

Does Ethics Need a Foundation in God?

Peter E. Payne — June 11, 2013

(Summary/commentary of arguments and points raised in the debate with JT Eberhard, UCSC, April 25, 2013)

What follows is a mixture of summary and reflections on arguments I made in the course of the debate and reply to some of JT's points. Parentheses are around things I did not say in the debate; although the rest involves some commentary, not strict summary.

I started the debate by noting three things that need to be stated up front:

(a) *A person can be kind, caring, basically honest and trustworthy without believing in God.* In other words a person can be basically ethical without belief in God.

(b) *A person doesn't need to believe in God to be motivated to be basically ethical.* Studies show that people who are kind, caring, etc. are more apt to be happy than those who are self-centered. And there is a natural appreciation for kindness, a natural aversion to observed meanness in others, and a joy that comes from being kind.

(c) *There is a significant overlap of shared ethical values across cultures and across religious traditions.*

Wherein, then, lies the need for ethics to have a foundation in God? There are several parts to the answer.

1. The need for some degree of free will: A significant part of ethics is bearing responsibility for one's choices, but this requires that the self, the person, is not just carried along by a stream of events determined at every point by prior states of affairs. But it is hard to see how self-determination could be possible from the perspective of the naturalist (one who believes the physical world is all that is real). (Indeterminacy does not imply self-determination.)

2. The need to avoid ethical relativism with respect to fundamental ethical values: Despite the shared ethical content across cultures, there are important differences in fundamental ethical values. If the differences were only about how to apply fundamental principles, this would not be too serious a problem. But the differences are not just about derivative values and norms.

For instance, at the heart of Western secular ethics (derived from our Judeo-Christian heritage) is the belief that all people are of great and roughly equal worth. (In fact this is so widely accepted that at times this is what people mean when they speak of an ethical outlook.) Yes, we value some people more than others in many ways, but there is a high baseline of value simply in virtue of being a human individual. When it comes to rights, opportunities, justice before the law and a general impartiality on how others ought to be treated, there is a presumed equality of value. (And note that utilitarianism—the view that equates the right with whatever maximizes overall happiness—typically assumes that each person's happiness counts the same as that of any other.)

But this presumption of the great and roughly equal worth of all human beings is not shared by most non-Western cultures. Yes, in nearly every culture one finds compassion, generosity, honesty, fairness, etc. extolled, but rarely is it taken as an ethical norm that all people ought to be so treated. (That all people should be treated as having great and roughly equal worth is basically captured by the golden rule—do unto others as you would have them do to you. Now, it is true that statements much like the golden rule can be found in various forms by individuals in widely different cultures—and this is significant—but in most cultures it is perfectly acceptable to treat some people better than others based on ethnicity, gender, family pedigree, station in life, age, religious affiliation, etc. [And note "fairness" within such cultures does not mean *equal treatment*; it means *treatment appropriate to the person's status*.] Obviously then, although it is part of our human nature to value honesty, compassion, etc. amongst people who are kin or members of one's specific community, this does not imply that there is societal consensus that the golden rule be applied to all people.)

Each culture will typically view its values as the right ones, but if there is no standard independent of differing cultural values and norms by which one can declare one to be right and the other wrong, or even to declare one to be better (objectively speaking) than the other, then when it comes to asking who is right and who is wrong, there is no answer. There is no transcultural right or wrong. This conclusion is ethical relativism.

Now, since the naturalist believes there is nothing but physical reality, and since values are not physical entities or properties, values have no reality beyond what people actually value. Given this, it is not surprising that many naturalists accept ethical relativism. They hold to and advocate ethical values, but they grant that where cultures have fundamental differences in values, there is no truth about who is right and who is wrong.

However, to embrace ethical relativism has serious practical consequences both at the level of society and at the personal level. At the societal level it is important for there to be broad consensus on fundamental ethical principles (such as the one mentioned above). Such ethical consensus is the glue that helps hold a society together. When large numbers of people do not accept these values, the effect is destabilizing to society. And note that it would also be destabilizing for large numbers of people to embrace the conclusion that the values in question are simply what their society happens to embrace. (This conclusion is not as evident as the former because most people who philosophically embrace ethical relativism rarely in fact view their own deeply held ethical values as simply being what they or their society have embraced.) In the debate I raised as an example of this how most atheists that I know embrace the norm of equal pay for equal work regardless of gender. (This is not itself a fundamental ethical value, but the presumptions that lie behind it are.) And they think that their position on this issue is right, that it is more ethical, than unequal pay.

On a personal level, an embrace of ethical relativism is also destabilizing and effects personal sense of well-being. Studies on happiness have shown that a significant part of personal happiness lies in believing that you are a person who, in the main, does what is right. However, when "right" becomes relativized to what one's culture endorses, the sense of satisfaction is diminished. In short, both socially and personally it behooves one to try to avoid ethical relativism if one can.

3. The Interconnectedness of norms, values and beliefs: This leads to the general point that, for human beings, personal and societal well-being is closely tied to an interweaving of norms, values and beliefs. Norms, if they are to be taken seriously need to have values that undergird them. E.g. the norm against infanticide needs to be undergirded by people valuing human life. But the values that people embrace typically need to be undergirded by beliefs. E.g. it is not enough just that I/we value human life, but there needs to be the belief that human life *is* of value and that people *ought* to value it. The problem for the naturalist is that ethical relativism reduces the belief that "People ought to value human life" to "I/we value human life, and we want others to do so." But, of course, this is not all of what "People ought to value human life" means in English. And this belief that one is right in what one values (and not just relative to one's or one's cultures opinion) is an important part of the satisfaction one has in doing what is right. In the debate JT spoke of the importance of beliefs for ethical values and norms, but the beliefs which he enumerated were beliefs about cause and effect facts, not beliefs about values themselves, e.g. that human life *is* valuable or that each person's life *is* of great worth.)

4. The nature of ethical claims—Independence from whatever individuals or groups may think: Many naturalists maintain that ethical claims are not truth claims; they are simply expressions of what people want and of their advocacy of what they want. Part of the problem with this is that the nature of ethical claims is that they entail that the speaker believes that the claim is correct independent of what he/she or anyone else may think. Using the earlier example, if one thinks that women ought to get the same pay as men for equal work, and if it is an ethical conviction, then the speaker cannot think that this "ought" applies only to people who already agree with it or that by "ought" they mean only to express their backing for this norm. If it is an ethical claim, and not simply a cultural claim, it has to be a conviction about how human beings (in the relevant circumstances) ought to behave.

(Note: making an ethical claim does not imply that the speaker thinks that there can be no exceptions. There may be exceptions, but this has to be because of ethically relevant differences. Thus, one might believe that infanticide is ethically wrong but allow an exception, say, to save the life of one of two conjoined twins. But the mere fact that others do not agree or hold to different values, or a different weighting of values, is not an ethically relevant difference.

5. Non-theistic religious grounding for ethics: Given that the debate was between myself and an atheist, I only touched briefly on this. Typically, non-theistic religions ground ethics in a moral order within nature. The order of things involves ways in which various creatures ought to behave given their

¹ There is an ethnocentric pride around which one can gain significant satisfaction, but even here there is usually the idea that "our way is better."

natures. This order includes ways in which human beings should behave and interact with each other. The failure to act according to this order, they believe, will bring disharmony and conflict. In some cases there is also the idea that the moral order will in other ways bring trouble on to the person who fails to act in accordance with the natural order. Bad things, unrelated to the violation, will come upon the violator of the moral order.

Two problems with this approach: (a) Nature seems to be blind to whether animals or humans flourish. Yes, there are resources in nature that enable survival and at times enables happiness, but suffering and what we would label as unethical behaviors seem as natural as what we deem to be good and right. (b) I don't see how an impersonal force could ever be an adequate grounding for ethics. Anything which is able to provide for and promote the welfare of organisms, including people, needs to have ends in view, understanding of what contributes to those ends, and wisdom to know how to bring about the conditions that result in those ends. Anything that possesses these properties is, by definition, personal, not an impersonal force.

(6. **What is right about an appeal to human welfare, but where it falls short:**) I have this point in parentheses because it is a point I had hoped to make in my opening statement but didn't have time. And although I spoke of it at several points in the debate, I didn't succeed in articulating it nearly as well as I would have liked.

As I suspected, JT did not accept ethical relativism and his way of seeking to avoid it was to appeal to the objective content of what contributes to and detracts from human happiness, human well-being. Some things clearly do contribute to happiness and some things clearly detract from it, and these facts are not dependent upon what any individual or group may think. (E.g. that close caring friendships contribute to human welfare, and that torture does not, are facts independent of what any individual or group may think.) Thus, if one can, by definition, insist that the ethically right thing to do is to promote overall human welfare (or perhaps the welfare of sentient creatures), then one has a way of avoiding ethical relativism. When two cultures hold to conflicting values, if it could be established that one of the values does a better job of promoting overall welfare, then one can meaningfully assert that that value is ethically superior to the other.

This appeal to overall welfare is on the right track. When Christians assert that God is wholly good, they are not asserting that God simply wills what he wills. They are asserting that God perfectly wills what is for the overall good, the overall welfare of all creation, including human welfare. And, again, what contributes to human welfare has some objectivity to it.

A position sometimes taken in ethical theory is what is called "ideal observer ethics." The idea is that what is right is what an ideal observer would recognize as best promoting overall welfare. An ideal observer would be one who knew all the relevant facts and knew all the consequences of all the possible actions people might take. Of course no human being is an ideal observer, but the ideal observer approach to ethics does make it intelligible to assert that one is right in an ethical dispute even if one cannot oneself demonstrate that what one is advocating better promotes overall good than the alternatives.

Now, obviously, if God exists (the God of Judeo-Christian theism), then there is an ideal observer. And, hence, if one can trust that God is wholly good, then one can trust that what he commands is for the best, that it is what best promotes overall welfare.

Throughout the debate, JT maintained that our knowledge of what best promotes human happiness is like our knowledge of any objective fact, say, the facts of chemistry. Given that our understanding of what maximizes is imperfect, it is not surprising that human beings and groups of human beings can get things wrong. But, he contended, we are continually refining our knowledge in this arena.

But this is in fact an unrealistic assessment of the situation. The problems begin with trying to specify what constitutes overall welfare. Being a utilitarian, JT assumed that the right is what maximizes human happiness, but (a) overall welfare does not obviously equate with maximizing human happiness, and (b) even if one were to accept this, it is not at all clear how human happiness is to be calculated.

(a) As for the first problem, overall welfare can include more than just human welfare. Exploitation of the animals and/or of the environment is viewed by most as ethically wrong. And then it comes to human welfare, the welfare of both individuals and societies consists in more than just happiness.

(b) And as for human happiness, how is it to be calculated? The earliest utilitarians thought of happiness in terms of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain, but quickly utilitarians realized that human well-being could not be equated with such a crude hedonism. People who consider themselves happy—in the deeper and more enduring sense of feeling good about themselves and the course of their lives—do so because they feel that their lives have meaning and that they are accomplishing things of lasting value, value to the broader community. (Studies on human happiness have shown this to be of great

importance.) But this means that genuine happiness has a moral dimension to it. (It is this that makes virtue ethics so much more satisfying than utilitarianism.) Given this, it becomes notoriously difficult to know how to calculate happiness. This has led various ethicists to conclude that utilitarianism is at a dead end, and that ethics has more to do with the overall desirability of a way of life. But this leads back to the fact that people differ widely on how they envision this ideal way of life. And, of course, this again raises the problem of ethical relativism.

One can, of course, say to the Christian, how can you claim to have the correct vision for how human beings are to live and how they are to relate to each other? The answer, I think, should be, "I cannot prove that the Christian envisioning of how human beings ought to live—including relationship to God—is in fact the path to true human fulfillment, but I can attest to how attractive I find it to be. And that this is not pure ethno-centrism is supported by the fact that many people not raised in a Western context also find Christian values attractive.

Postscript: There are several objections to a theistic grounding of ethics that JT raised that I have not addressed above.

JT contended that religious people have invented heaven and hell to motivate people to do what is right. But the motivation for living the Christian life does not lie simply in future reward and punishment. Being a Christian is not principally a matter of buying spiritual life insurance, it is being a follower of Jesus, living in awareness of his presence, and seeking to live as he has called us to live. Indeed, threat of punishment can never succeed in making people love their neighbor as themselves or even move them significantly towards that ideal. As Christians we love in response to God's love. We love because he first loved us.

JT started his opening by saying that a God who orders people to be killed who work on Saturday cannot be a good God, and that, wherever our ethical intuitions come from, we can recognize that that this is wrong. He later contended that a God who would inflict people with cancer and let them suffer is surely a malicious God. He contended that a God who allows a criminal into heaven through a death-bed conversion, but sends someone like himself to hell, can hardly be just. He also contended that a God who would have his Son endure crucifixion, while having the power simply to forgive people, is a horrible God. In the debate I did not respond to the first contention and only touched on the others. Part of what I did say was that although in judging evil in people can and has brought destruction on evil persons and even whole communities. But this does not reflect maliciousness in God. Indeed, God does not delight in doing bringing death to the wicked. In Ezekiel God says twice that he does not delight in the death of the wicked but would that they turn from their evil ways and be restored (Ez 18:23; 33:11). The Bible never portrays God as malicious. Note: he never tortures those upon whom he justly brings destruction.

Something I didn't say, but could have, is that the harsh punishments in the Old Testament are not obviously unjustified. God does not, and would not, call on Christians to kill infidels, or to kill those who break the Sabbath, or who engage in adultery, etc. But in the Old Testament context God's aim was to establish a people who would model for the surrounding nations the kind of society that seeks after God and walks in his ways. When the Jews followed other gods, or engaged in acts of defiance against the commandments of God (designed for their good), they both brought about misery upon themselves and failed to bring blessing to the nations. Capital punishment in such cases had the potential of being wake-up call to the nation. From the standpoint of promoting the overall good, it is hard to say that such harsh measures in that context were rationally unjustified. But, again, that Old Testament context is not the context in which we live. Jesus never denied the seriousness of spurning God's way, but offered a way of deliverance from the divine judgment we deserve. Like the father of the prodigal son, God wills that we would turn from the evil in our heart and return to Him.

Another point JT made in the debate (to which I should have responded) was that if ethics were founded on God then surely God could have communicated more clearly what exactly is right and wrong, rather than leaving so much confusion and room for disagreement. In response, there is no way that divine commands in the Bible could cover every situation. What is right can vary depending upon the circumstances. But God has given us the foundational principles that we need. That there will be disagreement about complex issues or about issues that did not exist in biblical times should be no surprise.