Chapter 7: Ethics and Religion: God, Euthyphro, and the Natural Law

Adventures in Ethics | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)

In this set of lecture notes and readings, we’ll be thinking about the relationship between ethics and religion. First, we’ll look at Plato’s famous **Euthyphro Problem,** which shows the difficulty in trying to *define* ethics in terms of God/religion. Then, we’ll look at the more nuanced **natural law** theory.

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# What Makes Good Things Good? The Euthyphro Problem

*Euthyphro* is one of the first dialogues written by **Plato (427-347 BCE)**, a famous philosopher who lived in ancient Greece. When the *Euthyphro* begins, Plato’s teacher **Socrates** (the main character in many of Plato’s dialogues) is on his way to his trial for corrupting the youth and denying the gods of state. In one of the world’s most famous miscarriages of justice, Socrates will eventually be found guilty in this trial. Among other things, Socrates claims that a “divine sign” has commanded him to philosophize as he does (no matter how much this annoys others, or what danger it puts Socrates in).

When he arrives at the courthouse, Socrates begins chatting with a young Athenian named **Euthyphro,** who gives the dialogue its name. The reader (and Socrates) quickly learn that Euthyphro identifies with Socrates, at least insofar as he thinks of himself as a bit of an “expert” on ethical or religious matters:

*I understand, Socrates. This is because you say that the divine sign keeps coming to you. So he has written this indictment against you as one who makes innovations in religious matters, and he comes to court to slander you, knowing that such things are easily misrepresented to the crowd. The same is true in my case. Whenever I speak of divine matters in [c] the assembly and foretell the future, they laugh me down as if I were crazy; and yet I have foretold nothing that did not happen. Nevertheless, they envy all of us who do this. One need not worry about them, but meet them head on. (3 c-d)*

We then find out that Euthyphro is about to bring charges against his father for being “impious.” His father left a murderer tied up in a ditch (while he was waiting for the police to arrive) and the murderer died of exposure in the meantime. Euthyphro’s family and friends strongly discourage Euthyphro from bringing charges, but Euthyphro argues that they are simply ignoring the commands of their religion, which clearly states that children should punish their parents when they do unjust actions (he gives the examples of Zeus killing his father Cronos when Cronos begins eating his children). Euthyphro is presented as a young, highly confident religious zealot, who doesn’t seem terribly worried that most of society disagrees with him (indeed, he seems to think it is a sort of compliment), and isn’t interested in hearing criticism of his actions. Like many of Plato’s characters, he’s supposed to be a somewhat exaggerated version of a certain “type” of person that readers (both ancient and modern) might recognize.

## Why is Socrates So Disagreeable? The Socratic Method

Over the course of the dialogue, Socrates and Euthyphro attempt (and eventually fail) to answer the questions: What is piety? and What is justice? The method that Socrates uses has been called the **Socratic Method,** or **dialectic**. It works in the following manner.

1. We begin by formulating a question of the form ‘What is X?’ (“What is piety?”, “What is love?”, “What is knowledge?”, “What is art?”) The goal of the Socratic Method is to determine the answer to this question.
2. A person proposes a **definition** of the form “X is D.” In order to be a satisfactory definition, it must meet the following criteria:
   1. D must be **sufficient** for X. That is, if something is D, it must be *guaranteed* to be X. For example, “being a human being” is sufficient for “being a mammal.” However, it is not necessary,since there are other ways of being a mammal.
   2. D must be **necessary** for X. That is, if something is X, it must be *guaranteed* to be D. For example, “being a mammal” is necessary for “being a human," but it is not sufficient, since not all mammals are humans.
   3. D must provide an **explanation** for X in terms of something more basic and better understood. For example, suppose that someone asked “What is the number 2?” It would **circular** to say that “the number 2 is what you get when you divide 4 by 2.” It would be uninformative (though not circular) to say that “the number 2 is what you get when you subtract 3 from 5.”
3. Someone (in the Platonic dialogues, it is usually Socrates) tries to show that the proposed definition is either not sufficient, not necessary, or not explanatory by providing **counterexamples**. When this happens, we go back to step 1.
4. If we can’t think of any counterexamples, we can tentatively conclude that we have succeeded. Of course, we can never be *sure* that we have succeeded, since there is always a possibility we have overlooked something.

## What is Piety? The Socratic Method in Action

In the Euthyphro, the method is applied to the question ‘What is piety?’ (or, what religious practices are correct?) However, since religion, morality, and the law are all so closely linked (especially at the dialogue is set), the discussion has ramifications that go beyond religious practice, and into the deeper question: “What is the relationship between religion and ethics?” The argument works something like this:

**Euthyphro’s first hypothesis.** “I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the [*e*] wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious.” (5e)

*In other words:* You want to know what the pious, moral thing to do is? It is doing what I am doing right now—punishing wrongdoers, even when they happen to be your family members!

**Why Socrates rejects it:** This isn’t a definition of piety, but just a few *examples* of particular “pious” actions (or at least what the speaker thinks are pious actions). For example, it is certainly the case that *one* way of being pious (or being “moral” or “doing the right thing) is ensuring wrongdoers appropriately punished (or acting as Zeus acted in punishing his father), it is hardly the only way (after all, not all questions about piety involve punishment). In order to make it into a definition, we’d need to specify out which features of Zeus’s action made it pious. The take-away: *When someone asks for a definition, you need to do something more than just give examples or provide a “list.”*

**Euthyphro’s second hypothesis:** “Well then, what is dear to the gods is pious what is not is impious.” (6e-7a)

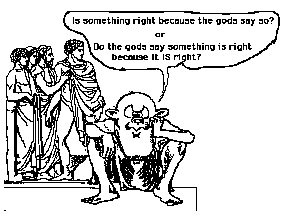
*In other words:* A moral action can be defined as one the gods like or approve of.

**Why Socrates rejects it:** This is miles better than the first try, since it actually offers a definition. However, it still has significant problems. First, the gods of Greek religion disagree about what is good, and the various gods love different things. Second, the very general “rules” that the gods do agree on are too vague to be of any use in formulating *definition* of piety or justice. For example: We can all agree that the gods hate a murderer. But this doesn’t allow us to figure out what counts as murder.

In a somewhat different form, Socrates’ problem applies to monotheistic religions, too, since religious texts are not sufficiently detailed to provide definitive answers to many (and probably most) of genuine moral or legal dilemmas (that is, to resolve moral questions *there isn’t already an obvious answer to*). For example, there doesn’t seem to be anything in the Bible/Koran/Vedas that dictates the specific form a government welfare program should take, describes the conditions under which killing in self-defense is justified, or so on. And, of course, different religions provide different answers to these questions, which makes it difficult or impossible for believers in a *particular* religion to justify the claim that their beliefs are true. While the “Dilemma” (coming up next) is the main focus of the argument, *this* problem has arguably been in motivating a cultural shift away from thinking of ethics (and law)

## The Euthyphro Dilemma: Goodness and God’s Will

*But if the god-loved and the pious were the same, my dear Euthyphro, then if the pious was being loved because it was pious, the god-loved would also be being loved because it was god-loved; and if the [11] god-loved was god-loved because it was being loved by the gods, then the pious would also be pious because it was being loved by the gods. But now you see that they are in opposite cases as being altogether different from each other: the one is such as to be loved because it is being loved, the other is being loved because it is such as to be loved. I’m afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet [b] told me what the pious is. Now, if you will, do not hide things from me but tell me again from the beginning what piety is, whether being loved by the gods or having some other quality — we shall not quarrel about that — but be keen to tell me what the pious and the impious are. (10e—11b)*

Let’s suppose ALL of the above problems are solved: there is universal agreement as to the uniquely correct religion, and this religion provides a comprehensive ethical theory guiding all action, and all laws. As it turns out, Socrates argues this *still* wouldn’t justify basing ethical beliefs on religious ones.

**Euthyphro’s third hypothesis:** “Piety is what is beloved by all the gods” (or, for many contemporary religions, “Morally good actions are those that God loves or approves of.”).

**Why Socrates rejects it:** This definition sets up what is known as the **Euthyphro Dilemma,** which is one of the famous arguments in the history of philosophy.

So what happens? Socrates recognizes that Euthyphro claim is ambiguous. It might mean one of two very different sorts of things: “Certain actions are morally good *because* God loves or approves them” OR “God loves and approves of certain actions *because* they are morally good.” Socrates now presents a devastating **dilemma** (An argument of the form “If A then B. If C then D. Either A is true or C is. So, either B or D is true.” Usually, B or D are unpleasant!):

1. Premise**: Either God loves actions *because* they are good OR actions are good *because* God loves them.** This premise is accepted by nearly all **theists,** or believers in an all-powerful, personal God. This includes most Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and many Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists.
2. Premise (Horn 1**): If actions are good because God loves them, then morality is *arbitrary* and there is no reason to *worship* or *trust* God.** Morality is arbitrary because God might decide tomorrow to make murder, lying, promise-breaking, and rape OK. On this horn, “God is good” simply means “God loves God.” God’s “goodness” doesn’t give believers any reason to think that God will keep promises to them, or even cares about humanity at all.
3. Premise (Horn 2**): If God loves actions because they are good, then morality is independent of God.** Taking this horn means admitting that God does not control what is morally good or bad. More importantly, it means that theists don’t have any advantage over atheists when it comes to answering the questions “What does it mean to be an ethical person?” or “How do I figure out what is good or bad?”
4. CONCLUSION: Either morality is entirely independent of God OR morality is entirely arbitrary (and God isn’t worth worshipping).

Theists have responded to the Euthyphro problem in two ways:

**Some choose horn 1: “An action is good *simply* *because* God loves it**.” This solution says that there is no nontrivial sense in which God is good or trustworthy. Many famous Protestant Christian theologians (such as **John Calvin** and **Martin Luther,** along with most Islamic theologians) have adopted versions of this line. This is known as **divine command theory.** (“Murder is morally OK if/when God says so. It is OK for God to break promises to humans. And so on.”) This solution emphasizes God’s absolute power and the complete inability of humans to understand or evaluate God’s actions. On this line of reasoning, theists *ought* to obey God’s commands because God is all-powerful, because of God’s service in creating the world/humans, and because of the consequences for disobeying. This solution is, of course, compatible with the ideas that God might be (as a matter of fact) perfectly loving and honest, for example in that matter of a good human parent. However, there is nothing in God’s nature (or in the nature of the universe) that guarantees that this must be so (or that it must remain so). What God requires of humans at a given moment is entirely up to God, and there are no limitations of any type on what God might do from moment to moment.

**Some choose horn 2: “An action is loved by God *because* it is good.”** This horn concedes that God does not directly cause actions to become right or wrong. Some famous theologians (such as the **natural law theory** defended by the Catholic philosopher **Thomas Aquinas**) have adopted versions of this response, and have emphasized that God’s *nature* is incompatiblewith doing evil things (“not even God could make murdering innocent people morally OK” or “God’s nature makes it impossible for God to lie, or to break promises.”). These thinkers often begin by arguing that there are plenty of nonsensical things that even God couldn’t do, but which don’t seem to be limitations on God’s power (“even God couldn’t make a stone that even God couldn’t lift” or “even God couldn’t make a four-sided triangle.”). This horn does require that there is a standard of morality outside of God, but it leaves open the possibility that religion is a good *guide* to what is moral. On this line of reasoning, humans *ought* to obey God’s commands because these commands are *reasonable* (even atheists should recognize how reasonable they are!)*,* and reflect what it is morally correct. God still holds a special relationship with goodness, however, since God chose which sort of universe to create and what sorts of creatures to put in it, all the while knowing what sorts of things would be good/bad for these sorts of creatures.

**Other solutions?** Many theists over the past few thousand years have argued that there are ways of “splitting the horns” of the dilemma. To date, however, such attempts have always left critics arguing that such attempts either (a) aren’t really answers to the dilemma at all or (b) end up having to surrender to one horn of the dilemma or the other. In any case, it doesn’t seem that there is any “easy” solution to the dilemma which allows one to “have one’s cake and eat it too”—any solution plausibly involves *sacrificing* something which many religious believers find intuitively valuable about the God they worship.

## Three Questions About the Euthyphro Dilemma

The Euthyphro Dilemma has been around for thousands of years now and it (and arguments related to it) have probably contributed to the very different way we now conceive of the relationship between morality, religion, and the law. However, many of the issues it raises remain unresolved.

1. Supposing that you are a theist (a person who believes in God) what is more important—that God be all powerful, or that God be all-loving? The Euthyphro problem seems to suggest a choice must be made. Disagreements about which “horn” of the dilemma is preferable have played a major role in many religious arguments, in particular the Protestant Reformation (with the Protestants emphasizing the “power” of God, and their Catholic opponents emphasizing the loving/rational “nature” of God).
2. Plato’s Athens was one of the world’s first “multicultural” cities, in which people would often associate with those of very different religious or cultural backgrounds. The Euthyphro makes it clear that, in such a context, it probably won’t work very well to appeal to one’s own religious beliefs in deciding on laws and policies. If we can’t do this, how *do* we decide on the correct laws and customs?
3. How much role does reason actually play in the “real world” when it comes to religion, morality, and the law? In the *Euthyphro,* Socrates clearly “wins the argument,” but this doesn’t make any difference. Euthyphro simply ignores him, and goes about his business of prosecuting his father for murder. Later, the Athenian jury will sentence Socrates to death, in part because they think he is a “religious innovator.” Does this mean argument and reason are doomed to failure?

# Natural Law Theory

**Natural Law Theory** is a theory of ethics closely associated with the work of the Italian philosopher and Catholic theologian **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).** Aquinas’s presentation of the theory has roots in the work of the ancient Greek philosopher **Aristotle,** as well as medieval philosophers like **Maimonides** (perhaps the most important Jewish theologian ever to live) and **Avicenna** (one of the most important Muslim philosophers). While the phrase “natural law theory” is closely associated with contemporary Catholic thought, many religious thinkers from other traditions (and a significant number of secular thinkers) have adopted key ideas from Aquinas, though they’ve often changed them in various ways. Even experts disagree on which theories count as “natural law” theories, but a rough rule is as follows: the more similar they are to Aquinas, the better the case is for counting them as natural law theories. Natural law theory is especially influential in **military ethics** (for example, in what counts as a “just war”) and in **bioethics** (regarding issues like abortion and euthanasia).

The key ideas of natural law theory are that (1) humans have a natural *purpose* or *design* and (2) because of this, certain things are **natural goods** (or have “natural value”)for humans, since they help humans fulfill these functions. Finally, natural law theorists hold that (3) humans can use their reason to figure out what these functions and natural goods are, and hence what **natural laws** we ought to follow. For Aquinas, this last point is crucial, since he wanted to argue that God had created a fundamentally good and fair universe, and that anyone who wanted to live a good/ethical life could do so (even if they had no idea about the “revealed” religion of the Torah or New Testament, etc.). For secular natural law theorists, of course, this point is even more important, since there is no God or religious text which might provide a list of the natural laws.

Natural law theory combines insights from a number of other ethical theories. Like consequentialists/utilitarians, natural law theorists believe that the “**good is prior to the right”—**that is, they think that the *reason* certain actions are right or wrong is because they promote/destroy certain *good* or *bad* things. However, like deontologists, natural law theorists tend to think that there are multiple things that matter, and that there are certain rules/laws that everyone *must* follow. Finally, like virtue ethicists, natural law theorists place a great deal of emphasis on the development of *good character,* and on the close relationship between leading an “ethically good” life and a “fulfilling life.” (Basically, the idea is that individuals who live according to natural law theory will generally find that their *own* lives will become better).

A simple application of the natural law theory might be as follows:

1. Human life is naturally good/valuable, either because God made it (Aquinas), or because the continuation of life is what evolution “designed” our bodies to do (secular natural law theory).
2. Since human life is naturally valuable, it is intrinsically immoral to kill an innocentperson (one who is not attacking you or someone else).
3. According to the **principle of forfeiture,** we CAN kill people if they attack or endanger us in certain ways. This explains why many natural law theorists think that killing in self-defense (or going to war) can *sometimes* be morally OK, though they usually argue that this should be done as a last resort.

## What are the Natural Goods?

The work of Aquinas, Maimonides, and Avicenna was all based on the (much older) work of Aristotle.Aristotle held that we could discover what was good/bad for humans by considering what sorts of beings we were, what we needed to flourish, and what sorts of “natural inclinations” we had. Following Aristotle, Aquinas saw humans as a mix between the “merely” biological (characteristics we share with plants and animals) and the fully human (the rational, social, and/or spiritual things that distinguish humans from the rest of nature). Based on this, one might arrive at a list of “natural goods” something like the following:

1. **Life, health, and procreation are valuable—**all life (from plants to fungi to animals) is “designed” to stay alive, and to reproduce. For natural law theorists, this means that one needs to have a *good reason* to kill something. For Aquinas and Aristotle, this explained *why* it was morally OK to eat plants and animals (who were “designed” to be eaten, though not to be tortured), but not other humans. It might also explain why we have a duty to be charitable.
2. **Reason is valuable; so is society—**In contrast to animals, humans live in large groups and use reason (and language) to help arrange their lives in these groups. So, for humans, being rational and social is a natural value. For natural law theorists, this explains many of our obligations to be honest, to follow the law, to educate children, and so on.
3. **A correct relationship to God is valuable—**Aquinas (unlike Aristotle) argued that humans also needed a correct relationship to God to flourish. Importantly, he argued that humans could get at least a significant part of the way there *simply by using their reason* (e.g., if they simply thought hard about the world, they would know that God existed). While other natural law theorists disagree on this particular idea, they do share Aquinas’s starting point: **if something really is a natural value, then it must be the sort of thing that we can discover through the use of our reason.** 
   1. While natural law theory is sometimes confused with **divine command theory** (“something is good because merely because God said so”), the two are importantly different. For Aquinas, morality is somehow built into the very fabric of the universe, as opposed to something that is “added in” by God after the fact. While it’s a bit complex, the idea seems to be that even God couldn’t change the “moral laws” of our universe to make things like murder OK (though God could destroy this universe and create a new one with different creatures, and thus, different natural laws).

Different natural law theorists arrive at somewhat different lists (and secular natural law theorists leave out God), but they arrive at them by a similar process: they ask “What sorts of beings are humans?”, “What do they need to live/flourish?” and conclude that “The things they need to live/flourish really are objectively good, and ought to be pursued.” It’s this last idea—that **there ARE natural values, and we OUGHT to promote them**—that forms the basis of any natural law theory.

## The Doctrine of Double Effect

Natural law theory occupies a sort of “middle ground” between deontology and consequentialists. Like deontologists, natural law theorists think that things like the *intention* for which an act is done matter greatly. However, like consequentialists, they think it would be immoral to simply ignore the consequences of our actions, especially when it comes to other people. The **Doctrine of Double Effect** is natural law theory’s attempt to meet these two goals. The doctrine is historically important, and has had major effects in areas as diverse as military ethics, biomedical ethics, “just war theory”, and even the law.

**The Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE)** holds that when an act will lead to both good and bad effects, it is permissible to perform that action *only* if *all four* of the following conditions are satisfied

1. **Moral principle condition***:* the act cannot itself be of a kind that violates a moral principle. For example, if “torture” is intrinsically immoral (as many versions of natural law suggest), then no amount of “good effects” could ever justify it.
2. **Means–end condition***:* The bad effect cannot itself be the means to achieve the good effect
   1. Sometimes act has two **independent** **effects** (e.g., a theft of bread leads both to thief having food, and owner losing money). DDE doesn’t rule these out (so, perhaps you could steal bread to eat, if you were starving to death).
   2. At other times, two relationships for **dependent** effects—one depending on other. In some cases, the good effect depends on bad effect (e.g., terrorists kill civilians IN ORER TO make a government capitulate to an otherwise good cause). DDE PROHIBITS THIS.
   3. Other times, the bad effect depends on good effect (e.g., you keep someone off a full lifeboat IN ORDER TO make sure the boat doesn’t sink, and drown everyone.) DDE can be OK with this.
3. **Right intention condition***:* one must intend *only* the good effect, not the bad effect. Even if the bad effect is foreseen and expected, it must not be intended.
   1. For example, in Catholic Natural Law theory, if a patient has a terminal illness and a lot of pain, it might be OK to give a high dose of opiates with the intention of relieving the pain (but which would foreseeably hasten the patients death). It would NOT be OK to do this “with the intention” of killing the patient, though (even if the overall “effect” would be the same).
4. **The proportionality condition***:* the good effect must be *at least* as great as the bad effect. Basically, you can’t use DDE to justify things like “letting 2 people die just to save 1.”

When using DDE, it is important to clearly distinguish between the *act* (what you do), the *good effect* (which you must intend)*,* and the *bad effect* (which you CANNOT intend, but can merely foresee).

**Example:** DDE often comes up at Catholic hospitals, in the context of life-saving abortions. So, for example, DDE seems to be OK with the removal of a cancerous uterus (even if this kills a developing fetus). By contrast, DDE does NOT seem to countenance a woman with a cardiac problem (and whose continued pregnancy risks causing a heart attack) getting an abortion. The difference is that, in the first case, the intention is merely “to remove the uterus in order to save the mother’s life, which will foreseeably kill the fetus.” By contrast, in the second case, the intention seems to be “to kill the fetus to save the mother’s life.” While the math is the same (kill one in order to prevent the death of two), DDE says these are morally different actions.

## Can Natural Law Theory Survive Darwin?

Aquinas’s version of natural law theory was arguably the dominant approach to “academic ethics” in Europe for a very long time, and it still remains influential (especially within Catholic universities and hospitals). However, it has proved difficult to reconcile the theory with certain aspects of Darwin’s theory of evolution, which holds that humans are the process of natural selection, and NOT of any deliberate design. We can formulate at least a few objections to natural law theory based on this.

* **Objection 1: There is no such thing as a “natural function” or “natural value.”** For Aquinas, the *reason* that humans were rational, social, animals is because God made them that way: God *wanted* there to be beings that could live in communities, go to worship God, etc. On Darwin’s theory, though, the fact that humans are rational and social beings is due to our evolutionary heritage as primates that underwent certain sorts of evolutionary pressures. If this is the case, then it seems like we DON’T have any reason to think that things like reason, socialness, or even life/health are intrinsically valuable. And if this is true, then natural law theory doesn’t work.
* **Objection 2: Natural doesn’t mean good.** Natural law theory depends on the fact that (1) our natural inclinations are “good” and (2) we can use reason to figure out what these natural inclinations are. However, it’s pretty obvious that not all of humanity’s biological impulses are good ones: i.e., like other primates, humans in all known societies have been prone to violence against “outgroup members,” and regularly engage in coercion, deceit, etc. (especially when it comes to things like sex or power). On Darwin’s theory, this is to be expected, since there is no guarantee that we will have especially good/moral natures. On natural law theory, though, it presents a big problem, since we need to have some way of figuring out WHICH parts of human nature we are supposed to pay attention to, and which we shouldn’t.
* **Objection 3: No difference between “Intend” and “Foresee.”** The Doctrine of Double Effect (DDE) posits a very strong distinction between what we *intend* by an act (“I want to beat the Nazis!”) and what I can foresee (“some civilians will die”). Before modern science, people tended to think this reflected some deep fact about the way souls/minds worked. However, given what we now know about our brains (from psychology, neuroscience, etc.), it doesn’t seem like this distinction is as clearcut as it might seem. Among other things, it seems that we often intend *lots* of things by our actions, and that we aren’t always the best judges of ourselves (e.g., we are pretty good at making “excuses” when we behave selfishly, and *we really believe our own excuses!*).

Most prominent defenders of natural law theory (including most Catholic ones) *accept* Darwin’s theory of evolution, and try to meet these objections in various ways. Common responses include: (1) evolution still allows for there to be “natural functions” , (2) we can reliably distinguish between the bad/unhealthy desires and the good/healthy ones, and (3) intentions can be found by looking more closely at the *act* (as opposed to inside of our heads).

## Review Questions: GEM Anscombe

The British philosopher **Elizabeth (“GEM”) Anscombe (1909-2001)** was one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century.Along with working on theoretical issues (such as the precise meaning of *intention),* she also applied natural law theory to a number of applied ethical debates (she was a convert to Catholicism, and studied Aquinas). She was also active in political movements regarding many of her causes (she famously protested President Truman when he came to Oxford, because she opposed his use of the nuclear weapon). She and her Oxford classmates **Philippa Foot,** **Iris Murdoch,** and **Mary Midgley** were among the first women to achieve high levels of philosophical recognition, and Anscombe has sometimes been described as the most influential woman philosopher ever. (The other three were *not* natural law theorists, and often disagreed with Anscombe, and with each other, about moral issues).

While we don’t have time to survey her arguments in depth, she held a number of positions worth thinking about. When reviewing these, I’d like you to answer two questions: ***(1) Why do you think Anscombe believed natural law theory supported these positions (try really spelling out the argument from natural law theory in detail, as if you are explaining it to a child)?* And (2) *How might a critic object?***

1. **Abortion.** Like many philosophers, Anscombe thought determining the exact point at which a fetus or infant becomes a “person” might be difficult. However, she argued that abortion at any point in pregnancy was highly immoral, regardless of how this debate turned out. Specifically, she argued it was closely analogous to murder, since it involved the destruction of something naturally good (human life).
2. **Masturbation, contraception, and all sex outside of (heterosexual) marriage.** Anscombe rejected the idea that these sorts of things were the “same” as abortion. However, she nevertheless argued that they were immoral, and for similar reasons. In particular, she thought that one of the natural functions of sex was to create new life, and to help care for the life that resulted. On this basis, she argued that any sex act that *didn’t* allow for the possibility of procreation (or which was outside of marriage) was immoral.
3. **Nuclear weapons.** Just War Theory (based on Natural Law Theory) requires that any acts of war be intended to kill combatants and that they are NOT “terroristic” (e.g., no killing civilians intentionally as a way of making other civilians scared, and more likely to do whatever you want them to do). Anscombe argued that the U.S. use of nuclear weapons in World War 2 against large population centers (Hiroshima and Nagasaki). violated this, since the whole point of the was to kill civilians, and to inspire fear in other civilians.

# Reading: What Is Catholic Just War Doctrine and How Does It Apply Today? (by E. Christian Brugger)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**[While this is a reading based on the Catholic version of just war theory, the main ideas should applicable all/most versions of just war theory—Brendan]**

***Question.****Last summer we remembered the 75th anniversary of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. I’ve heard some Catholic say the bombings were justified because they saved American lives. Can you explain just war thinking and how it applies to these bombings? —*Robert

**Answer.**The classical Catholic just war account derives from St. Augustine (354-430), who himself draws upon the theories of Cicero and St. Ambrose. Augustine’s account was picked up with minor emendations by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), whose own rendering was normative for Catholic theorists from the Middle Ages. The Second Vatican Council re-presents the classical account placing much greater emphasis on the avoidance of war and offering a very forceful condemnation of the use of contemporary weapons of mass destruction (*Gaudium et spes*, 80). And the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2307-2317) develops the classical account by conceiving war as a means of legitimate societal self-defense.

**Just war theory** traditionally has been formulated as a set of moral principles that act as conditions that need to be met in order for the decisions entailed in launching and prosecuting wars to uphold the requisites of justice. The most important is that wars be waged to correct some manifest injustice; this is referred to as the **principle of** **just cause**. Others include that war must be the best available remedy for correcting the injustice, and therefore solutions short of war should be employed if possible (**principle of** **last resort**); that public authority — and public authority alone — rightly decide questions of going to war (**principle of** **public** **authority**)**;**that all evil intentions must be excluded in war’s declaring and prosecuting (**principle of** **rightful intention)**, which entails (*inter alia*) the wrongness of the intention to kill non-combatants (**principle of** **discrimination**); that there should be a **reasonable** **probability of success;**and that if waging war would bring about a worse state of affairs, or if actions in war are more violent than what is necessary to accomplish the war’s just aims, then having recourse to war would be unjust (**principle of** **proportionality**). Augustine and Aquinas include a condition not found in contemporary accounts, which prohibits declaring falsehoods and breaking promises to an enemy (**principle of** **good faith**), which does not however require that one’s purposes or the meanings of one’s actions be declared.

**[Can you think of recent wars that did/did not follow these guidelines? – Brendan]**

You ask about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As you say, some Catholics still defend the United States’ decision to drop A-bombs on the two cities in August 1945. Their arguments almost always include the claim that the bombings saved lives — especially U.S. lives — hastening an end to the war. Whatever truth there is in the claim —and the “saving lives” claim is disputable — the intentional targeting of the civilian Japanese populations clearly falls under the condemnation of Vatican II: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 80), which was quoted again in full in the Catechism (2314).

This condemnation is a conclusion of the classical principles of rightful intention and discrimination. Catholic moral theory, of which just war theory is a subset, has always taught the absolute immunity of the innocent: no intentional killing — not in war, not in peacetime, never.

Defenders of the bombings justify the decision by reasoning that greater good was achieved by obliterating these cities and their peoples.

This kind of reasoning is called “proportionalism” because it assesses the act’s morality by weighing the proportion of good to be gained by the bombings against the evils being threatened. Since good apparently outweighed evil, there was justification for doing the act, even though evil had to be done. The evil, defenders say, is a justifiable evil, a lesser evil, a pre-moral evil.

**[What do you think about the principle that there should be no intentional killing of innocents? About the claim that the US use of nuclear weapons was immoral? – Brendan]**

Pope St. John Paul II criticizes this reasoning because it ends up justifying “deliberate consent to certain kinds of behavior” condemned by the Catholic Church (*Veritatis Splendor*, 75). On this basis he judges proportionalism unreasonable and unCatholic:

*“Such theories however are not faithful to the Church’s teaching, when they believe they can justify, as morally good, deliberate choices of kinds of behavior contrary to the commandments of the divine and natural law. These theories cannot claim to be grounded in the Catholic moral tradition” (76).*

You might ask how just war thinking applies to other U.S. military interventions — for example, in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Libya.

In order to judge the justice of each intervention, we need to assess whether the moral principles set forth above were respected in their initiating and prosecuting:

1. Were the claims against our enemies just, or exaggerated or fabricated?
2. Was the governing intention to correct the injustice or were there mixed motives?
3. Were reasonable non-military alternatives exhausted or was the judgment to take military action premature?
4. Did the proper authorities authorize the conflict or were they sidestepped in the rush to war?
5. Did we ever use more violence than necessary or other immoral means to accomplish our objectives?
6. Was there from the start a reasonable probability of success?

**[Trying applying these criteria to a recent conflict. For example, was Russia’s invasion of Ukraine justified? How about Ukraine’s defense of itself? - Brendan]**

Some of these questions can be difficult to answer. Assessing the reliability of intelligence and so getting clear on what the enemy is really up to; understanding his rightful claims to territorial hegemony; if he is engaged in a civil war, understanding the rights of either side to prosecute their own offensives; assessing the legality of hostile foreign intervention; gaining realistic foresight about outcomes and predictions of success — these require decision-makers to gather, sift through and assess the reliability of large amounts of information.

If this gathering, sifting and assessing is to be done with integrity, our leaders need virtue, for if they have mixed motives — e.g., to gain access to foreign oil reserves, humiliate our enemies, establish U.S. military superiority in a region, distract from prior or ongoing wrongdoings — then respecting just war principles is less likely.

Though leaders frequently hide their intentions from the public, they themselves know what they do and why they do it. They know why they authorize this or that air strike, or authorize more violence than needed to accomplish just military objectives, or sanction actions that cause disproportionate destruction; and they certainly know when they authorize the killing of civilians through bombings, or other coercive means, including sanctions and blockades. Decision-makers therefore are required to police their own motives and maintain a steely resolve to uphold the requirements of justice. Those who lack virtue find this difficult.

In the absence of publicly available information that allows us to reply to the questions above with moral certainty, citizens should not be quick to judge harshly the military actions taken by their authorities, since factors unknown to them may play decisive roles in decision-making.

This does not mean that we shouldn’t judge our leaders’ actions when facts come to light. For example, after all the facts were in about Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction program, Pope John Paul II’s earlier criticisms of a “preemptive war” against Iraq were vindicated. We learned that the U.S. decision to go to war was decided on false information; the truth was that Iraq had no active WMD program. We also learned that by March 2003, the war’s launch date, there existed eminently reasonable doubt as to whether such programs existed; our leaders therefore could not have had moral certainty that they had a just cause. The decision seems also to have violated the principles of last resort and probability of success.

As to the other military interventions named above, I have not done the hard work necessary to secure a confident moral judgment.

**[Just War Theory—which says that war is sometimes but not always morally OK--is probably the most common view on the ethics of war, both Catholic and non-Catholic. However, there are two competing theories. Realism says that “ethics don’t matter in war. Nations can/will/should do whatever is in their best interest.” Pacifism says war is never OK, even in self defense. Which theory/approach do you think is best? Why? --Brendan]**

# Reading: The God Decision (by Michael Ruse)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ever since I read Richard Dawkins’s book *The God Delusion* (2006), one thing has stayed with me above all the fiery polemics. It is an answer that Dawkins gave in the book to a question about priestly abuse of children: ‘I replied that, horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place.’ In the five or six years since I read this, it has disturbed me, put me off balance, to an extent that I would not have expected.

**[Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist who, in recent years, has become famous as a “New Atheist”, who is very critical of Christianity and Islam (and religion generally). Before starting, what do YOU think of his comparison of “teaching religion to children” with “child abuse”?]**

I was raised a Quaker, a member of the Religious Society of Friends, and lost my faith around the age of 20. I am as much a non-believer as Dawkins is, yet I look back on my religious training positively. We young Quakers were encouraged to think for ourselves and this was the foundation of my lifetime commitment to philosophy. The moral and social concerns of Quakers have been guides to my life as a teacher. In an entirely secular way, I see the inner light – what Quakers call ‘that of God in everyone’ – in each of my students. So I cannot see religious training as abuse. Nor is this simply because Quakers are a special case. There are Catholic beliefs, such as transubstantiation, that I could never accept, nor do I approve of every aspect of a Catholic education. But, intellectually, I am pretty small beer compared to thinkers such as John Henry Newman, the 19th-century theologian. Socially and morally, I could never measure up to people such as Vincent de Paul or Dorothy Day, whose actions were inspired by their religious beliefs.

Dawkins’s comment has led me to think seriously about the choices we make in being atheists, or theists, for that matter. Atheism, or its opposite, is not just about epistemology, that is, a question of whether or not it is *true* that there is no god or (Christian) God. It is also a matter of morality, of ethics: *should* one believe in a god or specifically in God, or should one shun such a belief? And if I believe in a god, am I abusing my children if I bring them up to believe in this same god?

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, provides the contrast here with Dawkins. Plantinga, a Calvinist, thinks that God has given us a direct way of insight to Him. As John Calvin wrote in 1536: ‘There exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [*sensus divinitatis*], we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead.’ Plantinga would say that those who deny the existence of God do so only because their thinking is corrupted by original sin.

These questions of whether one has a moral obligation to believe – or not – in God seem a bit strange. If I were to ask ‘Is there an Eiffel Tower or not?’ it seems clear that the answer is not really a matter of morality, but of epistemology, a question of knowledge. It doesn’t make sense to ask ‘Should you believe in the Eiffel Tower?’ or ‘Should you tell your kids about the Eiffel Tower?’ But the God question – to restrict ourselves now to the Christian deity – is obviously different. By and large, one doesn’t bump into God at the supermarket or see Him on the skyline in Paris. Even if He speaks to you – as apparently He did to Joan of Arc – He does not necessarily speak to me. As Joan’s interlocutors made clear, it is not proven that we should believe that He was speaking to her, or you for that matter. You might be making it up or be delusional. While we can have a consensus about whether or not the Eiffel Tower exists, you can see that there is a dimension of freedom around the God business that does demand judgment and commitment.

Here the moral dimension comes flooding in, in two distinct but related ways. First, are you morally obligated to believe in God, or to not believe in God? Second, what are the consequences of God-belief? Ought you to promote a God-view for society, and teach your children about God?

Morally speaking, ought you to believe in God or not? The 19th-century English mathematician and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford spoke of the ‘ethics of belief’: you ought to believe only that for which you have good grounds. If you have a nasty lump and, after tests, your doctor says you have cancer, and you have just had a confirming second opinion, I’m afraid you should accept the conclusion. If you are hard up and spend your last pennies on a lottery ticket, it might give you comfort to think that you will win, but you have no right to believe that. It is not just that you shouldn’t have a big spend in anticipation – that is wrong anyway because you don’t have the money. Clifford would say that you should not kid yourself in the first place. It would be wrong – morally wrong – to deceive yourself.

**[What do you think about Clifford’s principle—that you should only believe things you evidence for (and that doing otherwise is morally wrong)?]**

Now what about the God question? Here people divide. Some, like Dawkins and me, think He doesn’t exist. Others, such as the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, think that He does. People differ, but you can still come down hard on one side or the other. In my neck of the woods (Florida), most people don’t believe in evolution. I think they are wrong and that it’s not a matter for debate: they are truly, absolutely, utterly and completely wrong. Some feel that believing in God is just as clear-cut: on both sides are individuals who think the other point of view is truly, absolutely, utterly and completely wrong. I suppose if you feel this strongly, one way or the other, you know your moral duty, as Clifford would have it.

I cannot reconcile the existence of God with evil. For me, God died with Anne Frank in Bergen-Belsen.

**[The “Anne Frank” reference brings up the “problem of evil”—basically, that the existence of God can’t be squared with the horrible things that happen to innocents, such as Anne Frank (who was murdered by Nazis). Have you heard this argument before? – Brendan]**

What about someone like me? Can I be so certain the other side is wrong? Like most reasonably sophisticated Christians, I take the Bible as a story of how a nomadic people came to recognise and refine their notions of their Creator. One can take the Old Testament in particular as an account of growth, from infancy through childhood to adulthood, until one has the loving God of the gospels: there are problems moving from the literal and the metaphorical and so on, but they can be worked out. On the other hand, I think certain things make the existence of God simply untenable. The very notion itself is confused – the God of the Christians is an uneasy amalgam of a Greek notion of the Divine, eternal and unchanging, and the Jewish God, personal and part of daily existence. What is more, I cannot reconcile the existence of God with evil. For me, God died with Anne Frank in Bergen-Belsen. Finally, I think all the stuff about faith is simply self-deception.

On the other hand, I can see why some choose to believe. Why is there something rather than nothing? I am content to say I don’t know, but others are not, and when they say there must be a reason, I think they have a fair point. Equally, I am happy to accept that consciousness, sentience just happens, even though I cannot explain it – how can a computer made of meat think? But if the believer can make sense of consciousness only by invoking a deity, I cannot stop them from doing so, nor do I very much want to. And if someone says, sincerely, that the only way they can make sense of great evil is via religion, I don’t dismiss them as stupid or insincere. A process theologian, following Alfred North Whitehead, might argue that God has emptied Himself of His power – ‘kenosis’ – so He can suffer with us. Only by seeing a grieving God at the side of Anne Frank as she lay dying can we live and make sense of this life. This explanation might be incorrect – I think it is – but I am not going to say that someone who believes it is morally wrong.

To be perfectly candid, I am groping my way forward here. But for *me*, belief in God would be immoral. In Clifford’s terms, I should not believe because I do not have the grounds to do so. But this does not imply that all who believe in God are immoral in their belief: quite the opposite. I am talking about people who sincerely wrestle with these issues and decide that God exists. For them it would be immoral to do otherwise. Am I being paradoxical or outright contradictory? I don’t think so. Such issues are vexed. At some level, you have to respect the integrity of those who disagree with you on the God question, when they have good grounds for their own beliefs. Of course, when it comes to the consequences of those beliefs, we might have to take a harder line, as we would if the grounds for those beliefs proved entirely unreasonable.

It would be wrong for me or another atheist such as Dawkins to indoctrinate our children with belief. I have followed this maxim myself: although I have a deep affection for the Quakerism of my childhood, I have been meticulous not to impose any of this on my five children. Equally, I think sincere Christians have a moral obligation to bring up their own children as Christians.

Here’s the rub, of course. If it were just a matter of bringing up your children as fans of Arsenal or Manchester United – or in my pathetic case, Wolverhampton Wanderers, reflecting my Midlands childhood – then no one would care much. However, when it comes to religion, it never is that simple. People want to run their own lives and those of others according to their religious or non-religious beliefs. In my society, there are major battles over gay rights, capital punishment, state welfare, the place of women in society and, above all, abortion. Everybody wants to tell others what they should or shouldn’t do, in the name of the Lord or otherwise. What people believe as a matter of their religion can impinge on society – can impinge on what I can do and believe.

We start to see that the moral dimension of belief it is not quite as simple as I have suggested. Suppose someone is a sincere Nazi, believing Jews to be evil and all of that. I obviously don’t want any children brought up that way. But does my argument commit me to defending the moral integrity of the Nazi? I don’t think so. I am prepared to accept the integrity of a Christian believer but only because I see them as taking a stand on what I judge reasonable grounds, even if those grounds do not persuade me. Anyone who is a Nazi today rejects the indubitable findings of modern genetics for a start, and so, whatever else, it is just not a reasonable position to hold. It is immoral to be a Nazi and it is immoral to bring up children as Nazis.

**[What do you think about Ruse’s general idea here: basically, that you SHOULD bring up your children according to your own beliefs, but only if those beliefs are “reasonable” to begin with? What might be some examples of “unreasonable” beliefs? -Brendan]**

If Christianity means being something like a Quaker or a liberal Anglican or a Unitarian, then I for one am not too bothered by people holding those beliefs. However, let us suppose that part of your Christian belief is that gays are in some sense deviant. In the case of Catholics, their Catechism ‘reaffirms that every such inclination, whether innate or pathological, incurable or curable, permanent or transitory, is an objective disorder, an intrinsically disordered inclination’. But psychology and biology have taught us enough about the nature and origins of sexual orientation that to make this kind of claim is simply false. Let us say what seems to be reasonable, that about five per cent of people are gay. Apart from anything else, evolutionary biology says you don’t get those kinds of numbers without some good biological cause, being maintained by natural selection. So clearly and morally, I don’t think you should hold these beliefs – and I don’t think you should teach any children, including your own, these beliefs. They fail Clifford’s criteria of having good grounds.

I don’t like Catholics – or Protestants – teaching their children that gay people are ‘intrinsically disordered’ because such teaching leads to unhappiness and regressive social policies

Although I think Catholics should shun views about ‘intrinsic disorders’, I don’t see this as an essential element of their faith. Catholic thinking about sexuality is based on natural-law theory, articulated by Aquinas and going back to Aristotle, arguing that morality should conform to what is natural. Modern science makes us rethink the naturalness of non-heterosexual inclinations and behaviours and, taken in this context, it can be agreed that being gay is not only not ‘intrinsically disordered’ but quite possibly very intrinsically ordered. A gay person should love a gay person and not be caught in *mauvoise foi* (bad faith) pretending to be straight.

Lack of truth value is only one reason to reject religious teachings on homosexuality. I don’t like Catholics – or Protestants – teaching their children that gay people are ‘intrinsically disordered’ because such teaching leads to unhappiness and regressive social policies. Two of my students are heterosexual and are getting married: as a newly qualified notary public, I am doing the honours. Two of my students are gay: too bad if they want to do the same – gay marriage is banned in my state of Florida.

At the same time, I am wary of the state moving in on families to monitor what people tell their children. A case can be made for saying greater social evil might ensue from enforced conformity than from allowing false or even hurtful views to be propagated at home. But not everyone would agree with me. Plato, for instance, was prepared to force people to believe even false things for the sake of societal harmony. In the *Republic,* it is clear that Plato did believe in a god, although he was probably iffy about the Mount Olympus gods. But he thought god-belief necessary to keep order in the ideal society he was sketching. In the *Laws* Plato suggested that non-believers should be imprisoned, subjected to extreme thought control, served only by slaves and, when dead, buried anonymously. I think the dreadful regimes of the 20th century – Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia – have shown pretty clearly that forcing uniform beliefs on everyone causes great harm. It’s not at all clear that *either* uniform positive belief in God *or* uniform non-belief in God is necessarily good for society, regardless of whether God exists or not – or whether a belief in the existence of God is reasonable or not.

The social scientists don’t offer much definitive help. There are surveys, perhaps not surprisingly often backed by religious organisations, suggesting that religion does help in the quest for morality and keeping society humming along smoothly. One of my favourite findings (by the Barna Group in 2008) is that religious people are less given to gossiping than atheists. A little more seriously, in the US there is evidence – gleaned from tax returns – that people from states with higher levels of religiosity are more prone to give to charitable organisations, although often these are, in fact, their own churches. On the other hand, many European countries have less religiosity and greater state-supported social networks and consequent higher levels of health, longevity and the like. In other words, a state (eg New York) that endorses and enacts Obamacare might have higher wellbeing than a state that does not (eg Mississippi), even though Mississippi has both higher religiosity and charitable giving. A non-believer might be just as morally good as the believer, but prefer to contribute through taxes than through voluntary donations. One interesting finding, judged from internet downloads, is that US porn consumption is highest in Mormon-saturated Utah.

**[Do any of these findings surprise you? – Brendan]**

Whatever the side effects, then, it’s not clear whether we’d be better off if we were all made to believe in God, or if we were made not to believe in God. There is no simple answer, and we have to let people make choices, however much tension this might cause. Thus, I am brought back to Dawkins and to his provocative claim about teaching religion being a form of child abuse. At one level, I think he is wrong. If you have weighed the evidence and come out believing, then I would say that, morally, you should believe. But weighing the evidence means taking science and other empirical endeavours much more seriously than many religious believers are prepared to do. I’d say you have an obligation to teach your children your beliefs, thus purified, so to speak. However, if people hold religious beliefs that I consider false on grounds that should be accepted by all (like the findings of modern science), then I’d argue it’s wrong to teach those beliefs to children, and the rest of us have an obligation to speak out against what is happening.

I have spent a lot of my life on the podium, in court and in print arguing that crude biblical literalism is false and morally pernicious. Children should be taught about evolution. But this is not a call for enforced uniformity of belief. Of course, if parents are teaching their children views that could be harmful – say, that women are naturally suited to be multiple wives in a polygamous marriage – intervention might be called for. But generally one has to weigh the issues and decide. I am not about to send the thought police down to the local Baptist Church to check out their Sunday school teaching. You might decide that my thinking is flabbier than that of Richard Dawkins. Perhaps so. Or it could just be that matters are a lot more complex than he thinks and, while I might not have things quite right, I don’t have them quite wrong either.

**[How would you describe Ruse’s conclusion (about what sorts of things are OK for parents to teach their children) in your own words? Do you agree or disagree? Why? – Brendan]**

# Reading: Religion is about emotion regulation, and it’s very good at it (by Stephen Asma)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Religion does not help us to explain nature. It did what it could in pre-scientific times, but that job was properly unseated by science. Most religious laypeople and even clergy agree: Pope John Paul II declared in 1996 that evolution is a fact and Catholics should get over it. No doubt some extreme anti-scientific thinking lives on in such places as Ken Ham’s Creation Museum in Kentucky, but it has become a fringe position. Most mainstream religious people accept a version of Galileo’s division of labour: ‘The intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes.’

Maybe, then, the heart of religion is not its ability to explain nature, but its moral power? Sigmund Freud, who referred to himself as a ‘godless Jew’, saw religion as delusional, but helpfully so. He argued that we humans are naturally awful creatures – aggressive, narcissistic wolves. Left to our own devices, we would rape, pillage and burn our way through life. Thankfully, we have the civilising influence of religion to steer us toward charity, compassion and cooperation by a system of carrots and sticks, otherwise known as heaven and hell.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim, on the other hand, argued in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) that the heart of religion was not its belief system or even its moral code, but its ability to egenerate collective effervescence: intense, shared experiences that unify individuals into cooperative social groups. Religion, Durkheim argued, is a kind of social glue, a view confirmed by recent interdisciplinary research.

While Freud and Durkheim were right about the important functions of religion, its true value lies in its therapeutic power, particularly its power to manage our emotions. How we feel is as important to our survival as how we think. Our species comes equipped with adaptive emotions, such as fear, rage, lust and so on: religion was (and is) the cultural system that dials these feelings and behaviours up or down. We see this clearly if we look at mainstream religion, rather than the deleterious forms of extremism. Mainstream religion reduces anxiety, stress and depression. It provides existential meaning and hope. It focuses aggression and fear against enemies. It domesticates lust, and it strengthens filial connections. Through story, it trains feelings of empathy and compassion for others. And it provides consolation for suffering.

**[Does this fit with your own experience of religion? Why or why not? – Brendan]**

Emotional therapy is the animating heart of religion. Social bonding happens not only when we agree to worship the same totems, but when we feel affection for each other. An affective community of mutual care emerges when groups share rituals, liturgy, song, dance, eating, grieving, comforting, tales of saints and heroes, hardships such as fasting and sacrifice. Theological beliefs are bloodless abstractions by comparison.

Emotional management is important because life is hard. The Buddha said: ‘All life is suffering’ and most of us past a certain age can only agree. Religion evolved to handle what I call the ‘vulnerability problem’. When we’re sick, we go to the doctor, not the priest. But when our child dies, or we lose our home in a fire, or we’re diagnosed with Stage-4 cancer, then religion is helpful because it provides some relief and some strength. It also gives us something to do, when there’s nothing we can do.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Consider how religion helps people after a death. Social mammals who have suffered separation distress are restored to health by touch, collective meals and grooming. Human grieving customs involve these same soothing prosocial mechanisms. We comfort-touch and embrace a person who has lost a loved one. Our bodies give ancient comfort directly to the grieving body. We provide the bereaved with food and drink, and we break bread with them (think of the Jewish tradition of *shiva*, or the visitation tradition of wakes in many cultures). We share stories about the loved one, and help the bereaved reframe their pain in larger optimistic narratives. Even music, in the form of consoling melodies and collective singing, helps to express shared sorrow and also transforms it from an unbearable and lonely experience to a bearable communal one. Social involvement from the community after a death can act as an antidepressant, boosting adaptive emotional changes in the bereaved.

Religion also helps to manage sorrow with something I’ll call **‘existential shaping’** or more precisely ‘existential debt’. It is common for Westerners to think of themselves as individuals first and as members of a community second, but our ideology of the lone protagonist fulfilling an individual destiny is more fiction than fact. Losing someone reminds us of our dependence on others and our deep vulnerability, and at such moments religion turns us toward the web of relations rather than away from it. Long after your parents have died, for example, religion helps you memorialise them and acknowledge your existential debt to them. Formalising the memory of the dead person, through funerary rites, or tomb-sweeping (Qingming) festivals in Asia, or the Day of the Dead in Mexico, or annual honorary masses in Catholicism, is important because it keeps reminding us, even through the sorrow, of the meaningful influence of these deceased loved ones. This is not a self-deception about the unreality of death, but an artful way of learning to live with it. The grief becomes transformed in the sincere acknowledgment of the value of the loved one, and religious rituals help people to set aside time and mental space for that acknowledgment.

**[How would you describe “existential shaping” in your own words? To what extent has this sort of thing been important to your own experience of loss/grief? -Brendan]**

An emotion such as grief has many ingredients. The physiological arousal of grief is accompanied by cognitive evaluations: ‘I will never see my friend again’; ‘I could have done something to prevent this’; ‘She was the love of my life’; and so on. Religions try to give the bereaved an alternative appraisal that reframes their tragedy as something more than just misery. Emotional appraisals are proactive, according to the psychologists Phoebe Ellsworth at the University of Michigan and Klaus Scherer at the University of Geneva, going beyond the immediate disaster to envision the possible solutions or responses. This is called ‘secondary appraisal’. After the primary appraisal (‘This is very sad’), the secondary appraisal assesses our ability to deal with the situation: ‘This is too much for me’ – or, positively: ‘I will survive this.’ Part of our ability to cope with suffering is our sense of power or agency: more power generally means better coping ability. If I acknowledge my own limitations when faced with unavoidable loss, but I feel that a powerful ally, God, is part of my agency or power, then I can be more resilient.

Because religious actions are often accompanied by magical thinking or supernatural beliefs, Christopher Hitchens argued in *God Is not Great* (2007) that religion is ‘false consolation’. Many critics of religion echo his condemnation. But there is no such thing as false consolation. Hitchens and fellow critics are making a category mistake, like saying: ‘The colour green is sleepy.’ Consolation or comfort is a *feeling*, and it can be weak or strong, but it can’t be false or true. You can be *false* in your *judgment* of *why* you’re feeling better, but *feeling better* is neither true nor false. True and false applies only if we’re evaluating whether our propositions correspond with reality. And no doubt many factual claims of religion are false in that way – the world was not created in six days.

Religion is real consolation in the same way that music is real consolation. No one thinks that the pleasure of Mozart’s opera *The* *Magic Flute* is ‘false pleasure’ because singing flutes don’t really exist. It doesn’t need to correspond to reality. It’s true that some religious devotees, unlike music devotees, pin their consolation to additional metaphysical claims, but why should we trust them to know how religion works? Such believers do not recognise that their unthinking religious rituals and social activities are the true sources of their therapeutic healing. Meanwhile, Hitchens and other critics confuse the factual disappointments of religion with the value of religion generally, and thereby miss the heart of it.

**[This reading suggests that religion doesn’t need to be “true” in order to help people. What do you think about this? Can people find value/meaning in religious practices, even if they are not “believers”? – Brendan]**

# Case Study: Contraceptive Controversy (Ethics Bowl)

*From: Parr Center for Ethics, NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2020-2021 Regional Competitions. CONTRIBUTORS* *Christine Ball-Blakely, Guido Chiriboga, Alexandra Corbett, Ramona Ilea, Audra Jenson, Joanna Lawson, Camille Luong, Alex Richardson, Rachel Robison-Greene, Maggie Sun, Michael Vazquez, Dustin Webster, APPE Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl*

Jeremy and Ayla are involved with the Parent Teacher Association at Heritage High School, where both of their children attend. In the most recent meeting of the PTA, a major topic of discussion was a student at Heritage who had gotten pregnant. In discussing how to prevent teenage pregnancies in the future, a number of suggestions were made. There was a clear push to better educate students about contraceptive measures and to move away from abstinence-only education in their health classes. One parent suggested that they should start giving out condoms for free in the school bathrooms, as many university campuses do.

On the drive home, Jeremy and Ayla continue to discuss their daughter’s classmate’s pregnancy, and the PTA’s suggestions. Ayla dislikes the shame that the pregnant student faced at school and thought that giving out condoms in bathrooms was a good way to destigmatize sex and make students feel more comfortable asking questions about it. Remembering her friends’ stories from high school, Ayla reasons that there is no way to prevent teenagers from having sex altogether, and that the best thing to do is to ensure that they are doing so safely, so as to prevent unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Ayla thinks that offering condoms in bathrooms is a good way of making sure that contraceptives are accessible to all students, even those whose parents may not support other avenues of birth control. Additionally, it is a good way to educate about safe sex. Though she strongly dislikes the idea of either of her children having sex while in high school, the idea of either one of them getting pregnant or getting an STI as a result is a much scarier proposition for Ayla.

Jeremy disagrees, however, and thinks that giving out condoms encourages students to have sex, and would enable teenagers to have sex earlier than they otherwise might (or should). Jeremy and Ayla’s daughter has just turned sixteen, and Jeremy doesn’t like the idea that free condoms might be the thing that convinces her it is a good idea to start having sex. Jeremy, too, thinks back to his own experiences in high school, and remembers that for a lot of his peers, not having access to contraceptives did prevent them from having sex, or at least played a role in their decisions to wait. Making condoms available at school, Jeremy reasons, would make it easier for younger Heritage students to access them in a way that they couldn’t before. Many juniors and seniors can drive themselves to a store to buy contraceptives, and have spending money from summer and seasonal jobs. Most freshmen and sophomores, on the other hand, have no way to purchase condoms without the help of someone older. The way Jeremy sees it, handing out condoms is exactly that. Jeremy supports better education in classrooms about various contraceptive methods, but feels that teenagers should still wait until adulthood to become sexually active. He thinks that the school has an obligation to do as much as they can to discourage students from having sex any sooner than that.

Much like the PTA as a whole, Jeremy and Ayla are not able to come to an agreement about whether it is a good idea for Heritage to start giving out condoms in the school bathrooms. As the car ride home comes to an end, they realize they’ll have to spend a lot more time talking about the matter before the next PTA meeting.

## Discussion Questions

1. When, if ever, is it appropriate for a school to implement policies that directly contradict the students’ parents’ values or preferences?
2. How much of the responsibility for educating teenagers about contraceptives and safe sex lies in the hands of schools, and how much lies in the hands of parents?
3. How, if at all, is the responsibility for a teenage pregnancy shared between multiple people, and who shares it?

# Case Study: A Grave Dilemma (Ethics Bowl)

*From: Parr Center for Ethics, NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2019-2020 Regional Competitions*

The cemetery near Jade’s house has a sign posted at its entrance stating that dogs are not allowed on the premises. In fact, according to the sign, this is the law: a city ordinance prohibits residents from using cemeteries for a variety of recreational purposes—including walking or playing with their dogs.

Still, Jade does walk her dog there occasionally. It’s the only green space within walking distance of her house, and Jade’s dog really appreciates the exercise and the exposure to something besides concrete. She always picks up after her dog, and doesn’t allow him to dig up grass or destroy any plants. Besides, the cemetery is a historical one. No one has been buried there for decades. Jade has rarely seen anyone besides herself visiting the cemetery; and the other people she has seen there have all seemed to be walking the grounds to get exercise or to check out the old gravestones and mausoleums. As far as she can tell, she has never seen anyone visiting the cemetery to visit a deceased loved one.

If anyone asked her and her dog to leave, Jade would definitely comply. But given that the law was probably written to respect family members’ grief, and to enable them to honor their loved ones in peace, it seems that the spirit of the rule doesn’t really apply in this case. Moreover, Jade believes that she isn’t being disrespectful to those who are buried there, and she certainly isn’t causing any harm. In fact, she figures that it’s better that the space gets used and appreciated for something, even if that’s walking her dog.

## Study Questions

1. Is there anything inherently wrong with using cemeteries for recreational purposes? Why or why not? If it depends, what does it depend on?
2. Does someone have a moral obligation to obey the letter of the law even when the spirit of the law does not seem to apply? Why or why not?
3. Is Jane right that walking her dog in the cemetery is not causing any harm? Can something harmless also be wrong?

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2. Michael Ruse, “Is It Wrong to Teach Your Children to Believe in God,” Aeon, 2014, https://aeon.co/essays/is-it-wrong-to-teach-your-children-to-believe-in-god. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Asma, “Religion Is about Emotion Regulation, and It’s Very Good at It,” Aeon, 2018, https://aeon.co/ideas/religion-is-about-emotion-regulation-and-its-very-good-at-it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)