

Philosophy 104, Business Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2007

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Lecture Notes, February 23

## I. Nielsen and secular morality

In our last class, I presented a problem, arising from Socrates's question to Euthyphro, about linking morality with religion.

We can see the problem by considering, on the assumption that the good is identical to what God loves, whether God loves the good because it is good, or whether the good is good because God loves it.

If the latter, the position I called voluntarism, then the good seems arbitrary.

So, I rejected voluntarism.

If the former, the position I called natural law, then there are natural reasons why acts, or people, or intentions are good.

We can pursue morality independently of religion by seeking these natural reasons.

If we try to find a role for God, within a natural law perspective, by taking God as the divine discoverer of the good, then we have a problem of how to know what God truly loves.

At the end of our last class, I mentioned Pascal's wager, as an independent attempt to involve religion in morality.

Pascal's argument was that the expected value of acting as if God exists is infinitely positive, whereas the expected value of acting as if God does not exist is infinitely negative.

So, purely on a rational basis, in the absence of knowing whether God does or does not exist, we should act as if he does.

Nielsen argues that we can justify morality without appeal to religion, or even to Pascal's wager.

He presents considerations favoring a secular morality over a religious one.

Contrast the religious world view with the secular world view.

Call the person who says that morality is grounded in religion the religious moralist.

One opponent of the religious moralist says that morality can be severed from religion.

Call this opponent of the religious moralist the secular moralist.

Another opponent is the nihilist, who denies that there is any morality.

The religious moralist worries that nihilism is the only other option, since without religion, in a Godless universe, life appears to have no significance.

If life has no meaning in a Godless universe, then secular morality is unmotivated, and we must choose only between religious morality and nihilism.

Nielsen argues that there are reliable sources of human happiness: freedom from pain and want, security and emotional peace, creative work, art and music.

We seek happiness from these sources.

Further, we can see that others lack these, and we can find satisfaction in helping them.

Nihilism reveals a lack of compassion, not an insight into truth.

## II. Dogmas of religious and secular morality

The religious moralist accuses the secular moralist of having to accept, as unjustified dogma, two principles.

The first principle that the secular moralist must accept is that happiness is good.

We do not have to justify the happiness dogma, since it is just factually obvious.

The second principle is that we should sometimes sacrifice our own goods for those of others, since morality sometimes demands sacrifice.

Nielsen interprets this second principle as demanding that the secular moralist link morality to justice, interpreted as fairness.

That is, we must treat others as we treat ourselves, approximately.

(The phrase 'justice as fairness' comes from Rawls, as we shall see later in the term.)

The dogmatic acceptance of these principles means that the secular moralist has a problem of egoism: why should I sacrifice my goods for others?

The religious moralist easily solves the problem of egoism.

We should accept that every person is God's creature, and thus the principle of fairness, because that is God's will.

Nielsen points out that the religious moralist is required to accept a principle dogmatically, also: that we should do God's will.

Again, we have a problem of access, of knowing God's will.

So, the secular moralist has the problem of egoism, and the religious moralist has the problem of knowing God's will.

Nielsen thinks that the obscurity (and unintelligibility) of the religious moralist's principle is enough to make it less palatable than the two principles (or, the problem of egoism) that the secular moralist must accept.

## III. The secular moralist's principles are not dogmatic

Nielsen thinks that we can justify the principle of fairness, and so do not have to take it as dogma.

He adopts a thought experiment, which is really derived from Rawls, and also Locke and Hobbes.

If we were living in a state in which we did not respect the needs of others, life would be miserable.

We would rationally choose to live in a state in which others followed something like the Golden Rule.

It would be in our egoistic interests to respect others, since we could not count on their respect for us if we did not.

So, we could have reasons for eschewing egoism.

The difference between a dogma and a justified principle is just the existence of good reasons for holding the principle.

Still, when applying his thought experiment to the real world, Nielsen admits that we must accept the principle of fairness as dogma.

For, if we knew that people could not hurt us, we would not choose to be moral.

We will see another example in the next selection from Plato.

Nielsen, in the end, has to go with the argument that the secular moralist's dogma is easier to swallow, not that it is not dogma.

#### IV. Hobbes and moral motivation

So, we have a general problem of moral motivation.

To solve the problem of moral motivation, Nielsen argues that it is rational to accept principles like justice as fairness, since we would prefer to live in a world in which people do behave morally.

Hobbes defends a similar solution, for the secular moralist, by rooting all morality in self-interest.

He accepts that different people have different interests and desires.

Still, there are natural laws, laws of reason, which apply to every one, since every one has some interests, including the wish to preserve one's life.

Law #1: In the state of nature (war) every man has a right to everything.

So, people naturally pursue government in order to protect themselves and their property.

Everyone is basically equal.

We are completely free, and self-governing.

That is the good news.

The bad news is that life in such a state is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," p 64.

There is no justice or morality.

Everyone can break promises, contracts, without fear of repercussion.

Even if you have something, you can always worry about some one taking it away from you.

If we were living in this brutish state of nature, it would be natural to seek peace.

We would be willing to do whatever it takes to get this peace, including giving up our natural freedom.

Law #2: In order to achieve peace, we are willing to give up our freedoms, keeping only as much as we want others to have.

This second law is derived from the first, p 66.

Note the guiding principle of the golden rule, here.

We give up as much liberty as we are willing to give to others.

Our limited freedom is a consequence of our desire for peace and stability.

But this is not enough.

Even if we were willing to give up our liberty, it is possible that others will take advantage of us.

In the state of nature, there is no notion of justice, or morality, generally.

These only make sense in society.

We need something to ensure that our sacrifices will not be in vain, that others will keep their promises.

We need an arbitrator, or a commonwealth.

A commonwealth arises from the appointment of a leviathan, or absolute ruler.

(A leviathan is actually a giant sea beast.)

We all cede our rights to govern ourselves, as one, in favor of an outside ruler with total control, pp 70-1.

Without ceding all rights, we have no assurance that the contract will be upheld.

Thus, a government is justified by the agreement of a group of people to submit their will to a single rule.

We have to have a single rule, to act as the voice of the people.

Once we have this single will, then contracts can be enforced.

Then it makes sense to enter into contracts.

And breaking a contract is what Hobbes calls injustice.

Thus, we have an account of the origin of morality, and moral motivation, as well as the rule of law.

It is universal, in the sense that it holds for everyone within a civil society.  
But it does not depend on anything like natural rights.  
It is just derived from bare claims about the natural state of the world.

For Hobbes, then, it is in our interests to act morally, since our other option is to end up in a state of nature.

For Hobbes, morality thus really consists in obeying the law.

We have moral motivation in fear of the leviathan, in the guise of the police or army.

Note how Hobbes's position coheres with Friedman's argument that the only social responsibilities of businesses are to maximize profits and obey the law.

Hobbes's position gives us motivation, but not really moral motivation.

We might merely learn that we should avoid getting caught.

Hobbes's account of the origins of morality is echoed, in contemporary discussions, by the evolutionary explanation of the origins of morality.

There is an article in the Pojman reader by Howard Kahane which discusses how reciprocal altruistic behavior, which one might take as ethical behavior, could have evolved from the need for cooperative arrangements in light of competition for social goods.

Richard Dawkins has appealed to just this kind of explanation of the origins of morality for the atheist. Still, the origins of morality and its force are separate questions.

## V. Egoism and moral motivation

The basic problem here is one of moral motivation

The religious moralist is motivated by the fear of God.

If we choose not to be moral, the religious moralist provides eternal damnation.

The secular moralist provides no punishment.

So, it would seem that the religious moralist has the upper hand.

Nielsen points out that the fear of God does not seem to work, as a practical matter.

Even religious people act immorally.

More importantly, respecting persons out of fear of God is mere egoism, and not morality.

That is, if we act morally out of fear of God, we are actually just acting in our self-interest.

But it seems that morality is supposed to oppose self-interest.

Consider the example of helping some one merely for a reward.

At least, it is difficult to determine if some one acts morally, when self-interest is involved.