

Tuesday, May 22, 2007

The Moral Uselessness of the 10 Commandments

Christians are always telling us how necessary their god is for morality, as if man needed an invisible magic being to tell him what's right and what's wrong. For this, they love the 10 commandments found in the 20th chapter of the book of Exodus. According to believers, the 10 commandments formulate the bedrock of the ultimate standard in morality. Like them, we are expected to assume that the content of the 10 commandments was not developed by human beings and subsequently attributed to their god. On the contrary, we are supposed to believe that they were delivered to us just as the storybook tells us: from the divine creator of the universe itself to the rest of humanity by way of a man named Moses who encountered this supernatural being in the form of a talking tumbleweed on the summit of Mt. Sinai some 3500 ago, give or take a few centuries.

The 10 commandments are predominantly prohibitive in nature. They dwell on telling us what *not* to do, not what we *should* do. Debates over the appropriateness or sufficiency of the 10 commandments are waged from internet chatrooms to the chambers of the US Supreme Court. It seems, however, that many of these debates often miss the point of morality to begin with. Many people, including Christians, seem to view morality as a punitive restraint, a penalty which man is obliged to bear for being man. So it is natural that they would endorse a standard informed by prohibitions backed by personal threats and psychological sanctions.

Contrary to this punitive conception of morality is the conception which I have adopted, a view of morality which never loses sight of the facts underlying man's objective need for morality. Man needs morality because he faces a fundamental alternative, and because of this he needs values in order to live. Since man does not automatically know what is of value to his life or which course of action will enable him to achieve and/or protect those values, he needs a code of values which guides his choices and actions. "The purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live." (*Atlas Shrugged*) Essentially, according to my worldview, morality is the application of reason to the task of living, a rational code which takes account of man's profound need for values. A morality suitable for man needs therefore to be useful to man, but this is precisely where the 10 commandments fail as a standard of morality fit for my life.

To understand this, let's take a look at them:

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor thy father and thy mother.
6. Thou shalt not kill.
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
8. Thou shalt not steal.
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness.
10. Thou shalt not covet.

Regarding the first commandment, I have no gods before me whatsoever, since I have no god-belief. So the prohibition of other gods is morally useless for me.

Regarding the second commandment, I don't worship graven images in the first place, such as little statues of Mary or Jesus on a cross. So this prohibition is morally useless for me.

What of the third commandment? Since I have no god-belief, I obviously cannot take the name of my god in vain, since I have no god. This commandment is thus morally useless to me.

The fourth commandment demands that I set "the Sabbath day" aside for rest. (Originally this was Saturday, but for Christians this is typically Sunday.) It is essentially a prohibition against working on that day. In other words, it is a prohibition against producing values on a specific day of the week, which is utterly arbitrary. In fact, this is completely contrary to morality, for morality is all about achieving and protecting values. This commandment is

thus morally useless to me.

The fifth commandment is at best superfluous, and it misses the point to boot. I honor my parents because of the honor they have earned, not because I'm commanded to. Moreover, like love, genuine honor is not subject to commands; it has to be earned to be real. This commandment is thus morally useless to me.

The sixth commandment prohibits killing. Ostensibly this means killing other human beings (some Christians say it means premeditated murder or homicide outside of dire self-defense). But since I have no desire or intention to kill another human being, this commandment is morally useless to me.

The seventh commandment prohibits adultery. But since I have no intention of cheating on my wife, this commandment is morally useless to me.

The eighth commandment prohibits stealing. But again, I have no intention of stealing anything from anyone since I neither pursue nor accept the unearned, either in values or in spirit. This commandment is therefore morally useless to me.

The ninth commandment prohibits lying. But since I have no intention of faking reality, either to myself or to others, then this commandment is also morally useless to me.

The tenth commandment prohibits coveting, which I find to be the most curious of all the commandments. One [online dictionary](#) defines 'covet' as "to desire wrongfully, inordinately, or without due regard for the rights of others." But since I recognize each individual's fundamental rights, I do not take actions in social contexts "wrongly, inordinately, or without due regard for the rights of others." And again, since I do not pursue the unearned, a command prohibiting wrongful and inordinate desires is of no moral use to me. Even more, I do not see how simply desiring something can pose a threat to the rights of others. So long as I am not taking action which violates another's individual rights, what exactly is the problem here? It appears to be an arbitrary restriction, perhaps the foothold of a slippery slope argument. ("If you covet, then you're going to... and... and..." etc.) So this commandment is also morally useless to me; it does not guide the choices that I do need to make in order to live, but instead worries fallaciously about what appears to be a non-existent harm.

A rational individual clearly needs something better than all this. The commandments only tell us how not to live; they do not tell us how to live, which is what a moral code should do. They say nothing about values, neither man's need for them nor the proper way of achieving them, and apparently takes values completely for granted. Several of the prohibitions could be summarized by an injunction against the infringement of individual rights, a fundamental principle which would also prohibit involuntary servitude. But from what I can tell, the bible does not lay out a theory of individual rights to begin with. Then again, theists are often prone to confusing morality with social theory; morality focuses on the individual and the choices he makes for his life, while a suitable social theory applies moral principles in defining the limits of one's actions in the context of interpersonal relationships.

A list of prohibitions is not a substitute for one's need of a code of values which will guide the choices and actions he will make, and a list of prohibitions against choices he has no desire to make in the first place will not compensate for the omission of the former. Moreover, a rational individual by definition is one who guides his choices and actions according to rational principles, as opposed to threats from imaginary supernatural beings. He has no need for a list of injunctions telling him what an invisible magic being doesn't want him to do. The 10 commandments do not tell us what we should do or why, so in the final analysis they are morally useless.

by Dawson Bethrick

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And this is to say nothing of the fact that it is only in Exodus 34 that we find a decalogue explicitly titled "The Ten Commandments." But these (unhappily for the Christian) represent an earlier Yahwistic (and thus, more

cultic) set of religious guidelines, which focus more prominently on cultic festivals and Temple worship. The last of these is, strangely enough, "you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk," which is most reasonably interpreted as a prohibition against mixing meat and dairy in the same meal. To which one of my favorite questions to Christians who champion the Ten Commandments is, "Eaten any good cheeseburgers lately?"

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