Ethics without God

Exploring a Secular Basis for our Ethics

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How do we know what is right and wrong behaviour? We first learn this distinction from our parents and teachers. They pass on to us their own current values and also their criteria for judging what is right behaviour. Thus, even before we are old enough to develop any critical thinking of an ethical nature we have already been ethically shaped. Those who teach us, of course, have in turn been shaped, first by **their** parents and then by the culture in which they were brought up. We are all shaped by the human culture into which we born. In these modern multicultural times we may try to transcend the particular culture into which we were born but we can never extricate ourselves from human culture in general. We live in it as fish live in the sea.

When we pass through adolescence on the way to maturity we begin to question what we are told and we either modify, or accept as our own, the values and criteria that have been handed to us. That is all part of the process of 'coming of age' and learning to take our responsible place in society. Every human culture, in the course of its evolution, has developed the customs, principles and moral rules deemed to be necessary for the harmony and well-being of the group. Our words 'morality' and 'ethics' come respectively from the Latin and Greek words *mores* and *ethos* that referred, respectively, to the established cultural customs of Rome and Greece. All specific cultures have been evolving like this from time immemorial.

Now let us look at this evolutionary process on the much longer time scale. Just as we, as individuals, pass through a maturing process as we 'come of age', so, in the last three centuries, this same process has been occurring in human culture on the grand scale. Dietrich Bonhoeffer even referred to it as 'mankind's coming age'. How did this happen?

The period known as the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century has proved to be an irreversible threshold of cultural change that is now affecting all cultures on a global scale. Unfortunately the significance of the Enlightenment is still not widely understood and appreciated, with the result that at the popular level many still assume that the pre-Enlightenment conditions still obtain. This is particularly the case in traditional Christian, Jewish and Muslim circles. In each of these, the moral laws inherited from the past are still regarded as eternal and unchangeable, and hence not to be questioned.

Let me briefly explain.

In pre-Enlightenment monotheistic cultures it was taught by the religious authorities, and accepted without question, that the standards of right and wrong originated with God. He had ordained them and he had revealed them to humans. For the Jew they were set out in the Torah, for the Christian in the Bible and for the Muslim in the Qur'an. The divine laws were specifically to be found in such statements as The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Each tradition, in the course of time, constructed quite complex ethical Codes of behaviour that carried the stamp of divine authority. The Jews, for example, found 613 specific commandments. The Muslim assembled the Shariah. Christian theologians expounded Christian Ethics on the basis of what they found in the Bible. All of these ethical codes were regarded as being set in stone and not open to debate. It was sufficient for the Church to say: 'The Bible teaches…' and that was the end of the matter.

Nietzsche, that intriguing prophet of the New Age, called this form of learning right behaviour 'slave morality'. To understand that, just recall how we used to learn both morality and the Christian truths by memorising the catechism. Like a ventriloquist's dummy, we simply repeated what others put into our mouths! Indeed, the use of the catechism as a means of instruction in religion and morals was only disappearing in my childhood days.

It all began to change at the Enlightenment. Starting in the Christian West and now slowly spreading round the globe, the human race began to move out of its childhood phase and enter the phase of mature adulthood. The seat of authority was shifting from a point external to us to a point within us. This is illustrated, politically, by the transition from absolute monarchy to democracy. In religion we speak now of the voice of God within us, and less and less of the God up there.

Immanuel Kant the philosopher put it this way: 'The Enlightenment is man's exodus from indoctrination. Indoctrination prevents one from using his own understanding. . . "Dare to be wise" *(sapere aude).* Have the courage to think for yourself; this is the motto of the Enlightenment'.

During the 250 years on this side of the Enlightenment the new freedom to think critically not only advanced the enterprise of modern empirical science but made discoveries that undermined what had long been assumed to be the firm foundations of the Christian tradition.

First came the discovery that Christian doctrine, long taken to be the deposit of divine revelation, was after all really **human in origin**. It had been constructed by humans, starting with Paul, and continuing through Augustine,

Aquinas and the Protestant reformers. Those people believed, of course, that they were simply expounding the eternal truths that were contained in the Bible.

So attention then turned to the critical examination of the Bible. More and more did it become clear that the bible is a set of **human** documents. They could no longer be regarded as a collection of timeless truths that originated with God but were now seen to be the products of the historical and cultural context in which they were written and to reflect the limited knowledge, the ignorance, and even the prejudices, of their writers.

The next discovery concerned the **nature of the God** who had supposedly revealed his word in the Bible. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) conceded that the reality of God could not be confirmed by any rational process but, to do justice to human experience, he found it necessary to postulate both the reality of God and the immortality of the human soul. He said, 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: *the starry heavens above and the moral law within*'.

What impressed Kant most was the universal human experience of acknowledging moral duty; he called it the 'the moral imperative'. Notice that he was now using the reality of ethics to support the very idea of God, and not the other way round as before. It fell to Nietzsche (1844-1900) to be the first to announce the death of God. This he did most tellingly in his now well-known little Parable of the Madman. What Nietzsche had rightly discerned within Christendom was that the idea of God as the over-riding supernatural being was losing its power to convince. But what Nietzsche also realised, and wished to draw to everybody's attention to, was the fact that the loss of such a God had more far-reaching consequences than at first seemed to be the case.

Not only would the whole system of Christian doctrine come tumbling down, but the firm foundation of all morality would disappear. It is instructive at this point to go back to one of Kant's young disciples, who has been rather lost sight of. Johann Fichte (1762-1814) was influenced by both Spinoza and Kant. Unlike Kant, he found no need to postulate the existence of a divine entity (God) on the basis of the experience of the moral imperative. For him the moral order and God were one and the same. 'We do not and cannot grasp any other God', he said. As Fichte saw it, the moral imperative we experience within us is itself the voice of God and, when we obey it the Divine becomes alive and real in us. Thus for Fichte, the moral imperative was not only paramount, as it was for Kant, but was in fact the experience of God.

What was happening at the time of Kant and Fichte was this. While the death of the theistic God destroyed the basis of the traditional morality, it allowed ethics to come out from under the shadow of theology where it had long been positioned. The study of Ethics now stands on its own feet and has largely replaced the traditional role of theology. This move has even given rise to a church-like organisation – the Ethical Union. Even more importantly, ethical sensitivity among responsible people, far from disappearing, has become more refined as a result of the death of God. (I shall provide examples later to illustrate this.)

But how did these moral values come to be the attributes of God in the first place? How did the human moral imperative come to be identified as 'the divine imperative', to use the term of the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner.

That is a long and complex story that we are now beginning to unravel for the first time in human history. Previously it was unthinkable even to question the reality of God. Now we are able to write a 'History of God', something which Karen Armstrong has achieved so well.

To do this we may usefully divide the long cultural history of humankind into three successive phases. They may be conveniently labelled: the polytheistic, the monotheistic, and the humanistic. In each of these phases humans understood their moral duties quite differently because of the quite different ways in which they understood themselves in relationship to the environment in which they lived. I shall now sketch these phases for they help us to understand our current moral situation.

The Polytheistic Phase

As the ancients contemplated, and responded to, the forces they encountered in the natural world they invented personal names for them. Today we would say that they were unconsciously projecting their own consciousness into the natural phenomena they observed in their world. This is how the human mind first came to create the idea of spirits and gods; they were a class of unseen beings that were thought responsible for everything that happened in the world.

It's easy to understand how natural it was to arrive at that ancient polytheistic worldview because, even today, we may find a two-year-old, when accidentally hitting its head on the table corner as it passes by, turning round to address the object causing pain by saying, 'You naughty table!'

The unseen spiritual beings imagined by the ancients were at first simply **identified** with the moving phenomena of nature. Later they were thought to inhabit them. Later still, the gods were conceived as beings who **controlled** natural bodies and processes from a point outside of them. On reaching that stage the gods were conceived as possessing what philosophers call **'aseity'.** This word means they now possessed a being of one's own. The gods had become independent **beings**.

Each of the numerous primitive cultures developed its own version of this polytheistic interpretation of nature. In many there was a Sky-Father and an Earth Mother. They were the progenitors of all the other gods, each with his or her own portfolio or special area of operation. In ancient Greece the name of the Earth Mother was Gaia. The word is etymologically related to *GE,* the Greek word for earth, preserved in our word 'ge-ology', 'the study of the earth. The male consort of Gaia was Zeus, the chief of the gods.

Thus, in order to explain what we call natural phenomena, the ancients did not ask – '**How** did this event happen?' but '**Who** caused it and **why**?' This kind of reasoning occurs even to this day. Think how the Anglican Bishop of Sydney quickly jumped to the conclusion that the Indian Ocean Tsunami had been willed by God and for a moral purpose.

The First Axial Period

In the first millennium before the Christian era a radical cultural transition began to take place in Europe and Asia. The transition did not reach the remote tribal areas of Africa, the Americas and Australasia until much later. Karl Jaspers labelled this transition the Axial Period and centred it on 500 BC. Karen Armstrong has called it *The Great Transformation* in her book of that title. The Great Transformation ushered in a new cultural age which, in our part of the world we know as the monotheistic period.

The most important aspect of the transition from polytheism to monotheism so far as the theme of this lecture is concerned is this. The God who replaced the gods became the depository of the highest human values. These became known as the attributes of God in way they had never been applied to the gods of nature. The morals of the gods left much to be desired, as ancient mythology clearly illustrates. The gods simply mirrored both the moral strengths and weaknesses of humankind. It was only from the Axial period that God became identified with love, goodness, truth, justice and compassion.

The transition from polytheism to monotheism took place in the Persian Period. We probably see here the influence of Zoroastrianism. The Persian prophet Zoroaster not only proclaimed the oneness of God, whom he called Ahura Mazda, (the Lord of Light); he declared him to be wholly wise, benevolent and good, the guardian of justice and the friend of the just man. Zoroaster was the first to describe the being of God in terms of the highest human values. The Jewish Exiles in Babylon followed suit as they identified their God Yahweh with the one and only God..

But it very soon became clear that if there is only one God, then he must be ultimately responsible for everything, including evil. Deutero-Isaiah, the prophet of the Exile, and the first true monotheist in the Bible acknowledged this. He puts into the mouth of God:

'I form light and I create darkness.
I bring health and I create disease.
I, Yahweh, do all these things'. (Isaiah 45:7)

But if the one God is also wholly good, how can this God also be responsible for evil? So protest began almost immediately in the Middle East. It gave rise to the Book of Job and later Ecclesiastes. This problem has niggled away within monotheism for two thousand years and was finally labelled 'theodicy' by the philosopher Leibniz. There is both a theological, and a moral problem in affirming that God is both omnipotent and wholly good. It was to prove to be the Achilles heel of monotheism.

The way it was dealt with in practice, first in Zoroastrianism, and later in Christianity and Islam, was to turn pure monotheism into a dualism. The universe was conceived as one in which a cosmic battle was taking place between God and Satan (the Devil). Christian imagination saw this visible, tangible flat earth sandwiched heaven above (where God dwelt with his angels and church triumphant) and the burning Hell below (where Satan and his devils ruled over the damned).

It was this invisible world created by Christian imagination that came tumbling down as a result of the Enlightenment. For the Protestants Purgatory vanished at the Reformation, in the late 19th century Hell was questioned and in the 20th century heaven lost its significance. We now find ourselves living in one vast physical universe, a space-time continuum. Mankind has entered the current secular age.

Without God's eternal dwelling-place traditional monotheism began to collapse, leaving God as an idea. God lost his aseity, as had the gods two

millennia before. What was left of God were his attributes – the supreme moral and spiritual values that were attributed to him during the First Axial Period.

The reason that I have sketched this history is to show that Fichte was moving in the right direction, even before Nietzsche. We humans are now on our own, as we attempt to deal with the problems of human existence. But are we free to do as we like? More than ever, we are subject to a moral imperative, but that moral imperative is something we experience within us as we relate to other humans and to the world at large. The moral situation in which we find ourselves is not less demanding but more demanding. We not only have to **do** what is right; we even have to **determine** what is right. We have to create the ethic that we long took to be the prerogative of God.

Nietzsche was not only the first to proclaim the death of God. He was also among the first to look for the new ethic. In view of the fact that Zoroaster was perhaps the first prophet to describe God in terms of moral values, it is interesting to find that Nietzsche chose the name Zarathustra to symbolize the way-finder in the new ethical challenges. Nietzsche was more of a sage than a philosopher. Just as the ancient sages, such as Ecclesiastes and Jesus, used parables and one-liners to goad people into working things out for themselves, so the books of Nietzsche do likewise. Through Zarathustra Nietzsche speaks of the need to cease to go beyond the traditional 'good and evil' and proceed to what he called 'the transvaluation of all values'. Nietzsche does not give us ethical answers through Zarathustra; rather he challenges us to go out and create them ourselves.

So how shall we do that?

Let us first take stock of where we are. Today people in the secular world are freer from cultural restraints than they have ever been before. Does this mean that they have become immoral? Certainly, perhaps, at one extreme it has led to an increase in immoral activity – from petty crime and personal violence to fraudulent activity and gross injustice on the grand scale. This is quite understandable. The human race is still 'coming of age'. As with adolescents, not all people are equally ready to handle the new moral freedom we now enjoy.

But, while we may rightly deplore all of that, we may take heart from what has happened at the other extreme. Look, for example, at what took place in the twentieth century: the growing recognition of human rights, the acknowledgement of gender equality, the condemnation of racism and religious bigotry, the acceptance of sexual diversity, and the realisation that all cultures have evolved and reflect human creativity. We have witnessed an increase in

ethical sensitivity at the growing edge of human culture. In the post-Enlightenment global world, we may discern the emergence of an embryonic universal human culture now seeking to be born.

It is expressed nationally in the spread of democracy and internationally in the creation of the United Nations. Admittedly the 20th century witnessed the worst wars ever fought on the planet. But it also witnessed the increasing condemnation of war itself as a means of settling international disputes. There is increasing desire to promote the kind of international co-operation that will achieve world peace and harmony. War is no longer glorified as it long was. Early on in the 20th century in Western countries, what had long been called 'the Ministry of War' was re-labelled the 'Ministry of Defence'.

Where is this desire for peace and harmony springing from? What motivates us to try and do what is right? Some in each of the great religious traditions assert that such motivation can only come from the revealed traditions of the past. That may have been true once but it is no longer the case. Indeed, most of the ethical advances that have been made since the Enlightenment have been strongly opposed by the traditional religions.

Some assert that we all have built in to us a moral guide – we call it our conscience – and it is that which motivates us to do the right. That is partly true. Indeed, our psyche seems to come already programmed with some awareness of right and wrong. But because this innate function is then shaped by cultural forces, our conscience is by no means infallible. What it does is to prick us when we are on the verge of doing something that is in conflict with our basic cultural beliefs. If it works at all, and in some people it does not seem to do so very efficiently, it operates within parameters already put in place by the culture that has shaped us.

For example, until a century or so ago many people in the Western world experienced a bad conscience if they absented themselves from church without legitimate excuse or did some work on the Sabbath. At the beginning of the 20th century these feelings were still dominant, as I can personally testify, but by the beginning of the 21st century, concern for Sabbath observance had almost completely disappeared. Incidentally, it had been replaced by the condemnation of such things as racism and militarism.

An important consequence of the Enlightenment was to distinguish between those duties, on the one hand, that related to a specific culture and the God it worshipped and those duties, on the other hand, that are recognised as being universal to all humans, irrespective of culture, religion, colour, and race.

The Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, made no clear distinction between ritualistic duties on the one hand and purely ethical duties on the other.

These latter duties arise out of the cluster of human values that have surfaced in all advanced cultures – values such as love, justice, truth, compassion, and harmony. These values supply the raw material for ethics. They arise out of the human condition. The more we see ourselves in one another, the more these values come into play, urging us to act in certain ways. Our psyche is programmed to recognise and respond positively to our own likeness in others. That is why, as children, we find ourselves quickly drawn to those of our own age. By the same token, of course, we have tended to treat as potentially dangerous those who differ from our image.

Our moral duties first come into expression with those closest to us – the family, the tribe, the nation. That is why what is called the Golden Rule came to be enunciated in several cultures quite independently. 'Do unto others what you would have them do to you!' Then we began to acknowledge our common humanity more widely, across ethnic and cultural barriers, until at the present time it is in the process of becoming global.

But good as the Golden Rule is as a rule of thumb, it is only a start. The values that motivate us to perform our moral duties may in themselves come into conflict. The reverence for life may come into conflict with compassion. This conflict occurs in the clinical abortion debate as it does also in the euthanasia debate. It has led to this inconsistency; it is an act of mercy to put a morally wounded animal out of its misery, but it is wrong to end the life of humans who suffer from a mortal disease.

Such examples illustrate why we now have to create the new ethic. There are no clear and absolute answers to our moral problems that we can pluck out of the air. We simply have to work through each one of them as best as we can.

This is where the contribution of Joseph Fletcher with his *Situation Ethics* comes into relevance. His book was published in 1966, 3 years after *Honest to God,* and John Robinson referred to it as 'the only ethic for man come of age'. The book aroused vigorous opposition and condemnation. The opposition came from people who had not understood or come to terms with the new cultural age we have entered. That is why I sketched the cultural history that led up to this age. We have entered an age in which there are no absolutes and where all is relative. In such an age the guide lines proposed by Situation Ethics are very positive. It steers a middle course between the old legalism based on the

supposed absolutes and the unprincipled license to do anything, a position that is called antinomianism. Here is the essence of it.

> **'The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside if love seems better served by doing so.**

But since Joseph Fletcher's book, a whole new area of ethical problems has emerged. Ethics is no longer concerned solely, as it long seemed to be, with the duties we owe to one another as fellow-humans. During the latter part of the 20th century we have been coming to recognize that we have duties to the earth and to all forms of life on it. Strangely enough this has brought us into a position not unlike that out of which our long cultural story began.

Up until only two to three thousand years ago, humans believed they had duties to a Sky Father, an Earth Mother, a throng of gods, and all the plants and animals of the ecosystem. Today we are relearning how much we depend on the natural world. Our need for **pure** air, **clean** water, **healthy** food, **adequate** shelter, and the **most desirable** conditions for regenerating our species have once again become the ultimate or religious issues to which we must 'devote' ourselves.

This enables us to realise that there was a downside to the monotheistic culture that evolved between the two Axial Periods. Of course there was much in it to value, but it also had the effect of turning our attention away from the earth and even causing us to downgrade it as a 'fallen world'. The very concept of 'earthiness' we came to associate with things to distance ourselves from. In those two and a half thousand years of monotheism our minds were directed away from the earth to the unseen world of Heaven and Hell that our own imaginations had created. Now that that world has disintegrated, our eyes are being opened to physical reality. We are coming back to earth with a sudden bump. To our dismay we find we have been treating the earth too carelessly. We have been polluting it. We have been exploiting it. We have been interfering with the delicate ecological balance.

In short, as we move into the future we are also recovering something from our long lost past. We recognize that our relationship with the earth has much in common with that of the ancients. As far back as 1848, that early modern theologian, Ludwig Feuerbach, made the point: 'that upon which human beings

are fully dependent was originally, nothing other than Nature. Nature is the first, original object of religion'. In this 21st century we are painfully relearning that, with all of our knowledge and sophistication, it is the forces of nature that still transcend us.

Because we are dependent on nature for our well-being and for our future, we have duties towards the natural world as well as to one another. The big difference between us and the ancients is that whereas they created the gods to explain natural phenomena, we have developed the scientific method to help us understand the ways of nature. What we learn from science enables us to discern the duties we owe to the natural world. Since we can now acknowledge the earth to be the mother of all life and the on-going sustainer of life we have even come to speak of Mother Nature.

One scientist has gone further and re-instated the ancient name of Gaia. What is known as Gaia theory originated in the mind of an extraordinarily creative scientist named James Lovelock. Gaia theory does not say the earth *is* a living organism, but rather that life in all of its diversity has so evolved in relation to the physical forces of its earthly environment that the earth operates rather *like* a living organism.

But whether we call it Gaia, Mother Nature, or simply nature, we are dependent on it. That dependence leads to duties. Those duties will not be revealed to us from out of the blue as a set of new commandments. We have to enunciate them. For this we need knowledge – and for this we turn largely to the scientists.

But we also need to develop a new attitude to the world in which we find ourselves. It is an attitude that is very like the religious attitudes of the past, often referred to in terms of awe, worship and the sense of the holy. Church going was a regular time on a Sunday when we joined in what was called the public worship – that is the people's worship of God, on whom we thought life to depend.

If we are to live ethically in this new secular age, we need to pause, from time to time and -

- Stand in awe of this star-cladded universe.
- Marvel at the evolving diversity of life on this planet.
- Value everything on which our common life depends.
- Appreciate the total cultural legacy we have received from the past.

- Devote ourselves in a self-sacrificing fashion to the responsibility now laid upon us all for the future of our species and of all planetary life.

I conclude with the final words of Book of Ecclesiastes:

Stand in awe of Nature and do what it requires of you,
for this is the whole duty of humankind.

Endnotes

[1] Professor Geering was ill on the appointed day. The paper was read by Noel Cheer