

THE



DIVINE
GOOD

*Modern
Moral Theory
and the
Necessity of God*

FRANKLIN I. GAMWELL

FOREWORD BY DAVID TRACY

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Foreword

It is an honor to introduce this book by my colleague and friend, Franklin I. Gamwell. Some brief history is, perhaps, in order. When Professor Gamwell gave the basic lectures that form the heart of this book in a course on the "Foundations of Ethics" with Professor Paul Ricoeur and myself at the University of Chicago in 1987, both Paul Ricoeur and I urged him to expand the lectures into a much needed book. The book is much needed for two central reasons. First, the question of ethics today (including theological ethics) seems dominated by an impasse occasioned by Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment arguments over the meaning of modern liberal "rationality." Second, the question of ethics today (including, even more surprisingly, a good deal of theological ethics) seems strangely silent on the need to argue over the nature and reality of God and what difference the divine reality makes for ethics.

On both issues—as on several other issues logically and historically related to ethics, rationality, and God—the reader will soon discover that Franklin Gamwell has much to say. Moreover, what he has to say he states with an enviable clarity, logical rigor, and anti-polemical persuasive power. For example, Gamwell's analysis of the nature of transcendental argument is, in my judgment, unmatched in recent ethical literature; and his contribution to a "theocentric ethics" includes a careful analysis of what he does and does not mean by that widely used but too rarely analyzed word, "God." A list of the virtues of this book could easily be extended: for example, the persuasive choice of truly representative positions (e.g., Karl-Otto Apel and Alasdair MacIntyre) and the equally careful and critical analysis of their positions. Any reader who acknowledges the centrality of ethical issues for all serious thinkers in our pluralistic world and any reader who

wants to escape from too often merely polemical exchanges in ethics and theology to the demands and, indeed, the peculiar joy of calm and disinterested argument will find a welcome and critical companion in this book. The argument of the book not merely invites but demands clear-headed and critical inquiry—and that on two of the most important, controversial, and often obscure issues of our curious day: the nature of ethics and the reality of God.

Gamwell also honors his readers with the belief (perhaps his only unreasonable one!) that they will think as clearly, argue as carefully, and respect the strength of their adversary's positions as justly as he himself does. The possibility of the recovery of these intellectual and moral virtues is one of the signal contributions of this important, indeed major, work.

David Tracy

Preface

The intent of moral theory is to inform human life in its pursuit of the good. It is true that moral philosophers sometimes overestimate dramatically the measure in which human affairs wait upon the results of their work, and one may be impressed that theoretical discussion sometimes becomes so abstract as to seem all but irrelevant to the moral enterprise. Still, the entertainment of ideas is one of the agencies through which human action and human communities are shaped. Indeed, to understand the possibilities that one enjoys and to choose among them informed by some explicit or implicit idea of the good is what makes action distinctively human. Moreover, life informed by ideas is always implicitly if not explicitly theoretical and, therefore, is not complete unless theories are formulated and criticized. At least in the longer run, then, moral philosophy can hope to make a contribution to the course of human events.

It is a commonplace that modern thought has been pervasively secularized, and one expression of this fact is the widespread belief that at least many moral problems of individual and social life can be properly thought about and discussed independently of religion. This is often the case even among those who continue to associate with and affirm the convictions of one or another religious community. However important religious beliefs may be to the internal life of the community in question and to the personal lives of its members, those beliefs frequently coexist with the conviction that a secularistic morality can and should inform relations beyond the religious community and, therefore, the character and purpose of the larger social order. In this sense, the importance of religion for the lives of individuals is largely privatized, and the importance of religious associations for the public order is at least implicitly denied.

The widespread secularism of modern thought is a consequence of many historical conditions, including the emergence of religious pluralism within modern society and the violent conflict among religions that some periods of modern life have suffered. But a secularistic self-understanding has also been confirmed and promoted by the pervasive theoretical claim that moral ideals are valid independently of any explicit or implicit religious beliefs. However diverse its formulations or radical its disagreements, modern moral philosophy has widely agreed that its task is systematically to articulate a nonreligious basis for the moral enterprise. In our century, moreover, this consensus has been so dominant that, in moral philosophy, the independence of morality from religion has been largely taken for granted.

This book argues that this dominant consensus is mistaken. More specifically, I seek to show that the validity of moral claims presupposes the existence of God. The inquiry is, then, one in philosophical theology as well as moral theory, and its thesis is that one cannot affirm or deny any moral claim without at least implicitly affirming a divine reality.

On my understanding, this thesis is required by theistic belief itself. At least if one means by "God" a being or individual that is the source and end of all things, theism includes the conviction that God alone provides the authentic telos for the human enterprise as such. In other words, a divine reality is one upon which all worth or importance depends. It follows that adherents of theistic religions compromise the integrity of their religious belief insofar as they also believe that a secularistic morality is possible. To believe in God and also to affirm a common morality that is neither explicitly nor implicitly theistic is to embrace an inconsistent self-understanding. For the same reason, theistic belief cannot consistently endorse the view that religious associations have no importance to the process by which the character and activities of the public order are defined. It is appropriate to say, then, that the argument here is an attempt to reassert and redeem the integrity of religious convictions in modern life.

At the same time, this work seeks to help identify the good, in commitment to which the integrity of modern life generally may be pursued. At least in the last analysis, what ideas we seek to make effective in human affairs is inseparable from how we think those ideas are validated. To assert that the validity of moral claims as such

presupposes the existence of God is to say that moral commitments inconsistent with theism are insofar inauthentic. If it is true that effective modes of modern thought have been pervasively secularistic, then a moral argument for theism seeks the basis for a moral critique and reconstruction of modern life. The present inquiry, then, is one in moral theory as well as philosophical theology, toward the end that the human adventure might be more authentically informed.

If the book enjoys any success, then I am impressed with the extent to which it is indebted to others. In addition to numerous authors not discussed or cited in the text and many teachers without whom I could not even vaguely conceive of the inquiry, I wish to thank a few who have generously assisted specifically with the work. The design of the book was initially developed in a course at The Divinity School of The University of Chicago that I was privileged to teach with Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy. I am profoundly indebted to them for their studied attention to my efforts, their thoughtful criticisms and suggestions, and their encouragement of the project. David Tracy also read the manuscript in a later form and was persistently responsive to my requests for his characteristically pertinent counsel as the project developed. My colleagues Philip E. Devenish and B. A. Gerrish, my teacher Schubert M. Ogden, and Mary Gerhart, as consulting editor for HarperCollins, also reviewed the entire manuscript, some parts more than once. Their incisive comments, attentive to both the larger movements and the details of the discussion, have substantially altered and, if I have done justice to them, improved the work. I am immensely grateful to each of these people. I also express my thanks to three anonymous readers for their effective criticisms. My responsibility for the remaining inadequacies is all the greater because I have been the beneficiary of such intellectual company.

I take the liberty of dedicating the book, as an expression of my abiding gratitude and admiration, to Schubert M. Ogden, to whom, more than any other single individual, I owe my education.

I thank The University of Chicago Press for permission to republish significant parts of my essay "Metaphysics and the Moral Law: A Conversation with Karl-Otto Apel" (*Witness and Existence: Essays in Honor of Schubert M. Ogden*, edited by Philip E. Devenish and George L. Goodwin, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, 200–27) and the Center for the Scientific Study of Religion for permission to republish significant parts of my essay "Democracy, Capitalism, and Economic

Growth" (*Economic Life: Process Interpretations and Critical Responses*, edited by W. Widick Schroeder and Franklin I. Gamwell, Chicago, Center for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1988, 223–50). I also thank Mr. Robert J. Parker, Jr. for his thoughtful preparation of the index.

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Modernity and Moral Theory

This book explores the relation between theism and the ground of moral claims. Modern moral philosophy, notwithstanding its diversity and its abiding problems, has been characterized by a dominant consensus which holds that moral claims are independent of theistic affirmations. This independence has been asserted by most major philosophical ethics in the West at least since Kant and perhaps since Hobbes, and in twentieth-century moral theory the consensus has been massive. At least during our century, moreover, many who think within a religious context have given tacit consent to this conviction. Theological or religious ethicists have generally pursued the moral commitments that are implied by given religious convictions. But they have rarely argued that religious affirmations are implied by the moral enterprise as such. Upon first appearances, then, the subject of this book may seem irrelevant to the main currents of contemporary moral philosophy and, therefore, of interest only to some relatively small circle of religious ethicists who think about the moral implications of certain religious beliefs. On the contrary, however, my purpose here is to challenge the dominant consensus.

The intent of this book is to argue that success in modern moral theory waits upon the reassertion of theism. Negatively, I will seek to show that the problems of modern moral theory have stretched to its most fundamental claims, precisely insofar as it has affirmed, explicitly or implicitly, its independence from theism. Positively, I will defend the assertion that a divine reality is the ground of moral claims. Of course, nothing approaching this thesis can be so much as plausible in the absence of substantial clarity with respect to the meaning of "God,"

and one aspect of the discussion in later chapters will be an attempt to refine the use of this term.

The claim that modern moral theory cannot be successful without the affirmation of theism also calls for clarity with respect to the meaning of "moral theory," and it is important to introduce here at the outset the sense in which this term will be used. All discussion of morality includes some distinction or distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong, or better and worse human choice or action or character. For purposes of this book, "moral theory" will refer to the order of reflection that seeks to answer the question: What is the ground of any valid distinction between moral and immoral human choice, action, or character? In this formulation, the term "ground" refers to that which makes a moral claim valid, that is, the ground of moral validity. Since all moral claims purport to be valid, we may say more summarily that moral theory seeks to understand the ground of any moral claim. I recognize that this definition may well seem far too limited. It may be insisted, for instance, that questions regarding the motivation of moral activity or the moral life as well as those regarding the knowledge of good or right action or character properly belong to moral theory. Accordingly, the definition I have proposed is not meant to be an explicitly adequate account of what a comprehensive moral theory should include.¹ On the contrary, I intend only to identify the question that will focus the discussion here.

In the contemporary philosophical context, reference to the ground of any moral claim may raise the objection that I have begged the question against so-called nonfoundationalist modes of thought. There are many contemporary thinkers who hold that the Enlightenment's pursuit of universal or a priori or transcendental principles of thought and action has been discredited (see, e.g., Rorty 1979a and 1982; Stout), and, against this position, I may seem arbitrarily to assume that moral claims have some such foundation. But this objection misunderstands my identification of moral theory. To say that there is no "foundation" for any moral claim *is*, according to my intention, to assert an answer (or, at least, part of an answer) to the question: What is the ground of any moral claim? By implication, one thereby asserts that the ground in question is something other than a universal or a priori principle; that

¹ I do think, however, that an answer to the question I have formulated is *implicitly* an answer to all other questions that belong to moral theory, so that the definition I have proposed is, all implications considered, an adequate account of what a comprehensive moral theory should include.

is, the validity of a given moral claim does not imply a “foundation.” Similarly, a moral intuitionist of the kind that was more numerous in earlier decades of this century might answer the question of moral theory as follows: The ground of any moral claim is an intuition regarding the particular type of choice or human activity in question. It is perhaps worth saying here that I *do* intend to argue for a transcendental ground of all moral claims. But I also intend so to define moral theory that this conclusion must be *argued* rather than assumed—and I will, at an appropriate point, seek to argue against the supposed discrediting of the transcendental project. At this point, then, the only affirmation explicitly endorsed by my definition of moral theory is that valid moral claims can be validated or redeemed.

Even those who find the thesis of this work inherently implausible will generally agree that theism and the moral life were typically thought to be inseparable throughout most of Western philosophy. This recognition underscores that widespread belief in the separation of moral from theistic claims is a modern development. As I seek to challenge this consensus, however, I do not intend to recur to premodern modes of thought and thereby to except myself from what I take to be the identifying commitment of modern reflection. On the contrary, it is the modern moral project that the argument of this book seeks to help complete. Clarity will be served, then, by some initial attention to the relevant character of modern thought, after which I will return to the consensus regarding the independence of moral theory and, subsequently, to the purpose of this work.

I The Modern Commitment

The distinctive characteristics of modernity are a subject of extensive and complicated debate. Still, it is widely agreed that the modern age is marked in some sense by the increasing affirmation of autonomy. Of course, “autonomy” is also a term with many meanings, so that the agreement is, at least in substantial measure, only verbal. In part for this reason, the affirmation of autonomy is for some a cause for suspicion of the modern age even while, for others, it is a cause for celebration. For present purposes, I will stipulate a formal meaning of the term, which I judge is sufficiently minimal that it is common to, even if it does not exhaust, the diverse intentions with which “autonomy” is used in current discussion. In this formal sense, modernity is distinguished by the increasing affirmation that our

understandings of reality and ourselves in relation to it cannot be validated or redeemed by appeals to some authoritative expression or tradition or institution. In other words, our understandings can be validated or redeemed only by appeal in some sense to human experience and reason as such. Because it is identified by this latter appeal, the modern affirmation may also be called the humanistic commitment. The contradictory of autonomy or humanism in this sense is heteronomy, that is, the affirmation that our understandings can be redeemed by appeal to some authoritative expression, tradition, or institution. Summarily speaking, then, modernity may be distinguished from medieval Western culture, because the latter was characterized in large measure by the heteronomous affirmation of the church and the feudal social order. I do not mean to suggest that an appeal to human experience and reason as such was unknown prior to the modern period. In my judgment, one must recognize that this appeal entered Western history through ancient Greek philosophers and was sustained through the influence of Greek philosophy upon some expressions of medieval thought. My proposal, then, is comparative: Modernity may be specified as the period in which this appeal becomes increasingly accepted throughout the full range of human reflection.

The affirmation of autonomy may also be formulated as the insistence that all human understanding is fallible. It has frequently been said that humans are distinguished from other things in the known world by virtue of their capacity for self-understanding. If humans are similar to other things in having relations to an environment, human existence or activity alone includes or expresses some understanding of its relations. The humanistic commitment, then, insists that this understanding always involves an interpretation, such that its expression of the self's relation to its environment is always subject to possible distortion. Given this fallibility, the fact that someone or some tradition makes or asserts some claim is never a sufficient condition for believing that claim or affirming its validity. A claim is never valid simply because someone or some group says that it is. In this sense, any claim is open to question, and, therefore, no particular expression or tradition or institution can be authoritative in the heteronomous sense, no matter how pervasive adherence to it has been or how long it has endured. This formulation, it should be said, does not deny that what counts as a successful appeal is always a controversial matter and that theories of rationality are themselves particular expressions open to question. It only insists that reasons for

validity are not established by the conviction of some individual or some particular community. In other words, our understandings can be redeemed only by appeal in some sense to human experience and reason as such.

To affirm autonomy with this minimal meaning is not necessarily to despise but is rather to circumscribe the authority of the past. The fact that certain understandings have won the adherence of those whom we take to be wise or the widespread adherence of those who have gone before us may give those understandings a right to prior attention in our humanistic pursuit of the truth. They are privileged not in the sense that they are presumed to be true but because they merit our persistent attempt to clarify and assess them. This conclusion follows if one agrees that human understanding is fallible because it is also fragmentary, for the pursuit of validity is then a common enterprise. A similar response is appropriate if some contend that even moderns cannot escape reliance upon the authority of experts (for instance, historians, scientists, technicians) with respect to certain beliefs. Since human understanding is fragmentary, no human can become sufficiently reflective in all specialties of thought to dispense with practical reliance upon the expertise of others. But the affirmation of autonomy is a matter of principle. In accepting the understandings of specialists, one who adheres to this principle assumes that what they claim to be the case can be redeemed by humanistic appeal, and, therefore, is properly open to question by anyone who pursues the specialized reflection that is required. What Alfred North Whitehead said about the "appeal to history" applies also to the appeal to expertise: It is "the appeal to summits of attainment beyond any immediate clarity in our own individual experience," and it is, in this sense, "the appeal to authority." Still, Whitehead expressed the modern affirmation when he continued: "The appeal to reason is the appeal to that ultimate judge, universal yet individual to each, to which all authority must bow" (1961: 162).

It is not necessary in the present context to examine at any length the historical conditions for the increasing affirmation of autonomy in Western civilization. Doubtless, this appearance was a consequence in significant part of increasing communication. Once contact with a wider world introduces people, especially the educated or intellectual elite, to understandings other than those that are authoritatively maintained, it is at least difficult to prevent doubt regarding inherited convictions. Such doubt cannot be addressed but only forcibly suppressed by a

reassertion of authority, since it questions authoritarianism itself. But whatever the historical conditions of which the modern commitment is a consequence, there are others that we may call consequences of it, in the sense that the increasing affirmation of autonomy was, given previous historical circumstances, a necessary condition for the emergence of the activities or institutions in question. Some brief mention of such consequences will serve to suggest that the formal identification of modernity I have proposed is consistent with widely recognized modern developments.

Because the affirmation of human autonomy opens to question convictions that were previously maintained heteronomously, modern life has developed habits and institutions of reflectiveness that were more or less unknown in the premodern West. Perhaps the most obvious of these are the habits and institutions associated with the development of modern empirical science. Once understandings of the world in which we live were freed from those authoritarian interpretations asserted by and thought to be essential to the dominant religious tradition, the practice of disciplined, empirical inquiry appealing to human experience and reason as such so emerged and expanded that some have been led to call the modern period "the age of science." Scientific achievements have become the conditions for technological achievements, and the latter, in turn, have permitted the stunning economic advances of which the last century of Western life especially has been the beneficiary. At least in this respect, then, we may speak of scientific-technological-industrial society as a consequence of the modern commitment.

Further, the unprecedented institutional change throughout the modern social order is in significant measure the consequence of the modern commitment. Because institutional forms express human understandings, the affirmation that all human understandings are fallible or can be questioned became the recognition that cultural and social patterns are not a part of "the nature of things" but are human creations and, therefore, subject to purposeful change, and one form of this recognition is the rise of political democracy. Moreover, the appearance of religious pluralism within particular communities is another specific instance of distinctively modern institutional change. Of course, religious diversity has always characterized the human adventure, and we are only now beginning to appreciate how radical the differences are and have been. Until recent centuries, however, the differences have obtained between more or less isolated communities.