

# FROM BELIEF TO UNBELIEF AND BACK TO BELIEF: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL RUSE

by *Richard P. Busse*

*Abstract.* Michael Ruse's rejection of religious belief is questioned at two levels. First, on the metaethical level of analysis, evolutionary ethics cannot account for moral behavior that is based on a "strong version" of the Love Command. Second, agnosticism is discussed as a form of belief. Insights from religious forms of life that are inclusive, pluralistic, and expansive are contrasted with exclusivistic, closed, and fundamentalist forms of religion in order to develop criteria for "genuine religion." Theistic agnosticism is presented as a prolegomena to belief.

*Keywords:* agnosticism; ethics; existentialism; faith; metaethics; naturalistic; religious truth; Michael Ruse; transcendental ideals; transformation.

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Michael Ruse presents an impressive analysis of the origin and function of morality. His reasoning leaves little room for conventional religious belief. The main stumbling block for Ruse is the problem of evil: How can God be good when innocent children suffer and die? A further problem is that atonement theory makes little sense: How can Jesus' death wash away sins today? Or how does God's own death satisfy God's honor? Third, Trinitarian doctrine defies rationality. Fourth, what grounds are there for Christianity's claim to be the "true" religion? Finally, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and antifeminist teachings render many aspects of Christian ethics problematic. Unqualified love of the neighbor would be a non-adaptive biological strategy (Ruse 1994b, 31-32). Accepting traditional Christian doctrine and ethics requires a "leap of faith" that Ruse is not prepared to make. For Ruse, evolutionary theory not only challenges but replaces Christian theology as the most adequate way of painting a coherent picture of reality. Natural selection and

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nonteleological evolution is a more adequate worldview than one that posits God as the designer of the universe (Ruse 1994a: 20–21).

It would take nothing less than an apologetic book such as John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) to address all the issues Ruse raises. He has his finger on many vulnerable points of traditional Christian theology and philosophy of religion as well. I want to raise some questions, however, in two areas. First, the metaethical issues concerning the foundation of morality need clarification. Does Ruse's descriptive analysis explain away metaethics? Then the matter of agnosticism as a modern form of belief will be addressed. For the most part, I think Ruse is correct in his criticism of Christianity. It has become incredible, at least for many people informed by the scientific worldview. But does the rejection of traditional forms of religion warrant the complete abandonment of faith?

#### METAETHICS

Metaethics is the branch of ethical inquiry that asks questions such as, What is the good? What is right, What is virtue? What is responsibility? It is the most abstract part of ethics and is concerned with conceptual analysis, logic, and the nature of moral reasoning. The "divine command theory" (moral duties, obligations, etc., derived from the commands of a deity) carries little, if any, persuasion among ethical theorists. The point I want to make on the metaethical level of discussion is that Michael Ruse replaces the divine command theory with what might be called the "natural command theory" (nature produces moral imperatives). Nature tells us what is good, right, and virtuous. But these metaethical conclusions are derived from the concepts and methodology of science. Description replaces speculation. Metaethics becomes descriptive ethics.

Concerning metaethical inquiry, Ruse states: "I look upon myself as an empirical inquirer trying to uncover the already-known-and-acted upon moral sensitivities" (Ruse 1989, 216). The result of his inquiry is that evolutionary theory predicts the emergence of utilitarian and Kantian ethics and has no need for appeal to the divine command theory, a "mysterious life force," or teleology. The utilitarian and Kantian traditions express "epigenetic rules," that is, innate biological survival strategies (Ruse 1989, 216–17)—actions, customs, and beliefs that enhance the general good (happiness), that respect individual freedom and social justice, promote reproduction and, hence, survival. At this point Ruse adds an important qualification. We act morally first to family, then friends, then strangers. But the problem in the modern world is

that people living in Somalia and Bosnia are no longer strangers in the strict sense of the term. Modern technology has created a "global village" and brings the starving children of Somalia and the Muslim refugees from Bosnia into our living room. Thus, says Ruse, "technology has outrun our moral sentiments." To some degree, then, the epigenetic rules encoded in human genes are not adequate to the present situation. Yet Ruse is cautiously confident that humans will continue to refine their behavior toward one another.

The qualified confidence concerning the fate of *Homo sapiens*, as Ruse explains in two articles for this issue of *Zygon*, is derived from the evolutionary process itself. Morality evolved because it has enhanced human survival (Ruse 1988, 74-77). This analysis of the evolution of morality is based on the work of sociobiologists and anthropologists who study animal behavior in order to learn more about human behavior (Wilson 1978; Alexander 1987; Irons 1991). The evolutionary process itself becomes the justification for morality. Ruse's metaethical analysis is based on descriptive studies of human and animal behavior.

The implications of ethics based on sociobiology are clear. "Objectivist" theories that ground morality in the will of God (divine command theory) or in a supernatural form of the good (Plato) are rejected. Ruse's form of naturalistic ethics seems to exclude by definition any appeal above and beyond nature. "Emotivist" theories that ground ethics in subjective tastes, likes, dislikes, and feelings are rejected also. Ruse admits that morality is more than a matter of taste. Evolution has tricked us into thinking morality has an objective referent because such a grounding provides the soundest motivation for acting morally. Humans think there is some ultimate moral authority (God or the good), but, in fact, "morality is the collective illusion of the human species" (Ruse 1989, 221). Nature, in effect, is the foundation of morality, although we will see how Ruse modifies the usual understanding of "foundation."

At this point, Ruse's argument takes a Kantian turn because to be moral humans must act "as if" there were some binding moral authority. Kant argued that the concepts of God, freedom, and immortality were necessary for the possibility of moral action even though they could not be considered items of empirical knowledge. Similarly, Ruse argues that there is no ultimate moral authority, although we must think there is in order to act morally. Evolutionary theory thus functions as a transcendental ideal when one attempts to account for morality. As an ideal, the natural command theory goes above and beyond nature. A surprising result? No, if one

remembers that the natural command theory is a projection of and dependent upon the human mind.

Ruse argues that the justification for morality depends on the description of its function in evolution. Biology—not God, not the forms, not reason—provides the most adequate explanation for moral reasoning. Nature provides “moral imperatives” (Ruse and Wilson 1989, 315). Nature engenders human altruism. Avoiding incest and caring for children are “biological virtues.” Nature makes us think that deeply held customs, behaviors, and beliefs are either right or wrong. The justification for these beliefs is the adaptation to reproductive ends. Ruse’s non-normative description of ethics provides a natural foundation for normative ethical judgments. Yet nature functions in Ruse’s system, as God, as the forms, as reason did in religious, Platonic, or Kantian ethical theories. This is not to say that there is, in fact, a supernatural reality, yet nature has produced the belief that there are “imperatives.” Thus Ruse’s descriptive efforts have slipped into metaethical analysis. Nature functions as the “ultimate” in Ruse’s writings.

Michael Ruse gets nervous when words like *ground*, *foundation*, or *ultimate* are mentioned. He remains skeptical, in the Humean sense. He goes to great lengths to explain how he doesn’t commit the “naturalistic fallacy.” The classic case of the naturalistic fallacy is Herbert Spencer’s use of Darwin to derive *ought* from *is* (survival of the fittest). G. E. Moore coined the phrase (Moore [1903] 1968, 38) and Ruse argues, as did Moore, that Spencer’s idea is not moral. History vindicates the critique of Spencer since social Darwinism never gained status as a moral theory. Ruse’s point, however, is that matters of fact (evolution) never show us what is “best.” There is no “progress” in evolution: “Evolution is just a fact. If one argues otherwise, that evolution is in itself a good thing, then one has to conclude that the efforts of the WHO [World Health Organization] in eliminating smallpox was immoral, because it was making a certain species go extinct. And this is ridiculous. One is committing what philosophers term the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, namely one is trying to derive moral claims from factual claims” (Ruse 1981, 158). Yet, Ruse decided, as the discipline of sociobiology gained credibility, that evolution and ethics were connected: “All one can offer is the causal argument to show why we hold ethical beliefs. But once such an argument is offered, we can see that this is all that is needed” (Ruse 1986, 102). And moving beyond the causal connection of evolution and ethics, Ruse makes the stronger claim that “my empirical Darwinian case can account adequately for the philosophical foundations of morality” (Ruse 1988, 222).

Thus Ruse presents a naturalistic argument for the foundations of morality without committing the “naturalistic fallacy.” Moral claims are like other behaviors of human beings regarding food, sex, and fears. Notice that Ruse does not derive morality from evolutionary theory but explains morality as epiphenomenal to biological processes. He does not deduce moral claims from factual claims. Rather, Ruse describes how moral claims have evolved: we make them and live by them (or try to) because they have adaptive value. The naturalistic fallacy becomes a “pseudo problem” once it becomes clear that biology can account for the emergence of morality.

A counterexample raises some questions about the adequacy of Ruse’s descriptive metaethical analysis. Philip Hallie has written two books and numerous articles on cruelty. One of his main concerns is to point out not only the physical aspects of institutionalized cruelty, but also how such cruelty diminishes the dignity and self-respect of the victims. Hallie tells the story of how residents of the French Huguenot village of Le Chambon risked their lives to save over six thousand Jews (mostly children) from the Nazi holocaust (Hallie 1989). The opposite of cruelty is epitomized, for Hallie, in the altruistic behavior of the people from Le Chambon. He describes how their action depended on their faith that God was embodied in sacrificial love, that we should be our brother’s keeper, we should defend the fatherless, and we should not murder or betray one another. For Hallie, the people from Le Chambon impart an unambiguous example of goodness conquering cruelty. In Ruse’s terms, they acted on the “strong version” of the Love Command.

The question here is whether or not the actions of the people from Le Chambon can be accounted for by evolutionary ethics. Their own children, families, and community were put at risk to benefit complete strangers. Is a naturalistic explanation “all that is needed” to account for their behavior? How can their behavior, motivated by faith in God, be accounted for in sociobiological terms? Ruse would argue that they were acting upon a necessary illusion. But if it were brought to the attention of the people from Le Chambon that their beliefs were illusory, and they accepted that explanation, would they have continued to act on the basis of the Love Command? I do not think so. Would they help the Jews if their faith was founded on a “noble lie”? Can altruistic actions such as taking in the Jewish refugees and helping them escape to Switzerland, actions exemplifying unselfishness, heroism, unbounded love for humanity, and devotion based on the love of God and all of humanity as the children of God, be explained by the aims of survival and adaptation? The goodness of the people from Le Chambon cannot be accounted for

by ethics based on sociobiology. Evolution may tell us a lot about ethics, but not the whole story.

One example cannot be used to judge the adequacy of either the natural or divine command theories. But can the naturalistic ethicist seriously consider that the “illusion” of the people from Le Chambon is otherwise? How can their sense of obligation be tied to biology or be explained solely as a function of natural selection? How is altruism an adaptive behavior in this case? On what basis is the Darwinian position “more true” than one based on religious faith? Is it because it remains skeptical or “produces” more empirical knowledge? Would a skeptical or empirically oriented French village risk their well-being for strangers? The belief in the dignity of every person because each is a child of God transcends the natural order. Faith becomes a criterion that can be used to judge more limited ideals that pertain to nation, class, or family. A universal ethical system, and I take Ruse’s naturalism as such a system, needs an ultimate foundation. In Ruse’s thought, nature and evolution function as such. Would Ruse say that nature is God? I suspect he would remain silent, for how can the “unknown be known?” My point in this discussion of metaethics is that we should remain open to the possibility of something other than nature or the human mind as the foundation of ethics. But what that “other” is, remains unknown.

#### AGNOSTICISM

Agnosticism means “not knowing.” The human condition itself seems the best evidence for the agnostic’s position. As finite and limited, we cannot know everything. In the context of religious belief, agnosticism means there is no way of knowing whether or not God exists. Many religious people accept that knowledge of God is not possible—the *via negativa*. God is ultimately mysterious and from this perspective all talk about God is metaphorical, symbolic, and mythical. As a graduate student I was much more confident of rational knowledge of God and thought the Whiteheadians made the case. While I’m still interested in Whitehead, it is the “thick description” (to borrow the phrase from hermeneutics) of religion that interests me now and not the rational attempts to prove the veracity of the ontological argument, as Hartshorne and others still hold. Talk about God may prove to be meaningful and interesting, but it is not empirical. Further, I doubt that religious propositions make cognitive claims.

This admission departs from two major streams of Christian

theology. The Augustinian tradition maintains that faith leads to understanding—*Credo ut intelligam* (Hartt 1986, 222). In this way of thinking one can come to an intellectual assessment of the truth of Christianity, its highest values, and thus what it means to be a Christian. One believes in order to understand. Karl Barth is the most famous modern defender of the cognitive veracity of the Christian faith. God makes himself known in the revelation of Jesus Christ and here alone one can discern the imperatives of Christian faith and life (Hartt 1986, 223). While I would accept Augustine and Barth on discerning the truth of Christianity, I remain agnostic on the matter of absolute truth. I agree with Ruse's doubt concerning the ultimate truth of Christianity. Humans cannot know this for certain, and history is replete with negative examples of Christians armed with ultimate truth. I am simply uncertain as to whether or not there is a God to whom I am personally related. I may in the future become more certain of this, or I may finally decide that there is no God. At present I am a theological agnostic.

Michael Ruse, on the other hand, might be called a secular agnostic, leaning more toward atheism than toward theism. This stems from his allegiance to David Hume, whom he brings up to date with Darwinian theory. Hume's skepticism on religion is most pronounced in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Ruse seems aligned with Philo's arguments that there is no evidence for theistic claims, thus crippling any justification for religious belief. This is the basis for his pessimism concerning the "yoking" of science and religion. In linking his agnosticism with secular modes of thought, Ruse is inclined not to give religion the benefit of the doubt. There is no basis, that is, no evidence, to warrant religious belief. Thus his "deeply ambivalent attitude toward religion" (Ruse 1994b, 33). The interesting point in Ruse's position is that while he sees no justification for religious belief, he does not take the further step of saying there can be no such justification. In the true spirit of empirical investigation, the question remains open. My point in the above section on metaethics is that he perhaps should maintain the same openness with regard to the foundation of ethics.

Ruse says he is open to "genuine religion" and to the "insights of religion" (Ruse 1994b, 33, 34), but he gives no indication of what "genuine religion" might be or what "insights" might inspire him. I would agree with Ruse that it is very difficult to present sufficient evidence or rational proof for God. And this should be presupposed by those who think of God as infinite and beyond the finite human mind. Denial of knowledge of God has been the prolegomena to belief for the *via negativa* tradition. Luther spoke of faith as trust, not

as assent to rational propositions. The existential dimension of religion needs further probing. I want to draw on some "insights" from the mystical and existential theological traditions in order to develop some criteria for "genuine religion."

There is an empirical aspect of religion that Ruse has perhaps overlooked. Religion changes peoples' lives, albeit for better or worse. The notion of religious truth as transformative (Streng 1985, 25-42; Hick 1989, 36-45) might be brought profitably into the science and religion discussion. If a person orients his or her life to the "sacred" (Eliade 1959), then a transformation occurs. In Christianity this change occurs in different ways: being saved, born again, repentance, having faith. Salvation is the process of becoming whole or healthy. Eastern religions speak more of release or liberation from desire, but the goal of religious life is to transform one's present state of existence into what is thought to be oneness with, or absorption into, that which is the source of existence. The empirical element here is the life change, not the ultimate referent, which remains unknown. But the effects of religious transformation can be documented. Religious truth thus seems more concerned with oneness or wholeness, which are existential realities, than with propositional truth claims. Openness to the sacred changes lives. This kind of truth is coherent, not correspondent. One's life makes sense after the transformation, which seems more "true" than attempting to posit a correspondence between the idea of God and the reality of God. Religious truth is thus "verified" in its power to transform lives.

But now we need some criteria to sort out "genuine" from absolutistic religion. Religious truth can be "tested" in its capacity to enhance rather than negate human and natural existence. One can "examine" religion with this criterion of meaning. If religion fosters neurotic self-hatred, then we can say this is not a form of religious truth. If religion is self-destructive, destructive of society, or supports oppression, then this is false religion. The critique of religion set forth by Marx and Freud comes to the aid of the person seeking "genuine religion." If religion gives people a "false consciousness" concerning their status in society or transforms them into unhealthy individuals, then the world would be better off without religion. I would argue, however, that a transformative view of religious truth enhances human well-being. Further, human well-being must "fit" into the overall context of the health of the natural world. Religion that destroys the environment cannot be "genuine."

The suggestion here is that religion is one of the ways that humans process and make sense of external reality. Who am I? Why



am I here? Where am I going? Religion is subjective, but not totally. My religious consciousness is related to family, society and nature, and the "whole" of reality, whatever that might be. Since the Enlightenment and the development of science and technology, humanity has been testing the "hypothesis" that human life (and the natural world) would be better off without religion. Thus far, science has not completely replaced religion as the dominant worldview, as Laplace predicted in the nineteenth century. Notice the current brouhaha over prayer at high school graduation ceremonies. But is this concern for religion in the public realm based on healthy or neurotic religion? The answer remains to be sorted out—thus the need for criteria.

V.S. Naipaul (1993) poses some interesting contrasts in a speech, entitled "Our Universal Civilization," that offers further criteria for sorting out genuine from misguided religion. The universal civilization he defends transcends national and religious boundaries and is tolerant of a variety of civilizations and histories. Traditional cultures and religion (referring mainly to fundamentalist movements within Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism) are dogmatic, fearful of change, and intolerant of modern achievements. Ruse's antipathy toward the creationists comes to mind at this point. For Naipaul, the Golden Rule is a primary precept of his ideal of universal civilization. Another precept is the pursuit of happiness as a universal right. This is an elastic ideal and can take many cultural forms but contains within it other fundamental ideals: choice, individual responsibility, and the life of the intellect. The point of his speech is that traditional societies and dogmatic religion cannot survive contact with "liberal" universal ideals, which is precisely why there is opposition to the notion of a "universal civilization" coming from the various configurations of fundamentalism.

The contrasts are clear between inclusive, pluralistic, open, expansive modes of thought and exclusivistic, fundamentalist, closed, retrograde ideas. Exclusivists can become fanatics. Witness the religious conflicts in India, Bosnia, or Waco, Texas. Neurotic, self-destructive, and misguided forms of religious life are at work in segments of these communities. Their actions speak for themselves. In contrast, I would consider the inclusive modes of thought to be genuine religion. This form of religion is mystical in the sense of trusting transcendental ideals (the golden rule, the Love Command, the pursuit of happiness) and existential in the transformation from sin to salvation, illusion to enlightenment, bondage to freedom, chaos to order, and finally, from is to ought (Streng 1985).

To conclude, I would argue that "keeping the faith" in the context

of the age of science necessarily entails an agnostic attitude toward ultimate truth. Faith is trusting that certain transcendental ideals are important, and their actualization in personal and social life is necessary. Being faithful in this sense is not an incredible attitude to take and retains a necessary skepticism toward devastating forms of religion. Julian Hartt provides an appropriate summary for the form of theological agnosticism I here purport:

There is significant linkage of modernity with tradition in the conviction that believing that Christianity—in some form or element—is true entails a commitment to act persistently for the good of other persons. So if one really believes that God is love, it will be evidenced in character and conduct. Unloving conduct and character devoid of benevolence do not falsify the belief that God is and commands love; they tend, rather, to discredit the presumptive believer. By the same token, even the most resolute adherence to the principle and policies of *agape* does not prove that God exists and is absolute benevolence. (Hartt 1986, 224)

Religious truth, then, is a matter of trusting, not knowing, that the truth will set you free. Doing the truth is more important than knowing, for certain, that you are absolutely right. Yet criteria for action can be discerned: self-sacrificing love for the other is the central insight of Christianity. Faith in this precept is risky and does require a leap. Here enters the mystical element in religion. The difference between Michael Ruse and myself does not turn on the evidence for belief. We are both agnostics. The difference is rather that I am interested in religion and he is not. The evolutionary world picture is the source of his faith that life does have meaning and significance. I am simply more optimistic about the yoking of science and religion for the well-being of humanity than he is. The insights from religion and the knowledge from science do not necessarily contradict each other. This is the faith that I am keeping.

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