

Notes on
God and Morality

by

Richard Swinburne

I. Morality Actions may be morally good, bad, or indifferent. Among the good are the obligatory; and among the bad are the wrong. For an action to be morally good, (1) it must have overall goodness, which (2) arises from a balance of standard positive properties. (These are those which (almost all) humans recognise as contributing to the overall goodness of actions). Some moral judgments are true, and others are false. The moral properties of particular actions are (logically) supervenient on their non-moral properties. Hence, all particular moral truths depend on necessary moral truths.

II. Can the will of God make actions good or bad? The status of some individuals and institutions as benefactors gives them the right (within limits) to issue commands and so to make conformity to those commands obligatory for others. As our creator and sustainer, God has the right to issue commands – within very large limits. In virtue of his perfect goodness, he will not issue commands beyond those limits. The duty to obey God is thus not the only necessary moral truth.

III. But does not this view suggest the existence of a realm of moral truths independent of God, and hence that God is not omnipotent? No, the power of an omnipotent being is only the power to do the logically possible. It is not logically possible to make child torture or rape obligatory. This is because, in virtue of the meanings of the words such as ‘rape’ and ‘(morally) obligatory’, there is no ultimate sense in a supposition that such actions be obligatory.

IV. So God will (1) help us to see which actions are necessarily obligatory; and he will make other actions obligatory. He will do the latter because for our sake (2) he seeks to make us very good people, (3) he seeks to co-ordinate our actions, (4) he seeks to make us special by giving us particular vocations.