



Morality and Religion in Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904)

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In her *Essay on Intuitive Morals* Cobbe argued that morality and Christian religion are co-extensive because the moral law requires a legislator, i.e. God. Atheist morality is therefore impossible. Cobbe elaborated in several subsequent articles.

Cobbe's 'Magnanimous Atheism' of 1877 targeted positivism. Cobbe now argued that moral duty depends on Christianity not only because law requires a legislator but also because Christianity is the inherited horizon giving our moral outlook meaning. 'In Christendom every idea and every feeling have imperceptibly been built up on the theory that there is a God. We see everything *with Him for a background*' (1882: 49). The existence of virtuous agnostics such as George Eliot shows not that virtue is possible without Christianity but that these agnostics are still shaped by a Christian inheritance (1882: 64). But over time, if secularism became widespread and that religious inheritance died out, the moral consequences would be disastrous.

In 'Agnostic Morality' (1883) Cobbe argued against Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), for whom a secular morality was possible, based on utilitarianism combined with an appeal to evolutionary progress. Whereas Lee thought that secularism must be adopted because it is true, Cobbe replied that without religion there are no grounds to value truth or truth-seeking. Whereas for Lee it is a 'moral tonic' that there is no after-life and that we must do good and increase the general happiness in this world, Cobbe found this morally enervating, for without immortality moral actions and distinctions would lose much of their weight and significance. Cobbe concluded: 'They [virtuous agnostics] have imagined that they had merely to choose between morality *with* religion, or morality *without* religion. But the only choice for them is between morality and religion together, or the relinquishment both of morality and religion' (1883: 793).

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Keywords:

George Eliot, Vernon Lee, morality, Christianity, utilitarianism, evolution, positivism, atheism, agnosticism, secularism