

Religion and Morality

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The relationship between religion and morality cannot be discussed in abstraction. There are many varieties of ethical systems and religions, which radically diverge from each other with respect to the values, norms, and ideals advocated. One can, therefore, examine their interrelationship only after specifying what particular religions or ethical systems one has in mind.

It may surprise us but there are religions (e.g., paganism, Shintoism) which are purely cultic and make no ethical demands on their adherents. But, contrary to the claims of many religionists, the absence of religious sanctions need not adversely affect the standards of morality prevailing within a given society.

Some religionists argue that commitment to ethical values on the part of secularists attests to the residual impact of

religion, the root of our ethical beliefs. Just as cut flowers can retain their beauty for a short period of time after they are severed from their roots so, they claim, commitment to ethical values in a secular society is a "survival" of a religious age. They are convinced that sooner or later, an ethical system which has been uprooted from its religious roots, is bound to wither away.

It is, however, simply not the case that ethical systems must originate within a religious setting or can flourish only on religious soil. Although there is little doubt that many of our own moral beliefs derive from religious cultures, it does not follow that their ongoing viability depends upon the continued existence of the factors and conditions that originally brought them into being. After all, a house can outlast the death of its builder. We would be guilty of committing the "genetic fallacy" were we to maintain that in order to function properly our moral beliefs must continue to be buttressed by religious underpinnings.

That ethics can be completely independent from religion was driven home to me several years ago during a visit to Japan. I discovered to my amazement that, although most Japanese professed a religious faith which revolved exclusively around cultic acts and was completely lacking in moral requirements, there was far less crime in Japan than in the United States, where most religions mandate ethical conduct. Comparison between the incidence of crime in the two countries clearly shows that strong societal pressures to conform to an ethical code can at times be more effective than religious sanctions as incentives for ethical conduct.

Be that as it may, it is certain that monotheistic religions demand moral conduct. As opposed to polytheistic cults which worshipped their gods as sources of power, the monotheistic God figures not only as the omnipotent Source of Being but is worshipped as the supremely moral Being, Who demands

righteousness and justice. In the words of Micah (6:8), "He has told thee, Oh man, what is good and what the Lord demands of thee; only to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with thy God."

A monotheistic perspective makes it possible to subscribe to a divine command theory of ethics. Accordingly, what renders an action, state of mind, or intention good is the fact that it is commanded by God. But it is equally plausible to hold that goodness is by no means synonymous with the property of being commanded by God. Instead, God, as the supreme moral authority, commands whatever is good. It is not His command that makes actions or states of mind good; on the contrary, they are commanded by Him because they are good.

This issue has been debated ever since the time of Plato. Because of his polytheistic premises, he could not define goodness in terms of divine approval, especially since the Greek gods were conceived as powers rather than exemplars of morality. Since different gods may possess divergent desires, they are likely to issue conflicting commandments or be pleased by mutually exclusive forms of conduct. Plato, therefore, had no choice but to insist in his *Euthyphro* that goodness is a property which is independent of divine command or approbation.

In recent history, G.E. Moore contended that when we define goodness in terms of being commanded by God we commit the "naturalistic fallacy." To be sure, many critics observed that it was only on the basis of his highly controversial views on the nature of analysis that Moore could charge those who define goodness in terms of non-ethical properties with committing a fallacy.

While religious believers have every right to disagree with Moore's thesis and contend that goodness actually means pleasing to or commanded by God, there is really no reason why they should do so. Were they to define goodness in terms

of divine approval, they would no longer have a common universe of discourse with atheists or agnostics. Were religionists to insist that the very meaning of the term "good" amounts simply to "it is commanded by God," they could not engage in moral arguments with individuals who do not share their theistic beliefs. It is only when it is granted that the meaning of goodness is independent of divine approval or command that it makes sense to debate moral issues with non-believers.

Although religious believers can agree that the meaning of the term "good" is not directly connected with divine approval, they may assert that the proposition "it is good," without being synonymous with the proposition "it is commanded or approved by God," nonetheless is its equivalent. While the term "good" does not actually mean "it is commanded by God," it, nevertheless, is logically necessary that whatever is commanded by an omni-benevolent God be good. This, however, need not lead to the Kantian position that the fact that something is commanded by God is totally irrelevant to morality. For we may well argue that a divine commandment is bound to be moral, even if human intelligence is unable to discern its goodness.

The most blatant illustration of a conflict between what is commanded by God and what is perceived as moral by human intelligence is provided by the biblical account of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Kant argued that Abraham should have refused to abide by a command which ran counter to the dictates of his autonomous conscience, since it is inconceivable that God would have issued a command which contravenes moral requirements. Kierkegaard also agreed with Kant that Abraham's conduct was unethical. But it was precisely because his "suspension of the ethical" demonstrated his readiness to subordinate all ethical concerns to the demands of faith that he became the "knight of faith" *par excellence*.

Kierkegaard's approach, however, leaves us with serious difficulties. For it hardly makes sense to claim that God as the supremely moral being would command an immoral act. Thomas Aquinas' approach is far more palatable. In his view, there is an ethical requirement that we obey the dictates of a higher moral authority. In view of the fact that Aquinas adopted a consequentialist ethical perspective, he had no problem with God's ordering an act which strikes us as immoral. As the omniscient moral authority, He obviously knows best what would lead to the most beneficial results. Murder, as a general rule, will result in evil consequences to society. But when directly ordered by God, the supreme expert on goodness, an act of killing is bound to result in the best possible consequences.

Professor Fackenheim¹ has shown that even on the basis of a purely deontological ethics one can contend that it is one's supreme duty to obey the dictates of the highest conceivable moral authority. Killing a person as a divinely ordained sacrifice does not constitute murder. It seems puzzling that Kant, who regards the execution of a murderer as a moral imperative cannot find it acceptable to kill a person at the specific command of God. Hence, there is no need to justify Abraham's conduct by invoking the "suspension of the ethical," a notion that strikes us as absurd when applied to a religious faith that extols God as the perfectly good Being.

In sharp contrast with modern ethical theories, biblical moralities treat ethical imperatives as objectively valid norms or values. Unlike emotivism or prescriptivism, which ultimately ground ethical imperatives on subjective factors, biblical moralities emphasize that they represent the Will of God. It is this responsibility to God which distinguishes biblical from Greek moralities. The latter, while also claiming objective validity because they reflect the requirements of human nature, are essentially prescriptions for personal well-being. In the

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felicitous formulation of Professor Nozick, they constitute "push moralities."² They are designed to help the individual attain the best possible life, which is evaluated solely in terms of his/her happiness. Because of this self-centered conception of morality, Aristotle, who regards friendship as an integral part of a good life, recognizes the obligations deriving from the needs of a friend but has no concept of charity. For him, there were no requirements to concern oneself with the needs of strangers. This is why during the middle ages charity was classified as a "theological virtue."

Biblical morality, on the other hand, is not ego-centric but is responsive to the claim of "the other." Its basic premise is that human beings are responsible to God, Who demands that we concern ourselves not only with our own individual good (be it happiness, self-realization, pleasure, etc.) but acknowledge the claims of the other. As Leviticus (19:19) puts it, "Love thy fellow human being as thyself; I am the Lord."

Our moral obligations to our fellow human beings arise not simply from nature or from rationality, but they derive their obligatory character from their being apprehended as divine imperatives. Even the most rationalistic classical Jewish philosophers do not treat moral duties simply as rational requirements or dictates of nature but as "rational commandments." The concept of autonomy does not figure at all in Jewish ethics. The human self does not create or impose moral obligations; human conscience or reason merely discover divine imperatives. Even those Jewish thinkers who subscribe to the conception of natural law which can be discovered unaided by supernatural Revelation, nonetheless maintain that they amount not merely to rational or natural duties but to divine commandments apprehended by our rational faculties.

Alasdair MacIntyre³ has called attention to the difficulties encountered by secular ethics. Ever since Descartes rejected the notion of final causes, science has become value-free. With the

delegitimization of teleology, it is no longer possible to adopt the Aristotelian approach and base ethics upon the foundations of immanent purposes within nature. Kant's attempt to provide a secure foundation for morality by grounding it on rationality was also doomed to failure. As Anscombe has pointed out,⁴ reverence for the moral law hardly makes sense without a divine law-giver. It therefore is not surprising that we have arrived at a point where ethics, as in the emotive and prescriptive theories currently in vogue, ceases to possess any objective validity.

I have shown elsewhere⁵ that the characteristic of "overridingness" which distinguishes the ethical norm from other prescriptions or evaluations can also best be explained by reference to a divine commander. This option is available to all adherents of monotheistic religions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike accord their moral beliefs the status of an absolute norm that is due to a divine imperative, the highest possible source of authority.

Kant contended that with the exception of providing sanctions or incentives to abide by the moral law through the prospect of eternal bliss in the hereafter, religion had nothing to contribute to morality. We see now that Kant was completely wrong when he claimed that the only contribution that religion could make to morality was the ability to provide sanctions and incentives for moral conduct by promising reward in the hereafter. In the light of our preceding discussion it becomes clear that theistic belief affects the very nature of the authority of a moral norm. After hearing "performing X is irrational," one may ask "So what?" But one cannot reply in the same fashion to the statement, "Performing X is a transgression of a divine imperative."

Kant's claim may have had some plausibility in his time when it was taken for granted that there could be only one universally valid ethics, especially since he managed to

incorporate within his ethical system all the ethical beliefs of the dominant religion of his society. One could well claim that his entire approach was an attempt to hide a liberal Christian approach under the cloak of pure rationality. But with the sharp disagreements on moral issues which divide various segments of society, we can no longer appeal to a moral consensus. The controversies raging about abortion, assisted suicide, or euthanasia provide telling examples of the wide gulf between the various camps, each defending their respective positions on the basis of mutually irreconcilable moral beliefs.

In a pluralistic and democratic society, these issues must be resolved by recourse to democratic processes. But it is the height of absurdity to allow fear of the breakdown of the separation of Church and State to disqualify from public debate any moral opinion engendered by religious faith. Since the validity of moral opinions cannot be demonstrated on either scientific or rational grounds, it simply does not make sense to recognize moral opinions of atheists or agnostics but discriminate against the opinions of those whose moral outlook has been molded by religious faith.

One of the most basic features of biblical morality is the emphasis upon the sanctity of human life. Human beings must not be treated in the same fashion as other members of the animal kingdom, because "He made man in the image of God" (Genesis 5:1). The Palestinian Talmud⁶ goes as far as to assert that the verse, "on the day when God made man, He created him in the image of God" represents the most fundamental principle of the entire Torah. Whereas the Bible in describing the creation of various organic creatures states that they were formed "in accordance with their species," no mention whatsoever is made of the species with respect to human beings. The Mishnah already notes, that "man was created as a single creature to teach us that the destruction of one person

is the equivalent of destruction of the entire universe.”⁷ Each human being is irreplaceable. After all, so the Mishnah continues, “each human being bears the image of God in a unique way . . . and each human being is required to say “for my sake was the world created.” Since each individual possesses infinite value, no individual may be sacrificed on the altar of the collective welfare. Quantitative or qualitative factors are irrelevant. Euthanasia and suicide are categorically forbidden. Moreover, there is an overriding obligation to save life. According to Jewish law, one is duty-bound to make efforts to preserve one’s own life.

To be sure, Jewish law recognizes the distinction between killing and letting die. In the latter case, priorities must be assigned when it is not feasible to save every one. Similarly, when prolongation of life would only result in severe suffering for the patient, some medical interventions designed to keep the patient alive may be discontinued. Under no circumstances, however, would Jewish morality sanction any form of active euthanasia.

Jewish law operates with the principle, that no human life may be displaced for the sake of another life and, for that matter, any number of lives. There is only one exception to this rule: One is required to take the life of a pursuer, whenever necessary to save the life of an individual, regardless of whether one’s own life or that of a third party is endangered. When threatened by a pursuer, one is mandated to protect one’s own life, and, when necessary, even by taking the life of the aggressor. Non-resistance to evil is not the hallmark of a saint, but a grievous offense against God, Who has conferred upon us the precious gift of life and human dignity. This is why Jewish law permits abortions in life-threatening situations. If the embryo imperils the life of the mother, it is regarded as the pursuer. We must perform all actions deemed necessary to save the life of the mother.

The implications of the biblical doctrine that man bears the image of God are by no means limited to considerations involving the sanctity of life. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has pointed out,⁸ the Rabbinic doctrine of *Kevod ha-beriot* (human dignity), which stipulates that at times various religious requirements are set aside when their observance would entail the violation of a person's sense of dignity, is a corollary of the unique status which, according to Genesis, is assigned to human beings. Each individual matters, because each person bears the image of God in a unique manner and is entrusted with a unique mission which no one else can duplicate. So sensitive were the Talmudic sages to concern for human dignity that they compared causing embarrassment to 'shedding blood.'⁹ Jewish law not merely prohibits libel, but frowns upon disclosing unfavorable information about an individual, unless disclosure of such information is necessary to protect another individual from harm.

Moralities that have developed within the matrix of religion tend to praise as virtues traits of character which would not be acceptable to secular moralities. We need but recall Nietzsche's strictures against "slave morality" which extols pity, compassion, humility, etc., in order to realize the enormity of the chasm gaping between biblical and non-biblical moralities. Similarly, Aristotle's and Spinoza's disdain for humility are poignant examples showing how strongly the absence of religious foundations impinges upon the formation of value-systems.

The central role which benevolence plays in modern secular systems such as Humean ethics or utilitarianism also attests to the residual impact of biblical influences even upon agnostic philosophers. Social hedonism owes much more to the biblical imperative "Love thy neighbor as thyself," which precludes exclusive concern for one's own welfare, than to Greek ethical thought which revolved around the ideal of self-sufficiency and

which fostered an essentially egotistical outlook, which runs counter to the basic thrust of biblical religion.

Although, according to numerous Jewish thinkers, ethical laws¹⁰ are geared to promoting the well-being of society, there are instances where they clearly transcend considerations of social utility. Thus the obligation to assist the needy is defined in individualistic rather than general terms. Basing themselves upon the biblical verse which mandates helping others "in accordance with his needs" (Deuteronomy 15:8), the Rabbis maintained that one should help individuals to enjoy luxuries to which they have been accustomed, even if they are beyond the reach of ordinary individuals.

It must be emphasized that, as the Talmud observes,¹² performing acts of loving kindness constitutes *imitatio dei*. Hence, even if Ayn Rand and Adam Smith were correct and the pursuit of our own self-interest guided by the "invisible hand" would in the long run maximize social utility, we still would be required to perform acts of loving kindness.

Since the divine ethical attributes as enumerated in Exodus (24:6) are supposed to function as exemplars of the virtues to be cultivated by human beings,¹³ it is especially significant that the term "abundant" is employed only in connection with His loving kindness and not with respect to other ethical properties such as graciousness, compassion, patience, or truthfulness. This is another illustration of the primacy of *Chesed* (loving kindness) in the hierarchy of values of a theocentric ethics. For all its concern for justice, biblical morality treats justice not just as a formal property but views it as the proper distribution of love.¹⁴

Under the influence of Kabbalistic categories, many Jewish thinkers point to the linkage between *Chesed* and humility. In this view, it was out of God's concern for beings other than Himself that He created all creatures. In order to make space for the world, it was necessary for God to engage in *Tzintzum*

(self-contraction). It is this self-limitation that constitutes the very essence of humility. According to the Talmud, God's power is always associated with His humility.¹⁵

Some Kabbalistic thinkers such as Cordavaro treat humility as the very core of virtues. Without going so far, even a rationalist such as Maimonides attaches such importance to humility that he treats it as one of the few exceptions to the general rule that moral virtues are supposed to strike a balance between extremes. In the case of humility, Maimonides unequivocally advocates extremism rather than the "golden mean" or the "middle road."¹⁶ In his brief but seminal essay, "Majesty and Humility,"¹⁷ Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik contended that Jewish ethics reflects the dialectical tension involved in imitating both the majesty as well as the humility of the divine Creator.

The impact of religious norms upon ethical attitudes can be gauged when we compare the prevailing sexual ethics with that of the beginning of the Enlightenment, when, as MacIntyre has demonstrated,¹⁸ secular moralities basically reflected the prevailing moral standards of Christian Europe. Thus Kant, for all his rejection of theological ethics and his insistence upon autonomy, nonetheless found it possible to condemn masturbation (self-abuse), extra-marital sex, and homosexuality, and even advised women to choose death rather than submit to rape. But with the decline of religious influences and the growing secularization of the modern ethos, nowadays very few secular moralists would be prepared to endorse these recommendations. Incidentally, most Jewish religious authorities would permit women to endure rape if necessary to save their lives.

Another feature distinguishing biblical from secular moralities is the emphasis upon obligations arising from concrete historic situations rather than from general principles. When Nietzsche ridiculed the love-ideal as *Fernsten-Liebe*, he

was unfair to many religious traditions. Judaism, for example clearly mandates that when dispensing charity, members of our own families should be given priority and the Talmud operates with the principle that "the poor of one's own city take precedence over the poor of another city."¹⁹ Moreover, as we noted previously, the extent to which we are supposed to render assistance to the needy is not a function of "average" or minimal standards of living but is based upon the specific requirements of the particular individual concerned.

It has been argued that the biblical preoccupation with the requirements of humans has bred utter insensitivity and indifference to the welfare of all other organic and inorganic creatures. There is a widespread feeling that man's alienation from nature resulted from the biblical doctrine which granted human beings the right to exercise dominion over all other creatures. It has been argued that the exploitative and manipulative attitudes towards nature, which now imperil our very survival, are in large measure due to the radical dichotomy between man who was created in the image of God and the rest of nature which was completely desacralized.

To be sure, as some theologians have noted,²⁰ the Bible can hardly be accused of licensing irresponsible exploitation of nature, since the Torah's charge to humanity "to fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) does not stand in isolation but is counterbalanced by the observation of the second chapter of Genesis that Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden "to work it and to guard it" (2:15). The latter statement unequivocally affirms human responsibility for proper stewardship of the resources placed at our disposal.

Upon closer analysis it can be readily seen that the ontological as well as axiological primacy which the Bible assigns to humankind cannot be blamed for the ecological crisis. On the contrary, awareness of our responsibility to God for the preservation of the world acts as a much needed curb

on human arrogance which is frequently engendered by technological triumphs. There is a tendency to treat technology and science as ends in themselves to be pursued for their own sake, irrespective of the ecological and human cost. Judaism teaches that the world does not belong to man but to God — the Creator and, therefore, Owner and Master of the universe (Psalms 24:1). Interference with natural processes is regarded as legitimate only to the extent that it contributes to the fulfillment of divine purposes. Conservation of non-replenishable resources and protection of the environment are not merely matters of prudence but ethico-religious imperatives. Disregard of the limits to man's right to harness the forces of nature adversely affects human welfare. When scientists ignore the potential damage that may be caused by genetic research, their *hubris* may cause unimaginable suffering to future generations. Similar considerations dictate that we exercise caution and restraint with respect to any technological progress, lest it contribute to the pollution of the environment. Before embarking upon further expansion, we must carefully determine whether the benefits will outweigh the negative effects upon the ecology. We cannot make these decisions based upon the operation of the open market, since the laws of supply and demand are much more responsive to short-term selfish considerations than to the long-range requirements of humanity. As stewards of resources placed at our disposal by the Creator, we are duty-bound to expand our concern beyond instant gratification and economic benefits and assign much greater weight to the impact of our policies upon posterity.

While it is questionable whether secular ethics can sustain the notion of ethical obligations towards future generations, for Jewish ethics it is axiomatic that we bear responsibility for survival of the human species. In addition to the specific commandment be "fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28), the verse "He created it not a waste, He formed it to be inhabited"

(Isaiah 45:18) is interpreted in the Talmud as the source of the duty to procreate.²¹ The paramount importance of the commandment is also highlighted by Rabbi Eliezer's statement that "he who does not engage in the propagation of the human species is treated as if he had shed blood."²²

Since for Jewish ethics preservation of the environment is mandated to insure that the earth will be able to serve as a suitable habitat for humanity, it follows that population control for the purpose of reducing the strain on natural resources is unacceptable. Because of the sanctity of life, not only is it forbidden to take life, but procreation takes precedence over maintaining a high quality of life. Although the Talmud forbids procreation during a famine,²³ as long as minimal requirements for sustenance can be met, Jewish law demands that we lower our standard of living rather than limit population growth.

Although biblical morality primarily revolves around concern for people, it is also solicitous for the well-being of other creatures. Provision for the preservation of the various species of the world of nature is one of the salient features of biblical morality.²⁴ The first chapter of Genesis records the divine blessing bestowed upon the various *species* comprising the animal kingdom. In a moral system based upon *imitatio Dei*, we are mandated not only to insure the survival of the species but also to be solicitous for the well-being of all sentient creatures. Since "God is good to all and His Mercy is over all His creatures" (Psalms 145:9), we, too, must display compassion towards the animal world. This is why the Jewish tradition strictly prohibits inflicting unnecessary pain upon animals.

It must, however, be reiterated that Judaism assigns pre-eminent status to human beings, because they alone bear the image of God. Jewish morality rejects the extremism of the advocates of animal rights, who equate the suffering of animals with that of human beings. As long as all necessary steps are taken to reduce the suffering of animals as much as possible,

Jewish morality would unquestionably allow the performance of painful experiments on animals, whenever necessary for medical research. Concern for the sanctity of human life overrides solicitude for the well-being of other creatures.

Notes

1. See the chapter, "Abraham and the Kantians," in Emil Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 33-77.

2. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 40 ff.

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

4. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 33 (1958), pp. 13-14.

5. See my *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1994), p. 24.

6. P.T. Nedarim 9:4.

7. Sanhedrin 2:5.

8. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Yeme Zikaron*, trans. by Mosheh Kroneh (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Department of Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1986), pp. 9-11.

9. B.T. Bava Metzia 58b.

10. See my *Ethics of Responsibility*, pp. 40-66.

11. B.T. Ketuvot 67b.

12. B.T. Sotah 14a.

13. B.T. Shabat 133b; Sifrei Ekev, 49, Sifra Kedoshim, 1.

14. Compare Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

15. B.T. Megillah, 31a.

16. Hilkhot Deot, 2:6.

17. Joseph Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition*, 17, No. 2 (1978), pp. 25-37.

18. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

19. B.T. Bava Metzia, 71a.

20. Theodore Hiebert, "Ecology and the Bible," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Fall 1989, p. 7.

21. B.T. Gittin 41b and Tosafot *ad loc.* s.v., "Lo tohu bera'ah lashevet yetzarah." Especially significant is the statement of Tosafot, B.T. Pesachim 88b s.v., "Kofin et rabbb" which emphasizes that the obligation is so strong that, although as a general rule one does not recommend to an individual to commit a sin in order to save another from another more serious sin, an exception is made in the case, because the transgression of a prohibition is necessary to enable another individual to fulfill the commandment to procreate. See also B.T. Hagigah 2b, Tosafot s.v., "Lo tohu bera'ah."

22. B.T. Yevamot 63b.

23. B.T. Taanit 11a. See C.H. Medini, *Sedei Chemed*, vol. 5, p. 331.

24. It is noteworthy that according to Maimonides, God's special Providence extends only to human beings. The rest of creation is subject only to the exercise of the general Providence governing the species.

