

# Religion and Morality

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You ask me—first, How I understand the word *religion*; and, second, Whether I admit the existence of morality, independent of religion as understood by me. I will answer these most important questions, well put by you, as best I can.<sup>1</sup>

There are three separate meanings generally implied by the word *religion*. First—That religion is a certain true revelation given by God to men, from which proceeds man's worship of God. Such an interpretation is applied to religion by all believers in one of its existing forms, who regard in consequence their particular form as the only true one. Second—That religion is a collection of superstitious statements, from which a worship equally superstitious is derived. Such an interpretation is applied to religion by skeptics in general; by those, that is, who do not believe in the religion they are defining. Third—That religion is a compilation of propositions and rules, invented by clever men, and a necessity for the vulgar herd, as much for their consolation as for their subjugation and the restraint of their passions. Such an interpretation is applied to religion by those indifferent to it personally, but who regard it as a useful instrument in the governance of mankind.

By the first definition, religion is an indubitable and irrefragable truth, the propagation of which among all men and by every possible means is necessary to the welfare of mankind. By the second, religion is a mass of superstition from which it is desirable, and even needful to the welfare of humanity, that mankind should be delivered. By the third, religion is a contrivance useful to humanity, though unnecessary for those of the highest development, but which, as indispensable to the consolation and control of the vulgar, it is needful to maintain.

The first definition is similar to one a man might make of music, by defining it as his most familiar and favorite song, with which it is desirable that the greatest number of people possible should be acquainted. The second, in the same connection, would be that applied to music by a man who, not understanding it, therefore not caring for it, called it the production of sound by the throat, mouth, or hands upon certain instruments; a useless and even objectionable occupation, from which it was necessary to wean men as soon as possible. The third is similar to that which a man would apply to music, who considered it a useful contrivance for teaching men to dance or to march, for which purposes it should be maintained.

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<sup>1</sup> A reply to two questions put by the German Ethical Society. First printed in *Contemporary Review*, 1894. Revised and corrected.

The difference and narrowness of these definitions arise from their failure to take hold of the *essence* of music, merely defining its features from the definer's point of view. So is it also with the three definitions of religion. According to the first, religion is whatever the definer thinks that he is right in believing. According to the second, it is that which, in the definer's opinion, people are wrong in believing. According to the third, it is, by the standard of the definer, what it is beneficial to make men believe. All which define, not what constitutes the essence of religion, but the definer's belief of what religion constitutes. The first supplants the notion of religion, by the faith of him who defines; the second, by the faith by which other people regard it; the third, by the faith of men in whatever may be supplied them as religion.

But what is faith? Why do people believe in what they believe? What is faith? and whence has it arisen?

Among the majority of the educated classes it is regarded as a settled question that the essence of every religion has its origin in the personification, deification, and worship of the forces of Nature—proceeding from superstitious fear of Nature's incomprehensible phenomena. This view is accepted, without criticism, by the educated crowd of our time, and it not only does not meet with any refutation from men of science, but for the most part, finds, precisely among them, most definite confirmation. If, indeed, voices are at times heard, as that of Max Müller and others, which attribute to religion another origin and sense, these voices are unheard and unnoticed in the general and almost unanimous affirmation that religion is the outcome of ignorance and superstition.

Not long ago, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, if the most advanced thinkers rejected Catholicism, Protestantism, and Greek orthodoxy, as did the Encyclopedists at the end of the eighteenth, still not one of them denied that religion in general has been and is an indispensable condition in the lives of all. Not to mention the Deists—as Bernardin de St. Pierre, Diderot, and Rousseau—Voltaire raised a monument to God, and Robespierre proclaimed a festal day in honor of the Supreme Being. But at the present day, thanks to the frivolous and superficial teaching of Auguste Comte (who sincerely believed, in common with the majority of Frenchmen, that Christianity is nothing but Catholicism, and therefore saw in Catholicism the complete realization of Christianity) the educated crowd, which always readily and greedily accepts the lowest view, have decided and acknowledged that religion is only a certain long obsolete aspect in the development of humanity which hinders progress. It is agreed that humanity has already outlived two periods, the religious and metaphysical, and has now entered into the third and highest, the scientific, and that all religious phenomena are only the survivals of an outgrown spiritual organ of humanity, once needful, but long ago lost to sense and significance.

It is agreed that religion had its origin in the worship of imaginary beings, evoked by fear of the incomprehensible forces of Nature, as in ancient times Democritus thought, and as affirmed by the philosophers and historians of religion. But, putting aside the fact that the recognition of some unseen and supernatural being or beings has not always proceeded from a sense of fear evoked by unknown forces of Nature, as is proved by hundreds of advanced and learned thinkers of the past—Socrates, Descartes, Newton—and like men of our own times, who, being in no wise fearful of such forces, admitted the existence of some supreme supernatural being or beings—the affirmation that religion has been the outcome of man's superstitious fear of the incomprehensible powers of Nature, in reality does not answer the chief question. From what in man does the idea of an unseen and supernatural being derive existence? If men were afraid of thunder and lightning, they would fear them as thunder and lightning; but why invent an unseen

and supernatural Jove, living in certain regions, and occasionally flinging bolts at men? If men were astounded by the aspect of death, they would fear to die; but why invent souls of the dead with whom to enter into imaginary communion? From thunder men might hide; from the fear of death they might fly; but instead they devised an eternal, all-powerful Being, on whom they reckon themselves dependent, and the living souls of the dead—not from fear alone, but for some other reasons. And in these reasons, evidently, lies the essence of what is called religion.

Moreover, every man who has ever felt the religious sentiment, if only in childhood, knows from his own experience that such a sentiment has always been awakened in him, not by external, terrifying, material phenomena, but by an internal consciousness of his own frailty, solitude, and sinfulness, and connected not at all with any dread of the unknown forces of Nature. Hence man may, both by external observation and by personal experience, ascertain that religion is not the worship of deities, evoked by superstitious fear of unknown natural forces, and only proper to mankind at a certain period of their development, but something independent altogether of fear, or of a degree of culture, and not liable to destruction by any access of enlightenment; just as man's consciousness of his finality in the infinite universe, and of his sinfulness (*i.e.*, his non-fulfillment of all he might and ought to have done), always has existed and always will exist while man remains man.

In truth, every man, as soon as he emerges from the animal existence of infancy and childhood—during which he lives by the pressure of those claims which are presented to him by his animal nature—every man who is awake to reasonable consciousness cannot fail to remark how the life about him renews itself, undestroyed, and steadfastly subordinate to one definite eternal law; and that he alone, self-recognized as a creature separate from the entire universe, is condemned to death, to a disappearance in unbounded space and limitless time, and to the painful consciousness of responsibility for his actions—a consciousness, so to say, that, having acted not well, he might have acted better. And, with this understanding, every reasoning man must stop, think, and ask himself—wherefore this momentary, indefinite, unstable existence within a universe uncompassed, eternal, firmly defined?

Man cannot, when he enters into his full measure of life, elude this question. It confronts all, and all in some fashion answer it, and it is this answer which is the essence of religion; the answer to the question, Wherefore do I live, and what is my relation to the infinite universe about me? All religious metaphysics—their teaching as to deities, the origin of existence, external worship—though generally taken for religion, are only the various signs accompanying religion, and changing with a change in its geographical, historical, or ethnographical conditions. There is no religion, however cultured, however crude, but has its beginnings in the assessment of the relations of man to the surrounding universe or to its first cause. There is no ceremony of religion so rustic, nor ritual so refined, which has not a like foundation. All the teaching of religion is the expression of the relations in which the founder of the religion regards himself—and therefore all mankind—as standing towards the universe or towards its origin and first cause.

The expressions of these relations are very numerous, and correspond to the conditions of race and time in which the founder of the religion and those appropriating it are placed. Moreover, these expressions are variously misinterpreted and deformed by the founder's disciples, who, often for hundreds, sometimes for thousands of years, are in advance of the understanding of the masses. Hence many accounts appear to exist of this relation of man to the universe, called religions but in substance there are only three relations to the universe or its first cause of an essential quality: (1) The primitive personal relation; (2) the pagan social, or family, or State

relation; (3) the Christian or godly relation. Strictly speaking, man can only be related to the universe in two ways: the *personal*, which is the recognition of life as the welfare of the individual, separately or in union with others; and the *Christian*, which is the recognition of life as the service of Him who sent man into the world. The social relation of man to the universe is merely an enlargement of the personal.

The first 'of these recognitions (or perceptions), which is the most ancient, and which is now found only among men of the lowest order of development, consists in the consideration by man of himself as a self-sufficient being, existing with the sole purpose of obtaining for himself the greatest possible amount of personal happiness from the world about him, indifferent to the amount of suffering thus entailed on other creatures. From this early conception of a relation to the universe—which suffices for every child, as it sufficed for humanity on the threshold of its development, and still satisfies many savage tribes and men of a coarse moral fiber—have proceeded all the ancient heathen religions, as well as the corrupt and lower forms of more recent religions, as Buddhism,<sup>2</sup> Taoism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity in its perverted issues. To this same perception the more modern spiritism owes its origin, being founded on the preservation and welfare of the individual. All heathen superstitions, divination, deification of beings in blissful existence with the attributes of men, or of saints interceding for men, all sacrifices and supplications for earthly advantages or protection from calamity, proceed from the same conception of life.

The second or social pagan conception of man's relation to the universe, established in the next stage of development and natural to the state of manhood, consists in the admission that the meaning of life is to be discovered, not in the happiness of individuals, but in the welfare of a certain association of them, as the family, tribe, State, nation, even humanity (according to the attempted religion of the Positivists). In this perception, the attention is transferred from the individual to the family, tribe, State, or nation—that is, to an association of individuals, the welfare of whom is, in this case, regarded as the object of existence. All patriarchal and social religions of a like character have their origin in this conception: the religions of the Chinese, Japanese, of the chosen people of the Jews, the State religion of the Romans, our own religion of Church and State, debased to this connection by Augustine, and wrongly called Christian, and the Positivists' hypothetical religion of "humanity." Ancestor-worship in China and Japan, emperor-worship in Rome, the manifold ceremonies of the Jews to preserve their covenant with God, all family, social, Church, Christian *Te Deums* for the welfare of the State, and for military success, are founded on this same conception of the relation of man to the universe.

The third conception of this relation—the Christian one—of which every man of advanced years is involuntarily conscious, and upon which humanity, in my opinion, is now entering, consists in the acknowledgment by man that the meaning of life is not to be found in the attainment of his own individual aim, nor in the attainment of that of any association of individuals, but solely in serving that Supreme Will, which has produced man and the entire universe, for the attainment, not of the aims of man, but of the Superior Will which has produced him. From this conception, the loftiest religious teaching known to us has proceeded, germs of which existed

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<sup>2</sup> Buddhism, although it demands from its disciples resignation of all the pleasures of the world, and even of life itself, is founded on the same idea of an individual sufficient for himself, and predestined to happiness, or rather—in comparison with the right of man to enjoyment as proclaimed by positive heathenism—to the absence of pain. Heathenism holds that the universe should serve the interest of the individual. Buddhism that the universe must be dissolved as the producing factor in the miseries of mankind. Buddhism is only negative heathenism.

in the teaching of the Pythagoreans, Therapeutics, Essenes, Egyptians, Persians, Brahmins, Buddhists, and Taoists, in their best representatives, but which has only received its final and fullest expression in the true, unperverted interpretation of Christianity. All the ritual of those ancient religions proceeding from this conception of life, all the modern external forms of association of the Unitarians, Universalists, Quakers, Nazarenes, and Russian Spirit-Wrestlers (Doukhobors),<sup>3</sup> and all so-called rationalistic sects, their sermons, hymns, intercourse, and books, are religious manifestations of this conception of man's relation to the universe.

All possible religions of every kind are inevitably distributed between these three conceptions. Every man who has emerged from the animal condition must invariably adopt one of these conceptions of his relation to the universe, and in this adoption consists the real religion of every man, outside any confession of faith to which he may nominally adhere. Every man inevitably, one way or another, pictures to himself his own relation to the universe, because a rational being cannot live in the world without some sort of consciousness of his relation to it. And as only three explanations of this relation have been produced by humanity, and are known to us, every man must inevitably hold by one of the three, and, whether he will or not, belongs to one of the three fundamental religions, among which all humanity may be divided. And hence the general assertion made by men of culture in the Christian world that they have reached the summit of development, where they neither have nor need a religion, only means that, renouncing Christianity, the one religion proper to our time, they hold with one of the lower religions—either with the social-family-State religion, or with that of primitive heathendom—without being aware of the tendency themselves. A man without a religion—that is, without any perceptive relation to the universe—is as impossible as a man without a heart. He may be as unaware of the possession of one as of the other, but neither without a heart nor without a religion can man exist. Religion is the relation which man acknowledges towards the universe about him, or to its source and first cause, and a rational man must perforce be in some sort of perceptive relationship.

But you may perhaps say that the definition of man's relation to the universe is a subject not for religion, but for philosophy, or, in general, for science, allowing that the latter term includes philosophy. I do not think so. I hold, on the contrary, that the supposition that science in its widest sense, including philosophy, should define the relation of man to the universe is altogether erroneous, and the chief source of disorder in the ideas of our educated society as to religion, science, and morality. Science, including philosophy, cannot define the relation of mankind to the infinite universe or to its source; if only because, before any sort of science or of philosophy could have been formulated, a conception of some sort of relationship of man to the universe, without which no kind of mental activity is possible, must have existed. As a man cannot by any kind of movement discover the direction in which he must move, yet all movement is made inevitably in some given direction, so it is impossible, by the mental efforts of philosophy or of science, to discover the direction in which this effort should be made, but every mental effort is inevitably accomplished in some direction which has been given it already. And this direction for all mental effort is always indicated by religion. All philosophies known to us, from Plato to Schopenhauer, have followed inevitably the direction given by religion.

The philosophy of Plato and of his followers was a pagan system to procure the maximum of happiness, as well for the individual as for the association of individuals in the form of a State.

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<sup>3</sup> A section of the so-called sectarians, having a spiritual conception of life and the Gospels, and who claim to fight against the flesh by the aid of the Spirit.

The Church-Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages, based on the same pagan conception of existence, investigated means of salvation for the individual—that is, the means for procuring his best advantage in a future life—and only in its theocratic endeavors did it touch on the welfare of societies. The modern philosophy of Hegel, as well as that of Comte, is founded on the State-social-religious conception of existence. The pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer and Hartmann, which desired to free itself from the Jewish religious conception, became unwittingly subject to the basis of Buddhism. Philosophy always has been and always will be merely the investigation of the *results* of the relation of man to the universe inculcated by religion, for until this conception is acquired there is no material for philosophical investigation.

It is just the same with positive science in the strict meaning of the term. Such a science always has been, and always will be, merely the investigation of such objects and phenomena as appear to demand inquiry in consequence of a certain conception of the relation of man to the universe instituted by religion. Science always has been, and always will be, not the study of "everything," as men of science at present naively imagine (a thing which is, moreover, impossible, as the subjects in the scope of study are innumerable), but only of those things which, in order and according to their degree of importance, religion selects from the infinite objects, phenomena, and circumstances, into which inquiry may be made.

And hence there is not one science, but as many sciences as there are religions. Each religion selects a certain circle of subjects which must be studied, and hence the science of every time and nation inevitably bears the character of its religion in the point of view from which its examination is made. So the pagan science, reinstated at the Renaissance, and flourishing at present among us under the title of Christian, always has been, and continues to be, merely an investigation of the circumstances by which man may attain the highest welfare, and of those phenomena of the universe which may be put under contribution to the same end. The philosophical science of Brahmin and Buddhist has always been merely the investigation of circumstances by which man may be delivered from the miseries which oppress him. The Jewish science (of the Talmud) has always been the study and explanation of those conditions which must be observed by man in order to ratify his covenant with God, and to preserve the chosen nation at the highest level of its election. The Church-Christian science was and is the investigation of those circumstances by which man procures his salvation. The true Christian science, that which is but just at the birth, is the investigation of those circumstances by which man may become acquainted with the demands of the Supreme Will, whose instrument he is, and how he may fit them to his existence.

Neither philosophy nor science can institute the relation of man to the universe, because such reciprocity must have existence before any kind of science or philosophy can begin; since each investigates phenomena by means of the intellect, and independent of the position or sensations of the investigator; whereas the relation of man to the universe is defined, not by the intellect alone, but by his sensitive perception, aided by all his spiritual powers. However much one may assure and instruct a man that all real existence is an idea only, that matter is made up of atoms, that the essence of life is corporality or will, that heat, light, movement, electricity are different manifestations of one and the same energy, one cannot thereby explain to a being with pains, pleasures, fears, and hopes, his position in the universe. That position, and his consequent relation to the universe, is explained only by religion, which says, "The universe exists for thee, and therefore take from life all that thou canst obtain;" or else, "Thou art one of the favorite people of God; serve that people, and accomplish the instructions of that God, and thou and thy people shall be partakers of the highest bliss;" or else, "Thou art the instrument of a Supreme

Will, which has sent thee into the universe to accomplish a work predestined for thee; learn that will, and do it, and thou wilt do for thyself the best that thou canst do.”

To understand philosophy and science, one needs study and preparation, but neither is required for the understanding of religion: that is at once comprehensible to every man, whatever his ignorance and limitations. A man need acquire neither philosophy nor science to understand his relation to the universe, or to its source; a superfluity of knowledge, encumbering his consciousness, is rather an impediment; but he must renounce, if only for the time, the vanity of the world, and acquire a sense of his material frailty and of truth, which are, as the Gospels tell us, to be found most often in children and in the simplest, most unlearned, of men. For this reason we see the most simple, ignorant and untaught men accept clearly, consciously, and easily the highest Christian conception of life, whereas the most learned and cultured linger in crude paganism. As, for example, we observe men of refinement and education whose conception of existence is the acquirement of personal pleasure or security from pain, as with the shrewd and cultured Schopenhauer, or in the salvation of the soul by sacraments and means of grace, as with learned bishops of the Church; whereas an almost illiterate sectarian peasant in Russia, without the slightest mental effort, achieves the same conception of life as was accomplished by the greatest sages of the world—Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca—namely, the consciousness of one’s being as the instrument of the will of God—the son of God.

But you may ask me: In what, then, does the essence of this unscientific and unphilosophical knowledge consist? If it be neither scientific nor philosophical, of what sort is it? How is it to be defined? To these questions I can only reply that as religious knowledge is that which precedes, and upon which is founded, every other knowledge, it cannot be defined, there being no means of definition in existence. In theological language this knowledge is called revelation. And this word, if we do not give it any mystic meaning, is quite accurate; because this knowledge is not acquired by study, nor by the efforts of individuals, but through the reception by them of the manifestation of the Infinite Mind, which, little by little, discloses itself to men. Why is it that ten thousand years ago men were unable to understand that the meaning of their life was not exhausted by the welfare of the individual, and that later came a time when the higher family-social-State-national conception of life was disclosed to mankind? Why is it that, within the limits of historical memory, the Christian conception of life has been disclosed to men? And why has it been disclosed to such a man or men, and precisely at such a time, at such and no other place, in such and no other form?

To try to answer these questions by searching for their reasons in the historical circumstances of the time, life, and character and special qualities of those men who first accepted and expressed this conception of life, is as though one were to try to prove why the rising sun first casts his rays on certain objects. The sun of truth, rising higher and higher upon the world, enlightens it ever further, and is reflected by those forms on which first fall the illumination of its rays, and which are most capable of reflecting them. The qualities which give to some the power of receiving the rising truth are no special activities of the mind, but, on the contrary, are rather passive qualities of the heart, seldom corresponding to a great and inquisitive intellect. Rejection of the vanities of the world, a sense of one’s material frailty, and of truthfulness, are what we observe in every founder of a religion, none of whom have been distinguished by philosophical or scientific acquirement.

In my opinion, the chief error, which, more than all else, impedes the true progress of Christian humanity, is precisely the fact that the scientific men of our time, who are now in the seat of

Moses, being guided by the pagan conception of life revived at the Renaissance, and having accepted as the essence of Christianity its crudest distortions, and having decided that it is a condition already outworn by mankind (while they consider, on the contrary, that the ancient social-State conception of paganism, which is indeed outworn, is the loftiest conception and one that should steadfastly be held by humanity), these men not only do not understand true Christianity, which comprises that most perfect conception of life towards which all humanity is advancing, but they do not even try to understand it.

The chief source of this misunderstanding arises from the fact that men of science, having diverged from Christianity, and seen that their science cannot conform to it, have agreed that Christianity and not science must be at fault: that is, they have assumed, not the fact that science is 1800 years behind Christianity, which embraced the greater part of contemporary society, but that it is Christianity which is 1800 years in arrear. From this distortion of facts arises the curious circumstance that no people have more entangled ideas as to the essence of true knowledge, religion, morality, and existence than men of science, and the yet more curious fact that the science of our time, despite all its successes in examining the phenomena of the material world, appears to be, as to human existence, either unnecessary or productive of merely pernicious results. And hence I hold that it is neither philosophy nor science which can determine the relation of man to the universe, but only religion.

And so I answer your first question, as to what I understand by the word "religion," thus—Religion is a certain relation of man to the eternal, infinite universe, its origin and source. Out of this reply to your first question follows naturally that to the second. If religion is a definite relation of man to the universe which determines the meaning of his life, morality is the index and explanation of man's activity which naturally flows from one or other perceived relation. And as we recognize only two of these perceptions, if we include the pagan-social as the enlargement of the personal relation, or three, if we consider it apart, so there exist but three moral teachings: the primitive, savage, individualistic; the pagan-family-State or social; and the Christian or godly, teaching man's subservience to the universe or to God.

From the first conception of man's relationship proceeds the morality common to all pagan religions whose essential tendency is the welfare of the individual, and which, therefore, defines every condition capable of producing that welfare and the means by which it may be procured.

From this perception of man's relationship have proceeded the pagan moralities; the Epicurean in its lowest manifestation; the Mohammedan, promising the welfare of the individual in this and the next world; the Church-Christian, with salvation for its object—that is, the welfare of the individual chiefly in the world to come; and the worldly utilitarian, having for its object the welfare of the individual in this world alone.

From this same conception, which proclaims the welfare of the individual, and hence his immunity from pain, as the object of his existence, proceeds the Buddhist morality in its crudest aspect and the worldly teaching of the pessimists.

From the second pagan conception, which proclaims the welfare of a certain association of individuals as the object of existence, proceed those moral teachings which demand from mankind subservience to that particular association, the welfare of which is accepted as the aim of life. According to this morality, such amount of personal welfare is alone permitted as may be procurable for the entire association which forms the religious base of existence.

From this relation of man to the universe proceed such moral teachings of the Greek and Roman world as are known to us, in which the individual is always sacrificed to society; the



moral teaching of China; the Jewish morality of personal subjection to the welfare of the chosen people; and the Church-State-moral teaching of our own time which demands the sacrifice of the individual to the welfare of the State.

From this same conception proceeds also the morality of the majority of women, sacrificing their individuality to the welfare of the family, and especially of their children. All ancient history, and in part that of the Middle Ages, and of the modern era, is full of the exploits of this family-social and State morality. And, at the present time, most men only imagine they profess Christianity and hold the Christian morality, but in reality they follow this family-State morality of paganism. And this morality they elevate into an ideal in the education of the young.

From the third conception of man's relation to the universe—namely, the acknowledgment by man of his existence as an instrument of the Supreme Will for the accomplishment of its designs—proceeds the morality corresponding to this conception, which explains the dependence of man on the Supreme Will, and determines the demands of this Will. From this perception, proceeds the loftiest morality known to man—the Pythagorean Stoic, Buddhist, Brahmin, and Taoist—in their best aspects, and the Christian teaching in its real sense, which demands the renunciation of the individual will, and of the welfare, not only of the individual, but of family, society, and State, in the name of the fulfillment of His will who gave us the existence which our consciousness has disclosed.

From one of these perceptions of man's relationship to the infinite universe or its first cause proceeds the true, sincere morality of every man, in spite of what he nominally professes or preaches as morality or the appearance he desires to convey.

So that a man who acknowledges that the essence of his relation to the universe consists in the acquirement of the greatest welfare for himself, however much he may prate of the morality of living for family, society, State, humanity, or the accomplishment of the will of God (though he may be clever enough by feigning to deceive his fellows), the real motive of his activity will always be the welfare of himself, so that, when occasion arises for choice, he will sacrifice, not himself for his family, nation, or the accomplishment of God's will, but everything for himself, because his conception of existence being centered in his own welfare, he cannot act otherwise till the conception of his relation to the universe undergoes a change.

In the same way, however much a man, the conception of whose relation to the universe consists in the service of his family (as is the case with most women), tribe, country, or nation (as those of oppressed nationalities, or political workers in times of contention), may say that he is a Christian, his morality will always remain a family, national, or State morality, not a Christian; and when the necessity arises for choosing between the welfare of family or of society and that of himself, or between social welfare and the accomplishment of God's will, he will inevitably choose to serve the welfare of that association of his fellows for which he, according to his conception of life, exists; because only in such service does he discover the meaning of his existence. And, similarly, however much you may assure a man, who considers that his relation to the universe consists in the accomplishment of the Will of Him that sent him, that he must, in the interest of person, family, State, nation, or humanity, do that which contradicts this Superior Will, of which he is conscious through the reason and love with which he is equipped, he will always sacrifice persons, family, country, or humanity rather than be unfaithful to the Will of Him that sent him, because only by the accomplishment of this Will does he realize his conception of life.

Morality cannot be independent of religion, because, not only is it the outcome of religion—that is, of that conception by man of his relation to the universe—but because it is already implied by religion. All religion is a reply to the question, What is the meaning of my life? And the religious answer always includes a certain moral demand, which may sometimes follow the explanation of this conception, sometimes precede it. The question may be answered thus—The meaning of life is in the welfare of the individual, therefore profit by every advantage accessible to thee; or, The meaning of life is in the welfare of an association, serve therefore that association with all thy power; or, The meaning of life is in the fulfillment of the "Will of Him that sent thee, therefore try, with all thy power, to learn that Will and to do it. And the same question may be answered thus—The meaning of thy life is in thy personal pleasure, and that is the true destiny of man; or, The meaning of life is in the service of that association of which thou considerest thyself a member, for that is thy destiny; or, The meaning of life is in the service of God, since for that thou hast been made.

Morality is included in the explanation of life which religion offers us, and therefore cannot possibly be divorced from it. This truth is especially evident in those attempts of non-Christian philosophers to deduce the inculcation of the loftiest morality from their philosophy. These teachers see that Christian morality is indispensable; that existence without it is impossible; more, they see that such a morality does exist, and they desire in some manner to attach it to their non-Christian philosophy, and even so to represent things that it may appear as if Christian morality were the natural outcome of their heathen or social philosophy. And they make the attempt, but their very efforts exhibit more clearly than anything else, not only the independence of Christian morality, but its complete contradiction of the philosophy of individual welfare, of escape from personal suffering, of the welfare of society.

Christian ethics, that of which we become conscious by a religious conception of life, demand not only the sacrifice of personality to an aggregate of persons, but of one's own person and any aggregate of persons to the service of God. Whereas, heathen philosophy, investigating the means by which the welfare of the individual or of an association of individuals may be achieved, inevitably contradicts the Christian ideal. Pagan philosophy has but one method for concealing this discrepancy; it heaps up abstract conditional notions, one upon the other, and refuses to emerge from the misty region of metaphysics. Chiefly after this manner was the behavior of the philosophers since the Renaissance, and to this circumstance—namely, the impossibility of reconciling the demands of Christian morality already recognized as existing, with philosophy upon a heathen basis—one must attribute that awful abstraction, unclearness, incomprehensibility, estrangement from life, of the new philosophy.

With the exception of Spinoza, whose philosophy proceeded from a religious and truly Christian basis, although he is not commonly reckoned a Christian, and of Kant, a gifted genius who resolutely conducted his ethics independent of his metaphysics; with these two exceptions, every other philosopher, even the brilliant Schopenhauer, manifestly devised artificial connections between their ethics and their metaphysics. One feels that Christian ethics have an original and firmly established standpoint independent of philosophy, and needing not at all the fictitious props placed beneath it, and that philosophy invents such statements not only to avoid an appearance of contradiction, but apparently to involve a natural connection and outcome.

But all these statements only seem to justify Christian ethics while they are considered in the abstract. The moment they are fitted to questions of practical existence, then not only does their disagreement become visible in all its force, but the contradiction between the philosophical basis

and that which we regard as morality is made manifest. The unhappy Nietzsche, who has lately become so celebrated, is especially noticeable as an example of this contradiction. He is irrefutable when he says that all rules of morality, from the standpoint of the existent non-Christian philosophy, are nothing but falsehood and hypocrisy, and that it is much more advantageous, pleasant, and reasonable for a man to create a society of *Ueberschensch*, and to become one of its members, than to be one of a crowd which must serve as a scaffold for that society.

No combinations of philosophy which proceed from the pagan religious conception of life can prove that it will be of greater advantage to, and more reasonable for, a man to live, not for his own desired, attainable, and conceivable welfare, or for the welfare of his family and society, but for the welfare of another, which, as far as he is concerned, may be undesirable, inconceivable, and unattainable by his own insufficient means. That philosophy which is founded on man's welfare as the conception of life can never prove to a reasoning being, with the ever-present consciousness of death, that it is fitting for him to renounce his own desirable, conceivable, and certain welfare, not for the certain welfare of others—for he can never know the results of his sacrifice—but merely because it is right that he should do so: that it is the categorical imperative.

It is impossible to prove this from the pagan-philosophical standpoint. In order to prove that men are all equal, that it is best for a man to sacrifice his own life in the service of others, rather than to make his fellows serve him, trampling upon their lives, it is necessary for a man to redefine his relation to the universe, and to understand that such is the position of a man that he is left no other course, because the meaning of his life is only to be found in the accomplishment of the Will of Him that sent him, and that the Will of Him that sent him is—that he should give his life to the service of mankind. And such a modification in man's perception of his relation to the universe is wrought only by religion.

So, too, is it with the attempts to deduce Christian morality from, and to harmonize it with, the fundamental propositions of pagan science. No sophisms nor mental shifting will destroy the simple and clear proposition, that the hypothesis of evolution, laid as the basis of all the science of our time, is founded upon a general, unchangeable, and eternal law—that of the struggle for existence, and of the survival of the "fittest"—and that, therefore, every man, for the attainment of his own welfare, or of that of his society, must be this fittest, or make his society the fittest, in order that neither he nor his society should perish, but another less fit. However much some naturalists, alarmed by the logical inferences of this law, and by its adaptation to human existence, may strive to extinguish it with words and talk it down, its irrefutability becomes only the more manifest by their efforts, and its control over the life of the entire organic world, and hence over that of man, regarded as an animal.

While I am writing this,<sup>4</sup> the Russian translation of an article by Professor Huxley has been published, compiled from a speech of his upon the evolution of ethics before a certain English society. In this article the learned Professor—as did some years ago, too, our eminent Professor Beketoff as unsuccessfully as his predecessors—tries to prove that the struggle for existence does not violate morality, and that, alongside the acceptance of the law of this struggle as the fundamental law of existence, morality may not only exist, but may improve. Mr. Huxley's article is full of a variety of jokes, verses, and general views upon the religion and philosophy of the ancients, and therefore is so shock-headed and entangled that only with great pains can one arrive at the fundamental idea. This, however, is as follows:— The law of evolution is contrary

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<sup>4</sup> 1894

to the law of morality; this was known to the ancient world of Greece and India. And the philosophy and religion of either nation led them to the teaching of self-abnegation. This teaching, according to the author's opinion, is not correct; but the right one is the following: A law exists, termed by the author "cosmic," according to which all creatures struggle among themselves, and only the fittest survives. Man is subordinate to this law, and, thanks to it, has become what he now is. But this law is contrary to morality. How, then, are we to reconcile morality with this law? Thus: Social progress exists which tends to suspend the cosmic process, and to replace it by another—an ethical one, the object of which is no longer the survival of the "fittest," but of the "best" in the ethical sense.

Whence came this ethical process Mr. Huxley does not explain, but in Note 19 he says that the basis of this process consists in the fact that men, as well as animals, prefer, on the one hand, to live in companies, and therefore smother within themselves those propensities which are pernicious to societies, and, on the other hand, the members of societies crush by force such actions as are prejudicial to the welfare of the society. Mr. Huxley thinks that this process, which compels men to control their passions for the preservation of that association to which they belong, and the fear of punishment should they break the rules of that association, compose that very ethical process the existence of which it behooves him to prove. It evidently appears to the mind of Mr. Huxley, that in English society of our time, with its Irish destitution, its insane luxury of the rich, its trade in opium and spirits, its executions, its sanguinary wars, its extermination of entire nations for the sake of commerce and policy, its secret vice and hypocrisy—it evidently appears to him that a man who does not overstep police regulations is a moral man, and that such a man is guided by an ethical process. Mr. Huxley seems to forget that qualities which may be needful to prevent the destruction of that society in which its member lives, may be of service to the society itself; and that the personal qualities of the members of a band of brigands are also useful to the band; as, also, in our society, we find a use for hangmen, jailers, judges, soldiers, false pastors, etc., but that these qualities have nothing in common with morality.

Morality is an affair of constant development and growth, and hence the preservation of the instituted orders of a certain society, by means of the rope and scaffold, to which as instruments of morality Mr. Huxley alludes, will be not only not the confirmation, but the infraction of morality. And, on the contrary, every infringement of existing canons, such as was the violation by Christ and His disciples of the ordinances of a Roman province, such as would be the defiance of existing regulations by a man who refuses to take part in judgments at law, military service, and payment of taxes, used for military preparations, will be not only not contrary to morality, but the indispensable condition of its manifestation. Every cannibal, who ceases to partake of his species, acts in the same manner and transgresses the ordinances of his society. Hence though actions which infringe the regulations of society may be immoral, without doubt, also, every truly moral action which advances the cause of morality is always achieved by transgressing some ordinance of society. And, therefore, if there has ever appeared in a society a law which demands the sacrifice of personal advantage to preserve the unity of the whole social fabric, that law is not an ethical statute, but, for the most part, on the contrary (being opposed to all ethics), is that same law of struggle for existence in a latent and concealed form. It is the same struggle, but transferred from units to their agglomerations. It is not the cessation of strife, but the swinging backward of the arm to hit the stronger. If the law of the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest is the eternal law of all life (and one must perforce regard it as such with reference to man considered as an animal), then such misty arguments as to social progress—supposed to

proceed from it, and arisen none knows whence, a *deus ex machinâ* ethical process to assist us in our need—cannot break that law down. If social progress, as Mr. Huxley assures us, collects men into groups, then the same struggle and the same survival will exist between families, races, and States, and this struggle will be, not only not more moral, but more cruel and immoral than that between individuals, as, indeed, we find it in reality.

Even if we admit the impossible—that all humanity, solely by social progress, will in a thousand years achieve a single unity and will be of one State and nation, even then, not to mention that the struggle suppressed between States and nations will be altered to one between humanity and the animal world, and that that struggle will always remain a struggle—that is, an activity absolutely excluding the possibility of Christian morality as professed by us—not to speak of this, the struggle between the individuals which compose this unity, and between the associations of families, races, nationalities will not in the least be diminished, but will continue the same, only in another form, as we may observe in all associations of men in families, races, and States. Those of one family quarrel and fight—and often more and most cruelly—between themselves, as well as with strangers. So also in a State, the same struggle continues between those within it, as between them and those without, only in other forms. In one case men kill each other with arrows and knives, in another by starvation. And if the feeblest are sometimes preserved in the family or State, it is in no wise thanks to the State association, but because self-abnegation and tenderness exist among people joined in families and States. If, of two children without parents, only the fittest survives, the fact that both might live with the help of a good mother, will not be a consequence of family unification, but because a certain mother is gifted with tenderness and self-denial. And neither of these gifts can proceed from social progress. To assert that social progress produces morality is equivalent to saying that the erection of stoves produces heat. Heat proceeds from the sun; and stoves produce heat only when fuel—the work of the sun—is kindled in them; so morality proceeds from religion, and social forms of life produce morality only when into these forms are put the results of religious influence on humanity—this is, morality. Stoves may be kindled, and so may impart heat, or may be left unlit and so remain cold. So, too, social forms may include morality, and in that case morally influence society, or may not include morality and thus remain without influence. Christian morality cannot be founded on the heathen or social conception of life, nor can it be deduced either from non-Christian philosophy or science—can not only not be deduced, but cannot be reconciled with them. So always was it imderstood by all serious, consistent, ancient philosophy and science, which said, "Do our propositions disagree with morality? Well, then, so much the worse for morality," and continued their investigations.

Ethical treatises not founded on religion, and even lay catechisms, are written and taught, and men may believe that humanity is guided by them; but it only seems to be so, because people in reality are guided, not by these treatises and catechisms, but by the religion which they have always had and have; whereas the treatises and catechisms only try to counterfeit the natural outflux of religion. Ordinances of lay morality not founded upon religious teaching are similar to the actions of a man who, being ignorant of music, should take the conductor's seat before the orchestra, and begin to wave his arms before the musicians, who are performing. The music might continue a little while by its own momentum, and from the previous knowledge of the players, but it is evident that the mere waving of a stick by a man who is ignorant of music would be not only useless, but would inevitably confuse the musicians and disorganize the orchestra in the end. The same disorder is beginning to take place in the minds of the men of our time, in consequence of the attempts of leading men to teach people morality, not founded on that

loftiest religion which is in process of adoption, and is in part adopted by Christian humanity. It would be, indeed, desirable to have a moral teaching unmixed with superstition, but the fact is that moral teaching is only the result of a certain defined relation of man to the universe, or to God. If the determination of such a relation is expressed in forms which seem to us superstitious, then, in order to prevent this, we should try to express this relation more clearly, reasonably, and accurately, and even to destroy the former perception of man's relationship which has become insufficient, and to put in its place one loftier, clearer, and more reasonable; but by no means to invent a so-called lay, irreligious morality founded on sophisms, or upon nothing at all.

The attempts to found a morality independent of religion are like the actions of children when, wishing to move a plant which pleases them, they tear off the root which does not please and seems unnecessary to them, and plant it in the earth without the root. Without religious foundation there can be no true, unsimulated morality, as without a root there can be no true plant. And so in reply to your two questions, I say religion is man's conception of his relation to the infinite universe, and to its source. And morality is the ever-present guide of life proceeding only from this relation.

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Leo Tolstoy  
Religion and Morality  
1900

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