

ADRIAN-PAUL ILIESCU
THE AUTONOMY OF MORALS. TWO ANALYTIC
ARGUMENTS

Adrian-Paul Iliescu

Department for Moral and Political Philosophy, Bucharest University. Bucharest,
Romania.

Email: ad.paul.il@gmail.com

Abstract: The theist thesis that any true ethics must be a religious one is criticized from two different angles; it is shown that: (i) in order to avoid divine voluntarism, theism uses a supposition the acceptance of which makes arguments against autonomous ethics unacceptable, for they inevitably beg the question; (ii) it assumes a kind of moral foundationalism which is, according to some Wittgensteinian arguments, utterly superfluous; the idea that any authoritative ethics needs the absolute authority of God can thus be shown to be unjustified

Key Words: autonomy of ethics, moral truth, convention, foundationalism, moral authority, moral theism, rigid moral designators, theist exclusivism

Asking whether it is possible to have a fully developed ethics with no religious presupposition is a way of asking whether ethics is autonomous from religion. Supposing that God is the supreme authority from which moral truth necessarily springs means accepting that ethics necessarily originates in religion, and not in some sort of secular morality; and, if religion, and not some purely moral element, is the very foundation of ethics, then ethics itself is heteronomous.

The aim of this paper is to defend the autonomy of ethics against theism. In the first part of the text, I shall point out that some of the very arguments that are needed in order to build up the theist position on the heteronomy of ethics can be used to show that an autonomous ethics can be coherently constructed.. The whole perspective of the discussion will be conceptual and analytical; that is, I shall take theism and atheism as theoretical positions and analyze the arguments used inside them for and against the autonomy of ethics from a conceptual/analytical point of view. Moreover, I shall take for granted the common sense idea that no arguments that beg the question can be rationally accepted.

In the second part of the paper, I shall argue that the most important reason for which religious ethics is exalted and presented as superior to any secular ethics is not compelling, since it is inspired by a foundationalist view of moral certainty and intellectual authority that one does not need to adopt. In this second part, I shall make use of some arguments inspired by Wittgenstein's conception of language, knowledge and values.

The thesis that true ethics is necessarily religious (at least in its fundamentals) is usually supported by two presuppositions. The first is that ethics can only be authoritative if it derives from an authoritative source. The second is that there is only one truly authoritative source, namely God. The theist position is thus based on the following implicit or explicit reasoning: moral truth can only be certain and categorical if it springs from an absolute, uncontroversial, source; but there is just one such source: the authority of God. All other possible sources - human reason, human experience, social practice - are not reliable enough; by definition, it's only the divine authority that can be trusted entirely, because only God is absolute, infallible, infinitely wise and good.

I.

As it is well known, at least from Plato's *Euthyphro* and, in modern times, from Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (*Discours de métaphysique* - 1686), the theist position on moral values is inevitably confronted with a dilemma. Are moral values real values because God happens to embrace (and preach) them or the other way round: God embraces them because they (independently) are real values? Adopting the second alternative ruins the theist position concerning the heteronomy of ethics. Indeed, if moral values are real values independently from God's option for them, then they possess

autonomy from divine attitudes and ethics itself, as a realm constituted around such values, can safely be considered autonomous. Consequently, everybody who wants to make ethics dependent on religion is compelled to choose the first alternative.

But, to the satisfaction of atheists, adopting the alternative based on the principle that moral values become real essentially because God selects them generates a big problem. Making moral values dependent upon the God's will to select them as real and imperative creates the risk of some special sort of moral nihilism, i.e. the risk of having to accept the idea that anything that God may have chosen and postulated as a value could have become an objective, real, moral value. This idea is sometimes labeled as voluntarist, because it makes real moral values dependent upon divine, absolute, freedom of choice. Here is a quite recent formulation of this implication and of the way the conceptual mechanism of voluntarism works:

„Voluntarism implies that all moral truths are contingent on what God happens to approve. If God's attitudes had been different and he had approved of very different things, then very different things would have been good and bad, right and wrong; and if God were to come to approve of things very different from those he now approves of, then the moral status of these things would change. Thus, for example, had God not condemned genocide and rape, these things would not have been wrong, or, if God were to come to approve these things, they would have become morally acceptable. But these are awkward commitments, inasmuch as this sort of conduct seems necessarily wrong.“¹

Normally, one simply cannot imagine how God, by his mere personal choice, could have transformed genocide or rape into morally good or at least acceptable things; moreover, one simply doesn't want to contemplate such an alarming possibility, even if it was only an abstract one. The suggestion that any act - even acts we are horrified by - could have been labeled as «morally good» by divine decree is frightening, because it destroys what one considers to be «the rigidity of morals» - i.e. the capacity of morals to identify and confirm some rigid boundary between acts that can be seen as good, and acts that cannot, under any circumstances, be seen as good or acceptable. In other words, «good» and «bad» have some sort of «rigidity», because in any possible world genocide is bad, while charity is good. This is an essential part of what makes ethics authoritative in our eyes. If murder and genocide could have been included among «good acts», and a morality could have equally well been developed around them (seen as exemplary pieces of conduct), then ethics itself appeared as having such a wrong kind of flexibility that its authority over us vanished.

If we accept that any act could have been seen as moral, were God inclined to see it that way, then our own trust in morality appears to be ruined. In such a case, ethics would appear as unable to draw a trustworthy rigid boundary between right and wrong; its task would be reduced to that of simply conveying to us the implications of some divine contingent inclination. But it is hardly conceivable that God was capricious and religious ethics correspondingly accidental. That is why theists are compelled to find a way of avoiding the voluntarist conclusion quoted above as representing an „awkward commitment“.

Notoriously, there is no shortage of proposals in the matter. Theologians and philosophers have advanced various solutions to the problem, the specifics of which should not bother us here. What is important, from the present point of view, is just the common element of all these solutions – which is the conclusion that the very idea of God excludes the voluntarist conclusion. What we are constantly told, in the most various kinds of discourse, is this: the mere possibility that God would have approved of murder, genocide or rape is excluded not as a matter of fact, but as a matter of principle; the idea of God (as Supreme Goodness) is totally incompatible with such a possibility.

Now, this, I submit, is a good starting point for a discussion about the autonomy of morals. The theoretical step taken by theists, when they insist that any correct understanding of the concept of God excludes voluntarism, is particularly relevant for our present topic. By analyzing the conceptual consequences of such a step, one can develop some solid arguments against the theist position concerning the heteronomy of ethics.

II.

What are the implications of the conclusion that the very idea of God excludes the possibility that God could have approved of acts like murder, genocide or rape? The idea of God captures the identity of God; if the idea of God excludes the above alternative, it follows that the very identity of God excludes that alternative. One important consequence of that conclusion is the following: *a moral authority can generate the rigidity of morals by its very identity, and not by decree*. The rigid boundary between good and bad is thus acknowledged as a necessary and unchangeable one, inevitably deriving from the very nature of the relevant authority, not as contingent upon some free decision made (in some possible world, but not in others) by that authority.

It might seem that the theist position has thus been consolidated. But, in fact, it is precisely at this juncture that the biggest problem appears. For suppose that some people, with naturalist inclinations, came up with the following alternative theory: all human beings share some intrinsic, characteristic, quality that is called «human nature»; human nature directs

one's moral attitudes and generates the familiar rigid boundary between right and wrong, by providing «natural» authoritative insights about what one should, or should not, do. Thus, in normal circumstances, men and women cannot conceive of murder, genocide and rape as good acts, since human nature itself prevents such a possibility. The very identity of human nature excludes the possibility that such acts be - in some possible world as eccentric as you like, but in which humans remain nevertheless «normal» - taken as positive and exemplary; in virtue of some «intrinsic moral conscience», the very identity of normal human beings generates the rigidity of morals.

If such a banal theory was accepted, then the autonomy of morals could not be rejected any more. Ethics is seen as completely independent from religious authority and religious values; it is autonomous, to the extent that it derives from moral directions and instructions that are built into the very human nature. And, of course, the autonomy of ethics can be argued for not only by appeal to «human nature», but also by appeal to other similar concepts, such as «human reason». In all such cases, the explanation would be the same: the rigidity of morals is based upon human identity itself. Some built-in authority (be it human nature or reason) which is inseparable from human beings generates the rigidity of morals; but this amounts to saying that human beings do have a built-in moral authority to guide them – that is, the autonomy of morals is granted.

There is an obvious objection to the banal theory, but it is a minor one. It can be said that the frequency of immoral or amoral human conduct flies in the face of the idea that men and women do possess an in-built moral authority to guide them. Undoubtedly, it is easy to counter this objection. Weakness of will, vices (which can cause various sorts of moral sickness), moral abnormality or deviance, negative outer influences and probably other factors too can be invoked in order to explain moral failure: we do possess a built-in moral authority - it can be argued - but human personality is complex enough as to contain many other components which, in particular cases, raise huge obstacles to moral conduct. Exactly as we do possess reason, but we also err frequently, we do possess an inner moral guide, but we often fail to follow its directions. The above objection is, therefore, not fatal.

Now, what can theists still say in order to reject the naturalist idea of a secular morality based merely upon the dictates of human nature (or human reason), and, consequently, to reject the autonomy of morals? One possibility would be to dismiss such theories as «abstract» or even meaningless, because their proponents, the «naturalists», can never provide convincing proofs on the existence and on the undeniable traits of human nature (as an in-built moral authority). This way to attack can be attractive, especially for people who are inclined towards «non-nonsense», «palpable», solutions; but it is hardly adequate as a theist weapon. Obviously, if theists took that way, retaliation would be immediate and strong: atheists, for

instance, would be quick to point out that also the idea of God can be taken as «abstract» and insufficiently documented. The very fact that theists themselves invoke an invisible and controversial authority (God) puts them in an awkward position: they can hardly reject the «naturalist»'s right of resorting to some other invisible and controversial authority (like human nature, or reason). Theists, of course, would claim that there is nothing controversial about God and its capacity to found ethics; but agnostics, atheists and, in general, more skeptical minds, would reply that, on the contrary, it is the idea of human nature, and the idea of god, that should be taken as uncontroversial. In other words, theists would not gain much by entering a dispute about which idea - God or human nature - is less consolidated through conceptualization and through proof: both camps could provide endless chains of arguments and critiques against each other. It is thus very likely that theism will prefer to choose another way to attack.

The obvious guess is that theism would prefer to insist upon the argument that God is, by definition, not simply an authority on values, but, much more than that, *the only possible authority* capable of generating the rigidity of morals. This move is, of course, supported by a long tradition which claimed that understanding correctly the idea of God implies grasping the conclusion that there can be no rival axiologic or moral authority to Him. It is only the identity of God (as Supreme Goodness) that is capable of excluding options like taking genocide as a good act; the identity of human nature (which is not in itself Goodness) could never have the same capacity of exclusion. Thus, even if «naturalists» tried to propose different secular moral authorities, the theist answer would inevitably be that, in the area of founding values and of separating them rigidly from non-values, no secular authority can achieve what the divine authority can. In fact, it can be added, apparently secular ethical doctrines are actually secularized religious ones.

This foreseeable response can or cannot be countered - that is a matter I do not intend to approach at all here. And (I think) there is no need to approach it, because such an answer should be rejected for a different reason: it is simply begging the question.

Let us remember the very subject-matter that preoccupies us here: theists claim that there can be no secular ethics, because ethics is necessarily heteronomous; while «naturalists», and especially atheists, claim that a secular ethics is possible. That is, the bone of contention is precisely the question whether religious ethics is the only possible one. But then, if in order to prove that there can be no secular ethics, theists advance the argument that God is the only authority capable of creating the necessary moral rigidity, they simply beg the question. The idea that there can be no other ethics than the religious one is not, in fact, proved, but just reiterated in other words, via the claim that only God can be the founder of ethics. The thesis that any true ethics is in fact religious (apparently secular ethics being themselves religious ethics in disguise) and the thesis that any true ethics is

based on God's authority are so strongly connected conceptually, that they cannot be used to support each other.

The failure of theist exclusivism, which aims at showing that there can be no secular ethics, is, I think, easy to explain. As Plato, and much later Leibniz, have shown, theist metaethics is from the very beginning confronted with the objection that it makes God's intervention appear as either superfluous (in case moral values preexisted the divine commandments) or capricious (in case these values had been created by God through an arbitrary *fiat*). In order to avoid this very unpleasant dilemma, theism has been compelled to postulate that God's identity itself, and not God's capricious will, are the source of moral values and of rigid moral distinctions between right and wrong. This came as an interesting argument, but it also created a dangerous precedent, by suggesting that the existence of some fundamental moral distinctions can be explained as being enduring results, not of some particular act of choice (made by a certain authority), but of the very existence of the same authority. Now, if such explanations are acceptable, what could prevent «naturalists» from postulating other authorities (such as human nature or reason or a built-in moral conscience) which played the same foundational role? Or, to put it differently: if some people are entitled to claim that moral values can simply be deduced from the very existence of God, why shouldn't other people be allowed to believe that these values can be deduced from the very existence of human nature or from an universal reasoning capacity? In order to reject this possibility, which is at least logically coherent, theists need to stipulate that only God can generate moral codes and rigid moral distinctions. But, by doing that, they beg the question, for they actually assume what they initially wanted to prove: that no one else than God can found ethics. If one takes for granted that the very identity of some authority can create the rigidity of morals, the logical possibility arises that other authorities than God could perhaps do the same job; and, if one insists to reject this possibility, one has to use a factual premise like «there is only one authority, God, that is capable to generate moral truth». It is though logically unsound to use this premise in order to prove the conclusion that there can be no moral truth which comes from other source than God.

I think that points out an irrational ingredient in theism. Irrationality does not come from belief in God or from commitment to the postulate that God is (morally) authoritative and infallible, as critiques of religion have often claimed; but from *an epistemologically unjustifiable claim to exclusivity*: the theists feel themselves entitled to use the strategy of postulating the existence and the infallibility of God, and also of postulating that the rigidity of ethics derives from the very identity of God. But, simultaneously, they deny the «naturalists»' right to use a similar strategy, i.e. their right to postulate another authority (human nature or reason) capable of founding the rigidity of ethics in similar ways. This is epistemologically unacceptable, because it is as if someone declared: «I

have the right to postulate; you don't have a similar right». But, since the theists are human, and thus error-prone, exactly as the «naturalists» are, what justification could there be for such a declaration?

Theists could, of course, claim that they do not *postulate*, about God, but simply *acknowledge* some fundamental truths about Him, truths that derive from the very idea of God. Nevertheless, this argument does not change anything; it just pushes the controversy one step further. For, it can be asked, why couldn't also a «naturalist» define «human nature» or «reason» in such a way that his theses (for instance, the metaethical ones) be derivable from the very ideas of human nature or reason? And then, if the non-theist theses are actually derivable from the very idea of human nature, why couldn't people who support them claim themselves that they are not *postulating*, but simply *acknowledging*, obvious truths? The epistemological symmetry that exists between theist and non-theist positions makes the exclusivist strategy used by theists unjustifiable.

III.

It is interesting to see that a very similar error is being sometimes made in theist philosophy of law. Theist legal philosophers often claim that no secular law system can have true authority over people; true law presupposes the existence of a true authority; but only God has true authority; thus, it is only when the positive law system is seen as having been generated by God, that legal rules possess full validity and can actually be enforced.²

But, as regards positive law, the same old question can be asked: would God approve of it because it was actually «just»? Or positive law became just after, and because, God chose to enforce it? Theists will certainly say that it is inconceivable that God could approve of an unjust rule and thus consolidate its legal validity; i.e., that positive law approved of by God is just follows simply from the very identity (or essence) of God. But non-theists can, of course, provide an alternative interpretation of law. They will claim that law can also be created by practical reason, not by God. And, moreover: that «positive law (inspired by practical reason) is just» follows simply from the very essence of practical reason. What does that essence consist in? Well, practical reason is (by definition) sound, objective, mistake-free thinking. And, as a product of sound, objective, thinking, positive law can possess full authority and validity. The famous *Golden Rule*, or its legal implication encapsulated in the Lockean-Kantian-Millian principle that everyone should enjoy the maximal freedom compatible with a similar freedom for all the others, can be invoked as an example of law founded upon, and validated by, practical reason. John Rawls' principles of social justice can also be taken as an excellent case in point.

There is, however, an apparently obvious asymmetry: while theists can safely claim that God is infallible, non-theists could hardly claim that

practical reason is infallible too. Does that provide a strong argument for theism? Unfortunately, it does not. Defending the possibility of a secular system of positive law does not imply accepting the strong supposition that practical reason is infallible; it only implies the concession that practical reason can (sometimes) work correctly and generate an adequate system of law. For non-theists, there is no need to claim that practical reason always works perfectly and permanently provides absolute legal truths; they can be content with claiming that practical reason *can* work properly and *can* generate legal truth. In order to increase the plausibility of their point of view, non-theists might perhaps say that, although practical reason is indeed fallible, being put to work and to test by hundreds and hundreds of generations resulted in a successive elimination of errors – so that, although practical reason is in general error-prone, the systems of law founded on it have practically become error-proof.

Now, of course, theists could reject this argument, by saying, for instance, that human beings are so error-prone that, despite long experience and many error-correcting efforts, mistakes are still inevitable. This argument is not unreasonable at all, but using it is very risky, for non-theists will surely reply: if one acknowledges that humans are doomed to error, is there any proof that our certainties about God-inspired systems of law are reliable? What reasons we still have to be sure that such systems are not error-ridden too?

For, let us remember, we are talking about positive law, which is not itself included in the Bible or directly conveyed to humans by God. Theists cannot claim to be in possession of a divine system of positive law; they can only claim to be in possession of some principles or basic commandments from which the system should be derived and articulated. Developing such a system is a task for human reason, theoretical or practical. Thus, even if the original source of law is God's infallible authority, the positive system itself is constructed by human reason, which is always liable to err. Human errors can distort any system of positive law that one tries to derive from Biblical principles as much as they can distort one derived from principles provided by practical reason. Consequently, positive law deduced from religious principles is not a bit less fallible than positive law deduced from secular principles – for God's infallibility is not automatically and unproblematically transferrable to the system of positive law developed by them. Even if they try to develop it from Biblical principles, fallible humans can err in their efforts of building up the system of positive law.

To this argument, theist philosophers of law can only oppose the idea that, despite the fallible character of any positive system of law derived from religious commandments, the authority of such a system is genuine and great – while the authority of secular systems of positive law is inauthentic and deficient. But this, unfortunately, is another example of begging the question. You cannot deny the possibility of a genuinely

authoritative secular law-system by simply claiming that any secular law-system would be unauthoritative.

IV.

The *Euthyphro* problem springs, at least in part, from the fact that there is no usual conceptual connection between moral notions and the idea of an absolute moral authority. In a Wittgesteian vein: an order suggests an authority (in any kind of normal usage), but good and bad, right and wrong do not. The «grammar» of *order* does imply the existence of an emitting authority, while the «grammar» of such words like *good*, *bad*, *right*, *wrong* does not. We normally use moral terms (and terms like «just», «unjust», as well) without any presupposition about the existence of some authority on which the meaning and justification of such terms are based. When applying such terms, we don't usually suppose that their legitimacy is conditioned by the existence of some recognized or unrecognized, personal or, for that matter, impersonal, authority.

It is true, however, that the question «who determines right and wrong» pushes us towards postulating an authority in moral matters - where normally we don't think about one. But this question arises only in some theoretical or ideological contexts. Thus, the problem of axiological priority - «do values exist prior to some authority's declaring them as such, or does the authority exist prior to the values it announces?» - is one created by intellectualist or ideological approaches, not one inseparable from ethics or law *taken in themselves*. Ethical and legal problems can be solved without paying attention to axiologic priorities of the kind invoked in *Euthyphro*; true ethical and legal interests need not take into account these priorities, which should be safely left to theorists and ideologues. Any simple example can show this. For instance, «whether one should sacrifice one's personal creative aspirations in order to dedicate oneself to helping one's child or, on the contrary, one should leave one's child to follow his/her own fate, wherever it takes him/her, in order to follow one's personal aspirations» – that is a difficult moral problem that can be solved neither by postulating that God has founded morals, nor by postulating that morals is founded in human nature. Some people will provide solutions based on God's authority, while others will offer solutions based on the particularities of human nature; and both categories could opt for any of the two alternatives. Some theists would say: «sacrifice your own aspirations for your child, whom you should love more than you love yourself»; other theists would say: «leave your child into God's hands, where he/she is as safe as one could be, and follow your own aspirations which are a God's gift to yourself». On the other hand, some «naturalists» would say: «sacrifice your own aspirations for your child, because that is the command of human nature»; whereas others would say: «human nature dictates one to follow one's own creative aspirations, so no one should sacrifice them to one's

child». And, of course, tackling the problem of axiological priority is useless in this context; it can provide no hint about which one of the alternatives is more legitimate than the others.

It is thus only ethical theories and ideologies (be they theist or secular) that are confronted with «priority» obstacles, because they always start by postulating some moral authority (God, human nature etc). It is only various theories and ideologies that end in the same awkward position of having to conciliate normal usage with the idea (which is not naturally implied in normal usage) of an authority that generates moral truths. This creates a problem for theists, and also for non-theists. But it also excludes the theist position on the heteronomy of morals, since it shows that the very problem depends upon one's postulates; and it seems hardly deniable that one can postulate the foundational role of human nature or of reason, as well as one can postulate the foundational role of God.

V.

The widespread feeling that God's authority is likely to provide a rock-bottom foundation to morals, while other kinds of authority have only a limited and a relative foundational capacity, should not, in Wittgenstein's terms, be rejected as such, but rather deconstructed or analyzed as a piece of intellectualist entrapment. The deconstruction should just show that one can understand the rigidity of ethics and the necessary character of moral truths without any appeal to God or religious principles; thus, the necessary foundational role of God (in ethics) would appear as an illusion. In the remaining part, I shall sketch the main lines of such a deconstruction inspired by Wittgenstein's own thoughts.

The usual supposition is that «anything that is necessarily valid (true in every possible world) must be founded upon some sort of absolute authority» - let us call this supposition «the foundationalist thesis». We really want to think that fundamental moral and legal truths are absolutely well-founded (whence the rigidity of morals and law), and therefore we succumb to the foundationalist thesis : we take for granted that an absolute authority like the divine one should be recognized as the unique legitimate foundation for ethics and law.

But is there any real proof that being absolutely well-founded implies the existence of some absolute foundational authority (be it natural or supernatural)? Not at all; on the contrary, one can find some important counterexamples to the foundationalist thesis.

Take, for instance, mathematical truths. Do they come from some absolute authority? As far as we can understand, they don't; the authority behind them is simply human reason, which is far from being absolute and infallible. And though fundamental mathematical truths appear to us as absolute, as being as rigid as something can be (i.e., true in every possible world, with no exception allowed). If human commitments can be as strong

as mathematical truths are, if distinctions can be as rigid as mathematical distinctions are, although no absolute authority is to be found behind them, isn't that a proof that postulating some infallible, perfect, authority behind necessary truths and distinctions could be superfluous?

According to Wittgenstein, not only mathematical theses, but also other fundamental commitments appear as rigid and absolutely stable, although there is no supreme, perfect, authority to support them. For instance, some linguistic («grammatical», in Wittgensteinian terms) conventions are used by us as if they were necessarily valid, although no authority appears to have issued them. How could one explain that? One element of the explanation is *human need*. We have the deepest need for grammatical conventions, which, according to Wittgenstein, express *the essence* of things, and that need makes them (appear) so deep, so rigid, so absolute. Their well-founded character, Wittgenstein suggests, comes from our profound need to accept them:

„if you talk about *essence*, you are merely noting a convention. But here one would like to retort: there is no greater difference that that between a proposition about the depth of the essence and one about a mere convention. But what if I reply: to the *depth* that we see in the essence there corresponds a *deep* need for the convention“³

Grammar (in Wittgenstein's sense), i.e. the set of essential norms of language, is thus autonomous, because its components are conventions that cannot be justified by reference to something else.⁴ The hypothesis can be made that it's the same with moral truths, which are norms too, although norms of action, not of speech. Thus, it might be the case that we take certain moral conventions as deep, absolutely rigid and unchangeable, because they occupy a certain central place in human life – because, in our specific form of life, we simply can't do without them.

In such a case, the question «how is it possible that a fallible source, such as human reason, can lead to absolutely well-founded truths?» could be answered by saying: there are some conventions that we need so much that we simply cannot think outside them; they thus become necessary truths for us, truths that are valid in any possible world. Their well-founded character does not spring from some absolute authority, but rather from our deepest needs.

But is it possible that the well-founded character of moral truths be of the same kind? The fact that one talks here about conventions might appear as an impediment: moral truths do not seem conventional to us, on the contrary, they appear to be the very opposite of mere conventions. As it is obvious from the above quotation, Wittgenstein was aware that such objections can be raised. His reply would of course be again that «*the depth* of moral truths comes in fact from *our deep need* of moral truths». But how

should one interpret this reply? My answer is along the following lines. Moral norms are not conventional in the same way in which some traffic rules (for instance, «drive only on the right side of the road») are; such traffic conventions can be changed at will, but, of course, moral norms cannot be changed similarly. They are *deep* or rigid, in the sense that we cannot do without them: we simply cannot live together without assuming them as necessarily valid. Our fundamental moral distinctions are rigid by definition: not because some authority made them that way, but because they are needed as a foundation for human life and human action. This brings us at the next argument.

A second element of the explanation is *the role* played by some commitments in human activities. In his analyses of knowledge, Wittgenstein insists that some propositions acquire the status of «hard», «unshakable» elements, functioning as a „channel“ or a „river-bed“ for inquiry, for the flux of propositions (of thought).⁵ «I exist», «the world exists», or, to take Wittgenstein's own example, «every human being has parents» are parts of the very framework of our thought. They are absolutely certain, not because some absolute authority confirmed them totally, but because they do constitute the very structure of our thought; they are used in order to support all the other elements, and therefore they cannot be replaced or doubted. By being „removed from traffic“, i.e. placed in a «beyond any doubt»-position, such propositions can be used as a foundation for human enterprise:

„Can't an assertoric sentence, which was capable of functioning as an hypothesis, also be used as a foundation for research and action? I.e. can't it simply be isolated from doubt, though not according to an explicit rule? It simply gets assumed as a truism, never called into question, perhaps not even ever formulated“.⁶

The same question, of course, can be asked about moral norms or moral truths. If we think about the fundamental moral elements (principles, norms, distinctions) as commitments that are «removed from traffic», that are «hardened» by being assumed as truisms, we can explain their «solidity» and consequently their foundational role (notice that Wittgenstein speaks of some assertoric sentences as becoming a foundation not only for research, but also for action). That might explain why some conventions, which have no external absolute authority to support them, can still appear as absolutely well-founded and irreplaceable: because they themselves serve as the very foundation of our form of life, or as the very scaffolding⁷ of human action. They are conventions, because they are not founded in some absolute authority or in some infallible justification; but they are not arbitrary, changeable, conventions, but rather necessary, irreplaceable ones. We

cannot doubt them, simply because our entire mental, institutional and social web would collapse without them.

Wittgenstein has never claimed to have provided a theory about moral norms. His suggestions are not meant to give a full-fledged theory or to solve epistemological and metaethical problems once for all, but only to show how necessary truths could be seen as created by fallible humans. Is Wittgenstein's interpretation fully satisfactory? Does it account entirely for the rigidity of ethics? Does it constitute a sufficient proof that morals can be autonomous? Fortunately enough, answering these questions is not a must in the present context of discussion. What Wittgenstein's view of conventions suggests is an alternative way of explaining the autonomy of ethics. If he is right, ethics can be autonomous, and consequently theist exclusivism is not justified, because the authoritative character of moral principles can be accounted for without any reference to God. Theists who insist to defend their exclusivism have to prove that Wittgenstein's views are mistaken. The burden of proof is upon them.

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Notes

¹ David O. Brink, „The Autonomy of Ethics“, In: *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Ed. Michael Martin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 152.

² Among thinkers who defend this position, one could mention also the Romanian author Eugeniu Sperantia, and his article “Droit laïque, droit

transcendant et obligativité”, published in the journal of Cluj Law Faculty: *Analele Facultății de drept din Cluj*, vol. III, section 4, 1942

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), I, § 74

⁴ For a short but very clear presentation of the autonomy of grammar, see P.M.S. Hacker *Insight and Illusion*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), chapter VII, § 2

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), § 96-99, § 210

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), § 87-88

⁷ Actually, Wittgenstein doesn't speak about the scaffolding of action, but about „the scaffolding of our thoughts“ - see *On Certainty*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), § 211; but it seems obvious that action is in need of a scaffolding, exactly like thinking.