Morality without religion

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Is religion necessary for morality? Many people think it is outrageous, or even blasphemous, to deny that morality is of divine origin. Either some divine being crafted our moral sense during the period of creation or we picked it up from the teachings of organized religion. Both views see the same endpoint: we need religion to curb nature's vices. Paraphrasing Katherine Hepburn in *The African Queen*, religion allows us to rise above that wicked old mother nature, handing us a moral compass.

In the United States, where the conservative right argues that we should turn to religion for moral insights and inspiration, the gap between government and religion is rapidly diminishing,. Abortion and the withdrawal of life-support — as in the case of Terri Schiavo —are increasingly being challenged by the view that these acts are strictly against God's word — thou shalt not kill (note: originally translated as "murder"). And religion has once again begun to make its way back into public schools, seeking equal status alongside a scientific theory of human nature..

Yet problems abound for the view that morality comes from God. One problem is that we cannot, without lapsing into tautology, simultaneously say that God is good, and that he gave us our sense of good and bad. For then we are simply saying that God is in accordance

with God's standards. That lacks the resonance of "Praise the Lord!" or "Allah is great!"

A second problem is that there are no moral principles shared by *all religious people* (disregarding their specific religious membership) but *no agnostics and atheists*. This observation leads to a second: atheists and agnostics do not behave less morally than religious believers, even if their virtuous acts are mediated by different principles. They often have as strong and sound a sense of right and wrong as anyone, including involvement in movements to abolish slavery and contribute to relief efforts associated with human suffering. The converse is also true: religion has led people to commit a long litany of horrendous crimes, from God's command to Moses to slaughter the Midianites, men, women, boys and non-virginal girls, through the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, innumerable conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Moslems, and terrorists who blow themselves up in the confident belief that they are going straight to paradise.

The third difficulty for the view that morality has its origin in religion is that despite the sharp doctrinal differences between the world's major religions, and for that matter cultures like ancient China in which religion has been less significant than philosophical outlooks like Confucianism, some elements of morality seem to be universal. One view is that a divine creator handed us the universal bits at the moment of creation. The alternative, consistent with the facts of biology and geology, is that we have evolved, over millions of years, a moral faculty that generates intuitions about right and wrong. For the first time, research in the cognitive sciences, building on theoretical arguments emerging from moral philosophy, has made it possible to resolve the ancient dispute about the origin and nature of morality.

Consider the following three scenarios. For each, fill in the blank with morally "obligatory", "permissible" or "forbidden."

1. A runaway trolley is about to run over five people walking on the tracks. A railroad worker is standing next to a switch

that can turn the trolley onto a side track, killing one person, but allowing the five to survive. Flipping the switch is _____.

2. You pass by a small child drowning in a shallow pond and you are the only one around. If you pick up the child, she will survive and your pants will be ruined. Picking up the child is _____.

3. Five people have just been rushed into a hospital in critical care, each requiring an organ to survive. There is not enough time to request organs from outside the hospital. There is, however, a healthy person in the hospital's waiting room. If the surgeon takes this person's organs, he will die but the five in critical care will survive. Taking the healthy person's organs is _____.

If you judged case 1 as permissible, case 2 as obligatory, and case 3 as forbidden, then you are like the 1500 subjects around the world who responded to these dilemmas on our web-based moral sense test {http://moral.wjh.edu}. On the view that morality is God's word, atheists should judge these cases differently from people with religious background and beliefs, and when asked to justify their responses, should bring forward different explanations. For example, since atheists lack a moral compass, they should go with pure self-interest, and walk by the drowning baby. Results show something completely different. There were no statistically significant differences between subjects with or without religious backgrounds, with approximately 90% of subjects saying that it is permissible to flip the switch on the boxcar, 97% saying that it is obligatory to rescue the baby, and 97% saying that is forbidden to remove the healthy man's organs. . When asked to justify why some cases are permissible and others forbidden, subjects are either clueless or offer explanations that can not account for the differences in play. Importantly, those with a religious background are as clueless or incoherent as atheists.

These studies begin to provide empirical support for the idea that like other psychological faculties of the mind, including language and

mathematics, we are endowed with a moral faculty that guides our intuitive judgments of right and wrong, interacting in interesting ways with the local culture. These intuitions reflect the outcome of millions of years in which our ancestors have lived as social mammals, and are part of our common inheritance, as much as our opposable thumbs are. These facts are incompatible with the story of divine creation.

Our evolved intuitions do not necessarily give us the right or consistent answers to moral dilemmas. What was good for our ancestors may not be good for human beings as a whole today, let alone for our planet and all the other beings living on it. But insights into the changing moral landscape (e.g., animal rights, abortion, euthanasia, international aid) have not come from religion, but from careful reflection on humanity and what we consider a life well lived. In this respect, it is important for us to be aware of the universal set of moral intuitions so that we can reflect on them and, if we choose, act contrary to them. We can do this without blasphemy, because it is our own nature, not God, that is the source of our species morality. Hopefully, governments that equate morality with religion are listening.