

FAITH AND / OR REASON IN ETHICS

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WHEN YOU REGARD 'faith' as 'the devil's masterpiece' as Sam Harris does, it is not surprising that you also consider it is going to play havoc with everything to do with morality.¹ Faith, according to Harris, fails all ethical tests:

Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candour.²

Despite science being about 'facts', not values, about objects, not subjective states, he puts his faith in science as our aid to moral improvement:

A scientific understanding of the link between intentions, human relationships, and states of happiness would have much to say about the nature of good and evil and about the proper response to the moral transgressions of others.³

Harris throws into his moral mix 'biology', 'love', 'compassion', 'reason' and 'happiness', and draws from it the rather lame conclusion that 'we discover that we can be selfish together.'⁴

Similarly, Christopher Hitchens observes that 'the order to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' is too extreme and too strenuous to be obeyed', and from the same mix as Harris draws his own conclusion that 'By a nice chance', we discover that 'cupidity and avarice are the spur to economic development.'⁵

Daniel Dennett also rehearses the sins of 'faith', such as infantile motivation, absolutist morality, intolerance, and crimes against humanity—it is a long list.⁶ What he advocates in its place is:

an open-minded ('ambivalent') stance that permits rational dialogue to engage the issues

between people, no matter how radically different their cultural background.⁷

It is not at all clear how all the adherents of religious faiths around the world will be able to take part in this dialogue given his view of faith, although in spite of it he claims that 'the good news is that people really do want to be good.'⁸

A.C. Grayling echoes what is beginning to sound like a mantra: 'religious belief does not rest on rationality but on emotions—hope, fear, feelings of absolute certainty or agonising doubt, psychological needs of various and importune kinds', all of which, unsurprisingly, is prone to lead to violence towards the opponents of faith⁹; and, in contrast, humanist morality 'is about behaving like the best of civilised, thoughtful, responsible, considerate moral agents'.¹⁰

Most of these statements have the sniff of a gentleman's club about them, a club where all the members are totally reasonable and well behaved. Very little, if any, attention is ever paid to the unruly mob of hopes, fears, needs, sufferings, failures, and frailty, howling at the door.

We know from history and from current events that religion too can fall victim to the same mob rule—we forget that at our own peril. Religion deals in these dark realities of life, so it is always vulnerable. Yet it does go where others, particularly the New Atheists, do not care to go, which is one of its strengths, as well as being a constant danger.

Sam Harris confidently asserts that 'all that is good in religion can be had elsewhere.'¹¹ The answer, of course, depends

on what your definition of 'good' is. Still, it is worthwhile to ask what it is that faith might do that can't be found elsewhere?

The Church's moral teaching has solidified over the centuries into an ethical system that combines insights from the teaching of Christ and the Scriptures, particularly a basis in the ten commandments, and draws upon the conclusions of a long reflection by the early Fathers, Popes, saints and theologians, along with heavy borrowings from secular philosophical sources.

The resulting system defends certain absolute principles and values, such as conscience, the protection of innocent life, a strict sexual ethic, and the inviolability of human rights, as well as many other concepts and norms, which seek to apply this ethic to the changing circumstances of life.

This moral teaching is in stark contrast to the more utilitarian, secular and libertarian thinking of the New Atheists, and would certainly fail their test of something 'good'. Still for believers it is a 'good' that goes far deeper and offers something more holistic than anything the New Atheists have so far been able to produce.

The Church's moral teaching has evolved over time. Perhaps in today's world that teaching could be expressed more positively in terms of values to be pursued rather than rules and prohibitions, more emphasis put on individual conscience which has to find its way through the modern world's moral maze, and also be couched in more accepting terms for all those who fall, often through no fault of their own, through the cracks of the traditional moral edifice. Yet, even so, the Church is not going to resile from the core values of the Gospel, which especially on the cross enter the darkest places of our world.

Harris' challenge, however, can be met in another way also, by looking at how faith operates at the heart of a moral system, to



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change hearts, elicit new responses, and to seek continually to overcome the barriers and hurts that keep people apart.

A first point is that while we believe that Christ is an answer to our search for God, *he is also a question to our search for an authentic humanity*. St Paul understood this: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rm 12:2); it is a search for 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable' (Eph 4:8). Often we have the impression we have 'arrived', when, really, especially in our complex world, we should be continually 'searching' and 'discerning'.

As followers of Christ we too often forget that we are on a journey of discovery, and that we are not an encyclopaedia of ready-made answers. The Gospels have a freshness of approach we should never lose. The Pharisees represented a system which excluded all but the perfect and gloried in its own intricate web of rules and regulations, a system that Jesus time and time again broke through to respond to people's real human and spiritual needs. It is a responsiveness we should never lose.

Secondly, as the philosopher Terry Eagleton shows, 'reason' does not operate in some rarefied zone independent of the pushes and pulls of flesh and blood real life: 'it is only if', he states, 'reason can draw upon

energies and resources deeper, more tenacious, and less fragile than itself that it is capable of prevailing, a truth which liberal rationalism for the most part disastrously overlooks.¹²

Reason must emerge from the play of irrational forces and fears, evils and traumas, misconceptions and the precariousness of the human condition. There seems to be little in the New Atheist arsenal to combat these realities, except to place 'faith' in their number.

Yet, whether you accept faith or not, it does seek to address questions of guilt, hope, meaning, value, suffering, the propensity to violence, victimhood, greed, the sources of motivation, forgiveness, and the kind of love we should endeavour to express.

Thirdly, reason is the ability to reflect and reach conclusions within specified parameters, and for varied purposes, and so comes in manifold forms. The instrumental reason of science and commerce is one such form, while faith is another which prioritizes not objects, mathematical formulae, and costs and benefits, as science and commerce do, but rather subjects, their relationships, purposes, and the actions that realize or achieve them.

The British philosopher, Roger Scruton expresses this well:

Whatever we think of the evolutionary significance of religious belief, and its role in natural selection, we should recognise that there is another and far more transparent function that religion seems to perform: the maintenance of the life of the person... Religions focus and amplify the moral sense; they ring-fence those aspects of life in which personal responsibilities are rooted—notably sex, family, territory and law. They feed into the distinctively human emotions, like hope and charity, which lift us above the motives that rule the lives of other animals, and cause us to live by culture and not by instinct.¹³

This aspect of religion becomes more and more important as the value placed on personhood is undermined. Alex Rosenberg, for example, is one of a new wave of atheist writers, who deny there is any personal reality

at all—it is all an illusion:

Scientism tells us that all this nonspatial, nonphysical self, person, soul is just so much wishful thinking. The self whose existence introspection is so sure of is not physical... Ergo, the alleged facts about the self are not facts at all. They are mistakes. There is no self, soul, person.¹⁴

In opposition to this view, faith affirms that there is something about us that is unique, irreplaceable, ungraspable, inexhaustible, and of deep worth. Who we are matters, our choices matter and our strivings matter. As Raymond Gaita shows, so much depends on this affirmation:

Goodness and virtue, evil and vice, do not, therefore, exist separately side by side. Conceptions of virtue and vice, justice and injustice, of strict obligation and of moral necessity are transformed by a sense of the alienable preciousness of each individual human being. That transformation gives us a distinctive understanding of good and evil—to my mind the deepest.¹⁵

Far from being a failed science morphed into superstition, as the New Atheists maintain, faith is a complex reality that embraces all we are. For believers, faith is always more than a series of propositions, and what propositions there are do not compete with scientific statements, but rather concern the human meaning of life lived with God and with each other.

Faith is directed to persons and events infused with meaning and value, it resonates with deep intuitions, needs and emotions - it involves convictions, commitments, meanings, dispositions and engagement, has its own relationally-based language and practice, and is personally transformative, as John Cottingham points out:

If anything like the religious worldview is correct, there is something more dynamic and more dramatic typically at work in the human spirit. As moral beings, we do not just start from a reliable innate deposit, and then accumulate information and get more skilled at processing it; rather, we gradually, labouriously, stimulated

by examples, moved by parables, humbled by error, purged by suffering, begin to change... in Pauline language, to putting off the old nature and taking on the new, or in the language of the fourth Gospel, to the possibility of rebirth.¹⁶

Fifthly, if you take faith out of the equation, the moral bar tends to be lowered as is the case with Sam Harris' being 'selfish together' and Christopher Hitchens' 'cupidity and avarice', which are only a notch or so of the bar above evolution's reproduction and survival strategies.

Moral reasoning is about the standards we need to apply to our desiring, our goals, and the actions we take to achieve those goals, so as to live up to our own human potential - none of which is a given, but always an exploration throughout history.

Faith respects this reasoning process, but is able to set it within the context of God's own self-giving—'Love one another as I have loved you' (Jn 15:12). Over time, in conjunction with human experience and changing circumstances, the meaning of basic moral concepts, such as love, justice and injustice, and the common good, are

able to be filled out to better answer the question of our humanity put to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Terry Eagleton sees this question mark in the bluntest possible terms:

The stark signifier of the human condition is one who spoke up for love and justice and was done to death for his pains. The traumatic truth of human history is a mutilated body. Those who do not see this dreadful image of a tortured innocent as the truth of history are likely to adopt some bright-eyed superstition such as the dream of untrammelled human progress...¹⁷

The image of the Crucified God should always be enough to shatter the complacency and self-satisfaction of believers in the moral quest, just as it is a challenge to any atheist wearing rose-tinted glasses. Here, faith and reason are not alternatives: faith without reason becomes a fundamentalism shut off from human history, culture and experience; moral reason without faith is in danger of losing itself in the flux of human wants and desires. Faith and reason should be partners, not competitors, in the response to the vital moral dilemmas continually emerging in our history.

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