

The Source of Morality

Based on a talk by David Pollock to the Welsh Marches Humanist Group, 13 October 2009

At Christmas the Pope said that saving humanity from homosexual behaviour was just as important as saving the rainforests from destruction.¹

In November, a Vatican official, Cardinal James Stafford, deplored the election of Barack Obama, seeing it as evidence of a catastrophic “decline in respect for human life”: Obama was “aggressive, disruptive and apocalyptic” and had “extremist anti-life” views because of his support for a woman’s right to choose whether to have an abortion.²

Here in the UK the churches have coordinated opposition to allowing assistance to someone who wants to end their life when incurably ill and in pain and distress, despite such a reform having about 80% public support.

In August the Roman Catholic bishops of England, Wales and Scotland denounced the European Commission's planned Equal Treatment Directive against discrimination as "wholly unacceptable" because, they said, it would force Christians to act against their consciences.³

We would presumably take quite different views - but we would also recognise the sincerity and moral character of these pronouncements.

How then do you decide such issues when there is such disagreement? What about issues where religion plays no clear part? How far should we sacrifice our own interests to help those worse off than ourselves? Should we use animals in medical research? What obligations do we have to asylum seekers? Should parents be allowed to choose the sex of their children, or to vet embryos for propensity to diseases?

These are all *moral* questions, and to answer them you first need to look to basis of moral judgements - in other words, being able to answer the question of *How should I behave?* depends on the answer you give to a more basic question: what is the source of morality?

I want to examine briefly several possible answers to this question.

Religion

Many people answer it with one word: Religion. Newspaper columnists and religious preachers often imply that there is no logical basis for morality without a belief in god. The word ‘godless’ is used as a synonym for wicked. Without religion, the Archbishop of York has said, “moral responsibility will be displaced not by reason, science or ethics but by sheer consumerism”.⁴

The Roman Catholic Archbishop Vincent Nicholls says the virtues of compassion, respect and tolerance cannot survive once they have been severed from their roots in Christian teaching.⁵

We Humanists see this sort of remark as an unthinking insult. It is unthinking because it does not need much thought to see that morality and religion are completely independent of each other. If you are confronted by someone who sees **God** and **good** as more or less the same thing, ask them to think about this: in the Old Testament we read the story of Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho and the walls coming tumbling down. But what happened next? God commanded Joshua to slaughter every last defeated man, defenceless woman and innocent child in the city. No-one, not even any beast, was to be spared.⁶

Was that a good, virtuous act? - because if "good" means no more or less than "whatever God wishes", then it must be so, by definition.

But if you think this slaughter was not a good deed but an act of cruel vengeance, then you must already have an idea of what is good or evil, right or wrong, that is independent of your idea of god. So the ideas of right and wrong, good and evil are surely separate and independent of any notion of god.

This argument was first made by Plato in his dialogue called Euthyphro and it is known as Euthyphro's dilemma and is usually presented as:

"Is what is moral commanded by God because it is moral, or is it moral because it is commanded by God?"

The first horn of the dilemma (i.e. that which is moral is commanded by God *because it is moral*) implies that morality is independent of God and, indeed, that God is bound by morality just as his creatures are. God then becomes little more than a passer-on of moral knowledge.

The second horn of the dilemma (i.e. that which is moral is moral *because it is commanded by God*, known as divine command theory) implies that what is good is arbitrary, based merely upon God's whim; if God had created the world to include the values that rape, murder, and torture were virtues, while mercy and charity were vices, then they would have been so.

So, you can base your morals on religious teaching if you wish - but you run the risk of acting from time to time in ways that others - even you - will find immoral. For example, you may find yourself, in God's name, trying to prevent programmes in Africa to control AIDS by the use of condoms, thereby contributing to the unnecessary deaths of thousands of people.

So, if we want to avoid resigning our moral judgements to religious authorities who base their own judgements on ancient and out of date writings, what do we do?

Probably we turn to the moral philosophers. They have come up with a series of increasingly sophisticated answers to underpin morality. I shall mention the main ones, with apologies for extreme simplification. But - to give you my conclusion before I start - none of the answers philosophers have come up with has yet provided a knock-down argument for behaving well.

Natural Law theories

Early philosophers - Plato among them - proposed that what is right or good is fixed - a fact of the universe - and can be discovered by the exercise of moral insight. So, moral rules are external to us and probably unchanging and eternal.

For example, some philosophers, like theologians, talk of “natural law” - “the claim that standards of morality are in some sense derived from, or entailed by, the nature of the world and the nature of human beings”.⁷ The idea is that the world just *is* a particular way, and that we are duty bound to behave in accordance with its and our nature.

This is much the same as what is known as a **teleological** view - i.e., it is based on the idea that mankind has an externally imposed purpose: I quote from the Catholic Encyclopaedia on natural law:

“The standard is our whole human nature with its manifold relationships, considered as a creature destined to a special end.”⁸

A problem with this is that it is lacking any persuasive power if you do not believe in a god or any other purpose in the universe. And even if you do believe, there is the problem of working out what that purpose is and what sort of behaviour it dictates. Do you do it by some form of **intuition**? If so, what if different people intuit different rules?

People claiming to act on religious commands have often done atrocious things with the best of consciences - think of the Crusades and suicide bombers. Even if we ignore these cases, there are difficulties.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) said we could discover the eternal moral rules by the use of reason. So, we might by reasoning proceed from the logical need for accuracy in communication in a complex society to discover the law “Do not lie” because lies undermine the basis of living together. Once we have discovered such laws, we are (says Kant) morally bound to obey them.

But this runs into problems not only about how we actually discover these laws, and what happens when we disagree about them, but also about whether it is always right to obey them. We should not lie - but does that mean we should reveal the whereabouts of our friend to a criminal gang intent on murder? “Do not kill” seems a reasonable candidate for a universal moral law - but are wars *always* unjustified?

Morality independent of Facts

So if we reject natural law theories, where do we go? A second view is the polar opposite of natural law: that there is **no** link between the facts of the world and moral values: you cannot (as they say) derive an *ought* from an *is* - that is, you cannot argue from facts about the world (starving people there and an excess of food here, for example) to a compelling moral command (you must feed the starving).

So long as you stick to your logic textbooks, this seems sensible - but in the real world we know that we do make such connections and find them powerful.

Subjective Morality

So other moral philosophers say that what is good is simply subjective, it depends on individual preferences and feelings. On this basis in theory I might think that stealing is morally good and sharing is evil.

This seems completely unpersuasive - no one conscientiously argues that way or even anything near it - although under the name of relativism the churches persist in attributing such a view to Humanists and secularists and denouncing us for it. (What we are is "situationists" - the very different notion that circumstances alter cases.)

Social Contract

So other philosophers have argued that what is good is a matter of social convention - a Social Contract. This gets rid of the idea of moral rules being "out there", immanent in the universe.

Instead, the idea is that when people came together to live in communities they implicitly agreed to abide by the rules that are needed to help the community work and its members to prosper. Just as we decide that cars should drive on the left or on the right, depending on where we live, so we decide on moral rules. These have typically been tested by tradition and must not be questioned, just obeyed, or else the community will enforce obedience.

That's the idea. But traditional rules that have to be obeyed for fear of social sanctions or punishment sound more like conventions than morality.

And anyhow the moral traditions of different communities differ widely in some features, leading to a quagmire of relativism:

- Is it immoral for women to show their faces in public?
- Is it good for widows to kill themselves by leaping on the burning pyre of their dead husbands?
- Is it wrong to charge interest on a loan?
- Should adulterers be stoned to death?
- Is it acceptable to abandon deformed or unwanted infants to die on a dunghill?
- Is it right to murder your daughter and her husband if she has married below her and contrary to her parents' will?
- Is divorce always wrong?

The answer to all these and many more questions is or has often been YES for some people. So if we are not happy with something being right for them but wrong for us, the idea of a social contract is no sounder a candidate as a basis for morality than the use of intuition or reason to discover moral truths supposedly inherent in the very nature of the universe.

Virtue Theory

Other philosophers have said that goodness depends only on your intentions and character. This is a quite different theory of morals. It is known as **Virtue theory** and dates back to the

ancient Greeks - indeed, to Homeric times.

It looks to the intentions and lifestyle or character of the individual. Someone is good if they show in their lives a proper balance of virtues such as courage and generosity, not reckoning that such actions will bring their own reward but from a potentially self-sacrificing underlying disposition.

But this merely pushes the problem back. What counts as a virtue? and why? Answering these questions involves judgements that are either moral themselves (in which case we are going round in circles) or else it risks being subjective or dictated by the conventions of the society we live in. And some followers of this line say that the *same* deed may be good or bad according to a person's intentions or character - which makes the consequences of the action, for good or bad, morally irrelevant - and that seems wrong.

Utilitarianism

That brings us to another answer to our question about what is good. Should we look to the predictable results of an action? If the results are likely to be welcome to those concerned, the action is good. If not, it is either neutral or bad.

This sounds a plausible position. Philosophers who argue this way are called Utilitarians - the first was Jeremy Bentham, one of the founders of University College, London where he still attends Council meetings and is recorded as present but not voting! His ideas were later developed by John Stuart Mill.

Utilitarians propose that morality is based on what produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This is another superficially attractive idea, but once again there are problems.

- What counts as happiness? Relief of suffering is generally included, but what about artistic achievement? extension of knowledge? Does a drugged state of contentment count as happiness? John Stuart Mill himself said: "Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied".
- How can I measure happiness? How do I balance immediate effects and distant ones?
- Who counts for reckoning the 'greatest number'? just people I know? or all mankind? or all sentient beings? Do I attach no greater weight to the welfare of those I love than to that of total strangers? What if I have to choose between saving the life of a great doctor and that of my own much loved child? Utilitarianism says, save the unknown doctor because of the good he will achieve; instinct says, save my child.

It gets worse:

- Is it right to harm, even kill an innocent person if that will create a better life for many? Should we (for example) in the face of a dangerous epidemic compel a small number of people to put their health and lives at risk so as to short-circuit testing of possible drugs or vaccines if that means that the best one will be available quickly to the benefit of a great number of people? Or save the lives of five people who need

organ transplants by sacrificing the life of one innocent stranger - maybe someone who has no friends and relatives to regret his loss?

Human rights suffer under strict utilitarianism.

There have been many attempts to get out of these and other problems, because intuitively it seems right that acts are good or bad according to their consequences. For example, rule utilitarianism says it is not individual acts but general rules that have to be judged for their effects. But none of the get-outs works perfectly.

The Failure of Philosophy

These then are the main ways philosophy has attempted to find a logically compelling answer to the question about the basis of right and wrong. Although so many great minds have addressed the question over thousands of years, all they have done is to show us how much more complicated the question is than it appears at first sight.

What is good and right is

not whatever God commands

not something objective and inherent in nature which we can discover by intuition

not a matter of universal moral laws that we can discover by reason

not a matter of the virtue or intentions of the agent

not a matter of a calculus of the happiness resulting from an act.

There is apparently no reliable way to tell what is good, and so no knock-down argument to persuade the recalcitrant to behave morally or even to settle arguments about what is moral in given circumstances. Since the philosophers have all failed to come up with a clear answer, maybe there is not one.

Would that matter? It certainly would if we depended on having reasons for acting rightly. If we were all inclined to act selfishly, cruelly, deceptively and so on but were saved from doing so by the arguments of priests and philosophers, transmitted in the teaching we get as children or as citizens, and we all suddenly realised there was no binding logical argument why this was good and that was bad, then we could be in for a difficult time.

This is the position as some religious believers see it - the ones who predict that the collapsing levels of religious belief will result in disaster. Traditional Christians think this way. They have the dreadful doctrine of **original sin**: that by choosing knowledge rather than blind obedience back in the Garden of Eden Eve committed a sin so horrendous that all mankind ever since has been punished for it by being inherently wicked and sinful from birth. Without constantly being on guard, we will all behave viciously to the peril of our immortal souls. This very nasty doctrine has succeeded in making millions of people feel guilty about natural feelings, especially sexual feelings, over the centuries.

But consider: **are** we naturally inclined to act selfishly, cruelly, deceptively and so on? Occasionally, no doubt, but is that our overall nature? I think not.

A much better description of our situation is that we all have a pretty good notion of what is right and wrong, about which we for the most part agree (so long, maybe, as we do not

ask too many philosophical questions) and that on the whole but not invariably we do what is right - and know when we are doing wrong.

Why should that be, and where do we get that idea of right and wrong from?

This is an entirely different question from the one I looked at above. The first question was, *“what is morally good and why should I let it govern my actions?”* Now I am asking: *“why as a matter of fact do I have this idea of actions being morally good and bad and why do I generally act according to it?”*

The first is a philosopher’s question; the second is a scientist’s.

Science, Not Philosophy

So, we ask,

not What is the logical justification or basis of morality?

but What is the real-life origin of moral feelings?

And the answer, I suggest, is that it is inherent in our nature to have a moral sense, a moral *capacity*, and that we have it because it helped us - or rather, our distant ancestors - to survive over evolutionary time. The instinctive patterns of behaviour that evolution has bequeathed to us have been backed by social sanctions and by learned patterns of behaviour so that together they enabled our ancestors to survive over millions of years - as against all those other patterns of behaviour that did not enable other near-relatives to make it.

In fact our human capacity for moral thinking seems to be a product of our evolution as social animals.

It is usually in the interest of individuals living in a group to cooperate, to give and take, rather than to act in a crudely selfish way. All social animals have ‘rules’ - that is, standard patterns - of behaviour, and animals of many species behave in ways that look very like unselfish cooperation, altruism or even self-sacrifice.

Evolutionary biologists can see such behaviour as a good survival strategy - not for the individuals but for the genes of the individuals involved. Examples include:

- meerkats with their elaborate arrangements for sharing the care of their young and the duty of standing look-out for enemies while the rest feed
- dolphins which support sick or injured animals, swimming under them for hours at a time and pushing them to the surface so they can breathe
- bonobo apes which have been observed aiding injured or handicapped bonobos
- elephants caring for the dying and seemingly mourning the dead.

Humans are no exception. And we had already lived as social animals for millions of years even before we - very recently - became human. When we acquired the power of language - maybe 40,000 years ago - we seem quite naturally to have extended the idea of what was

good from food that was tasty and cloth that was warm to people who were kind and behaviour that was helpful.

It is no great leap, but in fact it was the start of moral philosophy.

So, the idea of goodness, of morality is a natural one for us, needing no divine sanction, even if the priests and the kings, who wanted to ensure orderly behaviour in society, quickly gave morality divine backing and so started all the confusion.

And so, unsurprisingly, there is in fact a huge degree of agreement across time and belief systems about basic moral values, because they always relate to people living together in society. The so-called Golden Rule, that you should behave towards others as you would wish them to behave towards you, is found in almost every religion and every ethical system, dating back not just to the Jains about 550 BCE and Confucius at about the same time but even to Egypt in the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE - that is, almost 4,000 years ago.

So let me finish with a quick sketch of the Humanist approach to morality. The story we tell is that we humans are endowed by evolution with a moral capacity. We live socially - in groups - and have an instinct to conform to the rules of the group. This forms the basis of our consciences.

We provisionally accept the general rules current in society, but are ready to examine them to ensure that they are still relevant and well-tuned to changing circumstances. Revision does not threaten their moral character any more than the rejection by Christians of the rule in Exodus [21:17] that "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death" means that Christians today lead immoral lives. After all, the lives we lead are very different from those led by our ancestors when the rules were formed.

And we realise that we have to answer for our decisions - but that quite often there is no single right answer but many plausible ones that we have to choose between on the basis of our view of priorities. This flexibility detracts somewhat - but only somewhat - from the predictability of other people's behaviour but it also liberates us from the potential totalitarianism of a rigid moralism.

An aspect of this is that as Humanists we also recognise that other people decide in other ways. We respect their right to do so, and when it comes to decisions about society as a whole we seek to find constructive compromises that allow as much freedom as possible for everyone to act according to their own values.

Here our endorsement from within Humanism of the idea of the open, plural society is quite different from the temporary compromise that is the best most religious people make with those in society with whom they have profound differences.

So, to come back to where I started.

When you have to tackle serious moral dilemmas, you have to decide first what is the basis of your morality. If you decide on a religious morality, you will ultimately have recourse to

authority - the authority of a sacred book or of a priest or of the example of a holy figure.

If you decide on a secular morality, you still need to decide on the basis of your approach. Philosophers have produced numerous theories but none provides a knock-down argument for why one should be good or how to determine what is good. But they have not been wasting their time: they have developed an invaluable range of concepts and a rich vocabulary that enable us to argue and reason in moral terms.

For humanists, morality is an evolved capacity of humans, and moral rules are the resulting cultural inheritance. They are not eternal, inherent in the universe, nor are they arbitrary, enabling us to change them at will. Rather, they are our revisable attempt at a code that will enable us as a community to live happy, productive and fulfilling lives.

NOTES

Note 1.

See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7796663.stm>:

Pope attacks blurring of gender

Pope Benedict XVI has suggested that the need to save mankind from a destructive blurring of gender roles is as important as saving the rainforests. He explained that defending God's creation was not limited to saving the environment, but also about protecting man from self-destruction.

The Pope was delivering his end-of-year address to senior Vatican staff. His words, later released to the media, emphasised his rejection of gender theory. Speaking on Monday, Pope Benedict XVI warned that gender theory blurred the distinction between male and female and thus could lead to the "self-destruction" of the human race. . .

When the Roman Catholic Church defends God's Creation, "it does not only defend the earth, water and the air... but (it) also protects man from his own destruction," he said. "Rainforests deserve, yes, our protection, but the human being ... does not deserve it less," the pontiff said.

Note 2.

See <http://www.zenit.org/article-24305?l=english>

Cardinal Says Future With Obama Is Gethsemane - Affirms That Life Cannot be Controlled by Government

The decline in respect for human life has had "catastrophic effects" on the unity and integrity of the United States, which are evidenced by the presidential election, says a Vatican official.

Baltimore-native Cardinal James Stafford, major penitentiary of the Apostolic Penitentiary, affirmed this in a lecture on "Humanae Vitae" last Thursday at the Catholic University of America. . . "On Nov. 4, 2008, America suffered a cultural earthquake," continued the cardinal. He pointed out that president-elect Barack Obama campaigned on an "extremist anti-life platform," and described him as "aggressive, disruptive and apocalyptic."

Note 3.

Daily Telegraph, 3 August 2009: see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/5960817/EU-equality-law-is-an-instrument-of-oppression-Roman-Catholic-bishops-warn.html>

Note 4.

See <http://www.archbishopofyork.org/articles.php/1712/the-role-of-religion-in-politics>:
“Our current Government is in danger of sacrificing Liberty in favour of an abused form of equality – not a meaningful equality that enables the excluded to be brought into society, but rather an equality based on dictat and bureaucracy, which overreaches into the realm of personal conscience.”

Note 5.- Source: a chapter of *The Nation That Forgot God*, co-edited by the Conservative MP Edward Leigh, as reported by the Daily Telegraph, 29 March 2009 - see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/5071302/Britain-has-sold-its-soul-to-o-pursuit-of-reason-over-religion-Catholic-Archbishop-warns.html>

Note 6. Joshua 6. Cf: Joshua 10.

Note 7.

From the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy - <http://www.iep.utm.edu/natlaw/>

Note 8.

See <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09076a.htm>

<http://david-pollock.org.uk/humanism/the-source-of-morality>