



# THE HARM DONE TO MORALITY BY THE IDEA OF GOD

PAUL ANDERTON

AND God spake all  
saying,  
I am the LORD thy God  
I brought thee out of the land  
out of the house of bondage  
Thou shalt have no other  
gods before me.  
Thou shalt not make a

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
[www.libertarian.co.uk](http://www.libertarian.co.uk) email: [admin@libertarian.co.uk](mailto:admin@libertarian.co.uk)

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Paul Anderton is a retired maths and science teacher.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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Religion is regarded by some people as a major obstacle to the achievement of liberty, both for believers and other people with whom the believers might 'sincerely' interfere. But other people are sure that their religion is a liberating experience which is essential for their mental and moral stability. The ultimate origin of such views is generally taken to be 'God', who is usually considered perfect and omnipotent. This and the following considerations apply specifically to the monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but much can be adapted to others. Considering every possible idea of God would be rather tedious and somewhat irrelevant to situations in which most readers might be interested.

It is worth summarising the arguments against this idea and the objections to them.

## OMNIPOTENCE AND EVIL

The most fundamental difficulty with the 'perfect and all powerful God' idea is the existence of 'evil'. In logical terms consideration of the exact nature of evil is strictly irrelevant. It is the contradiction between an omnipotent God and the existence of anything of which this God does not approve, whether or not it is our idea of 'evil', that matters.

The difficulty is, of course, quite simply stated: if God is omnipotent, why does he not remove anything He does not like from 'His' Universe. If He does not remove it then either He is not omnipotent or He actually approves of everything at present in the Universe including evil. God cannot be perfect or ideally 'Good'.

The standard reply to this is of particular interest to libertarians. The evil that exists is supposed to be *necessary* evil, introduced by *Man* as part of the immense privilege of exercising free-will. (Not a possibility for any other species of course.)

This explanation is not at all satisfactory because it does not solve the problem, and introduces new difficulties.

Either God knew what the result of creating Man would be or he did not. If He did know then He evidently was a willing party to the introduction of evil into a universe free of it until then. This is hardly the act of a 'perfect' being!

On the other hand if God did *not* know what the result of creating Man would be then His perfection evidently does not include foresight. Another characteristic of God, in addition to omnipotence and moral perfection, is generally supposed to be complete knowledge of the future. It is this omniscience on which the assurance of the ultimate triumph of 'good' over 'evil' depends. So if omniscience has to be abandoned then this assurance goes with it.

Secondly there is the problem of how a supposedly perfect being could create either a universe in which evil was possible or a species such as Man which was capable of introducing it. It would seem that there must have been some concept of, and capability of, evil in God himself for Him to create conditions in which it can appear.

But supposing, for purposes of argument, that He were perfect. What then would be the purpose of creating the Universe? Before creation there was just God and that was absolute perfection. After creation there was God plus a Universe flawed at least in part by 'evil', whether introduced knowingly or not. So it seems that creation has certainly produced a deterioration in overall 'goodness' and that creation was something of a bad investment for God.

## FREEDOM AND GOODNESS

The idea that freedom requires the existence of evil is also worth careful consideration. In the first place there are several alternative uses of the concept of freedom. The one that is generally implied in the context of good and evil is also considered essential for the application of any punishment and reward system. The basic idea is that any individual will, as an inevitable consequence of the passage of time and presentation of opportunities, be confronted by the necessity to choose between alternative courses of action. Among these alternatives will be some 'good' ones and some 'bad' ones. The virtuous person habitually chooses the good ones and gets the approval of God. Anybody who habitually chooses the bad alternatives is certainly not approved of by God and might well be punished by other people before God sees to it eventually anyway. By persistently choosing good alternatives instead of bad ones an individual can achieve highly virtuous status. But such choices must be free in the sense that the opportunity to choose the 'bad' alternative must exist.

This immediately raises two more serious difficulties. In the first place, if this is the way to achieve virtue, or 'goodness', in what sense can God be 'perfect'? According to the creation hypothesis God started off perfect, but could not have achieved this state by using His free-will to battle with evil because there wasn't any evil before Man introduced it. So as it is evidently possible to be not only moderately virtuous but actually perfect without having to battle with evil, it is not unreasonable to ask why we humans should not be given the chance to achieve that status without having to put up with evil as a condition.

Secondly there seems to be some philosophical sleight-of-hand introduced with the concept of freedom. The most satisfying experience of freedom is when the choice is between pleasant or even virtuous alternatives. The free market is - rightly - commended because it tends to offer individuals ever widening freedom of choice between desired alternatives (in exchange for the expenditure of either time or money or some combination of them). There is also opportunity for free choice between the alternative ways of actually doing good such as supporting a charity to treat sick horses or another one for mentally handicapped children. Such choices are by any reckoning an application of free-will but do not involve evil created by Man in any sense (unless we insist on the plainly absurd proposition that any evil, including sickness in horses and congenital mental handicap, must be Man-made). So it seems that exercising the pleasant aspects of free-will does not actually require the existence of Man-produced evil. The sort of choices where evil is involved are only free in the sense that there is supposed to be an opportunity for the evil choice without insurmountable physical obstruction, so the evil must be resisted by individual psychological effort - because the evil is supposed to be particularly attractive. In other words it seems that the existence of evil is not a *necessary* condition for the exercise of free-will as a pleasant or privileged experience.

## THE IDEA OF GOD AND THE EXPANSION OF KNOWLEDGE

In view of these difficulties it is perhaps surprising that the idea of God is still taken seriously. But this would be a rather hasty conclusion. In the first place such a conclusion presupposes a considerable respect for purely rational considerations, which is not exactly universal, and in the second place it assumes that the idea of God is similar to a scientific theory - open to proof or disproof.

A general respect for rational conclusions is not, in fact, particularly widespread. The most usual attitude, particularly in politics and other areas of mass persuasion, is that 'reason' is just one of a range of devices which can be used to gain support for some idea or theory already accepted. Some of the other devices are: simply ignoring argument and going on to consider any selfish benefits, disparaging or discrediting individuals with alternative views, denying the relevance of reason anyhow, and threats of economic or social penalties for dissidents.

The other consideration - the significance of God as a scientific or pseudo-scientific theory to explain aspects of the observed world - is perhaps worth pursuing in more detail for indications of why the idea of is so persistent.

For most of history the god hypothesis was not all that 'unreasonable'. So far as any individual could observe the universe was by today's standards very limited. The sun and stars revolved round the earth. All species were fixed. Social organisation was also fixed and certainly not subject to analysis and conscious modification, as we assume it is now. So the idea that this situation had been created in the relatively recent past by some super-human being was not completely absurd. In those circumstances God was not an obviously unreasonable explanation of how the world came into being and of its purpose.

This basic reasonableness received two major setbacks from the expansion of knowledge. Copernicus showed that the earth circled round the sun and Darwin showed that Man was just another placental mammal with monkeys and apes as fairly close relatives. Both ideas were strenuously resisted by the religious establishment at the time they were first introduced.

Most people are not really aware of these extensions of knowledge. There is very little emphasis on them in the educational system either in science courses or in history. Consequently the implication of the religious hypothesis - that human beings in general are the centre and purpose of the Universe and that their individual behaviour is a matter of near cosmic importance - is not immediately perceived as highly improbable. In fact the implication that human beings in general, and individual believers in particular, are of special importance is almost certainly one of the main attractions of religious belief. (Another illustration of this tendency can be seen in debates on such things as abortion, where the desire to emphasise the special nature of human beings in some cosmic sense is obvious.)

## HOW MORALITY USES GOD

The other major problem supposedly solved by the religious hypothesis is that of interpersonal behaviour or morality. In fact the maintenance of morality and the supposed distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' is often cited as one of the important reasons for teaching religion and, if possible 'inculcating' religious belief in children. Morality and social behaviour in general (including religious observance and ritual) are of course a major part of religious practice and are generally represented as an expression of 'God's will'.

There is an interesting implication of the supposed justification of religion as a means of establishing morality and civilised behaviour. This is that morality must somehow be perceived independently of religion itself. The argument "we must teach religion because it is the only way of getting people to obey the true moral code" obviously implies that the supposed true moral code has somehow been perceived *without* religion and that the problem is to get people (other people, presumably, than those clever enough to know what true morality is already!) to keep to the rules of 'true morality' in spite of temptations. There is then another sleight-of-mind trick which presents the morality as dependent on religion, the authority of God being invoked to endorse the morality.

At first the suggestion that morality is somehow perceived without some sort of religious or other authoritative 'guidance' might seem very unlikely. If it is so perceived, why the various arguments which seem to be characteristic of many supposedly moral issues?

There are many examples, such as attitudes to war, patriotism, sex outside marriage, use of animals, abortion, euthanasia, the environment, race and sex discrimination, and quite a few others. Usually one side at least in such disputes invokes God as a referee whose authority endorses their position and should silence dissent. More often each side relies to a large extent on individual interpretation of God's word.

This usually further confuses the situation because it deflects attention from what is really at issue.

The perception of morality actually arises from what is a sort of subconscious reasoning process, sometimes referred to as intuition, or simply as common sense. This effect is quite well known and exploited in other areas, particularly science and mathematics, where it is accepted that progress and discoveries are often achieved by sudden insight and justified afterwards by being presented as a logical deduction.

The idea that morality is perceived independently of religion by this means is resisted for several reasons which can be clarified by consideration of specific examples.

In the first place there are some moral rules about which there is virtually no disagreement. Murder and theft are the obvious ones. Anybody can see that these activities must be prevented so far as possible for purely practical social reasons. Unless individuals can be confident that both their lives and property are safe, they will be constantly preoccupied with security and therefore inhibited in engaging in social activities of a cooperative nature which are necessary in order to obtain the evident benefits of civilisation.

But then difficulties arise. What about foreigners or members of another tribe in so-called primitive society? The prevalence of warfare and the opportunity for pillaging puts a very practical limitation on too pedantic an application of the principle. Fortunately it is quite easy both to accommodate the exceptions needed for practical reasons and to avoid any disadvantages of doing so. The rules do not apply to outsiders. This removes the obligation to treat them the same way, for outsiders will not have been taught to behave according one's own tribal culture anyhow. But it is nevertheless a breach of principle and a logical complication which again, for practical psychological reasons, is best not stated too clearly. Pretending that the decision was made by God distracts attention from the basic contradiction. This is essentially an enabling mechanism for double-think, but the double-think is in fact quite necessary both in primitive conditions of potentially warring tribes, and in the modern nation state or regional power block. It is perhaps worth noting that the 'reasoning' postulated here need not be particularly abstract. The perception of mutually advantageous arrangements on a 'tit for tat' basis, for instance, would be a plausible explanation of basic 'moral' arrangements, at least in small groups.<sup>1</sup>

## SEX AND PROCREATION

Now let us consider another type of moral imperative which not only causes puzzlement but also illustrates the trouble caused by the rigidity which must be characteristic of 'word of God' morality.

Marriage in some form has always been a feature of civilisation. The detailed arrangements have varied from time to time and place to place, and still do, but the basic features have always been discernible - some sort of supposedly permanent association between men and women, often on a one to one basis but with quite a few examples of one to many (though never, so far as I know, many to many). These arrangements have always displayed signs of both acceptance and resistance on the part of individuals; and morality, often backed by law, has been very actively involved in influencing these relationships.

The prime function of the marriage system has obviously been to ensure the orderly procreation and training of children. As biologists have observed, the human infant has, proportionately, a much longer period of dependence on its parents (or other adults) than the young of any other species. This has to be accommodated somehow into social organisation. Another consideration is that human

beings seem to be relatively more sexually orientated than most other species. There is no breeding season as in most other species, for instance, so sexual interest is full-time rather than seasonal. This could be either because human beings can ensure a more or less constant food supply and so be independent of seasons, or because brain development opened up many more opportunities for interesting things to do so that sexual activity might be in danger of neglect or abandonment if it had not concurrently acquired additional attractiveness. Also human beings are the only species clever enough to have noticed the connection between sexual intercourse and procreation. (It is, incidentally, quite inappropriate to talk about the 'purpose' of sex being procreation. All species persist because sexual activity leads to breeding, not the other way round.)

Knowledge of the connection between intercourse and birth is the key to the attractiveness of marriage and its function. It provides both an old age insurance and a sort of immortality through the children. (The conditions assumed here are from 'primitive' times to a few generations ago where 'traditional' moral attitudes were developed. The influence of more recent developments is to be considered presently.) So long as exclusive proprietary rights can be established over specific children then they can be trained or conditioned into accepting an obligation to look after old and infirm parents as a sort of return for their education and inheritance. The opportunity to inculcate ideas and behaviour patterns, and pass on cherished property, leads to the idea of influence beyond the grave - also a very attractive prospect.

But for the system to work it is essential for children to be born only to married people. The social significance of the marriage, as distinct from a purely private arrangement, is to impress the seriousness of the condition and its associated obligations, not only on the individuals concerned but also on others by making a public statement which sends a general signal about appropriate behaviour towards the parties to the marriage.

If by some means everybody could be persuaded to stick to the system and its rules, derive whatever contentment they could from parenthood and dynasty creation, and contain all alternative indulgences of lust or friendship, no doubt the arrangement would work well. But of course real life is not so simple. For one thing there are questions of whom to marry which are not of only personal significance. Parents take a great interest in influencing the future, through their dynasty, and this can introduce considerable complication.

From an individual point of view marriage is supposed to solve three pressing emotional problems and a few practical ones as well. Lust, the desire for children of known parentage and a supportive relationship, are the emotional ones; the practical ones range from performing domestic chores, to child minding and education and, perhaps, promoting career enhancing contacts between families.

But if such rules can be presented as part of the Universe - the Will of God - then potentially the chances of persuading individuals to stick to them are increased. And historically other obligations were added, though not emphasised to the same extent as the taboo on adultery. Chief among these other obligations was the supposed duty to produce children, and the reciprocal obligations of these children.

### CONTRACEPTION

So long as the 'God hypothesis' seems sensible *and the practical necessity of the rules is also clear*, there is not a serious difficulty. (There might be serious difficulties for *individuals* who find themselves unhappy, but provided the majority, backed by 'reason', are satisfied, this imperfection can be ignored.)

Doubts about the system resulted from technological developments in the form of effective contraception. This enabled lust and procreation to be separated and so instantly demolished one of the key 'common sense' justifications for the marriage rules and taboos. The reaction to contraception also illustrates the major practical shortcomings of the God hypothesis in practice.

As with recognising the significance of scientific ideas, the first reaction of both the Church and State was to forbid, or severely restrict, the use of the new technology. This was on the grounds that the purpose of intercourse was the production of children and that contraception frustrated this aspect of God's will. The reaction of the 'progressives' was to justify contraceptive use on supposedly pragmatic grounds. It avoided unwanted children and promoted women's health. It enabled mothers to look after their wanted children better. It eliminated abortions. Eventually the widespread use of contraception was accepted. The real reasons were partly genuine family planning but mostly the indulgence of lust (particularly by women after the invention of the 'pill'). But the pretence of protecting the form of traditional marriage is still maintained with the result that people are discouraged from taking full advantage of being able to separate lust, procreation, and relationship formation. (This is well illustrated by calling contraception distribution and advice centres Family Planning Clinics when they would more appropriately be called either Family Avoidance Clinics or Lust Indulgence Centres.)

The result is considerable confusion, particularly among unreflective people who depend for their beliefs and attitudes on official or other prestigious sources. Developments which rationally would simply produce a reassessment of practice in the direction of expanded choice are instead supposedly incorporated into the existing rule system with some pretence at actually strengthening it. But the opportunities are nevertheless perceived and taken advantage of by increasing numbers of individuals. The result is that the whole marriage structure has gradually eroded with the actual reasons for this studiously avoided. Meanwhile, finding arcane and complicated explanations and 'solutions' for the resulting 'problems' forms a minor industry employing a lot of unproductive labour from 'agony aunts' and psychiatrists to professors of sociology. In this case religious belief has plainly acted as a considerable impediment to taking advantage of technological development.

### AIDS

In passing, I suppose some reference must be made to AIDS, though the purpose of mentioning marriage etc. was not to consider appropriate behaviour, but merely to use it as an example of the trouble caused by rigid ideas of God's will. In fact AIDS is very analogous to untreated syphilis, which was a problem about which very similar advice was (mostly sensibly) given, until the widespread availability of penicillin made such advice somewhat redundant. Anybody with a long enough memory might remember the campaign of the late 1940s on the lines of "VD is a shadow on health and clean living is the only real safeguard". Diseases of one sort or another have always been a risk factor in sexual behaviour, rather as avalanches and loose rocks are a risk factor in mountaineering. But on the assumption that a cure for AIDS will eventually be found, the present slightly enhanced risks are, historically speaking, only temporary.<sup>2</sup>

### MORALITY WITHOUT GOD

The significance of these two examples, in the present context, is to illustrate that so-called moral arguments are actually arguments about fundamental assumptions and their consequences. In the first relatively simple case it was about where to draw the line on mutually supporting or cooperative behaviour - around one's family, neighbourhood, country, or extend it to the whole of 'humanity' (or even further to other species). In the case of sexual morality the problem is to accommodate the extensive adjustments to established habits of behaviour which the separation of lust, friendship, and procreation could make possible.

The effect of associating religion with established habits is to slow down constructive change and, more importantly, make such change, as it does inevitably occur, both difficult and guilt-ridden. Also to produce considerable confusion from inconsistencies between different aspects of what is supposed to be 'God's will'. In the case of sexual morality this has resulted in the exquisitely absurd situation of taxpayers being simultaneously burdened with the

support of 'family planning' services through the NHS *and* abortion facilities *and* extensive social services support for single parent families.

So how is morality to be sustained if the will of God is abandoned? Historically, when the will of God was almost universally accepted there was still a lot of immorality of one kind or another. Secondly, now God is not taken so seriously, morality is not completely abandoned. So God is not a sufficient guarantee of morality and His disappearance does not necessarily take all morality with it.

This observation merely adds support to the contention that morality is appreciated independently of God. There are at least three reasons why this is so.

First, there is a rough and ready appreciation of what is reasonable behaviour to sustain civilised conditions and the conscious appreciation of the benefits of cooperation.

This situation can be illustrated by analogy with the development of mathematics. Originally this was a purely empirical subject. Then the Greeks tried to put it on a purely logical basis by stating fundamental assumptions (which at that time were considered obviously true of the real world) and then deducing other properties supposedly necessarily true of the real world (the famous theorems). Later developments often followed a similar pattern. Practical considerations stimulated the development of new branches of mathematics (e.g. the study of motion and probability) which were initially based largely on intuition. Students of calculus in the eighteenth century were told that they had to have faith in the methods, which included dubious concepts such as infinitesimals. In the nineteenth century all this was put on a proper logical basis and faith was no longer (theoretically) necessary. But nevertheless many present day students of mathematics must feel that a good deal of faith is still required. There are still two approaches to teaching mathematics - as a logically deductive system or as 'truths' which can be 'discovered' - and preferred methods of teaching alternate between the two approaches.

The analogy with morality is, of course, a fairly rough one, but nevertheless instructive. There have been interesting attempts to construct a morality from first principles. John Rawls,<sup>3</sup> for instance, has explored what sort of rules would be acceptable by people who did not know what their social circumstances or position would be. In *Anarchy State and Utopia*, Robert Nozick has replied by suggesting various different criteria for constructing ethical systems.<sup>4</sup>

### MORALITY WITHOUT JUSTIFICATION

In practice detailed consideration of the assumptions behind many supposedly moral precepts is deliberately avoided. This is because to do so would reveal glaring contradictions with observation or other manifestations of supposed common sense. For instance confining 'charitable' rules to selected individuals requires the assumption of some principle equivalent to "wogs begin at Calais" which could hardly survive logical examination. Similarly the maintenance of pre-contraceptive rules of sexual behaviour in post-contraceptive circumstances requires some principle such as "sexual contact is only meaningful as part of a larger caring relationship" or the "purpose of sex is procreation".

Secondly there is the effect from generation to generation of example and conditioning. Though it often doesn't seem like it, children do in fact generally adopt most of the views and behaviour of their parents and other adults and this tends to ensure continuity in 'values'.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly there are simply the rewards of conformity, which not only slows down the sort of changes indicated above but provides an incentive to justify conformity as a means of maintaining self respect. By this is meant the observation which any person with simple self-interest can make, that fitting in with whatever beliefs and behaviours seem to be adopted by the majority, and in particular the most influential people, is virtually essential for any sort of social progress or even acceptance. This ranges from wearing the

right clothes, through saying the right things to the most important people, to apparently agreeing with the current conventional wisdom in answers to examination questions for University degrees. The effect is to produce tacit acceptance of the existing value system by every new generation so that changes only occur where the pressure from perceived advantage in being unconventional is greatest, and then to absorb such changes with as little disturbance of supposed principles as possible.

It is perhaps difficult for readers of this sort of paper to believe how irrelevant theoretical argument seems to be for the vast majority of people preoccupied with the everyday problems of ordinary living - paying the bills, looking after children, doing the garden, keeping up with the Joneses. In those conditions theoretical arguments seem remote and irrelevant. Most people are, broadly speaking, content to take things as they find them and just keep on the lookout for the next chance of making social or career progress.

### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ATTRACTIONS OF RELIGION

Would the abandonment of religion and 'God' make morality more difficult or even impossible to maintain and teach convincingly? There is no real large scale example as a matter of fact. The so-called atheist regimes, now substantially defunct, of eastern Europe and the USSR were effectively based on the secular religion of Communism. Whether Communism can be regarded as a religion depends primarily on whether one is considering the metaphysical content or the psychological appeal. Most philosophers would insist that some sort of spiritual or super-human entity was a necessary requirement for a system to be called a religion, from which it follows that a specifically atheistic system cannot be a religion.

But psychological appeal is another matter. Insofar as ideas are 'inspiring' in the sense of inducing people to devote a lot of time to promoting them, give away their money, and even take enormous risks with life itself, the similarity between religions and Communism is very close. Both religion and communism supply a powerful mix of psychological attraction. The discernible elements in this attraction are: (i) membership of a community with a common purpose and set of beliefs, and exclusiveness based on specialised knowledge, private rituals, and a sub-language, allegedly derived from an irrefutable 'cosmology'; (ii) the prospect of a better life sometime, somehow, when an ideal condition is eventually realised; (iii) the promise of special privileges for believers in this ideal state (often in direct contradiction to promises of universal equality); (iv) the establishment of a higher authority which to a large extent removes from believers the burden of deciding on their own behaviour and accepting responsibility for its consequences - just follow the rules and you will be alright. This is probably the source of the seemingly paradoxical sensation of freedom which some believers ascribe to their faith - it is freedom *from* individual responsibility rather than freedom *for* it. (Interesting subsidiary question: does any of this apply to libertarianism, and if not why not and must we always lack serious 'inspiration'?) In other words it seems that all of the, admittedly only partially successful, moral systems have been at least tacitly based on some 'religious' cosmology.

But, if the observations above are correct, they were never *actually* based on religious cosmology. Rather the process was reversed. Religious cosmologies were adjusted to accommodate currently convenient or fashionable moral systems. These moral systems were primarily based on similar rational principles to those which have enabled us to construct a scientific cosmology whose main pillars are astrophysics and evolution. This cosmology should be convincing in the sense of substantially conforming to the real test of any theory - it enables predictions to be made which are confirmed by observation, whereas religious cosmologies, including Communism/Marxism, have consistently failed that test.

### HOW CAN MERIT BE JUDGED?

So what about the practical problem of teaching morality? Does it follow that morality is so indefinite that it must be left to each individual to decide for himself with consequent inevitable chaos, as religious fundamentalists often insist?

Not if the supposed connection between religion and morality were specifically abandoned and a fresh start made from the real situation. This would involve making the connection between 'reasonableness', including the rather difficult but important attitude of seeing oneself as a minor part of the universe rather than the centre of it, and expected behaviour. For the main - supposedly moral - rules this is not particularly difficult. The main principles are in fact neither obscure nor difficult to understand. Perhaps the easiest to understand but most difficult to apply is 'equality', the logical basis of which is easily demonstrated by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

On what grounds could one person be considered in some way more important or deserving of privilege than another? Colour? Intelligence? Sex? Parentage? Whatever is suggested needs to be justified on its own account. Suppose we select intelligence. So why is intelligence so special? Because intelligent people are more 'useful'? (Not necessarily. Intelligent people are sometimes ingenious criminals or a nuisance in other ways, and stupid people can be quite useful and very little trouble, but let's not bother about details like that for the time being.) In fact the justification has been changed from intelligence in itself to 'usefulness'. So we have to justify 'usefulness' as a criterion and in doing so provide some satisfactory definition of what could be meant by useful. The only non-arbitrary way of settling this would be simply to observe what sort of people were generally considered most useful. This in turn would lead to alternative criteria, for instance the 'market' in the form of who can attract most voluntary payments of money for their services (e.g. pop stars, athletes, financiers), or public opinion as discovered by pollsters (e.g. nurses, electricians, refuse collectors).

Whatever criterion were selected the results would not correspond to possession of intelligence. So the result of trying to set up some criterion would be an inconsistency of some sort. The same would apply to any other possible ranking principle, or else it would simply result in a potentially infinite regression of 'justifications' amounting, in effect, to simply asserting "that's how it should be". And that, of course, is not any sort of objective criterion. (It should be noted, in passing, that if, by some means, the majority of people were persuaded to accept some criterion for discrimination - such as colour or sex - then it might enable the criterion to be applied in practice, quite possibly through the exercise of 'democratic' principles in lawmaking. But all it would really mean is that a lot of people had been persuaded to make the same mistake.)

So what about economic inequalities? Should they be eliminated so that everybody has more or less the same economic resources at their disposal? This has been, and still is, a recurrently expressed ideal for many religions and there are many limited religious communities where serious attempts have been made to practice this ideal.

But for the real world inhabited by a wide variety of people rather than self-selected idealists there must be a lot more compromise with what is practical, both psychologically and economically. This has been considered in detail elsewhere (e.g. by Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises) so I will just note the most relevant considerations.

(I) If by some means it were arranged that everybody had equal wealth at some particular instant in time and equal income from then on, the situation would not last long. After a very short time some people would have saved a good deal of their capital and income and the more profligate and easy-going would be eager to borrow. Consequently inequalities would appear again.

(II) Incentives would be seriously reduced if the effects in (I) were to be 'corrected' by periodic redistributions. This is often represented as an expression of 'selfishness' which could be eliminated by education. Perhaps education could have an effect on attitudes and perhaps not, but motivation is not the primary impediment to helping others in any meaningful way, beyond assistance in extreme circumstances such as famine, earthquakes, communist governments etc. Information is the limiting factor. An individual, in the nature

of things, knows his own circumstances best together with those of his family and immediate associates. The further any situation is removed from this, the less likely any second guessing of what is needed, or what is supposed to be beneficial to somebody else, is likely to be correct, especially when unintended secondary effects are taken into account.

(III) If there is another change of criterion, to say 'satisfaction' itself, then the (quite insoluble) problems of calculation resulting, from satisfaction changing with circumstances and the opportunities available, present themselves. This would apply to any other non-measurable criterion, such as 'access to power' for instance. The advantage of money, as considered in (I), is that it is at least exactly quantifiable.

So is there another problem of compatibility between what seems morally or rationally demanded and the practical considerations of psychology and the nature of the real world? There is if the idea of equality is taken literally to apply to all possible conditions. In any case, the attempt to define how 'equality' should be expressed, together with political schemes to achieve suitable conditions, misses the most important consideration which is the function of individual choice in what to make of whatever conditions and opportunities are available.

One individual might decide that wealth is so important that it is worth devoting the whole of waking time to pursuing it, whilst another chooses to devote only enough effort to achieve comfortable subsistence and the remainder to some carnal indulgences. Obviously the effect of such individual choices would be differences in wealth but the individual 'satisfactions' might not (probably wouldn't) correspond to the resulting wealth distribution.

## INHERITANCE

Inheritance makes quite a difference and is a complication. To avoid 'unfair' advantages that the inheritance of wealth confers, there are persistent demands to forbid, or severely limit, the passing on of assets from generation to generation.

These demands are misguided for several reasons. The first is again the incentive effect. There is no escape from the fact that dynasty creating is very attractive. The prospect of leaving money and influence to one's children, and through them to later generations, is a powerful motive. Without it a good deal of economic activity would not be undertaken at all and the acquisition of assets would be abandoned in favour of immediate dissipation.

It follows that inheritance of wealth introduces an unavoidable element of 'inequality'. There are, however, several relevant observations that can be made about this. In the first place there is the universal irony concerning wealth - that there is an inevitable trade-off between possession and enjoyment. If wealth is merely owned in the legal sense then it is not being enjoyed, except insofar as ownership itself is enjoyable. But if wealth is enjoyed then it is inevitably reduced, and this includes just spending the interest from investment, because if the interest is not spent capital can be built up further so there is sacrifice of that opportunity.

Secondly there is some incentive to make sure that children who inherit wealth are trained to manage it appropriately, that is, to forego immediate pleasures for the sake of continuing investments.

Thirdly, economic wealth is probably the least undesirable form of inheritance. Political and professional 'privilege' can also be inherited and often is, in effect. In every country there are well known political families several generations of which are found in all levels of government and the bureaucracy. Much the same applies to the professions. Medical or legal families are quite common, and so are theatricals and writers. Apart from contacts and general professional knowhow, being brought up in the appropriate professional culture must be a relative advantage in absorbing information and ways of thinking peculiar to the family profession compared with entrants without such a background.

Some sort of nepotism is virtually unavoidable. As indicated above, the prospective opportunity to give one's children a good

start in life is one of the attractions of parenting. Some cultures, particularly in the Middle East, not only tacitly recognise nepotism, but elevate it to being an important obligation. The chief advantage of confining it, so far as possible, to the inheritance of money is that incompetence on the part of the (fortunate?) recipient in handling it is effectively self-correcting because the money disappears into (presumably) more suitable hands. But this does not happen with political or professional inheritance. In those cases incompetence can perpetuate itself.

### **MORAL TEACHING WITHOUT RELIGION**

But the fact that achieving equality in the sense of 'alike in all respects' is neither possible nor desirable does not mean that the notion, as demonstrated above, is meaningless or might as well be ignored. The real point is that there should be no externally imposed discrimination between individuals on the basis of qualities they cannot alter. And, so far as is practicable, there should be no impediments to individuals changing the qualities that they themselves can control.

So what about teaching, or more accurately, inculcating morality and civilised behaviour without the backing of religion? This is an area which has been massively confused by the historical association between religion and morality, because of the 'natural' but invalid conclusion that any doubts about the truth of religion must also imply doubts about the morality. One result of this has been lack of confidence in some so-called moral teaching, actual positive training and guidance being replaced by much discussion and conceptual analysis of supposedly moral ideas.

There are two major considerations for practical purposes, the method and the content of so-called moral education.

An important part of method is simply elementary conditioning. Eysenck once described how to get a puppy to prefer a proprietary dog food to chopped liver in order to make a convincing advertisement for the dog food. Whenever the puppy shows interest in liver he is lightly tapped on the nose with a rolled up newspaper and his attention directed to the proprietary dog food. After a few such training sessions the puppy apparently develops a 'conscience' about eating liver and prefers the proprietary dog food. But it is virtually impossible to achieve the same result with an adult dog who has been allowed to eat liver already. Much the same principles can be applied to human conscience development, with liver corresponding to indulgences which are attractive but 'wrong' and proprietary dog food with what is not so attractive but nevertheless acceptable and 'right'.

Such methods are quite traditional and usually described as 'teaching the difference between right and wrong'. But the association of notions of right and wrong with religion caused a lot of quite well-meaning people to lose confidence in the legitimacy of such training when the supposed truths of religion were seriously questioned. The result was often lack of positive training in morality and its replacement by what was evidently intended to be something of a discovery method about what made for harmonious relationships. Unfortunately this was largely ineffective because a lot of the necessary training needs to be done long before there is any developed capacity for rational assessment, and because it is very likely that a lot of children will discover the equivalent of raw liver for a dog - undesirable but apparently rewarding behaviour and how to get away with it - and 'detraining' is more and more difficult the longer it is delayed.

Another consideration is the misuse to which early conditioning can be put. It is said, for instance, that Jesuits are content to have control of a child's education for the first seven years because then his or her lifetime allegiance can be guaranteed. This sort of apparent misuse can make libertarians in particular suspicious of practices used in training children which are evidently non-rational and not consented to by the trainees. Such methods look suspiciously like indoctrination. However indoctrination is most appropriately interpreted as "teaching some belief irrespective of the truth of that belief" rather than the use of particular methods. Any effective

method not involving actual cruelty is surely justified in teaching what is evidently verifiable, or what is demanded by rational considerations as outlined above.

In fact reason itself could do with more positive inculcation. As noted before, it is not actually very highly rated by many people, who are inclined to be more impressed by role models and charismatic individuals.

### **MORAL INDOCTRINATION IS NOT NECESSARILY WRONG**

This brings us to the other possibility for distortion of belief and behaviour. There is more to conscience than the results of early conditioning. Along with conditioning there are developed positive desires and drives resulting primarily from the influence of important or charismatic individuals. In supposedly 'normal' families the first examples of this are inevitably the parents. Later they can be, and usually are, supplemented or even replaced by other figures. The essential requirement is exercising power over the child without at the same time provoking resentment. This is the critical factor for inducing lifetime loyalty as a result of early experience.

The idea that the power is used for the ultimate purpose of 'serving God' is useful both for heading off the inevitable resentment of it, and for introducing non-rational but supposedly moral principles. The God might well be associated with an established religion, but there are other possibilities such as nationalism.

As an example, the Ten Commandments are quite instructive and often referred to by fundamentalists. (In case any reader has forgotten them, they are, in essence: Worship no other god; No idols; Do not misuse God's name; Observe the Sabbath; Respect father and mother; No murder; No adultery; No stealing; No false accusations; No envy.)

The first four (and if order signifies some sort of ranking for importance, this is worth noting) are actually rules for maintaining the religious establishment. It is only the remaining six which are essential for the maintenance of civilisation. (There is some recent evidence that Moses was in fact a dissident minor Pharaoh. It is quite likely that his story about burning bushes and voices in the desert is an early example of the clever use of the gullibility of uneducated people to secure leadership of them.)

So we may draw two conclusions from the observation that the connection between God and morality is illusory.

First that any lack of confidence in God should not imply a similar lack of confidence in morality. In particular there is no reason why libertarians, or anyone else, should have misgivings about using methods to instil moral behaviour in their children which look like indoctrination - provided the morality so instilled is rational. The intellectual justification of it to the children can wait until their own reasoning powers are developed enough to appreciate it. In the meantime the possession of an appropriate conscience will not do any harm and will be a relief to the rest of us.

Secondly there is nevertheless need for considerable discrimination in what is inculcated. Preferably there should be a minimalist approach such as teaching just the last six commandments, for instance, with the addition of one or two extra ones appropriate to present day conditions. This is to avoid as far as possible the adulteration of the genuine common sense or rational moral requirements by other demands (such as by the first four of the famous ten) which are, in effect, just a support for the existing social power structure.

### **SCIENTIFIC DOUBT DOES NOT REMOVE ALL CERTAINTY**

The real question is a matter of fundamental attitudes. Whatever efforts have been made to convince the public that religion and science are separate, in the sense that religion should not pronounce on science, and that no scientific discovery is relevant to religious belief, there is a fundamental difference in attitude to knowledge of the external world, and what factors to consider in decisions about

personal behaviour. The religious attitude is basically one of certainty and rigidity; and that behaviour, in particular, can be judged according to fixed and eternal rules. In contrast the rational/scientific attitude accepts doubt as legitimate, and that virtually any idea is open to reassessment and modification. But it does not follow that the doubt and scepticism inherent in the rational/scientific attitude removes all certainty. There are vast areas of virtually incontrovertible observations and deductions from them. Later observations or information cannot in any way disprove this, but might present new circumstances to be considered.

## GOOD WORKS

But what of the tremendous investment in religion and, by implication, the metaphysics or philosophy associated with it? This investment is not only economic in the form of churches, mosques and other property, but the commitment of millions of individuals of time and the performance of activities which are in a large degree beneficial, in some sense, to other people. It is easy to be cynical about some 'good works', both in respect of the true motives for them and sometimes of the results which are often not quite what they were intended to be. But to be fair, this is often only another example of the fact that not everything can be perfect. It almost certainly is true that, overall, the results of religious charity are beneficial, particularly when acting as a countervailing influence on totalitarian governments. In fact the or unfortunate effects of well-meaning charity or helpfulness are largely the result of the rigidity of outlook which adherence to the idea of God requires.

The arguments given above show that anybody who believes his kind or charitable activities are inspired by 'God' is simply mistaken. They must, in fact, have arisen in himself by some other means and recognising this would have considerable benefits. In the first place generous or kind individuals could claim full credit for these qualities without pretending they were serving some higher authority. Similarly, cruel or greedy individuals would not have any similar excuse, such as spreading the true faith or helping history on its predetermined way.

## MORAL INNOVATION WITH AND WITHOUT GOD

As an example of the difference between God inspired decisions and rational ones let us consider a development which at present is hypothetical, but almost certainly soon will not be. Suppose that, as a result of genetic engineering developments, parents were able to choose the sex of their children. This would probably be achieved by a pill which induced the selective early abortion of the 'wrong' zygote or embryo. Consider the likely effects in two cases - with God and without God.

WITH GOD. Religious fundamentalists, and quite a few others, see the development as a danger. It interferes with God's prerogative and is possibly blasphemous. The idea that a potential human being should be destroyed just to satisfy the whims of parents is repulsive to human dignity, and particularly the idea that the destruction was for nothing more than being of the wrong sex. Dangers to population balance would be emphasised, particularly from sub-cultures which 'overvalue' males. As part of the campaign to get the sex pill banned, large single sex families would be discovered and the parents interviewed to give assurances that they were ecstatically happy without having had the chance to choose. Pregnant women would also be prominently featured saying that not knowing the sex of their future child was a source of pleasure and excitement.

After much campaigning and discussion a Parliamentary debate would be held on the subject. It would be decided that the free availability of such a revolutionary development was not in the public interest, but limited availability under medical supervision would be allowed. The principles to be applied in granting 'treatment' were whether the fact that a number of children of the same sex already in a (fairly large) family was a genuine cause of discontent to the parents or the existing children, whether there was a risk of abuse of further children of one sex in a particular problem family who might be helped by positive choice, and the overriding de-

mands of public interest which would be assessed periodically by the Home Office.

After a few years there would be a fairly settled system. For a suitable fee psychiatrists would certify that a particular couple, or even potential single parent, simply had to have a child of a particular sex in order to maintain their mental balance. The same sort of thing could be obtained on the National Health Service after a wait of about two years.

Eventually, as a consequence of imports from illegal sources, foreign travel, and eventually public rejection of controls, the pills would become generally available, though the price would be much higher than the free market one would have been.

WITHOUT GOD. The pills would be marketed by the usual channels at an economic price. There would be quite a rush of couples trying for the ad-man's archetypal family - boy first, then a girl. There would be a blip in the birth statistics in the form of a general reduction in number but a marked increase in the proportion of boys. This would cause some official consternation which would disappear when the balance swung the other way after a couple of years. Parents would be generally happier. So would children, who could meet the usual parental complaints about their sexual behaviour with a comment such as "you chose mine, mother". The system of having children until at least one child of each sex appeared would virtually cease, with a marked reduction in population growth and reduced pressure on the environment. After a few years the marked preference for boys in certain ethnic minority communities would decline rapidly as girls became more scarce because of the initial avalanche of male births.

## SHORT TERM HARM AND LONG TERM INSIGNIFICANCE

So does 'God' matter for this sort of moral situation at all? I suggest that the answer depends on whether we are considering the short term or the long term, short term meaning two or three generations, long term being measured in centuries. In the short term God matters, in the sense of making changes and adjustments more difficult and, perhaps more importantly, giving confidence to the people who want to resist change by encouraging them to believe that they have God on their side. Also God is important in confusing the argument and the factors considered important in it, by deflecting attention from practical considerations to the supposed necessity to conform with morality as developed in different conditions.

But in the long term the effects of belief in God in practice are almost certainly zero or minimal. Given time and sufficient incentive God can certainly be persuaded to change His mind. Religious belief is so flexible, and subject to alternative interpretations according to what part of sacred texts are consulted, that practically any new outlook can be accommodated. Probably the main requirement is to wait long enough for the believers in the old interpretations, and those strongly influenced by them, to die off.

## NOTES

1. This is considered in some detail from a biological standpoint in the *Three Fundamental Fallacies of Modern Social Thought* by Christopher Badcock, Sociological Notes No. 5, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1990.
2. For a more general consideration of AIDS and some related subjects, see Sean Gabb's *What To Do About Aids*, Pamphlet No. 12, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1989.
3. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973. He introduces the 'veil of ignorance' criterion on p. 136.
4. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Basic Books, New York, 1974. David Conway, *Nozick's Entitlement Theory of Justice: Three Critics Answered*, Philosophical Notes No. 15, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1990, gives some idea of this type of argument.
5. The French anthropologist Emmanuel Todd has developed the idea that family traditions and organisation actually account for the variations in the appeal and acceptability of ideologies in different geographical areas of the world. See *The Explanation of Ideology: Family Structures and Social Systems*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985.