THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY

by

David L. Lipe, Ph.D.

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Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117 U.S.A.
334/272-8558
800/234-8558

www.ApologeticsPress.org

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Time magazine printed an article on May 25, 1987 titled "Looking to Its Roots" that explored the ethical confusion characteristic of American society today. In short, the article claimed that American ethics is in a tangled state and cited church historian Martin Marty of the University of Chicago as seeing a "widespread sense of moral disarray." It noted another interesting statement by Joseph O'Hare, president of Fordham University: "We've had a traditional set of standards that have been challenged and found wanting or no longer fashionable. Now there don't seem to be any moral landmarks at all."

Interestingly enough, the article called attention to what some regard as the main problem in philosophical thought—the foundations of morality. John Stuart Mill pointed out in his book *Utilitarianism* that "From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning...the foundation of morality has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought…" (1979, p. 1). W.D. Falk stated: "It is **the** problem of moral philosophy" (1944, p. 6, emp. in orig.). The foundations of morals have been discussed from Plato to the present by some of the most renowned philosophers the world has produced.

With the collapse of standards of morality, many feel a real need to rebuild the edifice of morality. However, to build an edifice of morality a superstructure of morality must be built, and to build a superstructure the very **foundations** of morality must be examined carefully. It is not within the scope of this paper to give an exhaustive treatment of what constitutes the foundation of ethics. What I would like to do is: (1) clarify the two main types of thinking that prevail regarding the foundations of morals; (2) demonstrate the importance of these two different ethical perspectives; and (3) show that to claim knowledge of moral obligation principles, one must recognize a religious heritage behind them.

RELIGIOUS VERSUS SECULAR ETHICS

Generally speaking, ethics has to do with human conduct—what is right and what is wrong. Concerning the foundations of ethics, two main types of thinking (religious and secular) have to do with the

foundations of morals. For the religious ethicist, there is some sort of inseparable connection between ethics and religion. Moreover, ethics for the religious person is, in some sense, grounded in and dependent upon religion. Religion constitutes the foundation. When confronted with questions concerning rightness and wrongness or goodness and badness, or with decisions about what one ought to do or ought not do, the religionist turns to the sphere of the theological and metaphysical for his answers. Specifically, the Christian turns to God's revelation to answer moral problems because the Christian considers God to be the ultimate foundation of morality. On the contrary, the secular ethicist contends that ethics is relative to human experience and human nature. The answers to moral problems, we are told, need not be derived from theological or metaphysical foundations. Religious concepts such as God have no legitimate bearing on the content of morality (what one actually does or approves of as a moral agent) or the reasons one has for acting and thinking as he/she does (the moral arguments one gives and accepts). In sum, for the secularist **no** connection exists between the two.

IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS ETHICS VERSUS SECULAR ETHICS

The importance of the topic of religious ethics versus secular ethics can be viewed in a variety of ways. First, one might consider the importance of a subject itself. The inherent dignity of certain things makes them objects of importance. Few subjects are of greater importance than those of religious and secular ethics. (1) Religious versus secular ethics involves questions of divine significance. It would be difficult to imagine a greater question than one dealing with a Being believed to transcend the spatio-temporal order and on Whom all existence depends for its very being as well as its sustenance. Few truly great philosophers have ignored the topic of the existence of God. The religious ethicist is especially concerned about God because he views God as the ultimate foundation of ethics. Most secular ethicists are concerned about God in a negative sense because they view their work, in a significant measure, as critical of religious ethics.

(2) The topic of religious versus secular ethics involves questions of human significance: (a) whence did human life originate; (b) what is the purpose or meaning of human life on Earth; and (c) what is the end of all human life? Both religionists and secularists offer a variety of answers to such questions. The

religionist believes that all human beings ultimately owe their origin to God, while the secularist holds that all human beings ultimately are the products of evolutionary development. Both the religionist and the secularist are concerned with human happiness. The religionist goes farther and suggests that true happiness is achieved by bringing one's life in harmony with God's will and that true and lasting happiness ultimately will be achieved by dwelling in the presence of God Himself. However, the religionist would add that such true and lasting happiness will not be the ultimate end for all men, but only for those who bring their lives into conformity with God's will. The secularist contends that the ultimate end of man is death. Thus, it becomes apparent that the question of human significance is closely related to that of divine significance. This close relationship between religious and secular ethics underscores the intrinsic importance of these two subjects.

Second, one might consider the importance of a subject because of its foundational role with respect to other realities. For the religious ethicist, there are important **theoretical** as well as **practical** consequences that stem from a discussion of religious versus secular ethics. (1) Consider the theoretical consequences for the religious ethicist. If the secular ethicist's case can be sustained, the claims of religious ethics about what actually is right and wrong or what ought and ought not to be done are without foundation. In moral deliberations, the religious ethicist could not appeal to God as the ultimate foundation of morality.

The secularist might allow the religionist to use religious beliefs for psychological purposes (i.e., one could draw upon belief in God as a motivating factor to do the "moral" thing), but with the understanding that knowledge of moral principles occurs apart from divine revelation. Thus, one might depend on God to motivate oneself or others to do what is already known (perhaps from natural means) to be right; however, the religionist could not appeal to God for either the derivation or definition of ethical terms and concepts. Further, he could not appeal to the Bible (God's revelation to man) for answers in moral deliberations because what the Bible says may not be correct (or, at the very least, it must be evaluated critically in terms of an independent standard before it can be **known** to be correct). Thus, the Bible would be of little significance as a moral guide for a person's actions.

Theoretical consequences also are at stake when the religious ethicist purports an inseparable connection between ethics and religion as the main support for religious doctrines. In the eighteenth century, Kant argued that it was only through its intimate connection with morality that the religious doctrines of God and immorality could be supported rationally. Since Kant's time, philosophers and theologians generally have shied away from the cosmological arguments as proof for the existence of God. Instead, morality has furnished the main support for religious doctrines.

(2) Consider the practical consequences of the debate over the topic of religious and secular ethics. Many religious ethicists make the apologetic claim that religion is necessary for the continued survival of morality as a part of human life. Glenn C. Graber calls this the "cut-flowers thesis" (1972, pp. 1-5). The cut-flowers thesis consists of a hypothetical judgment that may be stated as follows: "Morality cannot survive, in the long run, if its ties to religion are cut." This judgment is a prediction of what **would** happen to morality **if** it were severed from religion. The following is an early statement of the thesis made by Leo Tolstoy in 1894.

> The attempts to found a morality apart from religion are like the attempts of children who, wishing to transplant a flower that pleases them, pluck it from the roots that seem to them unpleasing and superfluous, and stick it rootless into the ground. Without religion there can be no real, sincere morality, just as without roots there can be no real flower (1964, pp. 31-32).

Tolstoy's conclusion is a matter of grave importance to those who take religion seriously. Thus, on the cut-flowers thesis, those who believe morality is a valuable human institution, and those who therefore wish to avoid moral disaster, will make every effort to preserve its connection with religion and the religious belief that forms its roots.

The apologetic force of the cut-flowers thesis becomes even stronger if the religionist makes the additional claim that morality presently is in a withering stage. This claim takes on a sense of urgency when the decline in morality is identified with the muddle in which civilization now finds itself. Support for this claim can be found both among those sympathetic to religion and (surprisingly enough) among those with little or no sympathy for religion.

For a representative sympathetic to religion, I have not found a better statement than Basil Willey's. Willey's statement is disturbing because it claims that the predictions of the cut-flowers thesis are being realized even now. Willey holds that there has been a progressive de-Christianization during the last three or four centuries, the outcome of which "is what we see around us in the world today—the moral and spiritual nihilism of the modern world, particularly of the totalitarian creeds" (1964, p. 118).

For a statement by one who has no sympathy for religion. I suggest the following statement by W.T. Stace.

> The Catholic bishops of America once issued a statement in which they said that the chaotic and bewildered state of the modern world is due to man's loss of faith, his abandonment of God and religion. **I agree with this statement**.... Along with the ruin of the religious vision there went the ruin of moral principles and indeed all values (1967, pp. 3,9, emp. added).

Both of these statements underscore the prediction of the cut-flowers thesis which, by way of summary, suggests that morality cannot survive without religion.

The cut-flowers thesis does not say that a consequence of abandoning religion leads **immediately** to murder, rape, robbery, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, and the like. It does say that the institution of morality cannot survive **in the long run** if its ties to religion are cut. It now must be demonstrated that for there to be any real ground or reason for moral action, one must admit a religious heritage.

The following analysis demonstrates the recognition of moral obligation as an expression of the commands of God by examining certain distinctions concerning the moral experience itself as well as certain implications of this experience.

DISTINCTIONS CONCERNING MORAL EXPERIENCE

In this section, intend to: (1) argue that men do experience a sense of moral obligation; (2) contend that the conscience is that which imposes certain obligations on men; and (3) respond to some possible objections that may be offered to such a scenario.

First, consider the consciousness that one has of his own moral experience. Although, in a Cartesian fashion one can doubt almost everything, one cannot doubt successfully his own existence. Moreover, one cannot doubt successfully a phenomenon of his own existence—namely, his moral experience. The claim

is made that one can have an indirect knowledge of God and His commands based on data disclosed by God Himself, i.e. one can associate a sense of God with moral experiences. I use the term "experience" in its broadest sense to include those moments of deeply felt moral obligation. I do not restrict it to what some refer to as "religious experience"* where it is claimed that one has a numinous experience—i.e., either a direct or indirect encounter with God. Concerning the latter, one faces the epistemological problem of determining whether one can know that these data are attributable to divine influence. I am convinced that all men have the moral experience of feeling obligated in a certain way and that this sense of moral obligation is connected with God. This idea is consistent with the meaning of religion itself (the word "religion" is a compound of the Latin *re* and *ligare* meaning "to bind back"). Thus, for the religionist there is a bond that exists between man and God. This bond is the feeling of being morally obligated to live up to some moral law or standard that is the expression of the commands of God and that presses down on everyone.

Concerning man's experience of moral obligation, even secularists give evidence that men do experience moral obligation. Richard Robinson set forth a negative principle of moral obligation as follows: No kind of act may be forbidden unless its discontinuance would lessen misery upon the whole (1964, p. 51). This principle may be translated to read either of two ways: (1) If an act increases misery upon the whole, then one **ought** to stop doing the act; or (2) If an act increases misery on the whole, then one **ought not** to do the act. Robinson's principle of moral obligation is a principle of non-maleficence that says one ought not to inflict evil or harm.

Another secularist, Kai Nielsen, has suggested that one ought to act, or follow the rule, policy, practice, or principle that maximizes happiness and minimizes pain. The best statement I have seen from Nielsen to emphasize this point is one that incorporates his principle of justice—namely, that "it is not enough just to seek maximization of human happiness…and minimization of suffering, but that we **must** maximize and minimize it fairly (1973, p. 82, emp. in orig.). Nielsen's "must" should be taken as a term of

* (although the experience to which I refer could be interpreted as a religious experience as well as a moral experience)

moral obligation such as “ought” or “should.” From this, it is clear that he recognizes that we do experience moral obligation; however, I do not think Nielsen holds strongly to certain features (such as “binding force”) that we normally would ascribe to terms depicting moral obligation.

These two examples emphasize that men (even secularists) do recognize moral obligation. Both underscore that men are moral agents and that they can possess knowledge that some things **ought** to be done while other things **ought not** to be done. Such fundamental moral concepts (i.e., terms of moral obligation) have features such as “binding force” and “overriding character” that have a rich religious heritage. Nielsen’s statement hints at this, while Robinson’s “negative principle of obligation” makes a much bolder assessment. Concepts of moral obligation (i.e., moral right and wrong) are experienced by all men to a greater or lesser degree and have important implications—implications that have their roots in the phenomenon of the conscience and that have their clearest expression within the historical development of God’s revelation to man.

Second, the conscience is that which imposes certain obligations on a person. As John Henry Newman explained, the conscience may be considered under two aspects: (1) a critical faculty; and (2) a magisterial dictate (1900, p. 64). By “critical faculty” Newman meant that the conscience functions as a rule of morality, i.e. it has the power to judge concerning the content of morality—what is really right and what is really wrong. One should be careful in maintaining this distinction so that he does not regard the conscience as an **absolute** determining factor of the content of morality. This is necessarily the case because moral right and wrong often are viewed differently. Even Newman, who speaks of the conscience as the “rule of morals,” observed that it is only the rule when it is “refined and strengthened” in individuals (1896, p. 20). He noted elsewhere that “its promptings...are not in all cases correct” (1887, p. 102).

Perhaps this point could be clarified if a distinction were made between the **intellect** and the **conscience**. The intellect can be educated regarding the content of morality. In this education process, one may form many false beliefs concerning the content of morality. This explains why different cultures have different moral perceptions. The conscience, on the other hand, urges one to do what he is convinced intellectually is right (though what he believes is right may, in fact, be wrong). This is the magisterial as-

pect of the conscience. If this is the function of conscience, then the claim can be made that conscience always is consistent since it **always** urges the right and **always** discourages the wrong. One may live according to his conscience yet still do that which is wrong. Thus, if the intellect can be educated concerning the content of morality, this immediately admits the possibility of error. One may be mistaken in his moral judgment, but this is no reflection on the conscience because it still consistently urges what is believed to be right and discourages what is believed to be wrong. In other words, it backs up moral judgment—something common to all people. Everyone can expect the conscience to urge one to do what one has judged to be right. Thus, for my analysis I am willing to drop entirely the idea that the conscience is a critical faculty and maintain solely its **magisterial** role.

The magisterial dimension of conscience presents the conscience as the voice of authority that imposes certain obligations. It is “a certain commanding dictate, not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression, or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding him do certain things and avoid others” (Newman, 1900, p. 64). Thus, when a person feels obligated to do or avoid a certain action, it is the conscience that prompts such an obligation. If one feels obligated to do something and then fails to do what he has judged to be morally right, then in reflection on his failure his intellect (not his conscience) condemns him. In an effort to tie together both the concepts of moral obligation and the conscience, I would like to quote Paul’s comment from Romans 2:14-15.

> For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.

This statement says that although the Gentiles had no revealed law like the Jews, they nevertheless had a law—a **moral** law. Furthermore, they felt an obligation to live up to that moral law. Their conscience testified in regard to certain moral obligations in agreement with the law—urging the right and discouraging the wrong. By ratiocination, they made moral judgments on questions of right and wrong. If what was judged to be right was done (by the urgence of conscience), then the thoughts (rational insight) pronounced approval of the action. If, on the other hand, what was judged to be right was not done (although the conscience urged that it be done), then the thoughts (rational insight) pronounced condemnation of the

action.

Third, before leaving these remarks on moral obligation and conscience, some possible objections should be considered. (1) Someone might object that the moral sanctions of conscience differ radically. Charles Baylis mentioned this objection and called attention to such differences as those between conscientious objectors to war versus volunteers, and cannibals versus vegetarians (1972, 1:189-191). In response to this, I wish to make two points. (a) Although there are differences in moralities, as C.S. Lewis has observed the differences have not "amounted to anything like a total difference" (1952, p. 19). They clearly would not, as Baylis suggests, "differ radically." Thomas C. Mayberry noted that "there is broad agreement that lying, promise breaking, killing, and so on, are generally wrong" (1970, 54:113). Nielsen says that to ask, "Is murder evil?," is to ask a self-answering question (1973, p. 16). On the same page as the above quotation by Lewis, he commented that a totally different morality would consist of something like a country where people were admired for running away from battle or where a person felt proud for double-crossing those who had been kindest to him.

(b) Even if there are differences, this does not argue against my analysis because I have allowed for the possibility that the intellect may be educated with respect to the content of morality. The conscience sanctions moral insight. Although people may disagree concerning moral content, they do not disagree on a phenomenon of one's existence—namely, that one is obligated morally to do/avoid certain actions. Closely related to this is an observation by A.E. Taylor.

> But it is an undeniable fact that men not merely love and procreate, they also hold that there is a difference between right and wrong; there are things which they **ought** to do and other things which they **ought not** to do. Different groups of men, living under different conditions and in different ages, may disagree widely on the question whether a certain thing belongs to the first or the second of these classes. They may draw the line between right and wrong in a different place, but at least they all agree that there in such a line to be drawn (1945, p. 83, emp. in orig.).

My view maintains only that men are **in agreement** on the feeling of moral obligation—not that they are in agreement about that of which they have a feeling.

(2) The secularist might object that the deeply felt sense of moral obligation really is just a "herd instinct"—i.e., the desire to be a part of and contributing factor to the general welfare of the community.

Every person feels the desire to help and respect others. Nielsen made this point when he wrote: "The very concept of community implies binding principles and regulations—duties, obligations and rights" (1973, p. 61). In response to this, note that when one hears a cry for help he finds himself faced with two desires: (a) a desire to give help (resulting from a herd instinct); and (b) a desire to keep out of danger (resulting from the instinct of self-preservation). But one also finds himself with another impulse—something with a binding force and overriding character, i.e., the feeling that one **ought** to follow the desire to help and suppress the feeling of self-preservation. The thing that judges between (a) and (b) cannot be either (a) or (b). Rather, it is something entirely different that urges one action while discouraging another.

Further proof that moral obligation is not merely a matter of "herd instinct" is seen in the fact that the stronger of the two instincts may lose out. The desire for self-preservation is greater than the desire to help. But, in those moments when one is most aware of moral obligation, the conscience usually suggests that we choose the weaker impulse. Apparently something besides mere instinct can urge one to adopt a given course of action.[*]

(3) Robinson maintains that one's moral consciousness is simply the effect of social conditioning. He made just such a claim when he wrote: "The original conscience of an individual in any given society is an historical accident, the result of the influences to which he has been subject. It is a set of taboos and compulsions, acquired from his associates in the same unreflecting way as all his other taboos and compulsions" (1964, p. 110).

According to this view, the demands of conscience are due to society because society expresses disapproval of certain actions. Children feel the pressure of this disapproval and gradually (or immediately) begin to exercise their disapproval of such acts. This feeling of disapproval develops into a habit that functions as the conscience when one contemplates performing such an act. Along these lines, consider a fundamental point already discussed above—namely, that what is judged morally right or wrong is based

[*] Some of the reasoning in these last two paragraphs is from Lewis (1952, pp. 22-23).

on the intellect. This only needs to be taken a step farther to underscore that one's intellect can be molded or conditioned. Thus, I allow for social conditioning of one's concept of morality. However, this has to do with a person's intellectual side. There is another side, which includes the conscience, that cannot be explained adequately by social conditioning. If one says that a certain action ought/ought not to be taken, he is not merely echoing social approval or disapproval. Clearly, his moral judgment is affected by his cultural surroundings. However, this is not sufficient to explain the multitudinous circumstances where a person, although feeling a desire from society to adopt a certain course, feels the moral obligation to adopt a course altogether different. This decision is made in relation to something not itself due to social conditioning—some law that presses down on every person.

From the discussion of a person's moral experience it may be established that: (1) all men have the experience of moral obligation; (2) this experience is in response to a moral law that presses down on every human; (3) the conscience is that which imposes certain moral obligations on an individual and supports one's moral perceptions; and (4) moral disagreement, instinctual behavior, and social conditioning do not suppress the moral sanctions of the conscience.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF MORAL EXPERIENCE

In this section, I would like to consider some logical implications of moral experience. (1) One implication concerns a point I made in the preceding section—namely, that the experience of moral obligation is in response to a moral law. Along this line, religionists have offered the following for consideration.

(a) C.S. Lewis observed that even the common experience of quarreling indicates that men appeal

> to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about…. Quarreling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are… (1952, pp. 17-18).

(b) Lewis also suggested that moral criticism is meaningless without recognition of some law. He asked concerning World War II, "What was the sense in saying the enemy were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practiced?" Lewis held that men are under what he called "the Law of Nature" (something above and beyond the actual facts) that

presses down on every person and urges each to act in a certain way (1952, pp. 18-19,31). R.M. Hare called attention to the Nazis and said that in moral problems "we are logically prohibited from making different moral judgments about two cases, when we cannot adduce any difference between the cases…" (1980, p. 216). The reason one makes moral judgments is because he recognizes some rule or law.

(c) In conflicts of moral judgments, some judgments are recognized as better than others. Dietrich von Hildebrand wrote that "the indispensable presupposition of an objective moral norm reveals itself majestically in all diversities of opinions concerning the moral goodness or badness of a single attitude" (1953, p. 109). If it is not the case that one moral judgment is any better than any other moral judgment, then it is non-sensical to prefer one over the other. However, every person finds himself preferring one judgment over another and in this admission that one is better than the other, the fact surfaces that one is responding to a law that, in effect, measures the judgments.

(d) Lewis claimed that the recognition of moral progress and moral regress indicates an obligation to some law (1952, p. 25). This is implied because to measure progress requires a law by which to measure. This law presses down on every person and calls for a response—a response that says "this is better," "that is worse." By "progress" and "regress" I do not mean simply change, but change for the better or worse. But, change for better or worse implies some kind of law by which to measure both.

The aim of (a) through (d) is to suggest some considerations that imply a law conception of ethics. Thus, if we are going to use the language of moral obligation, we should recognize that such usage implies a law conception of ethics which, itself, has theological implications.

(2) In addition to the implication of a law conception of ethics, the feelings of moral obligation extend the mind out of and beyond itself to another reality—God. Newman noted on this point that "Conscience implies a relation between the soul and a something exterior, and that, moreover, superior to itself; a relation to an excellence which it does not possess, and to a tribunal over which it has no power (1896, p. 18). This is the conscience considered as a magisterial dictate. Newman wrote elsewhere in regard to the conscience as a voice of authority that it "vaguely reaches forward to something beyond self, and dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions, as evidenced in that keen sense of obliga-

tion and responsibility which informs them" (1887, p. 103). From this, it is clear that Newman claimed to find in the experience of conscience a response to "something" or "someone." Although this experience is a response to something **external** to man, the experience itself is **internal**. In moral obligation and conscience, it may be said that one is being addressed by a reality that points to another reality. A person's experience of conscience mirrors a reality behind itself. This mirrored reality is God.

(3) A further implication of the conscience concerns the bearing the conscience has on one's affections and emotions. There is an intimate connection between affections and emotions on the one hand and persons on the other. The affections and emotions imply that man is a person related not merely to things but to another person. Newman observed:

> Inanimate things cannot stir our affections; these are correlative with persons. If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is **one** to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear…. we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog; we have no remorse or compunction on breaking mere human law...and thus the phenomena of conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive... (1887, pp. 105-106).

From reflection in one's own experience, it seems that Newman is correct at this point. The shame, distress, and guilt experienced as a result of not acting in harmony with the dictates of one's conscience could arise only from a personal being. No impersonal being could exert moral obligation from above.

The following logical implications, therefore, may be established from the above discussion: (1) there is a moral law that man feels compelled to obey; (2) the reality of God is reflected in each person's conscience; and (3) a personal being (God) exists and urges moral obligation upon every human.

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