

God, Science and the Quest for Moral Certainty 2

In this second extract from his talk given at the SOF London conference Kenan Malik argues that looking to Science to determine right and wrong expresses a very Old Testament view of morality.

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.'

Do the gods love the good because it is good, or is it good because it is loved by the gods?

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.

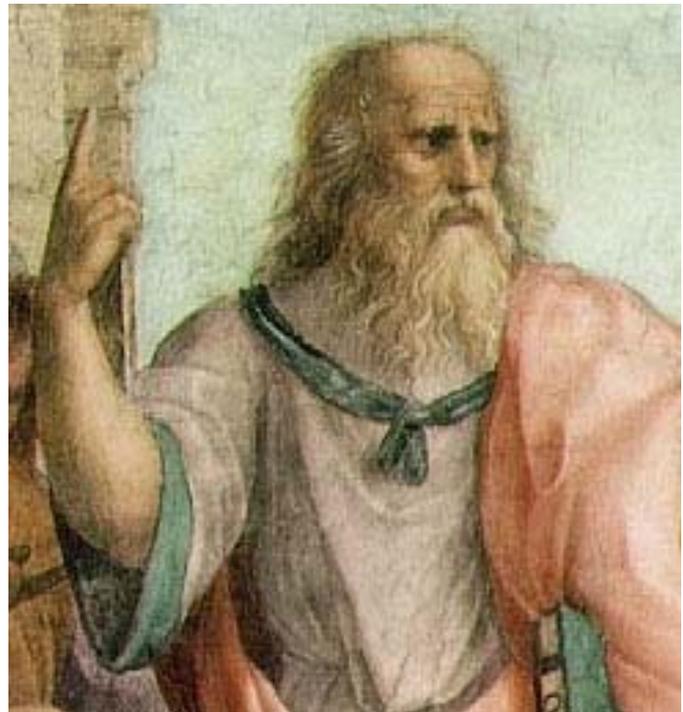
The neuromoralists' Utopias are clearly fantasies. There is no prospect, at least in the foreseeable future, of oxytocin being added to the water or of Nick Griffin being force-fed 'love thy neighbour' pills. And yet, in an age in which many people increasingly look to science for answers to social and 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



From Raphael's *School of Athens*:
Plato, who expelled the poets from his Republic.

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.

In Kenan Malik's original talk, between these two extracts there was a linking historical section, describing the development from belief in God to belief in Science as moral arbiter. His whole talk will be published on SOF website: www.sofn.org.uk/london/km.html
Short URL direct link: <http://bit.ly/iBbLiH>

Earth Song

'We long to make music that will melt the stars.'
FLAUBERT

Not entirely,
unless stars are no more than ice,
their light the bright shaping of frost
whose loss would leave heaven featureless.

Better to share
with them the mystery that keeps
each star within its galaxy,
locked in a universe that never sleeps.

One quaver cannot shift
a constellation's fixed design,
or tilt the bars of space to prove
we are made equal with the sun.

Earth's hope must be
some singing will survive, its music
bright enough to melt the heart
when, like dead stars, our fires are burnt out.

Edward Storey

Edward Storey now lives in Wales. His latest collection *Almost a Chime Child* was published by Raven Books in 2010 and his *New and Selected Poems* are published by Rockingham Press.