

The Boyle Lecture 2019

with Michael J. Reiss, “Science, Religion, and Ethics: The Boyle Lecture 2019”; and Janet Martin Soskice, “Science, Religion, and Ethics: A Response to Michael J. Reiss.”

SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND ETHICS: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL J. REISS

by Janet Martin Soskice

Abstract. The respondent agrees with Michael Reiss’s general diagnosis of the rudderless state of ethics in our modern society, but not with all of his account of its causes or possible solutions. Scripture has always been limited in terms of direct moral commands, and secular ethics has, since Aristotle at least, been influential in directing Christian understanding of the “good life.” Ethics must be based in biology, but evolutionary biology can tell us more readily what is, than guide us into “what ought” to be. Christian teaching classically emphasized moral formation, grounded in the understanding that we are creatures of a good Creator. We have our being as gift, and human life flourishes when oriented to the Good.

Keywords: Creator/creature; ethics; gift; moral formation; scripture; way of life

What is the relation of science, religion, and ethics? How do we decide what is “morally right” and “morally wrong,” and how might science, and especially evolutionary biology, contribute to our joint decision making in an age and society that apparently lacks moral consensus? These are the themes of Michael Reiss’s Boyle Lecture, and they are pertinent. If not pure science per se, then technological developments based on advancing scientific understanding present us with moral choices at dizzying speed. Twenty years ago the debating space was occupied by new reproductive technology; now it is the advance of digital technology, social media, and surveillance equipment that presents us, individually and collectively, with ethical quandaries for which there is no “off the shelf” answer. Should we allow the police and security forces to collate information from speed and surveillance cameras to “predict” where criminal threat might lie? Should we collect the genetic information of the entire populace to benefit research

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and the health service? How do science and religion, respectively, help us to address these questions? I find myself agreeing with Reiss's diagnoses of the present situation, if not with all of his account of its causes or possible solutions.

Professor Reiss suggests that for much of human history, the teachings of religion were either the sole or the principal means by which people decided what was right or wrong. Traditional ethical frameworks arose within systems of religious belief and there was a time, he says, when if asked, "is it wrong to lie?" the "majority of people in many countries would have said 'yes, because Scripture forbids it'." This reliance on religion (and here it seems to be Western Protestant Christianity he has in mind) has been displaced or challenged, he goes on to say, in the modern period by the development in the nineteenth century of moral philosophy and the "rapid growth of evolutionary biology with an enthusiastic presumption that biology was the source of ethics."

I wonder if this is so? I think Reiss has both overestimated the extent to which scripture-based religions derived their ethical frameworks from scriptural admonition, and underestimated the historical autonomy of ethical deliberation. In the Christian West, ethics has long been known to be separable from religion, at least from the kind of religion that turns to scriptures for ready-made answers. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* antedates Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* by well over two thousand years and was known to the medieval church and subsequently influential on all Western political and moral thought. Aristotle, like the Stoics and other antique moralists, is concerned with how to live the good life. The gods are only incidentally invoked, and not as givers of positive moral commands. Although the term "ethics" as we use it is of relatively modern provenance, wherever women and men have argued about the good, the social, and the political life, they have been "doing" ethics.

Christianity, when it grounded the moral consensus of the country in which we live, provided far more than a set of biblical prohibitions, a "mishmash of ethical injunctions" and some edifying tales, but something much more like a moral compass—a broad network of convictions about the good life based on the teachings of the Bible, the life of Christ, and above all the belief in a Creator God who was good and loving and called human beings to be likewise. The directives were followed not simply to avoid punishment, but to be the kind of creatures human beings were meant to be, in the image of God and oriented to the utmost Good, which is God.

I agree with Reiss on this point: ethics has its origins in biology. Ethics is "biological" in the profoundly basic sense that it depends on what we are as human animals. For instance, if it took three human sexes to reproduce instead of two, then teaching on matrimony would involve three people. If we didn't need oxygen to survive, there would be no harm in holding

someone's head under water for 10 minutes in jest. Ethical behavior, the human ethos, is based on what Wittgenstein called "forms of life." That is why ethics has both universal and particular instances. Some mothers, teaching their children to behave at dinner, encourage them to pass the salt and pepper. Mothers in societies whose food is offered in big communal bowls and eaten with the hands offer different directives. That's particular. More general, or universal, are understandings that to hold someone's head under water is, universally, to kill them, and generally frowned upon. Ethics goes all the way down and does not just concern contentious matters like perjury and theft but has its anchorage in the everyday—how you greet people, thank them, accept a gift. We can see that for ancient Israelites, dietary regulations were ethical and practical, as well as divinely prescribed.

Ethics is a way of life and any organized society has ethics. It is worth remembering that an early name for the Christian movement was "the way." As such, as Pierre Hadot has argued with memorable brilliance in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, in late antiquity the Christian "way" stood among a number of "ways" known to those who wished to pursue a virtuous life—the way of the Stoics, the Epicureans, and so on (Hadot 1995). These philosophical schools aimed at the "good life" and, for the leisured men (they were mostly men) who had time for it, the study of metaphysics, logic, mathematics, and ethics all led to an ordered, or good, life.

The Greek city states had complicated and sophisticated ethical systems. Christianity, emerging in the Greco-Roman world, took for granted that all men and women naturally seek the good and married this with the more distinctively Jewish and Christian conviction that this was to seek God, the source of all good things and of our well-being.

Thus, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante could make the pagan poet Virgil his guide because Virgil was a good and just man. Dante believed, as did apparently St. Paul, that it should be evident to all that the world is made for and guided to the Good, and that all right-ordered things, indeed all life, moves toward this end. Dante smuggled some Christian assumptions into Virgil's view, notably the identification of the Good with God, and indeed with a creator God who both made all that is (*creatio ex nihilo*) and declared it to be good. Nonetheless, for millennia the basic understanding in the Christian West was that a rightly ordered life was good, not just in terms of calculated outcomes, but because it reflected the order of the cosmos itself, the work of a Good Creator.

What dissolved this? Kant was writing at a time when metaphysics was at a low ebb, and atheism and agnosticism, though Kant espoused neither, were becoming socially acceptable. The various moral philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which Reiss discusses (utilitarianism, consequentialism), were laudable attempts to find a universal grounding for morals.

Laudable, if perhaps unsuccessful because ethics, once seen to be grounded in the very order of the cosmos (and this was true not just of Christian ethics but of many faith and philosophical traditions) was now a matter of rational calculus—a balancing of outcomes and effects. Might it be precisely this which made evolutionary biology so attractive to some as a possible source of ethical norms? Here, once again moral judgments might be grounded in the given—the given being our biological natures?

Evolutionary ethics thus, as Reiss suggests, “makes sense”—but only to a point. The difficulty, as he more or less admits, lies in the jump between a scientific account of “why the world is as it is—what is there and how it operates,” and *how we would wish it to be*, that is between the factual, insofar as we can reach it, and the evaluative—the “is/ought” difficulty again (Nagel 1997). Evolutionary biology, however successful, can only provide an account of what *is* the case, but it has proven fairly fragile in determining what *ought* to be the case, as the twentieth century’s disastrous experiments in eugenics demonstrate. As Reiss says, there may be biological explanations of music and dance, but people make music and dance because they enjoy doing these things. Evolutionary ethics has some points to make about what’s good for the species but is less forthcoming on what is good for the individual.

Reiss suggests there was a time when if asked, “is it wrong to lie?” the “majority of people in many countries would have said ‘yes, because Scripture forbids it’.” I would argue that, even within Christianity, this kind of propositional ethics is and always has been rare, not least because it’s so limited. What kind of moral directive does the New Testament give us on the surveillance use of drones, or for that matter banking and money lending? Not single prescriptions we can pick out and paste in at any rate. More common than we imagine in the history of religious ethics (and any parent knows this) is some form of “virtue ethics,” which is not about this or that prohibition but a trained direction of the heart and will.

The moral person is not someone who, every time on entering a shop, has to debate with themselves in Kantian mode—“Shall I steal something or shan’t I?” but rather someone for whom this thought would not occur. Traditional ethical systems, of all sorts, relied on moral formation. Classically, lying was considered wrong not simply because it was against scriptural teaching but because it hurt other people and, with roots going back to Plato at least, it damaged the one lying themselves. Virtue ethics, with its concern for the formation of whole and just individuals, is a far better way of addressing challenges of contemporary science and technology, which find no easy answer from scriptural proof-texting.

Although much can be said of the difference in ethical systems, it is easy to overlook an overwhelming amount of consensus—children should be loved, parties in transactions should be honest. The wheels of life and commerce won’t turn without such basics.

What perhaps has been lost in modernity, or maybe in modern Britain, is any sense of a metaphysical anchorage for these. I don't mean anything complex, but simply that there is an order to the universe, and a good life is ordered to this. Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, having rejected metaphysics, sought to establish everything, including ethical schemes, on pure reason, with limited success. A return to a biological grounding is arguably a good way forward, not least because it allows within our moral framework some way of thinking of our obligations to the rest of the "created" order.

Here, I have smuggled in a Christian term—"created"—because from the Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) view we are animals, certainly, with certainly biological needs and dispositions, but over and above this we are *creatures*. As creatures we understand our being and that of the entire cosmos as integrated order, as gift. Christians cannot avoid being at least minimally metaphysical, insofar as we believe in a Creator God and that all things, including space and time, have their being from this divine Creator.

Here, we must avoid the trap of "creationism," a fairly modern notion. The classical Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teaching on *creatio ex nihilo* is not concerned with seven days and the hand-fashioning of mammals, but with the belief that *all that is*, including space and time, is from God and has its being, at every moment, from God. The "moment" of creation is no further away than the now. Science cannot prove or disprove this theory, any more than Christian philosophy can demonstrate it.¹

Thomas Aquinas states the end of the human being is *salus*, often translated as "salvation," but the Latin suggests health, well-being, human flourishing—a topic on which Michael Reiss has written. In this eudemonistic ethic "flourishing" is the end for which we were created and it should inform this life as well as lead us into the next. Aquinas's imaginative integration of Aristotelian thought introduced a biological grounding to Christian moral theology that we may well want to emulate in our own manner today. It remains to be seen if a modern-day Aquinas could marry evolutionary biology with the metaphysics of gift.

NOTE

1. Here we see some quite distinct differences from the crude theology of some science popularizers. I don't say their science is crude, but their theology often is! For instance, Brian Cox, in a television sequence visiting a Hindu temple, delights to find the novices say that the world was made long before the gods and goddesses. "At last" said Cox, "a truly scientific religion!" Why is this any more "scientific" than *creatio ex nihilo*? This is to assert, without support, materialism as an obvious scientific truth, whereas it is, as is theism, a metaphysical conviction.

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