

God, Science and the Quest for Moral Certainty

Talk given by Kenan Malik to the 2011 London SOF Conference

‘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 ‘neuromoralists’, 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.

It has been a long and complex historical process through which theological arguments about the weakness of a fallen being revealing the necessity for divine intervention mutated into secular arguments about the limitations of an evolved nature demonstrating the imperative for scientific intervention. The coming of modernity transformed society's relationship to God. A religiously ordered world, rooted in faith, slowly gave way to a secular world driven by science. Modernity also transformed society's relationship to morality. A world ordered by a moral economy gave way to one driven by political relationships. In the premodern world, morality grew out of the structure of the community, a structure that was a given. Every individual possessed a fixed place in society (his 'station') from which derived his duties, rights and obligations. Moral rules both derived from, and defined, his role within that community, his duties towards other members and the actions that were compatible with his role and duties. The structure of the community, the role of the individual and the rules of morality were all bound together by divine law – all were vested in the authority of God.

The emergence of the modern world, from about the sixteenth century onwards, brought with it three main changes that transformed the language of morality. First the idea that morality should be invested in God became less plausible. Second came the dissolution of traditional communities. Social structures were no longer given but became politically contested. And third, the concept of individual autonomy became far more important. The relationship between the individual and the community became a political, rather than a moral issue, while ethics became less about fidelity to God-given community-defined rules than about the individual making the right personal choices.

In the premodern world, the facts of the world gave rise to its values. In the modern world, the realm of facts and that of values became wrenched apart, a process given philosophical substance by David Hume and GE Moore. The separation of facts and values opened the way to a fully scientific viewpoint, because science was no longer burdened with metaphysics. But it also made the question of morality far more difficult. For it raised the question: if values do not derive directly and automatically from the structure of the world, and they do not derive from God, whence do they derive?

The answer was that humans themselves had to take on the responsibility for creating and policing moral codes. For some this was a highly exhilarating prospect. Humans had to stand on their own feet, and think for themselves using reason. 'Each man is his own moralist,' as Kant put it. For others it was deeply disconcerting. The very ground of morality seemed to have slipped away. Nothing was certain, anything seemed possible.

Morality became highly contested because society itself was now highly contested. In the premodern world, the structure of society was a given. Societies changed, of course, but few

people entertained the idea that it was possible to will social change. Morality was about how to define right and wrong behaviours within the fixed social framework.

From the end of the sixteenth century onwards, however, the structure of society was debated intellectually and challenged politically and physically. Liberals and socialists, conservatives and communists, monarchists and republicans: all contested the idea of what constituted a good society. In the modern world morality became distinct from politics, in a way it had not been previously, but moral debate also became inextricably woven into political debate, again in a way it had never previously been.

This paradoxical relationship between politics and morality had major consequences. The political belief, embodied especially in the Utopian outlook, that humans could rationally transform society, make history and shape their fate gave substance to the idea that humans were capable of establishing moral law without God's aid. Such belief may have emerged out of a lack of faith in God, but it required a new kind of faith: a faith in humans as possessing both the wit and the will to transform society for the better. But over time, such faith, too, began to erode.

Consider the three nineteenth century figures who between them most embodied the changing attitudes to religion – Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche. Darwin represented one aspect of the Enlightenment challenge to faith – the importance of reason over revelation – providing for the first time a Godless account of Creation that made atheism not just conceivable but also plausible.

Marx represented another aspect of the Enlightenment challenge – the celebration of human agency. 'Religious distress,' he wrote, 'is both an expression of real distress and a protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heatless world, and the soul of a soulless situation. It is the opium of the people.' For Marx, religion was at one and the same time an expression of alienation and a comfort in the face of such alienation, a protest against oppression and the perpetuation of such oppression. The real battle was not against religion but against the social conditions that made religion both possible and necessary. 'The struggle against religion,' Marx argued, 'is a struggle against the world of which religion is the spiritual fragrance.'

Darwin embodied the scientific assault on faith, Marx the political challenge. Both drew upon the spirit of the Enlightenment and both became highly influential over the next century and half in determining attitudes to faith. But perhaps the biggest challenge to faith in the nineteenth century came not from a philosopher who carried the banner of Enlightenment but from one who was as dismissive of the Enlightenment *philosophes* as he was of God – Nietzsche.

No philosopher is more associated with the 'death of God', having coined the very phrase. But if Nietzsche was the high priest at God's funeral, he was also the chief celebrant at reason's wake. The late nineteenth century experienced not simply a crisis of faith, but also what has been called 'the crisis of reason' – the erosion of Enlightenment optimism, disenchantment with ideas of progress and disbelief in concepts of truth. Nietzsche's brilliance at giving voice to the growing disaffection of the age with both faith and reason

would eventually turn him into a key figure of the postmodern assault on the so-called Enlightenment project.

The ‘death of God’, insofar as it happened, did not happen, then, in isolation but was part of a growing broader estrangement from classical notions of truth, reason and universal human values, notions that were embodied in both certain strands of traditional religion and in the Enlightenment critique of faith. The so-called Great Separation – the uncoupling of politics and faith, and of the public and the private, an uncoupling that came, in part, to define modernity - is often seen as evidence of the death of God. In fact it was both a lot more and a lot less than that. God did not really die, but something more than God began to wither. Belief in a wider sense began to decay.

If the nineteenth century saw the ‘death of God’ – much exaggerated though that death may have been – the 20th century witnessed what we might call the Fall of Man. The history of the twentieth century – two world wars, the Depression and Holocaust, Auschwitz and the Gulags, climate change and ethnic cleansing – helped further gnaw away at Enlightenment hope, leaving many people disillusioned about what it means to be human. ‘For the first time since 1750,’ Michael Ignatieff has written, ‘people experience history not running forwards, from savagery to civilisation, but backwards to barbarism.’

In his book *The Twilight of Atheism*, Alister McGrath talks of what he calls ‘The remarkable rise and subsequent fall of atheism,’ a rise and fall framed by two pivotal events: the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and that of the Berlin wall in 1989. In between the Bastille and the Berlin Wall lay what McGrath calls the ‘Golden age of atheism’. In fact the golden age of atheism is a convenient fiction for both sides in the contemporary God Wars. Atheism has never flourished as a significant social force, nor ever even begun to displace faith in any real sense. The fall of the Bastille and the Berlin Wall bookended the golden age not of atheism but of politics. The French Revolution opened up the belief that collective human action could will social change and transformation. The fall of the Berlin Wall came to symbolise almost the opposite: not just rejection of the tyranny of the Soviet Union but also disenchantment with the very idea of human-directed transformation.

Many came to feel that every impression that humanity made upon the world was for the worse. The attempt to master nature had led to global warming and species depletion. The attempt to master society had led to Auschwitz and the gulags. ‘In a real sense,’ the late ecologist Murray Bookchin noted, ‘we seem to be afraid of ourselves – of our uniquely human attributes. We seem to be suffering from a decline in human self-confidence and in our ability to create ethically meaningful lives that enrich humanity and the non-human world.’

As broader political, cultural and national identities have eroded, and as traditional social networks, institutions of authority and moral codes have weakened, so the resultant atomisation of society has created both an intensely individual relationship to the world and a yearning for the restoration of strong identities and moral lines. Some have found those strong identities and moral lines in God. Hence the so-called resurrection of religion and, in particular, the increasingly literal readings of Scripture.

It is not just in fundamentalism, however, that we see the desire to find in a transcendent God the sanction for maintaining moral lines that seem to be blurring in this world. In recent debates on marriage and homosexuality, for instance, it is striking how even liberal believers have resisted change on the grounds that not to follow Biblical teachings on these issues would be to accept an 'anything goes' society.

If some have turned to religion to provide an anchorage in an age of uncertainty, others find similar solace in science. Science today is expected to provide not just a factual description of the world, but also a moral account of human existence. 'People need a sacred narrative,' the sociobiologist EO Wilson argues. 'They must have a sense of larger purpose, in one form or other, however intellectualised.' Such a sacred narrative, he believes, can be either a religion or a science. 'The true evolutionary epic,' he writes, 'retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic.' Evolutionary science 'has brought new revelations of great moral importance... from which new intimations of immortality can be drawn and a new mythos evolved.'

Wilson may be a maverick, and few would accept his idea of the evolutionary story retold as a sacred narrative, but science has unquestionably stepped in increasingly to answer questions that previously were seen as political or moral. And for many that is the only way that such questions can be answered. Where there are disagreements over moral questions, Sam Harris writes, 'science will... decide' which view is right 'because the discrepant answers people give to them translate into differences in our brains, in the brains of others and in the world at large.'

Some, like bioethicist Julian Savulescu, as we have seen, take it further, looking to science not only to determine right and wrong but also to make humans more right than wrong. Drugs or neurosurgery could help purge racists of their immoral views, and neurotransmitters such as oxytocin could be added to the water supply to improve the general level of social trust. 'Safe, effective moral enhancements,' should, Savulescu insists, 'be obligatory, like education or fluoride in the water.'

What is striking about these arguments is that they express a very Old Testament view of morality. Moral norms do not emerge through a process of social engagement and collective conversation, nor in the course of self-improvement, but rather are laws to be revealed from on high and imposed upon those below. Science will tell us which conception of the good life is objectively true, and scientists will inculcate such values into the masses, by tweaking the brain, lacing the water, handing out ethics pills or simply by keeping an eye upon our behaviour.

Sam Harris, for instance, relishes the prospect of governments and corporations utilising neuro-scanning technology to detect if people are lying, and so enforcing no-lie zones. 'Thereafter, civilised men and women might share a common presumption,' he writes, 'that whenever important conversations are held, the truthfulness of all participants will be monitored... Many of us might feel no more deprived to lie during a job interview or at a press conference than we currently feel deprived of the freedom to remove our pants in the supermarket.' Not for Harris the moral virtues of freedom and liberty. Science has decreed that truthfulness, at least truthfulness to those in power, possesses a moral premium.

The moral Utopias conjured up by Savulescu and Harris remind one of nothing so much as modern, high-tech versions of Plato's Republic, that best of societies in which 'the desires of the inferior many are controlled by the wisdom and desires of the superior few.' Unlike a democracy, in which every citizen ruler is, in Plato's words, 'always surrendering rule over himself to which ever desire comes along,' leading to an anything-goes morality (a fear that lies at the heart of much neuromoralist thinking), the rulers of Plato's Republic are especially wise and rational philosopher kings, in whose Utopia a special breeding programme ensures that only the best marry the best, in which deficient children are culled, and in which all undergo a strict programme of education, indoctrination and discipline. No doubt, had Plato known of oxytocin and neural scanners, they, too, would have had their place in the Republic.

The neuromoralists' Utopias are clearly fantasies. There is no prospect, at least in the foreseeable future, of oxytocin being added to the water or of Nick Griffin being force-fed 'love thy neighbour' pills. And yet, in an age in which many people increasingly look to science for answers to social and moral questions, and in which fMRI scan results are beginning to be used as evidence in criminal cases, it pays to be attentive to such fantasies. What they provide are not blueprints for a coming Platonic Republic but fleshed out versions of themes with which our age is already preoccupied, in particular despair about human nature and disillusionment with human agency.

The desire to root morality in science derives from an aspiration to demonstrate the redundancy of religion to ethical thinking. The irony is that the classic argument against looking to God as the source of moral values – Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma – is equally applicable to the claim that science is, or should be, the arbiter of good and evil. Plato provided the resources for the Christian view of goodness as a transcendental quality. But he also provided one of the key arguments that challenge the idea that God can define right and wrong. He might have created the template for neuromoralist Utopias. But he also demonstrated the fundamental weakness in their argument.

In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato has Socrates ask the famous question: Do the gods love the good because it is good, or is it good because it is loved by the gods? If the good is good because the gods choose it, then the notion of the good becomes arbitrary. If on the other hand, the gods choose the good because it is good, then the good is independent of the gods (or of the God in monotheistic faiths). Most of us would agree that torture is wrong whatever God's views on the matter. A believer might say that God would never choose torture as a good. But to say that God would never choose torture as a good is implicitly to accept that torture is evil independently of God.

A similar dilemma faces contemporary defenders of the claim that science defines moral values. If well-being is defined simply in biological terms, by the existence of certain neural states, or by the presence of particular hormones or neurotransmitters, or because of certain evolutionary dispositions, then the notion of well-being is arbitrary. If such a definition is not to be arbitrary, then it can only be because the neural state, or hormonal or neurotransmitter level, or the evolutionary disposition, correlates with a notion of well-being or of the good, which has been arrived at independently.

Or, to put it another way, science can tell us about the behavioural consequences of oxytocin. But it cannot tell us whether we should add oxytocin to the water supply. It cannot even tell us whether increased trust is a good or an evil. Adding fluoride to water is a good because stronger teeth enamel is desirable in all circumstances. But is it a good that trust be enhanced in all circumstances? After all, would not authoritarian regimes and even democratic politicians welcome a more trustful, and therefore a less questioning, population? These are moral judgements, not scientific ones.

Again, science (or rather scientists) may be able to invent machines that can predict whether an individual is lying or telling the truth. But it cannot tell us whether it is a good that all our thoughts should be monitored. That, again, is a moral judgement.

Who or what can make such a judgement? Or, to ask that question slightly differently, if the *Euthyphro* dilemma reveals the need for an independent gauge of goodness, what could such an independent gauge be, either in the case of God-defined morality or in the case of science-defined morality? The answer is the same in both: the existence of humans as autonomous, moral agents. The significance of the *Euthyphro* dilemma is that it embodies a deeper claim: that concepts such as goodness, happiness and well-being only have meaning in a world in which conscious, rational, moral agents exist. Human choice acts as the bridge between facts and values.

The search for ethical concrete is a search for moral certainty that derives from a despair about human capabilities and a deprecation of human agency. Both the argument that God tells us what to do and the claim that science defines right and wrong are attempts to relieve humans of the burden of making moral choices, by alienating to God or to science the responsibility for establishing what is good and evil. But one cannot so easily abandon our responsibility to make choices, even in those cases in which external commandments seem to have expunged any possibility of choice.

Take the story of Abraham, in which he is commanded by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Kierkegaard points out that even though this is a divine command, Abraham still has to make choices. First, he has to decide whether the command he has received is authentic. And, second, he has to decide whether to follow the command or not. Abraham cannot evade his own moral responsibility simply by following orders.

Perhaps no one has better expressed this sentiment than Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his meditation on faith and fate. Written in the embers of the Second World War, Camus confronts both the tragedy of recent history and what he sees as the absurdity of the human condition. There is, he observes, a chasm between ‘the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world’. Religion is a means of bridging that chasm, but a dishonest one. ‘I don’t know if the world has any meaning that transcends it,’ he writes. ‘But I know that I do not know this meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it.’

Camus does not know that God does not exist. But he is determined to believe it, because that is the only way to make sense of being human. Humans have to make their own meaning. And that meaning can come only through struggle, even if that struggle appears as

meaningless as that of Sisyphus, who, having scorned the gods, was condemned by them to spend eternity in the underworld forever rolling a rock to the top of a mountain.

The certainties of religion provide false hope and in so doing undermine our humanity by denying human choice. So do any other false certainties with which we may replace religion. For Camus, religious faith had to be replaced neither with faithlessness nor with another kind of false certainty but with a different kind of faith: faith in our ability to live with the predicament of being human. It was a courageous argument, especially in the shadow of the Holocaust. It is also an argument that remains as important today as it was then.

The human condition is that of possessing no moral safety net. No God, no scientific law, nor yet any amount of ethical concrete, can protect us from the dangers of falling off that moral tightrope that is to be human. That can be a highly disconcerting prospect. Or it can be a highly exhilarating one. Being human, the choice is ours.