

God, Science and the Quest for Moral Certainty 1

In two extracts from his talk given at the SOF London Conference Kenan Malik looks at the strange similarity between relying on God or Science for moral certainty.

‘God does not exist, everything is permitted.’ Dostoevsky never actually wrote that line, though so often is it attributed to him that he might as well have. It has become the almost reflexive response of believers when faced with an argument for a godless world. Without religious faith, runs the argument, we cannot anchor our moral truths or truly know right from wrong. Without belief in God we will be lost in a miasma of moral nihilism.

In recent years, the riposte of many to this challenge has been to argue that moral codes are to be discovered not in the mind of God but in the human brain. They are not revealed through faith but uncovered by science.

Ethics is not a theological matter but a scientific one. Science is a means of making sense not simply of facts about the world, but also of values, because values are in essence facts in another form.

Some, like the cognitive psychologist Marc Hauser, who has faced condemnation by Harvard authorities for the fraudulent manipulation of experimental data, argue that humans possess a ‘moral organ’ akin to Noam Chomsky’s language organ, ‘equipped with a universal moral grammar, a toolkit for building specific moral systems.’ Others, such as the philosopher Sam Harris, reject the idea that evolutionary dispositions are a good guide to questions of right and wrong, but suggest that values are facts about ‘states of the human brain’ and so to study morality we have to study neural states. In his new book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, which has caused considerable stir, Harris writes that:

Questions about values are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures.

Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood: regarding positive and negative social emotions, the effects of specific laws on human relationships, the neurophysiology of happiness and suffering, etc.

Science does not simply explain why we might respond in particular ways to equality or to torture but also whether equality is a good, and torture morally acceptable. For those whom we might describe as ‘neuro-moralists’, the best way to distinguish between good and evil is, it would seem, in an fMRI scanner.

At first glance these two approaches – that God tells us what to do, and that science defines right and wrong – seem to be distinct, indeed almost polar opposite, approaches. One alienates moral values to a transcendental realm, and makes them the personal choice of a deity, albeit an all-powerful, entirely good deity. The other suggests that values emerge out of human needs, and that such values can be discovered by scientists in the same way that they can discover the causes of earthquakes or the composition of the sun.

I want to suggest, however, that these two approaches have far more in common than might appear at first glance. In particular, in the desire to look either to God or to science to define moral values, both diminish the importance of human agency in the creation of a moral framework. Both seek to set moral values in ethical concrete.

The religious insistence on the need for a divine ethical lawmaker is, in part, an argument about the nature of God. In the monotheistic traditions, God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, completely good transcendent being, upon whose



power, knowledge and goodness humans rely to establish the moral rules by which they should live.

This is not simply, however, an argument about God's nature. It is also a claim about human nature. It is the weakness of human nature that creates the necessity for God's moral law. In the Christian tradition that weakness is primarily the result of Original Sin. All humans are fallen because of Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden in eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, having been forbidden to do so by God. It was this act of disobedience that disordered and disabled human nature. 'The overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination towards evil and death,' as the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it, 'cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam's sin and the fact that he has transmitted to us a sin with which we are all born afflicted.' Only through God's grace can humans now achieve salvation. 'It is through the grace of God alone,' the theologian Alister McGrath explains, 'that our illness is diagnosed (sin) and a cure made available (grace).'

The great medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas more than any previous Christian thinker lauded human nature and human reason and, unlike most theologians before him who had often insisted that faith and reason were contrary principles, sought instead to find faith through reason. But like all Christian thinkers Aquinas saw human nature and human reason through the prism of Original Sin. Before Adam and Eve's misdeeds, human nature had been in pristine condition. Once humans had been cast out of the Garden of Eden, their nature was no longer a reliable guide to good and evil, 'On account of the uncertainty of human judgement,' Aquinas wrote, 'different people form different judgements on human acts; whence also different and contrary laws result'. Such confusion reveals the need for divine intervention:

In order, therefore, that man may know without any doubt what he ought to do and what he ought to avoid, it was necessary for man to be

directed in his proper acts by a law given by God, for it is certain that such a law cannot err.

What is striking about this medieval theological claim about human nature is how closely it mirrors the argument now made by many of those who reject God but look to science to define right and wrong. The bioethicist Julian Savulescu, Director of the Uehiro Center for Practical Ethics at Oxford, argues, for instance, that the human capacity for morality is 'limited', because evolution favoured a tribal, short-sighted sense of morality that is insufficient to deal with the problems of the twenty-first century, from climate change to terrorism. Space age science can, however, put right our Stone Age morality. 'Our moral

dispositions are,' Savulescu argues, 'malleable by biomedical and genetic means'. So, a combination of positive eugenics and neurological intervention will, he believes, provide for 'a better understanding of human moral limitation' and allow us to 'inculcate certain values and certain forms of morality', enhancing good dispositions such as altruism, generosity and compassion, and flushing out unacceptable ones such as aggression and xenophobia.

In other words, to echo Aquinas, the uncertainty of human judgment has created different and contrary moral codes. So that we may know without doubt what we should do and what we should avoid, it is necessary for humans to be directed in their proper acts by moral laws established by science, for such laws cannot err. The argument about the weakness of human nature, and the necessity for moral certainty to be imposed upon frail humans, has become translated from the language of faith and transcendence to that of science and empiricism.

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