

Part One

Seven threats to ethics

This section looks at ideas that destabilize us when we think about standards of choice and conduct. In various ways they seem to suggest that ethics is somehow impossible. They are important because they themselves can seep into the moral environment. When they do, they can change what we expect from each other and ourselves, usually for the worse. Under their influence, when we look at the big words – justice, equality, freedom, rights – we see only bids for power and clashes of power, or we see only hypocrisy, or we see only our own opinions, unworthy to be foisted onto others. Cynicism and self-consciousness paralyse us. In what follows we consider seven such threats.

1. The death of God

For many people, ethics is not only tied up with religion, but is completely settled by it. Such people do not need to think too much about ethics, because there is an authoritative code of instructions, a handbook of how to live. It is the word of Heaven, or the will of a Being greater than ourselves. The standards of living become known to us by revelation of this Being. Either we take ourselves to perceive the fountainhead directly, or more often we have the benefit of an intermediary – a priest, or a prophet, or a text, or a tradition sufficiently in touch with the divine will to be able to communicate it to us. Then we know what to do. Obedience to the

divine will is meritorious, and brings reward; disobedience is lethally punished. In the Christian version, obedience brings triumph over death, or everlasting life. Disobedience means eternal Hell.

In the 19th century, in the West, when traditional religious belief began to lose its grip, many thinkers felt that ethics went with it. It is not to the purpose here to assess whether such belief should have lost its grip. Our question is the implication for our standards of behaviour. Is it true that, as Dostoevsky said, 'If God is dead, everything is permitted'? It might seem to be true: without a lawgiver, how can there be a law?

Before thinking about this more directly, we might take a diversion through some of the shortcomings in traditional religious instruction. Anyone reading the Bible might be troubled by some of its precepts. The Old Testament God is partial to some people above others, and above all jealous of his own pre-eminence, a strange moral obsession. He seems to have no problem with a slave-owning society, believes that birth control is a capital crime (Genesis 38: 9-10), is keen on child abuse (Proverbs 22: 15, 23: 13-14, 29: 15), and, for good measure, approves of fool abuse (Proverbs 26: 3). Indeed, there is a letter going around the Internet, purporting to be written to 'Doctor Laura', a fundamentalist agony aunt:

Dear Dr Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from you, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18: 22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

a. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors.

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They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

b. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21: 7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

c. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15: 19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

d. Leviticus 25: 44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify?

e. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35: 2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

f. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 10: 10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

g. Leviticus 21: 20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again, for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Things are usually supposed to get better in the New Testament, with its admirable emphasis on love, forgiveness, and meekness. Yet the overall story of 'atonement' and 'redemption' is morally dubious, suggesting as it does that justice can be satisfied by the sacrifice of an innocent for the sins of the guilty – the doctrine of the scapegoat. Then the persona of Jesus in the Gospels has his fair share of moral quirks. He can be sectarian: 'Go not into the way of the Gentiles,

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and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 10: 5-6). In a similar vein, he refuses help to the non-Jewish woman from Canaan with the chilling racist remark, 'It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs' (Matt. 15: 26; Mark 7: 27). He wants us to be gentle, meek, and mild, but he himself is far from it: 'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?' (Matt. 23: 33). The episode of the Gadarene swine shows him to share the then-popular belief that mental illness is caused by possession by devils. It also shows that animal lives - also anybody else's property rights in pigs - have no value (Luke 8: 27-33). The events of the fig tree in Bethany (Mark 11: 12-21) would make any environmentalist's hair stand on end.

Finally there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. So we might wonder as well why he is not shown explicitly

countermanding some of the rough bits of the Old Testament. Exodus 22: 18, 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live', helped to burn alive tens or hundreds of thousands of women in Europe and America between around 1450 and 1780. It would have been helpful to suffering humanity, one might think, had a supremely good and caring and knowledgeable person, foreseeing this, revoked the injunction.

All in all, then, the Bible can be read as giving us a *carte blanche* for harsh attitudes to children, the mentally handicapped, animals, the environment, the divorced, unbelievers, people with various sexual habits, and elderly women. It encourages harsh attitudes to ourselves, as fallen creatures endlessly polluted by sin, and hatred of ourselves inevitably brings hatred of others.

The philosopher who mounted the most famous and sustained attack against the moral climate fostered by Christianity was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Here he is in full flow:

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Under Christianity the instincts of the subjugated and the oppressed come to the fore: it is only those who are at the bottom who seek their salvation in it. Here the prevailing pastime, the favourite remedy for boredom is the discussion of sin, self-criticism, the inquisition of conscience; here the emotion produced by power (called 'God') is pumped up (by prayer); here the highest good is regarded as unattainable, as a gift, as 'grace'. Here, too, open dealing is lacking; concealment and the darkened room are Christian. Here body is despised and hygiene is denounced as sensual; the church even ranges itself against cleanliness (- the first Christian order after the banishment of the Moors closed the public baths, of which there were 270 in Cordova alone). Christian, too, is a certain cruelty toward one's self and toward others; hatred of unbelievers; the will to persecute... And Christian is all hatred of the intellect, of pride, of courage, of freedom, of intellectual liberties; Christian is all hatred of the senses, of joy in the senses, of joy in general.

Obviously there have been, and will be, apologists who want to defend or explain away the embarrassing elements. Similarly, apologists for Hinduism defend or explain away its involvement with the caste system, and apologists for Islam defend or explain away its harsh penal code or its attitude to women and infidels. What is interesting, however, is that when we weigh up these attempts we are ourselves in the process of assessing moral standards. We are able to stand back from any text, however entrenched, far enough to ask whether it represents an admirable or acceptable morality, or whether we ought to accept some bits, but reject others. So again the question arises: where do these standards come from, if they have the authority to judge even our best religious traditions?

The classic challenge to the idea that ethics can have a religious foundation is provided by Plato (c. 429-347 BC), in the dialogue known as the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Socrates, who is on the point of being tried for impiety, encounters one Euthyphro, who

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sets himself up as knowing exactly what piety or justice is. Indeed, so sure is he, that he is on the point of prosecuting his own father for causing a death.

EUTH. Yes, I should say that what all the gods love is pious and holy, and the opposite which they all hate, impious.

SOC. Ought we to enquire into the truth of this, Euthyphro, or simply to accept the mere statement on our own authority and that of others? What do you say?

EUTH. We should enquire; and I believe that the statement will stand the test of enquiry.

SOC. We shall know better, my good friend, in a little while. The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.

Once he has posed this question, Socrates has no trouble coming down on one side of it:

SOC. And what do you say of piety, Euthyphro: is not piety, according to your definition, loved by all the gods?

EUTH. Yes.

SOC. Because it is pious or holy, or for some other reason?

EUTH. No, that is the reason.

SOC. It is loved because it is holy, not holy because it is loved?

EUTH. Yes.

SOC. And that which is dear to the gods is loved by them and is in a state to be loved of them because it is loved of them?

EUTH. Certainly.

SOC. Then that which is dear to the gods, Euthyphro, is not holy, nor is that which is holy loved of God, as you affirm; but they are two different things.

EUTH. How do you mean, Socrates?

SOC. I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved of God because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved.

The point is that God, or the gods, are not to be thought of as arbitrary. They have to be regarded as selecting the right things to allow and to forbid. They have to latch on to what is holy or just, exactly as we do. It is not given that they do this simply because they are powerful, or created everything, or have horrendous punishments and delicious rewards in their gifts. That doesn't make them good. Furthermore, to obey their commandments just because of their power would be servile and self-interested. Suppose, for instance, I am minded to do something bad, such as to betray someone's trust. It isn't good enough if I think: 'Well, let me see, the gains are such-and-such, but now I have to factor in the chance of God hitting me hard if I do it. On the other hand, God is forgiving and there is a good chance I can fob him off by confession, or by a deathbed repentance later . . .' These are not the thoughts of a good character. The good character is supposed to think: 'It would be a betrayal, so I won't do it.' That's the end of the story. To go in for a religious cost-benefit analysis is, in a phrase made famous by the contemporary moral philosopher Bernard Williams, to have 'one thought too many'.

The detour through an external god, then, seems worse than irrelevant. It seems to distort the very idea of a standard of conduct. As the moral philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1824) put it, it encourages us to act in accordance with a rule, but only because of fear of punishment or some other incentive; whereas what we really want is for people to act out of respect for a rule. This is what true virtue requires. (I discuss these ideas of Kant's more fully in Part Three.)

We might wonder whether only a vulgarized religion should be condemned so strongly. The question then becomes, what other kind is there? A more adequate conception of God should certainly

stop him from being a vindictive old man in the sky. Something more abstract, perhaps? But in that mystical direction lies a god who stands a long way away from human beings, and also from human good or bad. As the Greek Stoic Epicurus (341–271 BC) put it:

The blessed and immortal nature knows no trouble itself nor causes trouble to any other, so that it is never constrained by anger or favour. For all such things exist only in the weak.

A really blessed and immortal nature is simply too *grand* to be bothered by the doings of tiny human beings. It would be unfitting for it to be worked up over whether human beings eat shellfish, or have sex one way or another.

The alternative suggested by Plato's dialogue is that religion gives a mythical clothing and mythical authority to a morality that is just there to begin with. Myth, in this sense, is not to be despised. It gives us symbolism and examples that engage our imaginations. It is the depository for humanity's endless attempts to struggle with death, desire, happiness, and good and evil. When an exile reminisces, she will remember the songs and poems and folktales of the homeland rather than its laws or its constitution. If the songs no longer speak to her, she is on the way to forgetting. Similarly, we may fear that when religion no longer speaks to us, we may be on our way to forgetting some important part of history and human experience. This may be a moral change, for better or worse. In this analysis, religion is not the foundation of ethics, but its showcase or its symbolic expression.

In other words, we drape our own standards with the stories of divine origin as a way of asserting their authority. We do not *just* have a standard of conduct that forbids, say, murder, but we have mythological historical examples in which God expressed his displeasure at cases of murder. Unhappily myth and religion stand at the service of bad morals as well. We read back what we put in,

magnified and validated. We do not just fear science, or want to take other peoples' land, but we have examples in which God punishes the desire for knowledge, or commands us to occupy the territory. We have God's authority for dominating nature, or for regarding *them* – others different from ourselves – as inferior, or even criminal. In other words, we have the full depressing spectacle of people not only wanting to do something, but projecting upon their gods the commands making it a right or a duty to do it. Religion on this account is not the source of standards of behaviour, but a projection of them, made precisely in order to dress them up with an absolute authority. Religion serves to keep *us* apart from *them*, and no doubt it has other social and psychological functions as well. It can certainly be the means whereby unjust political authority keeps its subjects docile: the opium of the people, as Marx put it. The words of the hymn – God made the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate – help to keep the lower orders resigned to their fates.

If all this is right, then the death of God is far from being a threat to ethics. It is a necessary clearing of the ground, on the way to revealing ethics for what it really is. Perhaps there cannot be laws without a lawgiver. But Plato tells us that the ethical laws cannot be the arbitrary whims of personalized gods. Maybe instead we can make our own laws.

2. Relativism

So instead of anything with supernatural authority, perhaps we are faced simply with rules of our own making. Then the thought arises that the rules may be made in different ways by different people at different times. In which case, it seems to follow that there is no one truth. There are only the different truths of different communities. This is the idea of relativism. Relativism gets a very bad press from most moral philosophers. The 'freshman relativist' is a nightmare figure of introductory classes in ethics, rather like the village atheist (but what's so good about village theism?). Yet there is a very