

‘THE MAXIM OF THE MOON’ AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF: AN ETHICAL REVISION OF THORNHILL-MILLER’S & MILLICAN’S SECOND ORDER RELIGION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican have provided us with a fine dialogical study of rational religious belief and its limits.¹ They argue that unavailability of conclusive evidence of perceived supernatural agency and contradictions between various religious belief systems render all religious traditions irrational. However, they also recognise that empirical research shows that religious belief may in some cases have beneficial individual and social effects, therefore they put forward a hypothesis of a ‘second-order religious belief’ which would be rational, because it would rely on the Fine-Tuning Argument alone and would not be bound by the orthodoxies of any specific religious tradition. One key aspect of religious belief that receives no mention, apart from a note in two footnotes (143 and 144, p. 47), is its moral dimension, its lived experience. This omission is significant as it undermines the very point they want to avoid in evoking the ‘Maxim of the Moon’ which they borrow from Buddhism, a religious tradition that values daily practices over a rational debate. Their lack of engagement with ethics can make Thornhill-Miller’s and Millican’s hypothesis of a rational ‘second-order theistic view’ unappealing to religious believers. Since both authors want to reach religious believers (as well as non- or un-believers), their position requires revision.

¹ Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, ‘The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015): 1-49. Subsequent references to this work are included parenthetically in text.

In his extensive reply to Thornhill-Miller and Millican, Janusz Salamon argues that their position appears to be incoherent, since their second order religious belief based solely on the Fine-Tuning Argument cannot serve as a source of existentially relevant sense of meaning, neither can it deliver any other practical benefits, such as comfort in times of grief which Thornhill-Miller and Millican (p. 45) identify as the motivation of religious commitment.² He also challenges one of their central claims, based on Hume's insight, that religious pluralism undermines rationality of all religious traditions, by pointing to the possibility of an epistemically coherent pluralistic interpretation of the fact of religious diversity (Salamon 2013, pp. 249-278, Salamon 2003, pp. 167-180) and to the possibility of an inclusivist account of religious experience (Salamon 2010, pp. 141-175, Salamon 2004, pp. 7-22). He suggests that Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's hypothesis of second order religion "may be refined by taking into account a view of axiologically grounded religious belief" which Salamon calls 'agatheism', since it identifies God or the Ultimate Reality with the ultimate *good (to agathon)* (Salamon 2015, p. 197).

For many religious believers relating to the ultimate good takes place through engagement in practices, including moral practices. This study aims to expand Salamon's agatheistic position and divert Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's attention to the sphere of morality. It shall start by exploring the relationship between theistic and non-theistic reasons for being moral and will suggest that settling in this question is more relevant to Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's debate than the Fine-Tuning Argument. It will argue that both believers and un-believers, even if they express their motivation for being moral in different terms, they both strive to be moral. Morality or moral formation, a concern for any decent human being, whether religious or not, can be a more fruitful starting point for Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's dialogical project. Dialogue at the level of morality or the lived experience of rational religious beliefs could result in more existentially relevant propositions. It could also help them to address the two biases to which they draw our attention, egocentric and confirmation, which they claim, are most powerful and persuasive biases as they can distort 'human perception,

² Janusz Salamon, 'Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millican and Thornhill-Miller', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2015): 197-245.

interpretations and judgments' (32). It's worth noting that different religious spiritualities have powerful resources for addressing these biases and for purifying perceptions, illuminating interpretations, and altering or improving judgments. Religious stories, spiritual exercises, rituals, engagements with the works of art can be more effective in addressing our narcissistic tendencies and improving our behaviours. However, for Thornhill-Millers and Millican to take on board these points would require amongst other things (to which we alluded above) a more positive approach to imagination than they seem to hold when they endorse Hume's distinction between imagination and rationality. For many theistic and non-theistic philosophers imagination is a key faculty for making sense of our world and it includes both rational as well as emotional elements. Engaging with the Maxim of the Moon, to which we shall turn next, in an imaginative way can open up a number of possibilities which Thornhill-Miller and Millican seem to overlook.

II. THE 'MAXIM OF THE MOON': A MORAL READING

Thornhill-Miller and Millican explain that the 'Maxing of the Moon' warns us 'against the blinding force of human cognitive bias by suggesting that all our pursuits of knowledge – including all our religions – are like 'fingers pointing at the moon'. They say that 'too often we mistake our own finger for the moon and allow it to eclipse our view' (48). They are right to warn us about our biases and dangers of projecting our own concerns on what is in front of our eyes, however close or distant we are to that object. But, there is another way of reading the fingers-Moon relationship. One indeed might get stuck and not see beyond one's finger and miss the Moon but one might also get inspired by others who point to the Moon and see the Moon for what it is: one's fingers are not alone in the scenario. The shift in our vision can take place thanks to a more attentive other who can challenge our perception, interpretation and judgement. Sometimes it is enough that one person changes her position in order to see more clearly and others move too in order to have a clearer vision. The point is that there is much more dynamism in the activity of pointing to the Moon than Thornhill-Miller and Millican see. It is a relational activity in the same way as the lived experience of rational religious belief is. Inspired or energized by others, we might eventually reach a moment when we see the Moon and recognise our

dependency on it. We may even realize that the Moon is not as distant and its influence on the lives of finger-pointers is visible or felt here and now. Thornhill-Miller and Millican rightly wonder ‘how much of the moon is genuinely revealed by our cultural religious pointers, and how much eclipsed by them.’ They are also right to suggest that if all fingers are removed there could be something sterile and unreal. They propose a third way of dealing with the Moon maxim – ‘another vision of the moon, as a luminous, second-order ultimate reality of some kind that yet lies beyond the comprehension of all our individual efforts to point to it’ (49). This paper argues that the fourth way of relating to the Maxim of the Moon is to focus on those who ‘point their fingers’ at a reality that is never fully comprehensible yet which influences the lived experience of these agents. Thornhill-Miller’s and Millican’s divisions into neat cultural religious and supernaturalist finger-pointers in the direction of the Moon or the Ultimate reality (Salamon’s agatheism) existentially (in a sense of the moral experience of religious or non-religious individuals) is not as tidy. There are both theists and non-theists who believe that God (or the Moon as in the maxim we have been considering) are unnecessary for the discussion of morality and there are those (theists) for whom God is essential element in the discussion. The next part of this paper will explore a sample of these different views. Its aim is to illuminate our reading of the Maxim of the Moon.

III. THEISTS AND NON-THEISTS ON MORALITY

Bernard Williams in his *Morality: Introduction to Ethics* argues that any appeal to God in morality ‘either adds nothing at all, or it adds the wrong sort of thing’³. The influential opinion of Otto Pfliegerer, calling for a clear separation of ethics from religion, emerged on the eve of the First World War in Berlin⁴. Richard Holloway (former bishop of Edinburgh in the Church of Scotland) in his *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics* agrees with Williams’s point that religion ‘adds nothing’ or that it adds ‘the wrong sort of thing’⁵. A Kantian follower, Christine Korsgaard

³ Bernard Williams, *Morality: Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 65.

⁴ Otto Pfliegerer, ‘Is Morality Without Religion Possible and Desirable?’, *The Philosophical Review*. 5(1896): 449.

⁵ Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics*, Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 1999.

in her *The Sources of Normativity*, has developed a 'transparent ethical theory', which claims to be neutral to both theism and atheism (similar position to the third way of approaching the Moon which Thornhill-Miller and Millican endorse), and whose success is dependent on the idea of transparency understood as a third person perspective (this third person, rather than the moral agent or the one with whom the moral agent interacts, determines whether the act is right or wrong)⁶. This theory has received mixed reactions. Ton Van Den Beld, who in his 'The Morality System With and Without God' takes on board Korsgaard's theory as well as both theistic and atheistic approaches, argues that even if at one level of human interactions all these approaches articulate what morality is about, in the end it is a theistic metaphysic that is capable of providing the resources for dealing with 'inescapable and (sometimes) for the agent costly obligations'⁷. John Cottingham also favours the theistic explanation of morality when it comes to dealing with the issues of unconditional obligations. However, his view (unlike Van Den Beld's) is, to a large extent, sympathetic to the atheistic position when it comes to 'good-making properties' which exist in our observable world, in front of our eyes, so to speak⁸. A similar (observation-based) point is made by Philippa Foot in her 'Natural Goodness', in which she proposes to see human goodness as analogous to the goodness of a plant or an animal; just as we can say that there is something wrong with a rabbit who fails to behave as rabbits do, so we can say that there is something wrong with a person who has no interests in being, for example, honest⁹. We are called to be moral by virtue of being human. Shameless or immoral people, we can say, are failing to be human. They are failing to see or failing to act upon what is in front of their eyes (there may be all kinds of reasons for that failure, some might be related to the weakness of the will, others to ignorance or to a deliberate decision not to 'look'). Cottingham considers whether it is enough to say that what we need for morality are 'purely natural features in virtue of which things count as good' (Cottingham 2009, p. 37). Non-theistic philosophers who base their approaches to moral theory on arguments from natural sciences

⁶ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁷ Ton Van Den Beld, 'The Morality System with and without God', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 4(2001): 383.

⁸ John Cottingham, *Why Believe?*, London: Continuum, 2009, p. 37.

⁹ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

clearly support this view. Some philosophers (Peter Railton, for example) attempt to answer the normative question of ethics by looking at the notion of ‘well-being’ in naturalistic terms and attempts to answer it at the level of social explanation. Social scientists too are contributing new insights to our understanding of, for example, the idea of moral character, which according to Gilbert Harman, has no possibility of having stable traits¹⁰. Another psychologist Darcia Narvaez draws from neuroscience in her discussions of the moral mind and ‘multiple moralities’¹¹. These thinkers claim that morality can be worked out on the basis of what is observable. This doesn’t mean that our evaluations are always correct; clearly, there are disagreements when it comes to assessing what we see. Cottingham says that ‘it is right that our pursuit of goodness is not a matter of seeing some mysterious extra quality in addition to the observable features of actions and objects, but rather involves a careful investigation and assessment of their relevant good-making properties’ (Cottingham 2009, p. 39). In other words, atheist and theist have the same tools for assessing morally right or wrong actions: ordinary observation of the world around us and ordinary reasoning about what we see are what is needed for making right moral decisions. However, Cottingham claims that while this is true there is something missing in this view. This missing bit is what he calls ‘conclusive’ or ‘unconditional’ reason for choice – ‘one that requires our compliance’ (Cottingham 2009, p. 39). It is worth noting that Van Den Beld makes a similar point with his idea of ‘inescapable’ and ‘costly’ obligations.

Cottingham explains his position by asking such questions as: ‘... 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?’ (Cottingham 2009, p. 39). In other words, what is this thing that establishes this odd connection between what is observable in front of our eyes and this strong normative power which requires us to act? According to Cottingham, the theist has 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

¹⁰ See Harman, *No Character or Personality*, <http://www.princeton.edu/~harman/Papers/Character.pdf>

¹¹ Darcia Narvaez, ‘Triune Ethics: The Neurobiological Roots of Our Multiple Moralities’, *New Ideas in Psychology*, 26 (2008): 95-119.

that is good' (Cottingham 2009, p. 41). He explains that 'such acts command our allegiance in the strongest way, since they bring us nearer to the 'home' where our true peace and fulfillment lie; 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' (Cottingham 2009, p. 41).

Both Cottingham and Van Den Beld insist that God is what makes us go this extra mile for the sake of the other as the conclusive unconditional and inescapable obligation. This point is well illustrated in Agnieszka Holland's latest film *In Darkness*¹². Based on the real story of Leopold Socha, the sewer worker in Lvov in occupied Poland (now Ukraine) during the Second World War, it presents a man, Robert Wieckiewicz, who hides Jews in secret underground passageways. Initially, despite the obvious dangers associated with helping Jews to survive, Wieckiewicz chooses to assist a Jewish family. We learn that he does so because he wants to earn the extra money that the family, who seem to be wealthy, offer him for this assistance. He doesn't come across either as a moral hero or a devout religious believer. In fact when we encounter him for the first time, he is a greedy man and a chancer. When there is no more money left to pay for his services, Wieckiewicz nevertheless doesn't stop what he is doing and, as we see in the film, he is genuinely concerned for the life and well-being of those in the sewer. He can't articulate his motivation but he is clear when he says that he can't walk away. For him, the obligation to stay and take a risk is unconditional. (Socha was posthumously awarded Israel's *Righteous Amongst Nations* title for what was considered to be heroic behaviour).

Rowan Williams proposes that in order to do something as extraordinary as what we see in Socha's case, one has to subscribe to the idea of a transcendent source of value. In the interview recorded in the *New Statesman* in 2010, Williams argues that 'to make sense of unconditional rights or claims, we need to be clear that there is such a thing as universal human nature and that it has some intrinsic dignity or worth. To try and ground this independently of the idea of a transcendent source of value seems to me not finally feasible'¹³. Williams refutes relativism and

¹² Agnieszka Holland, *In Darknes*, film released in 2012.

¹³ Rowan Williams, Interview with Archbishop Rowan Williams, *New Statesman*, 19 July 2010. <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2010/07/interview-religious-human> [accessed 9 November 2012]

believes that morality needs a notion of the sacred. He explains that for the Christian this means ‘understanding all human beings without exception as the objects of an equal, unswerving, unconditional love’ (Williams 2012).

Fiona Ellis in her *God, Value, and Nature* attempts to show that the naturalist can accommodate the idea of unconditional moral obligations, and that he has no need to say that the world we inhabit – the natural world – is random, impersonal, and meaningless¹⁴. This kind of naturalist is to be distinguished from the scientific naturalist, for he denies that the scientist has the monopoly on reality, and allows that there are values which cannot be comprehended adequately in scientific terms. This kind of naturalism is familiar to the work of David Wiggins and John McDowell, its framework remains secular, but Ellis argues that the position can be extended in a theistic direction, and that Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy offers a way of lending justice to this move. Levinas, known for his ‘ethics of the other’, proposes that the only way we can relate to God is by being moral; a true meeting of the other in turn puts us in touch with Infinity.

It is important in this debate to ask how *does* a belief in God affect our moral responses? Elisabeth Anscombe says: ‘give up religion, let religion completely fade away and there will still be morality’¹⁵. Human beings have always had morality. However, having stated this she immediately poses another important question: ‘what morality?’ Is her question suggesting that if we remove the concept of the sacred or a transcendent source of value we won’t have this conclusive and unconditional reason to choose? Or does she mean that religion (through its narrative, communal practices, appeals to Scripture, codes of behavior, etc.) is the mechanism for drawing our attention to this unconditional or inescapable obligation to which Cottingham and Van Den Beld refer? Is she anxious that without religious beliefs we are in danger of losing the link to that sense of unconditional obligation? If we have no belief or understanding that such acts as the acts of mercy, compassion, justice, and love (which we find in God who acts in this way towards us) call for our commitment, do we become impoverished as human beings? It seems that religion is

¹⁴ Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Anscombe, ‘Morality’, in Geach, M. and Gormally, L., (eds), *Fatih in Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M. Anscombe*, (St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs), Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008, p. 11.

capable of providing us (even if religious institutions don't always foster this provision) with a kind of space in which we can form our motivation and become passionate about morality. For example, a religious believer who believes that God is loving, when she realizes what she is receiving from God feels (this phrase is used intentionally here) compelled (in love) to give love. This doesn't mean that being a religious follower she will succeed in enacting love but she will have the right motivation for acting. Our world history shows that religious people are not immune to moral failure. But it seems that the reason for this state of affairs doesn't lie in religion per se but in our shared human condition which is capable of both moral success as well as moral failure. Becoming moral is a long and often difficult journey and the Moon maxim is rightly warning us from reducing this journey to a purely cognitive affair.

IV. RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND MORALITY: CONCLUDING REMARKS

So, 'how *does* a belief in God affect our moral responses?' It seems that in the deepest core of religions (we have in mind Abrahamic faiths in particular) we are called to be moral so that we can fulfill our God given potential to be truly human. Religious beliefs and morality are closely intertwined. For many religious believers there is more to their faith than the beliefs in miracles or afterlife. This wider notion of a rational religious belief is not adequately appreciated by Thornhill-Miller and Millican. In fact their approach to religious beliefs, for many religious believers will seem reductionist. Religious faith for many believers is broader and less staunch and neat. Religious faith, most of all, gives outlook about what is important. At the level of *motivation*, it shapes moral identity of religious believers and influences their decisions. But, religious faith doesn't give them the *moral tool* of right behaviour in every aspect of their daily life. A belief in the Transcendent who is the Triune God and who is Love may offer to a religious believer a *perspective* on life in general. It may help him or her to form an inner attitude to what they do with their life but it doesn't automatically translate into knowing whether they should spend more money on taking a depressed friend out for supper or whether to give money to this or that charity. These are individual moral dilemmas which an atheist, theist, or non-theist has to resolve. For the theist, there is no special line of communication from God from which God will call me and let me know what to do. Their relationship with God shapes who

they are but doesn't automatically translate into right decisions. Religious faith is often less certain than what Thornhill-Miller and Millican seem to suggest in their paper. The vast majority of religious believers live constantly with a tension between doubt and certainty, but they live with the hope that God somehow holds everything together, and (as the Moon in the Maxim) influences their existence. Religious faith fills religious believers with hope that they will be able to recognize and act upon unconditional obligations but their individual religious beliefs are not a guarantor that they will. Many religious believers (including the author of this paper) don't see miracles in the way Thornhill-Miller and Millican describe. Miracles are more extraordinary in the mundane: love, peace, natural world, a smile on the face of a refugee, a joy of music, the pleasure of friends, the moments of prayer – these are what we see as sparks of God in their existence. For many religious believers the notion of afterlife is a total mystery. In Christianity, the Kingdom of God is amongst us (not in some distant future). Salvation is embodied and present in every act of humanization; every act of dehumanisation calls for salvation. Bringing the human and the moral into the discussion of a religious belief would be a welcome move and the next step in the valuable dialogue which Thornhill-Miller and Millican initiated and Salamon is taking forward.

The above sample of possible ways of approaching of the relationship between religion and morality illustrates not only the complexity of the topic but also points to the wealth of responses and arguments which can inform or extend Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's approach. We haven't fully resolved the religion-morality question and are leaving it in the state as Plato's *Euthyphro* which ends with an unresolved dilemma. Socrates points out that Euthyphro, his dialogue partner, who is an expert on religious matters, cannot clearly explain whether something is pious or, in the language of the Divine Command Theory, morally right, because God commands it or God commands it because it is pious or morally right. The dialogue ends when the frustrated Euthyphro leaves. Perhaps the unresolvedness here is significant. For the theist, it gives not only a sense of consolation that the question of God and morality is indeed complex and perhaps we should not feel bad that we can't grasp it fully. Furthermore, it invites us to accept that although God becomes knowable to us (in Christianity through Incarnation), God is also a Mystery. Finally does it really matter whether God commands something because it is good or it is good because God commands it? Can we be satisfied with the idea that God commands or that God is in charge? As in the

Maxim of the Moon, the Moon is there whether we see it or not. Perhaps a more important question for working out in detail is how God's commandments or God's will are mediated to us. The answer to this question is necessary if our discussions on particular moral matters are to be constructive. Thornhill-Miller and Millican provide space for such a discussion in their second order theistic view.

It seems that there are religious reasons for being moral: because being moral is the will of God or it is to imitate God or it is an act of love for God. For example, it makes no sense if religious believers subscribe to their religious stories but fail to realize that life is a good gift or that every human being is precious or that the natural environment is to be respected or that the poor, the weak, and the marginalized are to be especially protected. This, for many religious believers, is the 'logic' of their faith. And, this logic is not alien to those who don't subscribe to the theistic framework. A moral framework based on rationality and love is possible for theists, non-theists and atheists. However, as Richard Harris, in his *Re-Enchantment of Morality: Wisdom for a Troubled World*, argues religion makes morality attractive¹⁶. So perhaps it is time to re-discover the wisdom of religious traditions, look for new and creative ways to re-enchant morality, ignite the passion for morality, and expand our interpretation of the Maxim of the Moon.

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¹⁶ Richard Harris, *The Enchantment of Morality: Wisdom for a Troubled World*, London: SPCK, 2008.

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