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The way one views the nature of moral obligation depends, in a very important way, on whether or not one believes in God. If one sees moral obligation as something that is handed down from a greater being or an all-powerful entity, for example, then one will view morality from a much different perspective than one would if one viewed morality as a human construct necessary for social compatibility; in other words, morality is viewed much differently from the point of view of a theist, than from that of an atheist. The differences between these views raise some very interesting philosophical questions concerning the nature of moral obligation. For example, is morality a mere human construct necessary for social interaction, or is it somehow more deeply embedded in the structure of the universe? What is it that makes things right or wrong? Why should people behave morally?

In this essay I shall explore both theistic and atheistic views of morality and attempt to find answers to some of the fundamental questions concerning the nature of moral obligation. In particular, I will examine the relation between religious belief and moral obligation, beginning with the view held by George Mavrodes. I will also discuss divine command theory, present the more serious objections to it, then consider a modified form of divine command as presented by Robert Adams. Next I will consider possible objections to Adams' view, focusing in particular on the views of Kai Nielsen. I will conclude with a general discussion on the nature of moral
obligation and say why I feel that it is more rational to have a foundation for one's morality that is independent of God.

Let us examine, first, a theistic view. Theism is belief in the existence of God and most theists hold that moral obligations are in some way dependent on God. For example, George Mavrodes feels that the existence of God is necessary for there to be any sort of deep-seated moral obligations. In his essay "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," Mavrodes states that it would be very odd to have moral obligations in a world in which there was no God, a world which he refers to as a Russellian world. He claims, first of all, that if there were moral obligations in a Russellian world, we would often be obligated to do those things which would not be in our best interest to do. He holds also that moral obligations would, in a Russellian world, be much more superficial, that is, not as deeply-seated, as they would be in a world in which God did exist. But is it true that moral obligation would be less deeply embedded in a world in which there were no God? Why should it be the case that we should receive some sort of reward for fulfilling our moral obligation?


²It is important to emphasize that Mavrodes does not think that people would not have obligations in a Russellian world but rather there would not be the "deep-seated" kind of moral obligations that are present if God does exist. I shall discuss this point in greater detail shortly.
Finally, is it true that God must exist in order for us to have deep-seated moral obligations?

Let us begin by examining Mavrodes' argument in greater detail. His central contention is that, in a world in which there is no God, it would be odd for there to be moral obligations, and even more odd that we should have the deep-seated kind of obligations that would be present in a world in which God does exist. One of the reasons for this is that in a Russellian world, "pleasure, happiness, esteem, contentment, self-realization, knowledge—all of these can suffer from the fulfillment of a moral obligation" (Audi, 217). In other words, fulfilling one's moral obligations in a Russellian world could actually result in some sort of sacrifice on the part of the individual who is fulfilling the obligation.3

I claim that in the actual world we have some obligations that when we fulfill them, will confer on us no net Russellian benefit—in fact, they will result in a Russellian loss. If the world is Russellian, then Russellian benefits and losses are the only benefits and losses, and also then we have moral obligations whose fulfillment will result in a net loss of good to the one who fulfills them (Audi, 217-218).

Here he points out that there are some things people do, moral obligations they fulfill, that do not lead to any sort of Russellian benefit, that is, a benefit that exists here and now, not, say, in some sort of afterlife. He disagrees with those who hold that there are always rewards and benefits we receive—

3Mavrodes defines losses that one would incur in a Russellian world as Russellian losses; similarly, he refers to the benefits that one might receive in such a world as Russellian benefits.
this life—to make it worth while for us to fulfill our moral obligations. Although "[it] is not contradictory to maintain, that for every obligation that I have, a corresponding benefit awaits me within the confines of this world and this life...such a contention," he feels, "would nevertheless be false" (Audi, 217). I agree with Mavrodes here, for it is often the case that very good, honest, ethical people die or suffer needlessly without incurring any Russellian benefits at all for fulfilling their moral obligations. But why does Mavrodes feel that we should be rewarded in some way for fulfilling our moral obligations?

Again, Mavrodes feels that morality would be strangely out of place in a Russellian world because we would have obligations to do things that would be contrary to our best interests; but is it as strange as Mavrodes thinks it to be to have moral obligations whose fulfillment is contrary to one's best interests? Say, for example, that you make a promise to someone. It is quite possible that when the time comes to fulfill your commitment, it is not to your advantage to do so. Does the fact that fulfilling the promise is, all other things being equal, not advantageous to you somehow make it odd that you should have such a responsibility, or relieve you of your responsibility to fulfill it? I think not. Because you've made a commitment, you are still obligated to fulfill it whether it is...

*This example was taken from a lecture given by Robert McKim, Philosophy of Religion, Spring, 1987.*
to your advantage or not. Mavrodes' view implies that one should be rewarded in some way for fulfilling one's moral obligations; however, fulfilling one's moral duties because one will receive some sort of reward seems even more superficial than does fulfilling one's moral obligations in a Russellian world. The point is that basing one's moral behavior on hope of divine reward is a less admirable, less morally worthy basis for fulfilling one's moral obligation than might be the basis for fulfilling one's moral obligation in a Russellian world. If Mavrodes thinks that we must receive rewards for our moral behavior, or that we do not behave morally except in anticipation of reward, it seems as if it is not Russell's view, but Mavrodes' view of morality which is superficial.

Indeed, Mavrodes' view implies that if we behave morally we will receive some sort of divine reward. It is odd, he thinks, that true moral obligation would exist in a Russellian world because we would often be obligated to do that which is not in

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*Of course, Mavrodes' point for fulfilling one's obligation is not one about motivation. He says that deep-seated moral obligations would be odd if God does not exist because we would be obligated to do those actions which are not in our best interest. He is not saying that the reason people behave morally is simply because they will receive divine reward; he says instead that it would be odd for people to have such obligations if there was no such rewards.

*Of course, there could be very superficial reasons for fulfilling one's moral obligations in a Russellian world as well. If one keeps a promise merely because he or she foresees some greater reward that will accrue by doing so, one would hardly think of this action as being done for an admirable reason.
our best interest; but if it is odd to have deep-seated obligations that aren't in our best interest to fulfill, are we obligated then to do only those things for which we shall receive some reward? As I indicated earlier, there could be some cases where we should fulfill our moral obligations for which we shall receive no such rewards. As Mavrodes himself points out, it could actually be disadvantageous for us to do so. Nevertheless, this gives us no excuse for not fulfilling our moral obligations.

It is important to point out that Mavrodes is not referring to people feeling that they have moral obligations, but rather to people actually having moral obligations.

I have not suggested that the existence of moral feelings would be absurd in a Russellian world; it is rather the existence of moral obligations that is absurd...[it] is quite possible...for one to feel (or to believe) that he has a certain obligation without actually having it, and also vice versa (Audi, 219).

Mavrodes does not think it is strange for people to feel they have moral obligations, but if God does not exist, it is strange that people would actually have moral obligations. But again, why does this seem so strange? In fact, it could very well be the case that we have moral obligations to ourselves as well as to others---obligations that are completely independent of the existence of God. Because my parents made great sacrifices for me when I was unable to take care of myself, for example, I have an obligation to take care of them when they are no longer able to take care of themselves. To me, this is an obligation, an obligation which is independent of God's existence.
This brings us to Mavrod's second major point. Mavrodes claims that "morality is dependent upon religion "...in such a way that if religion would fail, morality would fail also" (Audi, 213). Even if moral obligations exist in a Russellian world, he says, these obligations would not be as profound as obligations which are present if God does actually exist; the status of morality in a Russellian world would be odd, he says, because if God does not exist, then morality would not bear on reality in the same way that it would if God does exist. His view, as I take it to be, is that if God exists, then moral obligations are present in the world in much the same way as the Forms are present in a Platonic world; that is, they are "somehow fundamental to what is as well as what ought to be." If theism is correct, then moral obligations take on much more significance; they are much more deeply embedded in the structure of the universe than moral obligations would be in a Russellian world. Mavrodes says that

...there cannot be, in any "reasonable" way, a moral demand on me, unless reality itself is committed to morality in some deep way. It makes sense only if there is a moral demand on the world too and only if reality will in the end satisfy that demand (Audi, 220).

If God exists, then moral obligations are intrinsically present in the world in a way that they are not in a Russellian world; but if moral obligations are not intrinsically present in the universe, (e.g., in a Russellian world), they do not correspond to reality in the same way that moral obligations do if God does exist. If God must exist in order for moral obligations to
correspond to reality, then it seems that Mavrodies is right here, for it would indeed be odd to have obligations that do not correspond to reality. But is it true that moral obligations would not correspond to reality if God does not exist?

Mavrodies would say that morality would not correspond to reality if God does not exist because we would be obligated to do those things for which we shall receive no reward. This, he thinks, would be very odd. But again, it does not seem that we must receive some sort of reward for fulfilling our moral obligations. It seems that we have moral obligations that exist—and that correspond to reality—that are in no way dependent on receiving a reward. Mavrodies may be right that it would be odd to have obligations that do not correspond to reality in a way they would if God exists, but it does not seem that our moral obligations would not correspond to reality just because we will not necessarily receive some reward for fulfilling them. Let us turn now to divine command theory—the view that right and wrong are dependent upon what God commands.

Many theists hold that what is right is a result of divine command—that morality is a set of rules that is handed down to us by God, and that we are obligated in some way to follow these commands. Indeed, the idea that morality is handed down from God has always been a prominent one in theistic thought. Plato’s

—I will not attempt to give a full account of divine command theory here. I will, for the sake of brevity, discuss what I feel to be the most standard version.
Euthyphro, however, poses the following problem for advocates of divine command: does God command what is right, or is what is right commanded by God? If God commands what is right, then there is a right and wrong that is independent of God's will. In other words, God commands what is right, but does not determine it. The alternative view is that what is right is so by virtue of being commanded by God. Some people object to this view, however, because what is right becomes arbitrary, dependent only on that which God wills. As Kai Nielsen points out,

...if 'being obligatory' means just 'willed by God,' it becomes unintelligible to ask why God wills one thing rather than another. In fact, there can be no reason for his willing one thing rather than another, for his willing it eo ipso makes whatever it is he wills good, right, or obligatory.

Similarly, God does not base his commands on what is moral, because what is moral is precisely that which is commanded by God. Because there would be no restrictions on what God can command, one would have to abandon the notion that God is good on account of his commands; to say that would be to say nothing more than God's commands are commanded by God.

One attempt to side-step this problem for divine command theory is suggested by Robert Adams, who presents us with a

*That is, is there an intrinsic right and wrong present in the universe, and God only commands what is right? Or does God determine what is right and wrong?

"modified" version of divine command. One of the greatest problems with traditional divine command theory, Adams feels, is precisely that which is pointed out by Nielsen: if what is good is commanded by God, and no restrictions are put on the nature of God, God could command anything at all, and it would be considered good precisely because it was commanded by God. What would happen, then, Adams asks, if "God should command cruelty for its own sake?"

In response to this question, some theologians, Aquinas for example, say that what is right and wrong is independent of God's will, but because of the very nature of God, God only commands what is good. It is, in other words, impossible for God to command cruelty because God is, by definition, entirely good. The modified divine command theorists, however, disagrees that right and wrong are independent of God's will and does not deny that it is logically possible for God to command cruelty "for its own sake" (Helm, 85). Quite the contrary.

The modified divine command theorist agrees that it is logically possible that God should command cruelty for its own sake; but he holds that it is unthinkable that God should do so. To have faith in God is not just to believe that He exists, but also to trust in His love for mankind (Helm, 88).

Adams disagrees with Aquinas that right and wrong are independent of God's will, and believes that morality is not

something that is handed down from a God who could have just as easily commanded cruelty, or any other thing he so desired, but rather by a "loving" God who only commands those things that are good for "His creatures." This view "leads [him] to identify wrongness with contrariety to the commands of a loving God rather than simply with contrariety to the commands of God" (Helm, 116).

Indeed, Adams feels that what is right is determined by the commands of a "loving" God, but in order for one to understand the commands of God as being right, we must first realize that what is right is so because it is commanded by a "loving" God. What is important to understand here is that Adams is making a point about the nature of rightness and wrongness, and not merely about the way we understand or describe terms "right," "wrong," "good," "bad," and so forth. Adams makes this more clear by referring to Hilary Putnam's example of the nature of water.11 If I were to describe water, for example, I would probably describe it as a colorless, odorless, liquid, thirst quenching substance. The scientist, on the other hand, would describe it as a chain of molecules, each consisting of an oxygen atom bound to two hydrogen atoms. Even though we would both be referring to the same substance, we would have very different definitions of it based on what we conceive it to be.

By describing water as merely a colorless, odorless liquid, however, I am not giving an account of the true nature of water;

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the scientist, on the other hand, would be describing its very nature. In other words, there are facts about water that one must know in order to understand its true nature, just as there are facts that one must know in order to understand the true nature of morality (e.g., that actions are right or wrong depending on whether or not they are commanded by God). One could say that something is wrong because it fails "...to maximize human happiness," or that it is "...contrary to the objective interests of the progressive class or classes," but this would not be to describe the true nature of wrongness—that is, contrary to the commands of a loving God (Helm, 115).

If what is right is, according to Adams, that which is commanded by a loving God, then whatever is right must necessarily be based on divine command, even if it is not understood in terms of God's commands." Even though people do not always think of what is right as being commanded by God, an action is right by virtue of the fact that it is commanded by a "loving" God; similarly, an action is wrong precisely because it is contrary to the commands of a "loving" God, even if people do not understand wrongness in this way.

Many people have disagreed with Adams view because they feel that in order to determine if God's commands are right, one must have a prior conception of "rightness" and "wrongness" that is not defined in terms of what God commands. For example, Kai Nielsen feels that

[in] taking God's goodness as not being true by definition or as being some kind of conceptual truth,
we have, in asserting 'God is good', of necessity made a moral judgement, a moral appraisal, using a criterion that cannot be based on a knowledge that God exists or that he issues commands. We call God good because we have experienced the goodness of his acts, but in order to do this, in order to know that he is good or to have any grounds for believing that he is good, we must have an independent moral criterion which we use in making this predication of God. So if 'God is good' is taken to be synthetic and substantive, then morality cannot simply be based on a belief in God. We must of logical necessity have some criterion of goodness that is not derived from any statement asserting that there is a deity (Nielsen, 7).

Nielsen says that we must have some way to determine what is right and wrong that is independent of God, and it indeed seems true that one must have a prior conception of right and wrong in order to determine what sorts of things God would command. That is, if it were true—or if it is true—that what is right is that which is commanded by a "loving" God, one would first have to have some idea concerning the types of things a "loving" God would command. For example, if someone were to say to oneself, "I believe kindness to be commanded by God", it is true that one must first have some intuitive criterion concerning the types of things that a loving God would command; similarly, if someone said to oneself, "I believe dishonesty to be contrary to the commands of a loving God", one would first have to have a feeling about the types of things that would be forbidden by God. We would, then, have to have a standard of right and wrong that is independent of anything that is commanded by God.

In addition to thinking that we must have concepts of right and wrong prior to ascribing such qualities to a God, Nielsen also feels that if the basis for our moral behavior is simply to
follow the commands of a greater being, be it loving or otherwise, we cannot reasonably be considered autonomous moral agents.

It is indeed true that many of us turn to people for moral advice and guidance in moral matters, but if we do what we do simply because it has been authorized, we cannot be reasoning and acting as moral agents; for to respond as a moral agent, one's moral principle must be something which is subscribed to by one's own deliberate commitment, and it must be something for which one is prepared to give reasons" (Nielsen, 3). Nielsen feels that to base one's behavior on God's commands rather than on careful reflection on what one feels to be right and wrong independent of what God commands is to sacrifice one's moral autonomy. It is necessary, then, to have a criterion by which to judge actions to be right or wrong which is independent of what God commands. Adams anticipates this objections.

....it is sometimes objected to divine command theories of moral obligation, or of ethical rightness and wrongness, that one must have some reason for obeying God's commands or for adopting a divine command ethics, and that therefore a nontheological concept of moral obligation or of ethical rightness and wrongness must be presupposed, in order that one may judge that one ought to obey God's commands. This objection is groundless. For one can certainly have reasons for doing something which do not involve believing one morally ought to do it or believing it would be ethically wrong not to do it...Divine command theorist, including the modified divine command theorist, need not maintain that all value concepts, must be understood in terms of God's commands (Helm, 95).

12In defense of Adams, one could point out here that, contrary to Nielsen's belief, it is not obvious that one would be sacrificing one's moral autonomy by following the commands of God, for in accepting God's commands as the basis for one's moral behavior, one might very well be choosing autonomously a foundation for one's moral beliefs.
The reason for this "independent valuation," Adams says, is that if someone were to think about the "unthinkable, but logically possible situation in which God would in fact command cruelty for its own sake," the believer's concept of right and wrong would "break down" (Helm, 88). This is because one would no longer hold the same conception of what is right and wrong, because the terms would no longer hold the same meaning as they would if they applied to actions that were commanded by a "loving" God. As Adams points out: "[this] may even suggest that [the believer] values some things, not just independently of God's commands, but more than God's commands" (Helm, 97; emphasis mine). But is it true, one might ask, that one can have these "independent valuations" without discarding divine command theory altogether?

If the believer holds valuation judgments that are independent of what God commands, then why is it necessary to posit a God as the ultimate determination of the rightness or wrongness of an action? Why couldn't it be the case that there just are standards of right and wrong that in no way depend on the existence of a deity? Why is there a need for the existence of some greater being? Furthermore, by saying that what is right is that which is commanded by a "loving" God, doesn't Adams fall victim to the original objection to the standard version of divine command; that is, isn't it just as arbitrary to say that what is right is that which is commanded by a "loving" God as would be saying that what is right is that which is commanded by
God? Couldn't one just as easily say that what is right is that which is commanded by a "cruel" God, or an "uncaring" God?

The reason why Adams says that what is wrong is that which is contrary to the commands of a "loving" God is, of course, to avoid the main objection to divine command; that is, if what is right is what is commanded by a God, then God could command anything at all (cruelty, for example), and it would be right because it is commanded by God. Adams' view does not, however, address the most obvious objection to divine command; that divine command theory, even the modified version that Adams presents, is that it accounts only for a Judeo-Christian view of right and wrong. If to be wrong in the moral sense is to be contrary to the commands of a loving God, this definition cannot possibly hold for someone who does not believe in God.\footnote{Of course, this does not mean that the definition is not true just because some people do not accept it. The reason that the atheist does not accept a divine command theory of moral obligation, Adams would say, is because the atheist does not know the true nature of moral obligation.}

Adams realizes this, for as he himself points out, "...there are several things which are true of the believer's use of "wrong" which cannot plausibly be supposed to be true of the nonbeliever's" (Helm, 106). There are, however, certain similarities between the believer's and the nonbeliever's conception of wrong that make it possible for them to agree on certain fundamental concepts of right and wrong. For example, both the believer and the nonbeliever use much of the same moral terminology--"wrong, right, ought, duty, and
others...[furthermore, there] is a great deal of agreement, among believers and nonbelievers as to what types of action they call 'wrong' in an ethical sense" (Helm, 104).1*

Even though Adams believes there are many similarities between the believer's and the nonbeliever's use of moral terminology, he admits, however, that there are fundamental differences in the way each uses the terms. For example, "[the] chemist, who believes that water is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen, and the man who knows nothing of chemistry, surely do not use the word 'water' in entirely different senses; but neither is it very plausible to suppose that they use it with exactly the same meaning" (Helm, 107). In other words, people can use similar terms when discussing the nature of moral obligation without necessarily agreeing on the exact nature or definition of these terms. But again, this is not necessarily a problem for Adams, for as he points out in the very next line, even though people do not always use moral terminology in exactly the same sense, they can still agree on fundamental principles when discussing the nature of moral obligation. For example,

...in some fairly ordinary sense of "mean", a phenomenalist, and a philosopher who holds some conflicting theory about what it is for a physical object to exist, do not mean exactly the same thing by "There is a bottle of milk in the refrigerator," But they certainly do not mean entirely different things, and they can agree that there is a

1*For a greater discussion concerning similarities in the believer's and the nonbeliever's moral discourse, see Helm, 104-105.
bottle of milk in the refrigerator (Helm, 107).

The point that Adams makes here is pertinent, for obviously concepts such as "good," "right," "wrong," and so forth, are based on fundamental religious perspectives, and therefore interpretations of such terms often have a very solid grounding in theological definitions. Because religion and belief in God have been so intimately linked with conceptions of moral obligation, terms such as "good," "right," or "wrong" have theological connotations. Consequently, the basis for an atheist's feeling of moral obligation, although independent of a belief in God, is still greatly influenced by theistic interpretation of what is good, right, and so forth.

This idea, though, still does not account for the difference in the theistic and the atheist uses of these definitions. Even though the theist and the atheists use similar terms, and there could very well be situations to which they apply the same terms, they cannot be said to view the basis for this application in the same way. For example, they might agree that a particular action is right or wrong, but they could disagree on why it is so. Adams admits, though, that "wrong" as it is used in his theory—that is, contrariety to the commands of a "loving" God—can be used by "some but not all," for indeed it is obvious that the atheist would not agree that right and wrong are determined by the commands of God. But again, Adams would say that this is because the atheist does not know the true nature of
moral obligation, namely that what is right is that which is commanded by a loving God.

Indeed, Adams' theory avoids the main objection to divine command, and is in itself, internally coherent. But if we can get around problems of theistic morality simply by ascribing any qualities we wish to God, then it seems that we are merely adopting views that are theoretically coherent, but do not directly address the fundamental differences between theistic morality. This is not, however, a criticism of Adams' view; it serves to emphasize that there just are fundamental differences in the way the theist and the atheist view the nature of moral obligation. The question becomes, then, which view provides a more rational basis for the foundation of one's morality?¹⁰

Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed what I feel to be some of the more significant philosophical views on the nature of moral obligation. I began with a look at the relationship between religious belief and moral obligation as seen from the theistic point of view, and have shown the significance of God's existence as the foundation for morality in theistic thought. Mavrodes, for example, feels that moral obligations—deep-seated moral obligations—would be strangely out of place in a Russelian world. Adams feels there would be no moral obligation if there

¹⁰I shall return to this point momentarily.
wasn't a "loving" God. Nielsen, however, disagrees with Adams that what is right is determined by a God, be it loving or otherwise. He feels instead, that one must have a prior nontheological understanding of rightness and wrongness before one can ascribe such terms to the commands of a greater being. If one does not, Nielsen feels, one is in some way sacrificing one's moral autonomy. He believes further that "there are good reasons of a perfectly mundane sort, "why we should behave morally that are independent of anything that God commands." Following Kant, Nielsen feels that...

...there are good reasons, of a perfectly mundane sort, why we should have the institution of morality as we now have it, namely that our individual welfare is dependent on having a device which equitable resolves social and individual conflicts. Morality has an objective rationale in complete independence of religion. Even if God is dead, it does not really matter (Nielsen, 62-63).

Indeed, it does not seem that one should do certain actions simply because one believes them to be commanded by God; there are reasons to behave morally that should be followed independent of God, for example because fulfilling moral obligations will lead to the best possible society in which man can live. This indeed seems a much more worthy reason to behave morally than

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14. It is important to point out that the theist could agree here, for there are certainly reasons why theists behave morally that are independent of what God commands.
simply because one feels that one's actions are in accord with what they believe God to command.\footnote{This example is pointed out by Bertrand Russell in \textit{Atheism: Collected Essays, 1943-1949}, (New York: Arno Press Inc., 1972). I am not saying that this is the reason why we should fulfill our moral obligations; I just want to emphasize that there are reasons for behaving morally that are independent of God.}

After examining both theistic and atheistic views of morality, however, I feel that it is an atheistic view that gives one a more solid foundation on which to base one's morality. Furthermore, it is more rational to base one's morality on something other than the existence of a deity. There are basically two reasons why I feel this way. First, even if it were true that what is right is commanded by God, there is no way that one could know for certain what is, in fact, commanded by God.\footnote{There are, of course, people who would point to the \textit{Bible} or the \textit{Quran} as the source of God's commands, and there are even people who say that they have spoken to God or that God has spoken to them, (and maybe God even has!) To this objection, I cannot say that I have an adequate reply other than to point to apparent inconsistencies in each of the above mentioned doctrines, or emphasize the contradictions that exist between scientific doctrine and religious belief. One could argue, however, that there are only apparent inconsistencies, or that there is no conflict between science and religion.} Second, since we cannot know whether or not God exists, one's belief in the existence of God must be based on faith. If one behaves morally only because one believes that one's behavior is consistent with what God commands, it seems, in fact, that one's actions would be based on something that one has no conclusive evidence for. How reasonable is it, then, for one to
base something as important as the foundation for one's morality on mere faith that God exists? To make my reasons more clear, let us examine them more carefully.

One of the reasons why I feel that one has a sounder basis for one's morality on an atheistic view is in direct response to some of the points brought up by Mavrodes. He feels, once again, that it would be odd to have deep-seated moral obligations in a Russellian world. Moral obligations in a Russellian world would be odd, he thinks, because we would often be obligated to do actions which are not in our best interests. This view implies that we should be obligated, then, to do only those things for which we will receive some reward? But why should it be the case that we should be rewarded for fulfilling our moral obligation? We should fulfill our obligations because it is our duty to do so—not because we will receive a reward. On Mavrodes' view, fulfillment of moral obligation is less odd than in a Russellian world because it is in one's best interest to fulfill moral obligations; but again, we could very well have moral obligations that are not in our best interest to fulfill.

A second reason why I disagree with Mavrodes' view is that it implies that there is a world independent of our own where we will be rewarded for fulfilling our moral obligations. Since

1"Again, I feel it important to emphasize that there are reasons why theists behave morally that are independent of a belief in God. But even if their reasons for doing a particular action is independent of what they believe God to command, the justification for their actions of right and wrong is based on that belief. It is a base for the moral judgments of the theists."


Mavrodes does not feel that there is "a corresponding benefit that awaits [one] within the confines of this world," he implies that we will be rewarded for our moral behavior in some other world. Still other theistic interpretations of morality say that by following the commands of God in this life, even if it means that one might have to endure a great amount of suffering, we will, after death, be divinely rewarded for our moral behavior. But do we really have any reason to believe that there is a greater existence than our present life? Indeed, it seems that we do not. Furthermore, it seems that the benefits one would receive in a Russellian world (to use Mavrodes' term)—social compatibility, respect, self-contentment and so on—are more tangible rewards to reach for than those that one seeks to attain on a theistic view. Given that we do not know, nor will ever know, that God exists, it seems that we should strive instead to make our existence here as complete and fulfilling as possible rather than hoping, perhaps vainly, for a greater, eternally blissful existence.

As mentioned before, some will deny that we do not know (or will never know) that God exists. I'm sure there are many people who are quite sure they do know. Perhaps those who "know" that God exists are completely rational in basing their morality on God. The point, though, is that one's view of morality is not quite as sound if it is based merely on faith rather than knowledge that God exists. If one strives for soundness as one of the necessary criteria for one's morality, and one is unsure,
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as I am myself, of God's existence, then it seems more rational to have a foundation for one's morality that would hold in either case—that is, whether God exists or not. A morality not based on a belief in God holds whether or not God exists; a theistic morality, however, collapses if God does not.

If God exist, then there is not a problem for theistic morality. But if God does not exist, then the foundation for theistic morality collapses and the theist's concept of right and wrong is seriously undermined. If one bases one's belief of right and wrong on the commands of God, and God does not exist, one would no longer have a foundation for one's beliefs about what is right and wrong. It is possible that one would still consider honesty and kindness as "right" but one could no longer base one's conception of "right" on what is commanded by God. In addition to restructuring one's moral beliefs, one would seriously have to re-evaluate the reasons for one's moral behavior. All the people who were living their life, faithfully following the commands of God anticipating only the eternal blissfulness of heaven, would suddenly be struck with the realization the there hopes have all been in vain.

Because I do not feel that we have any reason to believe that there is a greater world besides our own where we will be

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*I don't think this is a problem for the theistic view that says there is a right and wrong independent of God's commands, but God, for whatever reason, only commands what is right. For if this were the case, people would have a conception of "rightness" and "wrongness" independent of God. Even if God does not exist, one would still have a criterion on which to base one's moral foundations.*
rewarded for fulfilling our moral obligations, (or that we necessarily should be), I feel that a theistic account of moral obligation not only undermines the reasons for one's moral behavior (one might behave morally only in expectation of reward), but also make this life less significant or meaningful for those who live only with the hope that there is a greater, everlasting existence to make up for the pains that we endure in this life. But instead of hoping for some greater existence, we should strive to make this life as complete and full as possible without depending on a greater being to make our lives meaningful. Furthermore, we do not know whether or not God exists, so belief in God must be based on faith. But again, the basis for one's morality seems far too important to be founded merely on faith. For these reasons, I feel one is more rational to base one's morality on an atheistic view of the world, and that it is this view which provides a sounder foundation for the basis of one's morality.
Bibliography


