

## **MUST MORALITY BE GROUNDED IN GOD?\***

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**T**o the question - must morality be grounded in God? – the initial answer is – it depends on what the meanings of “morality” and “God” are, for it is the basis of this paper that there is a direct relationship between what our concept of God is and the type and general outline of the morality that is derived from it. This is an answer however, that implies the further question of whether God, however we conceive of Him, really exists at all. This too has implications for a system of morality and I will examine that alternative also. The final answer to the question – must morality be grounded in God? – is therefore complicated.

As for “morality” when we ask the question as it is put forward to the conference, it seems to imply that what “morality” means is whether a biblically based set of moral rules, developed and embellished by Christian tradition, can be derived from reason alone, that is without recourse to the revealed sources of the Christian faith. It seems to me here that answer is “no,” and that in effect the traditional doctrine of natural law can only bring you so far along the road to a fully developed Christian ethics. This answer implies that there are two versions of the concept of “God,” that we must deal with: God as revealed in the Bible and in Jewish and Christian tradition, which is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is the father of Jesus Christ, or a concept of God as proposed and derived from the human reason alone. There is a profound difference between the two which results in a difference in the kind and range of moral doctrines that are connected with them.

As far as the fact that there is or whether there can be a notion of God derived from the human reason alone, the answer is “yes,” for I can offer two good examples. First, as you well know, both Plato and Aristotle, and the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophenes, wrote and thought about God apart from revealed sources, for their writings precede the time of Christ by several centuries, and as far as I have ever read, they had no contact with Jewish scriptures such as *Isaiah* or the *Psalms*. Yet they concluded confidently that God exists and that the plethora of pagan gods did not, and that He was indivisible (had no parts), eternal (had always existed and always would), spiritual (had no physical aspects such as sense organs), that he constituted the summit of metaphysical reality, and that His existence could be proved. Yet the ethics of Aristotle and of Plato are not the ethics of Christianity and two aspects of this difference can be pointed out here.

That there is a difference between the philosophic and revealed concepts of God can be seen in what they specify about the nature of God. Aristotle’s God was seemingly a passive figure, who as the “unmoved mover” was not actively engaged in the running of the universe: thus, no one would think to pray to the God of Aristotle, for he moved the planets in their spheres by a kind of attraction, who like a celebrity or movie star did not have to do anything in order to gain attention in a crowd and move people, so to speak, to gather around her. But then there is the question of whether Aristotle’s God is even a person. As a result, Aristotle, who in the past was more revered for his ethical writings than his metaphysics or his biology, wrote an ethics that is earthly, based on his own close observation of the virtuous, and unvirtuous behavior of the men and women he lived with in the ancient Greek city-states. It is an ethics that calls mankind to virtuous but not heroic behavior and is more descriptive than prescriptive.

By contrast with Aristotle’s “unmoved mover”, the God of the Bible is revealed as constantly and actively engaged in directing the fortunes of his people Israel, having first founded them, engaged we

might say in the lives of individual human beings up to the wrist. But a further difference is, of course, that in the Bible, God is first revealed as the Creator of the universe [*Genesis* 1], and not merely as its supreme metaphysical element. The resulting ethics is therefore a *command* ethics, famously condensed into the Ten Commandments, and in contrast to Aristotelian ethics is highly prescriptive, consisting of many “thou shalt nots” and many more “thou shalls”. [e.g., *Deuteronomy*]

Thus, to refer to the case of infant human life, the aspect of the universe being a creation of God’s renders each of its parts of special concern to Him, for even the lilies and the sparrows are provided with a means to life [*Matthew*]. And so human life itself is of special importance. Regarding infant human life, it was a practice in ancient Greece to leave abnormal or weak infants to die from exposure, a practice that is prohibited by Christian morality; this practice however was promoted by Aristotle who treated it as a means of protecting the health of the human population. [*History of Animals*] This particular difference exhibits the difference between the philosophic and the revealed concepts of God on a particular topic and no doubt we could find other such examples. This illustrates not only the difference between Aristotle’s conception of God and that of the Bible, but makes a general point that a difference in our concept of God directly implies a difference in the kind of morality that is connected with it, even though in both cases the systems of morality are “grounded in God” albeit in Aristotle’s case, indirectly.

In our own time, other representations of God are available; the Islamic conception is one prominent example. Here, the difference between the Christian and the Islamic ideas of God has been highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI in his well known Regensburg address, indicating generally among other points, that Allah gives diktats to his subjects in terms that are beyond justification or analysis, much less dispute. The picture presented in the Hebrew Bible of Abraham dickering with the Lord in order to save the people of the city of Sodom [*Genesis*] or of Jesus begging his Father that this cup should pass away [*John*] is completely foreign to the nature of Allah who issues his commands in the Koran. The refusal to assign any human qualities to Allah except authority to command and mercy excludes the aspect of reason, perhaps even of rationality, for Allah does not answer to human complaints or refer himself to human description. As a result, the question of whether philosophy can be applied to the understanding of religion has always been and remains a contentious issue in Islam.

Islamic ethics derived from the Koran are in the form of commands which are frequently connected to the threat of eternal damnation fulsomely expressed. Mercy too is frequently offered to those who admit their sins and expiation is often in the form of feeding the poor. The commands are explicit, but not categorically set out; thus, the fifth Sura [*Al-Ma’ida*] explicitly forbids liquor, gambling and worship of idols, but the classification of and commentary on these and other prohibitions have been done subsequently by commentators in the Hadith, which like the Jewish Talmud has less authority than the revealed text. Despite the prohibitions and commands in the Koran, the primary virtue expected of good Muslims is submission. But the concept of Allah is not highly developed or complex, unlike the Lord of the Old Testament which required approximately 40 books and numerous authors to explicate, while Islam has only one text, the Koran itself which is a single book by a single author - Mohammed.

Another concept of God that is available in contemporary culture perhaps oddly comes from theoretical physics, which is in hot pursuit of an ultimate, unifying theory of all physical phenomena in the universe. Contemporary cosmologists and physicists attempt in their own words, to discover “the God particle” and “the mind of God,” and describe the origin of the universe in terms of the “big bang” which seems to be a scientific rendition of the Creation story in *Genesis* (although some priest-scientists have warned believers away from that equivalence). Physics has recently come to the point of envisioning the possibility of the existence of universes other than our own, a theory which is

speculative but is also mathematically coherent; the serious difficulty with this theory however is that it seems to be beyond experimental confirmation or disconfirmation. The idea that there could be universes other than our own places before us the existential question of why *this* universe exists with ourselves in it, that is, the “why” of human existence. This question in fact implies a semi-teleological turn in contemporary theoretical physics that goes by the name, “the anthropic principle.”

It has seemed an obvious step for physicists to speculate about God at this point, as some of them have, to speculate on whether He exists and what his nature must be – provident, creative – to have designed a complex universe such as ours that runs along discernible laws of nature and which produces intelligent life, a “brave new world that has such people in it.” Despite these philosophical and existential implications, however, no actual set of moral rules seems to derive from this abstract not to say mathematical concept of God (except perhaps that scientific research is a good thing). Whether there are teleological implications of contemporary theoretical physics is hotly debated among scientists, some fearing the intrusion of philosophical and directly religious elements into pure science, others feeling free to speculate along such lines. One usually unexamined implication of the new physics is how its implicit teleology could provide the intellectual basis for a traditional, form of neo-Aristotelian ethics. (But see the author’s recent book, *The Ethics of Cosmology*.)

The point having been made that there are differing interpretations of God’s nature, and that such differences affect the kind of morality derived therefrom, we should now, in logical order, proceed to the examine the kind and range of moral doctrines connected with the denial of God’s existence. Sticking to what we, as modern American Westerners see before us in the cultural soup, this kind of atheistic or agnostic approach to morality depends in the first case on a rejection of theism in general and on the revealed God in particular. Currently we are faced with an aggressive atheism, its avatars making the case in books and lectures, arguing that evolutionary science and scientific logic preclude any rational belief in the Christian, Jewish or Muslim faiths. But contemporary atheism is not a new phenomenon, in the sense that it is a rejection of reliance on the idea of God, for that rejection first appears at the time of the Enlightenment in Western culture; in the historical context contemporary atheism is a reiteration of what happened five centuries ago when authors such as Descartes, Voltaire and Hobbes rejected the Medieval structures of thought based on Catholic tradition, biblical revelation and feudal social organization.

Asserting that human rationality and the scientific study of nature were adequate to the purpose, modern philosophers such as Kant and J. S. Mill subsequently constructed rational systems of ethics. Kant’s moral philosophy of duty precipitated the “Categorical Imperative” from which Kant deduced the principle that we ought to treat people as *ends*, not *means*, which seems to be a rationalistic re-statement of Jesus’ commandment to treat others as you yourself would like to be treated. [Matthew] Mill and the other Utilitarians including current ones like Singer offer what is in effect a moral principle for government policy, a rule of thumb for politicians, government officials and managers. But it doesn’t seem to easily result in a moral code for the guidance of individuals. The whole 500 year effort of rationalistic theory building to define ethical rules is now under attack by many current ethical philosophers who seem more ready these days to offer descriptive accounts of how virtue and character actually occur and operate rather than erecting newer versions of prescriptive theories.

Atheism and agnosticism in the foregoing discussion of ethics without reference to God, revelation, or principles of transcendence need not, it seems to me, be sharply distinguished from each other. Whether Hobbes believed in God or not is a debated issue, but his philosophy stands as the first attempt to create a moral theory based on a non-religious and explicitly scientific approach. Apart from

philosophic discussion however, atheism as it has appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries is a different thing from agnosticism and far more dangerous socially.

Atheism has been a danger when it is made an inherent part of totalitarian social ideologies, whether fascist or socialist; the extreme examples are, of course, Nazism and Soviet Communism, where the disagreements were not among philosophers but among tyrants and generals. Whole societies were threatened and ethnic groups and social classes destroyed in the attempt to remake mankind and to dominate history itself such attempts necessarily begin with the dismissal of the divine presence from human concerns, which would now be understood solely in human terms as a matter of class, economics, race, political party or the state. (Such attempts were subject to condemnations by Pope Pius XI who issued separate encyclicals on Communism and Nazism.) God's justice, we may say, pre-empts man's ideas of justice, which in the democratic context seems an unfair intrusion of religion into politics, of church interfering with the rightful operations of the state. In the totalitarian context however, the mere presence of the idea of God is enough to disqualify the schemes of the ideologues, by means of the First Commandment which condemns the worship of idols, i.e. golden calves but also social theories that deny human rights and justifies the destruction of human lives.

Current atheism however as expressed by Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, Harris and others is a very different kind of atheism from the totalitarian sort in which the rejection of the presence of God is the pre-requisite for a policy of force. This current atheism is philosophical and cultural and seeks its influence in the realm of ideas (although the totalitarian temptation sometimes lurks in the background as when Daniel Dennett says that religious believers ought to be prevented from passing on their beliefs to the children). The ethics implied by this cultural atheism is usually based on the theory of evolution, understood less as a scientific theory than as a materialist philosophy. Thus the treatment of ethical prescriptions found in society is that they are the result of evolutionary necessity, a means of preservation for the society as a whole, or a means of individual self-preservation. Altruism as exemplified by a mother's sacrificial act to protect her children is seen as a cost effective strategy for passing 50% of her genes into the gene pool. Moral values are emptied of their moral force in this reductive view; as a result not many attempts have been made by this class of new atheists to formulate a general ethical theory, although Dennett has attempted it.

But the contemporary cultural context includes not only the influence of the new atheists, but a postmodernist sensibility that claims that that the search for the truth is destined to fail, a truly disturbing trend. Advocates of postmodernism have gone further, arguing that assertions by individuals or authorities that they know the truth about morality and God are not only invalid but are a disguised means of accumulating or validating social power. In such a cultural context it seems as if no general sense of what constitutes morality could prevail, since a general skepticism and cynicism are characteristic of contemporary culture. Nonetheless, the culture does validate a certain class of ethical values, namely those exemplified by the virtues of *authenticity* and *sincerity*. The command to "know yourself" has become "be thyself," which is not a bad guide necessarily but discourages the search for definite rules or standards of moral behavior. "Be whatever is you are" the culture commands, however it does not presume, with a discreet delicacy, to tell you whether whatever it is you are is a good thing or a bad thing. Certain actions are condemned such as genocide, serial murder and pedophilia, but condemnations restricted to such extreme moral behaviors leave a very wide swath of behaviors that remain questionable, such as disrespecting one's parents, plagiarism, sexting, false advertising, etc. that remain largely unexamined for their moral implications.

To conclude, we can have a morality not grounded in God, and we do not have to search the annals of ancient history or survey exotic non-Western cultures to find it. But those systems and attitudes regarding morality that make God's existence irrelevant also do not often make references to the human soul and to transcendence in human life. Given the extreme reluctance to pronounce on moral truths today, it might even seem as if belief in God is necessary *as a practical matter* for grounding moral belief for most people. A few philosophers are currently trying to do otherwise, i.e. create a moral theory that does not have a religious reference point (Martha Nussbaum most notably) but the days of the credibility of a neo-stoic or neo-Aristotelian moral theory may be over given the toxicity of a culture which tends to deny even the possibility of that truth which once known, will set you free. ■

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\* **NOTE:** This paper was originally written in response to the question that formed the basis for a conference organized to take place at the Franciscan University of Steubenville in April, 2013: "Must Morality Be Grounded in God?" Although I am not attending this conference and will not be delivering this paper in person, it is important to recognize that Franciscan University is an explicitly traditional Catholic institution and thus certain presumptions about God and morality are in a manner taken for granted.

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