

Morality with and without God

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Historically considered, Western morality, since the advent of Christianity, has been characterized by an acknowledgment of God's existence, by the belief that union with God is the end of man, and by the conviction that man is morally free in the sense that he is not totally controlled by his desires and passions or by social forces, and that he is possessed of a soul immaterial in nature which permits him to enjoy life in God. From the time of the Stoics until the 18th century, moral reflection, for the most part, took God and an immaterial order for granted. In the 18th century dramatic changes occurred. Hume freed morality from creed; Kant plucked it from its roots in natural theology. These deeds are well known, and there is no need to chronicle them here, but certain features of the moral theory of Hume and Kant are relevant to the present enquiry and may be briefly recalled. Perhaps one ought to begin with Hobbes, but it was Hume who drove home the point that religion and morality are distinct and even disparate in their respective bases and ultimate references, their motivations, and their consequences for human existence. Morality, says Hume, cannot afford to wait on the efforts of natural theology. Mankind must have some commonly available principles and grounds for moral judgment. Hume believed that as a matter of experience, a natural inclination to humanity and benevolence has a more constant and reliable effect on man's conduct than even the most pompous view suggested by theological theories and systems. In this as in other matters, Kant was to accept too much from Hume.

In his first *Critique*, Kant denies that our theoretical reason can provide evidence for the existence of God or for freedom or for immortality, but he is nevertheless convinced that these notions are required for morality. For Kant, it is axiomatic that moral law requires justice, defined as a measure of happiness in proportion to virtue. Because happiness may elude the virtuous in this life, Kant must posit the existence of God and a future life to ensure that virtue will be properly rewarded. He writes, "There is only one possible condition under which. . . there can be a God and a future world. I know with complete

certainty that no one can be acquainted with any other conditions which lead to the same unity of ends under the moral law. Since therefore the moral precept is at the same time my maxim (reason prescribing that it should be so), I inevitably believe in the existence of God and in a future life, and I am certain that nothing can shake this belief, since my moral principles would thereby be themselves overthrown, and I cannot disdain them without becoming abhorrent in my own eye.” Kant will go on to say that even though no one can demonstrate the existence of God, one can still say, “I am morally certain.” He admits, “My conviction is not logical, but is morally certain, and since it rests on subjective grounds, I must not even say ‘It is morally certain there is a God, etc.’ I can only say, ‘I am morally certain.’”

For many Jewish and Christian thinkers who come after Kant, the only genuine basis for morality is religion. This is true of theologians such as Brunner, Barth, Niebuhr and Bultmann, who hold that without belief in God, there is no ground or reason for being moral. Elizabeth Anscombe has similarly argued that only if we believe in God as a lawgiver can we come to believe that there is anything a man is categorically bound to do on pain of being a bad man. Anscombe maintains that the moral use of obligation statements makes no sense apart from a divine law conception of ethics. Anscombe’s judgment focuses an issue that must be faced by anyone who takes up the problem of moral obligation. When in the 18th century God was removed as a source of moral law, something happened to the notion of obligation. It required a different sort of grounding. Enter the notion of “social contract” brought in to impose obligation and legitimate coercion by virtue of consent given to some hypothetical primitive state. Since the 18th century, the societal contract theory has been the prevailing one and perhaps the only modern rival for the doctrine that power proceeds from the barrel of a gun. The social contract is the keystone of John Rawls’s celebrated examination of “justice.” Leaving modernity aside for the moment, my topic, “Morality with and without God,” demands at least a cursory examination of some pre-Christian or pagan codes of morality.

To begin with the Greeks, we note that classical civilization had its gods and took for granted an immaterial order. Every schoolboy knows the names of Greek and Roman gods. An immaterial order needed little defense in classical antiquity. Plato reasoned to a *summum bonum*, worthy of veneration;

Aristotle reasoned to a self-thinking intellect, a first efficient cause, and an ultimate final cause. Cicero believed that the universe is governed by a divine plan and held that the mind or soul of each individual is a reflection, indeed, a part of the divine mind.

I take Cicero (106-43 B.C.) to represent the noblest expression of the Roman mind, indeed of the Hellenistic mind, on the subject of the moral life. Cicero claimed no originality but thought of himself as transposing Greek ideas about public life, specifically those of Plato and Aristotle, into a Roman context. In the *Discussions at Tusculum*, drawing upon both the Stoics and the Peripatetics, and making use of Plato's *Gorgias*, and his *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. Cicero begins: "If, my son, we adopt moral goodness as our guide—in each and every one of its forms, it will follow automatically what our practical duties or obligations must be. . . . The next step is to go to the various kinds of obligations which have a direct bearing on people's daily lives and needs." This is something that he does elsewhere in *De officiis*.

In the *Discussions at Tusculum*, he examines the essentials for a happy life. In the first four books of that treatise he concludes that death is not to be feared, that pain is endurable, that sorrow can be alleviated, and that disturbances of the mind can be conquered. Book Five is given to the thesis that moral goodness by itself is sufficient to make one happy. "But just suppose, on the other hand, that the good way of life lay at the mercy of a whole lot of unpredictable accidents, so that if appropriate accidents were not forthcoming this goodness would lack sufficient strength to maintain itself independently by its own account. If that were really so, all we could do to achieve a happy life, it seems to me, would be merely to hope for the best and pray heaven that happiness might somehow come our way." "The happy are the ones who are alarmed by no fears, anguished by no cravings, dissolved into no voluptuous languor by fatuous transports of delight." But is there such a man "who is capable of regarding all the hazards and accidents of human life as endurable, a man who moreover is troubled neither by fear nor by distress nor by passion, a man whom all empty pleasures of whatever kind leave utterly cold—then if such a person exists, there is every reason why he should be happy." The issue is not resolved by Cicero although one is left with the impression that in the absence of complete self-control there may be degrees

of happiness.

In *De officiis*, Cicero discusses the nature of responsibility and obligation. Given that all mankind is one brotherhood, Cicero infers that we should not be indifferent to the happiness and well being of others. Recognition of brotherhood implies a tremendous social and communal obligation. From the very fact that every human being possesses a spark of the divinity, an essential and indissoluble bond is created with all his fellows. He must therefore treat them with respect and dignity. In fact we incur an obligation to the other, indeed, a responsibility for the other. Nature's law, says Cicero, promotes and coincides with common interest.

In *De re publica III*, 33, we find Cicero's famous definition of natural law, "True law," he says, "is right reason, consonant with nature, spread through all the people. It is constant and eternal; it summons to duty by its orders, it deters from crime by its prohibitions. . . . There will not be one law at Rome and another at Athens, one now and another later, but all nations at all times will be bound by this one eternal unchangeable law and the God will be one common master and general (so to speak) of all people. He is the author, expounder, and mover of the law."

Justice, Cicero finds, is the crowning glory of the virtues, and close akin to justice is charity, which may also be called "kindness" or "generosity." Like the law of nature, to which it is essential, justice is absolute, eternal, and immutable. He extends this concept even to punishment, "There are certain duties that we owe even to those who have wronged us; for there is a limit to retribution and to punishment." It is no wonder that Petrarch could say of Cicero, "You could sometimes fancy that it is not a pagan philosopher but a Christian apostle who is speaking."

Turning to the Orient, we find that Confucianism represents a way of life that was followed by the Chinese people for well over 2,000 years. Although regarded by some people as a religion, it is non-theistic. Within its moral code there is no reference to God or to a teleological conception of nature. Ethical issues, for the Confucian, are not determined or formulated apart from the social setting in which they arise. One does not find in Confucian ethics any clear demarcation between moral rules and other sorts of rules. There are no rules that are functionally the equivalent of the Mosaic Decalogue. One

finds rather in Confucian ethics a theory of virtue rather than a theory of obligation. The sage follows his desires, satisfies his emotions but at the same time is restrained by a sense of propriety. That which is proper is that which is in accord with reason. The “reasonable” is a product of experience, both personal experience and that of the community. Yet classical Confucian ethics contains no division among the rational, the emotional, and the appetitive tendencies of man, comparable to their distinction in Greek morality.

Where difficult questions for ethical decision arise in a particular setting, their solution is to be found in the individual’s sense of rightness. Whereas the exercise of the individual’s sense of rightness in normal cases may well be the simple application of a rule, in complex issues that judgment may be challenged by a fellow agent. In such cases the agent proposing a solution must be prepared to offer a reasoned justification for his proposed course of action.

Confucius, like Plato, would have the ruler be a sage. Moral qualities, he maintained, are indispensable for leadership. To govern is to set things right, but he who would govern must first set himself right. He who would lead is the man who has cultivated, above all, the virtues of filial piety, magnanimity, loyalty, reciprocity, courage, and wisdom. Added to that list is the requirement that the superior man who would govern is one who loves his fellow man joyously from the innermost recesses of his heart. The superior man stands in awe of the ordinances of Heaven. He stands in awe of great men, and in awe of the “world of sages.” A just ruler derives his authority from and rules by the Mandate of Heaven, a mandate conferred upon him by reason of his virtue and talent.

It is said of Confucius that he prayed and fasted, that he attended sacrifices, and that he once even swore by “Heaven.” Heaven is to be understood here, not simply as the regularities found in nature, as it is understood by a later disciple, Hsun-tzu, but as a cosmic-moral power. Obedience and trust in Heaven are said to have given Confucius courage in times of disappointment and physical danger and to have provided him with a sense of a Heavenly mission in a troubled time. The Way of Heaven, Confucius held, should serve as the model for the way among men. The ruler is something like a schoolmaster whose purpose is to help his charges become better men.

Buddhism, like Confucianism, is sometimes regarded as a religion, even though there is no reference to God, to a transcendent reality or to personal immortality. Like most traditions, Buddhism is complex and to a significant degree heterogeneous. Buddhist ethics from the very beginning has been committed to a middle way between asceticism and hedonism but is perhaps best considered as asceticism. Gautama Buddha (b. about 563 BC) condemned all attempts to enquire into or to define the supreme good of life. Salvation is not to be found in theoretical speculation but in a strenuous moral endeavor which aims at the destruction of desire, the root of all suffering. The path to deliverance is the extinction of desire, a turning away from human life and the external order. It is such a path that leads to Nirvana, the eternal beatific silence. How sweet, he taught, would it be to be freed of all craving and of all passion? The path to such freedom is a life of virtue, the habitual choice of the mean. The ethical ideal thus becomes one of quietism and spiritual detachment. The wise man will take no part in the life of the state or in the business of human affairs. He will live in solitude, perhaps as a monk, conforming his spirit to the Absolute.

Although the Buddhist commits himself to a certain way of life, on the whole Buddhism eschews mandatory dogmas and specific injunctions to which the adherent must conform. There are, nevertheless, traditional precepts that are to be observed. There are five precepts for the layman, precepts that prohibit killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, lying, and the drinking of intoxicating liquor. There are an additional five precepts for monastic novices, i.e., not to eat during prohibitive hours, not to take part in festivals and amusements, not to use luxurious furniture and beds, not to accept money for oneself, and not to use garlands, perfumes, or ornaments. There is within the many strands of Buddhism a recognition of the obligatory nature of charity, of hospitality, and of love for every living thing. Thus the life of the fetus is to be protected, whereas Confucian ethics would permit its destruction in the early stages.

Viewed from a Greek perspective, that is, from classical Western philosophy, one is inclined to see in Confucianism and Buddhism intimations of a natural law philosophy, even though both lack an ontological foundation. There is no doubt that the transition from either Buddhism or Confucianism to

Christianity is relatively easy to make, in the sense that little has to be given up. Though both Confucianism and Buddhism are godless, the humanism characteristic of both is evident in their common admonition to self-restraint, charity and, in the case of Confucianism, its sense of propriety. We also find in both an appreciation of custom and tradition, and judged from a Christian perspective we have a sense of the fulfillment possible to both if only they were completed by the acceptance of divine revelation. Yet such “conversion” or fulfillment rarely happens. Confucianism and Buddhism are not a prelude to Christianity in the same way as Hellenic philosophy. It cannot be said of the East something we say of the intellect of the West—namely, that “Christ came in the fullness of time when the intellect of the West was prepared to receive the truths of the Gospel.” Although one is compelled to admire the humanism found in Confucian and Buddhist moral codes, neither can be thought of as an expression of natural law morality. Natural law is distinctively Greek in origin and cannot be affirmed except in the Western context which gave it birth. It is the distinctive features of the Greek mind that I will attend to in a moment.

The Enlightenment, we know, challenged not only Christianity but the underpinnings of the moral philosophy characteristic of Aristotle and of those Stoics who followed his lead, notably by denying the reality of nature and human nature along with the principle of final causality or teleology in nature. Our topic compels us to ask: Is a systematic ethics possible without the implicit acknowledgment of those principles? Though he could not reason to either God or to personal immortality, Kant needed to posit both to ground his moral code. His ethics remains theistic, though it is not what we would call a natural law ethics. Affirmation of the intelligibility of nature, itself the product of intelligence, is the key to a natural law philosophy.

In both Aristotle and Aquinas there is the common affirmation that things have natures that are indicative of tendencies that beg to be fulfilled. Aristotle, for example, maintained that from a consideration of what a thing is in its tendential aspects, one can determine what is suitable for it, in other words, its good. From a consideration of what man is, one can determine what ends he ought to pursue. For Aristotle, the supreme end of man is happiness, which consists primarily in intellectual activity, all

other pursuits being subordinate or instrumental to that one. Aquinas adds principally that ultimate fulfillment consists in an eternal beatitude in which man's intellectual and appetitive faculties will find complete satisfaction. For Aquinas, ultimate beatitude is possible even if temporal beatitude of the Aristotelian sort escapes one by reason of chance or the poverty of the human organism. This is the natural foundation for the theological virtue of hope.

The foregoing conception of natural law rests upon two ontological pillars: one, the conviction that there are intelligible natural structures, and two, the conviction that the processes of nature are purposive—in the language of Aristotle, upon the principles of essence and finality. But do these principles exhaust the intellectual commitments necessary to support a natural law outlook? We come back to the question, “Is it possible to subscribe to a natural law basis for morality without first establishing the existence of God?” The answer at first blush seems to be in the affirmative. We seem to find the rudiments of a natural law outlook in Confucian and Buddhist codes of conduct. Furthermore, in the West we find many who are agnostic with respect to the question of God's existence and yet who agree that arbitrary will is not final, that civil law and conscience are to be measured against an independent scale. How account for this?

The Confucian, the Buddhist, and the neo-pagan of the West have in common a humanistic ethic but one that is not supported by an acknowledgment of God's existence or by a systematic philosophy of human nature. A difference between ancient moral codes associated with the East and those proclaimed in the contemporary West is this: Confucian and Buddhist moral codes were developed without any knowledge of Christ, whereas much of contemporary Western philosophy has known but has rejected Christ. Yet the moral outlook characteristic of Christianity has not been culturally eradicated and remains to a considerable extent, although unacknowledged, in Western secular philosophy. Dorothy Sayers made this point succinctly in her 1947, Oxford lecture, “The Lost Tools of Learning.” “The truth,” she says, “is that for the last three hundred years or so we have been living on our educational capital. . . Right down to the nineteenth century, our public affairs were mostly managed, and our books and journals were for the most part written, by people brought up in homes, and trained in places where

the Scholastic curriculum with its emphasis on the Trivium and Quadrivium was still alive in the memory and almost in the blood. Just so, many people today who are atheist or agnostic in religion are governed in their conduct by a code of Christian ethics which is so rooted that it never occurs to them to question it.” She then adds this cautionary note, “But one cannot live on capital forever.”

Accumulated capital or tradition obviously plays a large role in how a people conduct themselves. St. Thomas, in discussing the role of tradition, gives it almost the force of law. Within Confucianism tradition plays an all-important role. It represents the collective wisdom of a people as they confront their daily affairs. For Mao, to complete his socialist revolution, the Confucian tradition had to be eliminated. To that end, he was aided by an intellectual class, tutored by John Dewey, who held that the function of education is to challenge rather than to perpetuate the inherited. Within the West we know full well what happens when a theistic-grounded morality is repudiated in favor of an outright materialism. We have only to recall the atrocities committed in the name of communism and national socialism. More recently, given the ascendancy of the materialist, secular outlook within the West, we find a renewed threat to Western civilization itself, as biblical and traditional moral standards have been called into question at all levels of society.

The cultural effects of atheism cannot be denied. Absent an acknowledgment of God’s existence, worship and the things pertaining to worship have no basis, and the consequence of their being lost within a secular culture portends the loss of Western culture itself. No one can deny that the great achievements of Western art, i.e., in painting, architecture, music, and literature, have been motivated by a sense of the sacred. It is true that Kant’s abstract and moralistic interpretation of religion attaches little value to visible manifestations of piety and worship. His pietistic upbringing may have led him to deprecate the cultural effects of communal religious practice, a position that is consistent with his purely moral religion, but contemporary atheism has gone much further, insofar as it seeks to suppress all public manifestations of religion—that, in spite of the fact that European culture has thrived on, and can almost be defined by, its feasts and pageants in celebration of sacred events.

By way of a concluding comment, it may be argued that a theistic natural law theory is best

construed as a meta-ethic. Although a natural law outlook is purely philosophical, it opens one to religious testimony, testimony that may have some additional things to say about life's goals, about happiness, and about the norms by which they ought to be pursued. An important feature is its empirical character, that is, its fidelity to evidence drawn from common experience and the sciences of man, insofar as that evidence bears on human fulfillment. Often when natural law is invoked, it is both presented and criticized as a set of normative propositions, which, because of their universality and necessity, in some fashion, transcend periods and cultures. It has that feature, to be sure, but it is best understood as a meta-ethic. It can easily be shown that natural law theory, in addition to its openness to the transcendent has a contribution to make on several fronts, notably as they are discussed in contemporary literature. In providing a theory about the determination of moral norms, it speaks to topics such as ethical reasoning, the movement from descriptive to normative assertions, the extra-legal grounds for judicial decision, and the societal basis of law. Natural law when so understood is seen less as a code than as a metaphysics or philosophical anthropology that calls attention to certain time-transcending facts about human nature and society, facts that must be taken into account as the race grapples with ever more complex moral issues arising notably from the biological and natural sciences and the recent phenomenon of globalization.

The "Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights," adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO, October 19, 2005, is perhaps the closest one can come to a transcultural declaration of moral objectives. Drafted by an international committee representing the major cultures of the globe, it deliberately eschews any reference to a divinely ordained moral order or even acknowledges that there are "laws of nature." Laudably it promotes the value of human dignity, human rights, and fundamental human freedoms. It insists on honesty and the value of cooperation, dialogue, social responsibility, and the priority of the interest of the individual over that of the state. In the practice of medicine, it emphasizes the importance of consent to any medical intervention and speaks to the patient's right of privacy. The list goes on, but what is missing is an ontological grounding of the principles assumed. Although it speaks of human dignity and human rights, their derivation is not addressed. Omitted, too, is any reference to an important setting of human life—the family—and of that which contributes to its

stability. There is no recognition of the destructive force of practices such as adultery, divorce, contraception, abortion, and euthanasia. In fact nothing is condemned; only the laudable, by universal consent, is affirmed. The genius of the document is that it is bland enough for the atheist, the theist, the Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, or Confucian to sign onto. Clearly for the West, this "Declaration" is no substitute for the Mosaic Decalogue. Furthermore, in substituting vague aspirations for tradition, it is, for example, less a guide than Confucianism. One is left with the unintended thought that morality is specific to a culture, with or without God.