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Journal #4

1. Which is the more honorable aim – the general one of fighting in and for the whole or the precise one of helping one particular person?

In my reflections about the nature of my morality, I believe that deontological views guide my daily decisions and reflect their validity through the lens morality characteristic to deontological views. Thus, it is out of sense of duty that I would believe that it is more honorable to fight for the whole, my actions "addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity" (Sartre, 1946). I believe that fighting for the whole benefits more than one person and has more potential to reflect common sense morality (Kaufman, 2010), which is concerned with the values of justice and respect independent of one’s focus on individual well being. The power of emotions might rule the precise nature of helping one particular person, stemming out of one’s need for personal happiness, the development of egoistic morality.

Even though equal moral strength is needed to maintain the focus on either type of aims (collective or individual), fighting for the greater good while going through precise, emotional human relationships is emotionally more challenging than tending to the concrete, immediate morality of personal sympathy. In fighting for the whole, a human has to choose justice over individual well being on a daily basis considering it a legitimate end in itself, putting personal happiness on the backburner. The depth of choice between justice and personal happiness (which might coincide form time to time but will differ for the most human beings) contributes in my mind to the honorableness of the aim of fighting for the whole. Kant believed that being good comes from duty that somebody would perform that would do no personal good, that there was no excuse for not being ethical, for not following one’s duty. Even though the sense of duty can be individualistic, its influence becomes more honorable as it expands to benefit the greater masses of people or the structures or procedures moving society forward.

One can argue that in following the aim of fighting for the whole can engulf an individual in fighting for the beliefs imposed by others without questioning those beliefs against his or her own moral compass. After all, the horrors of Genocide across times and nations have not been performed by the nations’ leaders alone. Many ordinary citizens stood behind the atrocities, being conditioned to fight for the ideals of somebody else and becoming the perpetrators of genocide. If an individual fights for the whole, it does not necessarily mean that his or her action is geared towards a universally morally good goal. Conscious evaluation of one’s own views on what is considered a morally good action is vital in either case of fighting for the whole or helping one particular person. The decision of fighting for the whole demands a strong stand on the morality of the action, therefore becoming a more honorable aim if that action is consistent with a universal moral code of justice and benefit for the greater good.

**2)** Contemplating the compatibility of religion and morality: is there anything in the current environment that suggests the “new atheists” may be more successful than their predecessors in convincing people that a humanly-developed moral code would be preferable to attempting to reconcile the competing codes of different religions? Moreover, do *you* agree that would be a desirable outcome? What grounds your position?

I believe that there is little likelihood that people might some day stop turning their eyes to a supernatural realm and begin to acknowledge the importance of peaceful coexistence in the world without the fear of afterlife retributions. Humans will use religion to support their morality for as long as they live, relying on their moral compass as an ultimate point of reference. Here I would like to differentiate between moral compass and religious compass, as these two concepts are not equal in nature. Moral compass supersedes the religious one, picking and choosing between religious concepts to fit the substantiation for what’s right or wrong. Moral compass in humans relies on the religion because of centuries-old habit of seeking for structures and processes to govern social groups, human need for safety, and belief that one’s actions are supported by the supernatural deity that knows best.

Religion, even though it relies on the same sacred texts, has undergone quite a transformation throughout the centuries. Our morality has changed, as we have become more tolerant towards diversity and more open to other practices. I am not saying we have completely turned around, but, in comparison to the practices of years ago, we have changed our religious compass. Our moral compass has guided our religious one, through changing views of what’s right or wrong, of what’s acceptable or intolerable. Humans have adjusted religion to their morality, picking and chooses verses from the Bible or Koran (or any other religious text, for that matter) to substantiate their beliefs. I am sure that throughout centuries, the same religious verses were used to substantiate the moral choices for reasons that would be quite different in today’s world.

Bertrand Russell (1927) notes that most people believe in God because of their need for safety, "a sort of feeling that there is a big brother who will look after you." Most people have been taught to believe in God from the early infancy. If one would initiate transformation of human ethical code based on religion to one that is humanly created, centuries-old practices would have to be combatted to reconfigure the reliance of the human moral compass on religion. I believe it would be impossible to reconcile all the competing codes of different religions, as one would have to provide that initial disruption in the religious upbringing of constituents of different religions and their reliance on the immutable laws handed to them down through centuries by the perceived deities. I can see the European countries being more susceptible to the more atheistic worldview, as the religious affiliation with Christianity is steadily declining in Europe. However, the United States is still one of the most religious countries in the Western hemisphere (Gallup, December 2012). If we add the Middle Eastern and Asian countries to the mix, we still end up with quite a religious world. Just as with Russell's First Cause argument, who would dare be the first cause for the new, comprehensive atheism?

The history of religion as an organized entity also yields into the history of mankind as a moral agency dependent on its religious beliefs. James Rachels in his “God and Morality Are Incompatible” (Rachels, as cited in Pojman and Tramel, 2009) notes that one cannot have complete faith in God and be an autonomous moral agent. The new, comprehensive atheism would require autonomy in one’s morality, and centuries-long human dependence on religious beliefs just makes me believe even less in the likelihood of humanly developed moral code different from previously promulgated beliefs.

On another note, even if the new atheists were successful in establishing the new, humanly developed, moral code, the human need for safety and hope for afterlife would eventually lead people back to the belief in the superior powers watching over them.  This view expresses my belief based on my experiences of growing up in Soviet Union. I grew up in a totally atheistic society, where death meant non-existence, and where people relied on the government to govern their actions rather than turning to spiritual guidance. As I became more conscious of questions about life and death, right and wrong, I sought something else besides the void in spirituality advocated by the Soviet government. And I found solace in the safety of belief in the superior being whose part was also in me.  I have accepted my belief on emotional grounds but stayed away from the organized religions that I do consider rigid and, as Russell stated, impeding moral progress in the world.

The idea of establishing a moral code that is mutually established by people rather than imposed by some ephemeral deities bears the ideal view of the world. However, the creation of deity is triggered by the human need for social cognition and the structures to govern social groups. Hume (1757) notes in “The Natural History of Religion” that “As every enquiry which regards religion is of the utmost importance, there are two questions in particular which challenge our attention, to wit, that concerning its foundation in reason, and that concerning its origin in human nature” (p. 21). Religion is an initial product of humanly developed systems of how people should act. The basic underpinnings of the code in different religions, as similar as they are, still yield to seemingly insurmountable conflicts between their respective proponents. Wars, civil unrest, and conflicts surrounding political debates about abortion, gay marriage, and civil rights are the evidence of current climate where religious views play an important role.

Perception constitutes reality for most of the humans, and the perception of an atheist as an immoral threat to community is quite prevalent in today’s America. In 2012 Gallup Poll, Americans stated that they would be more willing to vote for a Mormon, a Jew, or a homosexual than for an otherwise qualified atheist for a president (Gallup, June 2012). Religion in many minds is consistent with morality and trumps human awareness that many atrocious acts of Inquisition or witch burning were performed in the name of God.

Reflecting on the current political situation, the case of Wendy Davis, state senator from Texas, filibustering the Republicans’ attempt to enact one of the strictest abortion laws is worth mentioning in terms of religious views affecting current events. The senator’s own beliefs in pro-choice might have defended the rights of her female constituents but definitely went against the views of the conservative Republican males who frequently boasted about their religious affiliations.

On a final note, I agree that the humanly developed moral code that does not rely on the role of divinity in affecting human moral choices would lead to a better, more tolerant world. However, religious postulates and belief systems are the reflection of humanly developed code throughout centuries, used by different social caste systems to govern the society and to rule the masses. What is religion but a humanly developed code for morality? The problem lies in the diversity of these codes across the world and the stubbornness of the beliefs ingrained in human mind to agree on a universal moral code. Is it really possible to think as one and believe as one autonomous moral agent? Throughout my reflections, the answer is no.

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