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John Millspaugh

"God, Ethics, and the 'Is/Ought' Hypothesis"

Many atheist ethical philosophers take the position that, even assuming the existence of a traditional Judeo-Christian God, neither God nor God's will play any role in ethics. The arguments of these philosophers are plausible and significant. In his book, *Ethics Without God*, Kai Nielsen gives the clearest statement of their line of argument. Nielsen holds that "morality can yet have an objective rationale" independent of God or God's will (Nielsen, 127). He thus proposes that neither God nor God's will is of significance to ethics. Nielsen points out that a moral precept is true or false regardless of its source, even if that source is an all-powerful or all-knowing God. As Nielsen states, "The fact that God commanded, willed, or ordained something cannot...be a fundamental criterion for claiming that whatever is commanded, willed, or ordained ought to be done.... [T]he validity or soundness of a belief is independent of its origin" (Nielsen, 53). In this paper, I will explain Nielsen's position in *Ethics Without God*. I will then raise objections that will show, contrary to Nielsen's arguments, that God *could* play a significant role in ethics. And finally, through discussing the work of Judith Jarvis Thomson, I will show that God *must* make a difference in ethics, since ethics ultimately rely on God.

In order to be able to demonstrate that God is irrelevant to ethics, Nielsen assumes the existence of God. Nielsen concedes that when God wills something, what God wills is good by definition. According to Nielsen, there are two commonly accepted interpretations of this statement: first, "ethical principles gain their justification because they are God's decrees"; or second, that God is entirely good and therefore is only capable of willing what is good (Nielsen, 53, 57).

According to Nielsen, the first possibility makes goodness arbitrary. If something is good only because God wills it, anything God decrees will necessarily be good. God has no reason to will "one thing rather than another, for his willing it *eo ipso* makes whatever it is he wills good, right, or obligatory. 'God wills it because it ought to be done' becomes 'God wills it because God wills it' " (Nielsen, 54). This is a tautology and is therefore, according to Nielsen, not a valid explanation of why we should follow God's commands.

The second possibility, that God is omniscient and omni-benevolent, and therefore wills what is good, seems to provide a clearer reason to base moral systems on God's will. Since God is only capable of willing good, our moral practices, if based on God's will, will also be good. The statement "God is good" is not a tautology, because the statement "God is evil" also makes sense, though its meaning is different (Nielsen, 57). This is true, Nielsen points out, because the statement "God is good" contains both a subject and predicate ("God" and "good," respectively). "God is good" can be restated as "The being that is omnipotent and omniscient is omni-benevolent." The statement "The being that is omnipotent and omniscient is not omni-benevolent" also makes sense. Thus omni-benevolence, or goodness, is not an essential part of the linguistic definition of any possible omnipotent and omniscient being, or God. Regardless of whether or not the existent God is good,

good is a concept that can stand on its own, separate from God. If the existent God is good, as Nielsen and I assume, the term God contains the concept of good and cannot be understood without first understanding what is meant by good. However, an understanding of good is possible without, and must be logically prior to, an understanding of God. Ethics is based on an understanding of the good. Since ethics relies on an understanding of what is meant by good, and understanding the concept of good is possible without understanding the concept of God, then ethics is possible without an understanding of God (*ibid.*).

According to Nielsen, since either God's commands are arbitrary and consequently not worth following, or God's commands are based on a criterion of good that is independent of God, then God makes no difference in ethics (Nielsen, 127). However, I wish to challenge Nielsen's thesis that God cannot make any difference in ethics. There are some specific ways that God's influence might be necessary for successful pursuit of an ethical life. If God exists, then it would be foolish for ethicists to disregard God; there are some specific ways that God's influence might be necessary for successful pursuit of an ethical life. After explaining these, I will discuss Judith Thomson's exploration of Hume's concept that "no is implies an ought," to show that all ethics for this universe rest fundamentally on the will of God.

First, I must point out an insufficiency in Nielsen's argument about the significance of God's will, considering the possibility that certain things are good simply because God wills them. If true, it seems that God has no reason to will anything over anything else, as absolutely anything God wills will be good. Nielsen assumes that if God's will is so arbitrary, God's will makes no difference in ethics. This is not the case. Consider the statement "Something is good simply because God wills it." This means exactly what it says: "Something is good simply because God wills it." It may be that there is no reason that the thing is good other than that God willed it, but if God's will is sufficient to make a thing good, as it is in this first view, there is no contradiction in saying that something is good simply because God wills it. What was arbitrary for God, once decided by God, takes on a moral value for us, as it is good. If God's will makes something good, God makes a difference in ethics.

But I do not subscribe to this view that the goodness of a thing is a matter of God's will. For my remaining objections to Nielsen in this section, let us assume (as does Nielsen) the second position: God's will correlates with good, but does not cause it; the reason that the things God wills are good is something other than the fact that God wills them. Further, let us even grant Nielsen's assertion that as God's will does not cause something to be good, God's will is not a necessary or important consideration when we construct ethical theories. God's will is irrelevant to ethics. From this assumption about God's will, Nielsen goes on in error to make a similar implication about God: If God's will is not a necessary consideration when we construct ethical theories, then God is not an important consideration when we construct ethical theories. Nielsen states no major premise that enables him to draw this conclusion from this minor premise. The omitted major premise would have to be something like: "No aspect of a creature is an important consideration in constructing ethical theories unless that creature's will is a necessary or important consideration in constructing ethical theories." This premise is untrue, the

sylogism unsound. God's existence and actions can make a difference in ethics, even if God's will does not. Let me demonstrate why this is true.

Nielsen assumes that we can know the good without God's assistance. However, even if true, we have no reason to disregard God in our search for truth and morality. As an example, consider the Ten Commandments. Let us assume that they are good moral precepts to live by, and that God did give them to Moses on Mount Sinai. Nielsen would be quick to point out that even if this were the case, the Ten Commandments would have been good moral precepts to live by whether or not God had given them to Moses on Mount Sinai, as it is not God's will or proclamation that makes something good. However, even if it is not God's will or proclamation that makes something good, does it somehow follow that God's will and proclamations should be ignored? Should Moses have rejected the gift of the Ten Commandments and left Mount Sinai to try to formulate them on his own? There would have been no coherent reason for him to have done so. In moral theory, the conclusions are what are important, not the process of discovering them. It is true that struggling to find moral principles is a noble endeavor, but the very point of this noble endeavor is to find those moral principles. To reject accurate moral principles simply because God offered them would be absurd. Even if the good is independent of God, God might be an instrument for bringing us in touch with the good. God has the potential to make a difference to us in ethics by straightening our roads to truth, even if truth exists independently.

My third objection to Nielsen's position that God cannot make a significant difference in our understanding of ethics also deals with the merits of finding truth through listening to God. In the above paragraph, I took for granted that we could find complete truth without God, but that it might be wise to listen to God. However, it seems possible that we as finite creatures are not capable of discovering ultimate truth through reason alone. Mystics, however, feel that the divine revelations of truth they have experienced are completely authoritative. The sincerity of belief of true mystics can be seen in their complete devotion to their religions. Not having had such powerful religious experiences, I am not fit to judge their validity; but I can not dismiss the information they provide merely because it may lie beyond the reach of reasonable inquiry. Commenting on mystical experience, William James says that "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different" (343). By limiting ourselves to pure reason in discovering ethical truths, we ignore the possibility of non-reasonable paths to ethical truths. Reason can block our ability to open ourselves to non-rational paths. Indeed, "non-rational" often has negative connotations for the rational mind, and many think that faith in the non-reasonable is childish and immature. However, some philosophers, such as John Hick, argue that childlike faith is our ultimate virtue, and that through such faith, though it may seem contrary to reason, a person will come to manifest "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Nielsen 94). The rationalist would here respond by saying that it would be ignoble if we had to live our whole lives as children. But if knowledge of true ethics requires a relationship with

God, and a relationship with God does require childlike faith, then a rationalist's wish that it were otherwise is irrelevant.

My fourth objection concerns the role of God in "the best life." One way of describing ethics has traditionally been "the search for the best life." Plato and Aristotle agree that to live such lives, people must fulfill their "characteristic function," the purpose for which they were created. What if part of the characteristic function of a human being is communion or other interaction with God? In any such situation, interaction with God is an essential part of the best life for a human. Whether or not God willed that we commune with God is irrelevant, as it is our function to do so, and by not doing so we cannot live the best life. If it is part of our characteristic function to interact with God, God makes a difference in ethics.

My objections to this point have discussed possibilities of our relationship between us and God. However, with no further talk of the possibilities of such personal relationships, I will go on to prove that, assuming with Nielsen the existence of a Judeo-Christian God, God does make a difference in ethics--that, in fact, God makes the ultimate difference in ethics. To do this, I will explore the "is/ought" hypothesis" as it applies to God and God's act of creation.

Nielsen assumes the existence of God, but denies the importance of this absolute to ethics by trying to establish other absolutes, in statements such as "Even in a Godless world, to relieve suffering would still be good" (Nielsen, 76). By making such claims, Nielsen attempts to show that some claims are absolute with or without God, and in Chapter Six of *Ethics Without God* he asserts that the existence of God *cannot* affect the absolute authority of such claims. I disagree, for I would hold that any viable system of morality for moral agents necessarily must take into account their environment, tendencies, and reasons for living. If God is the Creator, God created these environments, tendencies, and reasons, and thus God established the ground rules for morality. Nielsen objects, saying, "God, let us assume, could, and indeed did, create the world, but he could not--logically could not--create moral values. Existence is one thing, value is another" (Nielsen, 82). In other words, morality and values are universal and would hold true in any possible universe. Nielsen here defends Hume's principle that no is implies an ought--that is, that no factual description of what is can tell one what one morally ought to do. Such an ought can only arise from values, not facts. I agree with Hume's idea in what I will call the ultimate sense, but not in what I call the practical sense, and the practical is what is important to ethical theory. My term practical refers to what most people call ultimate. In this last section of the paper, by practical I will mean "universal; holding true anywhere in this universe." By ultimate I will mean "holding true anywhere in any possible universe." To make clear my position concerning is, ought, the practical, and the ultimate, I will discuss part of Thomson's *The Realm of Rights* as applied to practical ethics. After this discussion, I will defend my proposition that God's creation of the universe did create moral values.

In her introduction to *The Realm of Rights*, Judith Jarvis Thomson sets out to prove that Hume is wrong and that, in some cases, is implies ought. She fails to do so in my ultimate sense, but she succeeds in my practical sense (which is what I think Hume is concerned with). Thomson points out that a statement containing no moral

judgment can logically entail a statement containing a moral judgment; thus, an is can imply an ought. For example, consider rudeness. If Jones says that Bloggs behaved rudely in a situation, it seems right to think that Jones "is making an unfavorable moral judgment about him" (Thomson, 10). To call a person rude is to make a light moral judgment about that person. However, "a bit of behavior is rude if it meets certain conditions of fact"; that is, to say "This bit of behavior is rude" is simply an evaluative statement, not a moral judgment. A definition for rude behavior could be "behavior that 'causes offense by indicating lack of respect'." This definition is no moral judgment; this is an evaluative statement. However, Bloggs committing an act that was rude (which can be determined by an evaluative judgment) entails that Bloggs acted rudely in the situation (which is a moral judgment about his action) (Thomson, 11). In this situation, the facts do entail a moral judgment. Thus Thomson refutes the passage of Hume that claims absolutely that "no is implies an ought" by showing through example that "there are moral judgments that are entailed by statements of fact" (Thomson, 12).

Although she tries to establish her thesis at an ultimate level, Thomson's refutation of Hume only works at a practical level. To approach the ultimate, Thomson (like Nielsen) explicates certain base assumptions that she feels are undeniable, though indefensible. For example, she says that

[the statement] "other things being equal, one ought not cause others pain" is surely true.... [Also, t]hat B promised to pay Smith five dollars is favorably relevant to its being the case that he ought to do this, and *could not have failed to be*. "Other things being equal, one ought to do what one promised" is not merely a truth, *it could not have failed to be a truth* (Thomson, 15-16, my emphasis).

Thus for Thomson, the statement "Other things being equal, one ought to pay one's debts" contains not only practical truth, but also some sort of ultimate truth. Her point of view is easily understood in statements such as her claimed absolute, "One ought not torture babies to death for fun...no matter what the circumstances" (Thomson, 18). Although this truth seems obvious and intuitive, Thomson is wrong in this specific case, just as she is wrong in general; is implies ought in a practical sense as I define practical, but not in any ultimate sense as I define ultimate. Morality depends completely on the universe in which it exists, and has no meaning outside of that universe. To see why this is so, let us consider a simple version of an alternate universe.

Imagine that when God creates the universe, God is not very ambitious and decides to create only a plastic chessboard and some molded plastic chesspieces. These chesspieces are rational beings and are capable of self-directed motion. Finding themselves alone in the universe, they struggle to find a meaning to their existence. They find that they are happiest and feel the most fulfilled when they move around the chessboard strategically. They decide to spend their existence playing chess, under the direction of their respective kings, as this seems like it will lead to the best lives for all. The kings assign each piece a certain pattern of

movement to make the game more interesting. For example, they say that knights can only move horizontally or vertically two spaces, followed by a perpendicular move of one space. Let us assume that these chesspieces spend centuries marching back and forth across the chessboard under the direction of the kings, and find meaning in their lives by doing so. One day, during an ordinary game, the white knight gets fed up with playing. The king, unaware, orders him to move forward two spaces and one space to the left. The knight, rebelling, refuses to do so, and in fact refuses to move as a knight should, moving diagonally, backwards. The knight starts moving all around the board, sometimes as a bishop would move, other times as a rook would move. This affects the other pieces negatively. If they do not play chess, they cannot live their best possible lives, and they cannot play chess without a white knight. The knight thus acts immorally, for morality for any piece consists in following the direction of the king and moving as a proper piece should. The knight ought to stop his random motion and once again act as a proper knight should. Because of the ground rules of the universe the knight inhabits, this cannot fail to be the case.

Thus, a knight in this universe can act immorally by moving diagonally across the squares of a chessboard. This is the practical sense of morality. However, it does not make any ultimate sense to say, "When a self-willed piece of molded plastic moves diagonally on a plastic chessboard, it commits an immoral action." The morality or immorality of the knight's action depends on the universe the knight inhabits. If God had created the chesspieces with autonomy as their characteristic function, and they took chief pleasure in acting autonomously, then a knight would not be acting immorally by moving whichever way he pleased, and might very well be acting immorally if he let his will be sacrificed to that of the king.

If God created us with a certain nature, that nature will give us certain goals and values in life, which, in turn, when placed in a certain environment, will define a certain code of morality, that moral code best suited to achieving those goals while respecting those values in that environment. If God had created us with a different nature, our values and goals would be different, as would be, necessarily, our system of morality. If God had created us as God did, but had created a different universe, our best method for achieving our goals and respecting our values would be different, and thus so would be our system of morality. Although there is no ultimate standard of morality (there is nothing *inherently* wrong in a plastic chesspiece moving one way rather than another, and contrary to Thomson, there is nothing *inherently* wrong with torturing babies to death for the sheer fun of it), there are practical standards of morality that should dictate our actions, as we live in the universe we do. If a knight moves a certain way, it *does* do wrong for its universe. A person who tortures babies for the fun of it *does* do wrong, as s/he undercuts her or his nature as a human creation of God, and what should be her or his own values and goals, as well as those of others. Both of these actions lead away from the best possible life for the actors, given their existent universes. Although no is implies an ought in any ultimate sense, in any given universe, is does imply ought.

Thus, ethics rely on God, as God provides the foundation for systems of morality. God determines the moral system of a universe by creating that specific universe. Nielsen and other atheist philosophers may be right when they say that we

can determine the best system of morality for use in this universe without God's help, but that system of morality will be the best only because God created *this* universe. God may or may not play a role in our continuing search for ethics, but given the existence of God the Creator, ethics depend entirely on God and God's will.

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