BECAUSE GOD WILLS IT *

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We have all heard the oft-asserted claim of popular theology that without God -- or at least, perhaps, without belief in God -- morality is impossible. ("Without God everything is permitted"). This familiar claim may be taken in at least two ways: that God is necessary to provide a motivation for acting morally, or that God is necessary to provide a content for morality. I shall be primarily concerned with the latter interpretation, particularly because of its relevance for two fundamental questions of ethical theory: Is there a single identifiable factor in virtue of which right actions are right? and Is the rightness of actions constituted by the subjective responses of some agent or agents? I suppose that the answer to both these questions is No, but if Divine approval is what makes right acts right, then the answer to both questions is Yes. Let us consider the matter.

But first let us briefly consider the view that the dependency of morality on (belief in) God is a matter of human motivation. The view is that only a belief in God, along, presumably, with the rewards and punishments that he will bestow on us, is sufficient to lead us to do what we ought. One may surely recognize that certainty of punishment -- and indeed of just punishment and just reward -- could hardly be better assured than by an arrangement in which sanc-

* This paper is a (slightly revised) selection from an unpublished manuscript on free will and practical reasoning. In that larger context it would be quite clear that the main point of this paper is to show the unacceptability -- both moral and logical -- of views which take the attitudes of persons to be constitutive of moral values. Theological voluntarism is one dramatic form of such views, and one which, as I argue, has peculiar difficulties of its own. Although I spend most of the paper discussing this form of these voluntarist views, it should be clear that my target is the more general one indicated. I should like to emphasize, in particular, that I intend no general attack on all theological or all scriptually based moral views.
tions are imposed by an omniscient, almighty, and morally perfect judge. But this fact, while helping to explain the conception of God held by those who presuppose a close tie between morality and religion — as well, of course, as by those who require a suitable object of commitment or of worship — is simply irrelevant to the theory of practical motivation under consideration. And that theory seems simply false. For one thing, it rests upon (and incidentally encourages) the belief that persons can be motivated ultimately only by considerations of a narrowly selfish sort. Waiving the Kantian point that on this theory genuine morality would be impossible, since actions done solely out of hope of reward or fear of punishment are necessarily lacking in moral worth, we may note simply that persons are frequently motivated, e.g., by concern for the well-being, or, as the case of revenge shows, the ill-being, of others. For another thing, even if human motivation were always as self-centered as the view under consideration seems to presuppose, there is no empirical evidence for the supposition that only divine — as opposed, say, to social — sanctions can be efficacious. But this is more than enough discussion of a philosophically uninteresting point.

The more important interpretation of the claim that morality depends on God involves an un-Socratic reply to Socrates’ familiar question in the Euthyphro, a question on which Wittgenstein at one time disagreed not only with Socrates but even with Schlick! Wittgenstein is quoted as having said the following to Friedrich Waismann in December, 1930:

Schlick says that in theological ethics there are two interpretations of the Essence of Good. On the shallow interpretation, the Good is good, in virtue of the fact that God wills it: on the deeper interpretation, God wills the good, because it is good. On my view, the first interpretation is the deeper: that is good which God commands. For this blocks off the road to any kind of explanation, “Why it is good”; while the second interpretation is the shallow, rationalistic one, in that it behaves “as though” that which is good could be given some further foundation.¹

To be sure, Wittgenstein made this remark at a time when his metaphysical-linguistic views led him to relegate questions of value to the realm of the “unsayable”, where they are beyond — not beneath — the possibility of rational assessment. It would appear at least con-