

Does Morality Require Religious Foundations?

It is often claimed, particularly in polemical debates, that morality makes no sense without a religious foundation. In this short piece, I will set out an argument on the other side. The issues which I will be discussing have been considered with great erudition by many scholars. Here, I can only write much more briefly. These space limitations will, however, have two consequences. First, I will have to be rather cruder and may come over as more polemical than I would if more space were available, and I will often state my views without stopping to note that and why many distinguished scholars would disagree. Second, I cannot here address many important issues which readers will spot really require an answer. (Here, as with all my work, I'd welcome criticisms, objections and requests for clarification.)

1. Introduction: the very idea of religion as the basis of morality

Are there dangers in a purely pragmatic and unreflective approach to issues of politics and public policy, which does not step back also to consider deeper moral questions? Second, if we say yes to this first question – as I would wish to – does morality stand in need of religious foundations? Here I will argue that it doesn't.

Let me start by being somewhat provocative. For I want to suggest that religion¹ as such does not help at all with issues to do with morality (although religious traditions obviously incorporate many important moral ideas, and religious people display considerable self-sacrifice for moral causes). There are various reasons for this.

The first goes back to an argument raised by the classical Greek philosopher, Plato: the Euthyphro argument (named after Plato's dialogue in which Euthyphro is a character). My concern is with what this argument might mean to us today, rather than with Plato's intentions. In modern terms, the argument might be put thus: 'Is something good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good?' The problem that faces the person who wishes to have a religious-based ethic, is that if they take the first of these options, then morality is *whatever* God decides. Its content, from our perspective, could seem completely arbitrary. While if they take the second option, all is fine in terms of morality – but there is a problem for their religious views. For this view seems to suggest that God is, in some sense, subservient to morality seen as existing independently of Him. It does not help here (as is sometimes done) to say: but the content of morality flows from God's nature which is good. For exactly the same question as we started from can be raised about the description 'good' when applied to God's character.

¹ In what follows, I will refer to religion in the sense in which one finds it in the Abrahamic tradition, just because this is the background which is most familiar to me and which is likely to be shared by my readers.

Second, in the Jewish tradition a distinction is made between two kinds of God's commands.² The first – *chok* – are seen as obligatory simply because they are commanded by God. Some of the requirements made upon Jews are seen as obligatory simply because God commanded them, and there seems to be no independent reason as to why they should be obligatory. (Consider, here, rules about not mixing different kinds of thread in one's garments, or the complications connected with ritual purity and the ashes of a red heifer.³) By contrast with this, there are various commandments the moral force of which can be understood independently of the fact that they are commanded – e.g. 'Thou shall not kill.' The problem of treating morality as *simply* the command of God, is that it would invite us to see all morality as of the same character as the first of these things – i.e. as being obligatory simply because God commanded it. By contrast *if* people believe that there is some moral obligation to follow God's commands, or if they are scared of what will happen to them if they don't, they may have good reason to obey God's commands of the first kind. But they do not do so because what is commanded is itself moral.

Third, a religious view of morality faces a problem that those inspired by religious ideas typically find themselves in difficulties in the face of ethical discoveries. Take the example of slavery. William Wilberforce and fellow Evangelical Christians played a key role in opposition to slavery. They did so on religious grounds.⁴ But for almost 1800 years it had not seemed clear to Christians that Christianity was in fact incompatible with slavery – to say nothing of attitudes to slavery in the Old Testament. Compare, also, attitudes towards women, animals, and homosexuality. It would look as if there is conflict today because of a clash between what the Christian tradition, or the Bible, had been taken to say, and what are, plausibly, moral discoveries that we have made independently of these sources about the problematic character of our earlier practises and attitudes. Even the most conservative of Christians is likely today to be morally unhappy at some of the more gruesome punishments that are meted out by God, or massacres which he is taken as commanding the Israelites to enact, in parts of the Old Testament.

This leads to another dilemma. Either the religious person can stick to their guns, and line up with various commands and conduct which their contemporaries will simply reject as barbaric and indeed immoral; or they will modify what their religious views say, to fit either the common views of their day, or their own subjective moral opinions. But to behave in this way, while in one way more reasonable than representing barbarism as moral, is giving up on the religious basis of morality. It also risks deifying one's

² According to Muslim friends, the same distinction can be found there – e.g. concerning aspects of Sharia law.

³ For an interesting dialogue on this example, between a cow and a Rabbi(!), see: https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/4432444/jewish/Do-Skeptics-Make-You-Have-a-Cow.htm

⁴ The arguments against slavery were typically made, initially, by Quakers – members of a small Christian group whose religious views were typically unorthodox. See, Elizabeth Cazden, 'Quakers, Slavery, Anti-Slavery, and Race', in Stephen Angell and Pink Dandelion eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, and for a brief account of Benjamin Lay (1682-1759), who was an important early figure here, Tom Holland, *Dominion* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

subjective preferences about morality, by claiming – typically without any serious attempt at supporting argument about one’s religious tradition and its history – that the modern re-interpretations are what the *real* content of one’s religious tradition always amounted to.

In my view, the only acceptable response to all this is to recognise that morality stands independently of religion, and also that it is an area in which we can make discoveries, in the sense of coming to learn that what, in the past, we thought to be morally correct was flawed. Judged by our perspective at any one time, we may then look at different religious traditions, and judge them as moral or otherwise. And, typically, we may well be led to say, from such a perspective, that sometimes religion has been a real force for good, but that at other times it has led people to do things which we would take to be immoral. In addition, we *may* judge that it has led people to develop moral concerns in a way that is unbalanced. What, say, some saints have done is remarkable. But it is not clear that they have lived good *lives*. (There is a parallel, here, in the way in which a mother may sometimes make excessive sacrifices of themselves and their legitimate interests, for the sake of their children.) In addition, religion – say, in the Abrahamic tradition – has often been concerned with issues of ritual, and with some aspects of sexuality which it is not clear have any moral content at all. The secular moralist might well say: if people believe that there is a God, and that he wishes them to do certain things, all well and good. But it is not clear why they should impose these things on anyone else – still less confuse them with morality.

Fourth, there are religions and religions. We are typically likely to view the issue of religion and morality from the perspective of religious ideas with which we are familiar, and to which we are likely to be sympathetic. But there have, historically, been religions which are gruesome and which, for example, have involved human sacrifice. To this someone might respond – I don’t mean *those*, I mean *good* religions. This, however, indicates that priority is being given to our ideas of morality, over what various religions are teaching, and that some are found wanting. This, again, suggests that rather than morality depending on religion, our choice of what is morally acceptable as a religion depends on our moral ideas.

Fifth, it might be responded. What has been discussed above is not what was meant: we *can* know what is moral on the basis of our (fallible, and we would hope possibly improving) ideas about morality. What we meant, is that people would not be motivated to be moral unless they were to be rewarded by God for being moral, or punished by him, if they weren’t. But this loses sight of something that we have only gradually come to understand: that morality should be done for its own sake, rather than because of possible rewards and punishments.

Sixth, a response could be made to my previous point. It is that to stress the significance of morality being done for its own sake is all well and good. But we also want people just to do the right thing, to treat other people decently, to be compassionate and so on – whether or not they have the right moral motivation. Religion, it could be said, has played a key role here. One might also add that some of our moral ideas are not so much

important in themselves, as for the broader social consequences that follow them. But, typically, people need to be open to abstract and difficult arguments to appreciate this – with the result that, with the decline of religious belief in Western countries, a lot of these important moral ideas have been abandoned, and it is difficult to see how their influence can be restored.⁵ This seems to me true enough. But it faces two problems. The first is that those who argue in this way face the problem that they will typically be selective about what, of the morality supported by religion, they favour. Second, it is unacceptably pragmatic as an argument for religion, and would need – in that context – to be supported by independent arguments for the correctness of the particular religion which was being appealed to, for the devotees of which it would then serve as an added bonus.

Finally, what about God and morality (a topic on which there has been a huge amount of controversy)? Not only do we have ideas about morality independently of religion, but when judged from such a perspective, God does not fare too well. If He is to be understood as all-powerful and all-knowing, then he would understand the pain and bewilderment that we often experience in the face of illness, and natural disasters. When *other people* could easily assist – and give succour and healing – but choose not to do so, we typically think badly of them, unless there is some pressing reason why they should not do so. Yet God, as traditionally understood by Christianity, knows all about all of this, and everything is in his power: As the *New Living Translation* of the Bible, Matthew 10: 19 has it: ‘What is the price of two sparrows – one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it.’⁶ Yet terrible things happen without relief or explanation. At the same time, succour is offered selectively and *prima facie* arbitrarily. Consider Jesus’ miracles as reported in the *New Testament*, and, as the Catholic Church would have it, on a continuing but again seemingly arbitrary basis, by way of the intercession of saints; or to those few prayers by Protestants for the relief of suffering to which there is a response. If *people* behaved like this when it was within their power easily to assist, or to explain why they should not, we would consider them monsters, not exemplars of morality.

All told, it should not surprise the religious that many of us find bizarre the idea that religion should be understood as the basis of morality. At the same time, the intelligent non-religious person should acknowledge the historical role of religious as a vehicle for various important moral traditions. We could thus readily acknowledge that there is a great deal of moral content in most religions, and that religious belief may well motivate people to behave morally. But to accept this does not mean accepting that religion is the basis of morality.

2. Does morality need foundations?

I have appealed to the idea of our making moral discoveries. This is something with which we are familiar both in history, and in our individual lives. Attitudes and practises

⁵ This is one of the problems that faces Friedrich Hayek in his *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1973-9). See also, for some most interesting discussion of this issue Ed West’s disturbing (but also very funny) book, *Small Men on the Wrong Side of History* (London: Constable, 2020)

⁶ Cf. <http://bible.cc/matthew/10-29.htm> which offers multiple translations on the same page.

which in the past were accepted may be called into question. While it is surely the experience of each of us to discover that aspects of our own conduct that we had taken to be morally unproblematic, are flawed, perhaps badly. There is an important area of philosophy, sometimes referred to as ‘metaethics’ which discusses the status of such ideas. (E.g. can moral claims be said to be true or false?) The field is interesting, and we may learn important things from it.⁷ But we do not need to wait on the outcome of such discussions before being able to address the issues with which we are here concerned.

For our day-to-day purposes, I would suggest that it is enough that we experience some things as good or bad, but that we need to recognise that we are fallible. We may learn, on reflection, that we made a mistake. Or we may learn from arguments and criticisms offered by other people. We are, surely, all familiar with this in our day-to-day lives: something may seem to us to be attractive, or even the right thing to do, or at least morally acceptable. But others may point to problems about it: for example, that it leads to suffering or involves the disrespect of other people, or that if we used our time or resources in other ways, it would do a lot more good.

Just what is telling in such contexts, is – at any one time – widely acknowledged. But it is also clear that there have been differences about these things over the course of history (and that there still are across different societies). The infliction of physical suffering on fellow human beings and on animals seems to have been something about which people in previous generations did not feel in the same way as we do. But we are surely right that those older attitudes were mistaken. We can also well expect that at some time in the future, all kinds of things which we take for granted will likewise come to seem highly problematic. However, it is also important to recognise that many moral issues will not be clear-cut, and that there will be important differences between the moral practises of different societies and traditions. These in turn may influence us as individuals – something that may pose some real problems for multicultural societies.

3. Why things can be complicated

People writing about ethics have highlighted several different reasons why our ethical decisions maybe difficult, and why conscientious people who listen to one another’s arguments may nonetheless still disagree on important points.

First, different kinds of things may seem to be important, ethically. There are, for example, those who stress the significance of people’s well-being and of suffering. Others draw our attention to the importance of treating others with respect, of people’s autonomy, and of not making moral exceptions for ourselves. Others may stress the importance of people’s integrity, of their lives having a wholeness and coherence to them, and of the significance of the cultivation of a good character and moral judgement. Still others, may stress the importance of special duties that we have towards others – of,

⁷ Cf., for example, David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

say, a mother towards her children, or a nurse towards his patients.⁸ All of these things typically have moral significance; but they may clash with one another.

Second, issues which are not moral may nonetheless have significance. We may properly value people living good lives, or cultivating their talents. But there may be clashes between these things and the kinds of issues referred to in the previous paragraph. It will surely be a matter for deep reflection, and some agonizing, just what any one person should give up to assist others. We also value what is sometimes referred to as ‘supererogation’ – i.e. doing more than is obviously morally necessary. But it is not clear that it is obligatory – and, indeed, one concern that the secular person may have about some religious traditions, is that they do suggest that such behaviour is obligatory, in ways that may be bad for those who practice – or try to practice – it. (There is also a nice comment by the Christian writer C. S. Lewis who commented of a ‘woman who lived for others’ that ‘you can see it by the hunted look on their faces’.) There may also be tensions between what is moral and particular religious injunctions. There may, say, be things that people are not willing to do which would really benefit others,⁹ because in their belief they have been forbidden by God.

Third, there may be important moral differences that stem from the fact that different societies operate in different ways. A hunter-gatherer society, for example, may put a premium upon sharing of the kind that does not make sense in a society such as ours,¹⁰ in which certain kinds of saving and investment, rather than sharing, may be needed for the operation of society and the longer-term well-being of others. Further, the complex market-based society in which we are living plausibly requires that people be motivated in important parts of their lives by economic self-interest, so that goods and services can end up in the places where there is high demand for them. In addition, particular ways of behaving are called for in societies which have legal systems of different particular kinds, and in which, say, bureaucracies and rule-following play a key role. I am not suggesting that these social issues dictate our morality in any simple manner. But different kinds of society generate different kinds of moral requirements, and call for different kinds of virtues. They may also make it difficult to avoid different, particular, kinds of vices. Different societies handle issues of these kinds in different ways; and we are each shaped, individually, by different traditions which have developed in response to them (within which there is typically ongoing argument and disagreement). Yet we increasingly find ourselves living in societies together people with many different such heritages.

4. What would this mean in practical terms?

It is important that those concerned with political decisions, with important decisions in commerce and the public service, and each of us in our day-to-day lives, do give time to

⁸ Cf. James Rachels’ introductory *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston etc: McGraw Hill, 2003) and Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Ethical Theory* (Oxford etc: Blackwell, 2007).

⁹ An obvious example, here, relates to issues about the public health consequences, in terms of the transmission of disease, of the rejection of the use of contraceptive devices.

¹⁰ I was particularly struck by this contrast when talking to some very traditional Aboriginal artists and craftspeople in Australia.

reflection on the moral significance of what we are doing, and of the consequences to which it is likely to lead. First, it is important to recognise our own fallibility, and the need to be open to the criticisms of others, however sure we initially are that we are right. After all, some of the grimmest things that have been done in human history have been done by people who thought that what they were doing was right. They may well have failed to think through what the likely consequences of their actions would be, and what their moral character would be, or to have listened to criticism.

Second, moral issues may be complex and we may need to weigh up the significance of different kinds of things, one against the other. Not only may this give us pause. But it may also bring home to us that other people may legitimately weigh these things differently than do we. We may think that they are wrong – but they are likely to take the same view about us. This in no sense means that ‘anything goes’. Rather, it reminds us that people who are thoughtful, conscientious, and willing to listen sincerely to what one another have to say may nonetheless perfectly legitimately disagree.

Third, if we explore issues carefully, we may find that there are commonalities between our different approaches and traditions. But we need to take seriously the fact that there are, in our society, traditions and ways of responding to issues which may legitimately take different moral views about them, or which weigh issues differently. Some people, say, may value the relief of pain, or their ability to die what they would take to be a good death, in ways that clash with other people’s moral misgivings about euthanasia. Here, it may be possible to cater for different moral traditions by way of providing different institutions for those who share them (say, different kinds of hospitals or hospices). But in many cases we will need to accommodate people who disagree with us within single forms of provision. In addition, as we learn about other people’s sensibilities, we will typically wish to accommodate them. If our Muslim fellow citizens have deep concerns about, say, the representation of Muhammad, they should explain them to the rest of us. We, also, should explain to them how, in our society, freedom of expression is strongly valued, and was developed, historically, against a background of religious-based censorship. Once we understand one another, and one another’s legitimate sensibilities, we can surely find ways either of accommodating one another, or of minimizing the upset which we cause.¹¹

It is here important that we don’t grandstand, and press issues of abstract principle or demand our rights, if others quite reasonably don’t accept that the claims are valid without qualification, or if their application clashes with other things that are genuinely important. In a multicultural society we may have to agree to differ about things concerning which we care a lot, and are convinced that other people are wrong. Those from traditions which are not well-known in our society may face a particular burden in

¹¹ An interesting literature about the notion of ‘public reason’ has developed in recent years; for an introduction, and some provocative questions about how it relates to religion, see the beginning of Juergen Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14, No. 1, 2006, pp. 1-25. (The latter parts of the article are turgid and in my view intellectually unsuccessful, not least because Habermas – rather like the early Marx – simply equates what he sees as important in religion with the things that agree with his own political and moral views.)

explaining just what is of significance to them, and why. And if they are in a small minority, they may find that the best that they can achieve is to be able to live by their own rules, where these do not involve significant clashes with the ways in which the wider society works and its citizens' expectations. Models here might be the way in which, say, exemptions from Sunday trading laws were historically granted to Orthodox Jews who closed their stores on the Sabbath, or observant Sikhs were allowed to wear turbans rather than the standard uniform in the discharge of their various official duties – but *not*, for example, ceremonial daggers.

To sum up. There are dangers about a pragmatic approach to issues, and it is important that those concerned with public policy issues look at their moral dimensions. However, the idea that morality must have religious foundations is badly flawed. Our moral judgements are fallible and we do seem able to learn if we open ourselves to criticism from others. But moral issues are complex, especially in a multicultural society, and we must accept that there can legitimately be differing moral concerns and judgements. It is important to investigate what there is and is not moral agreement about, and to take seriously other people's moral judgements and other (including religious) concerns rather than treating our ideas as if they are the only ones which can be legitimately held.

All this, however, also relates to ideas *about* the relationship between morality and religion. I am well aware that many of my readers will disagree with what I have written – and I look forward to hearing from them where they think that I have got things wrong. But if we are to be able to learn, it seems to me that we need to take one another's views seriously, and to conduct our discussions about them in a civilized manner.