Common Ground Part 5: Ethics

This post continues my series on considering the questions pertaining to the issue of "common ground" which occupies the focus of many a presuppositionalist. In the present installment, I provide my own position in regard to the question of what believers and non-believers share in terms of ethical matters.

The original questions that were posed were:

1. What do believers and unbelievers, if they share anything at all, have in common?

2. How is this common ground to be evaluated?

3. What is shared/unshared metaphysically?

4. What is shared/unshared epistemologically?

5. **What is shared/unshared ethically?**

6. In what ways can believers and unbelievers cooperate with one another intellectually/socially/politically?

7. What consequences do those matters that divide Christian and non-Christian have for how Christians are to do philosophy?

The present installment will focus on the fifth question. The questions before it have already been addressed here: first, second, third, fourth. I will devote individual blogs to each of the following blogs in due course.

Question 5: What do believers and unbelievers share in regard to ethics?

Answer: I have already written several times about the *differences* between Christian morality and objective morality. See for instance these blogs:

Christianity vs. Objective Morality

Do I Borrow My Morality from the Christian Worldview?

Rational Morality vs. Presuppositional Apologetics

Calvindude's Defense of Christianity's Moral Bankruptcy
Hitler vs. Mother Theresa: Antithesis or Symbiosis?

It is not difficult to identify the *differences* between believers and non-believers when it comes to ethics or morality. But the present question asks what believers and non-believers have in common when it comes to the issue of morality. Believers and non-believers both share the same meta-ethical basis, namely their biological nature, even if they are not aware of the implications which this fact has for value theory, and even if their expressed viewpoints reject its fundamental relevance. A comment by Porter on this issue succinctly puts the pervading attitude to rest while pointing to its remedy:

> Philosophers are unmoved by biological values. They want moral values and they want emotions. Moral values are justified, or not, by their relation to the valuer's genuine self esteem, a distinctively human biological need (thanks Nathan). And emotions are justified (or not) if they correspond to biological values, (or not, like the desire for a cigarette). Each deserves its own explanation. But in both cases, we can see already, the is-ought gap is a philosophers' myth.

As I mentioned in my response to the third question, both believers and unbelievers are biological organisms, and as I mentioned in my response to the second question, biological organisms face a fundamental alternative: to live or die. This fact alone isolates the metaphysical basis necessary for the concept 'value', since the concept 'value' refers to those things which a biological organism requires in order to exist. If human beings did not face the fundamental alternative of life vs. death, they would have no need for values, and therefore no need for value

theory. Rocks do not face the fundamental alternative that living organisms do; rocks are not living things and they cannot die. They are not biological. Is it just a coincidence that they also do not need and pursue values? Something that does not face the fundamental alternative of life vs. death (e.g., an immortal deity which is, by definition, immortal and indestructible) has no need for values and no metaphysical basis for valuing one thing over anything else. For such things, utter indifference is the only condition open to it in this regard.

Even believers, at least to some extent, value those things that make their lives possible and worth living, such as food, shelter, technology, know-how, comfort, pleasure, etc., and they regularly act for the purpose of achieving or keeping them. If they are inconsistent in gearing their actions toward the values they need in order to live, they very well may die, just as any of us might if we are inconsistent in governing the relationship between our actions and the values we need. As I point out in The Trappings of Mental Disfigurement:

> If you consistently practice a philosophy built on the primacy of consciousness, it will lead you to the same end as Jesus: willingly embracing a premature death.

If an individual wants to die prematurely, his ideal model will be the Jesus of the gospels.

Of course, the believer's value of things that are determined by his biological needs is most easily seen on the concrete level, but it is also evident in the case of so-called intangibles, such as self-esteem, a sense of fulfillment and happiness, which give an individual's life incentive for living. The believer's problem is that he cannot enjoy his values without guilt, for values are *selfish* in nature, and the believer's worldview condemns selfishness as an abomination against the Christian god.

In the realm of ethics, a fundamental difference between believers and at least some non-believers (such as myself), is the role they give to *reason* in identifying values and in guiding their choices and actions. The believer's worldview undercuts value theory because it undercuts reason and the human mind. For believers who endeavor to live their religion *consistently*, ethical choices are essentially made *for* them, independent of any inputs from reality and firsthand judgments made on the basis of reason (for reason is condemned as antithetical to theistic commitment because of its "autonomy"). Like pre-programmed robots, believers are expected to *obey* commandments, and to the extent that they do obey these commandments, they do so, *not because their independent rational judgment tells them that they are wise commandments* (for this would smack of autonomous reasoning, which trumps faith in god), but because those commandments are believed to have come from a supernatural being (which can condemn a man for any infraction that it can construe).

Consequently, believers as such do not abhor murder because it is a violation of a man's basic right to exist for his own sake (for the religious texts never affirm such a right, nor do they teach men that they have such a right or why), but because an invisible magic being told them not to do it. It may even be said that they do not abhor murder at all, for they are nowhere commanded to abhor it. After all, life as such for man is not promoted as the standard of value in the first place by such worldviews.

This only implies that if said invisible magic being says they should murder, they would not be against it. It should be noted that the story of Abraham and Isaac in Gen. 22, which is held up as an example of model behavior in Hebrews 11, makes it clear that god's instruction to Abraham was that he sacrifice his son, but Abraham is nowhere portrayed as *protesting* this directive, or even *questioning* it. The believer can point to the 10 commandments and say that is why he opposes murder, even though the commandment against murder never instructs the believer to *oppose* murder; rather, it simply tells him *not to commit it*. The bible doesn't even say that murder is "wrong."

So a believer could be all *for* murder, and yet, *if he does not commit murder*, he is still compliant with "the law." But for the believer to condemn murder as morally wrong, he must borrow from a value-based ethical theory, which means he must borrow from a non-Christian worldview which provides such a theory. For such condemnation is in the end inconsistent with the Christian worldview. If one values human life, he will have the moral basis upon which to formulate a social theory that is consistent with this, and thus recognize man's right to exist for his own sake. But it's pretty hard to affirm that man has any rights while endorsing a worldview that praises a supernatural being which, according to the mythology, wiped out almost all of the human race in a fit of rage.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: Common Ground