 95ff. Cf. P. J. Stratton-Lake, *Ethical Intuitionism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 15f.

whether or not the world was created by God? And does not that cast serious doubt about the idea of God as *the* source of goodness. For as we look around us (the atheist may urge), there *are* the good-making properties, existing already in the ordinary empirical features of the world; flints are sharp, and therefore apt for cutting; people sometimes choose to perform actions which help other people – these relevant good-making features indisputably exist, whether or not the world was created by God, or whether instead it arose by chance or some other impersonal mechanism. So (it might be argued) doesn't that make God, in a certain sense, redundant? We don't, in other words, need God as the putative 'source' of goodness; we just need the relevant purely natural features in virtue of which things count as good – and that is that.[9]

I think there is something right about this move, but something that it leaves out. It is right that our pursuit of goodness is not a matter of seeking some mysterious extra quality in addition to the observable features of actions and objects, but rather involves choosing actions and objects which already possess these observable good-making features. So the atheist and the theist are, as it were, on equal footing when it comes to assessing what objects and actions are good or bad: the available tools are not some hotline to a special, divinely-sourced property of goodness, but ordinary human observation of the natural world, and ordinary human reasoning about the features of this world and their observable effects and qualities. Ethics is a matter of human inquiry, just like science. It is a subject of rational debate, in which proper reasons for and against certain courses of action need to be marshalled using our ordinary human capacities, and our ordinary human perception of the various natural features of objects and actions which make them good or bad. So much, I think, is entirely correct (and is, incidentally, a welcome result, since the cause of rational and constructive discussion in ethics is furthered when theists and atheists see themselves as being on 'equal footing' in this way when it comes to debating moral questions).

Despite this, I think there must, for the theist, be something questionable about the implication that God is, as it were, redundant when it comes to questions of goodness, or that God has no special role to play as the source of goodness. To begin with, the theist will of course want to say that even if the account that passes the buck to the ordinary natural good-making features is correct, God still retains an all-pervasive general role, since his action was still required to create the world with all its natural features in the first place. God still performs the mysterious metaphysical act which (as Herbert McCabe puts it) makes the difference between its existing and not existing.[10]

But with that important proviso in place, should the theist then go on to concede that once the world is in existence, the goodness or badness of things can be 'read off', as it were, from their ordinary natural features, without any need for reference to God as its source (except in so far as he is regarded as the source of the universe existing at all)? In some ways this is a tempting option. It would mean that the theist and the atheist will see themselves as inhabiting exactly the same cosmos, a cosmos which naturally possesses some good-making and some bad-making features; but that the theist merely (!) adds the extra metaphysical claim that the world was divinely created.[11] Possibly this is as far as the theist should go. But, without being wholly sure about it, I am inclined to think that tempting as it may be, this view (as I suggested a moment ago) leaves something out. What I think it leaves out is any explanation of *why* certain features of actions or agents should be good-making features, not merely in the weak sense that they provide conditional

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[9] Interestingly, one of the most prominent of theistic philosophers, Richard Swinburne, though regarding God as *a* source of moral obligation (since 'his command to us to do some action makes it obligatory to do that action when it would not otherwise be obligatory'), considers that God is not *the* (sole) source of goodness or of obligation, since 'many truths of morality hold whether or not there is a God'. He cites the cases of feeding the starving and keeping promises: the first is clearly good, the second clearly obligatory, and these truths hold 'independently of God'. *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 11.

[10] Herbert McCabe, *Faith within Reason* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 75-6.

[11] Compare McCabe: 'So far as the kind of world we have is concerned, the atheist and the theist will expect to see exactly the same features.' *Faith within Reason*, p. 76.

reasons for choosing such actions, but in the stronger sense that they provide a *conclusive* or *unconditional* reason for choice,[12] one that requires our compliance.

For in a random or impersonal universe, why should the fact that an action oppresses the weak and helpless be a reason – a conclusive reason – against performing it? Or why should the fact that an act is one of forgiveness towards someone who is sincerely sorry for having injured us be a reason, a conclusive reason, for performing it? How can such descriptions of things have this compelling, action-guiding force, this specially strong version of the magnetic quality that we noted earlier, this conclusive built in 'to-be-doneness'. For many atheists (such as Mackie), the 'queerness' of such supposed conclusive reason-giving force will be taken as a reason for concluding that genuine objective moral properties do not really exist – that they are in the end specious, a mere projection of our own preferences. That is a radical position, with faces many philosophical problems, but at least it has the courage of its convictions. But for those who do not want to take this radical subjectivist route, for the increasing number of moral philosophers, even of an atheist stripe, who are drawn to objectivism in ethics, some account is surely required of *how* certain features of things are endowed not just with provisional or instrumental but with unconditional or categorical action-guiding force. How is it that the fact that something involves the deliberate infliction of distress provides a conclusive reason not to do it, and one that is applies whatever aims or projects I happen to have chosen? How is it that the property of helping the weak and afflicted provides (assuming there are no prior claims on my resources) a conclusive reason to perform a given action? What establishes this weird or 'queer' (in Mackie's phrase) connection between an observable feature of the natural world and this kind of strong normative power to require us to act?

For the theist, there is an answer. If God himself is in his essential nature merciful, compassionate, just and loving, then when we humans act in the ways just mentioned we are drawn closer to God, the source of our being, and the source of all that is good. Such acts command our allegiance in the strongest way, since they bring us nearer to the 'home' where our true peace and fulfilment lies; and, conversely, in setting our face against them, we are cutting ourselves off from our true destiny, from the ultimate basis of joy and meaningfulness in our lives. If, on the other hand, there is no God, if God is 'dead', then there might (as Nietzsche frighteningly suggested) be conclusive reasons to steel ourselves *against* impulses of love and mercy, to harden our hearts against compassion and forgiveness, since such sentiments might get in the way of our will to power, or our passion for self-realisation, or some other grand project we happen to have.[13] Only if those features we call good-making point us towards the true goal of our existence will we be able to make sense of their having, in addition to their observable aspects, a normative force which commands our allegiance whether we like it or not, independently of our own contingent inclinations. Only if the universe has a moral teleology behind it will moral goodness or righteousness really exist – as something we have conclusive reason to choose – rather than merely dissolving away into features that are suitable for furthering whatever projects we may happen to have adopted, or whatever purposes we may happen to have set ourselves.

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[12] Compare Immanuel Kant' famous distinction between various types of imperative in his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [*1785*], Ch. 2, nicely summarised in H. J. Paton's edition as follows: 'some objective principles are *conditioned* by a will for some end; that is to say, they would necessarily be willed by an agent *if* he willed that end … Some are *unconditioned*… and have the form "I ought to do such and such" without any *if* as a prior condition.' (*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, transl. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1948), p. 27.) Kant called the first type of imperative 'hypothetical', the second 'categorical', but the term 'categorical imperative' is now so overlaid with complications arising from Kantian scholarship that I prefer to avoid it in the present paper. (It is worth noting that Kant added an intermediate class of imperative, a 'pragmatic' imperative, which is technically hypothetical, since it is dependent on willing an end, but where the end is one that 'every rational agent wills by his very nature' – such as one's own happiness.)

[13] See for example Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §37.

3. Problems and conclusions

Let me, in this final section, try to draw some threads together, and canvass some problems.

First, a summary of some of the more important conclusions about the relation of God to goodness – points which I take to be illustrated in part by our earlier discussion of the 'closed world' of Oceana. (1) Just as the invocation of Sol did not succeed in providing a plausible scientific explanation of fieriness, so theistic accounts cannot provide non-circular 'explanatory theories' of goodness: they cannot provide explanations of the features of things in anything like the way ordinary scientific theories do – for example by placing them in a sequence of causes, or investigating their inner structure. (2) Just as Sol and its properties were beyond the grasp of the inhabitants of Oceana, so God is a transcendent being who cannot properly be comprehended from our limited perspective on things. As Paul's letter to Timothy puts it, he dwells, in 'light inaccessible, whom no man hath seen or can see' (I Timothy 6:16), and hence, the goodness of God is understandable, if at all, only by analogy. (3) Nevertheless, we can glimpse, in the analogy offered in our fable, how something beyond the closed world studied by science might be responsible for our human world and all its natural features. (4) In this sense at least the theist may maintain that God is the source of goodness, in so far as he is the creative force that brought the world, with all its natural good-making features, into existence.

These are our minimal conclusions. Now for some more specific points with respect to goodness. (5) Just as the fiery floating islands of the fable are *supported* by the waters of the ocean, so goodness depends or 'supervenes' on ordinary natural properties of things. (6) But just as the fiery properties could not be derived from the aquatic properties studied by the scientists of Oceana, so moral goodness is not wholly reducible to those natural features which underpin it. (7) In particular, goodness has a normative or magnetic force; and in the moral domain certain natural features of actions or agents seem to provide conclusive and authoritative reasons for choosing them or commending them. (8) A theistic metaphysics seems to provide an interpretive framework for accommodating all these aspects of goodness.

Now for some problems and questions. Even if it were conceded that a theistic metaphysics provides *a* viable framework for understanding value, many will ask why we should suppose it is the only viable framework, let alone the best one. In our fable, there were the aqualists, and the non-aqualists, both of whom had alternative accounts to the 'super-aqualist' account of fire; so what of their counterparts in contemporary moral philosophy, the various naturalist, and non-naturalist theories of goodness which reject supernaturalism? Obviously, this is not the place to examine, let alone try to refute, all the sophisticated contenders in the field. But at least some general points can, I think, be made. Naturalism, at least in its crude reductionist form, seems unlikely to work, since, as already suggested, it does not appear to have the resources to explain how purely empirical features of reality can have magnetic or normative force – at least in those cases where we take the normativity to be conclusive and unconditional. Non-naturalism takes us outside the domain of the empirical, but simply doing this does in itself not solve the problem of normative force; and there is a further problem about how these mysterious *sui-generis* moral properties are related to natural properties, and what sort of existence they enjoy. (It will hardly dissolve the obscurity to declare, as one recent ethicist has put it, that such properties are 'part of the furniture of the universe').[14] But the kind of more sophisticated buck-passing account mentioned earlier does seem in a stronger position than either crude naturalism or bald non-naturalism, for it is able to construe the natural features of things as having the second-order property of providing reasons for action in virtue of their ordinary natural properties.

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[14] E. J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.52. Compare R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003): moral standards 'just are correct'; they are 'a brute fact about the way the world works' (pp. 46, 48). In fairness, Shafer-Landau is candid enough to acknowledge that such bald ethical realism is a theory with 'very limited explanatory resources' (p. 48).

As already indicated, I think such buck-passing accounts are true, but incomplete. They do not tell us, in the moral arena, *why* certain features of actions provide conclusive reasons for choosing to do them. Ultimately, in a godless universe what I have reason to do will depend merely on the set of contingent desires I happen to have developed, and the set of inclinations and preferences I and my society happen to have evolved to have. Ethics, in short, will be subject to what Bernard Williams called a '*radical contingency*'.[15]

Yet is this really so troubling? Some contemporary philosophers who are drawn to objectivism in ethics have recently pointed out that, notwithstanding the contingencies of personal and social development, reasons for action remain objective and external, not personal or subjective. For example, what gives me reason to thank you for doing me a good turn does not hinge on what contingent beliefs or desires I have, but instead is a perfectly objective or external matter: the plain external fact that you did me a service. This may be true, but one still wants to ask: how do such so-called objective or 'external reasons' get their normative force? The moral philosopher John Skorupski has recently given the example of a character, Tom, who has been helped by Mary, but who simply has no sense of gratitude – he simply doesn't 'get' what it is all about. Do we want to say that Tom has reason to thank Mary? Skorupski argues that our response to this question is 'interestingly uncertain'. On the one hand we want to say "Of course he does – look what she has done for him!" But on the other hand, we can understand the basis for answering "no" – namely that Tom just doesn't see the reason-giving force of the fact that she has done him a good turn. So Skorupski concludes that 'only considerations which the agent has the ability to recognize, for him or herself, "from within", *as* reasons, can *be* reasons for that agent'.[16]

The upshot of this argument, in my view, is that the objectivity of ethics is indeed undermined by the 'radical contingency of the ethical'. The possibility that people and societies might have developed, or might still develop, different evaluative outlooks, depending on their evolving dispositions and preferences, undermines any confidence that certain features of actions *must* always provide objective and conclusive reasons to choose them. Such radical contingency means, in the end, I think, that there is ultimately no room in ethics for the idea that, in our attempts to pursue the good, we have got something right – in the way that we believe can get things right (or at least make progress towards getting things right) in science.[17]

From a theistic perspective, this alarming contingency of the ethical, the threat to objectivity, and the disturbing gap between the kinds of knowledge we can have in science and in ethics, are all avoided. In science, as Descartes and other theistic rationalists maintained, we can gain an insight, through the mathematical awareness innately implanted in us, of the rational patterns which govern the physical universe; and similarly in ethics, in the light of the fundamental moral awareness implanted in us, we are able to orient ourselves towards the good which lies at the heart of reality. The strongest kind of objectivity in ethics is secured, just as it is in science (though this does not of course mean that ethical questions have quick and easy answers, any more than is the case with scientific questions).

A further reason why a theistic metaphysics is fundamentally hospitable to the idea of genuine objectively normative standards like rationality and goodness (hospitable in a way I believe secular world views are unlikely to be) is that ultimate reality, on the theistic view, is *personal* and *purposive*, rather than blind, irrational, neutral, random or blank – which is in the end what an alternative atheistical worldview must take it to be. Thus, the two features of God that are

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[15] Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 20.

[16] John Skorupski, 'Internal Reasons and the Scope of Blame' in A. Thomas (ed.), *Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 73-103, at p. 88.

[17] See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [1985], Ch. 8; see further Adrian Moore, 'Realism and the Absolute Conception' in Thomas (ed.) *Bernard Williams*, pp.24ff. There are of course sophisticated subjectivists who claim they can still make room, in their theories, for our ordinary ways of talking whereby moral judgements can be said to be 'correct' or 'true'. But even if such moves work, there will still be a gap between such 'truth' in ethics and that which obtains in science, since the former will turn out, in the end, to be wholly internal to the prevailing norms or preferences of our culture circle.

prominent above all others in the Christian gospels (especially in the fourth and most metaphysical of the Gospels) are reason, *logos*, and love, *agape*. These are features that are very closely connected with attributes (intelligence, loving concern) that are irreducibly personal, and indeed, in the Christian picture, are supremely manifested in a particular person, the person of Christ.

Humans are (on any showing) an imperfect species, who are clearly not always disposed to conform their lives to reason and to love; but if the cosmos ultimately reflects a divine teleology or goal-directedness, our lives, because of the way we were created, cannot flourish without them. That rationality and love are the sources behind the cosmos is not something that could be established by ordinary scientific inquiry. Because of the 'transcendence' of God (the fact that the Creator is taken to be wholly 'other' than his creation), a long theological tradition maintains that we cannot even properly grasp these qualities (such as reason and love) as they exist in the divine nature. And as for the Christian claim that their human face has been disclosed to us in a way we *can* grasp, in the person of Christ – this is a matter of revelation, and therefore of faith, rather than philosophical reason. The extraordinary claim of this cosmic intrusion of the divine into our human world is nonetheless made with unmistakable clarity in the Fourth Gospel: the title of *to phôs tôn anthrôpôn* (the 'light of humankind'), applied to the *logos*, the divine creative intelligence, in John 1:1-5, is directly appropriated by Christ, when he claims 'I am the light of the world' (*ego eimi to phôs tou kosmou*, John 8:12). In this context, the *ego eimi* ('I am') is the ancient signature of divinity, recapitulating God's self-disclosure to Moses as the source of the moral law.[18] Traditional theism has always insisted that there is an eternal source of goodness, truth and beauty behind the visible cosmos; and in its Christian form, it insists that this source, though transcendent – dwelling in 'light inaccessible' – is made manifest in human form, full of 'grace and truth', dwelling amongst us, and visible to human sight (John 1: 14).

Because of the gap between transcendent reality and any manifestation accessible to human understanding, the idea of a divine source of goodness (or indeed of truth or of beauty) is not, I think, something that can be fully explicated philosophically. The gap can only be closed by revelation and faith. But the idea of such a divine source is at least strikingly consistent (so the theist will maintain) with what we can establish philosophically about goodness (and indeed the rest of reality). And, crucially, it provides a framework that frees us from the threats of contingency and futility that lurk beneath the surface of supposedly self-sufficient and autonomous secular ethics. It offers us not a proof, but a hope: that the cave of our human world is not sealed and closed, but that our flickering moral intimations reflect the ultimate source of all goodness (just as our logico-mathematical and aesthetic intimations reflect the ultimate source of truth and beauty). The unqualified, unprovisional and non-contingent good-makingness of the ordinary good-making features of actions arises from this. By choosing such actions, and continuing to choose them, we conform to an intelligible, rational pattern, the pattern that a being of surpassing love and benevolence intended for us. To so believe may partly be a matter of faith, but it may also reflect a more rational and coherent conception of the nature of goodness than anything else that is on offer.

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[18] Exodus 3:14 (compare John 8:58).