G. E. Moore

The Early Essays

Edited by

Tom Regan

1986

Temple University Press
Philadelphia

Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122

Published 1986
Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moore, G. E. (George Edward), 1873–1958.
G. E. Moore: the early essays.

Includes index.
1. Philosophy. I. Regan, Tom. II. Title.
B1647.M73G2 1986 192 86-6007
ISBN 0-87722-442-0 (alk. paper)

To my teachers,
Peter Heath and David Yalden-Thomson,
who introduced me to
Moore's philosophy

5

The Value of Religion[1]

It is, I think, well known that a great many people nowadays believe in God. And it is also known that many people do not believe that any God exists. Each party, the believers and the unbelievers, the Christian and the infidel, does know in general that the other party numbers many members. Some time ago there was not little public controversy between these factions. Bradlaugh and Huxley, to mention well-known names, assaulted the believers very vigorously, and Matthew Arnold did his best to arbitrate. At present the question whether God exists or not, seems to have ceased to be of public interest. Books are, no doubt, still published on both sides of the question, Huxley and Matthew Arnold are still read; but in general neither side seems very anxious to convince the other. I doubt if the Christians ever think how many infidels there are. And the infidels, on their side, have ceased to question equally the right of other people to believe and their own right to disbelieve. In general no unpleasantness arises from this great difference of opinion: you do not even know whether your neighbor is a Christian or an infidel; you see no reason to inquire, even if the question should occur to you.

Originally published in *International Journal of Ethics* 12 (Oct. 1901): 81–98.

Now there was not always such indifference on this matter: the question has been one of life and death. Perhaps I have exaggerated the present state of acquiescence. If any of you think so, then there is hope that you may take more interest than I expect in what I have to say. For I mean to re-discuss this ancient controversy; to put before you, so far as I am able, what valid arguments there are in answer to the question: Ought we to believe in God?

My utmost hope in the matter is to make clear the issues, on which our answer to this question must depend. For it seems to me that on both sides false arguments are often used, and I do not know but what, if these could be dismissed, that utter [82] difference of opinion which I have pointed out might disappear. For myself I share the opinion which, as I have said, seems from their actions to be that of most men,—the opinion that this difference between the Christian and the infidel is of little practical importance. On questions of much more importance, on moral questions, both sides agree for the most part even in opinion: and in practice they agree still more. Nevertheless, so long as many say, "There is a God," while others answer, "I see no reason for thinking that there is," it remains a possible danger that hostile action should result. This difference, I remind you again, has in the past been a large cause of violence and persecution: and so, not probably, but possibly, it may become again. Especially if the majority of Christians should once become fully aware how many people differ from them in belief and how completely, the present quiet state of things might be much altered. In any case, it is, I think, desirable that agreement should be reached, and, failing this, that each side should know at least what grounds will justify belief or disbelief. These grounds I shall try to give you.

I raise the question then: Ought we to believe in God? and I put it in this form partly because, apart from any general importance it has or lacks, this is a question which occurs to most people at one time or another, as one requiring that they personally should find an answer to it. The answer that they give will

make little difference to their future conduct: they will probably become accustomed to the answer they adopt; they will take it as a matter of course and quite forget that it ever was a serious question with them. For some, however, though it makes no difference to their conduct, to their happiness it may make much. And in any case, when the question is first raised, however soon they answer it and cease to think about it, just then it is a question to which they want an answer. To help them to the right one will surely be a work of use. Arguments may appeal to those who have already raised the question of themselves; whereas they are thrown away on those whom habit has convinced of their own answer. Moreover it is those who raise the question now who will determine the habitual answer of the future.

[83] Ought we, then, to believe in God? You may say that to discuss this question is not to discuss the value of religion. Religion is a very vague word, and some may agree with Matthew Arnold that it does not imply a belief in a personal God. For my part, I disagree: I think that it is generally understood to imply this, although of course it includes much more besides. But my object is not to discuss the meaning of a word. If you think that I have used religion wrongly, I am content to apologize. The question I do wish to discuss is the value of belief in a personal God. This question, quite apart from any wider meaning of religion, is certainly a serious one for many people. When Matthew Arnold says that it *ought* not to be so, that it is not a valuable element in Christianity, perhaps I should agree with him, though Christians certainly will not. But that many people feel it to be serious, even he perhaps would not deny, although his arguments imply such a denial. At all events, this is the only question with which I am concerned: What is the value of belief in a personal God? You cannot have religion, in the sense I mean, without this belief; although, when you have this, you may also have much more in your religion.

But next I must say what I mean by a personal God. As for

personal, all that I imply by the word is easily to be understood. I should hardly have thought it necessary to point the meaning out, but for Matthew Arnold's singular obtuseness in seeing what is meant when he is called a person, and his assumption that only the metaphysical ability of bishops can understand the matter. There are two properties which must belong to a person, whatever else may belong to him besides. (1) A person must be endowed with that which we call mind as distinct from our brains and our bodies; and (2) he must also have that positive quality whereby we distinguish ourselves from other people. These two marks of personality are quite sufficient for my purpose. All of us know what is meant by these two things, although we may not know exactly wherein they consist. We think that other people have minds—that they are not mere bodies—and we know from our experience of ourselves what we mean by this difference. And also [84] we know that when we talk of another person's thoughts we do not mean our own thoughts. Two persons may think of the same thing, but each one's thought belongs to him and not to the other. We know what we mean by a thought belonging to a person from our own experience of the thoughts which belong to us: and we are never tempted to think that when you and I think of the same thing, there are not two thinkings but one thinking. That you think of it, is one fact, and that I think of it is another, whatever the difference between the two may be. And so when God thinks, that he thinks must be one fact, and not the same fact as the thinking of anybody else whatever, even if it can include these other thoughts. This property that his thoughts belong to him, as our thoughts belong to us, in a sense in which they do not belong to anybody else, a personal God must have. And he must also have that other property common to you and me, which we call mind, as distinguished from body. These two properties are surely very easy to identify, and when I say a personal God I merely mean a God possessed of these two properties, whatever others

he may have besides—a God with mind or spirit, and a God with *one* mind.[2]

But God must not only be a person, he must also be a God: and by that I mean that he must be powerful, wise and good, all three in a greater degree than any one of us. *How much* more powerful and wise and good has been very differently thought in different religions. Some may even have held that he was not better but worse than themselves. But even though devil-worship deserve the title of religion I am not going to discuss it. The questions: Ought I to believe that there is but one God, and that he is a Devil? is not, I think, a serious question for many people. In any case, I must neglect it, and so far agree with Matthew Arnold that the important question concerns a God, who, though he be a person also, yet does "make for righteousness." And finally the God, belief in [85] whom concerns me, must be conceived as very greatly more powerful, more wise and better, than we ourselves, however many historical religions I may be thus excluding from discussion. That we can imagine a person all-wise, all-powerful and all-good I very much doubt, but the conception of God which I mean to discuss is one which comes as near to possessing these attributes, the attributes ascribed to God by Christianity, as any Christian is likely to imagine.

With this, then, I hope to have made plain to you, the minimum of what I mean by God. And my question is whether it is good to believe, as most religious persons do believe, that a God possessing at least these qualities, however many more he may possess, however much he may transcend anthropomorphic notions, does actually exist? Is it good to believe that such a God exists? Ought we to believe that he exists? What is the value of such a belief? This is an ethical question, and for that reason I believe it covers more completely than any other the whole ground of controversy between the believer and the unbeliever. For I admit or assume, whichever you please, that if it is true that

God exists, if he really does exist, then it is good to believe that fact. It may not perhaps be much good, but it is *pro tanto* good to know the truth. It is sufficient justification for any man's belief that what he believes is true. If a thing is true, then no one can be blamed for believing it. This, so far as I know, has never been disputed, at least in this religious controversy. At all events I do not mean to argue it. The question of fact, then, of the evidence for God's existence which has played so large a part in this controversy, is completely covered by my question. Before we can fully answer the question, Is it good to believe in God? we must first decide whether God exists; for, if he does exist, then, I take it, we may say at once that we do well to believe in him.

But my question does not only cover this inquiry; it also includes another: and in this lies its advantage. For supposing we have argued the question of fact, the question whether God exists or not, and have come to the conclusion, to which, as I shall try to show, we must ultimately come, that there is [86] not one atom of evidence, establishing the smallest probability either that God exists or yet that he does not exist: supposing, I say, that we have come to this conclusion on the factual question, there still remains another which is also covered by my ethical formula. There still remain what are called the moral reasons for belief in God. Appeals to these are very often made, and they often have great weight. But the weight they have is largely due, I think, to a confusion. Under this one head of moral reasons for belief we have two entirely different sets of arguments. One set attempts to prove from moral facts, of one sort or another, that God exists. It is argued that morality is without a basis, unless God does exist: this Matthew Arnold argues for his God, and Mr. Arthur Balfour for his. It is argued too by more humble persons that the goodness of the Christian is evidence that his belief is true. But all these arguments plainly fall only under the factual inquiry: the inquiry whether there be any evidence, moral or otherwise, establishing

a probability that God exists. As for the other set of so-called "moral" arguments, they would I think lose much of their influence if they were clearly distinguished from these last. It is, in fact, contended, that whether we have any evidence for God or not, to believe in him produces good effects,—is a powerful aid to moral action. This is an argument which certainly deserves to be considered. We have, some people would urge, a right and a duty to indulge in positive belief, where the evidence alone would give us no right; and this because of its effects. It is, therefore, proper to consider how far a belief in God has the alleged effects. This inquiry is what you probably understood by my title, the "value of religion." It concerns the moral arguments for belief as such; and these must be distinguished from any moral arguments there may be for the truth of the belief. Yet, as I have said, the two lines of argument are frequently confused: and how important such confusions are in strengthening religion I can show, I think, from an obvious instance. We hear a great deal of the value of religion; it is urged that its influence on conduct is enormous. But all this is usually urged on the assumption that there is some ground for thinking it true. Yet plainly, whether [87] it be true or false, the evidence for its moral efficacy is just the same. Observation alone can assure us, whether it has good effects or not; and the results of observation will stand firm, although the belief be proved a false one. This fact, steadily held before the mind, cannot fail, I think, to be a chilling one to many supporters of religion. It does not usually occur to them that they are bestowing their enthusiastic praises on a belief, which, failing other arguments to prove its truth, *may* be a mere delusion. A mere delusion may, no doubt, have very good effects: but I think I am right in saying that earnest men are very loth to think so. If, then, it be brought home to them that religious belief is possibly mere error, they will then be apt either to cool in their praises of its excellent effects, or else to argue that its effects themselves are evidences for its truth.

Now, in the former case, their moral argument for belief is sadly weakened; and, in the latter, they have fallaciously converted it into the moral argument for God's existence—for the truth of that belief. In short, if we are fairly to consider the value of religion, we must account the possible disadvantages of belief in what may be a mere delusion, as having a certain weight against alleged advantages. Many apologists, I think, are apt to forget that they are putting in the balance on their own side of the question an assumption that their belief in God is true. Now, unless they can prove by other arguments that so it is, they ought not only to remove a part of the weight from their own scale, but actually to add it to the other. For most men would admit, as I think rightly, that a strong belief in what is possibly false, is in itself a doubtful blessing.

Well, then, I hope to have convinced you that to think clearly in this matter is important. What I have called the factual inquiry into the *truth* of religious belief must be kept quite distinct from the moral inquiry into the worth of its effects. But at the same time the factual inquiry is necessary before we can decide upon the value of religion; because the truth of a belief, although it cannot alter its effects, has in itself some ethical importance. With this we may proceed to our discussion; and first to this same factual inquiry.

[88] The question here before us is this: Have we any evidence rendering it probable that God exists? The question is a large one, and I can do no more than summarize the arguments. And yet I think this summary, though brief, may be conclusive. The conclusion I wish to establish is as I have said:—There is *no* probability that God exists. That is all: a purely negative conclusion. I am an infidel, and do not believe that God exists; and I think the evidence will justify my disbelief. But just as I think there is no evidence for his existence, I think there is also no evidence that he does not exist. I am not an atheist in one sense: I do not deny that

God exists. My arguments will only urge that there is no reason for thinking that he does; they will *not* urge that there is reason for thinking he does not. I do *not* believe that he does exist, but also I do *not* believe that he does not exist. That is the attitude I am concerned to recommend.

Is there, then, evidence that God exists? Is his existence at all probable?

We say we have evidence for a thing, when it can be inferred from another thing that we suppose established. The question of evidence for God's existence is then the question whether there are any other truths from which we can infer it. To mention evidence at all implies that other things are true beside the thing we want to prove. He who would prove by evidence that God exists must first assume that something else is true.

Now the truths from which we can start on such a proof are what we call the facts of common life—experience. We all believe that we are here, between four walls, alive and able to move; nay, more, thinking and feeling. Such are the facts of observation, from which the Natural Sciences infer their laws. In these things we all do believe; we cannot help believing them, whether we like it or not. That they are true indeed, we cannot prove. Our belief is no evidence that they are so. And so far they are just on a level with a belief that God exists: the belief also is no evidence that he exists. I believe that I exist, and some one else, I grant you, believes that God exists; and so far as these beliefs go, there is not a bit of difference between the two things that are believed. Both have an equal [89] right to be taken for true and an equal right to be taken for false. But when we come to the question of evidence and probability, then there is all the difference in the world between them. There is evidence, in plenty, that I exist and there is none that God exists.

For my existence is an object of such a nature that it can be inferred from other objects of belief. These also are, like it and

God, mere objects of belief; they cannot be proved true. But they are such that *if* any one of them be true, the others and my existence are so too. The simplest statement as that "This hand moves," involves a host of others, from which again a crowd of other simple statements, as that *I* moved it, may be deduced. And all the arguments to prove the existence of God rest upon evidence like this. The evidence is certainly as good as we can get; it is what we cannot help believing, although it may be false. To the evidence, then, I have no objection: *but*—the existence of God will not rest upon it. That I have a scar on my hand is excellent evidence of something: the scar is visible and palpable, and no doubt it had some cause. I cannot prove that these things are so; and you cannot either, except from premises equally doubtful in themselves. All of them are possibly not true. But if you grant me that the scar is there, then I maintain there is no evidence, no probability, that an angel with a burning sword came down and made it: but there is much evidence, much probability that it came about in a way that I could mention.

People take, then, the world as we think we know it, and they infer that because it is such as they and we all believe it to be, God must exist. To the facts they start from I have no objection, although we must admit they may be false: but the inference they draw from them is as absurd as the inference from my scar to that angel. There are two well-known arguments of this kind—the stock arguments of what is called Natural Theology—arguments which in one form or another are still in use. These are the arguments to a First Cause and the argument from Design. The inadequacy of both these arguments was finally pointed out a hundred years ago by Kant. With the first, as distinguished from the second, we [90] need not deal, for, even if some First Cause were necessary, it would yet remain to prove that this Cause was intelligent and good: it must be both, you remember, to come within our meaning of personal God. That this Cause is intelligent

and good as well as powerful is what the argument from Design attempts to prove. The only argument, therefore, with which we have to deal is that: From the nature of the world, as it appears on observation, we can infer that it or parts of it were or are caused by a being immensely intelligent, wise or good. The answer to this is summary but sound. We assume that useful and beautiful objects we find in the world were made by man—had for their cause a being of some intelligence and goodness. By these useful and beautiful objects I mean houses and drains, hospitals and works of art—if you like, a watch—and I call it an assumption that they were made by man, in order not to overstate my case. We have as our premise, then, that certain objects, which I am far from denying to be either useful or beautiful or sometimes both, had for their cause some tolerably good people. Then, says the Natural Theologian, we may infer that anything useful or good we find in the world, that is not a work of man's designing—man himself, above all, the most useful and beautiful of all—had also for its cause a person of intelligence and goodness. This is the argument. But what reason have we for supposing that anything at all of any kind in the world was caused by a good person? Simply the assumption that certain things of one kind were caused by man. And what reason have we for this assumption? Simply and solely the fact that we can follow the series of causes back from them to the working of man. And if we are therefore going to call man their cause, we must also ascribe all other events to those which preceded them in the same way as man's work plainly preceded houses and drains. If houses and drains are the effect of man's work, then man himself and all other things, must be the effect of events in the world which preceded him, and so on *ad infinitum*. If, on the other hand, houses and drains were not caused by man, then we have no reason for supposing that anything useful or beautiful ever was caused by a good person. Either of these two alternatives [91] wrecks the theologian's argument completely. If

we are to infer from the nature of an effect to the nature of a cause, we can only do so on the assumption that we can find the *complete causes* of events in the course of nature. But if every natural event has a natural cause, then unless God is a natural cause, he is not a cause of anything at all. I have put this argument in a simple instance, for the sake of clearness: but it is of universal application. It has the advantage of being a question of logic, and not of fact; no new instances can overthrow it. It is as with the law of contradiction. If you have contradicted yourself, within the meaning of logic, then you must have made some mistake, however trivial. And so, if you use this argument, in whatever form you dress it, it must be worthless since your conclusion will not follow from your premises. One of your premises must be: This is the cause of that; and the other: Every event has a cause. And your conclusion is: God is the cause of these other events; his existence alone will explain them. But your first premise assigns as the cause of one natural event, another natural event. And you cannot be sure of this, unless every natural event is caused by another natural event: otherwise the effect you began with might not have had the cause which you assign—the hospital might have been made by miracle and not made by man. Either then God must be one or more among natural events, or else you have no reason to assert that he is more like one than another, more like a man than a billiard-ball. But you have asserted him to be more like a man than a billiard-ball; and you certainly cannot show that any natural event is a personal God. Either then God is a cause in some sense utterly different from that in which man is a cause: and then we cannot infer either to his existence or his nature; or else he is a cause in the sense in which man is a cause, and then we can infer his existence but not his nature: we can infer that the events in question had a cause, but not that their cause was God. This dilemma applies in general to every argument from Design—and not only to these, but to every metaphysical argument that

tries to mount from Nature and Mind to any superior Reality. All such arguments infer from the nature and existence of some or all the things that are [92] agreed to exist that something else, of a different nature, also exists. But the only known valid principle by which we can infer from the existence of one thing to the existence of something else is this same principle of causality, according to which that "something else" must be one among natural events. All these arguments must therefore involve the fallacy involved in the vulgar argument from Design. On the basis of such arguments modern philosophers are fond of offering to us, in place of a personal God, a more or less consoling Reality or Absolute. But the skeleton of any such construction is nothing more than this old fallacy. They muffle it up in garments infinitely complicated, many of which are in themselves sound stuff. But the more they muffle and the sounder the stuff, the less attractive their Absolute becomes. We have, I think, every reason to prefer the old God of Christianity. In him the artifice is more transparent, and the product, none the less, by far more beautiful.

We cannot then make a single step toward proving God's existence from the nature of the world, such as we take it to be in common life or such as Natural Science shows it. That we are here to-night, that we were not here this morning, that we came here by means of cabs or on our feet: all facts of this sort, in which we cannot help believing,—these facts, with all the implications, which Science or Philosophy can draw from them, offer us not one jot of evidence that God exists. But there are other arguments which start like this one from experience. There is the argument from general belief. I will admit at once that most people, who have existed heretofore, have believed in a God of some sort. I have, indeed, no reason to believe that there are or have been other people and still less that they have had this belief, except on the same grounds as I believe in the facts of common life. If we are not here now, there is no evidence even that most

people have believed in God. The mere fact of general belief, then, is no more certain than the facts of experience: if we reject the latter as untrue, we cannot use the former as evidence for God's existence. You cannot argue, as many people do: The facts of science are merely matters of general belief, and God's existence is the [93] same; therefore the one is as certain as the other. For, unless the facts of science are true, you have no title to your statement that God's existence is a matter of general belief. But now, granting that it is a matter of general belief, does this fact establish any probability that God exists? I think it cannot. For many things which we now all admit to be errors, have in the past been matters of general belief: such, for instance, as that the sun went round the earth, which Galileo controverted. All the probability is, then, in favor of the supposition that many things which are still generally believed, will in time be recognized as errors. And what ground can we have for holding that the belief in God is not among their number? The probabilities seem all the other way. For I think it will be admitted that the belief in God has in the past derived much support from ignorance of Natural Science and from such arguments as those of Natural Theology. If, then, as I have tried to show, those arguments are fallacious, in proportion as this is recognized, the belief in God will become less general. You can therefore only hold that belief in God will persist undiminished, while other beliefs disappear, if you maintain the continued triumph of ignorance and fallacious reasoning. But a belief which persists from causes like these has surely no claim to be therefore considered true. In short, if you are to argue from general belief to truth, you must have independent grounds for thinking that the belief in question is true. If you can show a probability that it is true, then the fact of general belief may confirm that probability. But if, as I try to show in this case, there is no such probability, no evidence that God exists, then the fact of general belief is perfectly useless as evidence.

The argument from general belief must then break down, and I think I need hardly discuss at length any so-called historical proofs for God's existence. They are all from the nature of the case too obviously weak. If what they aim at is establishing the fact of miracles, then no historical proof can by any possibility show that an event, which happened, was in very truth a miracle —that it had no natural cause. That an event should have had no natural cause contradicts, as I tried to [94] show, the very grounds of historical evidence, for this is all based on inferences from effect to cause, and if a miracle is ever possible, we can never say that any particular thing was the cause of any other. But if you mean by miracle only a great and wonderful work, then that a man can perform astonishing feats is no proof either that he knows the truth or that he tells it. And, miracles apart, historical proofs can only show that somebody said something: whether what he said was true must be decided on quite other grounds.

The facts of common life, then, the facts with which natural science and history deal, afford no inference to God's existence. If a man still believes that God exists, he cannot support his belief by any appeal to facts admitted both by himself and the infidel. He must not attempt to *prove* that God probably exists; for that is impossible. He must be content to affirm that he sees as clearly that God exists as he sees that he himself does. Many people, I admit, may really have had this strong conviction. And many people may be content to justify belief upon this ground alone. They, I think, are right. Their position is quite unassailable. If you have this faith, this intuition of Gods's existence, that is enough. You may, I admit, be as certain that God exists as that you yourself exist: and no one has any right to say that you are wrong. But these are two independent facts: one is perhaps *as* certain to you as the other: but the one is *not* more likely to be true, because the other is so. The moment you use that argument, you will be wrong. You cannot argue that if you exist, God also probably

exists: as you can argue that if you exist, I also probably exist. Nor can you argue that because you are so certain of God's existence, I ought to admit the slightest probability that he exists: if you do this, you are appealing to an argument similar to that from general belief. In fact, if I were the only person who could not see that God exists, and all the world agreed with you, it would be just as likely that I was right, as that you and all the world were right. It is equally likely we are right and equally likely we are wrong: but only equally. I have no more right to argue that probably God does not exist, because I cannot see he does, than you to argue that probably [95] he does exist, because you see he does. This is all I have tried to show, when I maintain there is no evidence for God's existence. It is mere faith, not proof, which justifies your statement: God exists. Your belief is right, because you cannot help believing: and my unbelief is right, because I have not got that intuition. We both are justified by mere necessity.

An appeal to faith, then,—to intuition—is the sole ground for asserting the truth of religion. That truth, if it be true, is coördinate with the facts of daily life, and cannot be inferred from them, as they can be inferred from one another. And so far it would seem that religious belief stands in the same position as our moral beliefs. These moral judgments, too, it may be said, are independent of beliefs about the world: their truth also can never be inferred from that of daily facts.

That moral truth cannot be thus inferred from any facts, is, I think, quite demonstrable. But since it is denied, I must say something on this head. The argument of Mr. Balfour's book on "The Foundations of Belief" depends in part on this denial. If, he seems to say, the view of Naturalism that all things were evolved from natural causes is true, then it is inconsistent still to hold that our beliefs in the goodness of this and the beauty of that are also true. And a similar view is implied by Matthew Arnold, who seems to hold, that unless we can verify the existence of a power not ourselves that makes for righteousness, then our belief that certain

conduct is righteous and other conduct wicked, must also justly perish. But is this so? Is it inconsistent to hold that this is right and that is wrong, and at the same time to hold that we only think this right, that wrong, because in fact such beliefs have helped us to survive? Or can it be less true that right is right, even if there be no power that will reward it? The former argument refutes itself. For if it be true that beliefs were evolved, then the belief that they were so must also have been evolved. And this, according to Mr. Balfour, is a reason why we must doubt its truth. That is to say, the fact of evolution is a reason for doubting the fact of evolution. It is inconsistent to believe in the fact of evolution, if we at the same time believe in the fact of evolution. The inconsistency, we may well reply, is all the other way. It is, in [96] fact, self-contradictory to hold that the validity of a belief depends in any way upon the manner in which it was acquired. And hence the truth of our moral beliefs *must* be independent of any scientific facts. Just so, we may answer Matthew Arnold: In order to verify the fact that righteous conduct is rewarded, we must already know what righteous conduct is: and to know that it is righteous is to know we ought to do it.

There is, therefore, no more evidence for moral than for religious beliefs; and the religious believer may be tempted to say, "I have as much right to my belief that God exists, as you have to any of your moral beliefs." But this claim, it should be pointed out, refutes itself. For his assertion that he has "as much right" to believe in God is itself a moral judgment. It can only rest upon the moral principle that necessity will justify beliefs: and this principle must have a prior validity to that of any particular instances which may be brought under it. The believer is therefore admitting that there is one moral principle to which he has more right than to his belief in God. It must be true, according to him, that necessity is a moral justification, whether his belief in God is so justified or not. In fact he cannot attempt to *defend* his belief in God except by a moral judgment; and by so doing he gives up the

supposed parity between moral and religious beliefs in general, although it may still be true that such parity exists between religious belief and *most* moral judgments.

It remains true, however, that if a man really cannot help believing in God, nothing can be said against him. But I very much doubt whether this is often the case. With most believers, I think, the disparity between their moral and their religious convictions is much more striking. Their religious belief gains much of its strength from the fact that they think they ought to have it. They have a direct moral feeling that it is wicked to doubt of God's existence; and without this belief, which is a strong one, their direct religious certainty would offer but a weak resistance to scepticism. For such persons the final question arises: Are they right in thinking that infidelity is wicked?

Now they can no longer urge in defence of this opinion that belief in God is good, because it is true. On the contrary it is [97] only because they believe it to be good that they hold it to be true. They must therefore rest their claim to its goodness solely upon its effects; and in the inquiry whether its effects are good, they must, as I pointed out above, carefully discount the vicious tendency to think the effects must be good, on the ground that the belief is true. They should bear in mind that the belief is possibly false; and that, if they shall decide that its effects are good, they will be committed to the theory that all this good is possibly a result of mere error.

Now whether they are or are not the better, the more strongly they believe that God exists, is no longer a matter to dogmatize upon. The manners in which religious belief may act on different minds are infinitely various. But I think there is at least good room to doubt whether it ever does much good. That there is a power who is willing and able to help you would be, no doubt, an encouraging thought. But from this, if our argument holds, our believers are in any case excluded. God cannot interfere in the course of natural events. This belief, which has played such a

large part in the religions of the past, is demonstrably untrue. At most, then, the encouragement must come from the knowledge that he sympathizes with us. And this is certainly no small comfort. But how are we to get it? We are faced by this dilemma. The encouragement will only be strong in proportion to our belief. But, on the other hand, our efforts to strengthen this belief are only too likely to fail, if we do not find we get the encouragement. That this difficulty is a real one I think most people for whom the present question has been raised, will acknowledge. That consolation, for the sake of which they desire to believe, must be already felt, before they can acquire it. They desire to "see that the Lord is good," in order that they may "taste" it; but on the other hand, unless they first do taste it, they cannot get to see it. It may well be urged that it would be better to give up this fruitless endeavor; especially when we consider that in so far as they succeed, they are deliberately acquiring a belief, which, for all they know, is false.

And moreover, I agree with Matthew Arnold that a more important element in religion than this is the belief that the [98] good will triumph. If we could rest in this belief, we might surely give up the belief in God, and yet get all the comfort that we needed. But for this belief also I am afraid we have no reason. That Good will triumph as that God exists is possible but only possible. Matthew Arnold's God, too, is not, as he thought, verifiable. Naturalism, as Mr. Balfour argues, does fail to verify him. We have reason to believe that human life upon this planet will presently be extinguished. We certainly have no reason to believe the contrary; nor yet that our souls will persist and grow better after death.

But though our belief in this God fails us too, I think it may be doubted whether we may not still retain the very elements which have rendered religion most effective for good in the past. They are in fact elements which have no logical connection with the belief in God.

(I) First, there is that valuable element in religious emotion,

which proceeds from the contemplation of what we think to be most truly and perfectly good. We are indeed only entitled to think of this as what ought to be; not as what is or will be. But I doubt if this emotion need lose much of its force, because its object is not real. The effects of literature show how strongly we may be moved by the contemplation of ideal objects, of which we nevertheless do not assert the existence. It may indeed be doubted whether the most effective part in all religious belief has not always been similar to that which we have in objects of imagination —a belief quite consistent with a firm conviction that they are not facts. (2) And secondly, that some good objects should be real, is indeed necessary for our comfort. But these we have in plenty. It surely might be better to give up the search for a God whose existence is and remains undemonstrable, and to divert the feelings which the religious wish to spend on him, towards those of our own kind, who though perhaps less good than we can imagine God to be, are worthy of all the affections that we can feel; and whose help and sympathy are much more certainly real. We might perhaps with advantage worship the real creature a little more, and his hypothetical Creator a good deal less.

NOTES

1. A lecture delivered for the London School of Ethics and Social Philosophy.

2. Possibly the conception of the three Persons in the Athanasian Creed negates, or adds something contradictory to, part of what I have said. But I am concerned only with the manner in which most believers habitually think of God.

6

Identity

I am very anxious it should not be thought that the subject of this paper is of merely departmental interest. What I have to say is not addressed to those who are interested in any particular science, such as logic, definition, or psychology, but to all who are interested in the question what the world is. It appears to me that if what I shall say be true, most of those theories about the nature of the world, which are of the most general interest and which attract the most disciples for the various schools of philosophy, must be either false or purely chimerical. It is not, indeed, my object to show that these important consequences follow; it is possible that they do not, and I have not space to argue that they do. But I wish it should not be *assumed* that they do not. My own view is that, whether what I say be true or false, it is certainly very important, and that is my main reason for raising the question of its truth. What I most fear, then, is not that it should be proved to be false, but that it should be admitted true without enquiry, on the ground that, though true, it is unimportant. I fear that many of the doctrines I shall put forward will

Originally published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* n.s. 1 (1900–1901): 103–127.

whole sets of results are nearly equal in total value, as to decide that they are nearly equal in pleasure-value: and in practical cases, as has been said, such a judgment is all that we can hope for. In the vast majority of cases, cases in which we do not raise a question, Common Sense clearly has no doubt that the total of good on the one side is unquestionably greater than on the other; and the philosopher who argues that there is a superiority of pleasure on the same side cannot avoid bearing witness to the clearness of this judgment, and generally bears witness also to his own conviction that the judgment is correct. Mr. McTaggart himself does not fail to give indications of the ease with which he can judge totals of good other than pleasure: "The happiness a man gives is" he can see "generally more closely proportioned to the development of his ideals than is the happiness he enjoys" (p. 125). In any case, whether it be easier or not, it is by endeavoring to compare totals of [370] different goods and not of pleasure only, that men always have attacked and do attack their practical cases; and most men find it easy to see a decisive superiority on one side. They may, perhaps, be as often wrong as right; but, until a further philosophical investigation has settled the point, there is reason to think that, since the value of pleasure is small, when they are wrong, they are less wrong, than if they had taken pleasure for their guide.

NOTES

1. By John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart, M. A., Fellow and Lecturer of Trinity College, in Cambridge. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1901.
2. Mr. McTaggart himself admits that it occurs, p. 134.
3. So Mr. McTaggart himself admits, p. 126 note.

10

Kant's Idealism

"It has been hitherto assumed," says Kant,[1] that all our knowledge must conform to objects; but on this assumption all attempts to make out anything about those objects *a priori* by means of conceptions, in such a way as to enlarge our knowledge, came to nothing. Then let us try for once, whether we do not succeed better in the problems of Metaphysics, by assuming that objects must conform to our knowledge; an hypothesis, which is immediately more agreeable to the desired possibility of an *a priori* knowledge of them—a knowledge which can establish something with regard to objects, *before they are given to us.*[2] It is with this assumption as with the first ideas of Copernicus, who, when he found he could not advance in the explanation of the motions of the heavenly bodies, on the assumption that the whole host of stars revolved around the spectator, tried whether he could not succeed better, if he supposed the spectator to revolve and the stars to stand still. Now a similar experiment can be made in Metaphysics, so far as concerns the *Intuition* of objects. If our intuition were bound to conform to the nature of the objects, I do

Originally published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* n.s. 4 (1903–1904): 127–140.