

M3 – A God-Awful Mess of Muddled Moralities

Dear: A few chapters ago, I began with the statement: “I want to begin comparing different opinions about morality, starting with differences between what you have been taught *versus* what I wish you had been taught about ‘kindness’ and ‘love’.” From what I’ve already written, I hope you understand what I mean by encouraging you to practice “kindness with keenness” and “love within limits”. Also, I hope you agree that a better “moral absolute” than to obey is to use your brain as best you can (i.e., apply the scientific method in your daily life) to evaluate. In this chapter, I want to show you at least a little of the “God-Awful Mess of Muddled Moralities” resulting from data-less speculations about the existence of gods. In this and the next chapter, I’ll try to outline how ideas of morality can be developed (and were developed!) not theologically but biologically, i.e., *via* evolution.

RIDICULOUS CLAIMS THAT ANY GOD DECREED MORALITY

Ever since you were a baby, you’ve been indoctrinated with ridiculous claims that some giant Jabberwock in the sky (“God”) dictated morality. As one of maybe millions of such claims, consider the following, which I found in the article entitled “Will I Be Happy?” published in the May 1987 issue of the Mormon magazine *Ensign* and written by “Elder” James E. Faust (of “the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Mormon Church”):

The scriptures clearly and consistently condemn all sex relations outside of legal marriage as morally wrong. Why is this so? It is so because God said so.

No, Dear, as nearly as I can guarantee you anything (with more assurance than I can assure you that the Sun will rise tomorrow), I guarantee you no giant Jabberwock in the sky ever said any such thing. Yet, Dear, of course I do urge you to refrain from engaging in any sexual relations without using your brain as best you can; thereby, being as moral as you can. Otherwise, if you’re not careful, you can easily damage your health, hopes, and happiness – and no god will ever give you any indication that he or she gives a damn.

To give you another example, an example illustrating that it’s not just Mormons who claim that some god decreed some “absolute morality”, I’ll quote from the Spring 1996 issue of *Free Inquiry*, in which John M. Frame (a professor at probably a Christian college, the Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California) wrote:

The highest moral and ethical values are absolute. Anyone who thinks it sufficient to have merely relative standards... won't see a connection between God and morality... The conclusion stands: without God, anything is permitted.

What garbage! I wouldn't be surprised if Fame's real concern is that without God, there would be no clerics!

But yet, in a way, there is some sanity in the above statement by Frame: without God (which is the case!) anything IS permitted – at least by God! Yet, Dear, some acts that you're able to do aren't condoned by society, and some acts that you're able to do shouldn't be condoned by you – because they're dumb. That is, again, please always use your brain as best you can; be as moral as you can; don't engage in dumb activities; leave such for the world's clerics!

As still another example, one illustrating that ideas linking morality to God aren't restricted to just Mormonism and Christianity, I'll quote from the 1997 “Liss Lecture”, entitled “The Values Vacuum in American Life”. This lecture was given at the University of Notre Dame by Senator Joseph Lieberman (who is “an orthodox Jew”, was the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Vice Presidency in 1999, and ran for President in 2004).

Sadly, we have too often dislodged our morality from its religious foundations, and come to treat the Judeo-Christian ethic as just the work of another group of dinosaurs. Without this grounding, we have opened the door to the values vacuum. Without a connection to a higher law we have made it more and more difficult for people to answer the question why it is wrong to steal, to cheat, to lie, to settle conflicts with violence, or treat women abusively. For too many, the Ten Commandments have become little more than another “do and don't” list that people feel free to argue with, negotiate, or ignore outright. There are too few constants, too few fixed points, too little clarity about what is right and what is wrong.

Balderdash! Again, Dear, there's absolutely zero data supporting claims that some giant Jabberwock in the sky (“God”) was involved with specifying morality. In contrast, as I'll try to show you in the “excursion” Yx, there's an enormous amount of data supporting the hypothesis that various groups of ancient people had some ideas about morality and law, described these ideas in various ways (for example in books that have subsequently come to be called “holy”) and claimed that the ideas were conveyed to them by various gods. Further, as I'll also try to show you, an overwhelming body of data supports the hypothesis that “moral concepts” evolved biologically.

Thus, Dear, in reality and as near as anthropologists, archaeologists, behaviorists, biologists, and various other “ists” (including psychologists and sociologists) have been able to discern the origins of moral concepts, humans (and other social animals) stumbled upon concepts of morality by experience: although “might makes right” seems to work well enough for sharks and tigers, for weaker and more vulnerable species such as humans, survival of individuals and groups is enhanced if we help one another. Our ancestors learned by experience to be kind (with keenness), to love one another (within limits), because “what goes around, comes around.” How much of this learning is “hard wired” in our brains (even in our DNA) and how much is “software” (passed on by our culture), i.e., the proportion that’s “nature *versus* nurture”, is still uncertain, but as near as I can guarantee you anything, Dear, I guarantee that none of it is derived from any giant Jabberwock in the sky.

Further, it’s easy to imagine how the clerics of the world became involved in kidnapping moral concepts. Evolution led people to possess a “moral sense”. Unaware of evolution, primitive people couldn’t understand how they seemed to possess their concepts of morality, and so (most unfortunately!), they accepted clerical claims that their gods dictated “moral laws”. Thereby, it can be rather humorous to realize: the true “gods” of the clerics are actually the processes of evolution! But what’s NOT so funny is that, thereby, the clerics kidnapped what belongs to humanity – and they continue to demand a huge ransom for its return.

Concomitantly, the poor children in essentially every society were (and continue to be) indoctrinated (by their parents and the rest of their society) with the lies that their community’s customs, morals, and laws were dictated by their culture’s rendition of some giant Jabberwock in the sky. Thus, the poor Hindu children are indoctrinated with the lie that Manu received his laws from “**the divine, Self-existent... imperishable one...**”, the poor Jewish children are indoctrinated with the lie that Moses received his laws from Yahweh, the poor Christian children are indoctrinated with the lie that Jesus received his laws from God, the poor Muslim children are indoctrinated with the lie that Muhammad received his laws from Allah *via* the angel Gabriel, and my poor grandchildren were indoctrinated with the lie that Joseph Smith received his laws from God and Jesus *via* the angel Moroni. What an astounding pity; what astounding ignorance; what astounding evil!

As still another example of the claim that morality was dictated by some god (an example revealing some of the history of the claim), consider the following quotation. In it, Milton S. Terry, “Doctor of Divinity... Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis and theology”, attempted to defend against the obvious criticism: “Why did the giant Jabberwock in the sky give different commandments to different groups of people?” It’s from his 1907 book *Biblical Dogmatics*;¹ I’ve added a few notes in brackets.

Comparative Legislation of the Nations. We find no civilized people or nation without laws, and we must not forget the profound observation of [“Saint”] Paul that the Gentile nations are not without the law of God written in their hearts. Although without such laws and oracles of God as were the advantage and glory of the Hebrew people [who slaughtered the people peacefully living on their own land?!], they nevertheless possessed revelations from heaven of the wrath of God “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” We have recently recovered the code of Hammurabi, believed to be the Amraphel of *Gen. 14: 1*, the contemporary of Abraham. The laws are written on a huge stone about eight feet high, and are cast in the form of judgments conspicuously after the manner of the Sinaitic legislation of *Exod. 21–23*. Many of the laws are in substance identical with those of the Mosaic code, and Hammurabi himself is represented on the stone tablet as receiving them from Shamash, the God of the sun and the source of light. We have also the sacred laws or *Institutes of Manu*, whose origin eludes us amid the mists of Hindu antiquity and legend [probably from about 1500 BCE]; but they claim, nevertheless, to have been first given by the Creator of mankind to the ten great sages whom he made at the beginning and trained in sacred things. We are familiar also with the legends of Minos, the king and lawgiver of Crete, the son of Zeus, who received from “the Father of gods and men” the laws which he delivered to his people. He was wont to resort to a cave in Crete in which he obtained his laws by dictation from the deity and afterward reported them in different portions and at different times [similar to the claim, made more than 1,000 years later, by Muhammad]. His name also connects in Grecian story with Lycurgus, the Spartan lawgiver, who made a journey to Crete to confer with Minos, and who also extended his researches into Egypt and other countries. When he went to Delphi, to consult the oracle of Apollo, he was declared to be the beloved of the gods, even more of a god than a man, and it was promised him that his laws should be the best in the world. Similar legends are told of Solon, the famous Athenian lawgiver, whose statutes and ordinances were cast in metric form, like those of Manu, and were inspired by Apollo and the Muses. There, too, was Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, born, according to tradition, the day that Rome was founded. He was wont to wander in the sacred groves, had frequent interviews with the goddess Egeria [sure he did!] and received from her the revelations which enabled him to become the founder both of the religion and the legislation of his people.

¹ Dear: The link that previously was here now yields “Not Found”; to find this book, search on the internet using “Milton S. Terry” + “Biblical Dogmatics”.

There are those, perhaps, who fear that such comparisons tend to disparage Moses and his divine legation. We believe, on the contrary, that a faithful study of all that can be known of these men and nations and their laws will magnify and enhance the Hebrew legislation. Vainly will we seek to honor Moses by denying that God himself has also spoken to other prophets and other peoples. Moses himself would in spirit rebuke such narrow jealousy, and say rather: “Would to God that Jehovah would put his Spirit upon all the peoples and make them all prophets!” It is both interesting and noteworthy that Moses, who was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, stands forth in the biblical records as the great lawgiver of Israel, and that Hammurabi, the contemporary of Abraham, and so living more than five hundred years before Moses, proclaimed the same laws in great part as the gift of the God of light.

The great ethical commandments, like those of the decalogue [i.e., the Ten Commandment], did not originate with Moses or with Hammurabi; they were spoken from heaven to men and written in human hearts before the times of Abraham. [And the evidence supporting that speculation is what?!] Abraham was called out of the land of Hammurabi, and his migration extended into Egypt where the future Hebrew lawgiver was born. There is no evidence that the different codes of these lawgivers were dependent on each other. [Riiiiight – The similarities are just a coincidence.] The Hebrews did not copy their laws from the stones of Babylon, nor from the sacred scribes of Egypt. [Riiiiight – I suppose because a little birdie told you that, when Ezra and co-conspirators were sitting in Babylon, they promised their Persian masters (who commissioned the creation of the “Hebrew laws”, i.e., the first five books of the Old Testament, i.e., the ‘Pentateuch’ or the ‘Torah’), that they wouldn’t so much as peek at the world’s literature that was available to them and, instead, would use the original writings of Moses – and not just his Ten Commandments carved on a stone tablet (which had disappeared centuries earlier) but also his 603 (?) other laws (mostly prescribing a Persian-type priesthood), which no one had ever seen before but for which they just happened to have xerox copies!] Law, in its deeper, fuller, higher meaning, is essentially a revelation of God to man. [Gimme a break!] Moses, Confucius, Hammurabi, Manu, Minos, Lycurgus, Solon, and Numa represent so many different aspects of divine legation, and show the essential relations of law and religion. “One only is the lawgiver and judge, even he who is able to save and to destroy. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (*James 1:17; 4:12*). Law and religion alike, but each in its own way, disclose the spiritual relationship between God and man.

What nonsense! What garbage!! What a pile of data-less speculations!!! Please, Dear, do yourself a favor: never buy into some complicated explanation of anything when a simpler and obvious explanation is readily available – especially when not only are you required to pay good money to the clerics for adopting their more complicated explanation but also you’re required to let them dictate how you’re to live your life.

Further, Dear, as I started to show you in the previous chapter, many features of the Bible’s “commandments” (e.g., the famous first Ten) are just plain dumb. And actually, as I’ll show you in detail in **Qx**, many of the other 603 (?) commandments in the Bible contain astounding evil. For example, consider the following two commandments [to which I’ve added some italics and some notes in brackets].

Exodus 21, 7: When a man sells his daughter into slavery [!], she shall not go free as a male slave may [i.e., even worse treatment for female than for male slaves]. If her master has not had intercourse with her [it was permitted?!] and she does not please him, he shall let her be ransomed [!]... If he assigns her to his son [!]...

Exodus 21, 20: When a man strikes his slave or his slave-girl with a stick [Isn’t it amazing that the creator of the universe busies HIMself with details about how to beat your slave?!] and the slave dies on the spot, he [presumably meaning the master] must be punished. [So, don’t beat your slave quite to instantaneous death!] But he shall not be punished if the slave survives for one day or two. [So, just beat your slave unconscious, and don’t worry if he or she dies on the third day], because... the slave is worth money to his master [and “Lord knows”, the few coins of silver you paid for your slave is more important than the life you beat out of your slave]...

Sorry, Dear, but anybody is either insane or a liar who tells you that the above “Commandments” of Moses were communicated to him from some giant Jabberwock in the sky who allegedly created the universe. Once any person or any book attempts to convey details to me about how to sell my daughter into slavery or how to “appropriately” beat my slave to death, then as far as I’m concerned, the communication ends.

Meanwhile, many modern-day politicians (such as the two president Bushs, vice-president Gore, would-be-president Lieberman...) and their henchmen-clerics of the world would probably tell you to ignore commandments such as the two quoted immediately above – that they were appropriate for another time (but they never were!) – and instead, you’re now to obey only “the good commandments”, such as the first Ten. But, Dear, don’t buy it. First, don’t buy it, because it makes no sense: if some giant Jabberwock in the sky specified “absolute rules”, then they’re “absolute rules” forever, not to be modified by later clerics and politicians. Second and more important, don’t buy it, because there’s absolutely zero evidence supporting the contention that any god ever provided any humans with any laws (or anything at all). And third, please don’t buy anything, anytime, anywhere unless it makes sense to you: use your brain as best you can, i.e., be moral!

Of course, politicians and clerics who are a little more “wily in their ways” will urge followers to read other parts of their “holy books”. Thus (as I’ll show you in detail in **Yx**), centuries after the Persians converted Israelites to Zoroastrianism, major modifications to “the commandments” appear in later parts of the Bible’s Old Testament. For example, at *Micah 6, 8*, we’re given an entirely different “moral code”, totally replacing the entire Ten Commandments (that Lieberman and politicians of his ilk, as well as all Christian and Mormon clerics in this country, so ardently still advocate):

God has told you what is good; and what is it that the Lord asks of you? Only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely...

But this new “commandment” also leaves major questions unanswered:

- What’s meant by “**act justly**”? Is it referring to “natural justice” (i.e., the principle of causality), “personal justice” (to get what you generally deserve), or “social justice” (meaning opinion)?
- What’s meant by “**loyalty**”? Loyalty to the clerics, to the scientific method, or to what?
- What’s meant by “**walk wisely**”? What’s wisdom? Is it wise to do what the damn clerics tell you to do, or to use your brain as best you can?

Further, Dear, more damning of the Bible than anything I can write (although I’ll try my best!) – and more damning to all the damn religions that follow the Bible (such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism) – are the following assessments, from the Bible. These assessments were allegedly made by God HIMSELF, as reported in *Jeremiah 8, 8*; *Jeremiah 14, 14*; & *Jeremiah 23, 16 & 32* [to which I’ve added the notes and the italics]:

“How can you say, ‘We are wise, we have the law of the Lord’ when *scribes with their lying pens have falsified it?* The wise are put to shame, they are dismayed and have lost their wits... *Prophets and priests are frauds, every one of them... The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I [God] have not sent them; I have given them no charge; I have not spoken to them. The prophets offer them [the people] false visions, worthless augury, and their own deluding fancies... Do not listen to what the prophets say [such as Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Joseph Smith, et al.] who buoy you up with false hopes; the vision they report springs from their own imagination, it is not from the mouth of the Lord... It was not I who sent them or commissioned them... This is the very word of the Lord.*”

Therefore, Dear, questions abound. Should we follow some “holy book” or is it wiser to use our brains as best we can? Is using our brains as best we

can the “wisest way” to walk, and talk, and act? Is “the correct way” as given in *Ecclesiastics 32, 23* and *Ecclesiastics 37, 13*:

Whatever you are doing, rely on yourself, for this, too, is a way of keeping the commandments... [T]rust your own judgment, for it is your most reliable counselor.

But if so, then why, in the last words in the Old Testament that are attributed to God (*Malachi 4, 4*), is the poor “believer” totally faked out:

“Remember the law of Moses... the rules and precepts which I bade him deliver...”

Do I hear a certain grandchild complain to God:

“But, but, but... you just finished telling us that all we had to do was act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely, to rely on ourselves, to trust our own judgment! Just exactly what are we supposed to do? Do what we’re told or use our brains as best we can?”

I trust you know, Dear, how I’d answer that question.

And thus, Dear, maybe you’re beginning to understand why I call it a “god-awful mess of muddled moralities”. Unfortunately, however, there’s much more. As just a single additional illustration (for now), let me show you another asinine statement, similar to the ones by Faust, Frame, and Lieberman that I showed you near the start of this chapter. I recently “bumped into” the following statement while wandering around the internet. It was written in 1997 by a Canadian judge who was described (on the same internet page) as “the greatest and most colorful judge this century has known” – although, previously, I had never heard of him (nor subsequently). In *The Influence of Religion on Law*, this “Rt. Hon.” Lord Denning wrote:

Without religion, there can be no morality, there can be no law.

I’m not sure how to describe my reaction to such a stupid statement – or even if I should – but I’ll try.

Dear: have you ever had a “head rush”? That’s what I’ve always called the dizzy feeling that I can get, e.g., sometimes when I stand up too quickly. I guess I first experienced it when I was a kid after I did headstands; later, when I was a teenager, I experienced it many times after doing handstands. That is, after walking on my hands for maybe 10 minutes (I used to be quite good at it!), if I stood up too quickly, I’d get dizzy – with a “head rush”.

Well, maybe “head rush” is a half-descent description of what I get when I read such idiocies as Frame’s *without God anything is permitted* or Denning’s *without religion... there can be no morality, there can be no law*. I feel my consciousness just slipping away. Somehow it’s as if my mind rejects all oxygen, saying: “No, No, I can’t accept such absurdities, I quit, I...” The notion that some giant Jabberwock in the sky will judge us after we die is dumb enough. When to such nonsense is added the idiocy that this same imaginary monster also defines morality and legality, the result is a crime against humanity. People who advocate such ideas shouldn’t be senators or judges or professors; they should be closely watched inmates of institutions for the criminally insane!

ALTERNATIVE IDEAS ABOUT ETHICS

But anyway, trying to get some blood back in my brain, let me try to make some additional points. My first point deals with the possibility that, rather than rely on “holy books” to define “moral rules”, you may want to consider alternatives (or additions). Among these, an obvious alternative is to study what various philosophers have written about the branch of philosophy usually called ‘Ethics’ (i.e., the philosophy of morality).

Below and in later chapters, I’ll show you a little about the topic of ethics, but at the outset, I advise you to be careful: during the past ~2500 years, an absolutely staggering amount has been written by philosophers about morality; my guess is that you can find somewhere between 1,000 to 10,000 books on the subject. And though I certainly don’t know for sure, my first guess is that at least 80% of it is pure bunk. Yet, keep in mind what the philosopher David Hume wrote: “*Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous.*”

As an introduction to why I describe so much of what’s been written on ethics as “bunk” (without yet showing you some examples), first consider this. If you’ll read surveys of philosophical ideas, you’ll find many proposed “groupings” of different philosophers. My own “categorization” is to try to identify philosophers as belonging to one of three groups: 1) dreamers (or “idealists”), 2) data analysts (“materialists” or “rationalists”), and 3) scientists (“realists”, “naturalists”, “pragmatists”, “empiricists”, or “humanists”). My crude conclusions are these:

- From the dreamers (including Plato, “Saint” Augustine, “Saint” Thomas Aquinas, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Whitehead, and many more), you can expect to find that their “moral teachings” are ~90% pure bunk; in my view, they were (and still are) mostly just a bunch of “smooth-talking” dreamers seeking to rationalize the religions in which their mothers indoctrinated them, and as David Hume also wrote: “Reason is... the slave of... passions.”
- From the data analysts (including Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Marx, and many more), you can expect to find ~50% bunk, because they relied almost exclusively on reasoned analysis of data, failing to test predictions of their hypotheses.
- That leaves only relatively few scientists, but if you will study the writing of some of them (such as Epicurus, Lucretius, David Hume, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Karl Popper, modern evolutionary behavioral scientists and evolutionary biologists such as E.O. Wilson, and other “Humanists”), then as I’ll try to show you, I think you’ll find good support for doing what I hope you’d do anyway: use your brain as best you can!

Nonetheless, a major contribution of most philosophers who considered ethics was to see that no god could ever have been involved in anything to do with defining any ‘morality’ –contrary claims by all clerics of the world notwithstanding. As I’ll show you later, the idea that God couldn’t have specified morality seems to have been first described by “the dreamer”, Plato. About 2,000 years later, the idea was restated by the German mathematician-philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716, who independently from Newton invented calculus), whose god was similar to Spinoza’s (i.e., everything). Leibniz wrote:

In saying, therefore, that things are not good according to any standard of goodness, but simply by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing it, all the love of God and all his glory; for why praise him for what he has done, if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the contrary.

The same idea is described in more detail in the tremendous summary of the history of moral philosophy (i.e., the history of ethics) contained in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* under the section title “Problems of divine origin of morality”.² The unidentified author of this article states the following.

A modern theist [i.e., Dear, someone who “believes” in God] might say that since God is good, he could not possibly approve of torturing children nor disapprove of

² Dear: If your computer didn’t come with a copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, you might be able to find a copy of this summary of ethics at <http://cyberspacei.com/jesusi/inlight/philosophy/ethics/Ethics.htm>.

helping neighbors. In saying this, however, the theist would have tacitly admitted that there is a standard of goodness that is independent of God. Without an independent standard, it would be pointless to say that God is good; this could only mean that God is approved of by God. It seems therefore [as Plato concluded] that, even for those who believe in the existence of God, it is impossible to give a satisfactory account of the origin of morality in terms of a divine creation. We need a different account.

There are other possible connections between religion and morality. It has been said that even if good and evil exist independently of God or the gods, only divine revelation can reliably inform us about good and evil. An obvious problem with this view is that those who receive divine revelations, or who consider themselves qualified to interpret them, do not always agree on what is good and what is evil. Without an accepted criterion for the authenticity of a revelation or an interpretation, we are no better off, so far as reaching moral agreement is concerned, than we would be if we were to decide on good and evil ourselves with no assistance from religion.

Traditionally, a more important link between religion and ethics was that religious teachings were thought to provide a reason for doing what is right. In its crudest form, the reason was that those who obey the moral law will be rewarded by an eternity of bliss while everyone else roasts in hell. In more sophisticated versions, the motivation provided by religion was less blatantly self-seeking and more of an inspirational kind. Whether in its crude or sophisticated version, or something in between, religion does provide an answer to one of the great questions of ethics: Why should I do what is right? As will be seen in the course of this article, however, the answer provided by religion is by no means the only answer. It will be considered after the alternatives have been examined.

The number of “alternatives” and the complexities of many of them are almost “mind boggling”. To gain some appreciation for them, I encourage you to read the highly condensed (~100 page!) article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* already referenced and quoted. For what follows, my goal is to try to give you at least a glimpse of the two main types of alternatives – and as you might suspect, I’ll be promoting the alternative that emphasizes the scientific method.

The two main types of alternatives are well described in an article by the biologist Edward O. Wilson.³ These alternatives can be called “top-down” *versus* “bottom-up”, but are usually called “transcendentalism” *versus* “empiricism”, respectively. In the “top-down” or “transcendental”

³ You can find Wilson’s article, entitled “The Biological Basis of Morality”, at many places on the internet (e.g., at <http://webpages.charter.net/dwhitlo2/wilson1.html>); it’s from the *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 281, No. 4, pp. 53-70, April 1998, and apparently is a summary of his book entitled *Consilience*.

alternative, it's assumed that moral principles "transcend" (or "are above") human experiences, but can be known by non-theists *via* reasoning or known by theists *via* revelations from god (or however). In the "bottom-up" or empirical alternative, it's assumed (based on a substantial quantity of reliable data!) that moral principles have evolved (and continue to evolve). Notice that, in either alternative, gods needn't be evoked – but of course, all clerics are vehemently opposed to that idea!

Supporters of the top-down, transcendental alternative have been promoting it for who-knows-how-long, but for at least the past 5,000 years. The version that the "transcendence" is in "the realm of the gods" has been the mantra of all organized religions. The version that suggests this "transcendence" can be conceptualized *via* reason has a long history, also, at least back to Plato (with his idealistic "Theory of Forms", which I sketched in **Ix11** and will revisit in a later chapter). Below, I'll comment a little on one of the most famous such "transcendental schemes", concocted by Kant.

Kant's Claim of "Transcendent" Morality

After the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776, a champion of empiricism) had demolished, especially, the "proof" of God's existence by the "argument from design" (and described ideas about immortal souls as "a most unreasonable fancy", judged the morality of all religions as "bad", and admitted that "when he heard [that] a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal"),⁴ and after he challenged future philosophers with what is now called "Hume's Law" (which is, basically, that an "ought" statement can't be deduced logically from statements of facts; i.e., from "is" premisses), the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) introduced still-another silly "proof" of God's existence (and seems to be the last important philosopher who tried). Kant then turned to the "transcendent" origin of morality, and in his enormous and complicated writings, he addressed the question that he described as follows [to which I've added the notes in brackets]:⁵

This, then, is a question which at least calls for closer examination, and does not allow of any off-hand answer: whether there is any knowledge that is... independent

⁴ These quotations were taken from *A History of Western Philosophy* by W.T. Jones (Harcourt, Brace and Co., New York, 1952, p. 764), in turn taken from *Private Papers of James Boswell*, ed. by G. Scott and F.A. Pottle, vol. xii (1931), pp. 237-32.

⁵ All material from Kant is also taken from Jones' book *A History of Western Philosophy*.

of experience and even of all impressions of the senses [i.e., “transcendent” knowledge, which Hume maintained didn’t exist]. Such knowledge [following the ideas of Leibniz] is entitled [i.e., “called”] *a priori* [i.e., “from the first” or “before the fact”] and distinguished from the *empirical*, which has its sources *a posteriori* [i.e., “from subsequent” or “after the fact”], that is, in experience [emphasized by Hume].

Kant convinced himself that humans do have *a priori* knowledge (i.e., not based on experience), e.g., about space and time. Subsequently, however, science has demonstrated that our *a priori* knowledge about space and time is not only empirical but also, according to Einstein, has limited applicability. And let me add that Einstein dismissed Kant’s ideas with the single sentence: “Kant’s... denial of the objectivity of space can, however, hardly be taken seriously.”⁶

In the case of *a priori* (before-the-fact) knowledge of God, Kant (to his credit) first discredited all prior “proofs” of God’s existence – including Descartes’ “proof”, with the comment: “merely so much labor and effort lost...” To his discredit, however, Kant then proceeded to produce his own “proofs” not only of the existence of at least a “watered down” God (one who “distributes happiness in accordance with righteousness”) but also of the existence of “immortal souls”. Subsequent philosophers have demonstrated the errors in both his “proofs” (his deductions contain contradictory premisses), but maybe Kant’s “proofs” did serve a useful purpose: maybe no philosopher will ever again make the mistake of assuming that deductions can produce more information than is contained in their premisses – an important topic that I’ll get to in Chapter R.

Yet, maybe I should show you at least a little of Kant’s reasoning – in part to show you how laborious his writings are (even worse than a certain grandfather’s!), and in turn, to prepare you for my abbreviating what he wrote. (“Would that you’d do the same for yours!” Child: behave!)

⁶ This sentence by Einstein appears as a footnote in his essay “Relativity and the Problem of Space”, which is included as Appendix V in his book *Relativity* (translated by Robert Lawson, Crown Publishers, Inc., NY, 1961, p. 137). Einstein adds the rhetorical question (p. 142): “Why is it necessary to drag down from the Olympian fields of Plato the fundamental ideas of thought in natural science, and to attempt to reveal their earthly lineage?” To which Einstein responds: “Answer: In order to free these ideas from the taboo attached to them, and thus to achieve greater freedom in the formation of ideas or concepts. It is to the immortal credit of D. Hume and E. Mach that they, above all others, introduced this critical conception. And let me add, Dear, if anyone ever offers you 6 Platons, 12 Kants, and 18 Whiteheads for one Einstein (or even for one Hume!), then refuse!”

There is a great difference between something being given to my reason as *an object absolutely*, or merely as *an object in the idea*. In the former case our concepts are employed to determine the object; in the latter case, there is in fact only a schema for which no object, not even a hypothetical one, is directly given, and which only enables us to represent to ourselves other objects in an indirect manner, namely, in their systematic unity, by means of their relation to this idea. Thus I say that the concept of a highest intelligence [God] is a mere idea, that is to say, its objective reality is not to be taken as consisting in its referring directly to an object... It is only a schema constructed in accordance with the conditions of the greatest possible unity of reason – the schema of the concept of a thing in general, which serves only to secure the greatest possible systematic unity in the empirical employment of our reason...

We declare, for instance, that the things of the world must be viewed *as if* they received their existence from a highest intelligence [God]. The idea is thus really only a heuristic [i.e., a mental invention] not an ostensive concept. It does not show us how an object is constituted, but how, under its guidance, we should *seek* to determine the constitution and connection of the objects of experience. If, then, it can be shown that the three transcendental ideas (the psychological, the cosmological, and the theological), although they do not directly relate to, or determine, any object corresponding to them, nonetheless, as rules of the empirical employment of reason, lead us to systematic unity, under the presupposition of such *an object in the idea*; and that they thus contribute to the extension of empirical knowledge, without ever being in a position to run counter to it, we may conclude that it is a necessary maxim of reason to proceed always in accordance with such idea...

The part of this argument by Kant with which it's easy to agree is that the idea of God is just an idea. What Kant failed to justify, however, is not only that the "God idea" is a useful idea but also that it's so useful that "**it is a necessary maxim of reason to proceed always in accordance with such idea.**"

The "God idea" is obviously useful for clerics – who would rather promote it than work for a living! – but as I'll try to show you in later chapters, data demonstrate that it has been (and continues to be) one of the most horrible ideas ever to blight humanity: not only because the God idea deludes people into thinking that they have knowledge, when all they have is speculation, and not only because the resulting ignorance of the people leads them to reject new knowledge, but also because the resulting "turf battles" during the past 5,000-and-more years between and among various schools of clerics and their followers have resulted in absolutely horrible brutalities, murders, and wars – which continue today, particularly those initiated by "religious fundamentalists" (of whatever crazy, data-less persuasion).

Inadequacies in Kant's "Moral Imperatives"

With Kant's conclusion that God was just an idea, he apparently found it necessary to "invent" a new source of human values (just as Aristotle did, because his God was totally occupied contemplating his own navel – or whatever). That is, whereas Kant couldn't demonstrate to his satisfaction anything "revealed" about any "revealed" religion, he couldn't accept the prescription for morality given in any "holy book"; otherwise, he'd making the unjustified assumption that God was more than just an idea.

Unfortunately, though, Kant (in contrast to Aristotle) made the blunder of assuming that science could say nothing about values (perhaps a forgivable mistake, given the state of science more than 200 years ago), which then led him to a conclusion from which he could never recover: that the basis of human values could only be reason. Thereby, Kant apparently didn't realize how astoundingly easy it is to be led astray by reason (another important topic that I'll get to in Chapter **R**).

In addition, Kant attempted to violate "Hume's Law" (that an "ought" statement can't be deduced logically from any "is" premisses), apparently not realizing both that Hume's Law seems to be valid and that science is far more powerful than deductive logic. Thus, as I tried to show you in Chapter **Ib2**, logic (itself) is a part of science, but as I suggested in Chapter **Ib1** and will show you more in Chapters **R** and **S**, logic is only a small part (maybe 10%) of the scientific method (for it includes observations, analyses, hypothesis formulation, predictions, tests of the predictions, analyses of the results, and so on, without end). Consequently, science certainly can develop useful statements about morality (what we "ought" to do) – provided predictions of resulting hypotheses continue to be validated!

But all of that was just a prelude to the main point that I wanted to make about Kant's ideas, namely, his ideas about values – or what he called "moral imperatives". Furthermore, whereas maybe you deduced from the above quotations from Kant that he was verbose, then rather than show you in detail what he wrote about values, let me apply three sets of filters to his verbosity.

One filter is Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, which did a great service to humanity by reducing all of Kant's writings to the following three (!) quotations:

Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law with me. *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781.

Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we make ourselves happy, but how we make ourselves worthy of happiness. *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788.

There is... only a single categorical imperative and it is this: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. *The Metaphysic of Morals*, 1797.

The second filter that I'll apply to Kant's verbosity is E. O. Wilson's excellent essay (already referenced), which I'll quote immediately below, and to which I've added a few notes in brackets.

Immanuel Kant... addressed moral reasoning very much as a theologian. Human beings, he argued, are independent moral agents with a wholly free will, capable of obeying or breaking moral law: "There is in man a power of self-determination, independent of any coercion through sensuous impulses." Our minds are subject to [an *a priori*] "categorical imperative", Kant said, of what our actions *ought to be*.

The imperative is a good in itself alone, apart from all other considerations, and it can be recognized by this rule: "Act only on that maxim you wish will become a universal law." Most important, and transcendental [i.e., "transcending nature"] *ought* has no place in nature. Nature, Kant said, is a system of cause and effect, whereas [in contrast] moral choice is a matter of free will, absent cause and effect. In making moral choices, in rising above mere instinct, human beings transcend the realm of nature and enter a realm of freedom that belongs exclusively to them as rational creatures.

My response to Kant is: Balderdash! Poppycock! Jabberwocky! Dear: I know from substantial experience that it's difficult to understand concepts that are buried in "twenty-dollar words", but please, never buy into anything that you don't understand. If it's too much work to try to figure out what somebody is trying to say, if somebody can't say it in "two-bit words", then please be advised: it's better, by far, to reject some idea in its entirety than accept anything you don't understand.

But in the case of the above junk by Kant, it's relatively easy to see his mistakes – and therefore relatively easy to reject the assessment that he was "the greatest of secular philosophers". In reality, he was just another armchair philosopher, similar to Marx, who would have done much more for humanity if they had been up to their knees in real mud, shoveling their horse manure with real pitchforks.

Yet, such *ad hominem* comments aside, consider Kant's idea that "Nature... is a system of cause and effect... In making moral choices... human beings transcend the realm of nature..." First, Dear, nature isn't just "a system of cause and effect". Nature is whatever it is! We try to develop testable models of how nature "operates", and if predictions of these models seem to be invariably correct, then we provisionally accept that we understand some "principle" of nature – with the provision being that we'll continue to accept any principle only so long as it continues to provide validated predictions. One principle that seems to govern almost always is causality (subject to some restrictions found in quantum mechanics and in chaos theory, which I'll get to in later chapters – and maybe subject to some restrictions that you'll discover, and for which you'd probably receive the Nobel prize). Other principles that seem to be followed (and which I'll describe in more detail in later chapters) are conservation of momentum, conservation of mass-energy, entropy increase, and so on.

So, Dear, first: don't accept anyone telling you what nature is (e.g., "Nature... is a system of cause and effect"). At most, if you agree that sufficient data support some proposition, then accept that the corresponding principle seems to be applicable in nature. Second, Dear, look at Kant's claim: "In making moral choices... human beings transcend the realm of nature." Hello? Humans aren't natural?! What are we, supernatural? Gods?! A human isn't "a system of cause and effect"? We do things without cause? We produce effects without causing them? Do tell! How? What? Like miracles maybe?! That's crazy! Which then leads Kant to his crazy conclusion: "*ought has no place in nature*". Gimme a break!

The other day in the desert, a jackrabbit went roaring by me. I asked him why he was running so fast. He answered:

"That damn coyote came outa nowhere – that's all it took to know that I otta get outa here!"

"But", said I, "Kant said 'ought has no place in nature'."

"Well, then," yelled the rabbit as he roared on by, "Kant otta get his head examined!"

Bye and bye, the coyote came by. I asked him, too, what he was up to. He told me he was trying to catch a rabbit and asked me if I had seen it. Caught in a moral quandary (whether to be kind, like a dolphin, or to violate the

giant Jabberwock’s commandment not to bear false witness), I tried a certain grandchild’s trick of deflecting his question with a question of my own:

“Do you think you ought to eat that poor little rabbit?” I asked the coyote. “Haven’t you heard Kant cant that *ought* transcends nature?”

“If *ought* transcends nature,” coughed the coyote, “then Kant can’t cant about it can he?” – whereupon he took off, like a rabbit, after the rabbit, doing what he thought he ought.

My point, Dear, is that another of nature’s principles (besides the principle of causality, in which Kant attempted to circumscribe science), a principle that’s passed innumerable tests “with flying colors”, is that the goal of life is to live, i.e., what all life has decided is that it “ought” to try to continue to live. Even crazy Muslim fundamentalists, who claim they love death (and proceed to bomb buses and fly hijacked airlines into buildings) do so with such a fierce desire for life that they “think” their actions will lead them to “eternal life”. Which then demonstrates not only Kant’s error in assuming that “ought transcends nature” but also that some religious people are totally bonkers. Yet, in spite of Kant’s errors, I readily admit that his “categorical imperative” is quite good. He wrote:

The imperative is a good in itself alone, apart from all other considerations, and it can be recognized by this rule: “Act only on that maxim you wish will become a universal law.”

In simpler language, it says: before you do something, ask yourself if you think it would be okay for everyone to do it.

But there are problems with this “categorical imperative”, as is well described by whoever wrote the already referenced, tremendous article on Ethics in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which I’ll now quote (and use as my third and final filter of Kant’s verbosity). The author states the following, to which I’ve added some italics and a few notes in brackets.

Kant’s ethics is based on his distinction between *hypothetical* and *categorical* imperatives. He called any action based on desires a *hypothetical* imperative, meaning by this that it is a command of reason that applies only if we desire the goal. For example, “Be honest, so that people will think well of you!” is an imperative that applies only if you want people to think well of you. A similarly hypothetical analysis can be given of the imperatives suggested by, say, Shaftesbury’s ethics [described in the article]: “Help those in distress, if you sympathize with their sufferings!” In contrast to such approaches to ethics, Kant said that the commands of

morality must be *categorical* imperatives: they must apply to all rational beings, regardless of their wants and feelings.

To most philosophers this poses an insuperable problem: a moral law that applied to all rational beings, irrespective of their personal wants and desires, could have no specific goals or aims, because all such aims would have to be based on someone's wants or desires. It took Kant's peculiar genius [That's a great way to say that! Kant's 'genius' certainly was 'peculiar'!] to seize upon precisely this implication, which to others would have refuted his claims, and to use it to derive the nature of the moral law. Because nothing else but reason is left to determine the content of the moral law [which isn't correct – as I'm sure the author of this article would agree – because (as I'll get to later) there is a biological basis for "moral law", but if the statement were correct, it certainly would refute the clerics' claim that some giant Jabberwock in the sky dictates "moral law"!], [therefore] the only form this law can take is the universal principle of reason. Thus the supreme formal principle of Kant's ethics is: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

Kant still faced two major problems. First, he had to explain how we can be moved by reason alone to act in accordance with this supreme moral law; and, second, he had to show that this principle is able to provide practical guidance in our choices. If we were to couple *Hume's theory that reason is always the slave of the passions* with Kant's denial of moral worth to all actions motivated by desires, the outcome would be that no actions can have moral worth. To avoid such moral skepticism, Kant maintained that reason alone can lead to action. Unfortunately he was unable to say much in defense of this claim.

Of course, the mere fact that we otherwise face so unpalatable a conclusion is in itself a powerful incentive to believe that somehow a categorical imperative must be possible, but this is not convincing to anyone not already wedded to Kant's view of moral worth. At one point Kant appeared to be taking a different line. He wrote that the moral law inevitably produces in us a feeling of reverence or awe. If he meant to say that this feeling then becomes the motivation for obedience, however, he was conceding *Hume's point that reason alone is powerless to bring about action*. It would also be difficult to accept that anything, even the moral law, can necessarily produce a certain kind of feeling in all rational beings regardless of their psychological constitution. Thus, this approach does not succeed in clarifying Kant's position or rendering it plausible.

Kant gave closer attention to the problem of how his supreme formal principle of morality can provide guidance in concrete situations. One of his examples is as follows. Suppose that I plan to get some money by promising to pay it back, although I have no intention of keeping my promise. The maxim of such an action might be "Make false promises when it suits you to do so." Could such a maxim be a universal law? Of course not. If promises were so easily broken, no one would rely on them,

and the practice of promising would cease. For this reason, I know that the moral law does not allow me to carry out my plan.

Not all situations are so easily decided. Another of Kant's examples deals with aiding those in distress. I see someone in distress, whom I could easily help, but I prefer not to do so. Can I will as a universal law the maxim that a person should refuse assistance to those in distress? Unlike the case of promising, there is no strict inconsistency in this maxim being a universal law. Kant, however, says that I cannot will it to be such, because I may someday be in distress myself, and I would then want assistance from others. This type of example is less convincing than the previous one. If I value self-sufficiency so highly that I would rather remain in distress than escape from it through the intervention of another, Kant's principle no longer tells me that I have a duty to assist those in distress. *In effect, Kant's supreme principle of practical reason can only tell us what to do in those special cases in which turning the maxim of our action into a universal law yields a contradiction.* Outside this limited range, the moral law that was to apply to all rational beings regardless of their wants and desires cannot guide us except by appealing to our desires.

Kant does offer alternative formulations of the categorical imperative, and one of these has been seen as providing more substantial guidance than the formulation so far considered. This formulation is: *"So act that you treat humanity in your own person and in the person of everyone else always at the same time as an end and never merely as means."* The connection between this formulation and the first one is not entirely clear, but the idea seems to be that when I choose for myself I treat myself as an end. If, therefore, in accordance with the principle of universal law, I must choose so that all could choose similarly, I must respect everyone else as an end.

Even if this is valid, the application of the principle raises further questions. What is it to treat someone merely as a means?... [Dear: I'll return to this point later.]

One thing that can be said confidently is that Kant was firmly opposed to the Utilitarian principle of judging every action by its consequences. His ethics is a *deontology* [viz., "the study of the nature of duty and obligation"]. In other words, the rightness of an action depends on whether it accords with a rule irrespective of its consequences. In one essay Kant went so far as to say that it would be wrong to tell a lie even to a would-be murderer who came to your door seeking to kill an innocent person hidden in your house. This kind of situation illustrates how difficult it is to remain a strict deontologist when principles may clash. Apparently Kant believed that his principle of universal law required that one never tell lies, but it could also be argued that his principle of treating everyone as an end would necessitate doing everything possible to save the life of an innocent person. Another possibility would be to formulate the maxim of the action with sufficient precision to define the circumstances under which it would be permissible to tell lies – e.g., we could all agree to a universal law that permitted lies to people intending to commit murder. Kant did not explore such solutions.

Kant's fundamental error was to rely only on reason – which (as I've already hinted and will show you in detail in **R**) is extremely dangerous. Instead, Dear, always test your reasoning (better: test predictions from your reasoning) against data. Worse still (but for understandable reasons, given when he lived) Kant relied on Aristotle's "either-or" type of reasoning, which is inconsistent with data. For example, although Kant's principle (or "categorical imperative") "**Act only on that maxim you wish will become a universal law**" is a fairly good "rule of thumb", yet fingers can easily get in the way when you try to apply it: you may decide that everyone should..., but I'm convinced that everyone should...! Similarly, although Kant's rule of thumb "**never treat others as means to some end**" seems fairly good, yet again "the devil is in the details". For example, although some people might praise a certain grandfather for trying to show his grandchildren some ideas about morality, treating his grandchildren, not as means, but as ends; yet, others might conclude that he's using his grandchildren as a means to promote the survival (even the welfare) of his own genetic code – consistent with a certain grandmother's claim that there are no "ends" only "means".

MORAL VALUES DEPEND ON OBJECTIVES

Thereby, Dear, maybe you see why I entitled this chapter "The God-Awful Mess of Muddled Moralities". Let me put it this way. In my opinion, the entire concept of "good and evil" is nonsense – without reference to objectives. That's why, it seems to me, the Philosophy of Morality (Ethics) has been in such a mess for the past ~5,000 years. The Hindus, Egyptians, Jews, Persians, most Greeks (the sophists, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle...), all Christians, Muslims, and advocates of other sundry sects such as Mormonism, philosophers such as Kant, Kierkegaard, Whitehead, etc. have all been "whistlin' in the wind". Ethics, morality, good and evil (and all shades in between) are meaningless before adequately addressing the fundamental question: **What's the objective?!**

Dear: what you 'ought' to do is determined by your goals, and the ultimate goal for all life is to continue to live! When the first DNA molecule began to replicate, it "determined" that it "ought" to maintain its chemical environment – and so ultimately encased itself in a cellular membrane. And thus life has continued, with 'ought' defined by life itself – that it 'ought' to continue! And so it is with us: 'ought' is defined by our goals – intelligently, by our dual-survival goals (ourselves and our extended

families), as I'll try to show you in later chapters. But the huge complication is that, in our daily lives, our dual survival goals "particularize" as a thousand-and-one immediate goals: if your immediate goal is to get a good grade on your next math exam, then you "otta" study; if your goal is to have friends, then you "otta" be nicer to people; and so on. And if your goal is to understand what's 'moral' then you "otta" understand that "**moral value**", as with any value, has meaning only relative to some objective!

Thereby and without the need for either religion or philosophy, all humans have developed generally similar concepts of morality – because all humans pursue their dual survival goals (of themselves and the group with which they're associated). Consequently, if we have some *a priori* knowledge of morality, it's because some of our understanding of how to survive (individually and collectively) is now "hard wired" in our brains (or even, in our DNA molecules) – and in the brains of dolphins, i.e., it's "nature not nurture". Yet, some of our opinions about morality are obviously absorbed in our emotions from our culture, i.e., "nurture not nature". All of which again leads to my recommendation to you, Dear, to **always use your brain as best you can** – including tapping into your intuition, instincts, and emotions, evaluating all relevant, reliable data, and questioning what you have been taught (especially questioning the idiocy and hypocrisy promoted by all clerics).

Again, Dear, please evaluate what's going on. Managing to keep a straight face in front of their hypocrisy (which must be quite a feat), while telling people "**thou shalt not bear false witness**", the fake prophets, con-artist clerics, and profiteering politicians tell us that they "bear witness" to a giant Jabberwock in the sky commanding us to obey HIS commandments: "Thou shalt not kill", "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's [whatever]", "Be kind to one another", and so on. But, Dear, skeptic that I'm glad you are, I hope you ask yourself: "Really?"

For example, in the case of the Bible's "thou shalt not kill" and "be kind to one another", is it really the case that God, HIMself, came down to Earth and told us (as well as all other social animals) that we shouldn't kill members of our own species? Do any data support such a conclusion? Do data support the speculation that God sent his "only begotten son" to Earth to tell dolphins to be kind to one another, monkeys to feel empathy for each other, apes to help one another, and ducks not to commit adultery?

As a certain grandchild would say: “Gimme a break!” Some giant Jabberwock in the sky came down to give us some obvious suggestions about how to promote the survival of our genetic code? Surely a more reasonable interpretation of the data is that people (and other species such as dolphins!) adopt “moral principles” that experience has shown provide survival advantages. That is, Dear, if a “root source” of morality is sought, “ought” will be found not from some god but in our genes!

Dear, there’s absolutely zero reliable data supporting speculations that morality is derived from some “supernatural scheme” (as the clerics maintain) or in some other way “transcends” nature (as Plato and Kant maintained). No god proclaimed any “commandments”. Moral principles (such as “use your brain as best you can” and “what goes around comes around”) are basic concepts that we (and dolphins!) have found to be useful in the pursuit of our dual survival goals (of ourselves and our extended families). Thus, as I concluded from a “limit argument” of an earlier chapter:

the basis for any shared moral values, judicial principles, customs, and even laws should be agreed-upon rules for interactions among people; supernaturalists notwithstanding, nothing “supernatural” is needed to define moral values, judicial principles, or laws.

In his 1991 book *Lila – An Inquiry into Morals*, Robert Pirsig (the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) put it this way:

Morality is not a simple set of rules. It’s a very complex struggle of conflicting patterns of values. This conflict is the residue of evolution. As new patterns evolve they come into conflict with old ones. Each stage of evolution creates in its wake a wash of problems.

THE BIOLOGICAL BASES OF MORALITY

Dear, I hope you see that morality has nothing whatsoever to do with any speculation about how the universe was formed. Understanding morality should proceed (and is now proceeding) as a part of science (e.g., as a part of “the behavioral sciences”, such as evolutionary biology, ecology, economics, psychology, sociology, etc).

In contrast to what should have occurred, what happened is that organized religions of the world tore morality from its roots (grown through evolution)

and planted it in temples, synagogues, churches, mosques, etc. There, clerics munched on its fruits, not just on the fruits of “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” but also on the fruits of the labors of the world’s producers. The clerics claimed (and continue to claim) that knowledge of good and evil is the province of their gods, that they speak for the gods (and charge a “modest” speaker’s fee!), and the result has been a god-awful mess of muddled morality – and immorality.

The alternative, which I’ve been trying to emphasize (and will continue to try to emphasize), is the following. Whenever you confront the question of “What’s the moral thing to do?”, then, Dear, first I hope you’ll see that the decision is entirely up to you. Second, Dear, when you start digging into details to try to choose “the moral course of action”, I hope you’ll demonstrate all the personal morality of which anyone is capable: use your brain as best you can.

Such an alternative to the “top-down” or transcendental view of morality (i.e., the “bottom-up” or empirical view) also has a long and complicated history, at least from the time of Aristotle. Aristotle’s rejection of Plato’s “Theory of Forms” is what led Aristotle to his famous line: “Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth.” To give you a brief review of some of the history of this empirical view, I’ll again quote McCabe’s tremendous ~80-year-old book *The Story of Religious Controversy*.⁷

By this time all Greece was speculating – and there has never been any country like it for speculation – on moral law, and there were three main opinions. There was the Platonic theory; and Christian writers followed it later, saying that the ‘ideas’ were in the mind of God. Then there was the theory of the Stoics and some others. Although the Stoics talked politely about the gods, it is fairly clear that they did not believe in them. For them, moral law was just “the Law of Nature”. It existed. It was part of the scheme of things. A man was at discord with nature if he did not observe it.

The third theory was really our modern theory... Probably the great early scientist and evolutionist Democritus first discovered the truth. At all events, there were soon several schools in Greece maintaining that the object and origin of moral law was simply concern for human welfare. Some, whom we call Hedonists, said that the test of a moral act was whether it promoted happiness (the Greek of which is *hedone*). Some made happiness consist mainly in pleasure. Others, like Epicurus, the last and sanest of the Greeks (although his views are nearly always misrepresented and slandered), said that moral acts were those which promoted a passionless tranquility

⁷ Available at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/joseph_mccabe/religious_controversy/index.shtml or maybe it’s still at <http://www.holysmoke.org/an/tan07.htm>.

of life. Epicurus built on science, not philosophy, and tried to bring the world back to science.

There are two main views. One is the old idea that moral law is a sort of eternal and august reality, either in 'nature' or in God or in a mystic world which nobody can understand. It is 'intued' (seen directly) by the mind, and so these theories are known as Intuitionism. Against this a number of British thinkers (Hume, Bentham, Spencer, Mill, etc.) held that moral law is a human law regulating the welfare or 'utility' of social life. These are called Utilitarians; and we shall now see how science stepped in amongst the philosophers, scattering them right and left, and proving that the Utilitarians were right.

Unquestionably there was in the mind of practically all men an imperious sense of moral law. Men might defy it, but they did not deny it. And it did not come from revelation, since it was just as strong among civilized people beyond the range of Christianity, or before the Christian Era. It was a great reality, and it had to be explained.

But until the idea of evolution arose again, there was no possibility of explaining it, at least fully. Some of the Greeks and the Deists could see how closely this law was related to the social interests of man. Justice, truthfulness, and self-control are obviously desirable social qualities. But there were parts of the law, like sexual purity, that seemed to have no social significance; and it was not at all clear how even the law of justice, however useful it was, came into existence. So the law was taken as a great fact, existing in the scheme of things apart from man, and 'intued' by him through a special faculty which he called his 'conscience'.

The entire situation was changed when the truth of evolution was proved. Some writers are fond of saying that evolution describes processes, but does not explain anything. You have here a good illustration of the foolishness of that gibe at science.

Evolution said that the human race had been evolving, from the savage to the civilized level, during at least some hundreds of thousands of years. This meant two things, as far as the great problem of the origin of moral law was concerned. It meant, first, that the law may have arisen amongst, or had been formulated by, human beings themselves long before the historic civilizations arose. This would explain how the ancient civilizations simply found themselves in possession of the moral code, and could therefore not suppose that it was drawn up by men. If they themselves had not formulated it, who had?

We quite understand their difficulty. But the difficulty would have disappeared ages ago if the theory of evolution, sketched by the first Greek scientists, had been retained and developed. Then the Greeks might have learned how all their religious and moral and political ideas had been gradually forged in the workshop of experience, by a long line of developing ancestors. Evolution lit up the whole problem, and nearly every other problem.

Secondly, evolution said that the lower races of men in the world today represent the various phases of evolution through which the race has passed. Take a simple illustration from the roses on a bush. The rose in full bloom or decay certainly passed through the stages of bud and half-opened flower which you see on the bush. So the race passed at one time through the successive stages represented by the Veddah, the Australian, the Bantu, the Polynesian, and so on. Circumstances drove one branch of the race onward and kept other branches behind, at various stages of development.

If this is true, we ought to find every stage in the evolution of moral ideas and conscience in the innumerable ‘savage’ tribes scattered over the earth. Here again, you see, the philosophers were at a great disadvantage. They had not the slightest reason to suppose that savages could throw any light on the difficult problem they were examining. Not even the wisest of them could be expected to look in that direction. In fact, very little was known about savage tribes, still less about their ideas... So we do not smile at the older philosophers and their “theories of morality”. We may be pardoned, however, for smiling at some of their modern successors, who repeat the old mysticism as if science had not altered the whole situation.

To see more of what McCabe outlined in the above quotation (so well, ~80 years ago!), you might want to start by looking at the article by Larry Arnhart, who is professor of Political science at Northern Illinois University and author of the 1998 book *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature*.⁸ For example, Arnhart gives more credit to Aristotle:

Aristotle was a biologist, and his view of human beings as political and rational animals manifests his biological understanding of human nature. His ethical writings incorporate ideas drawn from his of biological writings. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle compares human beings with other social animals, particularly in explaining the biological basis for parent-child bonding and other forms of affiliation or friendship (*philia*). In the *Politics*, he explains the political nature of human beings by comparing them with other political animals such as the social insects... Some of the scholars studying Aristotle have come to recognize the importance of Aristotle’s biology for all of his philosophic writing. Some of this new scholarship now suggests that for Aristotle, as Stephen Salkever has said, “ethics and politics are in a way biological sciences’.”

More than 2100 years after Aristotle, Darwin reinvigorated the idea with his suggesting in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*:

⁸ Arnhart’s article is available at several sites on the internet, including <http://www.science-spirit.org> and <http://dialogos3.tripod.com/dialintr.htm>.

The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable – namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well marked social instincts (the parental and filial affections being here included) would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well (or nearly as well) developed, as in man.

During the subsequent ~100 years, Darwin’s “proposition” was supported by additional data (as was suggested in the quotation, above, from McCabe’s 1929 book), so much so that Harvard evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson (whose recent article I quoted earlier in this chapter) could write in his 1975 book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*:

Scientists and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and ‘biologized’.

During the subsequent ~30 years, so much progress has been made “biologizing” ethics that, now, only the uninformed (such as clerics) still cling to the silliness that morality ‘transcends’ nature (either as some “categorical imperative” or as “revelations” from some giant Jabberwock in the sky). Further, even though one still encounters valid comments such as “objective science can only describe, never prescribe”,⁹ yet “objective science” has the best chance of any known, human endeavor to “describe” the most intelligent way for humans to pursue their objectives – from which can be “described” how behaviors “ought” to be “prescribed”!

If you would like to inform yourself about more progress understanding the biological or evolutionary basis of morality, Dear, I encourage you to read the 2004 book by Michael Shermer entitled *The Science of Good and Evil – Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (Holt & Co., New York). Notice that the title of Shermer’s book is not “The Philosophy of Good and Evil...”, or “The Religious View of Good and Evil...”, but “The Science of Good and Evil...”. That is, with the past few centuries of scientific progress, understanding of, not only “the physical world”, but also “the moral world” has thoroughly discredited the various mythical models of morality promoted by religions.

⁹ From a recent article by the very competent Manfred Weidhom entitled “The Dissident: Politics and Culture from New Perspectives”, available at http://www.the-dissident.com/Islamic_Democracy.shtml.

To try to stimulate you to read Shermer's book, let me give you a few illustrations from it. For example, under the section title "An Evolved Moral Society", Shermer summarizes as follows (p. 20):

Humans evolved as a social primate species with an ascending hierarchy of needs from self-survival of the individual (basic biological needs), to the extension of the individual through the family (the selfish gene), to a sense of bonding with the extended family (driven by kin selection of helping those most related to us), to the reciprocal altruism of the community (direct and obvious payback for good behavior), to indirect altruism of society (doing good without direct payback), to species altruism and bioaltruism (as awareness of our membership of the species and biosphere continues to develop). The most basic human needs and moral feelings are largely under biological control, whereas the more social and cultural human needs and moral feelings are largely under cultural control.

From the perspective of evolutionary biology, one can not only see how morality (and also religions) evolved but also gain a glimpse of the future. Thus, Shermer writes (p. 64):

The codification of moral principles out of the psychology of moral traits evolved as a form of social control to ensure the survival of individuals within groups and the survival of human groups themselves. Religion was the first social institution to canonize moral principles, but morality need not be the exclusive domain of religion. Religions succeeded in identifying the human universal moral and immoral thoughts and behaviors more appropriate for accentuating amity and attenuating enmity. But we can improve on the ethical systems developed thousands of years ago by people of agricultural societies whose moral codes are surely open to changes. As we transition from kin and reciprocal altruism to species altruism and bioaltruism, and as religion continues to give ground to science, we need a new ethic for an Age of Science, a new morality that not only incorporates the findings of science, but applies scientific thinking and the methods of science to tackling moral problems and resolving moral dilemmas. We have done well thus far, but we can do better.

Of course the clerics will object. Shermer states (p. 155):

An argument could be made that since America is still primarily a Judeo-Christian society, even nonbelievers have imbibed these values, regardless of their personal upbringing – that is, atheists are good because of all the good theists around them. Maybe, but as I argue in part I [of the book], religion codified these moral principles for sound reasons that have nothing to do with "divine inspiration". These moral sentiments and principles came first, evolving over the course of a hundred thousand years of humans living in a Paleolithic environment. Religion came second, co-opting morality and codifying it to its own end, all of which happened in just the past couple of thousand years... What would happen if we jettisoned religion altogether?

Would society collapse into immoral chaos? No, it would not. And we have a two-centuries-long experiment in the separation of church and state to prove it...

And then on p. 235 he adds:

Not only is there no evidence that a lack of religiosity leads to less moral behavior, a number of studies actually support the opposite conclusion [He shows data on helping the poor, committing crimes, cheating on college tests, divorces,...] Finally, David Wulff's comprehensive survey of correlational studies on the psychology of religion revealed that there is a consistent positive correlation between "religious affiliation, church attendance, doctrinal orthodoxy, rated importance of religion, and so on" with "ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, dogmatism, social distance, rigidly, intolerance of ambiguity, and specific forms of prejudice, especially against Jews and Blacks."

He concludes his book (after quoting Ingersoll's "torch statement", which I quoted in an earlier chapter) with the paragraph:

The bright torch of science illuminates the darkness of humanity to reveal a human nature that is both moral and immoral, a product of our evolutionary heritage and our cultural history. We can construct a provisional ethical system that is neither dogmatically absolute nor irrationally relative, a more universal and tolerant morality that enhances the probability of the survival and well-being of all members of the species, and perhaps eventually of all species and even the biosphere, the only home we have ever known or will know until science leads us off the planet, out of the solar system, and to the stars...

Yet, in spite of my criticisms of all clerics, most politicians, and many philosophers for their ideas about morality, I'd praise many other philosophers. One whom I'll be returning to many times is Socrates, whose amazing statement is: "There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance."

You may immediately object that his statement is meaningless without reference to an objective, but then, maybe you see what Socrates managed to do: even if he didn't appreciate that any value (including any moral value) has meaning only relative to some objective, he was able to encapsulate what humans had learned from tens of thousands of years of experience (pursuing their dual survival goals): "There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance". And maybe you'd object that it would have been better if he had written something similar to: *There is one good, willingness to learn, and one evil, refusal*. But in any event, maybe you at least see why I'm so infuriated with clerical ignorance (= refusal to learn = evil) and why

I've hinted (and will describe in more detail in later chapters) that a very worthwhile goal for humanity is to try to help intelligence (good) expand.

Further, Dear, if you then want to dig into the matter more deeply, to determine “moral rules” (especially those that you think would be valuable for you to uphold), then be careful! With respect to what the clerics of the world peddle, I doubt if you'd want to throw the whole “kit and caboodle” out, ignoring all their recommendations (even if they were dictated by a bunch of dinosaurs!), because if you'll consider the matter objectively (which I find hard to do!), you'll find that some of their rules were quite reasonable (for many of these rules represent the collective wisdom of thousands of years of living). But on the other hand, I don't remember seeing anything in any “holy book” about the morality of getting some exercise, whereas...