

Tuesday, March 29, 2005

Christianity vs. Objective Morality

In virtually mindless repetition of their mentors, presuppositionalists very often claim that their god is the necessary precondition for what they call "objective morality." Since the prescriptive notions presented throughout the bible in no way comport with what I understand by the term objective morality, it's stubbornly unclear what presuppositionalists might mean by this. For one, the bible nowhere affirms that its moral precepts are objective in nature. So if the morality given in the bible is at all objective in nature, its authors did not identify it as such. Also, since the bible nowhere even uses the terms "morality" or "moral," Christians need to clarify what they mean by this term, especially since they routinely posture themselves as authorities on matters relating to morality. They should also be careful to point out which teachings of the bible are supposed to be taken as moral teachings, and which are merely fluff and poetry. While they're at it, they should explain why man needs morality, if in fact they think he does, for I don't find this explained in the bible either.

So there are two issues here that Christians need to settle before their claim to objective morality can even be entertained, let alone seriously considered. They must define what they mean by (1) morality, and (2) objective. If by "objective morality" they simply mean a set of behavioral "rules" issued from outside oneself (as one presuppositionalist put it to me in private correspondence, "God's law is objective, in the sense of being an outside standard, for human beings"), then essentially any dictator's whims would qualify as "objective" moral directives since, for his subjects, they come from without. We can, and should do better than this in defining our terms. And since, in the words of presuppositionalist [Paul Manata](#), "the Bible was not meant to be a philosophic lexicon," it is conceded even by Christianity's defenders that we will have to look outside the bible for these answers.

One of the fatalistic assumptions vital to the religious mindset is that morality, to qualify as such, must consist of obedience to someone's commands. This assumption is unquestionable to the religious mentality, and it is essential to the behavioral codes we read in the bible. Commands are expressions of the commander's desires and are not a guarantee that their content is objective in nature. Commands are suitable for dogs and robots, but they are unsuited for man, for he does not live in a vacuum. On the contrary, he must factor in the inputs of his needs and environment in order to determine the actions he should take. This is a process which requires man to rely on his own reasoning skills, working within the context of his own knowledge, regardless of who disapproves. Obedience to commands is unfit to serve man's needs as a biological organism, and unnecessary for man's life because he has a rational faculty which guides his choices and actions.

Why Christianity's claim to objective morality is incoherent:

In one of my previous blogs, [John Frame vs. the Human Thinker](#), we saw the famed apologist eager to challenge non-believers "to show how an autonomous self can come to moral conclusions in a godless universe." Also in that post, I showed why the presuppositionalist's notion of "autonomy" essentially means thinking with one's own mind. So Frame's challenge is for non-believers to show how their morality can be objective in nature when they do not ascribe to the view that a god which issues moral commandments exists.

Unlike Christians, non-believers can and do have solid and veritable answers to such challenges. First we need to define our terms. Then we must ask the question if man needs morality, and if so, why? After these basic questions are addressed, we will begin to see the nature of a genuinely rational morality whose basis is objective in nature.

Some brief definitions:

By 'morality' I mean a code of values which guides man's choices and actions.

By 'objective' I mean based on relevant facts, not on imagination or wishing.

By 'value' I mean those things which meet man's life needs and which he must act in order to gain and/or keep.

Now the question: Does man need morality? And if so, why?

Since man faces a fundamental alternative - life vs. death, and since his life is not guaranteed, he must act in order to live. And since he does not automatically know what kind of action to take, he needs a means of knowledge and a code of values to guide his choices and actions. It is by means of reason that man identifies the values that his life requires, and it is by reason that man identifies the proper action required to acquire and/or keep those values. Morality is the application of reason to the problem of living life: without it,

man will die. So if man wants to live, he needs a code of values which guides his choices and actions, which means: he needs morality. It should already be apparent that the purpose of morality, then, is not to please a deity, but to enable man to live, for it is man's life that is morality's only concern.

The idea of a code of values implies a hierarchy of relationships: some values hold primacy over others. And this implies the need to identify a standard. In a rational worldview, the standard of man's values is his life, i.e., his nature as a biological organism. As a biological organism, man faces a fundamental alternative: to exist or to cease existing. What a man values is premised on whether or not he chooses to live. If he chooses to live, he has no choice about the fact that his life is conditional and that it needs certain values which make it possible for him to exist. Thus his most basic values are those things which keep him alive in the first place, namely food, water, shelter, etc. But he also needs a reason to live, which motivates his choice to live. For the rational man, that reason is to live and enjoy life, for life is an end in itself. In this regard, pleasure is a profound value in that it gives him incentive to live. These values are objective because their nature is determined the relevant facts of man's nature as a biological being. In rational philosophy, values are life-centric: they pertain to what man needs, not to what some invisible magic being wants.

The Christian view of morality, however, gives us a completely different picture. Its primary source is the bible, which nowhere defines the concepts 'moral', 'value' or 'objective'. These terms are completely alien to the language we read in the bible, and yet Christians tell us that the bible is the authority on these matters. Its morality (to the extent that it can be called that) is comprised of a number of commandments (how many are supposed to be followed is not clear) which allegedly find their source in a supernatural deity who supposedly revealed its wishes to a select few individuals (apparently by means of little voices resounding in their heads) who in turn proceeded to write them down and attribute them to this supernatural source. Their purpose is not to be understood, for Proverbs 3:5 tells the believer "lean not unto your understanding." Rather, they are to be obeyed on pain of eternal punishment, even if they are not understood. The content of these commandments is not determined by man's nature as a biological organism; his need for values is taken completely for granted. What is of highest importance in this view are the desires of the deity, not man's needs. According to Christianity, man's purpose is not to live and enjoy his life, but to sacrifice it in selfless service to the deity's imagined ends. So already a stark contrast between an objective morality and the Christian view of morality should be very clear: objective morality teaches men how to identify and acquire the values they need, while Christian morality teaches them how to sacrifice those values.

Objectivity is "the recognition of the fact that reality exists independent of any perceiver's consciousness." (Ayn Rand, "Who Is the Final Authority in Ethics?") It is the principle which teaches us how to distinguish between fact and fantasy, between the way things actually are and the way anyone might ideally like them to be. Subjectivism is any view that results from a failure to make these crucial distinctions. In essence, subjectivism is any view which elevates desires and wishes (in whatever form) over the facts of reality (as if reality conformed to someone's will). We can know that the Christian view of morality is ultimately subjective because it is grounded in whim rather than fact. Christianity couldn't be more explicit in its endorsement of metaphysical subjectivism, the view that the world finds its source in a form of consciousness. According to the primacy of consciousness view of reality, what is, is only what the ruling consciousness wants it to be or allows it to be. On this view the subject holds metaphysical primacy over its objects, which is the essence of subjectivism. Christian morality is simply an expression of its subjective foundations: things are good because god says they are, not because they have a logical relationship to objective facts, and men must concern themselves with what their god wants, not with what their lives need. Certain actions are wrong or evil, not because they work against man's life, but because they go against what the ruling consciousness desires. Of course, reality does not bend to anyone's desires and wishes, as if they held some kind of causal force over reality. But Christians ignore basic facts like this when they affirm their religious views, essentially building their worldview on the notion that wishing makes it so, while lacking the courage to identify it as such.

by Dawson Bethrick

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