Does Morality Need a Foundation in God? — Debate with Logi Gunnarsson
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Historically, and in nearly every culture, religion and morality have been closely tied to each other. In non-theistic cultures, morality is typically thought to arise from awareness of a moral order in the world.[1] The force of the *ought* in, "One ought to live in accordance with that order," lies in the consequences of conforming, or not conforming to it. It is thought that in this life society will be more harmonious if its members conform to the moral order, and also that the lives of individuals will go better. Failure to conform is thought to bring negative consequences both for society and for individuals. In those cultures that believe in reincarnation, one's next life will be in a higher or lower form depending on one's conformity, or lack thereof, to the moral order.

This non-theistic understanding of morality sees morality as independent of individual or group opinions, and it provides an explanation for the motivating force that moral claims are presumed to have.

It would be good to insert here that these two features of moral claims are from a secular perspective the most puzzlingly features of the meaning of moral claims. They are puzzling precisely because in secular thought—especially from a worldview that sees reality as being purely physical—the only reality that values have is people (individuals and groups) valuing what they in fact value. The puzzle is how to make sense of one person or group being right and another person or group being wrong when their fundamental values are different. And what is the force behind saying that one "ought" to follow a particular value when it is agreed that the force of the "ought" (in its current usage in English) implies that the speaker is making more than a cultural claim, that what is claimed is right independent of the speaker having affirmed it or any cultural affirming it.

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The idea is not always explicitly religious and it may connect with beliefs about human nature. Thus, in Aristotelian ethics, there is a way of living that best fits our nature as human beings, the *noble* way of life. It is not something one is born with and perception of it may need training. However, the training simply reveals a moral order within human beings that is already there and is not biological in any obvious way. This Aristotelian view is a bit like people today who don't believe in God or supernatural personal agents but who think that there is a moral order in the world or in us as human beings that we are able to perceive, but which many people may fail to perceive. Many Christians also believe in "natural law." This, I would suggest, arose out of the influence of Greek thought on Christian thought. However, a difference between Christian "natural law" morality and the kind of moral-order-in-nature view that I am describing here is that for Christian the natural moral law comes originally from God. However, either way, my contention here is that one needs more than what can be discerned from human nature or a natural moral order to have an adequate morality.

Although the moral-order-in-nature thesis gets around this puzzle, the fundamental problem with it is that an impersonal order or force cannot care about the welfare of anyone (or any animal). And if the content of this moral order contains nothing more than what can be called natural consequences of human behaviors and attitudes, then its content will be too little to provide an adequate set of moral values, adequate in terms of the needs of society and of the individual.

(Utilitarians do not believe in a moral order within nature, nor do they give moral claims any special metaphysical status (compared to other values people may embrace). For them what matters is only the consequences of attitudes and actions. Their reasoning is that humans have the desire for pleasure and the aversion to pain, and this ought to determine what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. For example, Peter Singer makes statement this way. "It seems to me that if one goes by this way of reasoning, and tries to develop a consistent moral principle, I may not like the consequences, but I think the proponents of this school would have avoided the idea of a given metaphysical moral order that rational intuitionists often invoke for *ought* and yet arrives at a situation where the greatest good of the great number prevails, which often is the happiness of the greatest number.")

In theistic religions, the grounding of a moral order is in the character and will of God. If God is wholly good, as Christians and Jews believe, then he (God) desires that people's lives would flourish. God will judge people for evil, but he does not delight in judgment and desires good both for people and his creation. Thus, although from a Christian perspective the force of moral right and wrong arises out of accountability to God, nonetheless right and wrong are intimately connected with the idea that what is morally right promotes the overall welfare of humans and the rest of creation. It is not the case that right and wrong are simply defined as what God wills if this definition does not also take into account God's complete goodness and his concern for the welfare of his creation and it human inhabitants.

However, a better word than "flourishing" to capture the Jewish/Christian understanding of morality is the Hebrew word "shalom." It reflects the conviction that people were created to be in relationship with God and that human flourishing must include right relationship with God; indeed morality it needs to be centered on God.

Morality begins with, and grows out of, love for God. "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19) Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment in the law?" He replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,'" adding, "and the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matt 22:35-40) Both are commands from the Torah; but many Jews at the time of Jesus thought of their neighbor as just being other Jews. Jesus, by contrast—in the parable of the Good Samaritan—makes it clear that one's neighbor is anyone.

Love for God is foundational for love for neighbor because to love God is to love what God loves, and God has a love that extends to all people. It should be noted here that the motivation to love God and love one's neighbor does not come principally from fear of divine judgment. Such accountability to God plays a motivational role in repentance, but the motivation to a genuinely moral life arises out of gratitude to God for the grace and love he has shown towards us. Further, to go beyond simply a moderate degree of kindness, compassion, etc. (a kindness that self-interest can motivate / such people are happier than selfish people) … to go beyond this, to love of one's neighbor as oneself, one needs the assistance of God through his Spirit.

I will say more about human nature in addressing what a secular grounding for morality can provide, but it should be noted here that according to Christian thought everyone is created by God with some awareness of right and wrong through conscience. The Apostle Paul speaks of "the law written on the heart" (Rom. 2), part of which is conscience. And by what theologians call "common grace," all humans have some capacity to love others. It is a part of human nature as God created us, part of our being created in the image of God. The doctrine of the fall says that as a result of the fall, there is an orientation in the heart of all of us towards self and away from God. Further, it affects everything we do. Nonetheless, the image of God is not totally erased, and there is, by God's continued grace, some capacity for love that remains in everyone.

One, therefore does not have to believe in God to have some knowledge of right and wrong, and to have some capacity, by God's grace, to love others. However, our feelings about right and wrong can be influenced adversely (as well as positively) by culture and upbringing. Hence those feelings of right and wrong are not a perfect guide. But, given the common human nature that we share, there is significant overlap in moral content across cultures. Nonetheless, there are also major differences, and, at times, these are important fundamental differences.

A good example of a fundamental difference concerns the principle that all human beings—simply because they are human persons—should be viewed as having great and roughly equal worth. Another way of expressing this is that each person's welfare should be viewed as important; and in contemplating what is right, each person's welfare should count equally with that of everyone else. This principle is assumed in the command, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and in the "golden rule." ("Do to others as you would want them to do to you." Matt. 7:12) If one views oneself as worth more than others and one's own welfare as more important than the welfare of others, then it makes no sense to love them as one loves oneself.

As with the moral-order view, the Judeo-Christian understanding of morality makes good sense of both the independence of moral truth from individual or group opinion. And it explains the motivational force that moral claims are presumed to have.

In the West, under the influence of its Judeo-Christian heritage, the principle of the great and equal worth of people, as persons, is so deeply engrained into how we in the West think about that morality that it has for most people become part of the definition of

morality. A moral outlook, by definition, has to consider everyone's welfare and cannot privilege any individuals or groups. However, in most other cultures—not strongly influenced by this Judeo-Christian idea—morality does not presume this. The worth of persons may vary according to age, race, gender, nationality, ancestry, religion, social position, or abilities. Although cultures may differ on which categories are relevant for differing value, what these cultures share in common is that treating some people better than others is morally fitting; it is appropriate in the natural moral order. (There are individuals in nearly culture who do accept the equal-value principle, but they are not representative of how the culture views morality.) Thus, even when cultures agree on certain values that seem wired into us as human beings, e.g. the value of kindness, this does mean that they agree that there is a moral obligation to be equally kind across gender, race, age, etc.

Further, even apart from moralities differing over a fundamental principle like this one, conceptions of morality differ considerably on how moral principles ought to be weighted one to another. Thus when there is conflict between moral principles and values, how these are weighted in importance relative to each another can make a huge difference. And the vision that different cultures have with regard to the relative weight of moral principles are different enough from each other that the prospects are not good of being able to come to cross-culture agreement around a sufficiently robust core set of values (and their weightings) to provide what societies and individual's need.

Before turning to the further problems that face attempts to establish an adequate foundation for morality on completely secular grounds, it is worth emphasizing that to be intellectually forced to accept cultural relativism with respect to morality is bad news both for the welfare of society and for the welfare of individual lives. I.e. even the atheist should—simply on prudential/practical grounds (not moral grounds)—strongly hope that there is some way of avoiding cultural relativism with respect to morality.

Cultural relativism is bad news for society because for a society to run smoothly it is important that the majority of its citizens embrace a core set of fundamental values. When cultures were largely isolated from one another, cultural consensus was possible; but in modern societies, which are increasingly multicultural, the negative consequences of cultural moral relativism for such societies is painfully apparent.

Cultural relativism is bad news for the individual because one of the most important factors in personal happiness is believing that one has (in general) lived according to what is right. "Happiness" here is not the superficial concept of pleasant experiences; rather is having satisfaction with one's life, and this satisfaction seems closely connected with believing that and one's life has had meaning in the broader moral sense. (Studies on what contributes to human happiness support this thesis.) One can endure a considerable amount of hardship and yet have deep satisfaction with one's life if one believes that what one has done has is right and has contributed to the greater good. But believing that one has lived such a life involves considerably more than the values that are simply wired into human nature, and it involves more than just enjoying the good things in life as they come. But this belief about one's life being morally right and for the greater moral good

is blocked by cultural relativism in morality, or at least is severely undercut by it. Again, happiness, in the deeper sense, depends of believing that one's moral values are right (and not just culturally right) and striving to live in accordance with those values.

Another way of looking at this is to note that strong moral values—values that both go beyond self-interest and which one maintains even at considerable cost—need to be backed by beliefs. This will include the belief that the value is correct, one that is not culturally relative. But this belief typically needs to be supported by other beliefs that help explain why it is right and why it matters that one act in accordance with the values in question.

This is where a secular morality faces severe problems. Some things are easy to justify in that way, but many are not. Thus, the challenge is both to justify the culturally independent correctness of this larger set of moral claims (which will involve beliefs) and to motivate acting upon them (which will involve beliefs). The failure to provide the needed beliefs and to justify them is bad news for both for society and for individuals.

Now, the central problem for morality without God (and without belief in a moral order in the world) is that one is left with a purely physical world or perhaps a world that mysteriously has physical systems with conscious mental states. But either way, the only reality that values have is what people or animals in fact desire. There is no reality to values independent of acts of valuing things. This pushes one towards moral relativism whenever the values are not simply part of human nature, or whenever human nature does not include the extension of those values to everyone, or when the prioritizing of those values in a particular way is not dictated by human nature.[2] (As stated above, the utilitarians do not believe in moral order or values that exist independent of human world. But they are able to avoid moral relativism. One of the ways they may put forth a universal principle may come about by saying that one ought not to reduce pain as far as possible. And they may justify this principle by saying that we all dislike pain.)

The challenge—and I think an insurmountable one—is to provide or justify the needed beliefs. The beliefs need to go beyond justifying the moral values that nearly all cultures share in common to justifying the larger set of beliefs needed by for the welfare

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[2] In some cases people or cultures can differ on particular values, but if the parties involve agree that it is a secondary value, and if they agree on more fundamental values, resolution of who is right is sometimes possible. Those on one side of the secondary-value conflict might successfully show advocates an opposing side that the secondary value they embrace is in conflict with a more fundamental value they embrace. Thus, by appealing to a shared more-fundamental value, it may be meaningful to say one side was right and the other side wrong. The correctness of the secondary value is relative to a more fundamental value. And if the fundamental value is wired into human nature, is something that humans naturally desire and embrace, then moral relativism can be avoided.

Of course, there is a sense in which right and wrong are relative to human nature, but this is also true in a Christian view of morality if one thinks of human nature not just as "fallen human nature" but the way God designed us such that we would flourish as human being. (And, as noted above, if we are created to be in relationship with God, then this God-created human nature includes the need to be rightly related to God.)

of society and for individuals. In short morality needs a foundation in a set of beliefs that go beyond what it seems that the secular worldview is able to provide. The need for morality to be founded in God rests both in the coherence of this perspective and in the inadequacy of the secular of impersonal-moral-order alternatives.[3,4] Hence, yes, *morality needs a foundation in God!*

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[3] It is, of course, possible philosophically to embrace moral relativism (beyond the minimum that we are able to read off of human nature), but most atheists (whom I know) *who say they accept moral relativism*, do in fact *have convictions about some moral issues*. In other words, they really do believe that their position is the right one, but this is not compatible with moral relativism. For instance, most atheists whom I know believe that *women should be viewed as having equal worth with men*, but they can't really believe this and be consistent with moral relativism. According to moral relativism, all that they can mean by *"women should be viewed as having equal worth with men"* is *"I want people to view men and women as having equal worth"*, or *"I, together most people today in the West, want people to view men and women as having equal worth.* But it seems that they mean more than this. They really to believe that it is *better* (not just in their culture's values) that *women be viewed as having equal worth with men.* "Better" here is a weaker value judgment than "morally ought," but if they feel *strongly* that every society should embrace this point of view it amounts to the same thing,. And note, the same arguments pushing one toward moral relativism push one towards a more general value relativism. Also note that if they say that the concept of morality has built into it that all people should be viewed as having equal worth, this faces that problem that this definition of "morality" merely reflects a Western consensus. Cultural moral relativism is not avoided.

[4] A final note: Christians struggle with many moral issues, but they possess a core of values supported by divine revelation that provides more than what cross-cultural consensus can provide. Western culture is in large agreement with most of this core, but the agreement arises out of its Judeo-Christian heritage. The challenge is how to justify the belief in this set of core values is correct (independent of individual or cultural opinions) once one has cut oneself off from the set of beliefs from which this set of values first arose. My contention is that it cannot.