



Religion Is Caring for Humanity: Community, Morality, and Altruism

An integral part of religion pertains to morality: how we interact with our fellow human beings and, increasingly, with all of nature. In this chapter, I will answer two questions: “Does religion make people good?” and “Can people be moral without religion?” Even though these questions appear to be contradictory, my answer to both is a resounding yes. However, there needs to be a number of qualifications.

Our moral nature grows directly out of our social nature. Social anthropologists attribute the development of human morality to group harmony. But humans exhibit ethical behavior that goes well beyond the explanatory power of group cohesiveness, and that is precisely where religion comes into play.

Religion Is Community

William James famously defined religion as consisting of “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” As much as I admire James, in this case he is decidedly incorrect. Religion is not an individual matter; it is foremost a communal affair.

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Rather than James, a more informed understanding of religion comes from the father of sociology, Emile Durkheim, who was specifically interested in religion as a communal experience: “Religion is eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities.” And this makes sense. The word “religion” is derived from the Latin verb *religare*, which means “to tie together; to bind fast.” The original meaning of religion pertained to binding oneself to God. Later the term would also be used to designate a bonded belief system and set of practices. But its meaning pertaining to the binding of people together under a common faith logically follows.

Empirical research reveals that religious activity is associated with greater social cohesiveness. In one of many studies working with survey data, researchers examined the relationship between religious involvement and social ties in a sample of 3,000 households in the southeastern United States. The results showed a positive relationship between religious involvement and both the number and quality of social connections. The average person who attends church several times a week enjoys 2.25 times more nonkin ties than the person who never attends. Another study by anthropologist Richard Sosis drew on a catalogue of nineteenth-century communes published in 1988. He chose 200 for his analysis, 88 of which were religious and 112 secular. Sosis found that communes whose ideology was secular in nature were up to four times as likely as religious ones to dissolve in any given year.

If religion is the original community-building institution, then it stands to reason that it also is a preeminent morality-building institution, because social organization always implies standards of behavior. And while that is certainly true, religion ultimately does much more. It is also largely responsible for civilization’s most important moral accomplishment: a universal humanist ethic.

Religion Is Morality

When we review the fundamental tenets of the major religions, we find they have in common a strong moralistic orientation. Moral values are central to a religious view that claims the world was created by a loving, all-powerful God concerned with human flourishing, and that posits a supreme goodness as the basis for all reality. The fundamental moral position that flows from a religious conception is that all of life, being a mode and manifestation of that ultimate reality, is holy and intrinsically valuable, and that moral action is the path to a union with God. This understanding necessarily obligates the believer into a moral contract under which by doing good he is participating in the highest good, the natural outcome of which is overflowing compassion and a deep, intuitive certainty of the common linkage among all living beings.

The fact that all religions attempt to explain the prevalence of evil in the world suggests further that the foundation of their beliefs is goodness—goodness in the deity and goodness in humankind. Thus intrinsic to all religions is a moral imperative. This cannot be said of any other cultural institution. Because God created all things, all things deserve to be revered, and by living in conformity with God's commands humans achieve as close an identity with God as can be had in this life. The equation of religion with absolute goodness is total. If the basis of sin (or, in the case of Eastern religion, the ego-illusion) is that man has separated himself from the divine source, it makes eminent sense that the way to a reunion with the divine is through the renunciation of sin and the perpetuation of good works. The way to Heaven or Nirvana, the liberation of the soul or atman, is through actions that conform to God's goodness.

Atheists often exhibit a lack of understanding of religious morality. They assume that, for the believer, morality is very simple: whatever

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God dictates is right is right, and whatever God dictates is wrong is wrong. Atheists speak about religious morality purely as a reward-and-punishment relationship to mythic parental figures. Religious people are seen as moral automatons; believers are commanded to *obey*. The most cynical see in religion a blind obedience to moral authority and an oppressive behavioral-control system.

There is no question that some religious adherents exhibit an authoritarian orientation, but the same can be said for many nonreligious people. (I have encountered more than a few sanctimonious atheists.) For the vast majority of people, however, authoritarianism is not the defining feature of religious morality. God is not seen as a parent in a disciplinary or authoritarian sense, but in the sense of a loving father who teaches the way to achieve salvation or liberation. God represents the moral high ground to which humans aspire.

The great moral advancement of religion comes from putting forth an ethical code that is rooted in an Absolute. God is understood as eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good. That is not a coincidence: When we conceive of Absolute Value, goodness is an integral and inherent part of that conception. Thus, participating in the world of an infinitely loving God always implies a moral relationship between man and God and, by extension, man and man.

Every major religion stresses the objective existence of moral ideals, the importance of moral conduct, and the possibility of individuals and societies attaining a good and happy life. The believer sees a God who holds humans to the highest moral standards; and he feels a loving obligation to do what is right for God and for other human beings. Religious people do not strive to be good because they want to avoid punishment and earn bonus points in the heavenly sweepstakes; they strive to behave consistent with God's love and grace in much the same way we naturally strive to be good for anyone we love.

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The most essential contribution of religion to cultural values is the sense of the sacred, of something so absolutely good that it is worthy of unconditional reverence. As with rituals and myths, morality is another manifestation of humans identifying with the highest values. And it is through good works that humans participate in these values. Righteous deeds, charitable acts, service to others, and ethical adherence are all primary vehicles for reaching heavenly redemption.

And this is true in Eastern as well as Western conceptions. The Supreme Self of many Indian religions is a reality of great wisdom and bliss, knowledge of which leads people to see all things as part of the Divine Self and worthy of reverence, union with which can be attained by leading lives of compassion and good works. The Tao of Heaven in East Asian religions is a basic moral order written into the structure of the universe, calling people to live in accordance with that order of justice and laying down ways of life that will bring fulfillment and inner happiness.

Humans were said to be made in the image of God, an ideal that laid the ground for a Christian humanism that made individual persons objects of respect in their own right. Since humans were meant to share in the divine nature, they are to be respected as children of God and not treated as a means to an end. So wrote St. Augustine in his *City of God*: “Whoever is born anywhere as a human being, that is, as a rational mortal creature, however strange he may appear to our senses in bodily form or color or motion or utterance, or in any faculty, part or quality of his nature whatsoever, let no true believer have any doubt that such an individual is descended from the one man who was first created.”

Such a moral conception has led to the highest sacrifices among humans. Albert Schweitzer’s deep religious conviction led him to renounce prestige and comfort to go to Africa and provide medical care

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for thousands. Martin Luther King's dream of a society in which all people would live freely together was essentially a religious vision. Religious conviction lay behind Mahatma Gandhi's life of asceticism and nonviolent protest. And for literally millions of less-celebrated people, their countless acts of sacrifice and compassion every day help to uplift humanity's condition.

If religion does motivate some people to perfidy, it is more than balanced by the myriad good deeds performed in the name of God every day. It is unfortunate that a large conflagration attributed to religion attracts far more attention than the billions of small candles lit by religious people all over the world.

According to Giving USA, American charitable contributions reached a total of \$307 billion in 2007, a figure that represents more than 2 percent of GDP, well above that of any other nation in the world. Of that \$307 billion, 33 percent was given to religious organizations—or just over \$100 billion. And of that, an undetermined amount went to further the charitable mission of thousands of religious initiatives, from feeding the poor to international relief efforts. As just one example that takes place literally hundreds of times every week: Addressing a conference of 6,000 Methodist youths in North Carolina in 2007, a bishop made an appeal for \$10 donations for mosquito nets to save African children from malaria. Within minutes, they had raised \$14,000. What other force has the power to raise so much money so quickly to help people on a distant continent?

Sociological studies forcefully argue that religious beliefs are correlated with moral behavior. Research cited by Rodney Start and William Sims Bainbridge showed that moderate religious people are more caring and compassionate than their nonreligious peers, and give more money to charity. Sociologist Arthur Brooks, who has performed extensive research on charitable giving, has shown that religious people

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are 38 percent more likely than secularists to give money to charity and 52 percent more likely than nonreligious people to volunteer their time. Thus in 2000, religious people donated about 3.5 times more money per year (\$2,210 versus \$642) and volunteered more than twice as often (12 times versus 5.8 times). Indeed, when looking at the difference between the populations that give the most versus the least, on a percentage-of-income basis, religion is the most salient predictor.

Looking at other measures of religious affiliation, people who pray every day (whether or not they go to church) are 30 percentage points more likely to give money to charity than people who never pray (83 percent to 53 percent). Further, people who say they devote a “great deal of effort” to their spiritual lives are nearly twice as likely to give as those devoting “no effort” (88 percent to 46 percent). Moreover, these practices are not exclusive to particular religions. It does not matter what religion one practices so long as it is practiced seriously. Among those who attended worship services regularly in 2000, fully 92 percent of Protestants gave to charity, compared to 91 percent of Catholics, 91 percent of Jews, and 89 percent of other religions.

Arthur Brooks is the leading expert in America about the demographics and characteristics of charitable giving, having evaluated the results of dozens of studies and authored the book, *Who Really Cares*. Although the charity gap is not as great when we examine giving to nonreligious causes, religious people were still 10 percentage points more likely than secularists to give to nonreligious charities such as the United Way (71 percent to 61 percent) and 21 points more likely to volunteer for secular causes such as the local PTA (60 percent to 39 percent). In addition, the value of the average religious household’s donations to nonreligious charities was 14 percent higher than the average secular household’s. The same is true when it comes to informal acts of kindness to others. Religious people were far more likely to

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donate blood than secularists, to give food or money to the homeless, and to express empathy for less fortunate people. In yet another example of religious charity, about 1.6 million U.S. churchgoers travel on short-term mission trips each year, devoting their time and money to build schools, deliver medical aid, or feed orphans.

By doing what God prescribes, one is accepted by God and participates in the realm of the divine. Doing good means being good, and within the divine context that means attaining the highest value; one's life is validated on the highest level. Thus believers do not do what is right because they think God wants them to, but because they feel it serves the ultimate purpose of God.

It is clear that the idea of moral and spiritual progress is at the very center of religion. And an evaluation of religious truths reveals a fundamental consensus on moral principles. Biblical scholar Lewis Browne illustrated the shared morality of the world's great religions with these variations of the Golden Rule:

- Brahmanism: "This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you." (*Mahabharata* 5, 1517)
- Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." (*Udana-Varga* 5, 18)
- Confucianism: "Is there one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one's life? Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." (*Analects* 15, 23)
- Taoism: "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss." (*T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien*)

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- Zoroastrianism: “That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.” (*Dadistan-i-dinik* 94, 5)
- Judaism: “What is hateful to you do not to your fellow man. That is the entire Law.” (*Talmud, Shabbat* 31a)
- Christianity: “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the Law of the Prophets.” (*Matthew* 7, 12)
- Islam: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.” (*Sunnah*)

The central idea of this book is that what is most sought in every human endeavor is Absolute Value, and what we seek to avoid is *relativism*. Humans cannot live in a world where ethics are relative. Thus, while it is true that without religion people can certainly have a morality, it is problematic if that morality is not felt to be rooted in something objective and absolute. The paradox is that the moment we think that our moral precepts are man made, we immediately feel they are fallible and insubstantial. No one wants to believe that their value system is culturally or historically arbitrary. Few people are comfortable believing their value system is a function of personal opinions, individual preferences, or calculating self-interest (even if it often is).

We all have a strong need to feel that what we believe in—from the facts of the universe to the principles of morality—is anchored in objective truth. That is what we need above all else, to feel that what is right is rooted in an absolute good that transcends human will. And there is no higher source of truth than a divine being from which all creation emerged. Religion thus becomes the most important cultural and institutional source of ethical principles precisely because it is felt to be above human caprice.

Our Innate Moral Sensibility

As a secularist, I must admit that I do not really believe that our morality comes from God. So the question remains: If not God, where then does morality come from? Harvard psychologist Marc Hauser thinks he has the answer: Morality originates from an innate sense of right and wrong. In this understanding, morality evolved like any other intrinsic capacity—for the good of the individual and society.

According to Hauser, “We evolved a moral instinct, a capacity that naturally grows within each child, designed to generate rapid judgments about what is morally right or wrong based on an unconscious grammar of action.” He found that moral decisions are made intuitively, rather than consciously or rationally, and that people come up with similar answers when faced with particular moral dilemmas regardless of culture, religion, and income. “Moral judgments,” Hauser wrote in his book *Moral Minds*, “are mediated by an unconscious process, a hidden moral grammar that evaluates the causes and consequences of our own and others’ actions.”

Hauser measured people’s morality by using hypothetical scenarios that usually begin like this: “A runaway trolley is about to run over five people walking on the tracks ...” or “You pass by a small child drowning in a shallow pond and you are the only one around” These “tests” have been given to thousands of people around the world, and the very interesting result is that all people responded much the same way. Further, he has shown that atheists respond in a manner almost identical to religious people.

This finding usually leads to a “eureka” response from secular humanists like Hauser, who believe this proves that religious people are no more moral than atheists and agnostics. He concludes from his research that “across a suite of moral dilemmas and testing situations,

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Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Sikhs, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics deliver the same judgments.” Hauser has also written that “our own nature, not God, is the source of our species morality.” And he further states, “These observations suggest that the system that unconsciously generates moral judgments is immune to religious doctrine.”

It is clear that Hauser’s aim is to prove that there is no difference in morality between religious and nonreligious people. And on the level of innate moral faculty, I think he is correct. But Hauser’s work suffers from one huge deficiency: Nowhere in his 400-page book does he seriously pay attention to the factors that result in the gap between moral instinct and actual behavior.

Being an academic, Hauser seems unconcerned with *real* human moral behavior. Thus Hauser neglects the most important question to arise from his book: If we all intrinsically know what’s right and good, why don’t we all behave that way? There is a need for an *intermediate* dimension between the innate sense of right and wrong and the actualization of moral behavior. And in this, religion plays an indispensable role.

In truth, our innate moral capacity is really just a vague moral inclination that points us all in the same direction. And I think it is nebulous for a reason: It accommodates different situations and some amount of free choice. But that also means there is no guarantee that any situation will in fact result in the most moral actions. I am not here suggesting, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that we are born to be good and society corrupts us. Rather, I believe science shows us that we are born with an undercurrent of good that is ready for adaptation, but which must first be activated, articulated, and actualized through *culture*. This moral sense is not so strong that it dictates instinctive behavior, but it is not so weak that it is easily corrupted. In fact, for the vast majority of

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us in the vast majority of circumstances, it serves us well. This is to say that people are innately good, but such goodness remains largely a *potentiality* and does not mean that people will always do the right thing. For that, contrary to the cynical perspective of Rousseau, we *need* culture.

It makes sense that the evolution of our nervous system would be biased in favor of pro-social behavior for the sake of our collective survival. But what Hauser completely neglects to explain is why if we are hard-wired for moral behavior we can be so *immoral*. Our history is one long list of people doing the wrong thing thinking that it is the right thing to do. Thus being in possession of a moral instinct does not mean that people will always do the right thing. In reality, there is a huge gap between our innate moral tendencies and our actual behavior. That gap is bridged by culture. And because of the almost infinite variability of culture, it is consequently a long and variegated path to actual moral behavior, which is where religion comes into play. Therefore to say that people do not need religion for moral guidance is incorrect.

The Moral Behavior Paradigm

Hauser's conceptualization does not begin to articulate the complexity of moral decision-making. I suggest that our moral behavior results from a complicated interplay of eight factors on five interrelated levels, wherein religion plays an essential role both historically and currently. The following five levels begin with two universal dimensions, one intrinsic (moral sensibility) and the other externally given (religious principles); followed by two cultural dimensions, one applying to all people in a society (laws, education) and the other pertaining specifically to the individual's immediate environment (parenting, peer groups); finally, these dimensions are influenced by an individual's distinctive genetic makeup.

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Level 1—Intrinsic Universal: Innate Moral Sensibility

Level 2—Extrinsic Universal: Religious Moral Principles

Level 3—Extrinsic Objective: Social Contract, Education, Laws

Level 4—Extrinsic Subjective: Parenting, Peer Group Norms

Level 5—Intrinsic Subjective: Genes

The interrelationships among these five levels are so variable that it is almost impossible to generalize. The two absolute pillars are the Intrinsic Universal (innate moral sense) and Extrinsic Universal (religion). Over time, these absolutes are filtered through the level of Extrinsic Objective, which codifies the moral absolutes into broad social norms, institutionalized education, and laws. On a more immediate level, these norms and principles are further filtered through the level of Extrinsic Subjective where they can split and diversify like light through a prism.

Level 1—Intrinsic Universal: Innate Moral Sensibility

As already noted, we are born with an inherent moral sensibility. But I think it is a pure potentiality that requires tremendous acculturation over time. At the core of this moral playbook is the unconditional principle that we acknowledge every individual as a person who deserves to be treated as we want to be treated—essentially a combination of Kant’s second formulation of the Categorical Imperative (“If I use a person as a thing, I myself lose my dignity as a person”) and the Golden Rule. But, again, this intuitive orientation must be articulated, objectified, and codified if it is to influence actual behavior.

Level 2—Extrinsic Universal: Religious Moral Principles

Religion has been the foremost articulator and explicator of these inchoate moral precepts. Remarkably, with respect to generalized situations, religions agree much more than they disagree. And this is

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because, I believe, they are the primordial linkage with the universal innate capacity.

Religion deserves its own category because it is antecedent and pervasive, because it trickles down to all other levels, and because it is attributed to an absolute (divine) source of validation. The greatness of this moral principle is that it accepts and tolerates all people, including those who we might otherwise find unacceptable. My enemy is united with me in something that is above him and above me, the ultimate ground of being that is in each of us (the absolute good).

Interestingly, this moral capacity is rarely felt as originating from “commandments” imposed by an outside authority; rather, it feels like it emanates from our innermost being. That is not to say all religious precepts are correct, for many are no more than derivations from more variable and superficial sources (identified next). Here I am affirming the tried-and-true religious concepts that have prevailed throughout millennia. Thus religion does two things: It explicates the innate moral sense and objectifies it, making it into an external absolute that, in turn, is reinternalized. This becomes the *conscience*, what St. Thomas Aquinas called the moral life “according to reason.”

Level 3—Extrinsic Objective: Social Contract, Education, Laws

These moral universals are further institutionalized within a culture through its social norms, education, and legal principles. *Importantly, it is at this point that they can conceivably be severed from their religious roots.* But that is not to say that we are ever fully independent of these religious antecedents, because historically we still owe much to the preceding religious traditions. And for the majority of people, the religious explication remains the foremost presentation of these universals.

The problem is that, as many informed observers have acknowledged, conceptions of right and wrong can differ from culture to culture.

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Anthropologist Ruth Benedict made a statement suggesting that morality is highly relativistic: “Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.” Further, we know from our own modern Western culture that institutionalized education does not as a rule teach ethics, values, or morality. Thus cultural institutions face the constant challenge of maintaining and imparting the moral universals.

Level 4—Extrinsic Subjective: Parenting, Peer Group Norms

This is the level that most closely touches the individual and is the most susceptible to arbitrariness. These are the most subjective and primal influences, especially peer group norms, where we tend to participate in several groups concurrently. This is the most immediate influence between moral principles and behavior, and where the greatest variability manifests.

In fact, there is no guarantee that any ethical learning takes place here. The question is whether these more relativistic sources of values contradict the objective and universal precepts, which they often do. Ultimately, the most desirable outcome is for this dimension to reflect the moral imperatives found in the Extrinsic Universal and Extrinsic Objective levels.

Level 5—Intrinsic Subjective: Genes

I included genetic influences because there are real and tangible correlations between genes and behavior of all kinds. While there are few hard-and-fast findings, epidemiological studies have shown that certain traits and behavioral characteristics with moral implications have genetic correlations. For example, substance abuse has a strong genetic component and is highly correlated with bad behavior. Thrill-seeking and anger, two characteristics with genetic underpinnings, can also potentially result in antisocial behavior.

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Note, however, this is not a deterministic argument for the genetic basis for good or bad behavior. In the studies cited previously, it took *both* bad genes and a bad home environment, not either variable alone, to result in aggressive behavior. Genes did not make these people antisocial; their genes only made them susceptible. Despite genetic influences, it is clear that, with few exceptions, our moral temperament remains well within our control on both an individual and social level.

Can We Be Good without God?

It would seem that our innate moral sensibility obviates the need for religion. But it actually makes the role of religion all the more important. The “moral language” as described by Hauser and other evolutionary psychologists is inchoate, amorphous, and abstract. Religion for millennia has been humankind’s most important moral intermediary between our selfish imperatives and our ethical behavior. That internal moral sense requires external articulation and reinforcement. And throughout history the closest we have come to a formal moral education has emerged from exposure to religion. The other sources of morality (education, parenting, legal system, cultural norms, peer groups) are variable and insular, and usually not appropriate for the development of universal moral principles.

Every atheist will say, correctly I think, that it is entirely possible for a nonreligious person to be moral. But to say that we can have a vibrant moral culture independent of religion is true in only a narrow sense. I believe we can hypothetically eliminate religion and still have a strong moral tradition in place, subject to three qualifications:

1. This transition to a religion-free culture can happen only if there is a determined, collective effort to replace religion with an explicit commitment to formally teach ethics to children via parenting and educational institutions to a degree that at this point does not exist in any sector of our society.

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2. We must not forget that whatever ethical culture prevails today in our secular society was formed over centuries of religious moral education as an antecedent.
3. This hypothetical exercise does not apply to most of the developing world, where the educational and legal systems and their corresponding institutionalized moral teachings are considerably underdeveloped.

I do believe that atheists have the same moral capacity as religious people. But whether that capacity is fully actualized is another question. I am also sure that atheists Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins are genuinely ethical people. I do not know them personally, but I am prepared to wager that they have lived privileged lives of familial stability, higher education, financial security, and the luxury of a contemplative life. The rest of humanity, however, is not so fortunate. It is easy for these culturally well-endowed atheists to conceive of a moral life apart from religion, leading them to naïvely suggest that all people can live moral lives without religion.

But I am afraid that while taking religion out of the moral equation may mean fewer acts of martyrdom among a few thousand people, it would also leave a huge moral vacuum for billions more. I do not believe, as Dostoevsky did, that without God everything is permitted. But it is wishful thinking and not consistent with empirical findings that people will act just as morally without religion as they do with religion. Look around—outside of religion, where does the average child formally learn about morality? Religion is the only cultural institution intrinsically committed to the moral improvement of humankind, which cannot be said of education, government, or business.

Atheism by itself does not motivate people to do bad things, but it is lacking one hugely important moral dimension. In our modern secular society, many moral values have already been institutionalized and on

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some level we can possess these values apart from the religion that developed them. These values will not disappear if we eliminate religion, but the infrastructure that has held those values aloft will substantially weaken. Of all the cultural templates we have, religion is the most robust and explicit about moral behavior.

People of faith have often insisted that in the absence of God human morality would cease to exist. At one point in time that was probably true. Atheists like to point out that we can learn morality from secular sources. But none of those insights, let alone the Enlightenment itself, is remotely conceivable apart from the religious contexts out of which they developed. Ultimately, militant atheists want the moral benefits of religion, but without the religion (as many people want the taste of chocolate without the calories).

In other words, eliminating religion from the cultural morality equation can take place only under rarified and highly qualified conditions. For most people under most circumstances, religion remains the primary model for morality. The innate moral sense by itself is necessary but not sufficient. There is an additional need for a codification and articulation of this moral sense through culture, a process taken up historically by religion. The conclusion is that we are hard-wired to know the difference between good and bad, but religion helps people make that distinction in a way that fosters a moral society.

The Moral Implications of Science

Time and again I have stated that science is not a moral teacher. However, while the scientific method may be values-neutral, scientific theories and the framework in which they are understood have existential implications, which, in turn, have moral implications.

In fact, allowing science to determine ethics may lead to some very disappointing consequences. With no transcendent and objective

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claim to moral standards, scientific materialism has no claim to the moral high ground. Imagine the moral philosophy that might naturally flow out of such images as selfish genes, survival of the strongest and smartest, and the view that humans are a dispensable offshoot of blind evolutionary processes, not the pinnacle of anything. How Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins can believe that from reason and science alone we can derive truly humanistic values escapes me.

Scientific Materialism and Relativism

What might we be saying in and through our scientific materialist understanding of human life? Compared to the idea originally derived from the religious conception that man was made in the divine image, the scientific view says that man is an animal and can be compared to other animals in moral terms. In the traditional evolutionary view, there is no difference between humans and animals, since both are driven by the same survival and gene-replication imperatives. On the plus side, this may lead many people to respect all living creatures. On the negative side and in the extreme, this can yield species relativism: the idea that humans are not the pinnacle of creation; we are no different from other creatures. Indeed, science's revelation that humans are nothing special may in fact lead away from the principle of the absolute sanctity of human life. If we needed proof that an atheistic view of morality can result in diabolically flawed relativist ethics, one should look no further than the Princeton philosopher Peter Singer.

Because humans are a product of evolution, Singer claims that humans exist on a continuum that includes other mammals; thus, there is not a clear separation between humans and animals, which has implications for ethics. One implication is that animals should be treated with greater respect, a point of view that we humans are increasingly and properly coming to share. But the second implication is very disturbing. If humans are animals and our lives are not divinely inspired,

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the edifice of Judeo-Christian morality about the sanctity of human life is discredited. God is dead and we should recognize ourselves as Darwinian primates who enjoy no special status compared to other animals. Therefore, not only are abortion and euthanasia permissible, but so might be infanticide. While Singer is clearly driven by compassion, his relativist positions derived from his atheistic conception of human life are morally offensive.

Singer has written that “Human babies are not born self-aware, or capable of grasping that they exist over time. They are not persons.” And on the viability of the unborn, he has this to say: “The calf, the pig and the chicken come out well ahead of the [human] fetus at any stage of pregnancy, while if we make the comparison with a fetus of less than three months, a fish would show more signs of consciousness.” Because, according to Singer, “it does not seem wise to add to the burden on limited resources by increasing the number of severely disabled children,” he says that the parents, together with their physicians, have the right to decide whether “the infant’s life will be so miserable or so devoid of minimal satisfaction that it would be inhumane or futile to prolong life.” Thus, once killed, a disabled infant will be freed of pain. Singer has also written, “Characteristics like rationality, autonomy and self-consciousness make a difference. Infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings.” And on killing newborn infants: “I suggest that a period of 28 days after birth might be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to life as others.”

I like the idea of treating animals more like humans, but am morally repulsed by the idea of treating humans more like animals. Not all atheists are so morally compromising, of course. But I can’t help thinking that, if Peter Singer believed in God and the corollary that every one of us is made in God’s image, he would have more respect for the sanctity of human life and would not so easily make his own determinations

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about what constitutes a worthy person. Singer is probably an unusual case, but it does call up the need for an absolutist dimension of ethics that has historically come from religion and a belief that life is a gift from God. The irony is that Singer is a professor of bioethics.

In the end, knowing that morality is an evolutionary adaptation shared with chimpanzees and social insects does not make a person more likely to act with high ethical standards. However, knowing that such morality is handed down by a higher power that loves him does make a believer more inclined to behave morally, and not so much because he will be punished or rewarded, but because he wants to share in that higher power's goodness. The most powerful way to participate in that higher value is by behaving in a way consistent with that goodness.

Social Darwinism and Eugenics

According to biologist E. O. Wilson, our whole system of values, including beliefs, virtues, and the rules related to them, is purely a product of evolutionary expediency. In *Consilience*, Wilson says that the insights of neuroscience and evolution will increasingly illuminate morality and ethics in a way that leads "more directly and safely to stable moral codes" than would the dictates of God's will.

I have serious doubts about this claim. Just ask yourself what ethical lessons emerge from the contemplation of this statement by Richard Dawkins: "We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes." How does that inspire anyone to be more compassionate and charitable? In an instance of self-reflection, Dawkins himself has questioned the validity of a moral system derived from evolutionary science: "A good case can be made that a society run on Darwinian lines would be a very disagreeable society in which to live." In fact, Dawkins has further stated, "If you wish to build a society in which individuals co-operate generously towards a common good, you can expect little help from

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biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish.”

For over 100 years, Darwinism was associated with a particularly harsh and unpleasant view of human nature. And as we have seen historically, social Darwinism has deleterious implications. Whether Hitler was actually influenced by social Darwinism is not important. What is important is that a pernicious relativism is easily derived from the application of Darwinian thought to human affairs.

Social Darwinism is the theory that competition among individuals, groups, nations, or ideas drives social evolution. The term draws upon Darwin’s theory of natural selection, where competition between individuals drives biological evolutionary change through the survival of the fittest. If humans are not the result of God’s will but of a survival-of-the-fittest gene-replication mechanism that cares not for human life, then there is little rationale to help those who have the misfortune of not being capable of survival on their own: the poor and helpless. The theory implies that those who cannot defend themselves should perish so that evolution can work its species-changing magic.

Certainly, evolutionary science is not responsible for these things: science is values-neutral. But this is what happens when science is allowed to infiltrate moral values without any ethical intervention or interpretation. This is what happens when science is not balanced by values-affirming disciplines such as religion.

Conclusion

It is clear that science by itself cannot lead to a moral culture. Science has no moral valence. Right and wrong do not come from physics or chemistry or biology. It requires the intervention of ethical institutions, mainly religion. Chris Hedges stated, “It is impossible to formulate a moral code out of reason and science. As the realm of fact rather than

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value, science is unable to generate a basis for moral behavior. Neither science nor reason calls on us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to forgive our enemies, or to sacrifice for the weak, the infirm or the poor.”

The biggest realization for me is that we cannot put our faith in a *relative* truth. Imagine believing in something that depends on something else that depends on something else, and so on. That is not how our minds are organized. We look for that *one* thing that all other things are dependent on. Call it first cause or the cause of causes. This imperative permeates all human strivings, but only religion offers it in a systematic and structured way. If moral imperatives are not instilled as a part of God’s will, and if they are not in some sense *absolute*, then moral relativism is the norm.

It is true that today we can extract these moral imperatives and separate them from religion, but that is only after many centuries of a process of externalization and internalization that I have already described. I think it is clear that for the majority of people there seems to be no way to fashion a complete moral architecture excluding religion. My main proposition is that the innate moral sense requires a medium for its articulation and institutionalization, and for most of human history religion has served that purpose.

Religion is uniquely suited to provide the psychological and social context for the necessary consensus about core humanistic values. Religion is uniquely capable of promoting the belief in a transhuman moral authority, thus supporting the ongoing traditions that form the foundation for an ethical civilization.

At some point in our history we transitioned from *human being* to *being humane*. Making that transition was facilitated by religion, the concept of being created in the image of God. And even though I do believe we have progressed as a moral species, it is still too early to dismiss religion.