

Morality is Natural

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I have been interested in moral questions for as long as I can remember. I became keenly aware of the need for social justice, as an adolescent growing up during the Great Depression when so many people suffered hardship. I even flirted with utopian visions of a perfect world—though I eventually became disillusioned with this quest. I enlisted in the U.S. Army during the Second World War in order to combat fascism. I was horrified by the devastation that I witnessed—the Nazi Holocaust, Soviet tyranny, and the brutal bombing of open cities by all sides, including the Allies. As a GI in the European theater of operations, I was appalled by the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the death of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, but I could find few soldiers who agreed with me. They cheered the allied victory and wanted to get home.

I began reading books on ethics, beginning with Plato's *Republic*, and was especially impressed by the Socratic quest for knowledge and virtue. Later, studying at NYU and Columbia, I was influenced by American pragmatic naturalists, John Dewey and Sidney Hook, who thought that the method of intelligence was the most reliable guide for resolving moral problems. I also read the logical positivists, whose scientific philosophy and critiques of metaphysics and theology I accepted—though I took exception to their defense of the emotive theory of ethics, which proclaimed that ethical statements were “subjective” (expressive and imperative) and could not be verified. I took a course with AJ Ayer, the leading English exponent of the emotive theory; and as a smart alec undergraduate argued with him and insisted that “the killing of innocent people was wrong;” but I was uncertain at that time about how to justify that judgment. I was so intrigued by such moral questions that I resolved to devote my life to moral philosophy. I now consider myself to be an *eupraxsopher*, being interested not simply in the love of wisdom (meta-ethics), but in the *practice* of wisdom. Philosophers from Aristotle to Kant have defended the autonomy of ethics as a field of inquiry, independent of theology. I believe that there are moral truths and that these can be drawn from ethical reflection.

I must say that I am puzzled by the mantra intoned by so many theists today that “a person cannot be moral unless one believes in God.” If this is a factual claim, it is patently false; for many good people have neither gone to church nor believed in God and yet have behaved

morally; and the converse is often true. Is there a necessary logical connection between the fatherhood of God and basic moral principles? I doubt that. I would rather suggest that the belief of theists that morality presupposes religious faith is grounded in the apprehension of true believers that they would not behave morally without God (or Big Brother) looking over their shoulders. The underlying premise of the theist is that human beings are born evil (stained by “original sin”) and unable to do good without the fear of punishment or the promise of reward in an after life. It implies that they lack an internalized empathetic moral conscience, and that the sanctions of religion (and law) are necessary to compel obedience to moral duties.

I disagree with that dismal view of human nature. Human beings are capable of either good or evil. We are potential moral beings; how we develop depends on a complex of bio-genetic and social influences, including parental care, belonging to some community, character formation, and the cultivation of some degree of moral cognition. Thus, it is possible to develop through moral education and life experience an empathetic-cognitive appreciation for the needs of others. I do not deny that there are exceptions, such as psychopaths and sociopaths, but morality is natural to the human condition, especially as human beings have evolved in socio-cultural communities. I am here presenting a naturalistic perspective on the good life, not one rooted in vain otherworldly hopes and fears.

I submit that a kind of autonomous moral sensibility can be brought to fruition; and that belief in God is not a prerequisite for knowing moral truths or acting morally. As a matter of fact believers in God historically have often waged pitched battles on both side of moral controversies—they have been for or against capital punishment; the rights of women; slavery; monogamy, polygamy, divorce; the justification of wars; monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, or theocracy. There is of course disagreement among secularists as well, though they do not claim to derive absolute moral principles from revelations On High. The point is there is there no easy road to moral truth; and it is presumptuous of theists to claim that they have a monopoly of moral virtue—particularly in the light of religious wars of violence and hatred waged historically and still today in the name of God. Witness the killings perpetrated by Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews, Muslims and Hindus, and other religious denominations among themselves. The present-day slaughter of innocent Sunnis and Shiites is tragic testimony that piety is no guarantee of moral purity. Religions of course have done much good for the benefit of humankind, but they have also at times been oppressive.

Now that I have devoted my entire life to ethical inquiry, what do I infer from these observations? Well first, that a bit of *humility* is in order. We need to recognize that moral choices are sometimes difficult to make. Although there is a fund of moral wisdom that has been developed by humankind, life does not always present us with clear-cut good or bad, right or wrong choices. Often we are confronted with two (or more) goods or rights, both of which we cannot have (e.g., I may wish to go college full time, but I need to take care of my handicapped sister at home); or sometimes its is a choice between the lesser of two evils (e.g. voting for presidential candidates, neither of whom I really want.) One has to be sensitive to the nuances and complexities in many moral dilemmas.

Second in importance is the need for *tolerance* for differing life styles, particularly in pluralistic societies. Disputes about the right of privacy versus the demands for public order; the alleged sinfulness or appropriateness of various forms of sexual morality (adultery, gay marriage, celibacy, sodomy, etc.); demands for the censorship of pornography versus freedom of expression; reproductive freedom for women; euthanasia and assisted suicide; the ethics of stem-cell research, etc. has led to an intense culture war. The principle of “live and let live—so long as we do not harm others” has some merit. Hence some respect for alternative conceptions of the good life, though not immune to criticism, should be encouraged. All of this is consistent with the core virtues of our secular democracy.

Does this mean that without God “anything goes,” as Dostoyevsky implied, that morality is simply a matter of taste, and that there are no ethical standards at all? On the contrary, there are some objective moral judgments that can be made and some behaviors are in principle wrong (e.g., “torturing innocent children”). Statements such as “we ought to tell the truth” or “keep our promises” are general statements that help to guide us, though how and in what sense they apply depends upon the actual existential contexts at issue. In the first case, we might consider it prudent to abandon our commitment to truth telling in time of war, as there may be a higher duty to self-defense; and in the second case, Socrates observed that if friend asked you to hold a weapon for him with the promise to give it back when he asks for it, and if in a moment of anger he demands that it be returned, you might decide justifiably to withhold the weapon until he calms down.

I should qualify my position by stating that I am a *relativist*—in the sense that moral principles and values are related to *human* (individual and social) interests, wants, desires, and

needs. But at the same time I am an *objectivist*, since I think that these principles and values are amenable to critical examination; and if need be, they may be modified in the light of inquiry—we need to take into account the pre-existing principles and values that I (or my community) may cherish, the facts of the case, a comparative evaluation of means and ends, and the consequences of various courses of action.

I submit that there are basic moral principles that civilized communities share. I have called these “the common moral decencies.” They emerge in the face-to-face interactions within a community. These are generally accepted by both theists and secularists, and they reflect the bedrock rules of civilized conduct. I do not deny that humans may differ about some of them, particularly their range of application; and thus a degree of cultural relativity may be present. Moreover, new principles may be discovered and hard-fought battles may be waged to gain recognition of them—such as the war against slavery in the United States in the 19th century, and the campaign for the rights of women, minorities, and gay people in the 20th century. Nonetheless these general moral principles have evolved in human culture over a long period of time and there is a broad consensus concerning their viability; they appeal to the reflective moral conscience.

A brief catalogue of some of the common moral decencies is listed as follows:

The Common Moral Decencies

I. **Integrity:** We ought to tell the truth, keep promises, be sincere and honest.

II. **Trustworthiness:** We should show fidelity to our friends, relatives, and neighbors in the community at large; we should be dependable, reliable, and responsible toward others who depend on us.

III. **Benevolence:** We should manifest a Good Will toward other persons. We should avoid malfeasance, harming or injuring others (do not kill, torture, or abuse others). We should avoid malfeasance to public or private property (do not steal or destroy property that is not yours). Sexual relations should be based on mutual consent between adults. We should strive for a beneficent attitude (kindness, sympathy, compassion). We should assist where we can in

alleviating another person's pain and suffering. We should help increase where we can the sum of goods for others to share.

IV. Fairness: We ought to show gratitude to others, be held accountable for our conduct. We should seek justice, equity. We should manifest tolerance; be cooperative, seek to negotiate any differences peacefully and work out compromises wherever possible.

The justification of the common moral decencies is first, *empirical* (having evolved in human civilization over a long period of time); second, *consequential* (no society can long survive if they are consistently flouted); and third, *principled* (they are so important that they should only be violated reluctantly, if higher goods or rights are at stake. These are *prima facie* general rules, but how they actually apply depends on the concrete moral situation at hand. The most reliable guide to action is moral intelligence able to weigh alternatives and make choices after a process of deliberation.

Thus far I have talking about our duties and obligations towards others. What about our obligations to ourselves? Again, is everything permissible within the life of desire and passion? My answer is, No and Yes, depending on the individual. I am not talking about the Puritans or Taliban "virtue police" who are unhappy if other people are having a good time. They wish to ban anything that they cannot understand or enjoy. I am talking rather about standards that we ourselves discover as essential if we are to lead a life full of enrichment. Obviously, there are some limitations and constraints on personal moral freedom that a mature person herself or himself decides to adopt. There are some things that we learn that we simply cannot do. "It is illegal, immoral, it makes us fat, or it is bad for our liver," to paraphrase an old refrain. We learn that some modicum of temperance and moderation in our desires is essential if we are to lead a full life.

On the other hand we are all different as individual persons; and our idiosyncratic tastes and values are uniquely are own. As a secularist I would say that each person needs to find meaning and purpose in his or her own terms, though some persons may lack the existential courage to become what they really want. Each person's life is like a work of art; for we are constantly adding the shape form, color and tone to what we create. Life has no predetermined meaning per se; it presents us with opportunities; and the meanings that we discover depend on

our own creative decisions. They are realized in the plans and projects that we unfurl every day. In one sense, each moment is intrinsically good in itself; though it needs to fit into a kaleidoscopic rendering that we constantly reinforce or remake. The significance of living is found in the educational experiences that we have had; the careers that we pursue or jobs that we endure; our partners and lovmates, friends and colleagues; the children that we have had, if we choose to have them, and their upbringing; our interests and activities; the beloved causes that we have become involved in; in sum, all of the things that we have undertaken or undergone during our lifetimes. Secular humanists have invariably emphasized the importance of *happiness* in realizing a full life. This has meant many different things to different men and women.: for some it is the quest for passive withdrawal or meditation; for others maximizing hedonic pleasure, money, power, or sexual conquests; for the bourgeois sacrifice for God or country; and for still others, service for a worthy cause. This is relative to a person's own interests, talents, and predilections.

I wish to propose still another ideal of the good life, which has special meaning in free, open pluralistic and democratic societies. This I have called the achievement of the *exuberant life*. Many of the models of the good life, particularly those with strong religious overtones, emerged under social conditions that were oppressive for the average person. Aside from the ruling classes, the wealth of society was limited; all too often there was not enough to eat; disease was rampant; wild animals or marauding bands often posed threats; and life was apt to fulfill Hobbes' warning: it became "nasty, brutish and short." Today, we live in affluent consumer economies; we have the power of science and technology to cure many of the diseases and afflictions of the past, to reduce human pain and suffering, and to raise standards of living. We are at the dawn of a new era where we can extend life significantly. Here the exuberant life of the Promethean spirit assumes real power, for we can perhaps discover new knowledge and wisdom, new reservoirs of joy. I would suggest that the life of exuberance is becoming available to a widening circle of individuals. For the first time we can extend the opportunities of the creative life, of work and leisure, travel and adventure. These daring opportunities for achieving a good life also enable us to attain lives of *excellence and nobility*. It is not salvation in the next life that we search, but the exuberant life here and now.

Strikingly, for the first time in human history the potentialities for enriching life are possible, not only for individuals who live within affluent democratic societies, but for *all of*

humankind. The rapid growth of the Asian economies, China, Korea, Japan and India clearly show that the possibilities of extending the promise of a good life to everyone on the planet beyond Europe and North America are real.

Here I wish to close with a new moral obligation that is both realistic and attainable. Thus we can extend our moral concern to the entire planetary community of which we are a part. Planetary ethics has emerged to capture our moral outlook and imagination. A new imperative beckons: “We should consider every person on the planet equal in dignity and value.” We should attempt to do what we can to extend an empathetic concern for the entire family of humankind. The common moral decencies now have a wider range of application, and the possibility of realizing exuberant lives for everyone on the planet at least is a realistic goal. If we are to achieve this goal, then we need to transcend the ancient religious, national, racial, and ethnic barriers of the past. We need to focus on “Humanity as a Whole” as our key moral concern. Finally, we now see clearly that each of us has a responsibility to do what we can to preserve and enhance the natural ecology of our shared planetary habitat. This high ideal is not only profoundly necessary, but also appealing to a reflective moral sensibility.

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