

Rational Morality vs. Presuppositional Apologetics

It has become fashionable among contemporary Christian apologists to assert the charge that atheists "borrow" their morality from the Christian worldview. And while some atheists may in fact have done this (notable examples such as Marx, Lenin and Stalin come to mind), I have [already weighed in on this matter](#), showing how my morality does not even come close to being guilty of this charge. That being said, the persistent fetish of the typical Christian apologist is to claim that non-Christians have no basis for morality, and because of this non-belief in their god is vilified as an evil force from which men should abstain. Examples of infamous dictators who happened to be atheists are often cited as evidence, and without deeper knowledge of the philosophical premises driving their terror, the association between atheism and atrocity may appear inevitable to the superficial thinker. In order to encourage this one-dimensional viewpoint, elaborate critiques of the writings of high-profile atheist writers, such as R. Dawkins, P. Kurtz, D. Barker et al., are proudly published by defenders of the faith who seem only too pleased with themselves, gloating over their quashing of yet another outcropping of anti-religious rebellion.

What is common to these critiques authored by Christians, however, is their surprising inclination to take key points for granted, leaving them indefinite, unexamined, at best approximate and uninformative. The very term 'morality', for instance, is tossed around as if both authors and their intended readers automatically had the same understanding of its meaning in mind. Just as the definition of the crucial term 'universe' is neglected in most expositions of the cosmological argument, the definition of 'morality' tends to remain unstated in apologetic treatments. In fact, one gets the impression that the term 'morality' is used more for emotional or psychological effect than for its philosophical importance to man, for man is essentially a secondary concern when it comes to religious morality. This leads to another common oversight: apologists treat morality as if it were important, but they tend not to indicate why it is important, or to whom. It is usually implied that morality serves a purpose, but exactly what that purpose might be is typically not explained very clearly. To make things even murkier, Christian debaters more often than not tend to jump beyond the moral needs of the individual and headlong into the fray of often silly or exaggerated dilemmas involving two or more individuals, often in emergency situations, effectively slighting morality as such.

When atheists encounter Christian apologists (especially those inclined to rely on presuppositional tactics) and the darts start flying from mystic predators as they try to assume control of this discussion on their terms from the outset, a few basic questions should be considered by both sides before weighing in on complicated (or even deliberately contrived) scenarios. For instance:

- What is the definition of 'morality'?
- Does man need morality?
- If yes, why?
- What is the purpose of morality?

These questions are straightforward enough not to cause too much controversy by simply asking them. The controversy will likely come when both sides start addressing them. If it is the case that the Christian's general conception of morality is fundamentally different from the atheist's conception of morality, this contrast should be brought out into the open at the very beginning of the exchange. After all, even Van Til asked: "Is not the important thing that Christian meanings be contrasted with non-Christian meanings?" (1) Given that the non-believer's moral views may significantly differ from the Christian's dogma, I wonder how well prepared Christians will be for such questions, because the issues these questions raise do not seem to figure very prominently in their treatments and critiques involving morality. In fact, no explicit definition of the concept 'morality' even seems to be given in the bible; I can't even find this term in any of my bibles, let alone a definition. It appears to be completely alien to its design.

Now, since I am proposing these questions to facilitate painfully needed clarification on these matters, here is how I would answer them on behalf of my worldview:

Definition of 'morality': Morality is a code of values which guides an individual's choices and actions.

Man's need for morality: Yes, man does need morality, and he does so because he faces a fundamental alternative (life vs. death), and to live he needs values which he can use in order to sustain his life. Since those values are not automatically provided, he needs a code of values to identify what values he needs and the actions he must

take in order to achieve and/or protect them.

The purpose of morality: The purpose of morality is to teach an individual how to live and enjoy his life.

Of course, it is expected - even hoped - that these answers will generate a variety of questions, perhaps even outright friction given their certainty. (Christians hate it when non-believers are certain about things.) But one thing is for certain: *I did not get these answers from the bible.*

What should be noticed right off, however, is the crucial role that this conception of morality grants to *values*. A value is something one acts to achieve and or protect. An important point to note about *rational* values is that they are *selfish* in nature: they are chosen by an individual according to his own needs, his own judgments, his own code of values. People share the same basic values on the most general level, such as food, water, clothing, shelter, health and well-being, companionship, security, personal fulfillment, options, etc. We know that a person values these things when he puts forth effort to achieve them. Since 'rational' here means *committed to reason as one's only means of knowledge and his own guide to action*, a *rational* morality applies reason to man's task of living his life, and takes into account the fact that man's actions are chosen and goal-oriented. Given these points, the picture is now in sharper focus, and it is quite the contrary to what is often assumed by theists: since faith in magic beings will not repeal the fundamental alternative which man faces or quench his need for values, religious belief is essentially irrelevant to morality.

Morality addresses the question "What should I do, and why?" Theists are correct in recognizing that not all species of morality are equal. In addition to those posed above, general, over-arching questions are useful in sorting the fit from the unfit when it comes to determining which morality is proper to man. For instance, should I live in fear of an invisible magic being which disapproves of my existence (even though it is said to have created me in the first place)? Or, should I live in happiness and enjoy my life, even if others disapprove? The former is the basic ideal of religion, and the latter is the norm for rational human life. If one wants to spend his life in the futility of trying to please something that does not exist, the religious model is recommended. However, if one wants to enjoy his life, pursuing those goals of his own choosing, then the rational model of morality is recommended.

The morality that I have defined here is fit for man because it offers him a hierarchical ordering of his values which enables him to guide his choices and actions according to his chosen priorities: basic life needs will of course come first if he wants to live (his first moral choice); after these are satisfied, he can pursue other goals which make his life worth living (his choice of happiness). Man needs such a guide because, as a biological organism, he faces a constant fundamental alternative: life vs. death. That is, man needs a clear understanding of his values in order to live, and he needs a code by which he can govern his judgments in a changing and sometimes hostile environment. Unlike an immortal and indestructible being which can know no threat and for which no hostile environment exists, man has no choice about the fact that he must *act* in order to live. If man does not act, or if he takes the wrong actions, he will die. Additionally, man must *choose* to act. Man's actions are goal-oriented and he is able to choose which goals he will pursue. Rational morality enables him to thus manage the choices and actions which make his life possible. Given his nature and the nature of his needs, man requires a morality which is wholly able to integrate these basic facts, facts which are common to all men, facts which no man can evade. These facts are not the outcome of a consensus; no matter how many people can be assembled and persuaded to agree otherwise, man will still face a fundamental alternative, and he will still need to act in order to live. Nor are they subject to commandments or wishes, for no matter how strongly one might deny them or hope they go away, they will nevertheless continue to obtain. Consistent with [the primacy of existence principle](#) that provides the firm basis of a rational, this-worldly philosophy, these facts are the metaphysical conditions which man must deal with if he is to exist.

For religion, however, morality begins with a set of mystical presuppositions, [rooted in the primacy of consciousness](#), which are accepted on faith and asserted in place of the facts which *should* be taken into account *if* a morality fit for man is sought (which, considering religion's lethal track record, is a big "if"). Where the rational view of morality is based on man's need for values whose characteristics are ultimately determined by reference to his nature as a biological organism, religion views morality as a *code of duties* which man is to perform regardless of his needs or understanding, for the sake of a being which could not benefit from the performance of those duties in the first place, for it could have no needs to satisfy to begin with. A man has needs, but an invincible deity does not. Where rational morality views man as the *primary beneficiary of his own actions* (cf. rational self-interest), religious morality views man as *the means to someone else's ends*, specifically the pleasure of an invisible magic being which, accordingly, would be unaffected if man were annihilated (cf. mystical self-denial). And where rational morality is premised on man's nature as a biological organism whose needs must be met by means of chosen actions, religious morality is premised on the character of a supernatural, immortal and indestructible being which has no needs, either the need for values or the need to act in order to exist. (As described, for instance, the Christian god could feasibly

sit on its hands in absolute idleness for all eternity, and, being unchangeable, it would still be the Christian god forever.) And while religious morality does recognize, at least on an implicit level, that man has a need to act, his actions are to be motivated by *fear of divine threats* rather than *the reward of earthly values*. This is simply a consequence of the types of goals each moral model upholds for man: for religion, the goal is to appease an angry god which cannot change, while for the rational man the goal is personal happiness and a life of fulfillment and enjoyment. Already we see profound differences which define the nature of the debate between religious morality and a morality fit for man's life on earth, confirming the fact that the presuppositionalist's charge that atheists necessarily "borrow" from Christianity's morality is bogus to the hilt.

Typically, however, apologists do not want to acknowledge these fundamental differences when framing the terms of the debate, for they do not play into their strategy. On the contrary, theists tend to focus more on situational ethics, that is, on hypothetical anecdotes involving more than one individual, especially when one of the individuals involved has for unspecified reasons the desire to harm someone else. Ironically, the answer to such scenarios is precisely what religion rejects, namely the fact that *man has a right to exist for his own sake*, a core teaching of rational philosophy which is the basis of the concept of political rights. But the theist then pretends to be concerned to find the proper morality which will effectively inhibit the harmful behavior and thus appears to have in mind the best interest of the individual in particular and society in general. If, however, he had the best interest of society in mind, why then is the theist so willing to neglect the moral needs of the individual, needs which are defined, not by social relationships (which are prone to frequent change), but primarily by his nature as a biological organism (which does not change)?

Christian apologists like to say that man's capacity for morality stems from his being "created in the image of God." But as we have seen, *it is precisely what is not god-like about man which determines his morality and his need for it*. The differences between the Christian god, as it is described by its self-appointed earthly representatives, and the human being, could not be more striking. As described, the Christian god, for instance, could not be said to be biological, and could not be said to face the fundamental alternative that man faces. Indeed, given the imaginative attributes that theists use to describe their god, it could have no needs whatsoever.

Consider the following points of contrast (2):

The Christian god is said to be *immortal, eternal, invincible and indestructible*. Thus it could not need to take specific actions or acquire anything in order to exist and remain what it supposedly is. But man is *neither immortal, eternal, invincible nor indestructible*, and thus he needs to take specific actions and acquire specific kinds of things (values) in order to live.

The Christian god is said to be both *omniscient* and *infallible*, and thus it has no need to *discover* and *validate* its knowledge, including any moral knowledge it is said to possess. But man is *neither omniscient nor infallible*, and because of this he needs a set of principles that he can apply in identifying those values his life needs.

The Christian god is said to be *omnipotent*, able to wish the universe into existence and conform objects to its every whim. Thus even if it could be said that something could possibly threaten the Christian god, it could wish it out of existence, or command it to become what it is not, turning A into non-A at will. Man, however, is *not omnipotent*, which means he cannot wish his values into existence, nor can he wish away those things which can pose a threat to his life. He must put forth effort to achieve and protect the values his life requires.

Thus premising morality on the nature of such a being puts man at a severe disadvantage from the very beginning, since his needs could at best only be a secondary matter of concern, and only then in the shadow of compulsions to obey contextless commandments which he is to follow whether he understands them or not.

These points and distinctions serve as the key pretext to keep in mind when it comes to considering the superficial arguments non-believers can expect to encounter in presuppositional apologetics. Many atheists, however, having not succeeded in fully shrugging the mind-crippling effects of their former religious lives, remain confused about morality and its purpose for man as a result of the anti-intellectual influence of Christianity. Unfortunately, many non-believers have a difficult time recovering from their acceptance of unearned guilt which the religious view of man requires of him. Although such individuals may often intend to provide an improved view of morality, many have bought into the fallacies and deficiencies of religious morality unwittingly. For them, as for theists, morality is primarily concerned with social behavior; right and wrong are defined, not in terms of values chosen by the individual on the basis of objective needs determined by his nature (which he did not choose), but on false premises and non-essential outcomes whose causation remains unspecified and whose impact is often confined to mere emotions.

Even worse, many atheists have adopted what is nothing more than a secularized version of religious morality, essentially viewing man as a means to some end beyond himself (as did Marx, Lenin and Stalin), such as to serve "the common good," to preserve the species, to save whales, spotted owls, yellow-spotted toads and forests, to provide for everyone else's children, etc. The common ground between such secular versions of morality and religious morality is the call for self-sacrifice on the behalf of someone else's interests (or non-interests, as the case may be). Both models, either implicitly or explicitly, hold that man is *innately guilty*, depraved and repugnant by his very nature, and thus he should not be free to choose his own goals, govern his own judgments, or seek his own form of happiness. Such choices are to be made either by the State or by the priesthood, gangs of Atilas or cliques of witch doctors, each pretending to possess a knowledge to which the "common man" has no firsthand access. The starting point for such models of morality entails the rejection of the view that man is an end in himself and that he has the right to exist for his own sake.

Because secularized versions of religious morality are just as weak and open to criticism as is religious morality proper, they serve as 'easy pickins' for Christian apologists, who like to presume that non-Christian philosophies can offer nothing better. After all, an authoritarian morality requires an omnipotent authority, and the actual power of a state could never match the powers concocted in the religionist's imagination. The preferred tactic in this case is to subject defenders of these secular models to a barrage of questions and scenarios which are supposed to be taken as serious examples which a morality is supposed to resolve. Given this formula, pettiness and exaggeration quickly replace focus on relevant facts and integration of rational principles. Of course, since the religious model of morality thrives on blurring man's need for values and for principles which he can use reliably in identifying the values he needs and the actions he needs to take in order to achieve and protect them, secular variations of religious morality tend to do the same, thus effectively handing the debate to apologists tutored on techniques of deception, wordplay, and entrapment as means of propping up a grandiose bluff.

All these points should be considered the next time a presuppositionalist wants to pick a fight over moral questions.

by Dawson Bethrick

Notes:

(1) Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., p. 23n.1.

(2) See also my blog [Is Man "Created in the Image of God"?](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [5:55 AM](#)

1 Comments:

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

That was great how you clarified that rational morality is about self-interest, while religious (pseudo)morality is about what is good for a being that cannot even HAVE wants.

It reminds me of the post I did awhile back on my blog titled "Morality Cannot be Based on God's Rules" where I pointed out that, in fact, theists borrow from the self-interested morality in their assumption that they SHOULD obey Gods rules in the first place.

[March 14, 2006 11:36 AM](#)