

CAN MORAL EDUCATION BE GROUNDED ON NATURALISM ?

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Among moral prescriptions common opinion would include the sixth, seventh, and eighth of the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, and thou shalt not steal, have usually been regarded as important moral laws. An orthodox Christian or an orthodox Jew can sincerely and consistently inculcate these laws because he believes them to be the laws of God. They are right because God has commanded them. And they are laws because God imposes penalties for their transgression. Thus moral education can consistently be grounded on Biblical religion.

Humanism, naturalism, or atheism obviously does not have this ground for morality, nor does it uniformly accept these laws. Professor Edwin A. Burt, himself a humanist, in both editions of his Types of Religious Philosophy, indicates the repudiation of Biblical morality by reporting that the more radical humanists regard "sex as an essentially harmless pleasure which should be regulated only by personal taste and preference." Similarly the political radicalism of many naturalists in attacking private property and advocating confiscatory taxation and the redistribution of wealth is a thinly disguised defense of legalized theft. And it is not difficult to identify godless governments which make constant use of murder. Naturalism therefore seems to be consistent with a repudiation of the Ten Commandments.

No doubt many humanists in America disapprove of the brutality and murder inherent in communism. Some may even have a kind word for private property. And some would not condone adultery. But the problem that naturalism must face is this: Can an empirical philosophy, a philosophy that repudiates revelation, an instrumentalist or descriptive philosophy provide a ground -- I do not say for the Ten Commandments -- but for any moral prescriptions whatever? Or do the humanists' arguments that place sexual relations in the sphere of purely personal preference also imply that all the choices of life are equally a matter of private taste?

The empirical method in axiology can only begin with the discovery in experience of so-called values. Art and friendship, health and material comfort, are frequently so identified. The precise identification, however, is not the crucial point. These so-called values are all descriptive facts. Burt discovers in his experience a preference for art and friendship. Someone else may not value art at all. Similarly, personal preference varies between monogamy and adultery. And Stalin shows a preference for murder. As Gardner Williams of the University of Toledo, in his volume, Humanistic Ethics (p. 6), says, "Selfish ambition, or the will to power, when successful, is intrinsically satisfactory." Thus murder, as much as friendship, is a value because it has been discovered as a value in experience. How then can a theory which restricts itself to descriptive facts provide grounds for normative prescriptions? If the premise of an argument is the descriptive fact that someone likes something, by what logic could one arrive at the conclusion that other people ought to like the same thing? Any syllogism with a normative conclusion requires a normative premise.

Some naturalists, perhaps most naturalists today, attempt to avoid this patent fallacy by speaking of obligation as a social demand. Instead of depending on Almighty God to impose sanctions, these naturalists depend on society. However, the attempt to base morality on society not only fails to

avoid the fallacy but it faces other difficulties as well. In the first place, if morality is a demand of society, one must indicate which society. Is it the demand of the family, the church, the nation, or all humanity? It can hardly be all humanity, for two reasons. There are no demands which are clearly demands of humanity. Humanity, if it speaks at all, speaks in such an indistinct and ambiguous language that no specific obligation can be proved. And second, if society is to take the place of God as the source of sanctions, then obviously humanity cannot be the basis of obligation, for humanity imposes no sanctions. Therefore an ethical theory based on social demand must appeal to family, church, or nation. Of these three the nation is most able to impose sanctions. Hence morality becomes loyalty to the State, and murder, adultery, and theft become moral obligations when Nazism, Fascism, and Communism demand them.

In the next place, this appeal to society is itself without basis. Where is the argument to establish an individual's obligation to any society? It may be prudent to act so as to avoid penalties, but even the most totalitarian state is not totally efficient. When possible therefore, disobedience to social custom or even an attempt to overthrow the State may be justified. In any case, a man may commit suicide. How can any society obligate an individual to continue living? Dr. Jerome Nathanson, executive secretary of the Ethical Culture Society, seeing that not everyone will be converted to Christianity, asks orthodox Christians to submerge their faith and cooperate in a moral enterprise to salvage the world from its present plight. Whether one believes in God or not, still he must go on and try to make the world a fit place in which to live. This appeal grossly begs the question. Indeed it contains an obviously false statement. It is not true that we must go on and try to improve the world. We do not have to go on. We can quit the world. It is here that Dr. Nathanson shuts his eyes to the problem. Is life worth-while if there is no God? He thinks so, but humanism seems to have no argument to support this belief. The question reappears, namely, if God be banished, how can society obligate anyone to keep on living? This question seems unanswerable, and instead of Christians being too polite to ask embarrassing questions, they should repeat this one insistently. Further, even if a person does not commit suicide, but prefers to live, how can society obligate him to sacrifice his ease for the improvement of the world? If naturalism can do no better than to call such people social sponges and other derogatory names, as W. H. Kilpatrick does, it has abandoned rational argument and can provide no basis for moral education.

In spite of the ethical speculation of the last hundred years, the best attempt to base ethics on empiricism, social demands, individual goods, and all without benefit of revelation, is still Bentham's utilitarianism. Bentham thought that all men universally desire pleasure. This assertion of a single common end supposedly puts all men under a common obligation. On this general basis the right and wrong in specific instances is to be determined by calculating consequences. Murder, adultery, and theft would presumably be means to pain, and thus moral education would be possible.

Unfortunately for naturalism all such attempts are failures because there is no empirical knowledge sufficient to brand murder as wrong and private property as right. Any empirical calculation to foster the good life in all persons affected by one's conduct is a vain dream. Even if it were true that murder and theft frequently result in pain to the perpetrator, it is clear that this is not universally true. Hitler may have suffered for his murders and confiscations; but Stalin lived to a ripe old age, enjoying the almost perfect fruition of his vengeful plans. Few adherents of Biblical morality can boast of such empirical success. Indeed, even in the case of Hitler, his final catastrophe included, what purely naturalistic

argument could show that his life was not better than the lives of the six million Jews he murdered? He enjoyed excitement, wealth, and power for several years, and suffered only a few moments. Is not this a better life than that of his pitiful victims? Unless there is an Almighty God to impose inescapable penalties on transgressors, why should we not praise the rich, full, stimulating, dangerous life of a dictator?

Any theory therefore which denies divine sanctions for violation of divine law not only fails to condemn murder, adultery, and theft, but in addition fails to establish any universal or common distinction between right and wrong. Naturalism therefore cannot serve as a ground for Christian morals, not can it serve as a ground even for the inculcation of the personal preferences of its exponents. In an empirical, descriptive philosophy, one may find the verb is; but the verb ought has no logical standing.

Notices

The Evangelical Theological Society, in 1956, went on record as favoring institutional support for representation at E.T.S. meetings. Should any member of the Society request that the administration of his institution be notified of this action, the E.T.S. secretary will be happy to do so.

Executive Committee of E.T.S. will meet at 10:30 a.m., Tuesday, Dec. 30, 1958, at the Nyack Missionary College.

Dr. Leon Morris, well known evangelical writer, scholar, and teacher of Ridley College, Victoria, Australia, plans to be in the United States during the year 1960 and would welcome speaking opportunities at the institutions represented in E.T.S.

E.T.S. directory, Vol. V, is planned for issuance the first of next year. So that the listings may be up to date and in the form desired, would all those associated with E.T.S. kindly indicate any changes or corrections on the form below and clip and return to the secretary by Dec. 15, 1958. If there are no changes or corrections, please disregard this notice. Thank you.

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